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# **Notes on Teaching International Studies with Novels: *Hard Times*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Quiet American***

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## **Notes on Teaching International Studies with Novels: *Hard Times, Half of a Yellow Sun and The Quiet American***

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### Abstract:

This essay records efforts over several years of undergraduate teaching to show how the work of creative writers complements the analyses of social scientists and historians to bring home the relevance and human dimension of central questions in international relations and development studies. I assign three novels by very different authors – Charles Dickens, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Graham Green – alongside ‘core’ scholarly texts about the implications of utilitarianism, the politics of ethnicity and the impact of great power intervention during the Cold War. Students’ responses to this self-conscious comparison of two ways of understanding are encouraging. They see vividly how social processes affect people’s lives; explore the mindset and motivations (moral or not) of people living under different circumstances from today; and gain an appreciation of the difficulty of analysing and interpreting one’s own social and political reality.

### About the author:

John Harriss is a social anthropologist and Director of the School for International Studies at Simon Fraser University. Since 2010 he is Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d’études du développement*. He has published extensively on the politics and the political economy of South Asia, and of India in particular. Before coming to SIS in 2006, he headed the Development Studies Institute (DESTIN) at the London School of Economics, where he was the Institute’s founding Programme Director.

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## Notes on Teaching International Studies with Novels: *Hard Times*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Quiet American*\*

The creative imagination of the literary artist often has achieved insights into social processes which have remained unexplored in social science  
(Lewis Coser)

... appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment  
(George Eliot)

David Lewis, Dennis Rodgers and Michael Woolcock argue, in their essay on ‘The Fiction of Development’, that ‘there may be a case for widening the scope of the development knowledge base conventionally considered to be ‘valid’ (2008: 199). They go on to discuss the importance on the one hand of narrative and of story-telling in social science, and on the other the significance of ‘fiction’ as a means of exploring and of expressing fundamental truths about human experience and human understandings of the world. Theirs is a project that has parallels in some earlier work, such as in Philip Darby’s book on *The Fiction of Imperialism: Reading between International Relations and Post-Colonialism* (1998). For Lewis and his co-authors a significant text from the earlier literature is Lewis Coser’s *Sociology through Literature* (1972), from which I have taken my first epigraph; and much of the body of their paper is concerned with illustrating Coser’s point in regard to insights into various aspects of ‘development’. The aim of the present essay is to record an attempt over several years to put the arguments of ‘The Fiction of Development’ into practice in undergraduate teaching, and in doing so to discuss the relevance of three novels written by very different novelists, from different periods. I hope to show here how the analyses of social scientists and of historians are complemented by the work of creative writers – and, at least in brief, what I believe my students have gained from this. The

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\* I am very grateful for their comments on early versions of this essay to my family – to Gundi Harriss, Patricia Harriss, and Kaveri Qureshi; to my former students Drew Stewart and Laura Gray; to Tony Barnett at LSE/LSHTM (his scepticism about the value of this exercise notwithstanding); and to Neera Chandhoke in Delhi.

aim is to straddle two ways of understanding the world, by bringing together different sorts of texts under one conceptual roof – in this case that supplied by the idea of ‘development’.

Students are exposed to different ways of understanding the same historical experience, through approaches that both complement and diverge from each other.<sup>1</sup>

### **‘IS451: Core Texts in International Studies’**

This is the bland title of one of the two courses that I designed as part of the ‘capstone’ of the undergraduate major in International Studies at Simon Fraser University. This, and a ‘writing intensive’ course in which students are taught to write in different kinds of professional ways (those of a ‘literature review’, a ‘briefing paper’, a ‘policy paper’ and an op-ed) about various problems in international policy and practice, are required courses studied by all majors. But why study ‘core texts’? What are ‘core texts’? Of course the only answer to the second of these questions is comparable with the answer to the question of what constitutes the ‘great tradition’ of English literature that is posed by Leavis’s classic work of criticism (1948). Leavis begins his book with the words ‘The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad ...’. As he goes on to say this is his critical judgement, which he proceeds to defend vigorously. In much the same way what may be considered ‘core texts’ in International Studies is a matter of judgement, and I will defend mine. I have taken as ‘core texts’ the following books: *Prosperity and Violence: The Political Economy of Development*, by Robert Bates (2001); David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism* (2005); Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (1944/1957/2001); *Imagined Communities: The Origins and Spread Of Nationalism* by Benedict Anderson (1983); and Odd Arne Westad’s history of *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (2005). Clearly, given that a majority of these are quite new books, this selection isn’t an attempt to define a ‘great tradition’ of work in development/international studies – though it is an interesting exercise to reflect on what five or six books one might include in such a listing (my own first thoughts: Polanyi, for sure; Barrington Moore’s *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966); Gershenkon’s *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (1962);

Paul Baran's *The Political Economy of Growth* (1957); Amartya Sen's *Poverty and Famines* (1981) .... Others?).

As I explain my choice of 'core texts' I believe that I will answer the first of the questions that I posed: why study 'core texts' at all? The question arises because, for me here, 'text' means 'book', and I have come across colleagues who say that they see no reason for reading books as opposed to articles, while it has become usual on student reading lists, for them to be guided to read just 'pages x-y' of a book or even of a journal article. Against this kind of thinking and of practice, studying a book as a whole – I suggest – encourages appreciation of the complexity and nuance of the critical arguments of important thinkers, and consideration of the whole of an argument. This is, of course, not a reason for not reading articles!

My selection of core texts reflects the central concerns in our teaching of 'International Studies' at Simon Fraser University with international development, and with conflict and security. Robert Bates' *Prosperity and Violence* is to most other book-length texts what a novella is to a novel, presenting a clear historical analysis of the political economy of development, over the last millennium, in not much more than 100 pages. It reflects, though lightly so, the author's theoretical stance, grounded in rational choice, and presents models of agrarian society, of state formation in early modern Europe and in post-colonial societies, of development as economic growth, and of state failure in the context of the Cold War and of events following its end (though the last is developed more substantially in the same writer's *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late Century Africa*, 2008) – all of which are more or less good to think with. Reading of the book thus prompts discussion of the role and value of models in social science, and of rational choice theory, as well as of Bates's argument about the central problems of contemporary development. His necessarily schematic treatment of the significance of the Cold War ties in well with Westad's substantial historical analysis. But I have taken to reading and discussing next Harvey's *A Brief History* as a theoretical counterpoint to Bates's work, and a substantial analysis of the ideas that are driving contemporary development, of their foundations and of their ascendancy in a particular historical conjuncture – that of the crisis of capital accumulation in the 1970s – and of their implications across the world. The book invites discussion of what constitutes Marxist analysis, of capitalism, and of class relations, as well as of

the meanings of ‘globalisation’. It also provides an introduction to Polanyi, given that Harvey expressly introduces ideas from *The Great Transformation*. This is of course a ‘classic’, if by this we mean a book that is continually being rediscovered and read in different ways (see the discussion by Keith Hart and Chris Hann, 2009). It is a sprawling and in many ways uneven book, and one that many students find difficult while others are inspired by its language and some have told me that it is the most important book that they have ever read. It remains a powerful moral and historical critique of economic liberalism, as Harvey argues, as well as having developed what have been foundational arguments in economic anthropology and in international relations (given the way in which John Ruggie, seminally, developed the idea of ‘embedded liberalism’: 1982). The final chapter, ‘Freedom in a Complex Society’, invites discussion of the meanings of freedom – with cross reference to Sen’s *Development as Freedom* (1999) – and of social democracy in opposition to liberalism, and relates back to Harvey’s arguments in *A Brief History*. The three books together, I believe, very effectively elaborate upon different ways of thinking about ‘development’ and what it has meant historically and means today.

Odd Arne Westad’s history of *The Global Cold War* examines particularly the ways in which the ‘Third World’ (as the ‘developing world’ was quite sensibly described – he argues – in the period he is talking about) was shaped by Cold War events, but also how what happened in the Third World influenced the unfolding of the Cold War itself. In part the book invites thinking over the analytical value of Bates’s models, in particular, and it sets development thinking historically into its political context. But it is also, of course, about the political ideas and the policies associated with them that have, through the actions especially of the United States and of the erstwhile Soviet Union, created the world in which we live. For Westad the Cold War was a contest between the different projects of social progress (of ‘development’) that were represented by the two super-powers of that recent era – projects that he sums up in the titles of his first two chapters: ‘The empire of liberty’ and ‘The empire of justice’. Westad accounts historically for the origins of many recent conflicts; and he explains the shift in the Third World away from communism, as the Cold War developed, towards what he refers to as ‘identitarian politics’ – such, for example, as political action based on one or other construction of Muslim identity. It is



for this reason that I have taken also amongst my ‘core texts’, Anderson’s study of the origins and spread of nationalism, which also invites reflection upon the nature and meanings of ethnicity. The idea of *Imagined Communities* is an extremely powerful one, deserving the critical discussion that it invites.

## The Novels

The novels that I have chosen to for reading alongside these books by social scientists and historians are Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, published in 1854, which is read against *The Great Transformation*, as a study of the experience of nineteenth century industrialism and of the applications in society of utilitarianism – also discussed by Polanyi at some length; the young Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, published in 2006, which as a novel about the Biafra war of the 1960s complements Bates’s analysis of post-colonial states, *Imagined Communities*, and Westad’s arguments about ‘identitarian politics’; and Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, published in 1955, and set in Vietnam before the final defeat of the French – a novel about American interventionism in the context of the Cold War, which highlights the contradictions of the youthful idealism of ‘the empire of liberty’.

### *Hard Times*<sup>2</sup>

Dickens is rather an obvious novelist to read in the context of studies of development, because – in the views of many critics – he took the English novel to new levels, in a time of rapid social change, partly because he wrote with purpose, to make his readers think about what was going on in the society in which they lived (he is specifically referred to in this regard by Polanyi, for his campaigning against the Commission on the Poor Law, 2001: 102). Dickens was engaged with the meanings of modernity in the mid-nineteenth century, and though he is sometimes associated in the popular imagination with Mr. Pickwick, the world of coaching inns and of ‘Olde England’, he was actually fascinated by machines and especially by railways, about which he wrote quite a lot. In his mature work, including *Hard Times*, some of his writing is about the industrial society that he saw coming to be, and about which he held nuanced views. In this he was like other nineteenth century writers who shared in Victorian doubts about ‘progress’. In parts of his novels, and of his other writings, Dickens shows that he did not regret

the passing of the old world of a primarily rural society – as did some of his contemporaries – and that he welcomed the possibilities of social change. In *Dombey and Son*, for example, he describes a dismal scene unfolding before the eyes of Mr. Dombey, looking out from the train on the approach to Birmingham, but he says that it is Dombey's own state of mind that leads him to see 'ruin and a picture of decay, instead of hopeful change' (*Dombey*, chapter 20). *Hard Times*, however, written in the aftermath of Dickens' observations of a long lock-out of workers in the northern English town of Preston, reflects nothing of this idea of 'hopeful change'. Though it is considered, as it was by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958), as being amongst the (generally unsuccessful) English 'industrial novels' of the nineteenth century, *Hard Times* isn't so much a report on conditions in an industrial town – and disappointed some of its contemporary critics for this reason – as it is a critique of the culture of industrial capitalism. As the critic David Craig wrote, it is a 'a source of insights into a specific phase in that long train of social experience which has brought us to where we are' (1969: 14) – as a novel 'about a kind of bondage to routine and calculation so integral to the culture of industrial societies' (1969: 12). In its way it is as much a moral critique of economic liberalism as is *The Great Transformation*.

The Preston that Dickens saw in the early months of 1854 was probably not unlike the 'Coketown' of his novel, or even cities in the emergent economies of our own day:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it ... a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye ... it contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours... to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow. (*Hard Times* Book One, chapter 5: 65)

The long descriptive passage from which these lines are taken brings out the theme of 'routine and calculation' that Dickens, very much like Polanyi, sees as undermining our humanity. Later in the book Louisa, its tragic heroine, is described entering 'one of the dwellings of the Coketown Hands':

... for the first time in her life, she was face to face with anything like individuality in connection with them ... She knew them in crowds passing to and from their nests, like ants or beetles. But she knew from her reading infinitely more of the ways of toiling

insects than of these toiling men and women. Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand ... she had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component drops. (*Hard Times* Book Two, chapter 6: 187)

Here the novelist conveys wonderfully well the meaning of what Polanyi describes as the necessary liberal fiction that labour – which really means ‘people’ – is simply a commodity. The description through the novel of the Coketown workers as ‘Hands’, reduced to minding machines, also anticipates some of Marx’s writing about the impact of capitalist industrialization, and Braverman’s much more recent book on the effects of industrial organization, which bears the sub-title ‘the degradation of work’ (Braverman 1974). The idea that ‘labour’ under capitalism involves the alienation of human beings from their ‘species being’ comes close to the central theme of *Hard Times*, which has to do with the inhumanity brought by utilitarian calculation. And Dickens’ emphasis on the regulation of individual action – ‘people ... who all went in and out at the same hours ... and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow’ – anticipates E.P. Thompson’s classic paper on ‘Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’ (1967). Craig, in his essay about the novel, argues that ‘...Dickens was never more surely in touch with rightful popular feeling than when, in this particular novel, he made rigid systematism ... his target rather than the more glaring sorts of material evil’, and he goes on to refer to a contemporary writer who said that the New Poor Law, the creation of Utilitarian philosophy, ‘did more to sour the hearts of the labouring population than did the privations consequent on all the actual poverty of the land’ (Craig 1969: 21).

The central character of *Hard Times*, Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, Member of Parliament for Coketown, is introduced at the beginning of the novel in his schoolroom, and described as:

A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations ... With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication tables always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. (*Hard Times* Book One, chapter 2: 48)

Gradgrind is Dickens’ satirical portrait of the Utilitarian, an exponent of the philosophy associated above all with Bentham and Mill, discussed by Polanyi in his chapters on ‘The Birth of the Liberal Creed’ – and responsible, as Polanyi saw it, for the contradiction of economic

liberalism, as when he argues that ‘the introduction of free markets, far from doing away with the need for control, regulation, and intervention, enormously increased their range’ (2001: 147). And *Hard Times*, throughout, conveys a strong sense of ‘lives clamped under a grid’ (Craig 1969: 17). The opening chapters of the novel effectively link the experience of education in the mid-nineteenth century with the regulation of industrial society.<sup>3</sup> They juxtapose the cold rigidity of the schoolroom in which nothing is to be taught but facts – a child’s knowledge of a horse from experience is, for example, worth nothing beside the capacity to rattle off an almost ludicrously abstract definition – with the warmth and humanity of circus people and the joy that they express through their performance. Essentially, for the book, they exemplify freedom from life ‘clamped under a grid’. Gradgrind, on his way home from the school spies ‘a number of children ... congregated in a number of stealthy attitudes, striving to peep in at the hidden glories [of the circus]’ and is appalled to find his own children Louisa and Tom, amongst them: ‘his own metallurgical Louisa peeping with all her might through a hole in a deal board and his own mathematical Thomas abasing himself on the ground to catch but a hoof of the graceful Tyrolean flower-act!’ (*Hard Times* Book One, chapter 3: 56). The central narrative of the novel is about the tragedies of Louisa and Tom, the development and the expression of whose humanity is stunted by their upbringing and their education. But Gradgrind, the Utilitarian, is not a bad man. He means very well indeed and shows kindness in taking into his home one of the circus girls who has, it seems, been abandoned. He is at last devastated by the fate of his own children. Louisa finally returns home in despair and collapses in his arms: ‘And he laid her down ... and saw the pride of his heart and the triumph of his system, lying, an insensible heap, at his feet’ (Book Two, chapter 12: 242). As Leavis says in his essay on the novel, which brings it into his canon of the ‘great tradition’ of English literature, ‘The confutation of Utilitarianism by life is conducted with great subtlety’ (1948: 269).

But there are great weaknesses in the book, too, and it has been described in such terms as that of ‘an implausible melodrama’. As many critics have noted, the most serious weakness of all is in Dickens’ treatment of the industrial worker, as an object of pity, through the figure of Stephen Blackpool, represented as the cowed victim of events and as having little effective agency in his own life. The workers of Coketown, too, are shown as being easily manipulated by

the union leader Slackbridge. Trade unionism is represented as an error – in a negative way that is surprising given Dickens’ own observations of how the Preston workers maintained their resilience, their solidarity and their dignity through 23 weeks of their lock-out (in his report ‘On Strike’, published in the periodical *Household Words* in February 1854). Dickens here betrays a thoroughly middle class sensibility and though *Hard Times* was described by at least one of his contemporaries as ‘socialist’, the novel suggests no project of social change resulting from the collective organization of workers, or from political reform. Dickens seems to hope for the restoration of ‘harmony’ in society, and the way out of what Stephen Blackpool refers to frequently in the book as the ‘muddle’ of industrial life is through individual goodness and restraint (a Gandhian perspective): ‘It is, rather, individual persons against the System’, as Raymond Williams put it (1958: 106). There is no sense whatsoever in *Hard Times*, of the ‘double movement’ that Polanyi saw as being inherent in the nineteenth century attempt to make a reality of the utopian idea of the self-regulating market in industrial society, as it is met by the resistance of people to their own treatment as commodities, and to the commodification of land (the environment), and eventually by the opposition of states, driven to defend business and accumulation from the effects of the treatment of money as a commodity through the gold standard.

### ***Half of a Yellow Sun*** <sup>4</sup>

If *Hard Times* is about the cultural experience of early industrialism, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s book is about the experience of life in an African colony in the immediate aftermath of colonialism, and then in the context of state failure and civil war. As a reviewer wrote for the *New York Times* (Nixon 2006), *Half of a Yellow Sun* ‘takes us inside ordinary lives laid waste by the all too ordinary unraveling of nation states’. The title of the book is a reference to the emblem of Biafra during the attempted secession from Nigeria of the Igbos of the south-east of the country between 1967 and 1970. Adichie, both of whose grandfathers died as refugees in Biafra, writes that ‘I grew up in the shadow of Biafra ... writing *Half of a Yellow Sun* has been my re-imagining of something I did not experience [she was born eight years after the end of the Nigerian civil war] but whose legacy I carry’. She goes on to say that she wanted to ‘engage with my history in order to make sense of my present’ ([www.halfofayellowsun.com/](http://www.halfofayellowsun.com/), last accessed

July 2011), and she has spoken on another occasion of how her book has helped some people in Nigeria, at least, to break the general silence about the war in their country (Adichie 2008).

Though it is factually accurate – apart from a few minor details – the book is not at all a fictional history of the Biafran war. Adichie said in an interview ‘Maybe *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a war book, but I wanted the war to be secondary. I wanted to write about the characters and the way they are changed by the war’ (Adichie 2008). The mostly very positive critical reception that her book has received is a tribute to the extent that she succeeded in this. As John Marx wrote in a commentary, Adichie ‘portrays life during wartime as both intensely violent and remarkably ordinary’ (2008: 597).

The central characters in the novel are twin sisters – though they are very different both in looks and in personality – Olanna and Kainene, the privately educated daughters of Chief Ozobia, who is described as owning ‘half of Lagos’ (p. 59) and a member of Nigeria’s ruling elite – depicted early in the book as corrupt and self-seeking. Olanna, recently returned from completing a master’s degree in England, disappoints her parents by choosing to go to live with her lover, Odenigbo, a lecturer in mathematics in the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, and to teach sociology. Her sister, the enigmatic, independent Kainene, manages some of ‘Daddy’s businesses’ – ‘She has always had an excellent eye for business’, her father says (p. 31) – who becomes the lover of Richard, an Englishman who has come to Nigeria to write about Nigerian bronzes, but is a diffident man, uncertain of himself and, as we see, seeking somewhere to belong. These four, together with Ugwu, a village boy who arrives, in the first chapter, to become Odenigbo’s house-boy are the central characters of the novel, and the chapters are written in turn from the perspectives of Ugwu, Olanna and Richard. To a significant extent, however, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is Ugwu’s story, and it comes to the reader as no surprise to know from published interviews with her that he is Adichie’s favourite amongst the characters she has created – and he is rather a remarkable creation. Interspersed through the book there are short passages, printed in a different typeface, that are taken, apparently, from a book about the war, and that are all entitled ‘The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died’. In part this is a device for providing background information about the history of Nigeria and the context of the civil war. We wonder whose words they are and many readers will presume that they are

Richard's. At the very end of the novel, however, we learn that they are Ugwu's. They are a symbol, perhaps, of the significance of the war for Nigerians' understandings of themselves, apart from the 'outside' knowledge of the intellectuals (but see Marx 2008: 614ff).

The action of the novel moves between the early and the late nineteen sixties and back again – between the world of the university at Nsukka and the kind of 'salon' that takes place in Odenigbo's bungalow (and which problematises the role of the intellectual in post-colonial society), Ugwu's village, Lagos, and northern Nigeria in the years immediately before the war, and the war itself. In her depiction of the world before the war Adichie makes her readers witness to the everyday dramas of race, gender and status distinctions in the post-colonial society of Nigeria, and to the tensions between the 'traditional' society of Ugwu's village and that of 'modern' Nigeria. The war overturns them all. The stories of Odenigbo and Olanna, of Richard and Kainene, are stories of loyalty and betrayal which subtly echo and are echoed in the political events of the book. The tensions between Olanna and Kainene, and the question of forgiveness between them, are another echo of Nigeria's politics. Ugwu, too, at a vital moment in the course of the war, under great pressure, betrays himself.

From more or less the beginning of the novel we are made aware of ethnic differences in Nigeria. Descriptions of Odenigbo's 'salon' in Nsukka focus attention on group distinctions. Ugwu notes, for example: 'The loudest [of those who come to Odenigbo's house] was Miss Adebayo. She was not an Igbo woman: Ugwu could tell from her name, even if he had not once run into her and her housegirl at the market and heard them both speaking rapid, incomprehensible Yoruba' (p. 19). In the discussions in his house Odenigbo talks a good deal about Pan-Africanism. The ideas of race and nation are, he says, a product of colonialism, but he also tries to maintain that his identity as Igbo is primordial. To this Professor Ezeka (a character based, Adichie tells us, on Colonel Ojukwu, who lead the breakaway Biafran state: Adichie 2008) retorts 'But you became aware that you were Igbo because of the white man. The pan-Igbo idea came only in the face of white domination. You must see that tribe as it is today is as colonial a product as nation and race' (p. 20). An 'imagined community', indeed. But it is not only through these didactic statements that Adichie's novel evokes Anderson's arguments. *Imagined Communities*, especially in the later edition with its added chapters on 'Census, Map,

Museum' and on 'Memory and Forgetting', as it treats 'The Last Wave' of more recent colonial nationalism, emphasizes the role of the colonial intelligentsia. Adichie takes her readers into that world in Nigeria. The characters who come together in Odenigbo's salon are there as a result of what Anderson talks of as the 'educational and administrative pilgrimages' occasioned by colonialism and as a result of which 'Nigeria' can be imagined at all. It is imagined essentially through the medium of the English language, the language of the salon. Anderson takes the example of Ghana, arguing that 'Nothing suggests that Ghanaian nationalism is any less real ... because its national language is English rather than Ashanti', and he continues 'Print-language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se' (1983: 122). Adichie's evocation of the world of the intelligentsia at the end of the colonial period, however, makes us aware of the contradictions of colonial nationalism, and of the problem of language. We see this at first through Ugwu's eyes and his experience of listening to the debates in the living room, and through his reaction on his first meeting with Olanna: 'He wished she would stumble in her Igbo; he had not expected English that perfect to sit beside equally perfect Igbo' (p. 23). John Marx says of the salon 'By doubly marking discussants as expert and ethnic it distances them from the citizenry they might otherwise represent' (2008: 613). In the end the intelligentsia are marginalized. They have failed to develop 'a common political language' – ideas and values that are shared through society as a whole -- substantially because of the contradictions that are associated with their use of English (I am influenced here by arguments of Sudipta Kaviraj's about the mutual incomprehension of elite and masses in India: 1991). This is the context of the rise of what Arne Westad refers to as 'identitarianism' – the affirmation of 'other identities outside the immediate discourses of modernity' (2005: 400) – that had already become significant during the late colonial era.

Language differences are important markers of group distinctions in Nigeria. Ethnic differences are remarked upon, too, through crude stereotypes, by Richard's first lover in Lagos, Susan, of the British High Commission: 'She told him the Hausa in the north were a dignified lot, the Igbo were surly and money-loving, and the Yoruba were rather jolly, even if they were first-rate lick-spittles' (p. 55). Through Susan's role in the novel Adichie portrays the 'unseeing', still dismissive and frankly racist attitudes of the former colonialists – who played a



contradictory role historically, in the civil war. (While the British government upheld the fight of the Nigerian government against Biafran secession, British NGOs were in the forefront of efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Biafra.) Later, Susan describes the Igbo as having ‘it coming to them ... with their being so clannish and uppity and controlling the markets. Very Jewish, really. And to think that they are relatively uncivilized; one couldn’t compare them with the Yoruba, for example, who have had contact with Europeans on the coast for years. I remember somebody telling me when I first came to be careful about hiring an Igbo houseboy because, before I knew it, he would own my houser and the land it was built on’ (p. 154). She says this to Richard shortly after he had witnessed the brutal murder before his eyes of the young Igbo customs officer to whom he had just been speaking at Kano airport.

Early in the novel Olanna has gone to Kano to visit her uncle and aunt and her cousin. On the way from the airport she passes by the Igbo Union Grammar School, and recalls people having talked ‘about the northern schools not admitting Igbo children’ (p. 38). But with her relatives ‘She felt a sense that things were in order, the way they were meant to be ... This was why she came to Kano: this lucid peace’ (p. 39). She meets her uncle’s friend Abdulmalik, a Hausa man who sells leather slippers in the market, and who gives her a pair; and she renews her acquaintance with a former lover, the distinguished, handsome Mohammed. Her next visit to Kano is terrifying. She is with Mohammed when they become aware that a riot has broken out and he determines to take her to the railway station. On the way they hear ‘slow Hausa words resonating. “The Igbo must go. The infidels must go. The Igbo must go”’ (p. 147). Then they see the destruction of her uncle’s compound and the murdered bodies of her aunt and uncle: “We finished the whole family. It was Allah’s will!” one of the men called out in Hausa. The man was familiar. It was Abdulmalik. He nudged a body on the ground with his foot and Olanna noticed, then, how many bodies were lying there, like dolls made of cloth’ (p. 148). The mystery of when neighbours kill each other is evoked with great power. Adichie makes her readers aware of the wider politics that have brought about these terrible events in Kano, and those that follow them, but she does not attempt to explain *why* it is that the killings take place. She helps us, her readers, however, to reach an empathetic understanding of how it can be that such killing comes about.

Secession is declared. Initial euphoria is quickly crushed by defeat, and Ugwu, Olanna and Odenigbo have to flee from Nsukka. We, as readers, then experience bombing raids, fighting and deaths and the progressive onset of hunger as Biafra is slowly crushed. The charismatic, forceful Odenigbo declines into depression; Olanna shows remarkable resilience. Kainene goes missing, and her fate remains unknown. Ugwu, aged by now just thirteen, is at last forced into joining the army, and is introduced to 'the casual cruelty of (a) new world', from which there 'grew a hard clot of fear inside him' (p. 359). In these passages of the book Adichie takes us into the world of a child soldier. Ugwu kills and earns the nick-name 'Target Destroyer'; and shortly afterwards he is with others in a bar, and more or less made to drink himself silly with the local gin. He escapes outside for a while but when he goes back in he finds the bar-girl being raped and is driven by the taunts of his fellows to rape her as well ... 'Finally he looked at the girl. She stared back at him with calm hate' (p. 365). The rape haunts him and drives him to write. His 'knowing by suffering' (a phrase of Veena Das's) makes him, in John Marx's argument, an 'uncredentialed expert of the war zone' (2008: 621).

Another aspect of the novel that is significant in regard to development studies has to do with the role that Richard plays. Portrayed very sympathetically by Adichie he is well meaning, but also ineffectual. He wants very much to identify with Biafra, yet he remains an outsider. The powerful passage in which he witnesses the murder of Igbo at Kano airport makes him seem almost like a voyeur of others' suffering. Through the character of Richard Western readers may be led to reflect upon their own roles in other societies.

For my students, certainly, Adichie's novel takes them from the 'cool distance' of the work on state failure and civil war by historians and social scientists 'to the inside of the maelstrom' (Sylvester 2006: 75).

### ***The Quiet American***<sup>5</sup>

Christine Sylvester's remark applies as well to much of the writing of Graham Greene, who certainly has a claim to having been one of the greatest English novelists of the twentieth century, and who was also a journalist and at one point an intelligence agent. *The Quiet American*, which drew on his experience as a war correspondent in Indochina in the early 1950s,

though it is constructed and reads like a thriller, is an emphatically political novel – and came to be seen as having anticipated the disaster of American involvement in Vietnam. It is a searing critique of American interventionism in the Cold War – to be read alongside Westad’s more analytical account of this in *The Global Cold War*, from the intervention against Mossadeq in Iran in 1953 and in Guatemala in 1954,<sup>6</sup> to Charlie Wilson’s War in Afghanistan in the 1980s. *The Quiet American* angered American readers at the time for what was seen as its one-sided representation of what America was doing; and the reviewer for the *New York Times*, for example, wrote:

If much of the description of Indochina at war is written with Greene's great technical skill and imagination, his caricatures of American types are often as crude and trite as those of Jean Paul Sartre. He is not ashamed as an artist to content himself with the picture of America made so familiar by French neutralism; the picture of a civilization composed exclusively of chewing gum, napalm bombs, deodorants, Congressional witch-hunts, celery wrapped in cellophane, and a naive belief in one's own superior virtue. (Davis 1956)

The reviewer’s argument that Greene employs his ‘characters less as individuals than as representatives of their nations or political factions’ (Davis 1956) does an injustice, however, to the complexity of the narrator, Fowler, through whom Greene explores themes, here relating especially to the idea of commitment, that run through much of his work (see Thomson 2009). But *The Quiet American* is above all a political novel.

Westad explains the reluctance of the United States to support the efforts of the Europeans to retain control of their Asian empires in the aftermath of the Second World War. The US was drawn into supporting the French in southeast Asia only because the French were struggling against communism, and Greene evokes the tensions in the relationship between France and the United States in a description of a press conference addressed by French officer. There are tense moments when the officer is driven to refer to supplies promised by the United States not arriving, but then says that his statement is not to be printed:

Perhaps the American newspapers would say ‘Oh, the French are always complaining, always begging’. And in Paris the Communists would accuse ‘The French are spilling their blood for America and America will not even send a second-hand helicopter’. It does no good. At the end of it we should still have no helicopters, and the enemy would still be there, fifty miles from Hanoi. (Part One, chapter 5, p. 80)

The two principal characters of the novel are Thomas Fowler, an English journalist who is approaching middle age, and an old hand in Asia, who pretends to somewhat world-weary detachment; and Alden Pyle, the quiet American, whom Fowler had first seen:

coming across the square towards the bar of the Continental: an unmistakably young and unused face flung at us like a dart. With his gangly legs and his crew-cut and his wide campus gaze he seemed incapable of harm ... Perhaps only ten days ago he had been walking back across the Common in Boston, his arms full of the books he had been reading in advance on the Far East and the problems of China. (Part One, chapter 1, pp. 12-13)

The extent to which the two are ‘representatives of their nations’ is at once apparent. The two become rivals for the affections of a Vietnamese woman, Phuong, who has some fascination for the West – she is described as ‘looking at the pictures in an old *Paris-Match*. Like the French she has a passion for the Royal Family’ – and who seems detached but, it appears, is easily moulded to their wills by the two men. She, evidently, is an allegorical representation of Vietnam. Pyle has come to Saigon ostensibly to join the staff of the American Economic Mission, but we learn eventually that he is with the CIA (though it is referred to in the book as the ‘OSS’ – the Office of Strategic Services, which was the precursor of the CIA). Fowler says ‘Pyle was very earnest and I ... suffered from his lectures on the Far East, which he had known for as many months as I had years. Democracy was another subject of his (always with the capital ‘D’ when he is talking of it), and he had pronounced and aggravating views on what the United States was doing for the world’ (Book One, chapter 1, p. 5). Later we come to know that ‘Pyle came out here full of York Harding’s idea’ – Harding being ‘a superior sort of journalist’, who has written books with such titles as ‘The Advance of China’, ‘The Challenge to Democracy’ and ‘The Role of the West’, and who is the author of the idea of a Third Force, that will be capable both of ending colonial rule and of defeating the communists. It becomes clear that Pyle, behind the cover of his role in the Economic Mission, is working to put the idea of the Third Force into practice, through working with General The, ‘the dissident Chief of Staff who had recently declared his intention of fighting both the French and the Vietminh’ (Part Two, chapter 2, p. 105). The notion of a ‘Third Force’ corresponds with Westad’s analysis of the American search for appropriate allies in Asia in the 1950s. Initially ready to support ‘radical Third World nationalism of the nativist kind’ (Westad 2005: 119), like that represented by

Sukarno's party in Indonesia, the United States soon started to intervene against even very moderate regimes, fearing that they smacked of communism, and began to support groups comparable with the fictitious General The's. One of Westad's central arguments is that 'Washington willfully reduced its potential for real alliances with popular nationalist movements. It was this self-inflicted isolation from associations of the more syncretic kind that forced the US to intervene repeatedly in the Third World' (2005: 119).

Fowler and Pyle find themselves stranded through the night in a watch-tower, surrounded by the Vietminh, on the way back into Saigon from General The's headquarters, and this becomes the moment for the confrontation of their different world views – though the conversation is dictated by Fowler. He says to Pyle of the frightened Vietnamese soldiers 'Do you think they know they are fighting for Democracy? ... You and your like are trying to make a war with the help of people who just aren't interested', and he sweeps aside Pyle's protestations that 'They don't want Communism', suggesting that 'the political commissar' is the only one likely to treat the ordinary peasant as a man, rather than as a 'unit in the global strategy' (Part Two, chapter 2, pp.117-23). Fowler protests that he is not 'engage', whilst arguing forcefully against imperialist meddling in the affairs of others. Later, after General The's forces, with Pyle's assistance, have exploded bombs in the city, killing innocent people, it seems that the American is indeed ready to treat people as 'units in a global strategy'. He is shocked at finding blood on his shoe, but he says distractedly, "I must get them cleaned before I see the Minister". Though Fowler is willing to concede that Pyle didn't quite know what he was saying – 'He was seeing a real war for the first time' – he retorts angrily that 'You've got the Third Force and National Democracy all over your right shoe'. Then, as Pyle goes off muttering about how General The must have been deceived by the Communists, Fowler remarks 'He was impregnably armoured by his good intentions and his ignorance' (Part Three, chapter 2, pp.212-13). This is a comment that must have struck some readers of the book in the course of the last decade as being a remarkably appropriate commentary, applying as well to American (and British) action in Iraq and Afghanistan as to Indochina in the 1950s.

## Conclusion

What is gained by bringing together different ways of understanding the ideas and the events and actions that have shaped the social world as we know it – the more or less detached analyses of historians and social scientists on the one hand, and works of fiction on the other? At the very least, according to the responses I've had from my students, reading the novelists' explorations of such themes as those of the implications of Utilitarianism, or the politics of ethnicity, or the impact of great power interventions during the Cold War, has served to bring these problems alive for them. Reading the novels has often helped to excite their interest in the texts, because it has brought home to them the significance for people of ideas and events and social trends that are analysed, often dispassionately, by the historians and social scientists. The novels have helped them to understand the experience of others, and in this way to appreciate the human significance of the arguments of the social scientists and made their reading of the texts more meaningful. A common reaction that I've heard from students is that reading the novels has made it possible for them to relate as human beings to the experiences of others, coming from different backgrounds and at different points in history, as well as leading them to reflect upon their own experience. One has written to me, for example, about how reading *Hard Times* led him to think about the significance of technology in relation to social change: 'for me, at least, as a student I was led to reflect upon the multitude of technological changes occurring around us now, and their implications'; and reading *The Quiet American*, he said, had helped him to appreciate what it meant to have been a young American in Indochina in the context of the Cold War.

So what is the value, to continue with this example, of reading Graham Greene on American intervention in Asia alongside the work of a historian such as Arne Westad? In this particular case I think that it is partly because Greene helps us to understand the way of thinking that led to what proved to be disastrous mistakes – following from what Westad speaks of as the United States' 'self-inflicted isolation'. It is very important for the novel that Pyle is so well intentioned. He is a decent man – while Fowler really isn't, as he himself recognizes. But as Westad concludes: 'Seen from a Third World perspective, the results of America's interventions are truly dismal. Instead of being a force for good – which they were no doubt intended to be [as

support for General The was believed to be by Pyle] – these incursions have devastated many societies and left them more vulnerable to further disasters of their own making’ (2005: 404). Of course Graham Greene didn’t ‘predict’ the American war in Vietnam, but readers at the time – in the mid-1950s – stood to gain insights into the minds of those who were just beginning to set the US onto the dangerous path of intervention. For all that Greene was seen, quite reasonably, as anti-American, as he was by the *New York Times*’ reviewer, I think it can be argued that he actually shows sympathy for the American position, through Fowler’s response to Pyle and his recognition of Pyle’s values. At the very least fiction is an aid to the kind of empathetic understanding that makes for the best history writing – and, for the student, is a means to understanding ‘what it was like, to have been that sort of a person, at that time’. In a similar way, as I argued earlier, though Adichie does not offer her readers a scientific analysis of ethnic conflict, they gain an understanding of what it means to live in a society that has been taken over by ‘identitarian politics’. And a novel like *Hard Times* is a kind of an historical document that teaches us how the events and ideas of his time were interpreted in the imagination of a creative writer (and it is through creative writing that we can hope to understand changing sensibilities in societies, exactly as Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*). *Hard Times* is a part of the cultural experience of what Polanyi refers to as the utopian idea of the self-regulating market. At times, too, creative writers help to push out the frontier of enquiry, as I think that Adichie does with her exploration of the role of the intelligentsia in post-colonial society.

The point of my second epigraph, which is a quotation taken from the very end of Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock’s essay, is that George Eliot sums up very well the reactions of many of my students to their reading of the novels. They are certainly not young people who are ‘trivial and selfish’ – and indeed one aspect of teaching about development and international affairs that has been a source of inspiration for me, is that our students are mostly drawn to the field because of their often idealistic interest in what is going on in the world, and their drive to have some positive impact upon it. But many have written for me about the ways in which the novels have enhanced their understanding of ‘how social processes affect people’s lives’, and drawn their ‘attention to what is apart from themselves’. The portrayals of the social impact of early industrialism, of colonialism, of ethnic conflict and of the impact of war in the lives of the

characters in these three novels do indeed extend readers' moral sensibilities, and bring greater meaning to the study of social science.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I owe this last formulation to Neera Chandhoke.

<sup>2</sup> Page references are given to the Penguin English Library edition, first published in 1969, listed in the References, below.

<sup>3</sup> An old but interesting source on Dickens' treatment of education and of political economy in *Hard Times* is Robin Gilmour's essay, 'The Gradgrind School: Political Economy in the Classroom', *Victorian Studies*, 11:2, pp. 207-24.

<sup>4</sup> Page references are given to the Harper paperback edition of 2007, listed in the References, below.

<sup>5</sup> Page references are given to the first edition of the novel, published by Heinemann in 1955, listed in the References, below.

<sup>6</sup> The American intervention against the social democratic government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 is the subject of a magnificent, recently re-discovered painting by Diego Rivera, with the ironic title 'Glorious Victory', which I have used in lectures to introduce Westad's themes.



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