

Today's social divide and the Charles Dickens bicentenary

By John Clayton and Paul Bond
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Celebrations marking the 200th anniversary of the birth of English novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870) reveal the contemporary version of the official hypocrisy generated by acute social divisions that the author spent much of his life pillorying.

In 1854, Karl Marx included Dickens among “[t]he present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together”.

A decade earlier, Frederick Engels had noted the appearance of this “new class of novel writers” as “indeed a sign of the times”.

The anniversary of Dickens's birth is being marked under conditions where the times cry out for a writer with the perception, wit and acute sense of social outrage the great novelist possessed.

The pages of Dickens's books offer a detailed picture of two different and opposed worlds existing uncomfortably side by side. The inhabitants of one world dwell in extreme poverty, their lives an ongoing struggle for survival. This was the world against which the writer often raged.

The great number of events commemorating the bicentenary reflects the author's continued popularity, in part because of his sympathetic treatment of the oppressed and wretched of this world. With Dickens in mind, Engels noted in 1844 that the new wave of novelists had now turned their attention to “the poor, the despised class, [their] fates and fortunes, joys and sufferings”.

It is not for nothing that the adjective “Dickensian” entered the English language, referring to, as one dictionary puts it, “the environments and situations most commonly portrayed in Dickens' writings, such as poverty and social injustice and other aspects of Victorian England”.

By contrast, the inhabitants of the other world Dickens describes are either financially comfortable or else live in unparalleled luxury and splendour. The descendents of this parasitic layer have moved to hijack the celebrations of the author's birth. The British monarchy, maintained in luxury at the taxpayers' expense, has been at the forefront of the commemorations. Prince Charles prominently laid a wreath at Dickens's grave as part of a service February 7 at Westminster Abbey.

Dickens had this to say about the leisured, indolent classes in a letter to a friend: “Oh Heaven, if you could have been with me at a hospital dinner last Monday! There were men there who made such speeches and expressed such sentiments as any moderately intelligent dustman would have blushed through his cindery bloom

to have thought of. Sleek, slobbering, bow-paunched, over-fed, apoplectic, snorting cattle, and the auditory leaping up in their delight! I never saw such an illustration of the power of purse, or felt so degraded and debased by its contemplation, since I have had eyes and ears. The absurdity of the thing was too horrible to laugh at”.

Nor was he an unalloyed admirer of the monarchy. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) begins with a devastating description of the savagery confronted in the period leading up to and triggering the French Revolution, and the complacency of the aristocracy: “[I]t was clearer than crystal to the lords of the State preserves of loaves and fishes that things in general were settled for ever”.

France, Dickens wrote, “rolled with exceeding smoothness down hill, making paper money and spending it.... [S]he entertained herself, besides, with such humane achievements as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive, because he had not kneeled down in the rain to do honour to a dirty procession of monks which passed within his view”.

In *A Child's History of England* (1853), the author praised the recently established American republic, comparing it favourably with the things Britain had not done so well “since the days of Oliver Cromwell”—a highly charged comment in the eyes of the British ruling class.

Critic Georg Lukács noted that Dickens adopted a more abstract moral tone in his historical writings than in his contemporary works, where the immediate and burning realities of life forced themselves upon him. Even so, if there is regret about the titanic and tumultuous French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*, that sentiment is tempered by recognition of the social conditions that produced the great upheaval.

It is unclear to what extent the novelist would have welcomed being feted in Westminster Abbey. Historian Judith Flanders said she found the February 7 ceremony “enormously moving”, but that Dickens would have hated it, as “he wanted no public ceremonies, no statues, no public acknowledgement”. He had requested instead an ordinary interment.

To accommodate this whilst still incorporating him into the ranks of the nationally celebrated, the writer was buried in Westminster Abbey early in the morning to reduce the likelihood of massive attendance. One commemoration event involved a reading by the actor Simon Callow in Rochester, where Dickens is thought to have wished to be buried.

Participants at the Westminster Abbey event were forced to acknowledge that it might not necessarily have reflected Dickens's own thinking. The Archbishop of Canterbury noted that Dickens had had "relatively little time for conventional religion". The Dean of Westminster, John Hall, sounded a note of social concern: "Dickens's humanity and compassion made an extraordinary impact on Victorian England through his writings, which remain immensely popular. This bicentenary should help renew our commitment to improving the lot of the disadvantaged of our own day".

Actor Ralph Fiennes read a passage from *Bleak House* (1853), an attack on the British court system, at the ceremony. It is clear that Dickens's scathing dissection of social inequality is resonating today, and that those presiding over this inequality are seeking to bury him beneath their casual claims on him. Obscenely, Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt apparently gave Prime Minister David Cameron copies of *Hard Times* (1854) and *Bleak House* to mark the anniversary.

David Wootton, Lord Mayor of the City of London, called for the celebration of Dickens, this "great writer and Londoner", to be the basis for restoring faith in business. "Never before", wrote Wootton, "has the importance of the relationship between business and morality been more pertinent".

Wootton's appeal for a moral capitalism invoked the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* and its backdrop to the French Revolution. Wootton called on financial sectors to work "in the service of the wider economy and in the service of our fellow citizens" so that they could "turn the worst of times—or at least seriously tough times—into the best of times".

Perhaps the most extraordinary reaction to the anniversary came in the pages of *City AM*, a free paper for London's financial district. The publication's business features editor, Marc Sidwell, cautioned against allowing Dickens to be championed by the poor and distressed—the very layers whom he defended against injustice.

Instead, Sidwell accuses Dickens of a "lack of documentary realism" and compares unfavourably his novelistic "campaigning exaggerations" with his journalism. He bases his dismissal of Dickens's scathing social satire of education in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) on the grounds that the situation at the time was better than Dickens represented it, and rather better than today.

Much of Dickens's sympathy for the oppressed was learned at first-hand, with the trauma of his father's imprisonment in a debtors' prison, and the removal of the youngster from school to work 10-hour shifts in a blacking factory. Although this was a relatively brief period in his life, it affected Dickens deeply, and fuelled his lifelong concern with social conditions.

Sidwell concludes that the "best advice Dickens can give us today" is contained in one of his most famous satires on the stultifying world of small trade, Mr Micawber's definition of social well-being in *David Copperfield* (1850): "Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen and six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery." From this Sidwell concludes that "We can't say he didn't warn us".

Sidwell chooses to ignore the damning criticisms embedded in

Dickens's satire. As Marx noted of Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë and Gaskell, their descriptions showed the small-minded brutality of this parasitic layer of the middle class, "full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance...the civilised world have confirmed their verdict with the damning epigram that it has fixed to this class that 'they are servile to those above, and tyrannical to those beneath'".

The layers whom Sidwell addresses are, if anything, even more rapacious than those savaged in Dickens's writing, of whom it can at least be said that they represented a social system that was still expanding.

In the 142 years since the death of the author, none of the central contradictions of the existing social order have been resolved. The exploitation so vividly portrayed in Dickens's works continues to be a feature of everyday life over vast swathes of the planet from Africa to Asia and on to Latin America.

Yet, even in those countries where grinding poverty was ameliorated in some measure through the struggles of the working class and the establishment of the welfare state, introduced under the shadow of the Russian Revolution, there is a serious risk of a return to the Dickensian nightmare.

Since the collapse of the global banking system in 2008 and the universal implementation of austerity measures aimed at making the working class pay for the folly of the financial elite, this is a scenario that day by day becomes ever more likely, as in Greece. The return of this scenario will take place under even more brutal conditions than those of a Victorian capitalism still able to offer certain social concessions.

In the UK, pensions and health care are already under sustained attack, education has taken a hit with the tripling of university fees and everywhere unemployment is on the rise. The dark days of the nineteenth century beckon.

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