

Hard Times
by Charles Dickens
1854

Reviewed by David W. Gill www.ethixbiz.com

Hard Times is a novel by Charles Dickens that described the lives of the winners and losers in the fictional "Coketown." Why read this book 155 years after it was written? Because perhaps we can get some insight into our own "hard times" from the great English author of *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *A Christmas Carol* and other works.

Dickens experienced the harshness of poverty as a youth when his father and family were sent to the Marshalsea Debtor's Prison. Young Charles worked ten hour days pasting labels on jars of shoe polish. The contrast between the financially comfortable lives of Thomas Gradgrind, Josiah Bounderby, and James Harthouse, on the one hand, and the difficulty of the laboring class members like Stephen Blackpool and Rachael is vividly drawn in *Hard Times*. The disrespect and disdain shown by the pompous hypocrite manager Bounderby toward Blackpool and other workers helps explain the attraction of Marx and other radical reformers to workers of that epoch.

While greed certainly plays a part, the real culprit in *Hard Times* is "utilitarianism," understood by Dickens as the worship of facts and numbers to the exclusion of all else. Gradgrind and his manager Bounderby are all business; life is about reason, calculation, numbers, "facts." Mystery, imagination, sentiment . . . these are obstacles and failings to overcome. Part of the consequence is the inhuman treatment of the workers and the environment. But Dickens dwells at length on how this philosophy also corrupts the families and souls of its practitioners. Gradgrind's daughter is condemned to a lifetime of repression and misery as she yields to her father's value system. Gradgrind's son turns into a thoughtless, empty, thieving scoundrel.

The polluted air, the bleakness of the industrial town, the loss of beauty and music, laughter and love, the rigidity of the economic classes despite the professed belief in upward mobility for the self-disciplined, the phoniness and hypocrisy . . . these are hard times indeed. In 2009 the cultural and economic landscape has changed. We still have the hard-nosed "hit the number" types around but consumerism rather than utilitarianism is the dominating ideology in our culture. According to our media and culture shapers, the meaning of life lies in consumption (not in facts, numbers, or measurable effectiveness). Despite the propaganda, however, a numbing slavery to mass consumption funded by extreme personal debt is a dubious advance over Victorian society.