

Article 6

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: AUSTEN'S AND DICKENS'S POLITICAL AND  
ECONOMIC VISIONS

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines Jane Austen's and Charles Dickens's political and economic visions in a comparative study of Pride and Prejudice, Emma, Hard Times and Great Expectations. Surveying the historical, political and economic backgrounds on the writings of these two British novelists, it was realized that their political and economic visions reflected on the ideology or the discourses of the early socialists namely Charles Fourier, Claude Henri de Saint Simon and Robert Owen. The article demonstrates that Austen and Dickens consciously or unconsciously articulate the early socialist's ideology to analyze issues related to politics and economy in the above-mentioned novels. It also shows that Austen and Dickens, in the same vein like the early socialists, disavow the ideology of classical economists like Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, Edmund Burke, Patrick Colquhoun and Fredric Eden. Finally, the article points out that Austen and Dickens, like the early socialists, highlight the ascendancy of human values and interests over materialistic and economic principles, advocate private ownership and capitalism but reject violence as a means of social change.

This analysis is based on New Historicism and psychoanalysis. New Historicism has disclosed through intertextuality and interdiscursivity, that Austen's and Dickens's texts do not only express the Regency's and Victorian's history but also interact with the texts and discourses of the classical economists and early socialists. The psychoanalytical perspective shows how the psychology of elites, in the novels under study, evolve from subjective consciousness to objective consciousness to achieve self-knowledge and humanism, which psychological change, according to Austen and Dickens, will bring about positive political and economic reforms in the Regency and Victorian societies.

**Keywords:** Vision, Regency society, Victorian society, New Historicism, psychoanalysis.

**Perspective comparative : la vision politique et économique d'Austen et de Dickens.**

**RESUME**

Cet article examine la vision politique et économique de Jane Austen et de Charles Dickens en termes d'une étude comparative dans *Pride and Prejudice* et *Emma* et *Hard Times* et *Great Expectations*. En analysant les contextes historiques, politiques et économiques des écrits de ces deux romanciers britanniques, il ressort que leurs visions politiques et économiques reflètent l'idéologie ou le discours des premiers socialistes tels que Charles Fourier, Claude Henri de Saint Simon et Robert Owen. Dans leurs romans, ils articulent consciemment ou inconsciemment l'idéologie de ces premiers socialistes pour analyser des questions liées à la politique et à l'économie. L'article montre aussi qu'Austen et Dickens, comme les premiers socialistes, critiquent la politique des économistes classiques tels qu'Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, Edmund Burke, Patrick Colquhoun and Frédéric Eden. Finalement, l'article révèle que Austen et Dickens, autant que les premiers socialistes, mettent en exergue l'ascendance des intérêts et des valeurs humaines sur les principes matérialistes et économiques, soutiennent la propriété privée et le capitalisme mais rejettent l'option de la violence comme moyen de changement social.

Cette analyse est basée sur la nouvelle critique historique et la méthode psychanalytique. La nouvelle critique historique révèle, à travers l'intertextualité et l'interdiscursivité, que les textes d'Austen et de Dickens n'articulent pas seulement l'histoire de la Régence et de l'époque Victorienne mais interagissent aussi avec les textes et les discours des économistes classiques et des premiers socialistes. La méthode psychanalytique démontre comment la psychologie des élites, dans les romans mentionnés ci-dessus, évoluent de la conscience subjective à la conscience objective pour acquérir la connaissance de soi et le sens d'humanisme qui, selon Austen et Dickens, conduiront à des réformes politiques et économiques positives dans la société de la Régence et la société Victorienne.

**Mots-clés :** Vision, Société de la Régence, Société Victorienne, Nouvelle critique historique, Psychanalyse.

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## INTRODUCTION

This study brings Austen and Dickens together in a comparative study of Pride and Prejudice and Emma and Hard Times and Great Expectations with a view to showing that both writers' political and economic visions are influenced by the discourse of the early socialists. This study also looks into the classical economists' and early socialists competing discourses which were expressed in the Regency and Victorian societies in which Austen and Dickens lived and wrote respectively, which will afford a better understanding of the selected texts under study. The contrastive analysis of the different discourses articulated by the characters will enable us to establish whether Austen and Dickens support the early socialists' discourses or reject the hegemonic discourses of the classical economists during the Regency and Victorian periods.

The analysis of the texts under study is based on the perspective of NewHistoricism and psychoanalysis. John Peck and Martin Coyle in Literary Terms and Criticism define New Historicism as a term, which "refers to a revived interest initially [...] in looking at literary works in their historical and political contents" (1993:198). To this effect literature cannot be separated from the history of the society the writer is writing from/about. Though literature is not a faithful anthropological documentation of society, it however represents society from the writer's point of view, blending history and fiction. As such, this theoretical analysis is not only based on the texts but also on what exists outside the texts. From the New Historicist perspective therefore, the novels under study are interpreted as a textual history of nineteenth century British society.

Psychoanalysis is also used in this analysis to ascertain to what extent the individual mind functions from subjective consciousness to objective consciousness. Jacques Lacan argues that subjectivity exists, which can be modified in the course of time, in accordance with a specific causality, a specific dialectic, which moves from subjectivity to objectivity and which perhaps escapes any kind of individual conditioning (Miller, 1991: 11). This shows the influence of society/environment on human behaviour. Given that the ego is not the realm of consciousness as often thought, it becomes difficult to be oneself. The illusion of an autonomous ego, Lacan points out, is at the centre of the naivety of our belief in the self. He

argues that the conviction about the existence of an autonomous ego extends beyond the individual naivety of the subject who believes in himself, “who believes that he is himself, a common enough madness. Obviously, we are all inclined to believe that we are ourselves” (qtd in Miller, 1991: 12).

In this study, we examine the concept from the perspective of the characters in the works under study to see how the assertion of selfhood is impeded by the unconscious behavioural motives. In the same way, some characters in the novels under study behave in particular ways in the belief that they are making decisions by themselves; that they are being themselves when in effect they are responding to another within them.

### **1. The Regency and Victorian societies' historical background**

The Industrial Revolution brought about social changes in the Regency and Victorian societies. These changes were driven by the development of machinery, production processes and means of transport. Cities were overcrowded as thousands of rural workers no longer needed on the farms flocked to urban factories. Working conditions in the factories were miserable. Men, women and children worked for long hours in unhealthy surroundings for meagre salaries. The Church and families were no longer the unquestioned pillars of social life. The traditional values these institutions once instilled seemed to be breaking down. Crimes and prostitution were a part of daily life in British industrial cities and the underprivileged were often ignored. The old political regime, the aristocracy, was crumbling and had been forcibly overthrown in France. It was a turbulent century; society seemed disordered and difficult to understand (Light & Keller, 1982:9)

### **2. The classical political economists**

Some classical economists or thinkers tried to come up with policies to address the changes in Regency and Victorian societies. They included Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, Edmund Burke, Patrick Colquhoun and Fredric Eden. There were

differences among these thinkers' arguments but all of them emphasized that social stability and progress could be achieved by self-interest, competition and utilitarianism. They disregarded traditional values such as benevolence and brotherhood which had encouraged the elites to provide for the poor in the past.

Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations (1776) held that prosperity and economic growth would be increased if people were allowed to satisfy their selfish interest. In doing so, they would maximize their gains and therefore add to the wealth of the nation. This implied that advances in civilization were the result of vices, not virtues; progress came from the selfish interest of individual desire for comfort and luxury not from benevolent concern for others. This discourse caused the collapse of traditional and spiritual values. The ethical teachings of religion imparted to people in the past held that each individual was morally responsible for others. These ideas were found in the Old Testament story of Cain and Abel and the New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan. In contrast to Biblical teaching, Smith's discourse encouraged rivalry not brotherhood as the necessary mode of behaviour (Fusfeld, 1976:30).

Thomas Malthus in his Essay on Population (1798) argued that even if laws were passed distributing all wealth equally, the condition of the poor would be only temporarily improved; in a very short time they would begin to raise larger families, with the result that their new conditions of living will get worse than the earlier ones.

Malthus helped shift the responsibility for poverty from society to the individual, which persuaded the middle-class to stop assisting the poor. His theory influenced the English economist David Ricardo who devised a law of wages by holding that if wages should rise temporarily above the subsistence standard, men and women would be encouraged to marry earlier and give birth to more children. This situation would cause the population to increase and the resulting competition for jobs would quickly reduce the rate of pay. The law of wages gave employers a useful weapon to protect themselves from their workers' petitions for higher pay (Meacham et al 1984: 757).

Jeremy Bentham believed, in his major work, The Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789), that to function properly, society needed an organizing principle that would both acknowledge humanity's basic selfishness and at the same time compel people to sacrifice at least a portion of their own interests for the good of the majority. That principle, called

utilitarianism, stated that a socially useful law was one which produced the greatest happiness of the greatest number and questions related to morality were not important. The industrial middle classes stood for the theory of utilitarianism because it acknowledged the importance of the individual and claimed that the interest of the community was the sum of the selfish interests of all individuals who lived within it and an individual was only interested in his own interest therefore he should be left to pursue it so long as it contributed to the happiness of the majority. (Meacham et al 1984: 760).

Besides Bentham, Edmund Burke in Thoughts and Details on Scarcity (1795), Frederic Eden in The State of the Poor (1797) and Patrick Colquhoun in A Treatise on Indigence (1806) blamed the poor for being responsible for the state of indigence in which they lived. These thinkers had a low opinion of the poor whom they described as being ignorant, wasteful and immoral, which shortcomings accounted for their poverty. Instead of help, the thinkers recommended contempt for the poor. Thomas Malthus argued that anybody incapable of living on his own is a despicable being: “Hard as it may appear in individual instances, dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful” (1798: 40).

The above-mentioned classical economists’ social, political and economic constructions influenced British public policy which marginalized the poor by considering them a danger for the rich during the Regency and Victorian societies. Edmund Burke asserted that the poor were unpredictable and violent like the French revolutionaries and he feared that they might “rise to destroy the rich” (1795:252). Still in the same vein, Patrick Colquhoun stated that the poor are endowed with criminal tendencies and represented a danger for social stability, “a gangrene in the body politic”, which gangrene would destabilize the nation as a whole (1806:64).

The social, political and economic transformations undergone by the Regency and Victorian societies brought about social injustices and revolts which threatened the stability of British society. The hegemonic discourses of classical political economists, whose views influenced the policy of the new industrial order, were challenged by the early socialists.

### 3. The Early Socialists

Early socialists who included Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen deplored the social disintegration and moral hypocrisy they saw as the legacy of the Industrial Revolution. They had nothing but contempt for the theories of Adam Smith or David Ricardo. In their views Adam Smith's and David Ricardo's theories did no more than excuse the greed and acquisitiveness of the new middle-class. The early socialists sustained neither a violent revolution nor the eradication of private property and capitalism. They shared some visions such as a desire to bring industrialization under control, to better the lives of individuals from all social classes, to put an end to social conflicts and establish an attractive and harmonious society (Kinder et al 2007: 480).

Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon advocated the entrepreneurial spirit but he preferred cooperation to competition in the market economy. In his most important work, The New Christianity (1825) he expressed his ideas of economic justice and a new society which functioned on Christian principles. He revealed his thought to the rulers as follows: "return to the path of Christianity [...] remember that Christianity commands you to use all your power to increase as rapidly as possible the welfare of the poor" (qtd in Kinder et al 2007: 480).

Charles Fourier's social construct encouraged the education of children and cooperation within the community. He believed that economic equality and social equality were not possible in society, but extreme differences in wealth were unacceptable. Robert Owen, like Claude Henri de Saint Simon, encouraged cooperation rather than competition in business. His discourse articulated a "pre-industrial moral economy" (qtd in Kinder et al 2007: 481).

Rural gentry and Tory politicians who stood against modern ideas shared Owens's opinion. The Tories were attracted by Owens's discourse because he questioned the theories of Adam Smith, Malthus and Ricardo, which theories sustained the factory system. Another reason for the Tory attraction was the fact that Owen advocated the paternalistic system of government or traditional rule. He argued that the factory system led to social irresponsibility, harmful competition and individual selfishness. In contrast, pre-industrial society encouraged communal values and the social responsibility of the upper class towards the poor and unfortunates. In his New View of Society (1813), he does not encourage radical social change; he comes up with a social construct which does not represent any danger to

individuals and society. Owen also denounced individualistic utilitarianism. He did not believe that happiness for society as a whole was to be achieved through industrial productivity or economic growth but rather through harmonious cooperation in society (qtdin Kinder et al 2007:617).

#### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A close examination of Pride and Prejudice and Emma and Hard Times and Great Expectations shows that Austen's and Dickens's political and economic visions countered the policies of classical economists and agreed with the ideology of early socialists. In other words, both writers advocate, like the early socialists, private ownership and capitalism, the paternalistic rule or the political responsibility of the upper class towards the poor, the education of the poor, cooperation, compassion and benevolence in the socio-economic interactions as the means to achieve social cohesion.

In Pride and Prejudice, Austen illustrates her support of private ownership and capitalism and the paternalistic rule through Darcy's management of his estate called Pemberley. Darcy manages his property with a humanistic attitude towards his workers. He is "liberal and generous" and spends "his money freely" in order "to assist his tenants and relieve the poor" (Austen 81). Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley allowed her to discover that Darcy invested back his annual income into the development of his home country. Mrs Reynolds praises Darcy for being "affable to the poor [...] the best landlord and the best master", which makes his tenants and servants to like him (Austen, 1992: 249).

From the observation of Mrs Reynolds it is evident that Darcy treats his workers well, which make them remain loyal to him. Austen's political and economic visions subvert the classical economists' discourse which claims that the lower class is lazy and incapable of contributing to society's economy, by showing that the lower class is economically productive and the different social classes are economically interrelated as Darcy depends on the servants' skill for his manual tasks and the servants depend on Darcy to earn a living.

In Emma, Austen reiterates her support for the paternalistic rule, private ownership and capitalism through Mr Knightley's economic activities in his estate, Donwell Abbey, and his

humanistic attitudes towards the underprivileged of his community. Also, Austen uses Emma renewed attitude towards the Bates, the poor women in Highbury, to advocate the paternalistic rule.

Mr Knightley's estate does not only contain a beautiful landscape with a strawberry garden but also a working farm that produces wool and crops for market. He is endowed with an entrepreneurial spirit and sometimes discusses with his steward, William Larkins, about improving the farm land in order to increase outputs. He prefers business to entertainment as he told Emma that he preferred to look over the week's account of William Larkin than to go to a ball (Austen, 1992:231). He is not only concerned about the productivity of his farm but also with the productivity of Robert Martin's farm as he often cooperates with him by teaching him some new farming techniques and encouraging him to read agricultural newspapers and journals. Also, Mr Knightley shows some interests in the condition of the poor in his parish. For example, he provided a sack of apple to the Bates and makes frequent visits to inquire about their wealth. Sometimes, he invites Highbury people, to his estate, Donwell Abbey, to come and enjoy his strawberries, "you had better [...] come and eat my strawberries; they are ripening fast" (Austen, 1992: 279). People "walk about the gardens" and "they gather strawberries [...] and sit under trees" (Austen, 1992: 280).

Also, Mr Knightley teaches the paternalistic rule to Emma who is not aware of her political role in Highbury. For example, during the Box Hill excursion, Emma humiliated Miss Bates, which caused Mr Knightley to blame her as follows : "she is poor [...] her situation should secure your compassion" (Austen, 1992: 295). Emma was touched by this remark and felt sorry for her unkindness towards a socially inferior fellow creature. She examined herself and realised that her behaviour towards Miss Bates was nothing but brutality and cruelty (Austen, 1992: 296). Emma's misbehaviour towards Miss Bates agrees with the discourses of Edmund Burke, Frederic Eden and Patrick Colquhoun who thinks that the poor deserve contempt rather than help.

After a moral awareness or psychological transformation, Emma became aware of her negligence towards individuals whose survival rests on the compassion of the elites. She even wept, which confirms that "human beings are so deeply endowed with a need to love that acting as wolves causes us necessarily to have a guilty conscience" (qtd in Fromm, 1978:

142). By weeping, Emma renewed herself with the values of paternalism. As a result she called on the Bates to re-establish a good relationship with them. This experience enabled her to grow into a paternalist leader. She sent some pork to the Bates when Mr Woodhouse killed a pig, “My dear pap, I sent the whole hind-quarter. I knew you would wish it. There will be the leg to be salted, you know, which is very nice, and the loin to be dressed directly, in any manner they like” (Austen, 1992: 142). Michael Giffin, commenting on Emma’s new attitude towards the Bates, claims that “being attentive to the disadvantaged Bates family is a measure of social appropriateness” (2000:137).

The Highbury community ignores Adam Smith’s economic principle of self-interest or Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism. It rather functions on the basis of benevolence as prescribed by the early socialists. In Highbury, people come together to assist the Bates who are the less privileged of the community. Mrs. Wallis, the baker of the village, always bakes Miss Bates’s apples for free and sends her boy to deliver them. Mr. Perry, the doctor of the village, treats the Bates without any charge whenever they are sick, which once caused Miss Bates to worry about how he was going to sustain his family out of his kindness to them since he “has a wife and family to maintain, and is not to be giving away his time” (Austen, 1992: 162). When Franck Churchill, in terms of a joke, held that Mr. Perry took advantage of people’s cold to make money, Mr. Woodhouse defended him by saying that Mr. Perry feels uncomfortable whenever a person is sick in their community (Austen, 1992: 202).

Dickens, in Hard Times, like the early socialists, shows that the economic principles of self-interest and utilitarianism led to the social irresponsibility and selfishness, so in terms of an alternative, he suggests the implementation of the paternalistic rule. Utilitarianism and self-interest is articulated through Bounderby who, like Frederic Eden in The State of the Poor (1797) and Patrick Colquhoun in A Treatise on Indigence (1806), considers poverty as the result of idleness but not as the result of his exploitation. Talking about the suffering of the workers he said, “serve them right [...] for being idle” (Dickens, 1988: 69). His providing insignificant wages to workers for time-consuming labour is an expression of Ricardo’s discourse which encouraged industrialists to give modest pay to workers. Stephen Blackpool boldly challenges Bounderby’s unjust authority by pointing out the despairing conditions in which the workers live, “look how we live, and where we live, and in what numbers” (Dickens, 1988: 180). Bounderby is indifferent to that remark as he is reassured by Thomas

Malthus's discourse which advocates that the rising wealth of a nation had slight or no propensity to improve the situation of the poor. All that Bounderby does is to intimidate workers with imprisonment (Dickens, 1988: 180).

As a proponent of the paternalistic rule, Dickens, through the narrator, appeals to the classical economists and their disciples, Bounderby and Gradgrind, to treat the poor with "the utmost graces of the fancies and affections" (1988:180). Dickens is optimistic about human nature; he believes that the political leaders can change psychologically or positively to transform society in the direction of benevolence and social justice. This is illustrated through Mr. Gradgrind's disillusionment about utilitarianism.

Mr. Gradgrind was disappointed by the doctrine of utilitarianism when he realized that it denies feeling or compassion in human nature, which induces him to understand that "there is wisdom of the head, and there is wisdom of the heart" (Dickens, 1988: 246). His previous vision of society and human relationship, conceived in a purely utilitarian term, or "wisdom of the head", collapsed as he mentioned it, "the ground on which I stand has ceased to be solid under my feet...I must bear the responsibility of its failure." (Dickens, 1988: 244). He is now on the side of humanity and as a parliamentarian he will use not only his head but also his heart to make laws which emphasize love compassion and benevolence in society.

In Great expectation, Dickens, in the same vein as the early socialists, encourages the education of the poor for the attainment of a harmonious society. He shows that the existing educational system in Victorian society was not inclusive and in contrast to the classical economists who recommended the marginalization of the poor, Dickens pleaded for their social and political inclusion through the education of their children. He pointed out that lower class schools were deficient in terms of teachers, didactic materials and competent teachers. The education received by pupils in those schools could not allow them to improve their social conditions or be competitive in the job markets. Dickens believed that quality education could provide the pupils with an opportunity to enter the social and political body of British society as legitimate and reliable members.

By describing the low standard of education received by pupils in lower class's schools, Dickens expects to draw the attention of political authorities to finance those schools. He shows that in lower class's schools, teaching was conducted with one worn out book which the

students used in turn (1985: 102). The book contained all the subjects taught to students, which subjects included “alphabet [...], some figures and tables, and a little spelling” (Ibid). The Bible was also taught to students but they did not understand anything as specified by Pip, “none of us having the least notion of,” (Ibid). Mrs. Wopsle’s great-aunt who taught in that school was of a sickly constitution. As soon as she gave the book to pupils, she fell “into a state of coma, arising either from sleep or a rheumatic paroxysm” (Ibid). Pupils lacked discipline and Bidley would often fight with some refractory ones (Ibid). The school did not work in winter as there were no facilities to warm the classroom which was at the same time her “sitting room and bed-chamber” (Austen, 1985: 103). Pip was aware of the ineffectiveness of his lower class schools’ low standard of education. “It appeared to me that it would take time to become uncommon under these circumstances” (Ibid). He was humiliated by Estella on the basis of his low standard of education particularly with regard to his poor English and ungentlemanly manners, which caused him to dream of becoming a gentleman.

Austen’s and Dickens’s political and economic visions projected for Britain a prophetic vision of a socialist order. This was translated by several important social reforms which turned Britain into a welfare society. Although Britain is a capitalistic country, the state remains the main provider of health care and education, basic welfare and pension payment and is still seen as a tool for social change in the direction of social justice (Harrison & Boyd, 2003., Escarpit & Dulck, 1977).

## CONCLUSION

This article has validated the assumption that Austen’s and Dickens’s political and economic visions, in Pride and Prejudice and Emma and Hard Times and Great Expectations, are influenced by the discourses of the early socialists. The article has also demonstrated that Austen and Dickens disavow the classical economists’ political and economic discourses.

In contrast to the classical economists who valued self-interest and utilitarianism, Austen and Dickens, like the early socialists, holds that economic relationships should be motivated by good will and concern for the interest of others rather than by pure profit-seeking

acquisitiveness. In contrast to the classical economists who claim that the poor are lazy and unproductive, Austen and Dickens respectively show, through the servants in Pride and Prejudice and Stephen Blackpool in Hard Times, that they are rather hard working and contribute to the economy of their society. In contrast to the classical economists who support selfishness, competition and social injustices in their political and economic constructions, Austen and Dickens, in the same vein like the early socialists, rather encourage paternalism or benevolence, compassion and social justice in the texts under study. The article has also demonstrated that Austen and Dickens, like the early socialists, stand for private ownership and capitalism and reject violence or the revolution of the masses as a means of political change.

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