

The Socioeconomic Reaping of Dickens

The world that Charles Dickens created in *Hard Times* had a threefold approach enshrined in pessimistic realism: sowing, reaping, and garnering. For all intents and purposes Dickens used the human mind as his garden for the provenance of these three aspects. In children he sowed a fact-based education. From this education he reaped productive and classist citizens. From these citizens he ultimately garnered negative outcomes. The second aspect, the reaping, had the greatest effect on the structure on society. The advent of educational standards begs the question: what exactly does society owe to students?

Social commentary on globalized classism takes on many forms in Fascism, capitalism, and unionism. On this commentary William Graham Sumner, in his *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, posited that

We each owe to the other mutual redress of grievances...to guarantee rights...to guarantee mutually the chance to earn, to possess, to learn...against any interference which would prevent the exercise of those rights by a person who wishes to prosecute and enjoy them in peace for the pursuit of happiness.¹

Sumner's description of what social classes owe to one another bases itself in the idea of the Social Contract that has so heavily pillars itself in American society. "The social structure," Says Sumner, "Is based on contract, and status is of the least importance. Contract...is realistic, cold, and matter-of-fact...It is not permanent. It endures only so long as the reason for it endures."² Perhaps Coketown represents a society with an expired social contract. Dickens blurs the pursuit of happiness in a fickle cloud for the characters presented in the story. No character represents this better than Stephen Blackpool. Stephen, when asked by Mr. Bounderby what

¹ William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1884), 297

² Sumner, 292

“you people”³ complain about, says, “Who can look on [life], sir, and fairly tell a man ‘tis not a muddle?”⁴ In Dickens’ utilitarian society, the individual has a purpose, but this purpose hides in life’s muddle. In utilitarianism society does not owe anything to the individual. Rather, individuals owe their practical appliance to society.

Classism exists in Coketown in the proletariat working class and the bourgeoisie land and factory owners. Coketown represents itself as a single entity: a factory. In describing its iconography, Dickens says that “It contained several large streets all very 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.”⁵ Coketown represented uniform structure. If a structure erected in the town was not uniform, then the town would make it as such. “If the members of a religious persuasion,” Dickens says, “built a chapel [in Coketown]...they made it a pious warehouse of red brick.”⁶ Coketown operated under the belief of society as a single entity, with the city as both the body and the brain. It rejected any notion of competing organizations in society, like the unions. Coketown appealed to the upper class and used the workers to further its own interests. Mr. Gradgrind and Mr. Bounderby are primary examples of the elitism in Coketown. This city of Coketown, this single entity wrapped up in a single identity, represents a sort of Fascism. Of the ideologies, Fascism incorporates utilitarianism into its operative structure more than any other. A Fascist regime, being a single entity, has a strong *nationalistic* identity. In Coketown, despite the debauchery of the rich, “the Coketowners were so *patriotic*, after all, they never had pitched their

³ Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Signet Classics, 1961), 155

⁴ Dickens, 155

⁵ Dickens, 29

⁶ Dickens, 29

property into the Atlantic yet...”⁷ The ills of Coketown, Sumner would say, “are due to the malice of men, and to the imperfections or errors of civil institutions.”⁸

Of course Dickens most certainly did not intend for his Coketown to be interpreted as a Fascist state. Dickens wrote this novel as a commentary on capitalism and its vices. Capitalism offers a broad range of answers as to what each class owes to one another. In a capitalist interpretation, the factory of Coketown represents not the entity that society feeds into, but rather the division of labor that structures society itself. Adam Smith calls this “the great multiplication of all the different arts, in consequence of the utility.”⁹ Capitalism’s tone gives workers a much more liberal and optimistic view of their personal social economy. The paradigm of what the classes owe to one another changes completely. In capitalism, in theory, the master should owe the workman, but Smith points out that the common wages of labor depend on

the contract...made between those two parties, whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little as possible. The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower the wages of labour.¹⁰

Capitalism creates a business contract to go along with the social contract that Sumner advocates for. These two contracts have immense trouble coexisting. As Sumner points out, “A society based on contract is a society of free and independent men, who form ties without favor or obligation, and cooperate without cringing or intrigue.”¹¹ In capitalism men have obligations. Freedom and independence exist, but intrigue runs amok. Coketown incarnates capitalism run amok. The treatment of the laborers by the masters does not equate to a social contract. Of the

⁷ Dickens, 118

⁸ Sumner, 292

⁹ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (1776), 280

¹⁰ Smith, 288

¹¹ Sumner, 293

factory barons, Dickens says, “They were ruined when they were required to send labouring children to school; they were ruined when inspectors were appointed to take a look into their works...they were utterly undone when” told not to make so much smoke.¹² In Dickens’ view of a capitalist society, he saw a town that had fallen victim to the abuse of the free market; the workmen taking the brunt of their master’s misdeeds.

The abuse of the capitalist system creates Eugene Debs’ central argument on why class warfare exists. Debs, in *Revolutionary Unionism*, blames class warfare on the division of society into two economic classes: the wealthy capitalists who own the workmen’s tools and the workmen compelled to use those tools.¹³ Through the idea of labor unionism, Debs wishes to bring back the theory within capitalism that the master must owe the workman a living wage. Of the workingman Debs asserts that “He has simply been a cog, with little reference to, or knowledge of, the rest of the cogs. Now, we teach him to hold up his head and look over the whole mechanism.”¹⁴ Slackbridge represented the voice of the labor movement in Coketown. He used diction similar (albeit grandiose) to Debs when he says “...the hour is come when we must rally...and crumble into dust the oppressors...”¹⁵ Capitalism, as an idea, presents the working class with the tools for success but as well gives the industrial captains and robber barons the chance to make a name for themselves at the expense of their workers.

The industrial ideal, while beneficial to a state’s comparative advantage, brings about negative classist outcomes. Perhaps there is a solace in the agrarian ideal presented by Thomas Jefferson and unexplored by Charles Dickens. “The mobs of great cities,” Says Jefferson, “add

¹² Dickens, 117

¹³ Eugene Debs, *Revolutionary Unionism* (1905), 332

¹⁴ Debs, 335

¹⁵ Dickens, 143

just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour.”¹⁶ If the worker despairs in his work, then state institutions suffer. Jefferson goes on to say that “Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example.”¹⁷ When a farmer manages his own plot, the hand of capitalism cannot make its mark; venality is suppressed. Jefferson saw the true opulence of America lay in its fertile soil and he believed that farmers could do the work of God. To Jefferson, an industrial complex would create an insatiable dependence on capitalism. In the agrarian ideal, the government owed happiness to the workers, and in turn the workers would supply the government with goods. This idea conflicts with Sumner, who blatantly says that “It is not at all the function of the state to make men happy.”¹⁸

Charles Dickens presented to us a drastic and satirical interpretation of what society could look like if certain socioeconomic conditions were left unchecked. The folly of capitalism manifests itself in the vices of those predisposed to greed. Expectedly, Adam Smith holds most of the cards when it comes to answering the question of ‘what do social classes owe one another?’ with regard to Dickens. Coketown was never meant to represent Smith’s idea of capitalism nor that of Dickens. As society moves forward on its hearth and takes on retrospect of its fires, perhaps it will learn to sow tolerance, reap liberty, and garner equality.

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *The Agrarian Ideal* (1787), 173

¹⁷ Jefferson, 173

¹⁸ Sumner, 293

