The Trisected Society: Social Welfare in Early Victorian Fiction

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**Introduction**

Social policy researchers have recently been taking an interest in culture and cultural studies (see, e.g., Clarke 2004). This article arguably opens up a new dialogue in its attempt to elucidate the role that popular culture has played in the evolution of British social policy. Histories of popular culture (e.g. Rose 2001) usually make only passing reference to social policies, while histories of the latter tend not to use popular culture as a source of influential historical documents (e.g. Fraser 2003). The premise of this project is that we achieve only a partial understanding of popular culture and social policy unless we are prepared to relate the two more closely.

As a first stage, the following article focuses upon some seminal novels of the 1840s and 1850s, by Dickens, Gaskell, Disraeli, and Kingsley, in their relation to developments in society and welfare policy of the early Victorian period – those most commonly seen by critics as significant in relation to “social problems.” These novels have been of interest to literary critics since the 1950s but their social-policy aspects have often been eclipsed by other disciplinary approaches (cf. Berry 1999). The aim of the article is to examine the novels in this light, as involving implicit sociological and welfare-related discourse that challenged some but not all aspects of classical political economics. In what follows I shall infer from these novels a particular view of industrial society and an accompanying set of precepts for its ethical recodification.

First, some disclaimers. There are two questions that I am not going
to address in this article: how we should model the relationship between culture, socio-cultural studies, and social policy, and how the history of social policy should be conceived. I am not going to hypothesise a relationship between popular culture, social history, and social policy at this stage because I suspect that a convincing account depends upon a prior exploration of popular culture and welfare history as they have connected at specific conjunctures. This article concerns one of these conjunctures.

Cultural Materialism and New Historicism

What cannot be avoided is discussion of an appropriate analytical framework. There have been three main schools of criticism applied to social problem novels: cultural materialism, new historicism, and feminism. I critique the first two below and, throughout the article, draw upon feminist contributions more generally.

According to Raymond Williams (1958: chap. 5; 1961: chap. 2), culture should be understood as socially and ideologically engaged. Literary forms should neither be detached from their material environment nor treated as superstructural reflections of an historical essence. The “structure of feeling” was Williams’s (1977: 128–35) term for ideology as a cognitive, emotional, and bodily *experience*. So, what the so-called “industrial novelists” were doing was articulating and disseminating a particular structure of feeling, one that legitimated the fact of industrialism while allowing readers to assuage their guilt at its social damage cathartically, by feeling an escapist sympathy towards its victims; accordingly, Dickens *et al* are seen as offering the middle class an escape route from the horrors of industrialism while failing to imagine alternative social realities. This cultural materialism was also the platform of Lucas (1977) and Smith (1980). For instance, Smith regrets that, in feeling a genuine horror at urban squalor and social deprivation, the early Victorian novelists were not able to think beyond this reaction and, instead, were content to do no more than invite the same emotions in their readers. Disgust and pity thereby remained unconverted into political forms of mobilisation as the universal claims of the poor were neglected (see Childers 2001: 79).

By the late 1970s, though, some scholars were seeking new forms of interpretation. Whereas cultural materialists brought a strong normative
stance to bear, the new historicists sought to understand what the Victorian novelists did, as opposed to what contemporary critics think they should have done (see R. Williams 1983: 155). For Gallagher (1985), social problem fiction is a site through which complex cultural energies can be seen to flow. Rather than latch onto some of these as real and others as illusory, the job of the critic is to trace all such discourses across a wider social field than that of fiction alone (see Goodlad 2003). If those novels did not offer a programme of reform that is because their actual purpose was to give aesthetic space to the fragmented discourses of industrial social change.

Other new historicists, however, are less Foucauldian in their approach. According to Mary Poovey (1995), social problem novels represented a welcome attempt to feminize debates hitherto dominated by a masculinist concern with statistical abstraction and social engineering: the novelists viewed society through a regendering of knowledge and identity even while upholding traditional codes of male/female attitude and behaviour; gender is therefore both present and absent in Victorian fiction. Josephine J. Guy (1996) also argues for a more generous response to Dickens and his contemporaries: while they could recognize problems in society, the theoretical equipment needed to perceive social problems (as well as their origins and solutions) was not yet available. It is not that they consciously rejected a sociological approach; rather, such an approach barely registered in the individualistic paradigm within which they were forced to work.

Thus New Historicism is concerned with historical context rather than ideological interpretation, arguably allowing it a greater freedom of movement and a wider frame of reference. Where cultural materialism regards Victorian novelists as spokespeople for the middle-class, sourcing their aesthetic failures to the structural contradictions of the early nineteenth century’s socio-economy, new historicists are less judgmental and are concerned to identify complexities, where flaws in the novels reflect the impossibility of reconciling the multifaceted discourses circulating around the wider social body.

While both schools of thought reject the idea that novels can be treated as contextless objects of analysis (see Brannigan 1998), the potential problem with New Historicism is when it neglects the extent to which social problem novelists were making conscious, and so political, responses to the age whose Zeitgeist they were articulating. Guy observes that we ought not to judge these novelists harshly because
we should not expect them to have seen at the time what we can see in retrospect. Yet even if they could not see all of the picture available to us retrospectively, some aspects were in the process of developing. We, too, cannot be expected to plot the future evolution of society and yet future commentators will justifiably criticize those who neglect the trends that are discernable. Guy may be underestimating the extent to which they perceived yet deliberately (and so ideologically) rejected certain ideas and political movements (see Keating 1971: chap. 9; Smith 1980: 181–89).

Thus, in Gaskell’s Mary Barton unions are presented as understandable but regrettable responses to urban industrial deprivation, the labourers’ equivalent to employers’ intransigence that threatens to undermine the possibility of worker and boss striving together. Trade unions are depicted as socially destructive militants and Chartism as naïve; instead, workers are encouraged to form a communal bond with like-minded employers. The evolution of John Barton from good neighbour to murderer to penitent eclipses any possibility of an alternative in which labour organisations are oppositional yet non-revolutionary. A similar sleight of hand appears in Hard Times where union members lack the personal integrity of Stephen Blackpool and the strikers are as self-deceiving as Bounderby (see David 2001: 89; Ackroyd 1990: 726–28). And in Kingsley’s Yeast, Christian fellowship is depicted as the only alternative to anarchy, and Tregarva’s ambition is to become a gentleman and so a more effective spokesman for the poor rather than for one class against another. Therefore, while these novelists did not have access to systematic alternatives to laissez-faire economics, they were certainly aware of, and chose to close off the imaginative spaces for, movements more radically political than themselves. If they were immersed within an individualistic paradigm (an assumption I will qualify) it is partly because they chose to reside there.

Both schools therefore read through social problem novels, sensitive to their differences but treating them as portals that lead us towards the sociocultural assumptions and values of the period and as factors that helped to shape Victorian society (see Childers 1995: 4). Although

1 The extent to which a novel tells us something about the author and/or something about his/her period is obviously contentious and not a matter for resolution here. My premise is that the social problem books can be read (not exclusively, of course) as screens upon which the cultural specificities of the time were projected.
new historicism is crucial as a reminder that cultures are multiple, diverse, ambiguous, fuzzy, and indistinct, cultural materialism has an advantage in its refusal to abandon ideological critique for discourse analysis (see Gallagher 1989: 44; Patterson 1996: 99).

It is for this reason that I shall follow Williams (1977: 108–35) in distinguishing between dominant and emergent cultures. Dominant cultures are hegemonic in terms of values, norms, codes, representations, and “common-sense” understandings; dominance implies here not a hierarchy of control but what, over a given period, might be identified as the most influential coordinates through which social practices and assumptions are framed. Emergent cultures denote the swirl of the new meanings, values, practices, and relationships that are in the process of being created. Some emergent cultures are radically new and some are not; some endure, some evolve, some are counter-hegemonic and some are not; and some of the latter effect a paradigm shift in the dominant culture, becoming dominant themselves. In this article I identify within social problem novels the hints of a newly emergent culture that bore hegemonic and counter-hegemonic properties, the latter being those which recoordinate the prevailing maps by imagining alternative histories, presents, and futures.

Continuities and Discontinuities

What was the hegemony that these novelists encountered and were concerned to comment on? The common answer is that they were opposed to the political economics that by the 1830s had been in the ascendancy for several decades (see Henderson 2000). This is not incorrect but may smooth over their more complex stance. Let me explain why.

“Classical” political economics is usually taken to encompass Utilitarian and laissez-faire principles. Like any political movement, therefore, political economics was volatile because, while there are some respects in which Utilitarianism and laissez faire may conjoin, there are others in which they conflict. Both see humans as preference-maximizers who respond in predictable ways to external stimuli; but where Utilitarians make room for social engineering, laissez faire advocates contend that this risks upsetting a natural equilibrium. To understand this volatility and how it was made relatively stable throughout much of the nineteenth century – allowing both state activity and free
markets to expand (see Evans 2001: 363–66) – we need to say something about the genesis of political economy.

David Hume is a key figure. By insisting, in *A Treatise on Human Nature*, that reason takes its lead from the passions he promoted a particularistic, i.e. non-abstract, conception of self and society, seeing people as driven by animal-like instincts. In this Hume was a direct influence upon Bentham (see Mack 1962: 102, 120–21) and Adam Smith. Jeremy Bentham offered a more rationalistic approach but one rooted in a view of humans as driven by the desire to avoid pain: for Smith “passions” signified the importance of emotion and sentiment in human affairs (2002 [1759]: Part 1, Section 2). The question is how these passions/drives can be contained and channelled in ways conducive to social harmony. For Hume the answer involved a form of governance that encouraged persons to see outside of themselves and converted their sentiments and cultural ties into forms of publicly oriented benevolence. Bentham took this in a state-centred direction, regarding it as the duty of knowledgeable legislators to engineer a system based upon the “greatest good.” Adam Smith (see Reisman 1982: 211–14) denied that such Olympian knowledge was possible and held that only a limited role for the state was permissible (2002: 814–16).

Despite their differences, then, Utilitarianism and *laissez faire* were both deeply influenced by Hume’s moral philosophy. Equally, by evolving beyond Hume, both schools of thought were superseding the kind of *moral economy* with which Hume would have been familiar. Edward P. Thompson’s (1963: part 2) remains the most influential account of the moral economy, by which he meant the social reciprocities, and mutual obligations that constituted the normative orientations, cultural practices, and commonplace understandings of communities in pre-industrial society. The moral economy was one of the strong and paternalistic social bonds in which actions were legitimate or otherwise in reference to a given moral order. If there was little material solidarity between rich and poor, there was at least some symbolic solidarity in which each recognized the other as members of the same moral community. Political economics was a self-conscious overriding of this moral economy, a response to social and economic changes that appeared to be dissolving the pre-industrial fabric: a new type of glue for a new type of society. So while political economics was by no means *immoral*, its values were arguably more limited (see Thompson 1991: 274–84; cf. Stedman-Jones 2004).
Thus Utilitarianism and *laissez faire* exhibit crucial similarities that enabled their differences to be occluded and gave political economics a strength that contributed to its rising influence. Nowhere was this more true than in Malthus's influence. Taking his cue from Hume and Smith, both of whom saw that population growth could outrun agricultural production, Malthus (2004: 18, 32) rejected their optimism (somewhat cryptic in Smith's case) and accepted war, famine, disease, and poverty as inescapable aspects of human fate. Although he later refined his hypothesis to allow for the possibility of reducing the birth rate, e.g. through moral restraint, his haughty pessimism remained. Malthus thus represents the first of the "dismal scientists" (David Ricardo, Nassau Senior, James Mill) who would discard not only Hume but also the Humean aspects of Bentham and Smith.

Political economics was therefore a confluence of volatile elements that were partly continuous and partly discontinuous with what had gone before, one we might denote as an emergent culture from 1770s to 1820s but which, for most of the nineteenth century, became a key element of the dominant culture (a full account of which would need to incorporate factors like Toryism, Romanticism, Christianity, etc.). My intent has been not to offer a definitive account of political economy\(^2\) or of the early nineteenth-century dominant culture but to concentrate upon the theoretical influence of the former in order to illustrate a methodological and analytical point: if the political economists could adapt some elements of earlier traditions and reject others, we should not be surprised to find social problem novelists performing the same feat. If political economics was both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic vis-à-vis its predecessors then might not the same be true of social problem novelists vis-à-vis political economics?

**Reacting to Welfare**

In order to illustrate what this involved I want to extract from the social problem novels a discourse of welfare that all appear to share.

\(^2\) Nor am I suggesting that, despite his influence, Hume was a political economist along the lines of Bentham or Smith.
In order to do so it is first useful to review their surface responses to contemporary developments.

First, their willingness to depict the reality of poverty is more effective than even the widely-read reports of Kay-Shuttleworth and Chadwick, despite the then common recourse to sentiment and melodrama. Lenard (1999: 46) observes that sentiment in the early Victorian novel was not so much a replacement for politics as its extension, a way of overcoming physical and symbolic distance by making middle-class readers weep for characters in the hope that they would go on to weep for their real-world equivalents. Novelists certainly portrayed the lack of material things but knew that readers respond principally to the human consequences of this lack. Statistical surveys achieved, and still achieve, less than a good, socially conscious drama. Yet the danger of sentiment lies in its potential for political obtuseness. The more subjects are foregrounded the more likely are their structural and institutional contexts to be obscured. In responding to characters we may easily adopt the very pathologism which was the source of their plight in the first place, a paradox with which Dickens came to wrestle (see below).

Second, they sought to place a large question mark over the assumption that political economics provided the answer to poverty, the most famous example being Dickens’s attack on Malthus in A Christmas Carol. For instance, Nussbaum (1995: 20–25) detects in Hard Times a hostility to prevailing kinds of policy-making and public reasoning. Qualitative diversity is regarded as superior to quantitative abstraction since the latter eclipses the human dimension without which institutions are rendered ridiculous: Gradgrind’s school is little more than a calculator in which the children are reduced to machine parts. Hard Times laments the belief that the accumulation of data and the arithmetical manipulation of statistics are sufficient to generate solutions to human problems, and a philosophy of self-interest is contrasted with emotions and motivations that Dickens regards as important: not only love, empathy, and altruism but the sense of wonder and mystery that Gradgrind disdains because it cannot be counted. In opposition to the above Dickens presents the circus, not as a model of an alternative social system but as a metaphorical exploration of what happens when we leave systems behind and embrace spontaneity, fun, absurdity, and attachment to the immediate. Of course, while challenging the political economists Dickens may also be articulating a kind of conservatism
since some statistical abstraction may be needed for the systematic relief of social problems.

Third, their hostility to the workhouse is clear. Oliver’s request for more food is rightly taken by the Board of Guardians as a challenge to their very existence. In asking for more than dietary science had determined was necessary for daily sustenance, Oliver not only lacks the required self-discipline but is questioning the philosophy of less eligibility and thus of self-help. He is now not only a member of the undeserving poor but a rebel who must be expelled. The subversiveness of the episode finds expression in the difference between what the Board and the reader know. Oliver is flogged as a warning to the other boys not to follow his example, yet he had already been acting as a spokesman for them. If Oliver is beyond help so are they, and the entire rationale of confining children to the workhouse, and so of the workhouse itself, collapses. Yet Dickens’s target is less a specific institution than the hypocrisy of a society that proclaims the virtues of self-interest for everyone except its most direct victims. The irony is that decent society is at threat from criminals like Fagin who simply mimic its ethics of self-interest.

Fourth, there is only modest support for a democratisation of the state or an extension of its role. In Coningsby, Disraeli attacks the new Poor Law for further undermining the parochial order of a nation in which the privileged had once given thanks for their position by taking responsibility for the peasantry (noblesse oblige). In Sybil, the spokesman for the workhouse, Lord Marney, is eventually stoned to death by the mob violence his views have helped unleash. Since, for Disraeli, the working class can and should be represented by enlightened members of the aristocracy, there is no need for universal suffrage or for workers’ representatives in parliament. Dickens offers a pessimistic and near anarchistic view in which the many labyrinths of the state wrap around themselves in a Kafkaesque loss of authority, effectiveness, and purpose. That the state is capable of being both efficacious and progressive is something Dickens can barely countenance. Although he supported the Second Reform Bill, his hostility to organized labour may stem from fear that it would make working people complicit in the activities of the governing classes he disdained.

Fifth, social problem novelists were also against contemporary forms of education. Most famously, Dickens’s savage portrayal of Dotheboys Hall seems to have been no exaggeration and led to the virtual extinction
of the Yorkshire boarding schools upon which it was based. In *Hard Times* he turns his fire on the kind of cold, mechanical education that he feared Utilitarianism engendered, and in *Our Mutual Friend* his humour is directed at the belief that meaningful social mobility can be achieved through education alone. Yet given their hostility to the state, it is not clear what, if anything, these novelists propose as an alternative. Kingsley’s heroes are autodidacts guided by mentors; Disraeli’s are privileged aristocrats who have acquired a sense of their responsibilities beyond school; while Gaskell valorises, first and foremost, education in the Christian virtues.

Sixth, their response to issues of disease and sanitation is more precise. When in *Yeast* and *Alton Locke* characters die of diseases contracted from the social conditions they had ignored, the implication is that poor public health is not something the rich can escape, that their neglect will inevitably be revisited upon them (see A. S. Williams 1987). In what is almost a sociological hypothesis, these novelists discern, however vaguely, a social infrastructure running beneath the individualised surfaces of everyday life. In *Bleak House*, Esther contracts smallpox from Jo, a figure who seems to carry the darkness and squalor of Tom-all-Alone’s around with him. It is here that our novelists were most obviously in favour of government intervention, though parliament’s inertia confirmed why theirs was a cynical view of it (see Ackroyd 1990: 746).

Seventh, these novelists call for fairer distribution of wealth. While the political economists’ argument that the market cannot be bucked remains unchallenged, what the social problem novelists propose is that the burdens and benefits be more fairly distributed (as is clear from the responses of Sissy Jupe to her economics lesson) and that opportunities for upward mobility be expanded so that men (sic) may develop their faculties (as in Tregarva’s desire to become a gentleman or when, in *Sybil*, the former militant, Devilsdust, becomes a capitalist). Scrooge’s redemption leads him to offer higher wages to Bob Cratchit, but the nature of the wage contract, and thus of broader market relations, remains the same (Newey 2004: 41–49). The work ethics is therefore valued both as a kind of social glue and as a means of effecting greater fairness – idleness is deplored as a potential source of social disruption and a waste of human talent. In Gaskell’s novels both employer and employee are condemned when they ignore the work ethics of the other: e.g., in *North and South* Thornton and Higgins come to respect
each other’s work ethic. Alternative ways of organizing the labour market are not proposed, but, as noted above, Chartism and trade unionism are regarded as additional symptoms of economic malaise rather than as possible solutions.

Finally, our novelists were cautious on the subject of charity, philanthropy, and early examples of social work (see D’Albertis 1997). While Kingsley does not query charitable motives, he does seem to condemn them as a palliative rather than a preventative, something inferior to Tregarva’s instinctive attempt to save the dog of the affluent women he loves, or to Colonel Bracebridge’s saving the life of Tregarva in turn. Dickens goes further still in condemning certain types of charitable motivation, for example in the near-misogynist depiction of Mrs Jellyby (see below). Gaskell comes closest to defending charity as an expression of Christian humanism. The famous scene when Barton and Wilson go to great lengths in order to help the Davenports communicates a strength of feeling that surmounts an attachment to one’s self-interest. What each novelist seems to be opposing is the misplaced use of charity as a response to social squalor. Charitable actions that patronize, moralize, or stigmatize are rejected in favour of spontaneous affection and a human instinct to assist others.

It is therefore not too difficult to spot in the early Victorian novelists an early formulation of the giants later identified by Beveridge: want and poverty, ignorance and education, disease and sanitation, distribution and work, charity and squalor. The question is whether we can deduce from their books a common discourse about the nature of society and, if widescale economic and political reform was being ruled out, what forms of intervention vis-à-vis social problems they were advancing. I address this in the next two sections.

The Trisected Society

I shall propose that we can infer from these novels a common discourse, one that views industrial society as trisected and makes this the starting point for potential social solutions.

Class

I have already outlined the suspicion these novels bear towards trade
unions, the point being that, because class divisions were seen as essential to social problems (see Ingham 1996: chap. 6), anything which exacerbated such divisions could not be thought of as contributing to the solution. Let me demonstrate this through *North and South*, the most sympathetic and sophisticated portrayal of organized labour.

The book concludes with Thornton describing his conversion to a new form of industrial relations based upon worker consultation and participation which, while not preventing strikes, would render them less hostile and destructive; Higgins, meanwhile, shares with his colleagues a recognition of employers' and employees' common humanity. Institutional reform is therefore not ruled out but considered by Gaskell as ineffective unless based upon personal interaction, mutual charity, and sympathy. So Gaskell’s emphasis is still upon morals and what I shall call the principle of equivalence (cf. Harvie 1991: 23–24). Higgins had earlier come to accept Margaret’s view that unionism had been responsible for Boucher’s militancy and later suicide; in her attack upon the closed shop Gaskell draws an implicit comparison between the compulsion exercised by employers and that exercised by workers. Compulsion by labour is shown as exacerbating the broader injustice propagated by capital: it is presented as a sin born from the masters’ sinning, another form of false materialism that diverts us from matters of spirit and morality. Margaret applauds the solidarity of labour movements but only if it embodies the ethos of a Christian community. Therefore, while she rejects some arguments from equivalence, e.g. that capital and labour are at equal risk from an industrial downturn, Gaskell depicts both sides as having to travel a similar *spiritual and moral* distance to achieve the interaction that, by the end of the novel, offers at least some kind of hope. Cooperation involves the classes meeting “in the middle” and is not advanced as a form of economic relation, an alternative to competition. The initial inequalities between capital and labour are smoothed over.

Class is also occluded as a social solution by an appeal to Christianity, nation, and family (I shall deal with the latter shortly). It is clear that Kingsley believes class politics to be subordinate to Christianity. In *Yeast* revolution is represented as a possibility – however undesirable – if the affluent do not attend to social conditions. Kingsley goes further than other authors in calling for a social economy that would enable workers to develop their faculties. Property diverts those who own it from a proper recognition of what it is to be virtuous; selfishness
cannot unite people. However, the socialist aspects of this view are as potentially tyrannous as a competitive economy unless anchored firmly in an ethos of Christian community and fellowship. This is made clear in *Alton Locke* where Chartism receives its most hostile condemnation precisely because, of all our authors, Kingsley was most sympathetic to it (see Childers 1995: 154). Locke’s well-meaning intervention sparks a riot and he later comes to accept the words of Eleanor:

> Denounce the effete idol of property-qualification, not because it happens to strengthen class interests against you, but because ... there is no real rank, no real power, but worth; and worth consists not in property, but in the grace of God. (1905: 358)

Christian Socialism is primarily an ethos of mutual sacrifice.

Disraeli creates a similar picture by appealing to national history and destiny. In *Coningsby* he defends an aristocratic paternalism in which authority and labour recognize their duties to one another beneath the Crown in its ascendancy beyond class. Unless commanded by national pride, human passions will mould other, less benign divinities (see Disraeli 1968: 251–54). In *Sybil* this is proposed as the only viable solution to the “two nations,” the rich and the poor. Yet, with few exceptions, Disraeli fails to depict these two nations, since their protagonists share practically the same vocabulary, customs, sympathies, and interests. Far from existing on opposite sides of an unbridgeable gulf, they are already one nation whose mutual comprehension has been forgotten. The union of Egremont and Sybil (who turns out to be aristocratic anyway!) symbolizes the act of recollection which needs to be performed by creating a paternalistic hierarchy that, as in Trafford’s factory, attends to the moral and material health of the people. Trade unions are practically depicted as a branch of the freemasons and Chartism as an ineffectual barrier against revolution (see Disraeli 1981: 219–21, 417).

Our early Victorian novelists therefore recognize class as a problem but will not admit class analysis or politics as part of the solution. Despite the moderation of most Chartists, they dramatize class conflict as invariably, and quickly, descending into revolutionary violence. This suggests what is perhaps the central contradiction in their social visions: the weight of circumstance upon human affairs is simultaneously affirmed and denied. Igor Webb (1981: 94–99) highlights Dickens’s awareness of environment in shaping the characters of *Hard Times,*
but when presenting the normative issues (the question of how Coketown should be governed) this awareness is suppressed and circumstance fades, as in Gradgrind’s facile conversion. Dickens’s early characters often float free of their social backgrounds – for instance, Oliver’s genteel manner and speech cannot derive from his upbringing. Later, however, Dickens would tie self and environment together more closely so that the happy endings, as in *Great Expectations*, become more incongruous as the overall vision becomes more pessimistic. Yet this alternating triteness and pessimism is the cul-de-sac into which Dickens drove himself by ruling out the possibility of social solutions to social problems through a politics of collective action. His increasing sense of the interdependency and complexity of human affairs led him to rule out systematic intervention. In *Bleak House*, the fog both unites and obscures the many sectors of society and is not something from which we can ever entirely escape. His injunction to the reader to assist the Jo’s of the world comes across as a cry of helplessness.

Dickens therefore represents an extreme example of the juxtaposition of circumstance and non-circumstance. The conflict here is reconciled by allowing the determining influence of material circumstance to fade and be overtaken by other factors. The possibility and desirability of economic and institutional reform through collective action therefore fades also. This would not be a contradiction if, like the political economists, the novelists attributed deprivation primarily to moral failings. But while they attribute importance to moral (and immoral) behaviour, Dickens and the others do not take recourse to this exit strategy since they stress time and again how the poor are also victims of circumstances beyond their control. Social problem novels therefore embody a contradiction – a recognition of material circumstance combined with a hostility to materialist and collectivist solutions.

**Work**

Although the novelists express horror at the workhouse, they revise rather than reject the deserving/undeserving distinction upon which it was based. Whereas the political economists focus upon ability and willingness – where a disinclination to work denotes a moral bankruptcy that justifies punitive action – the social problem novelists add a third term: luck. As already observed, they propose no substantial alternative
to the means of economic production, but merely call for a fairer
distribution of outcomes and opportunities. Yet if market forces have
to work in the manner suggested by political economics, then the role
played by good and bad luck in human affairs must surely be more
considerable than allowed for by political economists. There is a
randomness on where, when, and upon whom the axe falls – as in
Little Dorrit when Clennam, perhaps the most virtuously one-dimensional
of Dickens’s heroes, ends up in the Marshalsea. Our novelists therefore
challenge political economics to be more consistent than hitherto.

But once luck has been added there is nonetheless, as noted above,
a strong focus upon willingness to work (see Sanders 2003: 128–35).
In David Copperfield, self-discipline is that which transcends social
background to mark men and women out as worthy or unworthy; by
contrast, in Great Expectations Pip is morally hollow until his fortune
depletes and, like David, he is forced to work his way towards becoming
a true gentleman. It is the willingness to work rather than the desire
to acquire riches that is important here. Indeed, social problem novelists
sometimes appear quite radical in their inclination to attack the idle
rich as much as the idle poor. Once their fortune changes, the Dorrit
family (apart from Amy) is made to appear reprehensible and ridiculous;
and Eugene Wrayburn is a shallow figure until Lizzie saves his life.
So as long as affluence is seen to be deserved, there is no condemnation
of over-affluence or sense that poverty may be its effect.

Nor, then, is there any attempt to recreate the moral economy of
free time. Dickens et al certainly welcomed legislation to reduce working
hours, but lent no support for the early labour movement’s resistance
to the capitalist labour market per se. The social problem novels depict
struggles over time in which free time becomes leisure, a recuperation
from work during which the material and/or the familial rewards of
working hard can be enjoyed, but it is no longer an operating principle
of a socially-oriented economy. This is, after all, the period during
which bank holidays and the modern notion of Christmas were introduced.
The labouring body is therefore accepted as given and used as a means
of unifying the classes by relocating moral worth upon willingness to
work rather than upon inheritance. If willingness is the real platform
of social status, this represents a kind of egalitarian justice in which
the precise nature of the work matters less than its performance, the
divisions between employer and employee fade and a conduit for a
fairer distribution of social wealth is conceived.
So while the workhouse is damned, the deserving/undeserving distinction is, if anything, perpetuated: the workhouses and the debtors’ prisons were inhumane constructions upon foundations that were ethically legitimate, institutions which prevented the very behaviour whose supposed absence they were somehow meant to correct. They condemned this hypocrisy not only for its own sake but because it might stir up political militancy and so fatally undermine the ethical virtue of hard work. The novelists’ hostility to trade unionism and Chartism may have stemmed from a fear that they would tear everything down, the ethical foundations as well as the institutions. Their preferred society is one in which economic structures are repainted with humanitarian colours.

Gender

These ethical foundations are also viewed in gendered terms. Catherine Gallagher (1985: chap. 7) observes how Victorians appealed to the supposed virtues of the private sphere in order to compensate for the conflicts and vices of the public one. But the sanitized model of the home that this prompted only confirmed the gulf between public and private that social paternalists had wished to bridge. By emptying the domestic sphere of public struggles they only succeed in sublimating those struggles, not in addressing them. In Hard Times, for instance, the family unity achieved by the Gradgrinds at the novel’s end only serves to betray the metaphorical coalition Dickens had earlier drawn between the Gradgrind children and the working class. By constructing a family ideal Dickens abdicates from public responsibility.

It is women who are expected to carry the family ideal, to symbolize the domestic haven that offers retreat from public burdens. It has frequently been noted how dichotomized female characters are in Victorian literature (see Langland 1995; Ingham 1996: 25). On one level we have the kind of angelic figure which reaches absurd height in Sybil, a figure upon whom Disraeli loads spiritual significance, but which is also visible in Margaret Hale, a realistic because flawed character who provides North and South with its ethical orientation. By contrast, those who fail to embody this angelic ideal are shown in various states of falling from grace (see Winnifrith 1994). In particular, there are also those who have crossed the line of no return. Nancy’s
virtues do not suffice to save her from murder at the hands of Bill Sykes; Esther’s descent into prostitution is suspended long enough for her to warn Mary Barton against inviting the same fate, but Esther herself is not allowed to survive. In Bleak House Mrs Jellyby’s philanthropy is inseparable from her inadequacy as a mother, conveying the message that proper concern for others springs from a familial attachment to the immediate and the particular. That real charity is an extension of maternal instinct and feminine emotion is clear in the final image of Mrs Jellyby as having become as obsessed with women’s political rights as she had previously been with Africa.

And the work performed by women is rendered indistinct, even as the deserving/undeserving distinction is upheld. Despite the continued diversity of women’s employment in Victorian Britain (see Evans 2001: 154–57), female characters are almost always employed in jobs assumed to be extensions of their natural role, i.e. as governesses, tutors or housekeepers, and even then either as a temporary prelude to marriage or as a spinsterish alternative (see Swindells 1985: 82–89). It is only in such jobs that social problem novelists can envisage women reconciling employment and mothering; those women (like Mrs Jellyby) who have professional aspirations are rendered ridiculous. So whereas in men undeservingness is signified by a lack of willingness to work, in women it derives from a malfunctioning of the maternal instinct. All women are assumed to be carers, but when they, either wilfully or ignorantly, care too little, too much, or for the wrong thing they are defined against the angelic ideal.

Mary Poovey (1988: 10) therefore argues that gender was the site upon which virtue was rearticulated during this period. Where aristocratic feudalism had made class location central to its social and moral relations, the bourgeoisie had to pursue a more individualistic course. Virtue was depoliticized by its association with a domestic sphere now perceived as detached from the public, economic one. The middle-class homemaker comes to represent the ideal of morality and emotion. Economic reform is therefore depicted either as irrelevant to society’s moral order or even as inimical to it whenever radicals talk of altering property rights. The bourgeois family is therefore a goal to which all men and women, whatever their class, can and should strive.

The gendered nature of early Victorian novels, e.g. their appeal to sentiment, is therefore a means of occluding class conflict and political struggle (cf. Childers 1995: 118–19). Economic issues are quelled
through the domestication of desire. The social world that lies behind the occasional appearance of illegitimate children, e.g. in Nicholas Nickleby, is only alluded to since the direct depiction of middle-class men going in search of sexual fulfilment among working class women might reveal the prevalence of class exploitation (see Morris 1991: 12). Thus the psychological insights provided by Gaskell are a means by which domestic harmony is elevated over public turmoil and the emotional over the political; her heroines are only allowed to intervene in a society where the psychological is disembedded from its social relations (see Poovey 1995: 143–52). If it took a century to rediscover the political within the private, it was partly because Victorian novelists had helped to dissociate politics from the domestic (see Gilbert and Gubar 2000: chap.1).

What these three strands add up to is a discourse familiar to sociological theorists: the simultaneous association and detachment of production, distribution, and reproduction. Social problem novelists not only do not envisage socioeconomic alternatives to political economics, they close down the spaces (of class and collective action) through which such alternatives could be imagined. Their solution to the poverty that appalled them was therefore fairer distribution and cooperation within a framework of economic production that was essentially unalterable. While the economy may resemble a system of natural law, as inexorable as gravity, there are examples within nature other than that of self-interest upon which we can draw. Fairness was to be determined not according to precepts of justice, since this smacked of the kind of statistical abstraction they abhorred, but by constructing a community (Christian, national, familial) with which the reader was invited to identify. Cooperation implied a personalized, face-to-face interaction and not an alternative system of economic relations. Production and distribution are therefore disconnected from one another, even as they are being associated. Economic and material circumstances are invoked as part of the problem but not as part of the solution since this might further threaten the communal fabric, the social interdependencies, which are regarded as vital.

And as we have just seen, the same process of association and disconnection is visible in the novelists’ treatment of the family and of gender. The family is held to provide the utopian redemptions of which the public, political world is not capable. Women must therefore
be located upon a spectrum constructed to maintain this familial ideal with domestic angels at one extreme and non-domestic devils at the other. Prostitution and sexual abuse are alluded to only very indirectly since otherwise the familial ramparts of Victorian society might collapse. And where these are dealt with, e.g. in the case of Gaskell’s Esther, it is with reference to agent-centred failures of morality (denoting a lack of desert) that are detached from issues of material circumstance. So, like production and distribution, reproduction is presented as a sphere-onto-itself, occupying the same imaginative space as the others but without being conceptually or politically integrated (see Houston 1994: 170).

What the social problem novels therefore offer is a nascent awareness of social interdependency. While in his early novels Dickens employs coincidence as an inept *deus ex machina*, by the later books it becomes a logical consequence of the substratum which he sees underpinning the teeming variety of social life and of which the reader is allowed a glimpse. This interdependency is partly an imaginative recreation of traditions other than political economics, e.g. romanticism and Carlylean idealism, but also a recognition of the linkages that industrial urbanization was forcing upon humanity. The novelists’ hope was that these linkages could be transformed from negative phenomena, e.g. disease, into positive forms of communal empathy. So while they were able to write about production (economic change and wealth), distribution (poverty and the work ethics), and reproduction (home and family), they were suspicious of attempts to model these according to an all-encompassing formula. A single, integrative model of society (whether based upon utility, market, or class) seemed to them an unrealistic distortion of human complexity in that it made redundant those qualitative dimensions that cannot be modelled, e.g. the need for empathetic understanding and communal respect. This discourse of welfare might therefore be termed the *conjunctive non-integration* of the spheres of production, distribution and reproduction, or what might otherwise be called the *trisecting* of society, its division into three sectors. It will be the task of later stages of this project to see how this discourse evolved, and was itself challenged, as UK social policies developed.

3 Though nowhere near the extent imagined in Cazamian 1973.
The Ethics of Organic Individualism

There are many respects, then, in which the discourse emerging from the social problem novelists is counter-hegemonic. They are concerned with poverty, look it squarely in the face, and not theorize it away as contemporaries like Harriet Martineau have done. They grope towards some notion of fairness and dignity, not by offering abstract models of society or principles of justice, but by portraying human empathy as more virtuous than selfishness. Fair distribution is held to require the mutual recognition of others within some kind of moral community, so that the sphere of production does not require radical changes and can be conceived of as separate from that of distribution. Chartism and trade unions do not receive a sympathetic reception, therefore. There is an idealistic aspect to this vision (Cazamian 1973): a suspicion of industrialism, reaching an extreme in the medievalism of Disraeli, articulated by Carlyle's (1971: 61–85) fear not only that society is becoming more dependent upon impersonal mechanization but that humanity is taking on the qualities of a machine. There is also a resistance to the cash-nexus, to the idea that everything can and should be priced, since the novelist's eye sees within the human character depths to which quantitative scales cannot penetrate.

While social problem novelists recognize the materiality of social life, they reject materialism (see Eagleton 2005: 151), whether this be the materialism of political economists or of political radicals who, in their obsession with wages and strikes, are held to have internalized the tenets of political economics instead of propounding a true alternative. Humans are not the manipulable beings that both sides hold them to be. What arguably makes the observations of social problem novels superior to the sociological abstractions of contemporaries like Engels is that the former detect nuances and desires that the latter miss (see Lucas 1977: 46–56; Sanders 1999: 68–71) – not only gradations of status in terms of income and occupation but cultural traditions through which the distinct identities of labourers' communities managed to survive. The desire to maintain hierarchies of status was not simply a response to poverty but represented as an inevitable human drive – it is, for instance, present both within and without the Marshalsea. Poverty is immoral because it introduces into our co-dependent communities divisions and alienations that are neither inevitable nor desirable (Lindner 2000), but hierarchies are not necessarily unacceptable
because they need not, by themselves, prevent people from taking responsibility for others, from respecting others or from caring paternalistically for others. Social problem novelists reject materialism, whether it derives from political economists or radicals, for ignoring human complexity; they offer instead a set of non-materialistic values (family, humane Christianity, nationality) so that the ethical self-image of industrial capitalism might be re coordenated.

Yet in reacting to the materialism of political economics, by detaching values from their material context, these novelists are also content to leave the practices and relations of industrial capitalism more or less intact. For, once there is mutual respect and recognition of the worth of others, the question of how high or low those others are in terms of income, property, and wealth matters far less. Competitive self-interest is not objectionable in itself, but only its potential to descend into selfishness, which a strong moral order is required to avoid. As already noted, this is why work is so vital (see Sanders 1999: 143-49). Whether you are a crossing-sweeper or factory-owner, the dignity of work, its badge as a sign of social membership, exists on a non-material level that radical prescriptions divert us from. It is because not everyone can be a factory-owner that admission of essential human worth becomes so vital. Nor is there any substantial hostility to the essentials of free markets, for institutions are no more individuals interacting with other individuals and social problem novels are means of encouraging people to behave better towards one another.

So while interdependencies are acknowledged, they are still read by tracing social origins back to the motivations, values, beliefs, and actions of individuals. Interdependency is firmly rooted in and around individuals and not what later theorists would call social structures. This is what might be called an organic individualism rather than something which is entirely social, holistic, or collective. Human characteristics may have been formed by the social environment but, through efforts of will, we are able to develop individualistically beyond our environments and remould them. As already observed, the family ideal is crucial to this conception.

So if there are some respects in which social problem novelists are counter-hegemonic, there are others in which, by subscribing to a work-centred individualism, they are not, even if their understanding of social interdependency is far more subtle and complex than that of the political economists. This may be because, although influenced by
romanticism and idealism, they were arguably reaching back for earlier, conservative traditions of public benevolence that were in many respects the source for Bentham and Smith as well (if less frequently for followers like Malthus). Our novelists may be constructing another version of this earlier tradition that goes at right angles to political economics rather than evading it entirely. For both they and the political economists they disdained bypass the moral economy that continued to inspire many within the labour movement throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, their expression of an organic individualism anticipates, and frequently influenced, later generations of neo-idealists, social liberals, and socialists.

Conclusion

On the basis of a limited though influential series of books I have constructed a particular view of society (as trisected) and a set of ethical coordinates (organic individualism) that exhibit hegemonic and counter-hegemonic features vis-à-vis classical political economics. I am not claiming that this is a definitive reading of the authors in question; nor am I claiming that their stance is a microcosm from which early Victorian responses to social change can be easily extrapolated. Cultural discourses are obviously far more varied than that. Instead I attempt to kick-start a programme of analysis by identifying one possible strand in post-1834 reactions to social and welfare developments, to construct an hypothesis that may or may not throw light upon the history of UK social policy and may or may not enable us to think through the connections between this subject and socio-cultural studies.

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