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Introduction: The Mass-Observation Project

Defining Mass-Observation

M-O has always been an enigma since its foundation in 1937. Definitions shift bewilderingly according to perspective: 'It has been characterised variously as a documentary or photographic project (Laing 1980), as a deeply flawed social survey (Abrams 1951), as a middle-class adventure at the expense of the working class (Gurney 1997), as salvationist (Hynes [1982]), as a people's history (Calder 1985), and as a life history project which was a precursor to, for example, present-day oral history (Sheridan 1996)' (Sheridan et al 2000: 27). This suggests that a multidisciplinary and nuanced approach is required to do full justice to its complexity. However, such approaches often struggle to maintain focus and can become subject to historicist pressures that reduce complexity to the product of a particular time and place. For instance, Samuel Hynes's description of M-O in his influential *The Auden Generation* establishes it as a paradigmatic example of a radical generation's concerns while simultaneously reducing it to the background of social context against which his principle literary subjects are foregrounded: 'It was at once literary and scientific, realist and surrealist, political and psychological, Marxist and Freudian, objective and salvationist. In its confusions of methods and goals it is a complex example of the confusions of young intellectuals at the time' (Hynes 1982: 278). One way of evading these historicist pitfalls is to pursue potentially open-ended lines of enquiry as exemplified by the title of Penny Summerfield's essay 'Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?' (Summerfield 1985). Yet investigations of M-O as a movement have tended to founder on the question of what its goals were. One brief, but nonetheless intriguing, discussion is to be found in the excellent M-O anthology

with historical commentary, *Speak for Yourself*, which acknowledges the significance of M-O's close links to Surrealist and documentary movements: 'In both cases, one aim was a kind of social therapy; in either case, a further aim might be social transformation' (Calder and Sheridan 1984: 4). These two approaches in their counterpart Continental forms of the French *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* and the German *die neue Sachlichkeit* occupied prominent and rival positions in the European Left's debates concerning aesthetics and politics in the 1930s, as will be discussed in chapter three. The stakes involved in determining what kind of social therapy and social transformation were required rose to impossible levels with the seemingly inexorable advance of the Right as the decade progressed, informing Walter Benjamin's statement: '[Humanity's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicising art' (Benjamin 1999: 235)

All the above contradictions and ambiguities are highlighted by the choice of name which from the very beginning prompted critics to question 'whether mass-observation means observation *of* the mass or observation *by* the mass' (Marshall 1937: 49; see also Calder 1986: xiii). The working-class writer Jack Common's quip about 'the attempts of nice young men to penetrate into working-class pubs and try to get to know the workers' might have been a broad jibe at the wider documentary movement and its public-school-educated, popular-front-supporting and sometimes homosexual writers and photographers, but his real complaint was that the shared approach behind both social-realist fiction and the social anthropology adopted by M-O could only ever define the masses negatively in contrast to middle-class individualism: 'Even in supposedly sympathetic works of fiction the man of the masses registers as a thwarted individualist whose tragedy is, there's a lot of things he hasn't got, and he ought to have them because he has much amiable virtue – I'd hate to have anyone draw such a picture of me. So would you, I'll bet' (Common 1988: 2–3). This theme was later to become central to the seminal text of British Cultural Studies: Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*. In his conclusion to that book – divided under a number of sub-headings including 'Mass and Masses', 'Mass-communication' and 'Mass-observation' – Williams famously stated: 'There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses' (Williams 1990: 300). This assertion gains particular political resonance when directed at M-O because of their investigation of wartime public morale for the MOI.

A closely related issue is whether the opinion gathering methods employed by M-O – in many ways the direct precursors of the sampling and focus group work that has become so influential in Britain since the 1990s – actually served to transform rather than reflect public opinion during the Second World War. On the other hand, as Stuart Laing has shown, it is possible to identify positive connotations for ‘mass’ as used by M-O. Among the implications he identifies in their work are the contention ‘that a new kind of society had arisen in the twentieth-century for which the term ‘mass’ was particularly appropriate’ and the sense that the very use of the term ‘mass’ in an anthropological context, suggesting an unknown which has to be explored, anticipates a broadening of cultural consciousness within the rigid class society of England (Laing 1980: 155–6). Both of these ideas were forcibly argued at the beginning of the Second World War by George Orwell in his twin celebrations of an emergent classless England ‘along the naked roads and in the naked democracy of the swimming pools’ (Orwell 2000c: 408) and of a new ‘proletarian literature’: ‘So long as the bourgeoisie are the dominant class, literature must be bourgeois. But I don’t believe that they will be dominant much longer, or any class either. I believe we’re passing into a classless period, and what we call proletarian literature is one of the signs of change’ (Orwell 2000b: 297). The question arises as to whether M-O were able to realise their initial goals for social transformation only by working for the State and helping to implement a programme for reform similar to that outlined by Orwell in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, which anticipated many features of the 1945 settlement. Even if that should be the case though, the very fact that the M-O founders, like Orwell, came from the public-school-educated upper middle classes suggests the possibility that all this does is illustrate the ways in which the ruling class were able to adapt to changing times in order to maintain rule.

One of the central theses of this book is that M-O can only be understood in relation to all these major cultural, political and historical themes. While there is undoubtedly truth in the claim that the absence of a comprehensive history of M-O ‘makes it hard to develop a chronological and inclusive overview of how they operated’ (Sheridan et al 2000: 37), it is also the case that there are sufficient articles providing either short histories or accounts of particular aspects of M-O for the basic details to be readily available (notably Jeffery 1978; Calder 1985; Sheridan et al 2000: 21–42; Highmore 2002a: 75–112). Therefore, it is the significance of M-O that has to be established in the first place so

that the need for a comprehensive organisational history – which to be fully comprehensive would probably have to run to several volumes – will become apparent. So, although this work does provide a more comprehensive history than any that has gone before, it should be treated primarily as a combination of cultural history and critical exposition concerned as much with the ongoing value of M-O today as its origins in the 1930s. Of course, this does not preclude the necessity of providing an outline summary of M-O in this introduction so that readers can have some understanding in advance as to why certain frameworks, contexts and aspects are chosen for analysis in the main body of the book and how they fit together in the greater argument. To this end, the following brief chronological account of M-O, the history of which will be covered in much greater detail in the main body of text, is structured to show how their self-understanding changed across time.

A Brief History of Mass-Observation

The existence of M-O was first announced under the heading 'Anthropology at Home' in a letter to the *New Statesman* published on 30 January 1937 and signed by the three founders: Tom Harrisson (1911–76), Humphrey Jennings (1907–50) and Charles Madge (1912–96). Harrisson, a schoolboy ornithologist who had turned into an anthropologist during the course of four international scientific expeditions, was enjoying fame as the author of *Savage Civilisation*, a polemical account of his experiences with 'cannibals' in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), published earlier that month. Jennings was a documentary film-maker, painter, set-designer and surrealist, who had sat alongside his friend André Breton on the organising committee for the International Surrealist Exhibition held in London the previous summer. Madge, besides being a reporter for the *Daily Mirror*, was a communist, a poet and a regular contributor to the influential journals *Left Review* and *New Verse*. Their joint letter made reference to this diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds: 'The artist and the scientist, each compelled by historical necessity out of their artificial exclusiveness, are at last joining forces and turning back towards the mass from which they had detached themselves' (Harrison, Jennings and Madge 1937: 155).

This joining of forces was an amalgamation of two pre-existing projects. In November 1936, having recently both lectured to the Royal Geographical Society and appeared on the newly-launched BBC television service, Harrisson was working eleven hours a day in a cotton mill

in Bolton as a form of participant observation. He was later to justify this choice of location by arguing:

The one and only thing which I could find that affected the lives of people in all the places I had been to everywhere in the world was the Unilever Combine. Even the cannibals in the mountains of Melanesia were touched by the tentacles of this colossus, buying copra, selling soap. Unilever stemmed directly from William Lever. He was born and started business in Bolton. So I followed there (Harrison 1959: 159).

This one man operation would quickly be transformed under the auspices of M-O into a huge study of every aspect of life in 'Worktown' as it was named in emulation of Robert and Helen Lynd's classic American study, *Middletown*. Meanwhile, Jennings and Madge had spent 1936 toying with ideas for 'Popular Poetry': a surrealist-inspired social movement which would map the collective mass consciousness of the nation through the establishment of factory- and college-based 'Coincidence Clubs'. By December, they had with a group of others produced a questionnaire for public circulation – a precursor of the monthly directed questions which M-O would subsequently send to its 'National Panel' of volunteer observers – inquiring into such matters as personal superstitions and responses to the abdication crisis and the burning down of the Crystal Palace. Madge wrote about this group to the *New Statesman*, making the enigmatic claim that 'only mass observations can create mass science' and calling for people to take part (Madge 1937a: 12). It was by reading this letter that Harrison became involved in the project, bringing his own ideas for the study of Bolton with him. The obvious differences between these two projects and the subsequent splits in the movement have led commentators – and the principle participants themselves on subsequent occasion – to suggest that the enterprise was fundamentally divided from the start. However, what needs to be taken into account is the way that these divisions were accentuated by the fundamental social division in Britain between modernity and tradition which, as Harrison, Jennings and Madge all realised, was laid bare by the abdication crisis. As we shall see, opinion in the country was polarised by a modern king, at ease with air transport and radio broadcasts, supported throughout the crisis by an emergent Woolworths-shopping, Penguin-book-buying modern mass society and opposed by Parliament, the Bishops and the nonconformist North. In practice, this meant that the two projects

which formed M-O were actually directed at opposing social forces. What is interesting, therefore, is not that M-O eventually split along these predestined lines, but that it was ever able to transcend such fundamental difference. Of course, this social division was not exclusive to the 1930s as witnessed by the journalist Peter Hitchens's comments on Tony Blair's first General Election victory:

'The two Britains which faced each other in April 1997 were utterly alien to one another and unfairly matched. One was old and dying, treasuring values and ideas which stretched back to a misty past. One was new and hardly born, clinging just as fiercely to its own values of classlessness, anti-racism, sexual inclusiveness and license, contempt for the nation state, dislike of deference, scorn for restraint and incomprehension for the web of traditions and prejudices which were revered by the other side' (Hitchens 2000: xxxv–xxxvi).

Therefore, the value of exploring what was possibly a short-lived late 1930s inclusive cultural consciousness registered by M-O is not simply historical but valuable for confronting ongoing cultural and political concerns in Britain and similar problems created by the onset of modernity across the world.

The potential strains of early M-O were held in creative tension by a fluid tripartite structure in which Madge was responsible for national day-surveys and directives, Harrison responsible for the Worktown study and Jennings responsible for the presentation of results. This particular organisation was enabled by the collective decision to treat 'images' as the social facts of the investigation. The concept of the 'Image' in the 1930s had a particular modernist resonance that entailed something more specific than a mere pictorial impression. Ezra Pound had defined the Image as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' (Jones 2001: 39) and the aim of the Imagist poets had been to make the image rather than the word into the unit of signification so that their poems generated their own meanings separate from dominant narrative associations. For Pound, the point was to develop a new school of poetry distinct from symbolism, which he considered dependent on exactly such associations: 'The symbolist's *symbols* have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2 and 7. The imagist's images have a variable significance like the signs a, b, and x in algebra ... the author must use his *image* because he sees it or feels it, *not* because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics ...' (cited in

Jones 2001: 21). The appeal of these concepts to M-O – influenced as we shall see by their interest in Surrealism – lay in the twin ideas of variable significance and escape from externally imposed associations. Accordingly, a major early goal of M-O was to spread the expertise of painters and poets in the use of imagery to the mass-observers, thus liberating their perceptions from externally imposed sense associations and creating a sense of the possibility of change. This can be seen from the expressed intention of training observers: ‘We intend to issue series of images, like packs of playing cards, and to suggest various exercises which can be played with them’ (Madge and Harrison 1937: 37–8). M-O’s image-based approach is clearly central to the montage sections of their first book *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937*, edited by Jennings and Madge, but it also features in much of the early Worktown activity directed by Harrison. Not only did Harrison instigate projects involving artists such as Julian Trevelyan and William Coldstream, but he also encouraged written reports such as ‘The Bolton Tortoise’, reprinted at the start of *Speak for Yourself*, which demonstrated an imagist quality: ‘Large, tough guy with masses of hair held down by a hairnet ... suddenly takes a small live tortoise out of his overcoat pocket and threatens woman with it’ (Calder and Sheridan 1984: 1–2). The initial aim was to provide social facts that could not simply be reduced to statistics.

However, Jennings’s departure from M-O in late 1937 and the commercial failure of *May the Twelfth* led to a shift in the balance of the organisation and a change of priorities. In courting anthropological respectability in general and the patronage of Bronislaw Malinowski in particular, M-O switched to treating their observers as informants in the ethnographical sense and redefined their purpose: ‘Beyond the sphere of law and legal contract is the sphere of custom and agreement: a sphere of unwritten laws and invisible pressures and forces. The function of Mass-Observation is to get written down the unwritten laws and to make the invisible forces visible’ (Madge and Harrison 1938: 8). This approach resulted in the successful Penguin Special *Britain by Mass-Observation*, famous for its account of the Munich crisis but also highly significant for its detailed study of the ‘Lambeth Walk’ dance craze.

In August 1938, Harrison and Madge switched their respective locations of Bolton and London (partly because of problems in Madge’s personal life) as the original Worktown study of pubs, pools, religion and politics was wound up to be replaced by the Madge-led ‘Social Factors in Economics’ project, with Harrison taking over what was

now called the National Panel. The economics project, which ran from September 1938 to September 1939, was an investigation of the social psychology of working-class saving and spending, which employed trained social psychologists such as Denis Chapman and Gertrud Wagner and provided the model for much of the governmental social research undertaken during the Second World War by the Wartime Social Survey, in which former M-O researchers were key participants. In 1940, Madge devised and conducted social surveys into saving and spending for John Maynard Keynes in the run up to the 1941 Budget before leaving M-O and going on to work with, first, William Beveridge on industrial planning and, later, Michael Young at PEP. The understanding Madge gained of the social needs of the working class through his M-O research into patterns of saving and spending illuminates the thinking behind the formation of the Welfare State: 'I don't think that money is the sole driving force of working-class activity ... Prestige and social status are sought, even at the expense of economic needs' (Madge 1941a: 37).

During the Second World War, M-O, under Harrison, initially worked for the MOI – who were attracted to M-O on the strength of the analysis of public opinion during the Munich Crisis in *Britain* – and later Naval Intelligence, collecting material on public morale, including such areas as responses to political leaders and behaviour in cinemas. Anticipating the focus groups of the 1990s, Harrison claimed that M-O could supersede standard opinion polling – then, of course, a fairly recent development – because conventional interviewing did not give information about what people were thinking but only about what they were prepared to say to a stranger. Citing M-O's ability to distinguish between what a person says to a stranger, an acquaintance, a friend, his wife, himself and in his sleep, he concluded: 'It is at the level of wife, self and dream that the most honest assessment of morale can be made. From the private opinion of 1940 comes the public opinion of 1941' (Harrison 1940c: 1). This claim was arguably vindicated by Harrison's prediction of the postwar Labour victory as early as 1943, as subsequently recorded in the January 1944 issue of *Political Quarterly*: 'Some months ago I remarked, at a research meeting, that social surveys suggested a probable Labour victory, by a wide margin at the next election, if Labour played now for success' (23). As he made clear, this analysis was based on M-O diaries, letters and talk rather than public statements to opinion pollers. By this point of the war, Harrison had been conscripted and shortly afterwards departed to serve behind enemy lines in Borneo as a Major in the S.O.E.

On his return to Britain and M-O (run in his absence by Bob Willcock) in 1946, Harrison wrote a 'Demob. Diary' for the *New Statesman* complaining about how Britain was already characterised by a 'pathetic nostalgia' for 'masculine adventure' as everyday life sank back into 'the restricted circle of private western experience' (221). A further shock on his return had been to 'find sociology marking time on 1937'. This observation was made in a provocative article published in *Pilot Papers*, a seminal Cultural Studies journal edited by Madge. Distressed by the 1946 governmental Clapham Report on the provision for social and economic research, which advocated that social research be carried out exclusively by universities and governmental departments, Harrison attacked what he called a 'statistical obsession' and prophetically warned that without qualitative work 'sociologists will never be able to look further than the day after tomorrow' (Harrison 1947a: 16). Furthermore, he accused those academic sociologists insisting on statistically accurate and representative research of merely rationalising their own inability to integrate with life in a mass society. It is difficult to see this as anything other than a swansong for both M-O and the modern mass society that appeared to be developing in the late 1930s. Although both Harrison and Madge were involved in trying to establish an alternative social science forum at PEP, the vision of British sociology laid out in the Clapham Report was to prevail and presented a stark choice to researchers. Unable to accustom himself to the dullness of postwar Britain, Harrison had already accepted the colonial posting of Curator of the Sarawak Museum which he was to hold for nearly twenty years. Madge took the other pathway and in 1950 became Professor of Sociology at Birmingham University. After 1949, M-O, with no remaining direct input from its founders – although Harrison retained financial interests – became a limited company devoted to commercial market research.

The sheer weight of qualitative material collected by M-O in this initial period between 1937 and 1949 remains unparalleled. Aside from the day-surveys, completed by volunteers on the twelfth day of each month throughout 1937, there are the results of three years of intensive participant observation in Bolton including literally millions of words on religious, political and leisure institutions. There is an extensive national collection of material on popular culture, advertising, parliamentary byelections and particularly on the public response to the onset of war. Diaries kept by panel members during the war – some of which such as *Nella Last's War* and Naomi Mitchison's *Among You Taking Notes* have since been successfully published in their own

right – collectively amount to a comprehensive documentation of everyday social life. There is also the extensive work carried out for the MOI and the detailed studies of industrial production which underpinned M-O books such as *People in Production* and *War Factory*. There is a further mass of material from after the war including detailed studies of demobilisation and the birth rate.

It is this sheer informational value of the project that enabled it to survive. The huge collection of papers would have mouldered away in the cellars of Mass-Observation Ltd if not brought to attention by the research of historians Angus Calder and Paul Addison. This led eventually to Asa Briggs, the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Sussex, providing a home for the collection and inviting Harrison to take up an academic position in order to sort it out. The resulting public archive was opened in 1975 (Sheridan et al 2000: 38) shortly before Harrison's untimely death in a road accident. However, the positive reception enjoyed by his posthumously published collection of wartime M-O reports, *Living Through the Blitz*, combined with the success of Calder's *The People's War* and Addison's *The Road to 1945*, legitimised the archive as one of the key sources for social historians of wartime Britain and helped ensure its continued existence. The continuing presence of what was now called the Tom Harrison Mass-Observation Archive eventually prompted the social anthropologist David Pocock to restart the National Panel in 1981 in order to monitor reactions to the Royal Wedding of that year and record social conditions under the Thatcher Government. Directives have been continuously sent out and replied to ever since, with the resultant material available for research purposes. The current incarnation of the Archive and Project is in very good standing under the direction of Dorothy Sheridan, who has worked there since before Harrison's death.

Everyday Life and Social Transformation

However, there are other ways of viewing the M-O A than simply as a primary source for researchers. At around the same time as Harrison was venting his frustration with newly postwar Britain, the great French social theorist Henri Lefebvre was confronting the rapid decline of post-liberation optimism into the sterile attitudes which would eventually come to dominate during the Cold War period. His response was a *Critique of Everyday Life*, published in 1947, in which he called for 'the undertaking of a vast survey, to be called: *How we live*' including examination of 'the details of everyday life as minutely as

possible – for example, a day in the life of an individual, any day, no matter how trivial' (196). As we know, this search for 'unconscious social mechanisms' had been anticipated ten years before by M-O. Therefore, there are strong reasons for considering M-O within the growing sub-discipline of 'Everyday Life' Studies – a position that has been taken recently by Ben Highmore's *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, in which M-O is awarded equal consideration to such theorists and movements as Lefebvre, Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau and the Surrealists. Highmore's claim that such 'avant-garde sociology ... is fashioned when the everyday is taken as the central problematic' (22) provides a theoretical and historical context for reconsidering earlier attempts to represent M-O as sociological innovators, most notably Nick Stanley's unpublished – but known to a generation of M-O A users – Ph.D thesis, which made a brave attempt to argue that M-O's literary and aesthetic techniques lent an 'extra dimension' to the practice of the social sciences (N. Stanley 1981; see also Chaney and Pickering 1986: 29–44). The successful establishment of an everyday life approach would have huge significance for the reception of M-O, because hitherto their innovative interdisciplinary practices always fell between academic schools so that literary critics have been able to claim that their books failed because 'it is the *mass* in Mass-Observation which is numbing' (Hynes 1982: 286) while sociologists have been able to denounce that 'as social research, the methods used were unsystematic, relied too greatly on externals, and suffered from the investigators' conception of what they were doing as a form of art' (Bulmer 1985: 11).

Much more importantly, though, looking at M-O from the perspective of Everyday Life studies allows us both to see its wider cultural and historical significance, particularly in relation to its contemporary European movements, and to understand theoretically how it could pursue aims of social therapy and transformation. For example, it is possible to see Lefebvre's working concept of everyday life, in which the repeating units of capitalist exchange – money, time etc – comprise an everydayness that renders everyday life into empty time that has to be filled, while historical memory is simultaneously reduced to a trace existence, as owing clear debts to Freud's notion of spatial-temporal consciousness being produced by banishing memories to a trace form (see Freud 1984b: 295–301). Potentially, therefore, a therapeutic politics of everyday life would not be dissimilar to Freud's model of the analytical encounter, in which the trace is brought into contention with consciousness in a dialectical process of remembering, repeating and

working-through which causes the patient to 'act' out what has been repressed as a 'piece of real life' (Freud 1958a: 150–2) and, therefore, find a safe outlet for otherwise disruptive emotional impulses. This analytic process contains an inherent ambiguity for in order for it to function it has to override the pleasure principle, which is the primary defence mechanism for protecting the ego from trauma by regulating the level of excitement and agitation resulting from external or internal stimuli to as low and stable a level as possible. The pleasure principle carries out this function by discharging pleasurable stimuli – as exemplified by the sexual act which is in effect only the 'momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation' (Freud 1984b: 336–7) – and repressing unpleasurable stimuli. Therefore, the patient can only be made to act out the traumatic events in the analytic encounter by circumventing the pleasure principle's repression. This circumvention is enabled by inducing a regression from the pleasure principle to the infantile stage of ego defence mechanism which developmentally precedes it: the compulsion to repeat. Here, the classic example is the child who compensates for the mother's absence by staging the disappearance and reappearance of toys within reach. This repetition of a traumatic event allows the child to attain an active role in place of the usual passive one and the stage as a whole helps to form the pleasure principle because the lines of cathexis (neural links) which allow emotional discharge can only be formed by repetition. However, while this demonstrates that therapy is successful to the extent it is able to generate a new line of cathexis by inducing a controlled compulsion to repeat, the point of ambiguity arises from the question of why the passive maintenance of the ego by the pleasure principle should be seen as preferable to the active processes unleashed in the analytical encounter? Consciousness is momentarily set free to act out 'reality' before being returned to a state of conformity with external reality – the reality principle – but why is the one reality privileged over the other? In fact, the Freudian analytical encounter offers a model for transformation to creative and critical thinkers – hence its continuing interest despite it no longer being at the forefront of modern psychology – in which the 'reality' a person is aligned to can be transformed, either externally and within proscribed limits as a form of therapy or internally and without limits in what would amount to the development of an unfettered full consciousness.

Great public crises such as those surrounding the abdication and the 1938 Munich agreement between Chamberlain and Hitler, could be seen as analogous to individual trauma and as arising because the

normal societal defence mechanisms could not cope with the shock of the disturbance. M-O's interventions in these crises should be seen as attempts to induce social transformation, although whether this went beyond social therapy in either aims or achievement is a much more difficult question to answer. In later life Madge acknowledged the importance of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* to M-O and its influence on their early concept of the 'coincidence'. Freud's book was widely available in English in the 1930s, even appearing as a mass-market paperback edition in 1938 under Penguin's Pelican imprint. Freud's argument was that at the 'back of every error [whether slip of the tongue, memory loss or accident] is a repression' (161) of unconscious will or desire so that the errors happen precisely because 'unconscious thoughts find expression as modifications of other thoughts in unusual ways and through outer associations' (213). Clearly, there are similarities between the mechanism by which the Freudian unconscious disrupts dominant narrative associations and the conscious practice of the Imagist poet as previously discussed. Therefore, as we shall see, there is a strong case for arguing that Madge and Jennings, following the influence of the Surrealists, chose to read Freud against the grain and so set out by collecting images from their trained volunteer observers to consciously create the conditions for unfamiliar associations that would allow the (possibly collective) unconscious greater opportunity for expression than would otherwise 'naturally' occur and so accelerate social transformation. In assessing exactly which changes in society can be attributed to M-O, whether independently or in conjunction with other social forces, there are a number of good reasons for agreeing with Alan Read that '... the formation of an idea of nationality, the everyday practices which make up "Britain" itself, owes something very distinctive to the work of the "Mass-Observation" movement' (A. Read 1993: 70).

Firstly, in *May the Twelfth*, M-O anticipated Habermas's arguments concerning the structural transformation of the public sphere, by showing how the advent of modern mass society had empowered the media as the prime determinant of all social relationships. Their demonstration of the dilution of the historical relationship between the monarch and the people into just one – albeit, as they phrased it, the archetype – among a chain of media relationships foretold an essential component of the postwar state.

Subsequently, *Britain* utilized the ideas on pastoral of their friend, William Empson, to portray the Lambeth Walk as providing a model for an alternative myth, that could be deployed against the threat of

Fascism, in its capacity to represent Britain as a heterogeneous but nonetheless unified nation. In this manner, M-O introduced the pantomimes of class which were to characterise British society for the next fifty years.

Thirdly, as already mentioned, the M-O founders went on to gain central influence in the wartime British State – Harrison with the MOI, Jennings with the Crown Documentary Unit and Madge with Keynes, Beveridge and PEP. In particular, Madge devised and conducted the social research which won Keynes and the Treasury over to the income tax option for funding the war deficit. As a direct result of what began as M-O research, the 1941 Budget extended income tax ‘downwards’ to four million working-class payers for the first time, fundamentally altering the structural relations of prewar British society and laying the necessary foundations for the postwar Welfare State. The presiding Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Kingsley Wood, made the famous claim that ‘the Englishman has a genius for co-operating with the tax collector’ as a triumphant conclusion to an M-O style montage of direct quotations – incorporated in his budget speech to allay fears in the House of Commons over working-class willingness to pay – compiled by Madge (Wood 1941: 1301–2). This unprecedented registering of working-class voices at the core of the State can be seen as the culmination of M-O’s audacious political project to replace the space of former England with a British mass democracy.

Yet it is also possible to view the transformative project of M-O as a strictly limited exercise in social therapy: one which might even be pejoratively labelled social engineering. In ‘Magic and Materialism’, a 1937 *Left Review* essay in which Madge explains M-O in Marxist terms, he seems to be advocating a mass therapy which will lead to the collective abandonment of the pleasure principle in favour of the acceptance of the evolutionary maturity of the reality principle (in which immediate pleasure is deferred in the interest of long-term gains) – a reality that he links with Socialist Realism in art and literature as much as science. According to *Britain*, pleasure in the shape of popular culture (with the singular exception of the Lambeth Walk) is the practical shape in which Fascism invades the politically isolated home life of the masses, as the racing news and daily horoscopes distract readers from the news about Czechoslovakia. M-O’s *War Begins At Home* is nakedly authoritarian: ‘Effective government and leadership has as a prime obligation, and also as a necessity for its own survival, the job of telling every citizen who isn’t in a lunatic asylum roughly what to do and roughly what to think about the issues which affect everybody’ (Harrison and Madge

1940: 49–50). It is clear from Madge's writings at the time of the 1941 Budget that he regarded the obvious desire of many of the Northern working class to leave their home towns and move south to improve their standard of living as a form of collective neurosis. One of the results of that Budget, which effectively redistributed wealth within the working class, was to obviate the necessity for such an exodus and slow down social mobility in general. On the basis of this evidence, it is possible to argue that the social psychology of M-O was close to the governing social psychology of the eventual postwar Welfare State: the adaptive ego system in which society is scientifically ordered to help people towards the reality principle by planning for full employment and providing benefits to keep those temporarily unemployed on the straight and narrow.

Rather than seeing M-O as fluctuating between these two approaches, it probably makes more sense to see these apparent contradictions as the result of an attempt to maintain a reasonably stable society while simultaneously working for a planned transformation of that society. Such aims can be readily detected in Madge's postwar work in sociology, notably in his 1964 book *Society in the Mind*. Here, Madge described the social eidos – the mental framework of society – of the Sixties as predominately rational-technical and suggested the need of relaxing these socially coercive bonds in favour of individual aesthetic development. However, this advocacy of a combined social therapy and transformation within the parameters of the postwar state was swept away by the events of 1968, which coincided with Madge's tenure as the Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences at Birmingham. Distressed, Madge left his academic post and ended up reaching a complete state of physical and mental crisis by the mid 1970s, as well as total disillusion with sociology, Marxism and any form of Leftism.

The dominant academic conception of the new project – as expressed in *Writing Ourselves* by Sheridan, Brian Street and David Bloome – is of M-O as a practice of 'Writing Ourselves and Writing Britain'. Here, life writing is seen as a Foucauldian reverse discourse in which people use the materials provided by dominant institutions against those dominant institutions, to cut out a certain space to live in. Even an act as straightforward as making a list on the back of an envelope is a way of cutting a certain space for human agency out of the relentless passage of calendar and clock time. As M-O recognised in 1937, such apparently mundane activities as list making and diary writing are forms of popular poetry, as committed as the most intractable modernist verse to resisting the dominant meanings imposed by society. Promoting the use of

images was intended to enable that popular poetry to move beyond mere resistance to the possibility of signifying new meanings. Not just the new significations of an artistically and intellectually gifted minority, but new significations of the masses by the masses for the masses. This is not to suggest that the trajectory of M-O over the last sixty-eight years has been circular, but that the founding spirit is still relevant to the present-day project.

Inversely, present-day perspectives on life writing provide a significant filter for considering the past activities of M-O. It is interesting to note in retrospect how the writing of some observers can be read as not just resistant to dominant ideologies but to the leaders of M-O themselves. The following comments on *War Begins At Home* show how some observers were clearly not concerned about the book's ostensible purpose of demanding active leadership of the bewildered masses: 'Before we caught the bus home we went in the town library to ask if they had got 'our' book. (We always call it 'ours', hope M-O doesn't mind, but you see we've never had anything we've written in print before and claiming 14 lines and J. [the diarist's sister] 25 lines we feel a proprietary interest in the publication, and that everybody ought to sell and read it)' (cited in Sheridan 2000: 88). The presence of these resistances indicates how the idea of M-O – the promise of the emergence of a modern mass society – was greater than the positions taken by its founders. Yet in order to highlight these resistances it is necessary to focus on the characters, careers and ideas of those founders, who so neatly personalise the social forces and tensions of not just the movement, itself, but also the wider dynamics of the long twentieth century. After all, while it is surely right to reject the notion that history consists of the lives of great men, it is equally wrong to forget that history is driven by human agency, even if the circumstances are not freely chosen.

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