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☪ Research Article

A Reassessment of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* as a Socialist Critique against Capitalist Ethos

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to make a reassessment and revaluation of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* to expose how capitalism and the ills of England's Industrial Revolution inflicted its wrath on labour and bourgeoisie in the 19th century England. It also aims at manifesting how humans were forced to become machines under the aegis of capital and how the dominance of reason, intellect and wit in the 18th century minimised the effective side of humanitarianism

during the clash between capital and labour. It also reflects the miserable conflict between head and heart or reason and sentiments. It also makes a severe attack on the educational theory of “facts” and “statistics.” Through the two pivotal advocates and champions of industrial capitalism in the novel--Gradgrind and Bounderby--the paper provides a socio-economic critique of the times of early phase of capitalism, *Laissez Faire* and Utilitarianism when the processes of production were ideologically privileged over the inhuman existence of the workers.

Keywords: Industrialism, Laissez Faire, Utilitarianism, Unionism, Dehumanization, Humanitarianism

Communism and Socialism are umbrella terms referring to two left-wing schools of economic thought; both of them oppose Capitalism. These ideologies have inspired various social and political movements since the 19th century. Communism is “a political movement that believes in an economic system in which the state controls the means of producing everything on behalf of the people. It aims to create a society in which everyone is treated equally” (Hornby 305), or it is “a political system in which the government controls the production of all food and goods, and there is no private owned property (Longman 334),” or it is “a political ideology advocating a classless society, the abolition of private ownership and all sources of production being collectively owned and controlled by the people” (Robinson 278).

Socialism is “a set of political and economic theories based on the belief that everyone has the equal right to a share of a country’s wealth and that the government should own and control the main industries” (Hornby 1452), or in some similar or so other words it is “an economic and political system in which large industries are owned by the government, and taxes are used to take some wealth away from richer citizens and give it to poorer citizens” (Longman 1670), or it is “a political doctrine or system which aims to create a classless society by removing the nation’s wealth (land, industries, transport systems, etc.) out of private and into public hands” (Robinson 1330).

Both are opposite of Capitalism (private ownership), where limitations don’t exist and reward comes to those who go beyond the minimum. In capitalist societies, owners are allowed to keep the excess of production they earn. Capitalism tends to create a sharp divide between the wealthiest and the poorest

In a nutshell, both-Socialism and Communism (utopian public ownership)-safeguard the weak, the have-nots and the labour communities from their dehumanisation, exploitation, repression, suppression, oppression and subjugation in the hands of the haves and capitalists and try to found an equalitarian social system. Many of the issues said here are focused in Dickens’ *Hard Times: For These Times* (commonly known as *Hard Times*).

Hard Times, published in 1854 in weekly instalments in a periodical magazine *Household Words*, consists in several issues that are apparently dissociated. They confirm the horrible bitterness of the ethos of industrialism, laissez faire, the principal of utilitarianism, shallow self-interest and self-importance, the anti-social power of the capitalist, and trade

unionism, condemnation of discord between labourers and industrialists, obstinacy and stubbornness of trade unions and the fruitlessness of Parliament itself. Published at the time of initial 'textile phase' of England's Industrial Revolution, it is a powerful indictment of the inherent exploitative and repressive character of the emerging industrial system that based itself on the reduction and dehumanisation of the factory workers as mere mechanical units of manufacture and production, devoid of any human sentiments and emotions. It is unmistakably possessed of a comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of the Victorian civilisation are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy—aggressive formulation of an inhumane spirit. It fully manifests the utmost tragic limit to which intellect and emotion may entangle. Throughout long Christian tradition this novel is possessed of the miserable conflict between head and heart or reason and sentiments. The dominance of reason, intellect and wit in the eighteenth century minimised the effective side of humanitarianism in this clash. The novelist also makes a severe attack on the educational theory of 'facts' and 'statistics'. The filth, foul and squalid of capital industrialism is presented through the picture of Coketown and other issues are suggested through the characters like Gradgrind, Harthouse, Bounderby, Slackbridge and Mrs. Sparsit.

The novel, through its two pivotal advocates of industrial capitalism-Gradgrind and Bounderby-provides a socio-economic critique of the times of early phase of capitalism when the processes of production were ideologically privileged over the inhuman existence of the workers and when a uniform monotonous life of facts and statistics found supremacy in private as well as public life, institutional structures and value system that guided the middle nineteenth century England. The resultant crisis referring to working class reactions in the form of various militant actions has aptly been described by one of the eminent historians of the Industrial Revolution:

The most obvious evidence of this crisis is the high wind of social discontent which blew across Britain in successive gusts between the last years of the wars and the middle of the 1840's... Luddite and Radical, trade unionist and utopian socialist, Democratic and Chartist. At no other time in modern British history have the common people so persistently, profoundly and, often, desperately dissatisfied. At no other period since the seventeenth century can we speak of large masses of them as revolutionary, or discern at least one moment of political crisis... when something like a revolution might actually have developed. (Hobsbawm 1969).

The humanitarian novel with which the name of Dickens is pre-eminently associated is the popular section of an extensive humanitarian literature, and as such it is a very valuable record of a deep and far-reaching philosophic movement, which had its beginning in the eighteenth century, and rose to its sentimental culmination in the nineteenth century. The humanitarian movement gave us the humanitarian novel and in turn the novel probably accelerated the movement. Dickens became a sort of professor of humanitarianism, and he held this position for nearly thirty years. The light of that knowledge which was indeed somewhat false and misleading, and the light of an imagination of strange and alluring splendour, he tuned upon a great variety of English scenes and characters like Gradgrind, Harthouse, Bounderby,

Slackbridge and Mrs. Sparsit, but especially upon workhouses, debtor's prisons, pawnbroker's shop, hovels of the poor, law offices, dark streets and dark alleys, all the London haunts, the lurking places of crime and vice' and pain. Dickens' theme was always the downtrodden and the oppressed. Here *Hard Times* traces the life of a sensible, milk-hearted girl Sissy, a circus child abandoned by her remorseful father. She is given resort by a fact-ridden retired merchant 'Thomas Gradgrind' whose off-springs 'Tom and Louisa' were brought up in a manner absolutely divorced off love and affection that results in the catastrophe in the live of both. Louisa's unfortunate marriage ends in ever loneliness of her life and Tom who had committed the sin of robbery in his brother- in-law, Bounderby's bank is rescued by Sissy's efforts. These saddening happenings compel Gradgrind to realise the flaws of his theory of Fact.

Bounderby is a rich man, banker and capitalist who is entirely devoid of any affection or compassion. In his attitude to represent himself as a truly independent man, he has cut himself off from all personal relationships. All that he considers as a link between himself and others is power. He had pensioned his mother off under condition that she would never claim him to be her son; he deserts his wife when she asserts herself beyond being a mere article to possess. He dismisses honest and diligent Stephen Blackpool immediately when he finds that he is not ready to go against his lot though he knows that it may put him to starvation. He functions according to the doctrine of Utilitarianism. Acting entirely out of self-interest that is not only the source of money but that of power also, he is able to show self interest in Bentham's doctrine of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Sen 169). When he has a talk with Harthouse, he praises the filth, foul and squalid of Coketown's industrial chimneys as "the healthiest thing of world in all respects" (169). He describes the work of the 'hands' as: "It's the pleasantest work there is, and it is the lightest work there is, and its' the best paid work there is. More than that, we couldn't improve the mills themselves, unless we laid down Turkey carpets on the floors, which were not going to do" (169).

Laissez Faire is an economic system in which transactions between private parties are free from government intervention such as regulation, privileges, tariffs and subsidies. For the study of *Hard Times* attractive point to notice is the manner through which "practical" is ceased to mean simple or "down to earth". *Laissez Faire* theory became popular throughout Europe. Dickens' character Gradgrind favoured this theory. This theory stresses capitalism. Since an individual can work without government's interference, he can easily become a capitalist. Dickens has criticised capitalism because the rich are becoming richer and leading highly aristocratic life. The poor are totally ignored. Bounderby, the industrialist, is used to criticising the labour class because they make hue and cry at the aristocratic manners of the capitalists. Characters like Bounderby represent the rich businessmen of the Industrial Revolution who ignore the rights of the poor, Bounderby criticises the 'hands' that they want "to be set up in a coach and six and to be fed on turtle soup and venison with a gold spoon"; the hands "were a bad lot altogether, gentlemen", "restless", "never knew what they wanted", "lived upon the best, and bought fresh butter; and insisted on Mocha coffee, and rejected all but prime parts of meat, and yet were eternally dissatisfied and unmanageable" (165).

Dickens observes that the Coketown industrialists always represented themselves as ruined:

They were ruined, when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to look into their works; they were ruined, when such inspectors considered it doubtful whether they were justified in chopping people up with their machinery; they were utterly undone when it was hinted that perhaps they need not always make quite so much smoke... Whenever a Coketowner felt he was ill-used—that is to say, whenever he was not left entirely alone, and it was proposed to hold him accountable for the consequences of any of his acts—he was sure to come out with the awful menace that he would ‘sooner pitch his property into the Atlantic’... However, the Coketowners were so patriotic after all, that they never had pitched their property into the Atlantic yet, but, on the contrary, had been kind enough to make mighty food care of it. (165)

The workmen have excommunicated Stephen Blackpool for not joining their union dismissed by Bounderby for daring to defend their stands. Stephen is left all alone. He is discarded from his community and also dismissed from his own job by his employer. Here Dickens has made Stephen his mouthpiece to reveal the miserable life of labourers:

Look round town—so rich as it is—and see the numbers O’ people as has been broughten into bein heer, for to weave and to card, and to piece out a livin’, aw the same one way, somehows, twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, and where we live, an in what numbers, an by what chances, and wi’ what sameness; and look how the mill is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no nigher to any dis’ant object—‘ceptin awlus Death. (165)

Through Stephen too, Dickens has criticised *Laissez Faire* and the venomous division it creates in society. Towards the end Dickens seems to give a prophetic warning to the “Utilitarian economists, skeletons of school masters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infields, gabblers of many little dog’s cared creeds”, for fear that “in the day of (their) triumph, when romance is utterly driven out” of the souls of labourers (poor) “and they and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of you” (166).

Utilitarianism lays great stress and emphasis on material goods and is entirely regardless of spiritual demands and happiness. This philosophy says if the lot of happiness is equal, gambling is good as poetry. As per this philosophy, the happiness of an utterly selfish life was equal to, or greater than the happiness of an unselfish life. Gradgrind crammed his son on facts. The imaginative arts were scorned and the mind was yoked in the service of progress.

The novel exposes the conflict between fact and fancy; and hard fact is the biggest component of Mr. Gradgrind’s Philosophy of education. People who do not follow this theory in their life are ignored by the utilitarian. These people are made to suffer hard like Sissy Jupe, Louisa, Thomas and others in the novel. The world of hard facts unfolds the people hankering after money and material things like gold. The novel starts with the scene of a schoolroom. Here children are made to stuff their minds with facts as many, “little vessels ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured onto them until they were full to the brim” (162). Gradgrind is the steadfast believer of the philosophy of utilitarianism in the novel. He says to schoolmaster:

Now, what I want is facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Facts alone are wanted in life (162).” Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts, “nothing else will ever be of service to them. This is the principal on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principal upon which I bring up these children. Stick to facts, sir!. (162)

The facts related to Mr. Gradgrind are that he is a retired manufacturer of hardware, the M.P. of Coketown, the owner of a school and the father of five children. Dickens is intended to expose the disaster that is expected to happen as the result of the steadfast implementation of this kind of philosophy. The pivotal passage is the trial lesson in chapter 2. A pale and diseased boy named Bitzer explains ‘horse’ as “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty- four grinders, four eye-teeth and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shed with iron. Age known by marks in mouth” (162). If these facts are considered together, they do not give the right picture of a horse.

The students are called by their roll numbers not by their names because they are merely numbers. Gradgrind’s factual education philosophy is not possessed of humanitarianism, love and affection but of commercialism. Mr. Gradgrind calls Sissy Jupe by a number, ‘Girl no. 20’—whose real name is kept in dark because of the particular education system in which a human being is measured through a statistical number, belongs to the circus troupe, Sleary’s Horse riding. His philosophy of facts is so inhuman and strong that he doesn’t consider her a living being. She is merely a number for him. He describes her as, “Girl number twenty possessed not facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals” (Dickens 3). She fails to provide the convincing definition of a horse to Gradgrind according his theory of education though she has first hand information about horse because of living in circus with several kinds of animals around. When girl no.20 Sissy defends her taste for a flowery patterned carpet by stating, “I am very fond of flowers... and I would fancy...” (Sen 162). As she utters the word ‘fancy’, the schoolmaster immediately pounces upon her in a swaggering manner, “Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn’t fancy. That’s it: you are never to fancy” (162). And “You are not, Cecilia Jupe”. “Fact, fact, fact”, says the government officer, “Fact, fact, fact” reverberates Thomas Gradgrind.

Mr. Gradgrind implies is theory not only in school but it is the same with him at home also. “No little Gradgrind had ever seen a face in the moon; it was up in the moon before it could speak distinctly. No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are! No little Gradgrind had ever known wonder on the subject...” (163). The facts in which Gradgrind takes interest are not the facts of vitality or reality but only cut and dried facts that can be defined reasonably and intellectually.

He is no less harsh to his own children. He is rough and sordid to his own children. He forced both his daughter and son to follow his absurd theory of facts blindly. The conversation between father and daughter would move anyone’s heart: “You, Thomas and you, to whom the circle of science is open; Thomas and you who may be said to be replete with facts; Thomas and you, who have been trained in mathematical exactness; Thomas and you, here!” cried Mr.

Gradgrind. “In this degraded position! I am amazed.” “I was tired, father. I have been tired a long time,” said Louisa. “Tired? Of what?” asked the astonished father. “I don’t know of what-of everything, I think” (Dickens 11).

Louisa, the daughter of his, has no way out for her emotional life except her brother. Her brother Tom finds outlet for his emotions in gambling, “When the fact about who has committed robbery is revealed, Tom says to his father that all the time he is taught utilitarian philosophy” (Sen 163). “So many people are employed in position of trust; so many people, out of it so many will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times of its being a law. How can I help laws” (163). This individual philosophy is belittled in favour of conformity to abstract rules of statistics; the choice of human being is restrained under the bends of mechanical determinism. Thus, Gradgrind’s philosophy believes in judging human behaviour rationally and in nipping emotion, fancy and imagination in the bud. Bitzer’s argument with Gradgrind at the moment is worthy to notice because in it Gradgrind is answered exactly according to his own education philosophy and he feels embarrassed at it.

“Bitzer—have you a heart?”

“The circulation, Sir,” returned Bitzer, “couldn’t be carried on without one--”

“What motive—even motive is reason-can you have for preventing the escape of this wretched youth”, said Mr. Gradgrind, “and crushing his miserable father? See his sister here. Pity us!...” (163).

“I am going to take young Mr. Tom back to Coketown, in order to deliver him over to Mr. Bounderby. Sir, I have no doubt whatever that Mr. Bounderby will then promote me to young Mr. Tom’s situation. And I wish to have his situation, sir, for it will be a rise to me, and will do me good.”

“If this is solely a question of self interest with you.....” “Mr. Gradgrind began.”

“I beg your pardon for interrupting sir,” returned Bitzer; “but I am sure you know that the whole social system is a question of self-interest.”

Bitzer is not ready to accept any kind of offer from Gradgrind. His promotion at the bank is worth more than any amount Mr. Gradgrind can give. Mr. Gradgrind now says that he had got education in his model school, in this order he wanted to make Bitzer feel gratified. But Bitzer replies, “My schooling was paid for,” says Bitzer; “It was a bargain; and when I came away, the bargain ended” (164).

Something happens in the case of Gradgrind’s daughter Louisa. Mr. Gradgrind finds no reason why Louisa would not marry his friend, a rich, manufacturer Bounderby. From the economic point of view they are too matched couples; her lack of emotions for him wouldn’t disturb their life any how because Bounderby requires nothing immaterial from her. Apart from the other characters in the novel, James Harthouse also has faith in the policy of self-interest.

Hard Times deals with the condemnation of principles of industrialism. Dickens is callously against industrial capitalism. He makes his grim satire on inhumanity and commercialism. In *Hard Times* he condemns not only the policy of an individual, but the social evils. Shaw observes, “This is Karl Marks, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter, rising up against civilisation itself as a disease, and declaring that it is not our disorder but our order that is

horrible; that it is that is not our criminals but our magnates that are robbing and murdering us... Here you find no more villains and heroes, but only oppressors and victims, oppressing and suffering in spite of themselves, driven by a huge machinery which grinds to pieces the people it should nourish and ennoble, and having for its directors the basest and most foolish of us instead of the most far-sighted” (166).

G. B. Shaw believes that what Dickens started has now expanded into “A passionate revolt against the whole industrial order of modern world” (Shaw 1). The philosophy that was ruling over the model school of Gradgrind is governing Coketown and its industries. His philosophy of ‘facts’ is only the violent outcome of the inhuman spirit of the Victorian materialism. In Gradgrind, though obnoxious, it is honest and disinterested; Bounderby is an industrialist full of greed of power and material progress.

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