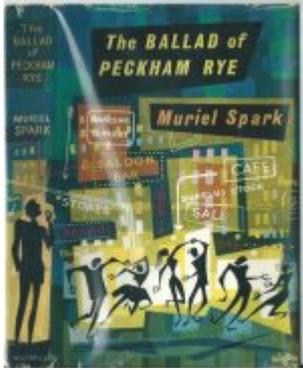


Spark's Balladisation of Work

By Michael Gardiner



First published at the end of 1960, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* sends Edinburgh graduate Dougal Douglas to an unglamorous region of south London, and a world that has seen a large-scale rationalisation of work during the post-war consensus. Dougal succeeds a Cambridge Time and Motion man to unleash chaos into this environment, exasperating union man Humphrey Place by suggesting absenteeism to the workers, scandalising Humphrey's fiancée Dixie with his sexualised and vaguely demonic presence, and puzzling his boss Mr. Druce, who had expected Dougal to concentrate on efficiency, whereas he encourages absenteeism and moonlights on another job by 'doubling' himself and reversing his name. In their own ways these three become comic foils in their tendencies to measure time by work: Druce struggles to explain the imperative of production, Humphrey earnestly obsesses over the fairness of work rates, Dixie, aspirational and hyper-aware of class gradations, dedicates her youth to saving.¹ Within which environment of work rationalisation, Dougal lives an excess described in bodily and in poetic terms.

Indeed the book's proleptic opening famously uses a single ballad 'quatrain' to establish that Dougal's ludic presence will have infected or scandalised Peckham residents, and sets up a system of poetic echoes which will undermine every rational statement of the work ethic to follow:

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'Now, Mavis, now, Mavis,' he said.²

But what this most poetically taut of Spark's poetically taut novels offers is not merely lyrical whimsy, but also a serious undermining of the 'rhythms' of Time and Motion itself. Time and Motion had gained serious purchase in the British

workplace with the suspension of other family and personal loyalties during the emergency of World War Two, and a mass repurposing of effort drawing from the defence effort and information-gathering about the population.³ The aims of John W. Hendry's *A Manual of Time and Motion Study* (1944) have their own establishing quatrain:

1. *Establish a fair day's work.*
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The 1946 Ministry of Information film *Britain Can Make It!* - gesturing back to the rousing defence of Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings's *Britain Can Take It!* (1940), calls, in something much like a war address, and corroborated by Stafford Cripps, for a general rationalisation of movements in production, since 'the [previous] movements lacked rhythm and the muscles became tired through lack of balance. By applying the science of motion study to the job, the operator can be saves a great deal of unnecessary work'.⁵ These mass adjustments would be amplified by the mid-fifties prosperity, but they have their roots in the mobilisation of the war.

So although boom in post-war British management science was partly an Americanisation - the workplace accompaniment of the coffee bar and rock culture seen in the novel - as Nikolas Rose has described, post-war work rationalisation in many ways grows from a domestic emergency. The imperative of morale particularly - techniques for morale management would become the base of a post-war boom of social psychology, and an industrial stress on the need to analyse and streamline not only body movements but also 'personalities', a mobilisation of 'subjective and inter-subjective attitudes that are pertinent to work' that more or less describes Dougal's role as an 'Arts man'.⁶ So as Rose puts it, '[t]he new social psychology of industry thus promised an astonishing transformation of industry, reducing friction and increasing the technical efficiency of production in terms of the numbers of hours contributed by a given labour force as well as output per man hour'.⁷ And crucially (and as had been argued in the couple of years before 1960 by the nascent New Left), postwar

consensus had allowed the demand for competitiveness in individual companies to take on an oddly 'public' ethic – a sense of public value that would not only be instrumental to post-war British values but would also be built on by the post-industrial vision of Thatcherism, in a 'bizarre collective good' in which social wellbeing is tied to organisations' specific competitiveness.⁸

By the turn of the Sixties, the management of behaviour and personality, or the 'subjectification of work', had spawned a network of expert institutions adding to Time and Motion with an extensive terminology of social psychology.⁹ The British Productivity Council for example published frequent guidebooks and newsletters in which aerial 'string diagrams' track workers' movements over a shift, in which workplace decisions are rationalised by flowcharts (which in fact oddly anticipate the flowcharts in the next decade's plans to beat Humphrey's unions), and in which technique after technique refines the efficient restriction of body movements.¹⁰ The younger generation of *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* have become child-citizens under this post-war body regime, as have the technocrats that form the horizon of Dixie's hypersensitive class aspiration, those individuals who have risen through rational and specialised evaluation in an expanded meritocracy, as that term is understood by Michael Young's deceptively dark 1958 satire.¹¹ Except Dougal, of course, whose reaction to Time and Motion is to draw out or poeticise its rhythms in order to undermine it:

'[...] We had a man from Cambridge advising on motion study. It speeded up our output thirty per cent. Movements required to do any given task were studied in detail and he worked out the simplest pattern of movement involving the least loss of energy and time.'

'The least loss of energy and time!' Dougal commented.

'The least loss of energy and time,' said Mr Druce. 'All our workers' movements are now designed to conserve energy and time in feeding the line. You'll see it on the posters all over the factory, "Conserve energy and time in feeding the line.'"

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When this mantra of efficiency is revived in a dream by Dougal, it has become a song, and is accompanied by 'girls in factories doing a dance with only the movements of their breasts, bottoms, and arms as they sort, stack, pack, check, cone-wind, gum, uptwist, assemble, seam and set'.¹² The rationalisation of movement demanded by specialised jobs has here collapsed, and specialisms that had threatened to produce something like separate and isolating castes within the factory - or discrete human 'types' to feed to a cannibalistic line - have become one sexualised flow, with the linguistic 'movements' of the line (the assembly line/poetic line) reverting to more lyrical movements that might be based on the rhythms rising from the body itself.¹³

But it is not simply that Time and Motion is drowned out by poetry in Spark's novel - much more subversively, poetic rhythm and poetic connotation is read within and against the Time and Motion language already in circulation. The BPC's *Better Ways: Nineteen Paths to Higher Productivity* for example, returns obsessively to mnemonic alliteration (the "'Three S's" - simplification, standardisation, specialisation' - within which, the '[a]dvantages of variety reduction').¹⁴ It frequently moves into lists without punctuation or warning, giving a peculiar sense of poetic lineation, or, as in Dougal's dream, of breaking into song. And next to one diagram showing the maximum angles of body parts it recommends that managers make sure that workers:

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*[...] in repetition work, where thousands or even hundreds of thousands of parts may be made in a year, a most careful and detailed study may be amply repaid, for a few seconds lopped off each cycle will add up to a considerable saving of time and money.*¹⁵

'A considerable saving of time and money!' Still, as quaint as these guidebooks look now, they point to a revival of the most fundamental principles of British social organisation, just as Spark's story points to a scepticism over them. The conflict between Dougal and the others is nothing more than a contest over the labour theory of value, taken by the Scottish Enlightenment from Hanoverians

including John Locke. Looking for a way to reduce government to property rights, Locke had started with ownership of the self – clearly a problem for the doubled hero in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* – then theorised that when the right kind of bodily exertion was added to nature, nature is made useful as property, so that labour is not only a means of personal advancement but also a general social good.¹⁶ Against which reboot of the Hanoverian Protestant Work Ethic, comes a moment of work-scepticism from a figure who is vaguely ‘Highland... [and] fey’, and ‘pan-Celtic’ in sometimes being assumed to be Irish, and who has connotations of the feckless, the indisciplined, the balladic, the irrational, the superstitious, a Gothic oddity who re-stages the eighteenth century Scottish contest of civilized and barbarous, light and darkness, at the height of post-war consensus. Hendry had urged ‘[work] study men [to] remember that they are representatives of management, and should engage in no practice likely to lower its prestige’.¹⁷ Dougal’s tendency to find body rhythms under the rhythms of Time and Motion, on the contrary, is a scurrilous reassertion of what Pat Kane has described as a ‘Play Ethic’, something both deeply suspicious of imperatives to work harder and in its own way more productive.¹⁸

But if the Edinburgh graduate Dougal shows a distancing from the labour theory of value in Scotland from the mid-twentieth century, this also means undoing Scotland’s amplification of it in the eighteenth. Indeed the division of labour was given a certain historical inevitability in the Scottish Enlightenment by associating development with forms of property, the model of ‘staged’ historiography in Adam Smith’s *Lectures on Jurisprudence*.¹⁹ And perhaps the single best-travelled passage from the Scottish Enlightenment is Smith’s description of work specialisation in *The Wealth of Nations*, often later gestured towards by Thatcherites as a rationale for lowering labour costs. This gesture was misleading, of course – as well as the fact that Smith saw this process of work specialisation less as a goal to be striven for than a kind of developmental inevitability to be dealt with socially, he was worried enough about the potential psychological horrors of assembly lines to describe the need for a counterweight in state-funded provision for education.²⁰ In Smith’s highest stage of human development, the commercial stage, there is a clear public need to cope with the effects of this rationalisation:

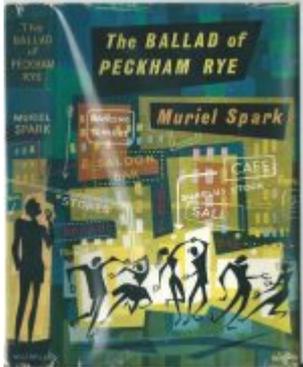
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of those who live by labour, that is, of the great body of the people, comes to be confined to a few very simple operations [...] His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues. But in every improved and civilised society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it.

Against these ills there is a shared duty to act – ‘the public can facilitate, can encourage, and can even impose upon almost the whole body of the people the necessity of acquiring those most essential parts of education’.²¹ And for Smith as for many Scottish Enlightenment literati, such an education, if it really wants to address work specialisation, should be general, critical, and encourage wide enquiry: ‘[a]n instructed and intelligent people... are more disposed to examine, and more capable of seeing through, the interested complaints of faction and sedition [...]’²²

It is telling then that the high point of Time and Motion subtly undermined in *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* also sees a rise of ethical questions about access to a general, non-specialist education. Published within a few months of Spark’s novel, G.E. Davie’s *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) calls for a defence of generalism against the kind of instrumentalising British education Davie sees as gaining dominance in the nineteenth century.²³ In which sense Spark’s staging of a contest contrast between Cambridge and the Edinburgh graduates, between the Time and Motion man and the poetic sceptic over Time and Motion – is extremely pointed – not in terms of educational ‘quality’, but in terms of attitudes towards generalism. General education, in the Davie thinking, should lead to graduates able to stand back from the instrumental tasks in which they might otherwise get tied up – it should make them civic actors – and it should also be accessible to anyone with ability (thus the question of Scottish resistance to university tuition fees). But what, asks *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, if education does not suggest a civic answer to the boredom and the body-narrowing of specialism at all, but instead gets drawn into the imperative of the ‘expertise of productive subjectivity’ and the imperatives of production bound up in Time and Motion?²⁴ What are the possible consequences, physical, social, and psychological, if the adaptation of Enlightenment’s logic of development accepts a public imperative to productivity

while jettisoning a public imperative to general criticality? *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* is just a short comic novel, yes, though a pretty funny one, and one with an awesome economy of expression - but its comic exaggerations of 'specialist' and 'general' educations holds this very barbed critique. If the power of post-war labour practices for the streamlining of work in our own times has been



underestimated, so has this playful and poetic voice. First published at the end of 1960, *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* sends Edinburgh graduate Dougal Douglas to an unglamorous region of south London, and a world that has seen a large-scale rationalisation of work during the post-war consensus. Dougal succeeds a Cambridge Time and Motion man to unleash chaos into this environment, exasperating union man Humphrey Place by suggesting absenteeism to the workers, scandalising Humphrey's fiancée Dixie with his sexualised and vaguely demonic presence, and puzzling his boss Mr. Druce, who had expected Dougal to concentrate on efficiency, whereas he encourages absenteeism and moonlights on another job by 'doubling' himself and reversing his name. In their own ways these three become comic foils in their tendencies to measure time by work: Druce struggles to explain the imperative of production, Humphrey earnestly obsesses over the fairness of work rates, Dixie, aspirational and hyper-aware of class gradations, dedicates her youth to saving.²⁵ Within which environment of work rationalisation, Dougal lives an excess described in bodily and in poetic terms.

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(c) *The Bottle Imp*