



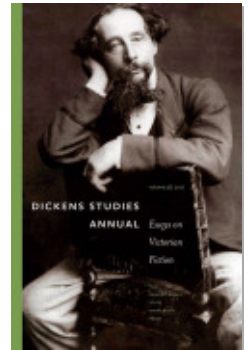
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Recognizing Status in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

Albert D. Pionke

Although most often read for its fictional—and, for many reviewers and critics, vaguely unsatisfying—response to the condition of England question, Hard Times also analyzes the historical peculiarities of Victorian middle-class status with sufficient sophistication to test the limits of later sociological and cultural theory from Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu. Attentive to several of the warrants that might legitimize the exercise of domination in Victorian society and reliant upon the use of type concepts at the level of character, Dickens identifies each possible warrant for public domination with one or more representative characters, whose respective loss of status before the end of the narrative then undermines his or her associated warrant. Their systematic repudiation results in a figure “of wonderful no-meaning,” middle-class status, which is provocatively constructed by Dickens on the basis of a series of categorical negations, and which therefore can be confirmed only through its recognition from those—whether circus performers or periodical readers—in a position to be dominated. In rendering status a highly figurative and uncertain affair, Hard Times suggests that ultimately novelists may be the best sociologists when it comes to representing the epistemologically unstable society of the Victorian middle classes.

Conceived as a weekly serial by Charles Dickens at the behest of his publishers, Bradbury & Evans—who were concerned about the flagging sales of *Household Words*—*Hard Times*, critics have generally agreed, manifests a number of

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interpretive problems.¹ The first emerges out of expectations shared by its earliest readers and reviewers that the novel is primarily concerned with the Condition of England question, to which it provides a response that many find insufficient. Even settling upon industrialization as the subject of the work presupposes that its structure permits a clear identification of the primary plot and its dominant character; however, as Alexander Welsh observes, “*Hard Times* is also a multiplot novel, and it is not easy to locate the affective center or to name with confidence the protagonist” (150). This difficulty is magnified by the apparently unfinished or schematic quality of many of the characters, who seem to be caricatures rather than realistic individuals.² Although praised by the otherwise critical reviewer in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* as “beautifully sketched,” Stephen Blackpool has been found by subsequent critics as particularly wanting in depth (“Charles Dickens” 454).³ All of these problems converge in critical responses to the circus, in that Sleary and company as embodiments of the universal panacea, Fancy, while perhaps amusing, hardly offer a credible alternative to the factory system and the hard-fact school.

Although complicit in expectantly limiting *Hard Times* to “a story, certainly sad—perhaps tragic—but true, of the unfortunate relationship between masters and men which produced the strike of Preston,” the *Blackwood’s* reviewer, in his broader comments about Dickens, does suggest an alternative and largely unexplored perspective from which to interpret the novel (“Charles Dickens” 454). Dickens, the reviewer writes, is “perhaps more distinctly than any other author of the time, a *class* writer, the historian and representative of one circle in the many ranks of our social scale. Despite their descents into the lowest class, and their occasional flights into the less familiar ground of fashion, it is the air and the breath of middle-class respectability which fills the books of Mr. Dickens” (451). While he uses the word “class,” the reviewer’s emphasis on characterological traits—not just “respectability,” but later, “intelligent, sensible, warm-hearted” (452)—and his definitional vagueness about this “circle of society” that “in itself is a realm of infinite gradation” with “perhaps a different meaning in the lips of every individual who says the words,” suggests that what differentiates “the wide middle ground” from “the rich and the poor” is not reducible to economics but instead comprehends a whole set of social behaviors and collective practices (452). What he means, in other words, is not “class” but “status.”

Applying this observation to *Hard Times* itself provides a compelling response to the interpretive problems outlined above. If the novel is primarily interested in the fine distinctions of middle-class status, then it need not be found wanting for failing to resolve the condition of England question. This shift in theme from industrialization to status also renders *Hard Times*, unambiguously, the story of Thomas Gradgrind, senior: retired from the “wholesale hardware trade” and “now looking about for a suitable opportunity of making an arithmetic figure in Parliament,” Gradgrind possesses both the commercial

background and the authoritative aspirations of an amorphous middle that is eager to assert its public status (13). Moreover, if the characters in the novel, including the unfortunate Stephen Blackpool, are intended to represent individual facets of a highly differentiated status system, then concerns about their verisimilitude seem misdirected; as in Hogarth's classic *Industry and Idleness* (1747) or Thackeray's *The Book of Snobs* (1848), caricature might be more appropriate to Dickens's method.⁴ Finally, refocusing attention on the novel in this way sheds an entirely new light on the itinerant Sleary and his horse riders: they do not offer a way of life or locus of value diametrically opposed to Coketown, but instead provide the necessary approbation of Gradgrind's successful practice of his middle-class status.

I. Critical and Methodological Contexts

This way of reading *Hard Times* departs significantly from the novel's initial reception by reviewers and from the subsequent critical tradition, enshrined in F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition*, of focusing on an industrial "intention [so] peculiarly insistent . . . that the representative significance of everything in the fable—character, episode, and so on—is immediately apparent as we read" (227). The original reviewer for *The New Quarterly Review and Digest of Current Literature, British, American, French, and German* was representative in anticipating "a story of over-work, small wages, poor food, and scanty clothing; and we took it up, rather expecting to meet with a tale of the Mary Barton school, and with some curiosity to see how even so experienced an author as Mr. Dickens would meet Mrs. Gaskell on her own ground" ("Hard Times for these Times" 489). Judged with such preconceptions in mind, the novel met with an equivocal response at best: the *Blackwood's* reviewer mentioned earlier, for instance, censured it as a "lamentable *non sequitur*" ("Charles Dickens" 453); the writer for *The Critic*, full of praise for Dickens in general, found that "*Hard Times* has fewer beauties and more defects than any thing he has yet produced" ("Hard Times" 513); John Forster's *Examiner* more positively declared "*Hard Times* reads admirably in a volume" ("Hard Times. For these Times" 568); and John Ruskin preceded Leavis by almost 90 years in judging *Hard Times* "in several respects, the greatest" work written by Dickens, even as he acknowledged that it partakes of "the colour of caricature," "brilliant exaggeration," and "a circle of stage fire" (159). Ideologically, the novel presents, as Welsh admits, a noticeable "lack of a coherent program for the improvement of either education or industrial relations" (151). This absence leaves critics interested in these topics either, like Robert Caserio, to concede Dickens's "reactionary political ideas" while investing them with greater complexity at the level of form or, along with Patrick Brantlinger, to contest the dominance

of such ideas by observing that the novel more ambivalently shows how “the factory owners, their allies, and also their opponents, all use political economy and ‘tabular statements’ to excuse their moral and legal failures” (Caserio 11; Brantlinger 282). Among the most sophisticated of such “condition of England” readings is Patricia Johnson’s “*Hard Times* and the Structure of Industrialism,” which reexamines the novel’s bivalent deployment of “the physical structure of the factory itself as both the metaphor for the destructive forces at work on its characters’ lives and as the metaphor for its own aesthetic unity as a novel,” ultimately arguing that Dickens problematizes the industrial city by metonymically associating its inhabitants with both “the fuel and eventually the waste products, of the factory system” (129, 132).

Leavis’s inclusion of *Hard Times* in *The Great Tradition* both rehabilitated the novel for serious inquiry and determined the direction of critical study for decades to come; beginning in the 1970s, however, the text also became the object of numerous alternative critical methods and conclusions. Thus, as concerned to connect the novel to its historical moment as those critics who focus on industrialism, John Baird reconstructs the “memorial” to the failed divorce bill of 1854 “woven deeply into the texture of the narrative” (401). The book’s relationship to other facets of its historical moment, as represented by its original serial publication, is the focus of Paul Schacht and Joseph Butwin, who in their respective studies reconnect the novel’s weekly installments to surrounding articles in *Household Words*. Among the recent contributors to Dickens’s magazine was Harriet Martineau, who broke publicly from Dickens as a result of his publication of *Hard Times*; K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith adjudicate among their mutual recriminations, ultimately finding that Dickens was more sinned against than sinning in the exchange. Approaching the novel from a somewhat less historicist direction is John Kucich, who reads the text in light of a persistent “dialectic of excess and restraint . . . resolved outside of any single character” that animates much of Dickens’s fiction (180). Ultimately most interested in one of Kucich’s examples of individual excess crushed by social restraint, Katherine Kearns reexamines the novel’s patterns of figurative language in order to argue that Louisa Gradgrind serves as “a potent sign within the text of *Hard Times*, a figure that embodies Dickens’s resistance to realism’s co-opting of language to its causes” (876). Also concerned with the novel’s language, Francesca Orestano joins Caserio in building upon the semiotic theories of Umberto Eco to reveal a stylistic predilection for entropy-inducing lists throughout the text. Nils Claussøn offers an alternative strategy for dissociating *Hard Times* from the condition of England novel, by instead locating it at the generic intersection point of the comedy of humors and Menippean satire. For philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the text even serves as a foundational example of social justice grounded in sympathetic identification with distant others. Nussbaum’s own critique of a hyper-rational system of ethics, parodied in the

novel's utilitarians, is itself questioned by Paulette Kidder for its omission of Dickens's frequent religious references and thus for its exclusion of "at least one important dimension of human motivation: that of spiritual longing toward a dimension of transcendent mystery" (420).

My own approach focuses on an alternative dimension of human motivation, status, that has been conceptualized most convincingly by early twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber and later twentieth-century social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. In *Economy and Society* and *Distinction*, respectively, these two thinkers elucidate a variety of individual and collective strategies designed to assert social dominance on the basis of "style of life" or "cultural capital." Seeking to ground the nascent discipline of sociology in "type concepts and generalized uniformities of empirical process," Weber proposes three systems of domination, each claiming its own type of legitimacy (I.19). Modern "rational" domination relies upon the "free market" to generate "money power," or wealth as expressed through the control over the production and acquisition of material goods (II.927). Preindustrial "traditional" domination is built upon "status," an "effective claim to social esteem" that is typically founded on "style of life," formal education, or "hereditary or occupational prestige" and that is expressed through conventions that "create economically irrational consumption patterns and fetter the free market" (I.305–07). Finally, "charismatic" domination begins with the nonrational, apparently magical power of a single leader, who must continuously "prove" his legitimacy by obtaining "recognition on the part of those subject to authority" (I.242). As Dickens represents matters in *Hard Times*, the middle-class masters of Coketown certainly participate in the creation and expansion of the free market, while also somewhat incongruously seeking to legitimate their claims to authority by claiming a type of status that can only be secured through public recognition—including but not limited to Parliamentary election—like that normally reserved for holders of charisma.

Even as it contravenes Weber's typological methodology, Dickens's fictionalized society in *Hard Times* also poses a significant challenge to the more recent cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu. Most notably in *Distinction*, Bourdieu reformulates Weber's systems of domination and strategies of legitimacy into his own "systems of dispositions" (6). These dispositions become the basis for an individual's "habitus," or the set of practices and attitudes that differentiates particular class fractions from one another.⁵ As a result largely of education and childhood experience, these class fractions manifest more or less "specific capital," including varying degrees of "cultural capital," which can be deployed by individual agents to assert cultural and social authority. According to Bourdieu's account, an individual's habitus, cultural capital, and ultimate location in the status economy can be determined with great precision by an astute observer, one whose own status seems predicated upon his ability to detect that of others. Although this may be true of instances in which the stratification of society is fixed and the practices

denoting habitus well understood to rest upon a set of affirmative demonstrations of cultural capital, Coketown presents readers with a version of Victorian England whose hierarchy of class fractions is dramatically in flux and hence a society in which individuals are not always easily classified.

Despite being written a half-century apart and, in Bourdieu's case with the explicit goal of revising Weber's earlier work, both *Economy and Society* and *Distinction* share the fundamental assumption that status is both grounded in and detectable by affirmative demonstrations of its possession.⁶ Even Weber's "negatively privileged status groups," whose "social honor" is not acknowledged by the society of which they are a part, maintain their "belief in a providential mission and . . . a specific honor before God" by means of an observable style of life (II.934). All such life-styles, whether positively or negatively privileged, "are stratified according to the principles of their *consumption* of goods," including "wearing special costumes . . . eating special dishes . . . carrying arms," etc. (II.937, emphasis in original; II.935). Similarly, although Bourdieu allows that in "matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others," he still imagines such distastes operating according to a substitutive logic of binary opposition (56).⁷ Thus, the members of one class fraction might profess disgust at the choice of food, clothing, music, etc. of a rival group while always asserting their own "superior" preference for an alternative. Whether as an element of a style of life or as an object of distinction, such evidence is consistently represented by Weber and Bourdieu as a positive sign of legitimacy: I do/have/prefer X, and therefore I am an individual of status.

It is ultimately as a result of the provisional, even paradoxical nature of middle-class status in *Hard Times* that I depart from Weber and Bourdieu on epistemological grounds. Attentive to several of the warrants that might legitimize the exercise of domination in Victorian society and reliant upon the use of type concepts at the level of character, Dickens renders middle-class status an uncertain subject by grounding it not in positive demonstrations of capital but rather in negative assertions of value and the need for disinterested acknowledgment by outsiders. At the beginning of the novel, Gradgrind asserts, quite famously, that his status rests in "'Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else'" (7). By the end of *Hard Times*, Dickens has done him one better, unearthing birth, wealth, force, and finally fact itself, by identifying each possible warrant for public domination with one or more representative characters, whose respective loss of status before the end of the narrative then undermines his or her associated warrant. Their systematic repudiation leaves, in Mrs. Gradgrind's dying words, "'something—not an Ology at all—that [Gradgrind] has missed, or forgotten'" (149). This figure "of wonderful no-meaning," I argue, is middle-class status, which is provocatively constructed by Dickens on the basis of a series of categorical

negations unaccompanied by substitutions announced via patterns of consumption, and which therefore can be confirmed only through its recognition from those in a position to be dominated (150).

II. Four Negative Assertions of Value

Birth

Consanguinity and longevity were perennial weak points in the aspirations for status made by middle-class Victorians, who generally could not bolster their claims to legitimacy by invoking a lineage of illustrious antecedents like those enjoyed by members of the aristocracy. *Hard Times* reminds readers of a number of period-appropriate strategies for eliding this problem. Most succinctly, Dickens's narrator dismisses the manufacturing of noble pedigrees (like that enabled by Baptist Hatton in Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* [1845]) as a "mean claim (there is no meaner)" (194). Emulation also merits just enough pejorative attention to appear in the behavior of the nameless "many of the Gradgrind school" who "liked fine gentlemen; they pretended that they did not, but they did. 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" (95). Public association by members of the middle classes with their gentler counterparts is treated at greater length and by means of specific personalities. When not fatiguing themselves by impersonation, members of the Gradgrind party "went about recruiting; and where could they enlist recruits more hopefully, than among the fine gentlemen who, having found out everything to be worth nothing, were equally ready for anything" (95). Thus arrives in Coketown that younger son of "a good family and better appearance," that "handsome dog who can make you a devilish fine speech," that "thorough gentleman, made to the model of the time; weary of everything, and putting no more faith in anything than Lucifer," Mr. James Harthouse (96, 97, 91–92). And the nouveau-riche Josiah Bounderby cements his sense of himself as a "Conqueror" by keeping at a cost of "a hundred a year" his own "captive Princess," Mrs. Sparsit, whose claims to gentility arise from her consanguineous connection to the Scadgerses and her union by marriage to the Powlers (37). Both Harthouse and Sparsit, then, signify in their persons birth in service to middle-class status.

For his part, Harthouse also represents a significant threat to his middle-class patrons, not through any active malice but rather through an amoral and at times uncomfortably familiar "smoothness so perfectly diabolical" (172). A lifetime of cultivated boredom has led him to a "conviction that indifference was the genuine high-breeding (the only conviction he had)" (170). This conviction allows Harthouse both to understand perfectly the impetus to rob banks—"“Fellows who go in for Banks must take the consequences,”” he tells the Bounderbys, ““If there

were no consequences, we should all go in for Banks” (139)—and to repudiate the wonder of friendship as readily as any utilitarian, since “it was as much against the precepts of his school to wonder, as it was against the doctrines of the Gradgrind College” (133). Dissuaded by statute and unfettered by friendship, Harthouse, without “any earnest wickedness of purpose in him,” begins to go in not for a bank, but for a banker’s wife, engaging in a slow seduction of Louisa that she escapes just short of consummation (135). “Publicly and privately, it were much better for the age in which he lived,” the narrator judges, “that he and the legion of whom he was one were designedly bad, than indifferent and purposeless. It is the drifting icebergs setting with any current anywhere, that wreck the ships” (135). This mixing of biblical and maritime metaphors seems especially designed for Dickens’s middle-class readers, who were both the motive force behind the nineteenth-century’s evangelical revival and the commercial investors most likely to be interested in ships meeting with accidents at sea.

Harthouse himself is wrecked on the “ingenuousness,” “fearlessness,” “truthfulness,” and “entire forgetfulness of herself” of Sissy Jupe (171). Managing to touch “the cavity where his heart should have been—in that nest of addled eggs, where the birds of heaven would have lived if they had not been whistled away,” she accesses his capacity for shame by appealing to his pride in the status of birth (172). She begins their interview by wondering aloud “‘what your honour as a gentleman binds you to do,’” raising a blush that makes evident the “blood” guaranteeing Harthouse’s social position (172). Through a series of rhetorical maneuvers recently mapped with admirable precision by Victor Sage, Sissy uses Harthouse’s care for his own reputation against him, ultimately forcing him to acknowledge himself “‘James Harthouse a Great Pyramid of failure’” (174).⁸ He agrees to leave Coketown, never to return. That he is so defeated by Sissy, who is “[o]nly a poor girl—only a stroller,” dramatically undercuts the value of gentle birth in the novel, thereby partially unhooking middle-class status from its most venerable source of legitimacy (174).⁹

Consumed by the same pride in “ancient stock” that betrays Harthouse in his final confrontation with Sissy, Mrs. Sparsit reveals a slightly different but no more appealing side of status supported by birth (36). Unable to afford the smooth indifference permitted by his financial independence, she cultivates instead a “self-laudatory . . . ladylike deportment” that permits her to maintain a sense of superiority to “the rude business aspect” of her domestic service at the bank (87). She directs her barely disguised passive-aggressive resentment upon Louisa—whom she persists in calling “Miss Gradgrind” even after the latter’s marriage to Bounderby—participating vicariously in her emotional entrapment by Harthouse through jealous surveillance:

Mrs. Sparsit saw James Harthouse come and go; she heard of him here and there; she saw the changes of the face he had studied; she, too, remarked to a nicety how and when it clouded, how and when it cleared; she kept her black

eyes wide open, with no touch of pity, with no touch of compunction, all absorbed in interest. In the interest of seeing her, ever drawing, with no hand to stay her, nearer and nearer to the bottom of this new Giants' Staircase.
(153)

The key term in this passage, used twice in quick succession, is "interest," with its palimpsestic combination of active attention, shared participation, material investment, selfish advantage, and financial indemnity, whether for a legal injury or an outstanding debt. For all of her assumed superiority to her business surroundings, Mrs. Sparsit has thoroughly absorbed the vocabulary that was prescribed for personal success and broader economic health by the self-appointed entrepreneurial heirs of Adam Smith.

Smith would likely find Mrs. Sparsit's self-interest in the developing affair neither rational nor enlightened, but even he would be hard-pressed to fault her industry. It is, in fact, her zealous pursuit of her own "gratified malice" towards Louisa that leads to Mrs. Sparsit's own loss of status, and, through her, to the further diminution of gentle birth as a warrant for domination (158). Shadowing Louisa through the storm, both meteorological and emotional, of book 2, chapter 11, she sacrifices her ladylike deportment until reduced by woods and weather to the state of "an old park fence in a mouldy lane" (160). Having lost Louisa in the rain, she finds Bounderby in London, discloses the alleged infidelity, and attempts to salvage her dignity with an aristocratic faint. Instead, in the chapter that immediately follows Harthouse's humbling acquiescence to Sissy Jupe, Mrs. Sparsit is grammatically reduced from subject to object through a series of transitive verbs, being shaken off upon the floor, unceremoniously "recovered" by means of violently "potent restoratives," "hustled" onto a train, "carried" back to Coketown, "crammed" into a coach, and born off to Stone Lodge (175). Reprising the language of interest with which he had described her several chapters earlier, Dickens writes, "Regarded as a classical ruin, Mrs. Sparsit was an interesting spectacle on her arrival at her journey's end; but considered in any other light, the amount of damage she had by this time sustained was excessive, and impaired her claims to attention" (175). That her story will be discredited by Louisa's presence in her father's house is an almost unnecessary confirmation of Mrs. Sparsit's, and by extension birth's, loss of legitimacy when presented before the novel's locus of aspiring middle-class status.

Wealth

It is on the strength of a letter of introduction from Gradgrind that Harthouse gains entry into Josiah Bounderby's home and business. Already resident at both is Sparsit, who presides in "State humility" over the tea she serves at the former and jealously broods as "Bank Dragon . . . over the treasures of the

mine” at the latter (40, 87). As Leavis was among the first to note, Bounderby’s affiliations with these two aristocratic embellishments to his environs extend beyond a common setting to include a shared attitude; together, Leavis writes, they “form a trio that suggests the whole system of British snobbery” (247). Whereas Harthouse and Sparsit recursively remind others of the relative privilege due to them from their pedigrees, Bounderby elevates himself by proclaiming the most vociferous rejections in *Hard Times* of any sort of status grounded in gentle birth. His own myth of himself as an entirely self-made man without mother or father, with a childhood spent, first, in the chandler’s shop of “the wickedest and the worst old woman that ever lived,” his alcoholic grandmother, and, second, on the streets, “where everybody knocked [him] about and starved [him],” is only the most flagrant example of his efforts to exempt himself from the influence of family connections (18).¹⁰

That, rejecting filial antecedents, Bounderby still believes himself deserving of middle-class status becomes abundantly clear on his birthday. Waiting at Stone Lodge for the return of the family principals, he recites for Mrs. Gradgrind a resume of his own meteoric rise from the gutter: “Vagabond, errand-boy, vagabond, labourer, porter, clerk, chief manager, small partner, Josiah Bounderby of Coketown. Those are the antecedents, and the culmination” (18). In the supposed absence of the advantages of birth, Bounderby’s legitimacy rests primarily in the power of his wealth, a fact implied in the narrator’s opening description of him as “a rich man: Banker, merchant, and what not,” and confirmed by Mr. Childers’s admission to him soon after that “‘if you mean that you can make more money out of your time than I can of mine, I should judge from your appearance, that you are about right’” (16, 28). At this early stage in the novel, at least, Bounderby’s wealth-secured status is sufficient to impress even Gradgrind, who looks upon him “as if Mr. Bounderby had been Mrs. Grundy” (16).¹¹

Bounderby certainly invites the comparison, dispensing self-aggrandizing and censorious opinions to all within earshot, whether they ask for them or not. Not everyone is convinced, of course—Louisa remains nonplussed by his “[c]heerless and comfortless, boastfully and doggedly rich” manner even after marriage, and the circus performers nearly “‘pith [him] out o’ winder” (97, 33)—but enough people endorse his authority that the narrator is brought to confide that it was “one of Bounderby’s most exasperating attributes . . . that he not only sang his own praises but stimulated other men to sing them. There was a moral infection of clap-trap in him” (37). In fact, Bounderby’s is not an idiosyncratic but rather a representative failing of those the novel represents as legitimizing their status through wealth. Among the “fictions of Coketown” is one articulated by any “capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence,” and who “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" (60). Bankruptcy does "sometimes happen in the best regulated families in Coketown," but even the failures of men like Nickits, "who, in his determination to make a shorter cut than usual to an enormous fortune, overspeculated himself by about two hundred thousand pounds," enrich Coketown's banker, who finds himself, "'like a maggot [got] into a nut,'" now in possession of that ultimate status symbol of wealth, a country estate (126–27).

Bounderby's only pecuniary loss in the novel is the one hundred and fifty pounds stolen from the bank; his loss of status before the end, however, is considerably greater, and occurs in two stages. First, his repudiation of the power of birth, in the form of the story he has told and has induced others to tell about his childhood depravations, is exposed as a lie before "the busiest of the neighbours to the number of some five-and-twenty" by his doting mother, Mrs. Pegler (191). Filled with "impatient mortification" throughout the scene, Bounderby is at the end reduced to

a blustering sheepishness . . . at once extremely crestfallen and superlatively absurd. Detected as the Bully of humility, who had built his windy reputation upon lies . . . he cut a most ridiculous figure. With the people filing off at the door he held, who he knew would carry what had passed to the whole town, to be given to the four winds, he could not have looked a Bully more shorn and forlorn, if he had had his ears cropped.

(192, 194)

Crucially, Gradgrind stands among the five-and-twenty, and it is his interrogation of Mrs. Pegler that publicizes the truth behind Bounderby's lies. Throughout the scene, as Bounderby swells "larger and larger . . . redder and redder," Gradgrind is "shocked by the possibility which dawned upon him" and ultimately feels himself "innocently placed in a very distressing predicament"; implicitly, the possibility he realizes is that his earlier innocent endorsement of Bounderby's wealth-legitimated claim to serve as Coketown's Mrs. Grundy has been founded upon false deserts (192–93). Second, Bounderby's attempt to salvage his legacy by establishing another "windy reputation," built this time not upon the past but upon the future, also fails spectacularly. Seeking to justify his status post facto, Bounderby makes "a vain-glorious will" intended to memorialize himself through the perpetual maintenance of "five-and-twenty Humbugs, past five-and-fifty years of age" on his country estate, everything and everyone taking on the name of Bounderby "with a vast amount of Bounderby balderdash and bluster" (217). This scheme comes to naught, as he dies five years later, his "precious will" embarking on a "long career of quibble, plunder, false pretenses, vile example, little service and much law" (218). Soon to be consumed in Chancery, a process represented to such memorable effect

in Dickens's just-completed *Bleak House*, Bounderby's wealth alone is thus represented by *Hard Times* as another insufficient warrant for establishing lasting middle-class legitimacy.

Force

Shorn, forlorn, and victim of a fatal fit before the end of the novel, Bounderby is for most of the story appropriately caricatured as a "Bully," one who uses force to dominate others. Whether verbally stunning Mrs. Gradgrind through "three sonorous repetitions of . . . pride in having at any time of his life achieved such a great social distinction as to be a nuisance," blasphemously swearing "by the Lord Harry" while badgering Stephen Blackpool about his fellow weavers' union, or discharging his "coarsely blurted . . . loud outbreaks . . . like a Rocket, at his father-in-law's head" during their confrontation over Louisa's alleged infidelity, Bounderby consistently relies upon bellicose forms of speech (18, 111, 176–79). When especially agitated—as he is in the last of the aforementioned examples—he escalates to physical violence, "screwing," "smiting," "knocking," and otherwise assaulting individuals and objects (175–76). As Blackpool recognizes during his unfortunate interview, this predisposition to force also guides Bounderby's and by extension the other Coketown employers' business practices. "'Look how you considers of us, and writes of us, and talks of us, and goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us,'" he enumerates, "'and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong, and never had'n no reason in us sin ever we were born. Look how this ha' grown an' grown, Sir, bigger an' bigger, broader an' broader, harder an' harder, fro year to year, fro generation unto generation'" (113). Proving Blackpool's point about the deteriorating relations between "masters" and "hands" at the end of this chapter, Bounderby fires him for speaking the truth when commanded to do so.

Bounderby's fondness for the "strong hand" and his and the other "united masters" impulse towards collective action align them in surprising ways with what is surely the most significant long-term threat to middle-class aspirations to public authority in the Victorian period, the growing numerical and productive power of those closer to the bottom of the social scale (114, 88). Whether in its "moral" or "physical" form, Chartism sought to harness this "force" of the people, which was also manifested in the move towards unionization, the rise of the Radicals in Parliament, and the increasingly inexorable progress towards expanded suffrage. The Preston strike to which critics so often allude in connection with *Hard Times*—and which did receive explicit attention in *Household Words* during the novel's serialization—was a single point on this increasingly visible line of what I would call domination legitimized by force. The most visible representative of this third and for Dickens false form of status is Slackbridge.

"An ill-made, high-shouldered man, with lowering brows, and his features crushed into an habitually sour expression," the union delegate has little that is personally

appealing (105).¹² However, it is the ugliness of his words that is most at issue in the novel, which painstakingly records Slackbridge's repeated descents from biblical diction to threats of violence. Thus, in his opening speech to Coketown's factory workers, he marries an allusion to "the God-created glorious rights of Humanity, and upon the holy and eternal privileges of Brotherhood" with a call to "crumble into dust" the factory owners (104–05). Similarly, in his public denunciation of Blackpool for refusing to join the union, Slackbridge, with "violent scorn" escalates in his name-calling from Esau to Judas to Castlereagh, thus progressing from one biblical figure who sold his family birthright to another whose betrayal enabled the crucifixion of Jesus to the historical politician associated with the violent repression of the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and the massacre at Peterloo in 1819. During Blackpool's subsequent address, Slackbridge also expostulates with increasing violence, first shaking "his head as if he would shake it off," then "laugh[ing], fold[ing] his arms, and frown[ing] sarcastically," and finally jumping to his feet "gnashing and tearing" (107). At the end of the meeting, the physical, even militant, threat posed by his bombastic rhetoric is subtly highlighted when "Slackbridge acted as fugleman" to the crowd (109). Although some of those present at this and the later assembly of workers resist his excesses, "these were pygmies against an army; the general assemblage subscribed to the gospel according to Slackbridge, and gave three cheers for him, as he sat demonstrably panting at them" (183).

No dramatic comeuppance is needed to discredit Slackbridge as an individual; however, containing the democratic force that he represents cannot be accomplished solely on the grounds of his mouth-breathing. It is for this reason that the novel includes the pathetic character of Blackpool, whose quiescence in the face of repeated provocations and final lingering death promises that the numerical majority will be no threat to *Hard Times*'s middle-class readers. Thus, upbraided by Bounderby for inquiring about a divorce, he polishes the banker's "brazen full-stop" on his way out (61); trapped in his house by his alcoholic spouse, he promises Rachael, "'I nevermore will see or think o' anything that angers me, but thou, so much better than me, shalt be by th' side on't'" (70–71); about to be ostracized by his lifelong neighbors and coworkers, "Not a grain of anger with them was in his heart" (108); and, finally, on the brink of death from his fall down the Old Hell Shaft, he counsels, "'But in our judgments, like as in our doings, we mun bear and forbear'" (201). As melodramatic, saccharine, even irritating as Blackpool's attitude and fate are for many readers and critics, they make perfect sense as elements within Dickens's dilution of force as a legitimate warrant for status.

Fact

With birth, wealth, and force discredited, all that remains is fact, "the one thing needful" according to the title of the opening chapter in the schoolroom, and the focus of attention for the vast majority of the novel.¹³ Every bit as topical as the

Preston strike, the “tabular statements” and “blue books” alluded to with such frequency throughout *Hard Times* represent what Oz Frankel identifies as the nineteenth-century’s new “*print statism*,” itself a symptom of Mary Poovey’s broader epistemological unit of “the modern fact.”¹⁴ Carolyn Berman convincingly locates Dickens’s novel specifically within the epistemological and rhetorical contexts established by mid-century Blue Books, with their combination of numerical tables and charts purporting to represent without distortion the modern facts of nineteenth-century life alongside pathos-inducing interviews and individual anecdotes.¹⁵ Exposing the insufficiencies of fact, as contained in government-sponsored reports and as deployed by utilitarian reformers, occupies Dickens in his industrial, educational, and domestic subplots, and thus an entire crowd of characters contends to represent this final warrant for middle-class status. A much smaller number links all three subplots together, with two characters in particular demonstrating to Gradgrind the full extent of the problem with entrusting public authority to those whose sole claim to legitimacy rests upon being “replete with facts” and “trained to mathematical exactness” (16). Both educated by having “imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim” and then apprenticed in different capacities within Bounderby’s temple of wealth—where both witness Harthouse’s performance of the indolent superiority of birth and later participate in the robbery investigation that authorizes Blackpool’s second condemnation by the delegate of force—Bitzer and Tom Gradgrind, junior, together represent fact in its least edifying form in *Hard Times* (8).

The model pupil in M’Choakumchild’s model schoolroom, Bitzer shows the consequences of the perfect realization of fact. His thorough schooling ensures that Bitzer remains as unfazed as a child by Gradgrind’s imperative to define a horse as he is later unimpressed by Harthouse’s command of appearances: he wonders aloud to Mrs. Sparsit whether fashionable dress is “‘worth the money’” and finds Harthouse’s likely gambling “‘ridiculous . . . because the chances are against the players’” (94). He is also proof against the allure of wealth for its own sake, viewing his Christmas gratuity as merely an opportunity to “‘put by a little’” (90). Even the prospect of the force derived from numerical preponderance only inspires Bitzer with factual schemes for advancing individual self-interest: “‘As to their combining together; there are many of them, I have no doubt, that by watching and informing upon one another could earn a trifle now and then, whether in money or good will, and improve their livelihood. Then, why don’t they improve it, ma’am! It’s the first consideration of a rational creature, and it’s what they pretend to want’” (90). Bitzer has so perfectly learned this foundational lesson of the school of fact that he has relieved himself of the need to care for his own mother by having her confined to Coketown’s workhouse under the provisions of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act.¹⁶

Tom, by contrast, provides an example of the consequences of a perverse indoctrination into fact. Like Bitzer exercising himself “‘diligently in his calculations relative to number one,’” Tom is already two-thirds of the way along the professional

trajectory enumerated earlier by Bounderby—he is clerk at the bank—by the time Harthouse arrives on the scene (71). Unlike Bitzer, Tom quickly falls under the spell of aggressive indifference cast by his new friend, to whom he later confesses that he games, and loses prodigiously. Since moving out of his father's house, Tom has been, the narrator reveals, a slave to “groveling sensualities” brought on by his strict education in fact; these same also lead him to pimp his sister to Bounderby, to brag about his accomplishment in the first evening of his acquaintance with Harthouse—who uses this confirmation of Louisa's one emotional vulnerability to lead her gradually down Sparsit's “mighty Staircase, with a dark pit of shame and ruin at the bottom”—and, ultimately, to rob the bank, framing Blackpool for the crime (101, 150). Offered the opportunity to confess in private to Louisa, he shams sleep until she leaves, afterwards “tearing his hair, morosely crying, grudgingly loving her, hatefully but impenitently spurning himself, and no less hatefully and unprofitably spurning all the good in the world” (143). He is, the narrator judges, “a monster . . . a hypocrite . . . incapable at last of governing himself” (101).

Bitzer's perfect and Tom's perverse realizations of fact collide in book 3, chapter 8, “Philosophical.” Alerted by Sissy at the side of the Old Hell Shaft, Tom has fled to Sleary's circus, where he is absurdly separated from his former middle-class status. Sleary first hides Tom in plain sight, as “one o' them black thervanth” in a Jack the Giant killer routine (207). Denied even the role of the thieving English boy, Tom descends a bit further down the status scale, to similitude with a “monkey” and at last to a “deplorable object,” once he justifies his actions to his father by an appeal to the statistical laws derived from tabular statements: “‘So many people are employed in situations of trust; so many people out of so many, will be dishonest. I have heard you talk, a hundred times, of its being a law. How can *I* help laws?’” (209). Bathed afterwards by Sleary in beer, Tom is at last redressed as a “Jothkin,” a country bumpkin with no middle-class status whatsoever for his final flight from Liverpool abroad. At this moment, Bitzer appears to arrest Tom, “his colourless face more colourless than ever, as if he ran himself into a white heat” that provides a pointed contrast to Tom's recent status as a “comic blackamoor” (210, 209). Just as Tom had cited the facts of his education to rationalize his dishonesty, Bitzer now recites the “catechism” of “self-interest” that he learned at Gradgrind's school, which lesson thoroughly absorbed makes him inaccessible to any definition of his heart that exceeds “the facts related by Harvey relating to the circulation of the blood” (211). That Bitzer's goal of watching and informing upon Tom in exchange for a trifle to improve his own livelihood is frustrated in part by a horse whose reality exceeds any narrowly factual definitions only further proves the insufficiencies of his education. In this climactic scene, therefore, Gradgrind is presented with the extreme ends of a continuum predicated upon fact. In Tom's case, fact has led to vagabondage, whereas for Bitzer fact has resulted in a pale imitation of humanity. In both cases, fact has proven a poor warrant for middle-class status.

III. The Need for Recognition

All of which leaves Gradgrind at the end of *Hard Times* in the somewhat incongruous position of having witnessed the systematic diminution of every form of legitimacy supporting the exercise of middle-class domination. That he nevertheless retains his own right to an especially empowered version of public authority is clear from his continued possession, into a point of “futurity” distant enough to age him into “a white-haired decrepit man,” of his seat as Coketown’s MP (218). Given the ritualized brutality of contested elections, during which Gradgrind’s position as the father of a bank robber would surely be raised, his lingering status among his own constituents would have to be considerable to allow him to overcome his own consanguineous baggage.¹⁷ As readers, we are never in a position to see what the voters of Coketown value in their representative, but we are witness to two extended scenes in which Gradgrind’s legitimacy is confirmed through public recognition. During both of the chapters in which he interacts at length with the members of Sleary’s Horse-riding, Gradgrind is evaluated and ultimately approved by its itinerant members once he explicitly distances himself from the more conventional warrants of middle-class status.

Thus, in book 1, chapter 6, “Sleary’s Horsemanship,” Gradgrind and Bounderby walk to the Pegasus’s Arms public house with the express purpose of expelling Sissy from the model school. Placed immediately in conversation with Childers and Kidderminster, Bounderby repeatedly asserts his status on the basis of his wealth, “rattling his money and laughing” (30). Far from impressed, Childers quickly alters his address from “gentlemen,” inclusive of both, to “Sir,” directed exclusively thereafter at Gradgrind (28). Insulting and then “feigning unconsciousness of Mr. Bounderby’s existence,” Childers seeks “to conciliate” Gradgrind, whom readers know, courtesy of the narrative’s focalization, he sees as a “gentleman” (31). Once the entire company of performers arrives and Sissy returns, Bounderby even more egregiously insults them by his command of “plain Fact” (33). Rejecting both the advice and the example of his friend, Gradgrind offers Sissy a place in his home and at his school, prompting Sleary to forgive him even past efforts “that keepth a prethiouth thight of money out of the houth” and to address him consistently as “Thquire” (35).

Much later, in the final confrontation with Bitzer, Sleary witnesses Gradgrind’s repudiation of fact as he pleads ineffectually for Tom’s freedom; in response, the circus master arranges an elaborate escape act, complete with horse, dog, and pony show. Offered “a handsome remuneration in money,” Sleary suggests instead a more personal set of gifts—in election parlance, treats—for the members of his company, who perform in this instance the role of Gradgrind’s loyal constituents (213). After lunch, Sleary recognizes Gradgrind’s status more personally by taking him into his confidence about the reappearance of the now-dead Jupe’s dog Merrylegs and about the insufficiency of “Thelf-intereth” to explain either

canine or human conduct (215). They part with a handshake, one of the most basic forms of acknowledgment and a staple of the election process.

The need of a character like Gradgrind for the endorsement of a social outsider like Sleary helps to explain why the *Blackwood's* reviewer quoted earlier remains so imprecise in his definition of the social circle represented in Dickens's fiction. As depicted in *Hard Times*, at least, middle-class status cannot be known by those who claim it, but only acknowledged after the fact by others who do not aspire to it themselves. Extending this fictional logic to the fiction in which it appears, we can see that what was at stake in the serialization of the novel, then, was not merely the sales figures for *Household Words*, but rather Dickens's own legitimacy as a unique weekly purveyor of information, opinion, and public authority. That his readers voted, as it were, with their expanded purchase of the magazine, implies both that they were willing to confirm the Inimitable's status and that the epistemologically unstable nature of middle-class status may best serve those accustomed to deal, not in "the howling ocean of tabular statements" but in "mere fables about men and women" (42).¹⁸ Moreover, in what represents a significant challenge to still-current twentieth-century theories of status, this recognition comes not on the basis of positive performances of familial, material, physical, or intellectual capital, but rather upon the active repudiation of these conventional sources of legitimation. Such negative assertions of value render status a highly figurative and uncertain affair, and suggest that ultimately novelists may be the best sociologists when it comes to representing the epistemologically unstable society of the Victorian middle classes.

NOTES

- 1 According to John Forster's *Life*, this fictional gambit paid off: "He more than doubled the circulation of this journal" (2.66).
- 2 Despite her personal vitriol, Harriet Martineau is typical when she judges, "Master and man are as unlike life in England, at present, as Ogre and Tom Thumb: and the result of the choice of subject is simply, that the charm of an ideal creation is foregone, while nothing is gained in its stead" (36). A rare dissent to this general opinion appears in *The New Quarterly Review and Digest*: "In 'Hard Times' the characters are strongly drawn, but they are true flesh and blood: it is easy to fancy that all and each of them live and move in the world around us, and that they are not mere puppets called forth by an arbitrary will to play a part according to the dictates of the machinist" (489). A much better predictor of subsequent opinion comes from *The Critic*: "He has carried his bad habit of caricature to an excess unknown before, even to himself. There is scarcely a natural character in the whole book. Sissy, Louisa, and her brother, are tolerably free from exaggeration; but all the rest are more fitted for *Punch* than for a sober narrative professing to paint life as it is to-day" ("Hard Times"). I am grateful to Deborah Logan for leading me to the original full text of Martineau's response.

- 3 Stephen Spector speaks for many critics when he asserts that “Dickens bestows hardly a single spark of his vitalizing genius upon Stephen Blackpool and Rachael, *Hard Times*’s thwarted working-class lovers. Like Victor Frankenstein’s creation, a monstrous assemblage with limbs and features ironically chosen for their beauty, Stephen and Rachael are automatons compounded of such Victorian middle-class virtues as industry, honesty, self-denial, chastity, and deference. Where Frankenstein’s unattractive child entertains, Dickens’ beau ideal of the industrial worker bores” (365).
- 4 An alternative defense of Dickens’s methods of characterization appears in Thomas Kelly’s “Character in Dickens’ Late Novels.” For observations with particular relevance to *Hard Times*, see 390–91, 393, and 395–96.
- 5 “The habitus, an objective relationship between two objectivities, enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by the habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition” (Bourdieu 101).
- 6 In his preface, Bourdieu explains that *Distinction* is “‘an endeavour to rethink Max Weber’s opposition between class and *Stand* [status]” (xii). This opposition appears a number of times in *Economy and Society*, and is addressed most overtly in Weber’s remarks on “status honor,” which, he explains, “need not necessarily be linked with a class situation. On the contrary, it normally stands in sharp opposition to the pretensions of sheer property” (II.932).
- 7 See Bourdieu 468.
- 8 See Sage 330–35.
- 9 The aristocratic Harthouse’s defeat by the virtuous Sissy offers a fictional example of what Pam Morris describes as a shift away from eighteenth-century faith in “elitism of birth” and towards a nineteenth-century belief in “an elitism of individual worth” (6). In an observation particularly relevant to my reading of middle-class status as predicated in part upon the rejection of gentle birth, Morris writes, “However, unlike self-evident ties of blood, ties of affiliation need to be defined in opposition to what they are not; an affiliated group can experience its identity only by reference to those who are different and not of the group. Class affiliation, therefore, depends upon the power to exclude and marginalize, as well as to interpellate” (6).
- 10 Even Bounderby’s manner of dress, which explicitly rejects fashionable norms, makes perspicuous his repudiation of gentle birth: “So, Mr. Bounderby threw on his hat—he always threw it on, as expressing a man who had been far too busily employed in making himself, to acquire any fashion of wearing his hat—and with his hands in his pockets, sauntered out into the hall. ‘I never wear gloves,’ it was his custom to say. ‘I didn’t climb up the ladder in *them*. Shouldn’t be so high up, if I had’” (21).
- 11 Bounderby’s capacity to impress others with his legitimacy extends beyond Gradgrind to unnamed “third parties” and “[s]trangers, modest enough elsewhere,” who “started up at dinners in Coketown, and boasted, in quite a rampant way, of Bounderby. They made him out to be the Royal arms, the Union-Jack, Magna Carta, 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” (37). He is thus associated in the public mind with the very symbols used by propagandists of all political persuasions to justify national chauvinism and international expansionism.

- 12 As Morris observes, “Despite public approval for the ‘respectable poor’, it was in fact upon vociferous reiterations of the uncouth behaviour and moral degeneracy of the ‘vulgar poor’ that the middle class depended to construct their sense of class identity and worth” (8).
- 13 The title’s allusion to the biblical narrative of Mary and Martha from the Gospel of Luke is surely deployed to outrage the novel’s original readers at the sacrilegious pretensions of its fictional utilitarians. Ironically, it also invests Dickens’s own efforts to describe the negative assertion of middle-class status with an aura of sacredness that can only be justified through negation.
- 14 The first two phrases come from *Hard Times* (42, 75). Frankel explains how these forms of “official reportage” were designed primarily to bring various disenfranchised constituencies within the sphere of political discourse, and hence governmental control: “Exchange of knowledge and texts thus operated through multifarious paths, implicating governments and legislatures, the disenfranchised populations—now the object of national attention—and diverse communities of readers who recognized the state in its published documents. Conversely, through fact-finding enterprises, the state conjured up its subjects, publics, and spheres. It also fashioned itself a target of observation and scrutiny. I term this field of communication between the state and its constituencies *print statism* (following Benedict Anderson’s notion of *print capitalism*)” (Frankel 2, author’s italics). As Poovey documents, governmental and scientific reliance upon numerical representation—whether of the politically disadvantaged or of less obviously human objects of inquiry—had come under renewed criticism in the late 1830s. Citing G. Robertson, subeditor of the *London and Westminster Review*, who in 1838 excoriated the Statistical Society of London’s terminologically sloppy approach to “fact,” she writes, “In his scathing criticism of the Society’s claim to collect theory-free data, Robertson makes it clear that it was possible in the 1830s to see facts as an inherently ambiguous—or, to use my terms, an epistemologically peculiar—category” (xxiv–xxv).
- 15 In addition to offering a pithy one-paragraph history of the Blue Book, Berman argues that “*Hard Times* reveals a convergence between government reports, novels, and the periodicals that digested them. All three rivals in the print marketplace sought to represent, to educate, and to speak *to* and *for* the public. *Hard Times* caricatures a representative government trying to apprehend its subjects. By implication, it also probes a flourishing print culture trying to apprehend its audience” (563).
- 16 It is in response to decisions like this that Nussbaum writes, “At the limit, the character Bitzer shows us the extreme unreliability of the feeling of satisfaction when not linked to any more probing ethical evaluation, for whatever makes that empty vessel of self-interest feel pleased fills the reader with anxiety and even horror” (50).
- 17 Dickens’s familiarity with the parliamentary election process is apparent from the Eatanswill episode in *Pickwick Papers*. For more on this and other Victorian novels’ representations of election ritual, see Pionke 123–58.
- 18 A number of critics—among them Dahmane, Gallagher, Nussbaum, and Starr—focus productively on the ways in which *Hard Times* reflects on novel reading and writing.

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