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Ineffective Institutions in Dickens's *Hard Times*

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Dickens began *Hard Times for These Times* in 1854, and the novel was published serially in his magazine *Household Words*. The serial publication of the novel was not unique; Dickens preferred this method of publication.[1] His decision to publish the novel in *Household Words* was taken to boost sales of the magazine, which had recently declined.[2] The publication of the novel came after that of *Bleak House*, which looked at social ills through the lens of Chancery Court, and before that of *Little Dorrit*, which viewed social ills as permeating everything, much as prison life permeated the lives of the characters in *Little Dorrit*.

Like the novel before it, and the novel after, *Hard Times* takes aim at the social ills of Victorian society. In the case of *Hard Times*, that aim takes three separate, but related approaches: the notion that facts, and not imagination, are required in life; the ineffectiveness of government, and Parliament in particular to resolve society's problems; and finally, that Utilitarianism and unbridled capitalism are harmful to society.

Dickens's attack of facts to the exclusion of imagination or "fancy" began in the eighteen-thirties, when he prepared to write *Nicholas Nickleby*. In February 1838, Dickens traveled to Yorkshire with his illustrator, Hablot K. Browne (Phiz), to visit a number of schools in Yorkshire which had gained notoriety for the poor treatment of students. His visit led to the inclusion of Dotheboys Hall, run by its sadistic schoolmaster, Wackford Squeers, in the novel. It is believed that Dickens's portrayal of Squeers was based on the life of William Shaw, who ran the Bowes Academy in Yorkshire; yet Dickens's attack against the administration of these schools is meant to be more universal in nature and not merely an indictment of a particular school. Michael Slater provides a number of details about the trip to Yorkshire in *Charles Dickens*, and writes: "On 2 February Dickens and Browne saw the one-eyed William Shaw, proprietor of Bowes Academy, one of the biggest schools in the area, and Dickens made a note to himself to research newspaper reports of prosecutions brought against this man fifteen years earlier after two boys had gone blind at his school" (116).

The Yorkshire schools were Dickens's first experience with a failing school system but it was not the last time he took an interest in schools. In 1843, he traveled to a "Ragged School" in Field Lane in an attempt to help Angela Burdett Coutts establish a series of schools where poor children could receive an education.[3] His letter to Ms. Coutts, dated September 16, 1843, describes the conditions he witnessed at the school:

> I have very seldom seen, in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere, anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children. . . The school is miserably poor, you may believe, and is almost entirely supported by the teachers themselves. . . The moral courage of the teachers is beyond all praise. They are surrounded by every possible adversity, and every disheartening circumstance that can be imagined. (*SL* 122 – 123)

Dickens feared that an education which relied on facts alone, a reliance bred in the doctrine of Utilitarianism, would lead to a loss of imagination or "fancy" and would culminate in a citizenry that viewed everything in binary fashion; right versus wrong; black versus white; rich versus poor. Dickens believed that the theory of Utilitarianism, which propounded that society should be concerned with the greatest good for the greatest number of people, was too vague. Depending on whose definition of good was used, Utilitarianism could justify any number of practices which, in fact, might be harmful to society.[4]

From the very beginning of the novel, Dickens strikes home with the opposition of fact to fancy when he introduces the reader to Mr. Gradgrind, master of the school in Coketown, who is: "A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who will not be talked into allowing anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, Sir—peremptorily Thomas—Thomas Gradgrind" (*HT* 10). Gradgrind raises his children in the same manner, emphasizing facts and dismissing "fancy" as a species of nonsense.

The idea that facts alone are worth learning is appreciated by Mr. Bounderby, who is also a man of facts and figures, as well as being a responsible proprietor of one of the largest factories in Coketown. The person of Bounderby, and his position as one of the owners of the manufactory in Coketown, leads the narrator to speculate rhetorically that there is a connection between the Gradgrind children and the workers in the Coketown factories:

> Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds? . . . That there was any Fancy in them demanding to be brought into healthy existence instead of struggling on in convulsions? That exactly in the ratio as they worked long and monotonously, the craving grew within them for some physical relief—some relaxation, encouraging good humour and good spirits, and giving them a vent—some recognized holiday, though it were but for an honest dance to a stirring band of music . . . (*HT* 29 - 30)

In this direct address to his readers, Dickens is explicitly linking the concepts of a misguided educational system and of unbridled capitalism together. If both focused solely on facts and efficiency, to the exclusion of everything else including "fancy," it would lead to disaster.

Gradgrind's personality was established early in the novel. Dickens then proceeds to inform the reader about the personality of Josiah Bounderby, that bastion of capitalist efficiency, in the following quotation:

> . . . [Bounderby was] a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up. . . A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility. (*HT* 20)

Mr. Bounderby, like all the other manufacturers in Coketown, believed in facts, and the facts pointed to the conclusion that the workers in Coketown were idlers, and not to be trusted. They were lazy, inefficient, and had to be prodded to work optimally. They were not even accorded proper names, but were referred to as "hands," as if they served one function only: to act as mere extensions of the machines on which they worked. According to Mr. Bounderby, "There's not a Hand in this town, Sir, man, woman or child, but has one ultimate object in life. That object is, to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon!" (*HT* 126). According to Mr. Bounderby, the "hands" wished to live a luxurious life and must be forced to apply themselves to tending their machines. The implication is that the factory owners, and not the "hands," are the only ones who should be allowed to live in luxury.

By having Gradgrind elected to Parliament for the district of Coketown, Dickens is able to unite the three themes of the work in the persons of Bounderby and Gradgrind. Both characters believe in facts and disdain imagination. Bounderby is seen as the ultimate capitalist who ruthlessly works his "hands" to extract the last bits of efficiency he can from them. Gradgrind is a representative of a governing body that caters to its own needs and offers no respite for the people it is intended to serve. Elected to Parliament, Gradgrind is made:

> . . . one of the respected members of the multiplication table, one of the deaf honourable gentlemen, dumb honourable gentlemen, blind honourable gentlemen, lame honourable gentlemen, dead honourable gentlemen, to every other consideration. Else wherefore live we in a Christian land, eighteen hundred and odd years after our Master? (*HT* 92 – 93)

In this passage, Dickens disparages a Parliament that he characterizes as ineffective. It is a theme that gestated during his time as a Parliamentary reporter and was born into the light of day in *Bleak House.* It was to emerge full-blown as the center of incompetence and nepotism that somehow gained control of all governmental functions, the Circumlocution Office, in *Little Dorrit*.

The denouement of the novel begins with the marriage of Louisa Gradgrind to Mr. Bounderby. At first, Louisa continues to believe in the strictures of her father and her husband but after visiting one of the workers at her

husband's factory, she realizes that the system in which she was brought up does not apply to the lives of the workers. She recognizes that the workers are not:

> Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws, and floundered into difficulty; something that was a little pinched when wheat was dear, and over-ate itself when wheat was cheap; something that increased at such a rate of percentage, and yielded such another percentage of crime. . .something wholesale, of which vast fortunes were made. . .(*HT* 155)

This passage is an attack against the theory developed by Thomas Malthus, who proposed that there were arithmetical principles governing population growth, wealth formation, and employment; propositions which Dickens renounces in the novel. Louisa, although possessed of new-found knowledge, realizes that what she lacks in her life is not factual principles but imagination and love. She searches for these two qualities in her life and observes that her father and husband cannot provide them. She returns to her father's house and leaves that of Mr. Bounderby, who renounces her. Mr. Gradgrind, chastened by the death of his wife and Mr. Bounderby's treatment of his daughter, has a change of heart. He understands that there is more to life than facts and figures; that imagination and fancy have a part to play as well. When Mr. Gradgrind approaches Bounderby in an attempt at a reconciliation between husband and wife, he is met with a stern refusal by the industrialist.

Near the end of the novel, Bounderby's claims to self-reliance, hard work, and lack of formal education, prove false when his mother, Mrs. Pegler, a mother he claimed had abandoned him, appears at his house where she rebukes the visiting Mr. Gradgrind:

> My dear boy knows, and will give *you* to know, that though he come of humble parents, he come of parents that loved him as dear as the best could, and never thought it hardship on themselves to pinch a bit that he might write and cipher beautiful, and I've his books at home to show it!'. . . And I'll give you to know, Sir—for this my dear boy won't—that though his mother kept but a little village shop, he never forgot her, but pensioned me on thirty pounds a year—more than I want, for I put by out of it—only making the condition that I was to keep down in my own part, and make no boasts about him, and not trouble him. And I never have, except with looking at him once a year, when he has never knowed it.' (*HT* 252)

One by one, the claims made by Bounderby, and by extension, the rich industrialists in Coketown and by the members in Parliament, come crashing down. The strict educational system practiced by Mr. Gradgrind and endorsed by Bounderby, produces stunted adults who, while filled with facts, lack imagination and love. The "hands," who are held in contempt by Bounderby and his cohorts, are seen to be better people than their employers. The notion of the self-made man, who without assistance or education of any kind, raises himself from the gutter to become rich, is given the lie by a simple woman who was granted thirty pounds a year to keep her son's past a secret. In the end, Josiah Bounderby is exposed as a fraud and by extension the whole notion of Utilitarianism, founded as it is on the basis of unbridled laissez-faire capitalism, is also exposed as a bankrupt fraud.

For Dickens, facts and figures, without imagination and love, make for a life that is incomplete. Power and wealth that is based on oppressing those less fortunate while at the same time neglecting friends and family, leads to a sterile, heartless, life. A legislature that is not responsive to the needs of its people fails in the purpose for which it was created. *Hard Times* may be allegorical, it may be moralizing, but it expresses Dickens's belief that life is meant to be lived: it is not a theory which proposes the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Furthermore, people are not easily categorized into neat black and white polarities. What was true for Dickens's time, is true for our time as well: if life is reduced to a series of polarities; if education is to be based strictly on facts with no room for imagination; if government is not responsible to those governed; if power and wealth are concentrated in the hands of the few; then there will be *Hard Times for These Times,* as well.

Abbreviations

HT *Hard Times*

SL *Selected Letters of Charles Dickens*

Notes

1. Dickens began using the serial method of publication with the release of the *Pickwick Papers*. Each installment was issued on a monthly basis and featured thirty-two pages of text and one or two illustrations. The installments were bound in green covers with an illustration on each cover; advertisements were generally included in each installment. The monthly installment cost one shilling, which contributed to the popularity of the format. The final installment of each of the novels was published in a double issue, which included sixty-four pages of text and at least four illustrations. Hard bound copies of the novels were issued after the full novel was published in serial format. Dickens's two magazine offerings, published weekly, *Household Words* and *All The Year Round,* also made use of the serial form of publication.

2. Dickens was the "conductor" of *Household Words* (he declined to use the word editor), as well as being part owner of the magazine along with the publishers Bradbury and Evans. *Household Words* was published from 1850 – 1859, and was disbanded when he argued with his publishers regarding his separation from Catherine Dickens. The title of the magazine is derived from Henry V, Act IV, scene iii, when the King gives his St. Crispin Day speech, telling his followers that their deeds will be "Familiar in the mouth as household words" (Shakespeare I: 556). The magazine included articles on current events, news, inventions, editorials, and works of fiction. Dickens personally edited each submission, often re-writing entire sections of an article or literary piece, and in a letter to William H. Wills, sub-editor of the magazine, urged him to scrupulously edit each piece with the adjuration: "Brighten it, brighten it, brighten it!" (*SL* 259-260). After publication of *Household Words* ceased, Dickens began a new weekly magazine, *All The Year Round*, which was published until 1893, several years after Dickens's death in 1870.

3. The Ragged Schools were a series of private institutions that were established as charitable organizations and were funded by private individuals. The aim of these schools was to provide a rudimentary knowledge of reading, handwriting and arithmetic to children whose families were too poor to send them to private institutions. Formalized, state run schooling was not adopted in England until 1870, when the Elementary Education Act was made law.

4. The notion that Utilitarianism can mean different things to different people is raised by Philip Hobsbaum in his discussion of the novel *Hard Times*: "It [the image of Coketown] is, however, powerfully backed by the figure of Thomas Gradgrind, who links it up with Utilitarianism. This philosophy is based upon Bentham's dictate concerning social legislation: that government should aim towards the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. It is quite plain, on closer scrutiny, that this argument is open-ended; depending entirely upon who is defining 'greatest' and 'happiness' and from what position in life they are considering the proposition" (175).

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