

The Politics of Economic Power and Exclusion: A Critique of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

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Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to scrutinize the relevance of Foucauldian concept of Power/Knowledge Discourse in Dickens's celebrated novel *Hard Times* (1854). It will be very significant to mention here that *Hard Times* belongs to the Victorian era after the Industrial Revolution in England. So far, this text has been analyzed from the traditional point of view by critics. For example, Percy Marshall says that *Hard Times* is "a savage attack on Capitalism and on those who kept on working in the general disadvantage and in defiance of the laws of charity" (Marshall 42).

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F. R. Leavis opines that "the adult mind does not as a rule find in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness. Dickens, the moralist always distinguishes between good and bad and he always indicates some evil of this era of rapid industrial expansion but in no other book as harshly and consistently as in *Hard Times*" (Leavis 18). Earle Davis says that *Hard Times* is "of all Dickens's books the clearest in its statement of his economic belief. Its thesis is a satire on Utilitarian philosophy" (Davis 27). J. Hillis Miller says that "In *Hard Times*, Dickens dramatizes in strikingly symbolic terms the opposition between a soul destroying relation to a utilitarian, industrial civilization in which everything is weighed, measured, has its price, and in which emotion is banished, and the reciprocal interchange of love" (Miller 226). Lionel Stevenson remarks "*Hard Times* is more strictly centered upon a single social theme than his other novels, and that he had not absorbed this theme through his pores from childhood onward. He began with the conscious purpose of examining the relationship between industrialists and workers in the new manufacturing cities, and of discrediting the utilitarian philosophy which has the ideological basis of current capitalism" (Stevenson 312). Dickens felt that a dependence upon capitalistic practicality without reference to sympathy and human understanding causes continued difficulties in the relations of capital and labour. Thus we observe that the existing criticism of *Hard Times* is based on the traditional point of view. In the modern times when literary theories have become so much prominent, Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge is quite relevant and another valuable and significant way of understanding the text and major thematic concerns.

Michel Foucault is an outstanding and distinguished French philosopher, historian, and a renowned thinker who has given a

kaleidoscopic view of man's condition, is known for having made the exploration and the operations of power. There is no doubt that the issue of power and knowledge has occupied a central position within sociological analysis in recent times. Above all, Michel Foucault believed in the freedom of the people. He also realized that as individuals, we react to situations in different ways. He used his books as a vehicle to show the various factors that interact and collide in his analyzation of change and its effects. As a philosophical historian and an observer of human relations, his work focused on the dominant genealogical and archaeological knowledge systems and practices, tracking them through different historical eras, including the social contexts that were in place that permitted change – the nature of power in society. He wrote that power is “always already there, that one is never outside it” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 140). He further argued that “A society without power relations can only be an abstraction” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 222).

Foucault believed that knowledge is a form of power, but he took it a step further and told us that knowledge can be gained from power, producing it, not preventing it. Through observation, new knowledge is produced. In his view, knowledge is always connected to power, and often wrote them in this way: Power/Knowledge. Foucault's theory states that knowledge is power because knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of the truth but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, becomes true. Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and disciplining of practice. “Power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 27). For Foucault, power exists everywhere and comes from everywhere; it is a key concept because it acts as a type of relation between people, a complex form of strategy, with the ability to secretly shape another's behaviour. “Power refers to the degree to which individual or groups can impose their will on others, with or without the consent of others.” (Haralambos 24). Foucault did not view the effects of power negatively. For him, power didn't exclude, repress, censor, mask and conceal because Foucault saw it as a producer of reality, The importance for him always lay in the effect that power has on entire networks, practices, the world around us, and how our behaviour can be affected, not power itself. “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production” (Rabinow 205).

One of the techniques of Power/Knowledge that Foucault cited was the Panopticon, an architectural design put forth by Jeremy Bentham in the mid-19th century for prisons, insane asylums, schools, hospitals and factories. Instead of using violent methods, such as torture, and placing

prisoners in dungeons that were used for centuries in monarchical states around the world, the progressive modern democratic state needed a different sort of system to regulate its citizens. “Panopticon is the spontaneous exercise of power without noise, often without any need of intervention at all and the constant power of one mind over many” (Crimmins 74). The Panopticon offered a powerful and sophisticated internalized coercion, which was achieved through the constant observation of prisoners, each separated from the other, allowing no more interaction, no communication. This modern structure would allow guards to continually see inside each cell from their vantage point in a high central tower, unseen by the prisoners. In the view of Foucault, power and knowledge comes from observing others. It marked the transition to a disciplinary power, with every movement supervised and all events recorded. The result of this surveillance is acceptance of regulations and docility— a normalization of sorts, stemming from the threat of discipline. Suitable behaviour is achieved not through total surveillance, but by panoptic discipline and inducing a population to conform by the internalization of this reality. The actions of the observer are based upon this monitoring and the behaviours he sees exhibited; the more one observes, the more powerful one becomes. The power comes from the knowledge which the observer has accumulated from his observations of actions in a circular fashion, with knowledge and power reinforcing each other. Foucault says that “by being combined and generalized, they attained a level at which the formation of knowledge and the increase in power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 224).

Hard Times deals with industrial power, but it is not so much a picture of its ramifications as a presentation of its underlying principles. It is an analysis and a condemnation of the ethos of industrialism. There is no mistaking Dickens's violent hostility to industrial capitalism and its entire scheme of life. Here, he is proclaiming a doctrine not of individual but of social sin, unveiling what he sees as the real state of modern society. As the novel stands, its thesis is a satire on utilitarian economy. In *Hard Times*, Dickens assailed Industrialism, Utilitarianism, new education and difficult and costly divorce laws in Victorian England. He believed that industrial progress cannot solve human problems by power and knowledge alone. The novel fiercely attacks industrialism and utilitarianism because it maintains a huge gulf between the rich and the poor where the poor become victims of discourse of power because they are powerless and these aspects receive a telling expression at the hands of Dickens in *Hard Times*. Thus, as the novel's plot and narrative form convey, the whole Victorian atmosphere is knitted in power relations. In the words of a critic, “Power is not possessed or appreciated as a commodity or piece of wealth, rather it has the character of a network, its threads extend everywhere” (Smart 83). Thomas Gradgrind, the major character in the novel, serves as an embodiment of the beliefs of utilitarianism and industrialism. Through his narrative and characterization, Dickens expounds the ideals, evils and effects of industrial utilitarianism. Dickens felt that a dependence upon

capitalistic practicality without reference to sympathy and brotherly understanding causes continued difficulties in the relations of capital and labor. "Here you will 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 noblest and most farsighted. Dickens has spread the indignation into a passionate revolt against the whole industrial order of the modern world" (Shaw 126).

In *Hard Times*, the utilitarian principle finds its exponents and champions in the two leading characters, Gradgrind and Bounderby. Gradgrind's theory of education is evidently an offshoot of this utilitarian attitude to life. This man emphasizes the importance of facts, and fails to attach any importance to feelings and emotions. *Hard Times* opens, significantly in a schoolroom where the children are to be indoctrinated in the tenets of practicality, encouraged to think of nothing except in terms of use, crammed full of information like so many "little vessels ... ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim" (1). Now what I want, Mr. Gradgrind tells the schoolmaster, 'is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. 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 principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!' (1). In the world of Gradgrind, there is to be no imagination, no fancy, no emotion, only fact and utilitarian calculus. "No little Gradgrind had ever learnt the silly jingle, twinkle, twinkle little star; how I wonder what you are!" (10) So this is convincing from Foucauldian perspective that the discourse of a powerful man cannot be challenged who is the representative of the society. "Power demands obedience. Power, ultimately, is repression; repression, ultimately is the imposition of the law, the law, ultimately demands submission" (Boyne 125). Here Bentham's plan for the chrestomathic school is finally realized, these schools like 'factories, panopticon style, turning out finished products under the eyes of monitors, were never built, but Dickens erects a Chrestomathia in Coketown. But the fact in which Gradgrind is interested are only the cut and dried facts of intellectual definition, not the facts of living and breathing reality. However, the fancy, the love, the compassion which Dickens brings to his picture of Coketown workout to erupt spasmodically, but they do finally and forcefully make themselves felt, win their small victories.

The novel ironically subverts this complacent picture of an invincible Gradgrindian system, of course, for it is Sissy Jupe who functions as the principle of juxtaposition of Sissy Jupe and Thomas Gradgrind, the novel sets heart against head, loving compassion for the particular human heart against soul deadening uniformity, uniformity that it represents as the product of the mid-Victorian social movements and reform efforts. *Hard Times* represents a system of disciplinary scrutiny, a hierarchical system of multiple hazes that enforce docility and obedience. The circus

serves as a figure in small for the pervasive, multiple-layered system of surveillance at work in the novel as a whole, for the representation of the circus makes that system highly visible. As Gradgrind approaches Sleary's horse riding establishment at the circus, he is horrified to see that his own children are peeping at the circus people through a hole in the tent. As he admonishes the children, they tell him that they wanted to learn more than they had at the lecturing castles. Tom and Louisa talk about the rebuking to "never wonder" – as Dickens writes, the keynote of Gradgrind's educational system. Tom is disgusted with his education, indeed, he writes that he could use gunpowder to blow up the doctrine of 'Facts and Figures', but he says instead that when he leaves home to work for Bounderby, he will take revenge for enjoying life. Here we see the reflection of Foucault's notion of resistance that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* 95).

In contrast to these, Sissy Jupe, the strolling juggler's child, also resisted the utilitarian education system of Gradgrind that she could not be filled with facts only. She has vitality, generosity and uncalculating goodness. It is significant that she has been born and nourished among a people whose activities are not dominated by pure utility, but have at least some association with those of art, self-fulfilment, and self-satisfaction. Sissy, like a character in a morality play, illustrates all the ideas opposite from the utilitarian philosophy. The contrast between her 'dark-eyed and dark haired' warmth and Bitzer's cold eyes and colourless hair renders in pure sensation, as F.R. Leavis points out, the opposition between "the life that is lived freely and richly from the deep instinctive and emotional springs and the thin blooded, quasi-mechanical product of Grandgrindery" (Leavis 231). So utilitarian is Gradgrind that, even in the matter of his daughter Louisa's marriage, he does not need to take into account Louisa's feelings. The interview between Gradgrind and Louisa, when he puts before her Bounderby's proposal of marriage, is fraught with irony, and is a powerful attack on Gradgrind's utilitarianism. So this is convincing from Foucauldian perspective that the discourse of a powerful man cannot be challenged who is the representative of the society. It is also evident that our social fabric is knitted by power relations and the web of power is spread everywhere and it has effected the most intimate relations in the society, as we observe in the case of Gradgrind's relations with his son, daughter and wife.

The principles that dominate Mr. Gradgrind's school are the principles that dominate Coketown and its industry. His hard-facts philosophy is only the aggressive formulation of the inhumane spirit of Victorian materialism. In Gradgrind, though repellent, it is honest and disinterested. In Bounderby, its embodiment in the business world, with his bragging self-interest, it is nothing but the greed of power and material success, Victorian rugged individualism in its vulgarest and ugliest form. He is described as a "man perfectly devoid of sentiment." (15) While Gradgrind does show some signs of human feeling by taking the abandoned Sissy under his protection and he certainly changes his outlook upon life by the time the story ends, Bounderby shows no sign of any human feeling and remains till the end

what he is at the beginning — cold and impervious to human needs. Bounderby is a man made out of a coarse material who constantly boasts of his being self-made. He looks upon his workmen as tools by using which in the proper manner he can enrich himself. He is frankly contemptuous of the needs, requirements, and demands of his workmen. His treatment of Stephen, both when Stephen seeks his guidance in the manner of his domestic life and when he is called upon to supply inside information about the activities of the workers' union, shows his utter callousness. He dismisses Stephen Blackpool from employment without realizing the enormity of the damage he is doing to a man whom he himself recognized as a “steady hand”. Here we see the reflection of Foucault's hypothesis that where there is imbalance of power, one person will surely try to dominate the other. The exercise of disciplinary power of Bounderby is also apparent here as he wants to assert his authoritative attitude on whosoever comes in his contact whether he is Tom, Sissy, Louisa or Stephen Blackpool.

Tom, reacting against the rigidity of his utilitarian upbringing and in order to compensate himself, takes to evil courses, going to the extent of robbing the bank in which he is an employee. His life is a wreck too, and the manner in which he explains his conduct shows how, as in the case of Louisa, Gradgrind's philosophy has rebounded upon himself. Tom says to his father, “So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people, out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of it being a law. How can I help laws? You have comforted others with such things, father. Comfort yourself” (286). Thus the sinister system is once again exposed and derided when Gradgrind finds his son Tom to be a thief. It is rather ironical that the utilitarian Gradgrind's public façade and personal beliefs should end at the hands of Bitzer. Bitzer, a truly successful pupil and the real triumph of the Benthamite system intercepts the guilty Tom's flight to clinch his own promotion to Tom's job in the bank. Conclusively, we see that *Hard Times*, one of the masterpieces of the Victorian era can justifiably be analyzed from the point of view of Michel Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse. Though the novel has been set up in Victorian surroundings and the existing criticism is based on this text from the traditional standards, yet Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge has set in motion an entirely new way of examining power relations in the Victorian society. In the sphere of modern literary criticism, Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge is quite prominent and significant which is another alternate and valuable approach to understand and peruse this Victorian text.

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