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"Wilderness of Smoke and Brick": Imagination of the Times in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

Borislav Knežević
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb
bknezevi@m.ffzg.hr

The article examines the imagination of the present period of English society in Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times*. This industrial novel is somewhat atypical of Dickens's novel writing, for its setting in a manufacturing town (the fictional Coketown). The focus of the article is on the novel's representation of the ideologies of the town's middle class (associated with political economy and utilitarianism), and on the role of Stephen Blackpool, a working-class character, in the context of that representation. The novel depicts a society in which large segments of the population experience great economic, political and legal inequality, and critiques a number of middle-class ideological attitudes, embodied in the characters of Thomas Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby. The article discusses the importance of the novel's image of the town's industrial society as a "wilderness"; such figurative language has the effect of defamiliarizing the middle-class social ideologies in the industrial society of Coketown. The article also examines the way the novel addresses its work of defamiliarizing the middle-class ideologies to the middle-class readership.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, industrial novel, middle-class ideology, utilitarianism

Bleak House (1852-53) opens with a description of an area of London which creates a peculiar conflation of the novel's present time and a time we call prehistoric:

> LONDON. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. (Dickens 1980: 49)

The focus of this image is on the muddy streets of 19th century London; the amount of the mud in the centre of the great metropolis prompts the narrator to imagine the scenery in the immediate wake of some diluvial event far back on an unspecified timescale, when creatures like the Megalosaurus roamed the muddy landscape. The mention of the Megalosaurus was influenced by new developments in the field of natural history, i.e. new attempts at the description,

interpretation and naming of fossil finds, and the growing popular interest in the subject.[1] In the context of the novel's focus on the English legal system, it could be said that the opening sets the tone: the narrator's imagining the animal "waddling […] up Holborn Hill," the location of the Court of Chancery, creates a metonymical relationship between the prehistoric animal and the contemporary legal institutions, which, as an effect of the figurative connection, are immediately recast as a relic of a bygone era. The image thus conveys a suggestion that the legal apparatus of present-day England is obsolete; at the same time the eruption of the prehistoric image into the present also brings up the question of how actually to imagine and characterize the present. The prehistoric reference creates a critical perspective on the present moment: in foregrounding the antiquated character of a specific institution in England it necessarily raises the question of imagining a more advanced form to replace the relic. In other words, the novel's opening poses, albeit implicitly, through the roundabout work of the imagery, the question of social reform. That tone is in tune with a more general theme in Dickens's fiction: a perception that large segments of the social order are stuck in antiquated social forms and are badly in need of transformation.

The newly developing understanding of the vastness of changes in natural history allows Dickens to construct a figurative frame that foregrounds the question of transformations in social history, and particularly the question of their pace. There is at work here an irritation with the uneven character of social change in his own time (a common feature in Dickens's fiction): the present era is after all a period of great social change in England, in many ways unprecedented in terms of scope and pace, a period in which the country undergoes a momentous economic transformation and commands substantial global power; however, some things—especially those related to the orders of social and political power—are quite capable of allowing change to happen only at a very slow pace.

"Fictions of Coketown"

It is this kind of irritation with the unevenness of social transformation in mid-century England that also informs the social imagination at work in *Hard Times* (1854), Dickens's only industrial novel. In *Hard Times* Dickens dealt with a social setting seldom visited in his earlier novels, a manufacturing town (a fictional place he named Coketown).[2] The novel's setting invited much critical

[1] Adalene Buckland presented an interesting examination of Dickens's writing in relation to new developments in geology and popular entertainment inspired by scientific subjects ("'The Poetry of Science': Charles Dickens, Geology, and Visual and Material Culture in Victorian London."). Dickens personally knew Sir Richard Owen, the palaeontologist who coined the term dinosaur. Buckland's article discusses the cultural significance of popular scientific shows at the time, and Dickens's interest in geology in the context of the popularity of scientific subjects.

[2] An analysis of the treatment of industrialism in several novels by Dickens can be found in Patrick Brantlinger's essay "Dickens and the Factories" (1971).

discussion of its perspective on industrial capitalism, and more broadly, of the tenor of its social imagination. In the middle of the 20th century, F.R. Leavis sought to give the novel the stature of "a completely serious work of art" (Leavis 1993: 258), which he thought had not been sufficiently recognized before. Whereas "[o]rdinarily Dickens's criticism of the world he lives in is casual and incidental – a matter of including among the ingredients of a book some indignant treatment of a particular abuse," in *Hard Times* Leavis saw "a comprehensive vision, one in which the inhumanities of Victorian civilization are seen as fostered and sanctioned by a hard philosophy" (Leavis 1993: 259), the philosophy of utilitarianism as practiced by Thomas Gradgrind. In *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams opened a short section on the novel (in the context of an overview of the industrial novels from the period) by quoting Leavis's remark about the novel's "comprehensive vision," in order to point out the specific character of the social imagination in the novel. Comparing *Hard Times* with Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Williams claimed that Dickens's novel is "a thorough-going and creative examination of the dominant philosophy of industrialism," offering a "more comprehensive understanding" of it, while on the other hand "in terms of human understanding of the industrial working people Dickens is obviously less successful than Mrs Gaskell;" *Hard Times* is "an analysis of industrialism, rather than the experience of it" (Williams 1983: 93). In Williams's interpretation of the novel Dickens's "positives do not lie in social improvement, but rather in what he sees as elements of human nature—personal kindness, sympathy, and forbearance" (Williams 1983: 94). This means a story of "individual persons against the System" of industrialism (Williams 1983: 94-95). Dickens critiques industrialism "as a whole way of life," and his response to that system is expressed by Sleary's Circus, "because it is not part of the industrial organization" (Williams 1983: 95). This "go[ing] outside the industrial situation to find any expression of his values" also helps explain why Dickens's "treatment of the industrial working people should have been so unsatisfactory" (Williams 1983: 95-96). However, there is more to the novel's social critique than just a commentary on either the social implications of utilitarianism or the system of industrial capitalism in England. The novel's vision of industrial capitalism is only part of its social imagination, and its characters are placed in situations which emphasize a range of social disadvantages that shape their lives. *Hard Times* is an industrial novel, but still also a novel about the society at large. In fact, the narrator's stance, which appears to be the stance of someone who describes Coketown from the outside, and who simultaneously introduces and defamiliarizes the town's society to a national readership, conveys a clear sense that industrial capitalism is a big part of contemporary English society, but not all of it. Moreover, while there is some textual evidence for Williams's remark that the novel deals with the industrial workers in an "unsatisfactory" manner, there is also a good deal of evidence in the novel that it is concerned with the question of working-class political voices, even as it shies away from articulating them.

While *Hard Times* has attracted a great deal of critical attention for the politics of its social imagination, my intention here is not to re-examine and comment on

the various trends in some of the earlier political readings of the novel, which would be a task that involves sifting through a voluminous critical production, shaped by specific historical and critical perspectives that would require as much commentary as Dickens's text itself. This article is meant to present a much more limited reading which focuses primarily on the text itself, and in particular its view of the historical moment it inhabits; in the process I will argue that the political sentiments expressed by the novel are shaped by its perception of the present period in history. Also, it would sound too presumptuous to propose to examine something like Dickens's philosophy of history; here, I find it best to assume, as Patrick Brantlinger proposed in his analysis of *Barnaby Rudge*, that Dickens's "philosophy of history" was "an amateur, unsophisticated one" (Brantlinger 2001: 61), which really means that it proceeded largely from Dickens's own social imagination rather than a methodical intellectual engagement with a body of works in history, philosophy, political writing, etc. A sustained discussion of Dickens's view of history across his novelistic career would certainly yield certain persistent themes and perspectives; on the other hand, looking at an individual text has the advantage of examining how that particular text imagines its own historical time, rather than seeking to reconstruct some unifying notion of "Dickens" or his historical imagination. In other words, what is being discussed in this article is not Dickens as a historical figure or an author whose views are reflected in his writing, but the text of *Hard Times* and its own version of historical imagination.[3] Aspects of the novel that can be identified as having to do with imagination of history are not many in the novel, nor are they given a careful or elaborate structuration, but they inform much of the novel's tone and the meaning of its title.

Before presenting my reading of the novel, I would like to make several points about its thematic structure. These points have often been acknowledged in the criticism of the novel in some way, and even a cursory glance at the novel reveals their centrality. First, the novel's view of the industrial society of Coketown is not motivated by an ambition of documentary realism, and there are few passages detailing either the working conditions or everyday life of the industrial working classes. One aspect of the novel that seems like an attempt to capture a trait of working-class life is the novel's version of representing a working-class dialect (which is one of the novel's ways of instructing the middle class that it should learn to hear the working class), but in most other respects it regards working-class life from a relative distance. Secondly, it might be tempting

[3] In an article on the politics of *Hard Times*, Nicholas Coles made an interesting argument about the importance of distinguishing between the politics of the novel and Dickens's views as a social reformer in public life, especially in the context of *Household Words*, in which the novel was first published. Coles claimed that Dickens's novels are more radical (in comparison to his views expressed outside of his fiction), developing "positions which would be untenable outside the fiction in the world to which his activity as a reformer-journalist was addressed" (Coles 1986: 146). Coles's article discusses this difference in detail with regard to the critique of utilitarianism and political economy in *Hard Times*.

(and it is misleading) to think of the novel's perspective as reflecting middle-class prejudice in depicting the industrial working class; it is important to recognize that the novel altogether conveys not *the* middle-class position (or prejudice) but *a* middle-class position, one that can be summed up as a critique of middle-class aspirations to exert social and ideological control over the industrial working class. That position also informs one of the novel's most interesting features, its refusal to speak on behalf of the working class. Finally, there is a simplicity, and almost a crudity to its main thematic configuration, which Stephen Connor, for instance, described as follows: "In a sense, the whole purpose of the novel is to convince us of a number of equivalences, most particularly between the educational philosophy of Gradgrind and the economic theory and practice of the new industrialism; it is in metaphor that this association is established" (Connor 1985: 98). But these apparent simplicities are part of a highly complex text: *Hard Times* generates complexities in a vast range of ways (and this stylistic richness is certainly one ingredient of what is conventionally and vaguely meant by the adjective "Dickensian"), from the narrator's presence and tone to character construction, prolific figurative language, narrative use of a vast range of social jargon,[4] emplotment, and finally, to the manner of the novel's imagining the social world, that is, its historical imagination. Sometimes this complex proliferation of meaning presents challenges to interpretation of a single sentence, let alone the entire text. While Connor's reading was mainly and markedly concerned with the (formally inconsistent) workings of metaphor and metonymy in the novel, I find it more plausible and necessary to appreciate the figurative complexity of Dickens's text not in terms of its inconsistent formal features but rather as the very form of its narrative procedure. My reading will not systematically examine this characteristic lavishness of Dickens's text, but it will assume it is there. This also means that in focusing on those aspects of the novel that have to do with its imagination of its historical time a good deal of the text's complexity must necessarily be abstracted.

So, what are the times of *Hard Times*? The obvious should be remembered first: that the story of the novel takes place at a time when English political

[4] Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out that in "[t]he English comic novel," Dickens included, "we find a comic-parodic re-processing of almost all the levels of literary language, both conversational and written, that were current at the time" (Bakhtin 2014: 301). One of the aspects of that re-processing of a wide range of social idiom is that the comic novel presents a particularly lively and elaborate arrangement of heteroglossia. The humour of heteroglossia is certainly one source of the complexity of Dickens's novels (even in *Hard Times*, in spite of its pronounced melodramatic elements), at least as important to the complexity of the fabric of the novel as figurative language is. But there is also quite a bit of important figurative work in *Hard Times*, which does not come from parody but from what is specific to the text itself: the manner of figurative construction of Coketown as "wilderness" (*HT* 1966: 69) is the work of Dickens's imagination and a "key-note," to use a title chapter from the novel, to its depiction of Coketown. Similarly unique figurative instances are the descriptions of Gradgrind's and Bounderby's physical features.

society is limited to a select group while large segments of the population are still not citizens in the basic political sense of possessing the right to vote; in fact, the country's population consists predominantly of the unfranchised. To use a shorthand description of the situation after the Reform Act of 1832 by David Cannadine: "the representational system remained in many ways anomalous, inconsistent, restricted and oligarchic" (Cannadine 2017: 163); this was still very much the case in 1854, when *Hard Times* was published. Over the course of the century, the right to vote will be gradually extended through two more reform acts, without producing even universal manhood suffrage, and without extending the franchise to women. While the question of political representation of the unfranchised is not explicitly addressed in the novel, either by the narrator or the characters (perhaps this is a measure of Dickens's understanding of this issue as politically too cumbersome to address in his novelistic writing), the novel is not reluctant to proffer a critical view on the sphere of institutional politics. This political theme is very much there, albeit on the margins of the narrative. Without much detail we find out that Gradgrind, after "retir[ing] from a wholesale hardware trade," the only mention of the origin of his wealth in the novel, "was now looking about for a suitable opportunity of making an arithmetical figure in Parliament" (Dickens 1966: 7). Eventually he gets elected in a "by-comer" (*HT* 1966: 71). It is suggested that he is not averse to forming a convenient political alliance with the established political elites. His political group in Parliament, "[t]he Gradgrind party," which represents a manufacturing interest and is associated with the idiom of political economy, engages in "recruiting" political allies among "fine gentlemen" ("They liked fine gentlemen; they pretended that they did not, but they did" (*HT* 1966: 94-95). They find a political associate in James Harthouse, a younger brother to a member of Parliament, who introduces him to Gradgrind's group:

> "Jem, there's a good opening among the hard Fact fellows, and they want men. I wonder you don't go in for statistics." Jem, rather taken by the novelty of the idea, and very hard up for a change, was as ready to "go in" for statistics as for anything else. So, he went in. (*HT* 1966: 95)

The tone of the references to the English political culture at the time is sarcastic. Members of Parliament are referred to as "[t]he national dustmen" (*HT* 1966: 164); in the same spirit, Gradgrind is described as "usually sifting and sifting at his parliamentary cinder-heap in London (without being observed to turn up many precious articles among the rubbish), and was still hard at it in the national dust-yard" (*HT* 1966: 150). Harthouse seems to provide Gradgrind with additional political capital, which is a motif comparable to the social capital that Bounderby claims from his association with Mrs. Sparsit, an impoverished widow with a pronounced sense of social pride about her family background, whom he hires as his housekeeper. (Mrs. Sparsit, Bounderby, and Harthouse, in F.R. Leavis's succinct phrase, "form a trio that suggests the whole system of British snobbery"; Leavis 1993: 281). Harthouse serves in the story to highlight the cooperation between the older genteel elites and the new industrialist

class: embarking on a political career with "his adopted party" (*HT* 1966: 126), Harthouse is found to show promise for being good at an ability appreciated by his new allies, "a tolerable management of the assumed honesty in dishonesty" (*HT*: 127). While Harthouse represents the readiness of the patrician-dominated social order to cooperate with the new capital and economic power from the industrial parts of English society, Gradgrind and Bounderby are implied to regard the cooperation as a means of access to patrician influence on the levers of political power. Interestingly, Dickens also chooses to emphasize, as a prominent part of Harthouse's political habitus, his attitude of patrician boredom, which proves useful as he joins his new allies (one of the qualities with which his political promise is described is "genteel listlessness for the general society"; *HT*: 126-127). Harthouse shows little more than indifference to the general public, cynical as he is about practicing any sort of political belief, and interested solely (but jadedly) in the social expedience of his political connection with Gradgrind.

An important remark is in order here on the setting of the novel's social lens. The novel is far from trying to claim a nuanced look at the English society as a whole; in fact, in place of intense focus and nuance there is a bundling of a variety of social trends together. Coketown is home to a range of different middle-class practices which seek to exert control over the industrial working class, including religious proselytizing, a teetotaling society, utilitarian education, and, of course, exercise of economic and political power of the industrialists. These practices are bundled together, while remaining separable: Gradgrind is more of an ideologue and utilitarian cultural activist,[5] whereas Bounderby is a ruthless *laissez-faire* capitalist and a boisterous (as well as disingenuous) megaphone for the ideology of self-help. Gradgrind himself promotes a mixture of utilitarian social reform and political economy. As a capitalist Bounderby is an amalgamation too, a bundled-up emblem for different forms of capital: "banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not" (*HT* 1966: 11). As already noted, on the national stage, that is, outside of the stage of the industrial town, the novel registers processes of different kinds of power coming together, but also a process of hybridization of the social attitudes of the "many of the Gradgrind school," who "liked fine gentlemen": "They became exhausted in imitation of them; and they yaw-yawed in their speech like them; and they served out, with an enervated air, the little mouldy rations of political economy, on which they regaled their disciples. There never before was seen on earth such a wonderful hybrid race as was thus produced" (*HT* 1966:

[5] To what extent is Gradgrindery an allusion to actual educational practices at the time is a good question. Referring to a contemporary review of *Hard Times*, which expressed doubt about whether such schools were common, Robin Gilmour stated that "Dickens was right and the *Westminster Review* wrong: elementary schools of the Gradgrind variety did exist at this time, and though they were a small and now largely forgotten area of nineteenth-century education, they do constitute a remarkable instance of the complex workings of practical utilitarianism in Victorian England" (Gilmour 1967: 212). Gilmour specifically mentions William Ellis and the Birkbeck schools, which included popular instruction in what he called 'Social Economy,' which was "the key to Ellis's brand of utilitarianism" (Gilmour 1967: 215).

94-95). Even the proponents of the Gradgrind school (the novel's construction of a confluence of middle-class ideologies based on utilitarianism and political economy) are not immune to the tremendous pull of the hierarchical idea of society, anchored by the landowning class. In the broad-view satirical optics of the novel, there is little psychological complexity or sociological nuance in the portrayal of Gradgrind, Bounderby and Harthouse, on some level caricatures all; but the main drift of the bundling them all up in emplotment is clear. Their interactions allude to the workings of power on the national level, a confluence of the various social forces: different kinds of capital, different forms of middle-class ideology, and an administrative apparatus still very much influenced by the patrician class, with opportunistic alliances formed in the interest of patrician landowners and capitalists alike.

In its concern with the social attitudes of the middle class in the industrial town of Coketown, the novel calls attention to both middle-class ideologies (in that generalized, bundled-up way) and the imposition of the ideologies (in a more dramatically important way). The novel opens with a scene at Gradgrind's school, which highlights the school's educational ideas with their grounding in political economy and utilitarianism, and its rigid educational practice designed to indoctrinate pupils into pursuit of "Facts" and to stultify their exercise of "Fancy."[6] Later, Gradgrind is devoted, in accordance with his doctrine, to the idea of the key role of statistics and "Facts" in creation of governmental policies, which idea presumably shapes his political work based on blue books, that is, reports presented to Parliament on various social issues. (His style of thought is based on using statistics to further his ideological agenda; the narrator casually remarks that the blue books proved "usually anything you like"; *HT* 1966: 73.)[7] Gradgrind's exercise of his social ideas is originally so programmatic and

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[6] In its dedication to fact, Gradgrindery stands in great disapproval of fancy, which in the context of the Gradgrind classroom means exclusion of any kind of instruction not based on fact (necessarily meaning removal of anything aesthetic, imaginative or entertaining from instruction). Because it is ostracised in such a wholesale manner, fancy comes to stand in the novel for imagining freedom from the constraints of Coketown ideologies. One of the common topics in the criticism of the novel has been the relationship between Sleary's circus and Gradgrindery; Raymond Williams saw the role of the circus in the novel as an "expression of [Dickens's] values" (see above). However, the circus also allows the novel to foreground the question of popular entertainment. In a comment on the situation of the working people in Coketown, the narrator emphasizes that they are very much in need of "some relaxation, encouraging good humour and good spirits […] some recognized holiday, though it were but for an honest dance to a stirring band of music—some occasional light pie in which even M'Choakumchild had no finger" (*HT* 1966: 19).

[7] Assessing the tone of Dickens's critique of industrialism, Williams stated that "in condemning Thomas Gradgrind, the representative figure, we are invited also to condemn the kind of thinking and the methods of enquiry and legislation which in fact promoted a large measure of social and industrial reform" (Williams 1980: 94). The possibility of such an interpretation comes from the novel's bundling up of different middle-class ideologies; however, if the caricatural character of that amalgamation is considered,

consummate that it doesn't appear characterized by the duplicity of "assumed honesty in dishonesty," suggested to be typical of others in his political circle, including the new addition of Harthouse. Gradgrind's fault is both in the character of his ideology and in his relentless imposition of it.[8] He clearly belongs to a group of ideologues the narrator describes as "Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used-up infidels, gabblers of many little dog's-eared creeds" (*HT* 1966: 125), who seek to enforce their ideologies, economic and social, across society, and especially to preach them to the working classes; Gradgrind's school, which "he intended […] to be a model" (*HT* 1966: 7), is one form this ideological effort takes, and his parliamentary work another. He also applies his ideology to his family life (in the education of his children; his entwining of private life and ideological doctrine is underscored by the names given to two of his younger children, Adam Smith and Malthus, and possibly the youngest child, Jane)[9].

"Utilitarian economists": the novel presents a condemnation of the absurdity of Gradgrind's exaltation of fact and economistic reason, yet its engagement with utilitarianism as a doctrine is not overly specific.[10] What the novel does place in

it is more difficult to argue that in opposing Gradgrindery the novel more generally brings into question actual social and industrial reform.

[8] In a melodramatic turn of events at the end of the novel, the narrator speculates on Gradgrind's future as "a white-haired decrepit man, bending his hitherto inflexible theories to appointed circumstances; making his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope and Charity," which in turn leads to his being "much despised by his late political associates" (*HT* 1966: 225). It should be noted that the story limits the significance of the partial ideological transformation of Gradgrind and the liberation of Louisa by their helping Tom escape the country; Sissy's assistance in the process is also problematical in that regard, as well as for being an expression of class deference. Regarding the effect of Tom's escape in the context of her discussion of the reformation of the Gradgrind family, Catherine Gallagher stated that their "salvation is full of ambiguity: it entails an illegal act that cuts them off from society […]" (Gallagher 1988: 161). In her reading, the absence of a more significant reformation of the Gradgrinds shows the breakdown of the novel's endorsement of the idea of family as a resource of social reform. However, it could be argued that the incomplete reformation of the Gradgrinds is very much a part of the design of the novel's fabric.

[9] Hilda Hollis suggested that the choice of the name Jane "likely alludes to an important figure associated with classical political economy–Jane Marcet, one of the best-known popularizers of the subject. Marcet was well known for her textbook introducing the tenets of classical political economy […] *Conversations on Political Economy in which the Elements of the Science are Familiarly Explained* (1816)" (Hollis 2002: 89). Hollis mentions that Dickens met Jane Marcet. The possibility that Dickens may have alluded to Marcet's work is interesting, though a speculative one.

[10] Mary Poovey presented an interesting perspective on political economy and *Hard Times*, in an article which doesn't attempt an extensive reading of the novel, but rather explores the operations of what she calls "structure of anxiety." She uses that concept (inspired by Sigmund Freud's understanding of anxiety) to discuss "[t]he epistemological and ethical similarities between political economy and novels like *Hard Times*" (Poovey 2001: 167). In dealing with Dickens's novel, Poovey's focus is not so much on

the foreground in its depiction of Coketown is a sense that utilitarianism is a popular middle-class creed with a wide social reach. Richard D. Altick observed about utilitarianism that it was "part of the atmosphere every nineteenth-century Englishman breathed" […] "Like evangelicalism, utilitarianism became not so much a set of formal tenets as a state of mind" (Altick 1998: 129). Altick remarked that the two "often overlapped, the Sunday evangelical being the weekday utilitarian" (Altick 1998: 132). Incidentally, Coketown may be said to point to this affinity, as can be seen in the description of its architecture: "You saw nothing in Coketown but what was severely workful. If the members of a religious persuasion built a chapel there—as the members of eighteen religious persuasions had done—they made it a pious warehouse of red brick" (*HT* 1966: 17). The "pious warehouse" seems to be the narrator's shorthand indication of the above-mentioned affinity.

The narrator gives a name to the object of his disapprobation: "the fictions of Coketown" (*HT* 1966: 90), the ideologies articulated and propagated by the dominant class of the town. Among them is the ideology of the self-made man, which is ridiculed for its patent absurdity: "Any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn't each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat. What I did you can do. Why don't you go and do it?" (*HT* 1966: 90). The preposterous character of the proposition that personal wealth and poverty are exclusively the result of individual effort is underscored in the passage by the foregrounding of the quantifying idiom of the Coketown capitalists which obviously does not make sense, economically or mathematically: workers cannot in large numbers become self-made capitalists. At Gradgrind's school a form of reasoning shaped by (manipulative) quantification is used as a vehicle of ideological indoctrination, dramatized in M'Choakumchild's questions about "National Prosperity" addressed to Sissy Jupe, whose answers show that the teacher's (ab)use of statistics doesn't stand the scrutiny of common sense. The teacher asks: "Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation, there are fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and a'n't you in a thriving state?" Sissy replies that she doesn't know, since, as she tells Louisa in recounting the classroom episode, "I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not,

its "explicit criticisms of political economy," but rather on the way they are reinforced by "a subtler critique, which both targets and exploits the structure of anxiety" (Poovey 2001: 161); she uses the notion of anxiety primarily in regard to the aspiration to social knowledge and the ethical issues attendant on that aspiration both in political economy and Dickens's novel. Poovey's discussion illumines specific formal aspects in the construction of dramatic scenes and the narrative manipulation of point of view in the novel; it would have been of additional interest, within the framework of her assumption of similarities between political economy and fiction, if she had further explored the ways in which *Hard Times* seeks to create a critical distance from the perspective of political economy while interpellating the same audience (the middle-class one).

and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine." Her observation, shaped by a clear exercise of common sense, is that the merely quantified and clearly deceptive question posed by the teacher conceals uneven distribution of wealth. The teacher continues to question Sissy by repeating his logic: "This schoolroom is an immense town, and in it there are a million of inhabitants, and only five-and-twenty are starved to death in the streets, in the course of a year. What is your remark on that proportion? And my remark was—for I couldn't think of a better one—that I thought it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million" (*HT* 1966: 44). The teacher's examples, part of the lesson on "National Prosperity," are rather straightforward allusions to the title of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and Jeremy Bentham's notion of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."[11] The point of the scene (which subtly foregrounds Sissy's authority as the scene is narrated by her to Louisa) is Sissy's simple but rigorous use of reason to underscore the ideological pretensions of the questions and the dehumanizing use of statistics in them ("it must be just as hard upon those who were starved, whether the others were a million, or a million million" *HT* 1966: 44); the absurdities of the teacher's condescending utilitarian didacticism are pointed out by the rational mind of a child. The scene is also symbolical of the ideological work of the Coketown middle class: the schoolroom in Gradgrind's school indeed is *like* a nation, the metaphor of a specific middle-class ideological ambition to shape the culture of the massive parts of the population and the nation as a whole. In that context, Sissy's responses in the scene present a question mark about the condition of that national community; later in the novel various social inequalities and rifts will be characterized by Stephen Blackpool as a 'muddle.'

Generally speaking, the narrative seeks to expose the contradictions and absurdities of the various middle-class ideologies or 'fictions' and bring to light the 'dishonesty' of the dominant social and political creeds, primarily in an industrial place like Coketown but also on the national stage. This is also why various critiques of the novel that insisted on its supposedly poor understanding of the condition of the working class miss the point, at least in part. G.B. Shaw saw the character of "Slackbridge, the trade union organizer […] a figment of the middle-class imagination" (qtd. in Dickens 1966: 337), and claimed that Dickens "turns his back frankly on Democracy, and adopts the idealized Toryism of Carlyle and Ruskin" (qtd. in Dickens 1966: 338). The story of Stephen Blackpool and Rachael, and the novel's very industrial setting, can be read as part of the contemporary condition-of-England debate, not so much for the novel's accounts of the conditions on the factory floor, everyday life of the industrial working class, industrial relations or trade unionism, but certainly for its description of middle-class attempts to subject the working class to various forms of control

[11] In *A Fragment on Government* (1776), Bentham first formulated the notion that "*it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong*" (Bentham 1891: Preface, 93).

(as Gradgrind and Bounderby see it, the working class is "eternally dissatisfied and unmanageable"; *HT* 1966: 18). In contrast to Shaw's assessment, it should be observed that the novel in fact critically foregrounds the various middle-class meddlings and ideologies, hostile and/or paternalist, which were seeking to exert control over the industrial working class. (Similarly, the effusive Slackbridge, while associated with a working-class unionism, is also featured in the story as an outsider who manipulates the local working-class community, especially in reviling Stephen at the Combination meeting). On the whole, the novel's concern with middle-class ideological impositions on the working class is about providing topical commentary on contemporary industrial relations, as it is about dramatizing the harrowing condition of comprehensive social disempowerment of working-class individuals.

While a substantial focus in the novel is devoted to (the imposition of) middle-class ideologies, the novel's plot is configured around the stories of two characters impacted in different ways by these ideologies and practices: Stephen Blackpool, a "power-loom weaver" (*HT* 1966: 49), and Louisa Gradgrind, daughter of the former merchant turned educational ideologue and parliamentary politician. The structure of the plot has both characters find themselves in situations that highlight their being deprived of agency by dominant social practices and norms, that is, their exclusion from political society.[12] The "industrial" theme in this narrative (which, it should be stressed again, doesn't feature a documentary attempt to observe and record the life of industrial working class, the kind of which can be found, for instance, in the industrial novels of Elizabeth Gaskell) is in effect shaped by the more central theme of political marginality in the story of Stephen Blackpool: here, I use the term political in the broadest sense of having to do with matters of the polity.

The story of Stephen Blackpool doesn't unfold within factory walls; the dramatic predicament that Dickens creates to frame Stephen's story is his being trapped in a miserable marriage with a woman who became an alcoholic; in spite of not living with him she occasionally comes back. In an interesting turn of the plot, Stephen seeks audience with his employer, Bounderby, to get "advice" (*HT* 1966: 55) on whether there is any legal recourse for someone in his situation. Stephen's decision to turn to Bounderby for help is a measure of the helplessness of his situation, as much as an indication of the authority, real and symbolic, that Bounderby enjoys in Coketown. There is a large dose of caricature in Dickens's creation of Bounderby, an emblem of the power of the new economies centred in

[12] The plot analogy between Stephen and Louisa is established primarily by both of them being trapped in miserable marriages; there is also an elaborate symbolic architecture created by the way the two protagonists are placed in interactions with other characters. Stanley Friedman analysed the analogies between the two protagonists in great detail; for instance, Stephen is tormented by his wife, and Louisa is tempted by Harthouse; Rachael and Sissy appear in angel-like roles ministering to the two protagonists through their trials; both Stephen and Louisa are victims of Tom's machinations, etc. (Friedman 1990).

Coketown and a medley of various middle-class ideologies. He is "[a] man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man" (*HT* 1966: 11); other than praising himself, he also is said to inspire others to praise him: "[A]t dinners in Coketown" Bounderby is "made […] out to be the Royal arms, the Union-Jack, Magna Charta, John Bull, Habeas Corpus, the Bill of Rights, An Englishman's house is his castle, Church and State, and God save the Queen, all put together" (*HT* 1966: 33). The praise lavished on him by the town's middle-class society can also be read as a shorthand of its ideological self-fashioning: it makes a claim both about a historical continuity of dominant English political ideas, and about Bounderby as a new embodiment of these long-established political concepts (this is possibly a reference to the political and historical position commonly described as the Whig view of history). While apparently without direct political ambition himself, Bounderby acts as a local wielder of power of great stature in the town; his first conversation with Harthouse, who has political connections in the sphere of institutional politics, is designed to instruct Harthouse not to think of interfering in Coketown affairs and to impress on him the need to respect Bounderby's "independence" (*HT* 1966: 97), which is less than a subtle hint that industrialists like Bounderby expect to be let alone to run their businesses as they see fit. Harthouse is given to understand that "the work in our mills [is] the pleasantest work there is, and it's the lightest work there is, and it's the best-paid work there is" (*HT* 1966: 96), an absurd account even for a caricatural ideologue.

Stephen's approaching for advice the overbearing, unsympathetic and multifariously ideologizing Bounderby is an important aspect of the plot insofar as it suggests that Stephen finds himself in a situation that requires him to rely upon Bounderby's social authority, and more generally, to rely on the ideology and practice of social paternalism. Stephen tells Bounderby that he "read i' th' papers that great folk (fair faw 'em a'! I wishes 'em no hurt!) are not bonded together for better for worst so fast, but that they can be set free fro' their misfortnet marriages, an' marry ower agen" (*HT* 1966: 57); he hopes that Bounderby would give him more information on that possibility (one of a complex legal and parliamentary procedure for obtaining a divorce). Bounderby's reply is that this is "not for you at all. It costs money. It costs a mint of money" (*HT* 1966: 58).[13] Stephen doesn't consult Bounderby merely as one of the "great folk," but also as his employer, a familiar figure of paternalist authority (almost the Carlylean captain of industry). What the conversation effectively demonstrates—and what Bounderby states matter-of-factly—is that there is no equality before the law ("not for you at all"),

[13] When Stephen asks how much money that would require, Bounderby describes the complex legal procedure and gives him an estimate: "'Why, you'd have to go to Doctors' Commons with a suit, and you'd have to go to a court of Common Law with a suit, and you'd have to go to the House of Lords with a suit, and you'd have to get an Act of Parliament to enable you to marry again, and it would cost you (if it was a case of very plain sailing), I suppose from a thousand to fifteen hundred pound,' said Mr. Bounderby. 'Perhaps twice the money.'" (*HT* 1966: 58). For the legislative context concerning the theme of divorce in the novel see John D. Baird, "'Divorce and Matrimonial Causes': An Aspect of 'Hard Times'."

and that the potential for protection under the law comes down to property. Needless to say, it is Stephen's lack of economic capital that also denies him—and the others of his class—the full scope of the available rights of political citizenship, which in turn serves to reinforce the relationship of paternalism. When Stephen responds to Bounderby's information with the words "Why then, sir, […] '*tis* a muddle" (he used the same word before, in a conversation with Rachael, in what might be construed to be a reference to current legislation), he is chastised by Bounderby, who sees it as transgression against the paternalist arrangement of social roles:

> "[…] Don't you talk nonsense, my good fellow," said Mr. Bounderby, "about things you don't understand; and don't you call the institutions of your country a muddle, or you'll get yourself into a real muddle one of these fine mornings. The institutions of your country are not your piece-work, and the only thing you have got to do, is, to mind your piece-work." (*HT* 1966: 58)

The second of the two conversations between the two characters happens when Stephen is summoned by Bounderby to his house; Bounderby wants to know what the problem is between the Combination (the workers' Union) and Stephen, but he is actually trying to get Stephen to inform him on the activities of the Combination. (Harthouse is present, and Bounderby is questioning Stephen also for Harthouse's political edification.) Stephen, who is shunned by his fellow-workers for not wanting to join the union, remains "faithful to his class under all their mistrust" (*HT* 1966: 113), and refuses to talk to Bounderby about the Combination. (Earlier, at the Combination meeting, Stephen indicated that he would have joined the Combination in spite of his doubts about its proposed activities, but could not do so for private reasons). When Bounderby asks him to state what the workers "in a general way, complain of?", Stephen uses the word muddle to describe the situation of the workers in Coketown. Pressed by Bounderby to suggest how he would fix the muddle, Stephen first expresses a reluctance to give his outright opinion on that: "'I donno, sir. I canna be expecten to 't. 'Tis not me as should be looken to for that, sir. 'Tis them as is put ower me, and ower aw the rest of us. What do they tak upon themseln, sir, if not to do't?'" (*HT* 1966: 115). At this point in the conversation Stephen expresses a deference to the view that the privileged political class is the only social group with the authority to act in the sphere of political society; it should be noted that this deference is for the entirety of the political order as it is, indicating that Stephen's statement here is shaped by older, organicist assumptions about social hierarchy and social roles (which also makes him wonder what else is the obligation of the political class if not to fix the muddle). Earlier, when he sought Bounderby's advice about divorce, Stephen was showing deference to a familiar, local figure of authority, but still with an awareness of the larger political order and Bounderby's place in it. These expressions of deference, both to that larger political order and to Bounderby, suggest that Stephen accepts, or has been forced to accept by his circumstances, a view of society based on the assumption of social paternalism.

But then Stephen's use of the word muddle in their first conversation was already a step towards dismantling the paternalist relationship which

at that point seemed to provide the basis for his approaching Bounderby for advice (incidentally, the scene contains a possibility for an alternative reading in which already Stephen's act of seeking advice frames their relationship in more egalitarian terms). When Stephen uses the term muddle to describe class relations in Coketown in their second conversation, in which he also refuses to humour Bounderby's paternalist request for loyalty to him (and not to Stephen's fellow workers), the story signals that Stephen is getting closer to rejecting class paternalism altogether, as an arrangement which is neither functional nor justifiable.

However, while the theme of social paternalism in the novel deserves more examination than can be attempted here,[14] it needs to be noted that the central feature of the plot is to place Stephen in a situation from which there is "no way out" (which is the title of Chapter XI) under the present social, political and legal circumstances, no way out of the muddle. His being stuck in a bad marriage, getting ostracized by the Union, getting fired by Bounderby, and getting framed for a bank robbery, are all developments attendant on thorough social subordination, which is both political and civil, and which comes with his class status. As Stephen's marriage situation illustrates, the workers don't have equal access to legal protection in the contemporary society (for financial reasons). The novel doesn't directly address the question of suffrage (also a matter of property at the time), and the very avoidance of dramatizing that issue may be an expression of a political reluctance, but in its foregrounding of paternalist social assumptions the novel also foregrounds the fact that the workers are effectively not regarded as political citizens in contemporary society (and that they are denied voting rights and representation in political institutions). The novel also portrays the theme of working-class unionism from a distance, and doesn't paint a favourable picture of Slackbridge, the union organizer; on the other hand, it is arguably more critical of Bounderby, the manufacturing capitalist who is opposed to working-class organization and who even threatens punitive action against Union organizers: "'We will make an example of half a dozen Slackbridges. We'll indict the blackguards for felony, and get 'em shipped off to penal settlements.'"; *HT* 1966: 115). Bounderby's idea of society is thus one in which the law exists for the working class primarily in its punitive form. All this together reinforces the atmosphere of social disadvantage in Stephen's story. If other Dickens's novels allow for, in spite of the usual bleakness of their depictions of the social order, at least a limited space for imagining social transformation and improvement in some areas, Stephen's story in *Hard Times* is one of thorough powerlessness stemming from his social position as a working-class person (and exacerbated by his losing even the fellowship of his own class). The plot's construction is about

[14] I use the term paternalism in a broad sense to describe both the character of the existing political and social order, based on hierarchy and an uneven access to power, and the various discursive articulations propping up the assumptions of such uneven social roles (what Catherine Gallagher analyzes in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* as the family-society metaphor can be seen as being an instance of paternalist discourse).

highlighting the social forces that shape all aspects of Stephen's life; through such a construction of Stephen's story the novel asked its middle-class audiences, to whom it was primarily addressed, to contemplate the entrapment of a great part of the population in a state of deprivation of what the same middle-class audiences took to be the material, political and legal standards of civilization.

The narrative builds a similar configuration around Louisa. She is subjected to a deadening educational regime by her father, treated as an object of exchange by her father and brother in getting steered into marriage with Bounderby, degraded by the marriage as well as by the social and legal obstacles to ending it, and tempted to elope by Harthouse, the bored patrician. Her entrapment is almost comprehensive; she has no personal agency and for the greater part of the story (until the last few chapters) she seems unable or unwilling actively to express moral or social reflection on her situation. At least part of that indisposition proceeds from the relentless suppression of personality caused by her education; another part is associated with the general condition of the subjection of women to patriarchal law and social custom at the time. The plot places Louisa in a traumatic marriage from which it is difficult to fully extricate herself (until Bounderby dies five years after the end of the story, which is stated in the narrator's concluding remarks); but while it is clear that the current marriage legislation affects both Stephen (for his poverty) and Louisa (as a woman), the fact that she does manage to leave Bounderby, which is made possible by her social status and her father's intercession and protection (since Gradgrind undergoes a partial melodramatic transformation at the end of the narrative), emphasizes that it is more feasible for Louisa to find some way, albeit an incomplete one, out of her marital predicament. Nevertheless, taken together, the stories of Stephen and Louisa bring into focus different sets of social circumstances in which great parts of the population have to manage without the status and rights of full political citizenship.

In *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Catherine Gallagher interpreted *Hard Times* in the context of what she analysed as the family/society trope, a common trope in mid-Victorian fiction that brought together ideologies of domesticity and social paternalism to dramatize and examine the social issues of industrial relations. In her reading, the novel produces a reflection on its own narrative premises, and in that context particularly interesting is the question of the novel's "comparison between the Gradgrind family and industrial society" (Gallagher 1988: 150),[15] which is the main focus of Gallagher's analysis, and which allows her to point out the ambiguities in the novel's use of the idea of domesticity as a resource for social reform. Unlike Gallagher, however, I am inclined to argue that while the collocation of domestic and social themes has an important role in the novel's fabric, the novel's chief concern is with the relationship between

[15] The narrator of the novel foregrounds the comparison: "Is it possible, I wonder, that there was any analogy between the case of the Coketown population and the case of the little Gradgrinds?" (*HT* 1966: 19). At this point in the narrative, the narrator is specifically referring to the workers "work[ing] long and monotonously" (*HT* 1966: 19), without access to the life of the imagination and relaxation (something that characterizes the education imposed on the Gradgrind children as well).

individuals and society, or to be precise, between individuals and the social order which oppresses them, degrades their humanity, and marginalizes them in different ways.[16]

"It was the nineteenth century that first thought in terms of 'populations'" (Osterhammel 2014: 28), observed Jürgen Osterhammel's regarding the growing importance of statistics as a method of collecting data on the population of a nation in the 19th century, when statistics becomes a resource for governmental policies. While the era evidenced a strong concern with gathering and processing data on populations for purposes of governance, the readiness to think of populations in terms of citizenship lagged behind. In Britain, which enters the 19th century with a long history of parliamentarism, but a limited representative democracy, a gradualism in expanding the franchise set the pace of political reform in the 19th century. The novel is situated, and emphatically aware of this situation, in this intermediate period of historical change when populations have not yet become citizens: M'Choakumchild's method of calculating national prosperity and Gradgrind's work with blue books exemplify a view on the national population that doesn't concern itself with the idea of polity constituted by citizens. The novel conveys, by the very centrality of the social discrimination suffered by some of the characters, the sense of belonging to a period of incomplete (or insufficient) political transformation. Dickens's emphasis on this historical crevice clearly exudes a sense of despair over the present condition of English political society, and an irritation about the persistence of the various ideological fictions and social muddles.

"Wilderness of Smoke and Brick"

Comments on that historical crevice occasionally appear in the narrator's commentary on the present condition of the nation; however, the most interesting image of it in the novel is in the figurative work of the description of the architecture and machinery of Coketown:

> It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was 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

[16] An interesting perspective on the degradation of workers is offered in Catherine Gallagher's reading of the novel in *The Body Economic*: "In this novel the most pervasive problem attending industrialism is not factory hours, low wages, child labor, dangerous machinery, unsanitary housing and neighborhoods, pollution, unemployment, class conflict, unsympathetic masters, or even the cash nexus. Many of these are mentioned, but the most pervasive problem is, quite simply, labor itself in its repetitious invariability. In *Hard Times*, monotonous work by itself makes people unhappy" (Gallagher 2006: 62-63). That the novel refers to industrial work as monotonous is certainly a key motif, but it does so from a distance, as it were, without much direct description of industrial work.

> canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. 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, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (*HT* 1966: 17)

In the second half of the paragraph, the narrator brings into focus the uniformity of the town's layout and buildings, and then the monotony of the lives and work of the workers in Coketown. That the town is "inhabited by people equally like one another" is a striking description, which may be read as a reference to the way the industrial system reduces workers to an abstract measurement of human labour, as well as a statement about the bleak effects of the standardization and repetitiveness of the Coketown form of production and social organization on the workers' lives. It may be observed here that it is against this backdrop of the power of that social form to deprive the industrial workers of their individuality and humanity, that the novel situates its own concern with the stories of Stephen and Rachael, as stories of working-class individuals struggling with the dehumanizing pressure of that system. The language of that section of the paragraph is stern, free of metaphor, and repetitive in its style that matches its description of the predicament of the workers. In the first part of the paragraph, however, the language that depicts the town is highly figurative, requiring readers to make sense of the figurative design that informs "the key-note" (which is the chapter's title) of the novel's introduction to the town's form of society. This figurative construction necessarily calls attention to the relatedness of its defamiliarizing character and the question of the narrator's perspective. The imagery in the first part of the paragraph ("the painted face of a savage;" "interminable serpents of smoke;" "an elephant in a state of melancholy madness") may be seen as emanating from contemporary European discourse on cultures and spaces regarded as savage and exotic. But there is more than that at work here. The defamiliarizing effect of imagining the industrial town as a place of otherness raises the question of the narrator's perspective on the town: readers are asked to assume that the narrator is describing the town from the outside, as it were, from the point of view of an English observer with a non-industrial background, someone presumably reporting back to a different kind of English audience, one which resides outside Coketown and which is not greatly familiar with its industrial society. There is a double logic of defamiliarization here: on the one hand, the narrator defamiliarizes the town by creating an implicit difference between the town and the national audience to which the description is addressed; on the other hand, the figurative work in the paragraph has the effect of bringing into focus the very ideologies of the town (of prosperity, and by association, of social progress). The use of the term savage (to characterize the

physical appearance of the town's buildings and not its inhabitants) potentially conveys the otherness of place also as otherness of time: this figurative lens sheds a peculiar light on the present time of the industrial town with its new form of civilization. This has the effect of challenging the common self-understanding of the champions of industrialization: what from their point of view is seen as a new social form of social organization that furnishes prosperity (products of the Coketown factories are, the narrator points out, "comforts of life which found their way all over the world, and elegancies of life […]"; *HT* 1966: 17), is recast by the figurative work as a regression to some crude stage of civilization (using the language evocative of conventional European notions of civilization at the time).[17]

In the passage, the very production method of a manufacturing mill is also rendered as strange, and even dysfunctional. The peculiar comparison of industrial machinery to "an elephant in a state of melancholy madness" attributes an unsalutary character to industrialization;[18] the very repetitiveness in the image of the steam engine metonymically evokes the malaise of repetitive, degrading and dehumanizing labour performed by the industrial workers themselves. The passage and the characterization of Coketown as the "wilderness of smoke and brick" (*HT* 1966: 69) can be read as subversion of its ideological discourse of fact, utility and prosperity; rather than meriting celebration as a new breakthrough in

[17] Catherine Gallagher points out the unified character of the figurative work in this passage, but explains it in a different way: "[t]hese separate metaphors and similes coalesce into a single image of Coketown as a jungle, an image that was used by advocates of 'internal missions,' and one that resonates with echoes of the worker-slave metaphor" (Gallagher 1988: 160). However, she doesn't elaborate how these meanings are generated by this particular passage. Her mention of internal missions may be an allusion to the work of "eighteen religious persuasions" (*HT* 1966: 17) among the workers of Coketown. The worker-slave metaphor is examined in one of the chapters of Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction 1832-1867* as a common comparison used in debates about industrialism, which describes the situation of workers as that of slaves. There indeed is an instance in the novel which may be read as a direct allusion to those debates; it is in Slackbridge's speech to the combination meeting: "Oh, my friends and fellow-countrymen, the slaves of an iron-handed and a grinding despotism!" (*HT* 1966: 17). In my reading however, the figurative work of the passage (in which Coketown is described) has a more specific purpose: it renders a defamiliarized image of the town that equates its form of social organization with wilderness.

[18] The image of "the melancholy mad elephants" also occurs in a depiction of the factory setting as quite literally a substitute for nature: "The measured motion of their shadows on the walls, was the substitute Coketown had to show for the shadows of rustling woods; while, for the summer hum of insects, it could offer, all the year round, from the dawn of Monday to the night of Saturday, the whirr of shafts and wheels." The substitution highlights the displacement of the natural world by industrialization, as well as the separation of the Coketown workers from the natural world; the novel also depicts the degradation of nature brought about by industrialization in the town: "Down upon the river that was black and thick with dye, some Coketown boys who were at large—a rare sight there—rowed a crazy boat, which made a spumous track upon the water as it jogged along, while every dip of an oar stirred up vile smells" (*HT* 1966: 85).

historical development, the current form of English industrialism is thus described as almost a rudimentary form of civilization. This is very much comparable to the conflation of temporal perspectives that happens in the opening scene of *Bleak House*, with the similar effect of defamiliarizing the present moment in history.

Coketown has its own understanding of time, which is a matter of quantifiable economic indicators: "Time went on in Coketown like its own machinery: so much material wrought up, so much fuel consumed, so many powers worn out, so much money made" (*HT* 1966: 69). From the very opening of the novel in a "monotonous vault of a school-room" (*HT* 1966: 1), the experience of time in the industrial town is rendered as dull and mechanized: the workers "worked long and monotonously" (*HT* 1966: 19), and "life at Stone Lodge [Gradgrind's house] went monotonously round like a piece of machinery" (*HT* 1966: 43). There are several mentions of a clock in Gradgrind's room which the narrator describes as "statistical"; the narrator sardonically points out that in this room "the most complicated social questions were cast up, got into exact totals, and finally settled—if those concerned could only have been brought to know it."[19] The room itself is compared to an Observatory: "As if an astronomical observatory should be made without any windows, and the astronomer within should arrange the starry universe solely by pen, ink, and paper, so Mr. Gradgrind, in *his* Observatory (and there are many like it), had no need to cast an eye upon the teeming myriads of human beings around him, but could settle all their destinies on a slate, and wipe out all their tears with one dirty little bit of sponge" (*HT* 1966: 73). The statistical abstractions of Gradgrind's political activity, for he is an M.P. at this point, are contrasted to the lived experience of the "teeming myriads," and may possibly be read as an indication of Gradgrind's Malthusian views on population. But most importantly, Gradgrind's vantage point, in its aspiration to knowledge of universal application, is rendered as a dull and narrow-minded exercise of doctrine, blind to the bleak realities of social life.

The cotton mills are occasionally referred to as "Fairy palaces" (for their illumination);[20] "[t]he atmosphere of those Fairy palaces was like the breath of the simoom: and their inhabitants, wasting with heat, toiled languidly in the desert" (*HT* 1966: 85). This reinforces the defamiliarizing effect of the narrator's depiction of Coketown, simultaneously evoking places of (possibly colonial) alterity and underscoring the draining character of industrial work. In some other respects, the representation of the industrial town in the novel is not far from, for instance, the description of Milton-Northern in Gaskell's *North and South*: there is emphasis on environmental contamination and uniformity of architecture, which reflects a growing mid-Victorian middle-class concern with poor sanitary and aesthetic qualities of urban life. What is specific to *Hard Times* is

[19] Harthouse, who is cynical but not unperceptive, describes Gradgrind himself as a "machine" (*HT* 1966: 177).

[20] That is what the factories look like to "the travellers by express-train" (*HT* 1966: 49); this is another defamiliarizing image of the town, and perhaps also indicative of the novel's stance of looking at the town from an outsider's point of view.

that its imagery depicts the industrial city as a strange form of social organization, both a "wilderness" and a displacement of the natural world, a form whose appearance exudes a rudimentary level of civilization, whose exhalations and effluvia are omnipresent, overpowering and noxious, and whose very manner of existence is mechanistic and senseless in the restlessness of its production. On the whole, the drift of such imagery is to offset the central ideology of Coketown capitalism, that of Gradgrind's practicality and statistical "national prosperity." And, importantly, in doing so it highlights the question of historical perspective, a recurrent device in Dickens's novels, by subjecting the current period and its dominant ideologies to defamiliarization. The withholding of civil and political subjectivity from Stephen and Louisa; the "muddle" of the national political and legislative frameworks; Gradgrind's model of "sound practical education" (*HT* 1966: 30) and the banishment of the imagination from it; the social inequities and the environmental fallout of industrialization; all of these are in the novel's view defining traits of the present moment in English history, and while they are not rendered as deriving from the same source, their cumulative effect is to project the image of contemporary England as a society riddled by severe social muddles in combination with a social climate of a specific kind of sluggishness. Factory and wilderness, palace and desert, machinery and spiritual malaise, wealth and languid toil: all of these defamiliarizing oppositions highlight the tension between the middle-class fictions of Coketown and the realities of the actual historical moment.

In that sense the title of the novel could be read not merely as the lot of particular characters or social groups in the novel (of Stephen, Louisa, the working class, women), but rather as the defining feature of the current condition of England—the oppressiveness of the absence of effective coping with the social issues that contemporary society has generated. The hard times come into view with the assessment that the social configuration described by the novel is a range of muddles the sorting out of which is presently hardly imaginable. The present condition of England *is* the era of hard times, an intermediate period which features dramatic situations of social suffering and injustice, but does not make visible a way out of them. A note of weariness about the current state of the nation is sounded again in one of the closing narratorial comments, on "the era of its being quite settled that the national dustmen have only to do with one another, and owe no duty to an abstraction called a People" (*HT* 1966: 225). This is an era of continued massive civil and political exclusion in a polity with a self-absorbed political class and a large part of the population without full political citizenship.

What Will Not Fix the Muddle

In spite of making such a strong assessment, the novel exudes a reluctance about proposing its own political stance, particularly as regards the question of articulating the voices of those without political citizenship. The implied readership of this narrative is a middle-class one, and it is to that audience that the narrator appeals in the very last lines, in the hope that their social

attitudes would steer clear of some of the fictions of Coketown, and promote interclass empathy—and essentially, that the middle-class audience would develop a new and more benevolent social habitus. But since it does feature working-class characters the novel necessarily finds itself having to confront the question of what kind of social and political voice to give them. This is handled interestingly in the two conversations between Bounderby and Stephen: in the first conversation the relationship of social paternalism is brought up and already questioned as Stephen seeks Bounderby's advice about divorce laws; in the second this kind of class deference is questioned by Stephen even more openly and practically rejected. When Bounderby asks Stephen in their second conversation to let Harthouse know how he would "set this muddle (as you are so fond of calling it) to rights," Stephen is, as noted before, reluctant to state his opinion on that. However, he does point out a number of middle-class attitudes that will not fix the muddle:

> "Sir, I canna, wi' my little learning an' my common way, tell the genelman what will better aw this—though some working men o' this town could, above my powers—but I can tell him what I know will never do 't. The strong hand will never do 't. Vict'ry and triumph will never do 't. Agreeing fur to mak one side unnat'rally awlus and for ever right, and toother side unnat'rally awlus and for ever wrong, will never, never do 't. Nor yet lettin alone will never do 't. Let thousands upon thousands alone, aw leading the like lives and aw faw'en into the like muddle, and they will be as one, and yo will be as anoother, wi' a black unpassable world betwixt yo, just as long or short a time as sich-like misery can last. […] Most o' aw, rating 'em as so much Power, and reg'latin 'em as if they was figures in a soom, or machines: wi'out loves and likens, wi'out memories and inclinations, wi'out souls to weary and souls to hope […] this will never do 't […]." (*HT* 1966: 115-116)

This list of middle-class attitudes to the industrial working class includes a forcible, repressive exercise of middle-class social power, a paternalist denial of rational agency to the workers, as well as the imposition of the quantifying rationality of political economy on working-class lives. The list also refers to the notion of "lettin alone," which rings with a twofold resonance: while here Stephen is perhaps evoking and rejecting the economic ideology of *laissez-faire* in general, which is thus identified as yet another cause of the muddle, his grievance is also related to the social gulf between the classes engendered by such a policy, the gulf which helps create two homogenized social groups in a relationship of antagonism. Stephen (like arguably the novel itself) does not espouse, even in the second conversation, the understanding of class relations as necessarily antagonistic. It should be noted that in the dramatic construction of the second conversation Stephen's relationship to the social authority of the paternalism of the existing political order changes, from the initial gesture of acknowledging it (the fixing of the muddle is in the hands of those with power) to the listing of the social attitudes and policies that create the muddle. (Stephen's speaking out about the failures of the existing social order is motivated in the scene by his

loyalty to his class.) Dickens interestingly chooses not to have him put forward a working-class politics in a declarative form (perhaps because he exercised the restraint of not usurping Stephen's voice altogether with one of his own, which would have amounted to yet another imposition of middle-class paternalism). Yet Stephen makes it clear that "some working men o' this town could" articulate working-class positions on what might be done to improve the situation—this is not an unimportant remark, though of almost a singular character in the novel in the sense that elsewhere in it there is little focus on that autonomous working-class politics, even as the story is aware of it. That restraint in focus shapes the scene of the union meeting as well; the union organizer is not one of the workers of "this town" to whom Stephen refers as possible representatives of the working-class point of view, but rather an outsider on whom the plot bestows a manipulative purpose. The voices of those local working men who do have a clear political perspective remain a possibility in the novel, but not a concretized or represented one. It is as if the novel holds that it is not up to it to speak for the working class when it comes to politics: the novel's vision comes from and speaks to a different social space.

A similar reluctance to speak or invent a voice on behalf of the subordinated may be seen in Dickens's construction of Louisa's character. It is not so much that Louisa never speaks out, because she eventually does put into words her experience of suffering under the utilitarian education imposed on her. Then, after renouncing her father's view of education, she continues relatively voiceless in the story; in the epilogue the novel does not place her in a new marriage, but it seems that she is given a new though only vaguely suggested social role, possibly developing into a new kind of educator: "grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be despised; trying hard to know her humbler fellow-creatures, and to beautify their lives of machinery and reality with […] imaginative graces and delights" (226).[21] In the epilogue, which is a part of the last chapter (and not separately titled), Louisa is the last character mentioned; the epilogue conveys information on a number of characters (including Bounderby, Gradgrind, Rachael, Tom and Sissy), but the longest section it features, and with which it ends, is about Louisa. There is an ambivalence permeating the epilogue in this regard, and the focus on Louisa is a reminder that the narrator's ideological and class habitus is closer to Louisa than Sissy. While Sissy has come to epitomize in the story the power of common sense, which has served to expose the absurdities of the economic and social ideas of Gradgrindery as well as to protect Louisa against Harthouse's predations, the epilogue offers little information on Sissy's life, other than mentioning "happy Sissy's happy children loving" Louisa (HT 1966: 226); this mention functions as

[21] Catherine Gallagher assumes that the novel's ending presents Sissy (and not Louisa) as spreading "imaginative graces and delights" among the working class (Gallagher 1988: 166). While the wording and syntax of this paragraph in the novel are somewhat unclear, the final words of the paragraph imply that it is about Louisa ("Did Louisa see these things of herself? These things were to be" (*HT* 1966: 227).

both a comment on the superiority of Sissy's parenting in contrast to Gradgrind, and a vehicle for refocusing the narrative attention to Louisa. Indeed, Louisa's story, and the hint that she perhaps becomes an example of reformed middle-class sentiment, is given a central place in the epilogue. Why Louisa's voice is kept repressed within the plot itself is arguably attributable to the narrative emphasis on how difficult it is for middle-class women to cope with the social constraints placed on them, so that within the plot she only comes to eventually challenge those constraints rhetorically, but not actively (as for instance Charlotte Brontë has her protagonist do in *Jane Eyre*). Louisa's new social identity as an educator hinted in the epilogue thus comes to signal a significant shift, but one that would require imagination of a greater social transformation than the novel allows within its plot. A broader range of social agency is given to Sissy, but it is primarily as a helper to Louisa, and for the most part Sissy remains somewhat hidden in the wings of the narrative, a potential but only sparingly introduced harbinger of a superior social habitus.

Discontentment with the politics of the novel has long been a leitmotif of critical responses, most notably with regard to the novel's attitudes to the industrial working class. Indeed, the novel barely looks inside factory life, or working-class homes; it does not really proffer a sustained focus on factory relations (other than their impact on Stephen's life), and it does not propose anything amounting to a comprehensive political response to industrialism, excepting the appeal to the (middle-class) readers to do what they can in their spheres of action, presumably in the spirit of promoting social benevolence and understanding. But the novel is eminently political, insofar as it maps out a social order with remarkable clarity: it outlines a mesh of specific social arenas marked by a complex muddle of political oppression and marginalization that requires sorting out. What appears as the novel's overall political diffusiveness can best be comprehended by regarding it as more than just a topical narrative, that is, by recognizing its specific historical imagination. That Dickens addressed his novels to middle-class audiences, a customary feature of his writing, means that in some way the novel is contained within the rigidity of social division, a partial cultural voice in a society without a common notion of rights and political citizenship. But *Hard Times* also shows very much a discomfort with the fact of such partiality: if there is a single dominant theme uniting the novel's social vision it is its emphasis on the hypocritical and stark imposition of middle-class ideologies on the industrial working class. It is not just that the working class is not allowed political representation; it is also that it suffers a range of ideological, cultural and social impositions.

"Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not" (*HT* 1966: 227), quoth the narrator in the last paragraph of the novel regarding its story. After the novel has worked to construct a defamiliarizing view of the present moment in English history by contrasting the middle-class ideology of prosperity on the one hand and the reality of the muddles on the other hand (economic, political and legal inequalities standing in the way of a polity of citizens), the ending of the novel revisits such

a defamiliarized present of the "[d]ear reader! […] you and me."[22] The social identity which is interpellated as "you and me" in the novel's ending is not the nation on the whole, but rather the middle class; while the term middle class is not actually used in the novel, it approximates the only class identity that the term "reader" can be understood to have here.[23] As the novel offers a defamiliarizing perspective on Coketown, it assumes that it is the middle classes of the nation that need to experience that ideological defamiliarization, and be dissuaded from the fictions like those of Coketown. The novel is a kind of lesson on the ideologies of the middle class delivered to the middle class.[24] A lesson format is also inscribed in the titles of the novel's three parts (Sowing, Reaping, Garnering): implantation of certain middle-class practices and ideologies, facing the consequences of that implantation, and sorting them out for their value. In effect, what the novel's lesson thus proposes is a process of self-reflection and review—by and for the middle class. The notion of review is re-emphasized in the narrator's appeal to "dear reader," by which the text advertises its didactic purpose as part of the public discourse about the state of the nation, and calls upon its middle-class readership to reflect on the nation's political order and on many of its own social ideologies. The various aspects of the existing social order described as muddles as well as the various "fictions of Coketown" are critiqued in the novel, as it calls attention to the state of incomplete constitution of population as citizenry, the hard times; that lesson is for the middle classes, the readers. At the same time, the novel does raise the questions of working-class presence, voice and activity in the social world through Stephen's story, much as the emplotment shuns the temptation to imagine a working-class position on the issue of fixing the muddles. A specific literary space is thus constructed, which privileges the vantage point of the reading middle class, while it simultaneously acknowledges an incongruence

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[22] The foregrounding of the relationship between the narrative voice, audience and historical time is present in other novels by Dickens. For instance, S.J. Schad writes: "In opening with the words 'In these times of ours,' *Our Mutual Friend* at once establishes for itself a sense both of contemporaneity and of audience, both of 'now' and of 'you' who read. What is primarily a statement of time doubles as a rhetorical device, and so by setting its relation to history the novel is also set in relation to its readers. The work's initial historical bearing coincides, that is, with its rhetorical disposition" (Schad 1989: 423). Interestingly, something comparable occurs in *Hard Times*, which ends with a similar reference to its own historical and rhetorical stance.

[23] The narrator mentions that "[t]here was a library in Coketown, to which general access was easy" (*HT* 1966: 38), and points out Gradgrind's worrying about what the working people read. These are not the readers the narrator addresses; his readers are imagined as those with some social power to influence things in their field of action (the working people are portrayed in the novel as being deprived of agency by the existing order of things).

[24] In its depiction of Coketown, *Hard Times* sporadically hints at the heterogenous composition of the town's middle-class society; however, the gallery of middle-class characters is very small (while the main middle-class characters are amalgamations of various class ideologies). It would be interesting to compare this very scanty world of middle-class characters to much more elaborate galleries from other novels by Dickens.

between that vantage point and the "general society," or a satirical version of that notion, "an abstraction called a People." In its depiction of mid-century England as an era of hard times the novel projects a historical awareness of a far from complete civil equality in a society caught in a variety of muddles; in doing so, it presents itself primarily as an appeal to the middle classes to review the effects of some of their ideological fictions and social attitudes.

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"Divljina dima i opeke": Imaginacija sadašnjosti u romanu *Hard Times* Charlesa Dickensa

Članak donosi raspravu o viđenju povijesnoga trenutka engleskoga društva u romanu Charlesa Dickensa *Hard Times*. Ovaj je roman ponešto netipičan za Dickensov romaneskni opus, budući da je smješten u industrijski grad (izmišljenoga imena Coketown). Članak primarno raspravlja način na koji roman prikazuje ideologije srednje klase u Coketownu (povezane s utilitarizmom i političkom ekonomijom), kao i pitanje uloge Stephena Blackpoola, lika iz redova industrijskoga radništva, u kontekstu prikazivanja tih ideologija. Roman oslikava društvo u kojemu su veliki dijelovi stanovništva izloženi velikim ekonomskim, političkim i pravnim nejednakostima; pri tome, roman kritizira niz ideoloških stavova srednje klase, otjelovljenih u likovima Thomasa Gradgrinda i Josiahe Bounderbyja. Članak razmatra važnost slike industrijskoga grada kao „divljine" u romanu; ta figura proizvodi očuđenje određenih društvenih ideologija srednje klase vezanih uz industrijsko društvo u gradu Coketownu. Članak također analizira i način na koji se roman, u tom očuđenju ideologija srednje klase, obraća čitateljstvu koje pripada srednjoj klasi.

Ključne riječi: Charles Dickens, industrijski roman, ideologija srednje klase, utilitarizam