

## Dickens and civil society

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The article discusses Dickens's social activism and journalism in the 1850s, when Dickens edited *Household Words*, when he wrote his only "political" novel *Little Dorrit*, and when he took very vocal part in criticizing the British patrician government over its handling of the Crimean war. The article aims to elucidate Dickens's rhetorical strategies of spurring his middle-class audiences into enthusiasm for reform.

I shall never overstep, further or for a longer period than I do tonight, the circle of my own pursuits, as one who lives by Literature, who is content to do his public service through Literature, and who is conscious that he cannot serve two masters.

The great, broad, true case that our public progress is far behind our private progress, and that we are not more remarkable for our private wisdom and success in matters of business than we are for our public folly and failure, I take to be as clearly established as the existence of the sun, moon, and stars.

(From a Dickens speech at the third meeting of the Administrative Reform Association, June 27, 1855)<sup>1</sup>

Although Charles Dickens was a topical writer and a social activist, he had little direct interest in the world of institutional politics. It is certainly true that any account of his novel-writing in the 1850s would have to consider some very broadly political questions: the imposingly inefficient legal system in *Bleak House*, the tense industrial relations in *Hard Times*, the political violence in *A Tale of Two Cities*. But Dickens did not write novels about British institutional politics the way Benjamin Disraeli did in his

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (ed. by K.J. Fielding). Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1960, pp. 200–201.

political romances or Anthony Trollope was going to do a decade later in his Palliser novels. The one conspicuous exception is the satirical depiction of British government bureaucracy in *Little Dorrit*, published in 1855-57, at a time when Dickens was angered by the way the patrician-staffed British government handled the Crimean war. Around the same time, and for the same reason Dickens took active part in the Administrative Reform Association, a civic group whose name succinctly captures its main goal. In the speech (quoted above), delivered at an ARA meeting, Dickens conveyed clearly that his excursion into politics ends there. "[C]ontent to do his public service through Literature," and having lent his enormous cultural prestige to the ARA's push for civil service reform, Dickens halted at the very doorstep of institutional politics.

But the quote above testifies equally vocally to a very political way of understanding literature – Dickens reminds his audience that in his view literature is a form of public service, a special method of affecting the welfare of British society at large (in his own sphere of action "he tried to understand the heavier social grievances and to help set them right"). Using a language Dickens does not use, but drawing on the tradition of political liberalism on which he does draw, it could be said that Dickens delineates a very sharp distinction between civil society and political society. To the latter belong the political parties, the parliamentary system, and the infrastructure of government – the institutional armature of British politics. On the other hand, by civil society, I will mean here, after Jürgen Habermas, the "domain of private autonomy" that is independent of political society.<sup>2</sup> Civil society comprises private citizens in the internal space of the conjugal family, in the marketplace, and in citizen associations, who in pursuit of their various goals use non-political-institutional means at their disposal, including literature. Dickens clearly designates civil society as his proper sphere of action, and suggests that influencing public opinion is his proper political goal. Dickens the writer claims here and elsewhere an important role for literature, which in effect takes on a form of political action in a wider, non-institutional sense. That is, he wants literature to generate public opinion in the realm of civil society as an important mechanism of social reform that in turn might include (stimulate and direct) political reform as well.

What I want to sketch out in this essay is Dickens's view of the relationship between political society and civil society in Britain in the 1850s. In order to do so, I shall begin with his critique of patrician bureaucracy in *Little Dorrit*, but I shall mainly look at his writing in *Household Words*, a miscellany he started and edited. While Dickens criticism has traditionally focused on Dickens the novelist, the fact remains that as a professional writer he was more than just a novelist, and that, for instance, his journal-

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<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. This characterization of civil society would roughly correspond to the golden age of the bourgeois public sphere in the 18th century, when bourgeois civil society sought to create and control a space independent of the aristocratic state.

ism was very often co-textual with his novel-writing. As it appeared in *Household Words*, fiction by Dickens and journalism by Dickens were part of the same textual array directed at a generalized reading audience. In addition, some of Dickens's editorial strategies resulted in subordinating other notable authorships to his own (to name but one among such journal conventions: whereas contributors were most often unsigned, as was often the case in Victorian periodicals, Dickens's name headed every page of the journal). *Household Words* was a controlled affair, not to say an orchestrated one – Dickens took on himself the role of "Conductor." In his preliminary and clearly programmatic word to the first number of *Household Words* Dickens stated that the journal's mission was to present stories of "many moving lessons of compassion and consideration." He also imagined that the journal would thus facilitate a unanimity of response connecting innumerable households: "a multitude moved by one sympathy."<sup>3</sup> In that sense, Dickens did not only aspire to conduct his contributors, but his audiences as well – so as to mobilize them by uniform sentiment. Such ambition was ridiculed by some of the literati: for instance, Dickens received an unflattering portrait as Mr. Popular Sentiment in Trollope's 1855 novel *The Warden*. But even as the novel relentlessly parodied Dickens, Trollope's narrator was not altogether facetious when he intoned that "[i]f the world is to be set right, the work will be done by shilling numbers:"<sup>4</sup> the idea that popular literature could create public sentiment for social reform was the function of an enormous increase of social authority accorded to literature following Dickens's rise to fame.

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In the title itself of *Household Words* lies the core image of Dickens's literary activism: the literary word becomes a sort of sentimental forum for constructing and mobilizing audiences. The mission of conducting the journal's readership towards a common sentiment is perhaps best understood in terms of the political subject matter of *Little Dorrit*. It does not suffice to describe this novel as a satirical depiction of the inefficiency of British bureaucracy, for it is as much an indictment of the patrician grip on the state apparatus as a cautionary tale about the political lethargy of the middle classes. Proceeding from a sense that Britain is paying a high price by clinging to an obsolete political state of things, Dickens's satirical ire is directed at no more or less than a failure of political modernization. *Little Dorrit*'s attack on British bureaucracy was very topical: it was inspired by the events in Crimea, where a British expeditionary force suffered heavy casualties, some in action, while many occasioned by poor supplies of food and clothing. By way of dispatches from the frontline in many British pa-

<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens, "A Preliminary Word," published in *Household Words*, no. 1, March 30, 1850. Quoted in *The Works of Charles Dickens*. Gadshill Edition, vol. 35. *Miscellaneous Papers*, vol. I. London: Chapman and Hall, pp. 181-183.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Warden*. London: Everyman, 1994, p. 133.

pers, the British public had a chance to find out about the horrific condition of the troops in Crimea. With most of the upper echelon officer corps staffed by patricians, there was a public feeling that the bunglings were caused by aristocratic incompetence. When the ARA was formed in response to the Crimean events, Dickens found himself on the verge of getting very closely involved in politics and of transgressing the self-imposed limits on his social activism; the fact that he did join the ARA is a strong indication of how important Dickens thought the moment was. At the same time, in *Little Dorrit* Dickens created his most political novel, with its overarching image of aristocratic domination of British political society – the Circumlocution Office.

*Little Dorrit* warned in very strong terms that continued patrician rule might lead to national disaster. For instance, the Bleeding Heart Yard, one of Dickens's most memorable studies of London slums, serves as an image of where "Britannia herself might come to look for lodgings ... some ugly day or other, if she over-did the Circumlocution Office."<sup>5</sup> The main business of the CO in the "science of government" is deliberate mismanagement, or "how not to do it" (110). Monopolizing the Office are the Barnacles, a patrician family "dispersed all over the public offices, and [holding] all sorts of public places" (113). Ubiquitous in civil service, the Barnacles are often described as "colonies" and "shoals." This crustacean metaphor depicts the Barnacles' mode of operation as a sort of multitude without an organizing center and without individual agency, but capable of acting and reproducing en masse in a parasitical manner. Another implication of course is that such a decentralized collective mode of operation makes the Barnacles all the more difficult to criticize or resist.<sup>6</sup> "Altogether splendid, massive, overpowering, and impracticable,"<sup>7</sup> – this is a short sketch of one of the Barnacles, which also encapsulates Dickens's view of the state of British political society. The sketch exudes an exasperation with the indifference, ceremonious inefficiency, and labyrinthine wastefulness of this political society, as well as a sense that it is hard to imagine for this order of things to change. The aristocratic political society in the novel is depicted as deeply obsolescent as well as stubbornly persistent. From their position of privilege and power, the Barnacles are consistently harmful, and they effectively undermine what Dickens identified as significant national accomplishments. Throughout the novel they are shown to be out to do exactly what they claim not to be out to do: "to set bounds to the philanthropy, to cramp the charity, to fetter the public spirit, to contract the enterprise, to damp the independent self-reliance, of its people" (391). One of the results of the Barnacle administration is that the industrial inventor

<sup>5</sup> Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*. London: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 165.

<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Dickens insists on the political expediency of this political culture for the patrician elite, describing the attitude of a Barnacle who "fully understood the department to be a politico-diplomatic hocus-pocus piece of machinery for the assistance of the nobs in keeping off the snobs" (157-8).

<sup>7</sup> *Little Dorrit*, p. 152.

and entrepreneur Doyle cannot patent an invention of his in Britain and is forced to look for a foreign market to develop it.<sup>8</sup> The simple message here is that aristocratic government has become an obstacle to further growth of British industry. This registers another important Dickensian anxiety: that Britain is ignoring the department where it was a world leader – a technologically innovative, industrial economy.

In this cautionary tale concerning the fate of British industry Dickens turned out to be quite right. Already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was evident that Britain ceased to be the industrial leader of the world. To understand why that happened is certainly a complex question. There is probably a great deal of truth in Eric Hobsbawm's remark that the industrial revolution in Britain in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was carried out by relatively small enterprises, and that after that Britain did not "take the path of systematic economic concentration – the formation of trusts, cartels, syndicates and so on, which was so characteristic of Germany and the USA in the 1880s," when these countries surpassed Britain's industrial output. Britain's continued commitment to "the technology and business organization of the first phase of industrialization" (from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) was coupled with an adherence to free trade when its competitors did not hesitate to protect their home markets by import tariffs.<sup>9</sup> But to view the changes in the position of British industry merely in terms of statistics on its global performance could be misleading. Namely, it is at least equally important to ask why the industrial sector in Britain took a back seat to other economic developments, primarily those in the service sector. Why did Britain in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century cease to be the workshop of the world, while at the same time it became the banker of the world?

Again, there is no simple answer to a question of this kind. However, raising such questions is not only necessary, but also to some degree symptomatic of a shift in British historiography in the past three decades, when the conventional images of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an era of industrialization and the rise of the middle class (still a very strong commonplace of Victorian literary criticism) have begun to lose their explanatory power. Some recent historians, like Tom Nairn, brought into focus the emergence of a unique or "transitional" state form in England, which was the first state form to inaugurate modern ideas of representative democracy although it remained in part structured by versions of patrician privilege.<sup>10</sup> While political modernization in Britain failed to establish a modern state form (perhaps this process is only now being finished with Tony Blair's reforms of British political infrastructure), the British state form was historically powerful and adaptable, and certainly not regressive – it was after all the patri-

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<sup>8</sup> Doyle goes off to Russia, which was thus presumably to benefit from this exodus of British technological knowhow. Published during the war with Russia, Dickens obviously meant this as another charge against the patrician monopoly on power.

<sup>9</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*. London: Penguin Books, 1990, p. 130-1.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*. London: NLB, 1977.

cian state apparatus that presided over the industrial revolution. In an analysis of the politics and economics of British imperialism, Cain and Hopkins have recently argued that industrialization on the national stage at best played second fiddle to the economies of British service capitalism and imperialism. Tracing a long history of cooperation between the patrician ranks and the financial elite after 1688, Cain and Hopkins described a ruling culture that they called “gentlemanly capitalism.”<sup>11</sup> The underlying proposition of these new historical perspectives, whether they appear in neo-Marxist or neo-liberal versions, is that British social, economic, and political histories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are better understood in terms of continuities and evolutions (such as the persistence of a “gentlemanly” ruling elite, domination of a service economy, and the unique evolutionary character of the British state) than radical breaks and revolutions (such as the rise of the middle class, or alternatively the working class, the industrial revolution, the First Reform Bill, etc.).

David Cannadine has argued eloquently that post-1832 British society was still a hierarchical society dominated by a patrician elite. Especially the political and official worlds remained the preserve of a patrician elite which thoroughly refashioned itself precisely during the first stage of the industrial revolution.<sup>12</sup> The Reform Bill of 1832 loosened very little the patrician grip on power – the patrician elite continued to staff the parliament, the government, the civil service, the military, the Church, the diplomacy. There was no change of guard in 1832, as it were, and changes in personnel of government continued to be slow and incremental for the rest of the century. In addition, involvement of non-patricians in the state apparatus was very often carried out through long-established political and social mechanisms of class cooptation that changed the composition of the governing elite but not its structural position – that is why Cain and Hopkins use the term gentlemanly elite (and not patrician elite) when talking about the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In *Little Dorrit* Dickens included a story about such class cooptation through the character of the banker Merdle, who is represented as the pillar of Britain’s global commercial success, and a crucial part of the domestic mix of power (along with characters named Admiralty, Treasury, Bishop, Bar – metonymies that foreground the appropriation of power as personal privilege). As his ARA speech shows, Dickens quite clearly and emphatically saw a failure in political modernization as the defining feature of British political society: “The great, broad, true case that our public progress is far behind our private progress, and that we are not more remarkable for our private wisdom and success in matters of business than we are for our public folly and failure, I take to be as clearly established as the existence of the sun, moon, and stars.”

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<sup>11</sup> P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion 1688-1914*. London: Longman, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> David Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994. See the chapter entitled “The Making of the British Upper Classes.”

This statement exudes a keen sense of an incongruity between the character of British civil society and the character of British political society. A fundamental Dickensian topic emerges in this statement: the "private" space of civil society (comprising economic individuals and their ethic, or "private wisdom," unclear as it is what Dickens might have meant by it) as contrasted with the "public" space of political society (which is structured by a patrician domination that Dickens detested so much). Turning to Habermas's understanding of the classic bourgeois public sphere can help us unpack some of the important elements of Dickens's view of his role in British civil society. In Habermas's scheme of the classic bourgeois public sphere, there is a constitutive tension between bourgeois civil society and aristocratic political society, and the bourgeois public sphere comes into existence (at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) as an arena for critical-rational debate of political and social issues, through which bourgeois civil society sought to dismantle the aristocratic state and politically institutionalize its own values that it saw as universal. In the 1850s Dickens insists on the same tension between civil society and political society that characterized the original context of the bourgeois public sphere two centuries before. In this line of analysis, there is the obvious complication following from the fact that the British political society of Dickens's day had already institutionalized, and arguably quite a long time before, a significant portion of the bourgeois political project. But at issue at this juncture is not whether Dickens was aware of a mixed character of mid-Victorian political society; what is important here is his dramatic polarization of middle-class civil society and patrician political society in terms of modernity and obsolescence. The strong message he is bent on conveying is that the political society in Britain is antiquated, that it needs modernizing, and that the modernizing needs to come from the private space of civil society. It could easily be argued, in Habermasian terms, that by insisting on the tension between civil society and political society in Britain Dickens tried to recreate the originary moment of the bourgeois public sphere and primarily its reform enthusiasm. But there is an important difference between the classic bourgeois public sphere and Dickens's reconstruction of it. Dickens did not really see the classic instruments of the bourgeois classic sphere as primary: the business of debating is almost superfluous at this point, because its outcome has already been "clearly established." That is why, as the analysis of Dickens's journalism in *Household Words* will show, in Dickens's idea of the public sphere what counts is not so much the enlightenment emphasis on reason but an emphasis on sentiment capable of mobilizing the reading public in the cause of reform – a sentimental reeducation of civil society.

What his ARA statement also clearly establishes is that Dickens speaks against the current constellation of power from a place of a kind of empowerment. Dickens takes on the role of spokesman for the most obvious national accomplishment – success in business. Though it is not immediately clear to whom exactly the statement is addressed (the capitalists, the middle classes, the laboring classes, the "industrious" classes, the "people," the English people?), and equally importantly, to whom the statement is not addressed (the ruling elite, the idle aristocracy, everyone else who is not a

successful businessperson?), it is evident that Dickens's rhetoric in the ARA speech is rooted in a sense of alliance with economic capital. Moreover, the very fact that Dickens appears as a speaker at the ARA meeting and a spokesperson for such a ponderous political agenda as the reform of government speaks of his representing another kind of capital – the cultural capital he accumulated as a professional writer and a public figure. That is, Dickens speaks at this point as the spokesman for a tremendous cultural transformation he was at the very center of – the emergence of the professional novelist and the first mass market for novels. He weighs in his cultural authority as a literary man and the economic power of industrious Britain against the "folly and failure" of aristocratic politics.

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Dickens's journalistic texts published in the 1850s in *Household Words* were not written as rigorous pieces of social analysis; rather they are sketches, allegories, editorials – emphatically literary compositions, designed to appeal to pathos and ethos more than to offer a systematic argument. The journal was meant to contend with what Dickens saw as the lack of social and political independence characterizing what I shall for purposes of brevity call the middle classes. Quite literally, the journal aspired to use the realm of letters to reform the middle classes into an enthusiasm for social reform. Started in 1850, when Dickens was at the very summit of his fame, *Household Words* was another measure of his literary prestige, as much as an attempt to further advance his professional autonomy. As "Conductor" with unlimited editorial control, Dickens had the opportunity to actively shape the direction and the general tone of the journal. The journal soon became the most popular periodical of the fifties, during the golden age of the periodical and in the segment of the literary market characterized by the stiffest competition.<sup>13</sup> A literary miscellany, presenting contributions on almost everything (with the notable exception of book reviews), the journal was anchored by works of fiction provided by Dickens himself, as well as some younger rising novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Wilkie Collins. In a preliminary address in the first number, Dickens described the purpose of the journal: "We aspire to live in the Household affections, and to be numbered among the Household thoughts, of our readers." In addition:

We hope to be the comrade and friend of many thousands of people, of both sexes, and of all ages and conditions, on whose faces we may never look. We seek to bring into innumerable homes, from the stirring world around us, the knowledge of many social wonders, good and evil, that are not calculated to render any of us less ardently persevering in ourselves, less tolerant of one another, less faithful in the progress of mankind, less thankful for living in the summer-dawn of time.

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<sup>13</sup> T.H. Heyck mentions that between 1830s and 1880 more than a 100 periodicals were launched each decade. T.H. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian Britain*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982, p. 33.



Apart from repeating some standard elements of his social philosophy (self-reliance, tolerance, progress), Dickens indicates that the journal was to serve as a vehicle for achieving some sort of social unity: "to bring the greater and lesser in degree ... and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kinder understanding." Ultimately, Dickens conjures up the image of the journal's readership as "a multitude moved by one sympathy," tellingly emphasizing that the mode of imagining social solidarity in the journal will be primarily sentimental.<sup>14</sup> In practice, and in spite of its all-nation rhetoric, *Household Words* meant to sentimentally move the middle classes of British society – in order to cultivate its independence from patrician civil and political societies.

In 1850 Dickens started publishing a column in *Household Words* entitled "Supposing!" A mixture of wishful speculation and wistful satire, the column questioned two things: the practicality of British political institutions, and the political habitus of the journal's readership. The column is another recapitulation of Dickens's favorite causes in social reform:

Supposing, we were to change the Property and Income Tax a little, and make it somewhat heavier on realised property, and somewhat lighter on mere income, fixed and uncertain, I wonder whether we should be committing any violent injustice.

Supposing, we were to be more Christian and less mystical, agreeing more about the spirit and fighting less about the letter, I wonder whether we should present a very irreligious and indecent spectacle to the mass of mankind [...]

Supposing, we were all of us to come off our pedestals and mix more with those below us, with no fear but that genius, rank and wealth, would always sufficiently assert their own superiority, I wonder whether we should lower ourselves beyond retrieval.

Supposing, we were to have less botheration and more real education, I wonder whether we should have less or more compulsory colonisation, and Cape of Good Hope very natural indignation!

Supposing, we were materially to simplify the laws, and to abrogate the absurd fiction that everybody is supposed to be acquainted with them, when we know very well that such acquaintance is the study of a life in which some fifty men have been proficient perhaps in five times fifty years, I wonder whether laws would be respected less?

Supposing, we maintained too many of such fictions altogether, and found their stabling come exceedingly expensive! [...]

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<sup>14</sup> Dickens, "A Preliminary Word."

Supposing, Governments were to consider public questions less with reference to their own time, and more with reference to all time [...]

Supposing, the wisdom of our ancestors should turn out to be a mere phrase, and if that there were any sense in it, it should follow that we ought to be believers in the worship of the Druids at this hour [...]

Supposing, we were clearly to perceive that we cannot keep some men out of their share in the administration of affairs [...]

Mr. Lane, the traveller, tells us of a superstition the Egyptians have, that the mischievous Genii are driven away by iron [...] Supposing, this should foreshadow the disappearance of the evil spirits and ignorances besetting this earth, before the iron steam-engines and roads, I wonder whether we could expedite their flight at all by iron energy.

Supposing, we were just to try two or three of these experiments.<sup>15</sup>

Here is a great catalogue of concerns that went into the making of Dickens the novelist as well as Dickens the social activist: tax reform, legal reform, penal system reform, administrative reform, educational reform, election system reform, and finally, a reform in manners, some sort of self-education that "we all" have to undertake. The catalogue is presented in the form of a list of conditionals – or supposings – and the conditional form of the list serves to highlight the difference between the desirable order of things and the order of things as they are. A herald of the desirable state of affairs is found in the emblems of new industrial technologies, iron and steam; but the evocation of these technological achievements is an ambiguous affair. On the one hand, new technology seems to proffer a hope that the persistence of a whole series of troubling failures in British society may prove to be somehow assailable by the salutary spreading of technology/industry. But on the other hand, it also proffers a warning that technological modernization does not necessarily translate into social and political modernization. Industrialization may have a salutary effect, but then it may not; and, at that time, Dickens seems to say, it does not, and cannot – on its own.

The tone of the piece is almost self-parodying, almost rendering the supposings as an exercise in foolish hope – do not his suggestions appear to the writer, who knows better as one of "[us] all," hardly convincing, and thoroughly hypothetical? The rhetorical drift of the pamphlet consists precisely in perceiving this conditionality as very unlikely in order to make its readers wonder why it should appear so unlikely. Even as each supposition presents the possibility of some ultimately more practical and more

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<sup>15</sup> This contribution is dated April 20, 1850. It is reprinted in *Miscellaneous Papers*, II, in *The Works of Charles Dickens. The Gadshill Edition*, vol. 36. London: Chapman and Hall, n.d., pp. 187–189. Of course, "supposing" is the word with which *Bleak House* ends, and arguably the connection is in the destabilizing conditionality between the current condition and the projected sense of unattained social modernity.

reasonable arrangement of things, it also raises the question of its feasibility. What chance such calls for economy and reason have of interfering with the current ways, which apparently depend on fiction and waste? In this contrasting of reason and lack of good sense, profitability and waste, the act of supposing simultaneously renders a disbelief in itself as well as a belief in the endurance of the "fictions," or the irrationality underlying the current order of things. It is because the proposed "experiments" in social reform are clearly taken to be so much more rational and just, that the question of their feasibility is not a function of reason alone.

The pamphlet thus works by shifting the focus from demonstrating the necessity for social reform to demonstrating the necessity for action. Note that Dickens again does not speak from an individual, personal point of view, but rather from the point of view of a collective we; it is a voice that speaks on behalf of the pamphlet's audience. In doing so, he asks his audiences to contemplate two different self-images. There is the image of a community characterized by a lack of belief in and commitment to social reform: while the experiments the piece proposes are deemed just and reasonable beyond the need for demonstration, the almost resigned tone of conditionality with which these supposings are rendered recreates what Dickens diagnoses as the low level of reform enthusiasm of his audiences. But there is necessarily a second identification, suggested by the very list of goals enumerated in the pamphlet – one that creates a call for action. The primary purpose of the pamphlet is not to argue for a list of reform goals; the purpose is not even to determine what goals should be accorded priority; rather, it is to convince the journal's audience that something needs to be done about the existing state of affairs. Blending his own voice into the collective "we," Dickens presents to the middle-class readership of his journal an unflattering mirror that emphasizes frustration and passivity, but through this very emphasis it also cajoles the audience into mobilizing around the idea of reform. In short, the pamphlet has more of a motivational than a programmatic purpose. As Dickens invites a consensus about the obsolescence of the current state of affairs and expresses his frustrated outrage over the pace of reform, he obviously does not intend the piece to demonstrate that there are better ways of doing things; he primarily intends to get his audience to act on this knowledge.

"Supposing!" thus exudes a mixed – and characteristically Dickensian, emotion: there is a push for reform yet also not much belief in the push, unless "we" decide to act in the cause of reform. Of course, from the start it is obvious that the "we" are not everyone, the entire population of Britain: the term designates the social strata that are above, "on our pedestals." One way of interpreting this collectivity is by roughly identifying it as the political nation, the enfranchised, those who have it in their power to steer the proposed reforms, which, in the aftermath of the First Reform Act, meant the electorate of tenpounders, which added to the landowning elite the middle classes and a thin segment of the artisan class. But again, we cannot be fully certain what collectivity is interpellated here by Dickens, other than it is a collectivity defined against "those below us," as well as by some measure of "genius, rank and wealth." The social imaginary framing this interpellation is, to use David Cannadine's terminology, binary – a vision

of society somehow divided into us and them, the privileged and the de-privileged. Yet it is also hierarchical, inasmuch as it presupposes a society stratified by the principle of "superiority" (of genius, rank, wealth), in which there are always "those below us."<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, at this juncture Dickens leaves it to his audiences to recognize themselves in the appellation, and behind that deliberate lack of clarity there lies a need to appeal as broadly as possible – as long as his audiences possess some measure of economic or social capital.

Without attempting a more detailed analysis of Dickens's vocabulary of class, I want to suggest at this point that Dickens in his writing often vacillated among different models of social description. In other words, Dickens's language of class is not unlike the language of class used by a vast majority of Victorian literary figures – it is sometimes binary (the opposition between the people and the aristocracy, or upper and lower classes, for instance), sometimes triadic (upper, middle, lower class), and sometimes hierarchical (the language of degree, rank, status whereby society is minutely stratified into a multitude of class positions).<sup>17</sup> Each of these models (and their many versions), as Cannadine reminds us, is a product and function of complex historical forces and relations. At the same time, each constructs social reality in different ways – any language of class is an attempt to affirm and consolidate a particular vision of the communal space. Two remarks are in order here. First, Dickens believed the aristocracy to be the main obstacle to British political modernization, which is why he often used the binary model people/aristocracy, simple as it is for mobilizing purposes. Secondly, even when Dickens says "people" he most often means "middle class" – that is, his target audience is seldom defined as all citizens of Britain (even when he speaks of suffrage reform), but more often than not it evokes the traditional liberal community of more or less propertied individuals.

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An interesting example of Dickens's dissatisfaction with the disposition of his audiences to pursue reform causes can be found in another *Household Words* contribution, "Nobody, Somebody and Everybody," from 1856. (*Little Dorrit*, published in monthly parts around the same time, and voicing the same caution, was originally to be entitled "Nobody's Fault"). The article was another reaction by Dickens to the way the British government handled the Crimean war, but also to what he perceived was a feeble response of the British public to the government mishandling of the war. Certainly there was no lack of media uproar about the war. In powerful reports for *The Times*, W.H. Russell documented closely the hardships of the common soldier. In most ac-

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<sup>16</sup> See Cannadine's discussion of binary, triadic, and hierarchical models of social description in *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Again, I am alluding to Cannadine's discussion of social description from *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*.

counts of the failures and the suffering in the press, the War Office and the aristocratic officer corps were identified as the cause. A liberal Member of Parliament, A.H. Layard called for reforms in the military, and especially for the officer corps to be made open to the middle classes. Layard also founded the Administrative Reform Association, designed to campaign for a more comprehensive political reform, and in particular for wrenching the civil service from patrician patronage, and the ARA attracted Dickens and some other literary figures. In spite of his reservations discussed above, Dickens probably felt compelled to speak for the ARA because he was not convinced that the British public reacted strongly enough to the patrician bungling of the war, in spite of the press coverage. Following the Russell dispatches in *The Times*, Dickens suggests, the country fell into a "gloomy silence;" this state of shock and inactivity has to be addressed by "the awakening of the people, the outspokening of the people, the uniting of the people in all patriotism and loyalty to effect a great peaceful constitutional change in the administration of their own affairs."<sup>18</sup>

While he felt that a substantial political change was necessary – "a great peaceful constitutional change" – Dickens also believed that a chance for doing something about it was slipping away in absence of more public support for reform. Dickens's involvement with the ARA turned out to be brief, but he continued to write articles in *Household Words* that were meant to awake the public and unite it in reform sentiment, and among these articles was "Nobody;" the article attacked the government's handling of the Crimean war, but more broadly it was a diagnosis of a social situation in which accountability of government officials failed to become an issue. Speaking of a culture of shirking responsibility characteristic of the government, Dickens extends the article's chief metaphor, ironically observing the agency of Nobody in all spheres of public life:

Surely, this is a rather wonderful state of things to be realising itself so long after the Flood, in such a country as England. Surely, it suggests to us with some force, that wherever this ubiquitous Nobody is, there mischief is and there danger is. For, it is especially to be borne in mind that wherever failure is accomplished, there nobody lurks. With success, he has nothing to do. That is Everybody's business, and all manner of improbable people will be invariably found at the bottom of it. But, it is the great feature of the present epoch that all public disaster in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland is assuredly, and to a dead certainty, Nobody's work.<sup>19</sup>

This is an appeal to his readership's sense of modernity. Though the perspective of modernity is established somewhat jokingly in terms of distance from ante-diluvial times, it certainly evokes the national experience as a vanguard of modernity ("in such

<sup>18</sup> Charles Dickens, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (ed. by K.J. Fielding). Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1960, pp. 200-201. The speech was given on June 27, 1855.

<sup>19</sup> Published on August 30, 1856. The piece is reprinted in *The Works of Charles Dickens*, vol. 36, pp. 115-119.

a country as England"). Dickens continues with expressions of anxiety about the national image of England, and more specifically about its present inability to live up to the promise of its own political standards, among which should be numbered accountability of public officials. If previously Dickens "remark[ed] ... the impression made on other peoples by the stern Saxon spirit with which, the default proved and the wrong being done, we have tracked down and punished the defaulter, and the wrong-doer," now he believes that the recent failures in the conduct of the Crimean war will leave an impression "more potent and more vivid in Europe (mayhap in Asia too, and in America) for years to come than all our successes since the days of the Spanish Armada."

Describing the management of the war as a "system of false pretence and general swindling," Dickens calls for a different, accountable kind of civil servant: "I want Somebody who will be clever in doing business, not clever in evading it. ... I want Somebody who shall be no fiction; but a capable, good, determined workman." But what does "Nobody" stand for? In a caustic commentary on the level of public interest in the matter, Dickens claims some sort of sublimity for Nobody: "It is difficult for the mind to span the career of Nobody. The sphere of action opened to this wonderful person, so enlarges every day, that the limited faculties of anybody are too weak to compass it" – another jab at the middle classes for their insufficient readiness to scrutinize the behavior of the holders of political office. There is in fact no sublime mystery for Dickens as to who is accountable, and he clearly identifies Nobody as the irresponsible yet ceremonious public official: "Reserving Nobody for statues, and stars and garters, and batons, and places and pensions without duties, what if we were to try Somebody for real work?"

The broad satire of this article has led some critics to question the focus of Dickens's political vision. Alexander Welsh, for instance, suggested that the article makes manifest "Dickens's inability to define a political creed."<sup>20</sup> To Welsh it appeared that "'Nobody' is ironic because it stands for somebody, and doubly ironic because Dickens finally does not know who that somebody may be; it may as well be nobody after all." Granting that Dickens may not have had a clearly doctrinal approach to politics, a convincing case can hardly be made that his political practice was shapeless or directionless. In fact, "Nobody" sums up two important tenets of all of Dickens's political thought and action. First, Dickens held that the running of the country has been monopolized by an exclusive group of privileged and unaccountable officials. Through the thin allegorical veil of Nobody it is only too easy to recognize the gentlemanly class monopolizing the public domain, as is obvious in the following description of what a responsible civil servant should not be like: "I don't want Somebody to sustain, for Parliamentary and Club entertainment, and by the desire of several persons of distinction, the character of a light old gentleman, or a fast old gentleman, or a free-and easy old gentleman, or a capital old gentleman considering his years." "Nobody" is given the in-

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander Welsh, *The City of Charles Dickens*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 51.

different face of the patrician tenure of power – the metaphor is an indication of just how little the gentlemanly elite holds itself accountable. Secondly, and equally importantly, the metaphor of "Nobody" entails an image of a society characterized by insufficient public scrutiny, or at least the lack of public momentum in calling for accountability in office – it takes two to let "Nobody" take the blame for misgovernment. That other agency contributing to the successful political existence of "Nobody" is the apathetic middle-class audience that Dickens's journal attempts to "move by one sympathy."

As Dickens tries to impress on his readers the necessity of mending this state of affairs, he ultimately resorts to an image of national catastrophe: "Something will be the national death of us, some day; and who can doubt that Nobody will be brought in Guilty?" The double-entendre is of course too obvious. On the one hand, Dickens apportions the blame for any possible disaster that might befall Britain to the political regime represented by Nobody; on the other hand, he implies that even in such a case of national catastrophe the responsible party will get away with it. Note that again Dickens addresses the political nerve of his middle-class audiences in the same manner that was characteristic of "Supposings!" – not through a critical analysis of the political field, but rather by serving up images of the audience's own social and political inertia. The idea is to shame his audiences into action.

Let me briefly look at another contribution to *Household Words*, published earlier in the same year. "Insularities" is one of many Dickens lamentations over the peculiar British class culture. The title concern of the piece is scarcely a matter of some great singularity of insight on Dickens's part, but its interest lies in the particular political content that Dickens gives to the phenomenon he describes as insularities. While nations, he states, are likely in some measure to glorify themselves and their institutions, "it is of paramount importance to every nation that its boastfulness should not generate prejudice, conventionality, and a cherishing of unreasonable ways of acting and thinking, which have nothing in them deserving of respect, but are ridiculous or wrong." The stereotypical national traits Dickens dwells on include conservative dress, social formality and constraint, and court press. In talking of such English peculiarities, Dickens assumes a modest task for himself: "Our object in this paper is to string together a few examples."<sup>21</sup> Yet the casual tone is given a sharp counterpoint in Dickens's description of the conditions generating English peculiarities:

We, English people, owing in a great degree to our insular position, and in a small degree to the facility with which we have permitted electioneering lords and gentlemen to think for us, and represent our weakness to us as our strength, have been in particular danger of contracting habits which we will call for our present purpose, Insularities.

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<sup>21</sup> This contribution is dated January 19, 1856. It is reprinted in *The Works of Charles Dickens*, vol. 36, pp. 80-86.

The irony on the relative importance of the causes of insularities hardly needs pointing out – the rest of the piece will say very little about the insular geography, physical or cultural, but a substantial deal about the monopolizing of public life by "electioneering lords and gentlemen." As the text unfolds, it becomes clear that for its writer the fundamental mechanism of English insularities is to be found in the singular arrangements underwriting Britain's public life. The real target of Dickens's attack is the character of what he perceives to be the tacit social pact between the "English people" (rather: "We, English people") and the political establishment, that is, the patrician and gentlemanly elite. The peculiar character of that pact is the "facility" with which the "English people" have given over political power to the "electioneering club" (whose partisan differences mean little to Dickens here, their control of political society uniting rather than dividing them). In spite of his personal sympathies for the cause of suffrage reform, let me point out again, Dickens in "English people" hardly means all Englishmen and Englishwomen, including those excluded from representation; exclusion from representation is not really at issue in the piece. The general drift of the piece (as in other similar writing by Dickens) is to point to the middle class (a class that already has access to political representation) as the social group responsible for the chief English "insularity" of political and class subservience. For instance, Dickens writes of an admittedly past situation, when "Tory writers" used to ridicule popular entertainment, jeering "the weaker members of the middle class into making themselves a poor fringe on the skirts of the class above them, instead of occupying their own honest, honourable, and independent place."<sup>22</sup> Dickens's call for a middle-class identity free from aristocratic influence is part of his strategy to appeal to the sense of social responsibility of the social group which he perceives to be, presumably because of their unused enfranchisement and their potential for occupying a more "independent place," the most responsible for making a difference in the field of social reform, as well as the most responsible for the circumstance that no substantial difference is being made.

The final insularity that Dickens presents for "general consideration and correction," is "that the English people are wanting in self-respect." Just like "Supposings!" and "Nobody," "Insularities" attributes the cause for the various national failures not only to the constellation of power in the political field, but also to a certain failure of middle-class self-understanding – a failure of a non-patrician English civil society to assert itself against the obsolescence of the patrician political society. The piece is an

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<sup>22</sup> It is not known to me who the writers are that Dickens has in mind here, or what the popular recreation and entertainment they derided was. However, a little below, speaking of contemporary traces of such attitudes, Dickens points to "unlikely places," and castigates Macaulay for poking fun at "the thousands of clerks and milliners who are now thrown into raptures by the sight of Loch Katrine and Loch Lomond," that is, at the lower middle-class nature tourists. Dickens was a strong advocate for popular entertainment, against the dullness of industrial and clerical life.



other in a series of rhetorical attempts to shame the middle class into some sort of civil and political existence, and thus to lend it a civil and political identity.

The driving force of Dickens's social activism and writing in the 1850s is precisely this: the perception of an anemic middle-class posture in civil society. During the decade, Dickens repeatedly proposes that the intimacy between the patrician elite and the state needs to be countered by an attempt to create a critical distance between middle-class civil society and patrician political society. It is as if Dickens tried to impress on his (largely) middle-class readership that in order to restore to the middle class some sense of autonomous influence on the domain of political authority, the public sphere needs to be reconstituted from within civil society, through a reform of middle-class political and social identity, behavior, and sense of purpose. This obviously informed Dickens's social activism – the many societies and associations that he supported or helped fashion, and that were as a rule independent from the state, and that sought to create, primarily through sentiment, a sense of collectivity and moral responsibility within middle-class civil society itself. As he stated in another attack on the subservience of the English middle class, the first postulate of his social vision is that "[r]eform begins at home."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Dickens, "The Toady Tree." *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens Journalism. Volume 3. "Gone Astray" and Other Papers from Household Words*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1999, p. 299. The article was originally published on May 26, 1855.

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## DICKENS I CIVILNO DRUŠTVO

Članak se bavi Dickensovim društvenim aktivizmom i novinarstvom pedesetih godina devetnaestog stoljeća, kada je Dickens uređivao časopis *Household Words*, kada je napisao svoj jedini "politički" roman *Little Dorrit*, te kada je vrlo glasno kritizirao britansku aristokratsku vladu zbog njenog vođenja Krimskog rata. Cilj članka je rasvijetliti retoričke strategije kojima je Dickens nastojao utjecati na reformski entuzijazam srednje klase.