

DICKENS AND ENGLISHNESS: A FUNDAMENTAL AMBIVALENCE

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In *Our Mutual Friend*, Mr. Podsnap says, infamously: “We Englishmen are Very Proud of our Constitution, Sir. It Was Bestowed Upon Us By Providence. No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country.” When the unfortunate Frenchman dining with the Podsnaps asks how other countries do, his host replies “They do—I am sorry to be obliged to say it—as they do”, underlining his declaration of faith in England’s privileged place in the world “with his favourite right-arm flourish”, which “put the rest of Europe and the whole of Asia, Africa, and America nowhere.”¹ Mr. Podsnap is typical of those Dickens characters, from Mr. Lillyvick in *Nicholas Nickleby* to Mr. Sapsea in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, who believe that England is superior to other countries and, indeed, under the protection of divine providence.² In his novels, such characters are generally mocked, and their claims to cultural preeminence seen as absurd.³ Moreover, in some of his articles for *Household Words* and *All The Year Round* like “Travelling Abroad” and “A Monument to French Folly”, Dickens shows that, as the narrator of Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* says, “They order this matter . . . better in France.”⁴ The article, “Medicine Men of Civilization” even suggests that, in some

¹ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1865 [1987]), 133.

² Dickens is following a long tradition, as Linda Colley’s *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* suggests. Colley argues that one component of the forging of British identity in this period was the belief that Britain, as a Protestant nation, was under a special providence. See *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Pimlico, 1994 [1992]), 20, 29.

³ As John Forster says, Dickens has “a very wholesome hatred of the cant that everything English is perfect, and that to call a thing un-English is to doom it to abhorred extinction.” *Life of Charles Dickens* (Np: Diderot, 2005 [1872-74]), 599.

⁴ Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey* in *A Sentimental Journey with The Journal to Eliza and A Political Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1768]), 3.

respects, so-called savage cultures may deal with some aspects of public life more successfully than England does.

Yet at the same time, there are elements in Dickens's writings which assert the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon character and of English culture, especially in relation to non-Western countries, or to Catholic countries in Europe, or to America. Articles like "The Noble Savage", "The Niger Expedition", or "The Chinese Junk" reveal Dickens's sense that, as unsatisfactory as it may be in some respects, English culture is superior to the cultures of Africa or the Far East. *Pictures from Italy* reveals Dickens's liking for present-day Italy, but also his sense that the country is still in thrall to its oppressive past, and his horror at "picturesque" poverty, while *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *American Notes* testify to Dickens's intense dislike of many aspects of 1840s America. Indeed, he was so profoundly disillusioned by the country on his first visit that he declared in a letter to W. C. Macready: "This is not the Republic I came to see. This is not the Republic of my imagination."⁵ I shall begin with what Dickens sees as the problems of Englishness, before discussing his opinion that, despite its problems, contemporary English culture is to be praised for the progress it represents in avoiding the cruelty and political oppression of the past as well as the stagnation of Italy or the crudity of American capitalism in the present.

Problems of Englishness

In examining Dickens's analysis of the problems of Englishness, I will focus on *Little Dorrit* since it offers some of Dickens's most sustained attacks on certain aspects of English life in the 1850s. Then I shall consider one or two of Dickens's journalistic comparisons between England and France, before looking at the way in which "Medicine Men of Civilization" suggests that even savage customs (for which he usually has scant respect) may sometimes be more efficient and therefore more acceptable than civilized ones, at least theoretically.

In *Little Dorrit*, famously mocking the insularity and obstructionism of government in "this right little, tight little island"⁶ through the Circumlocution Office and its philosophy of "How not to do it"⁷, Dickens

⁵ Quoted in Michael Slater, ed., *Dickens on America and the Americans* (USA: The Harvester Press, 1979 [1978]), 89.

⁶ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1857]), 73. The phrase is from Charles Dibdin's patriotic song "The Snug Little Island", mockingly quoted by Dickens. See *Little Dorrit*, *ibid.*, 931 n 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

also criticizes not only those who profit from England's domestic riches and imperial possessions, like the Barnacles, but also those, like the poor inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard, who parrot xenophobic prejudices.⁸ Dickens's criticism of the official inertia and inefficiency which had such disastrous consequences in the Crimean War, in the Circumlocution Office, which he also attacked in articles like "Prince Bull: A Fairy Tale" (1855), is too well known to need discussion here. Instead I will focus on how Dickens extends his critique of Englishness in *Little Dorrit* to Britain's diplomatic and imperial activities abroad, and to attitudes to foreigners at home. Towards the end of the first Book of *Little Dorrit*, when Pet Meagles marries Henry Gowan, the narrator explains that all the Barnacles are not present, because

Wherever there was a square yard of ground in British occupation, under the sun or moon, with a public post upon it, sticking to that post was a Barnacle. No intrepid navigator could plant a flag-staff upon any spot of earth, and take possession of it in the British name, but to that spot of earth, so soon as the discovery was known, the Circumlocution Office sent out a Barnacle and a dispatch-box.⁹

In short, says the narrator, on "every speck of ocean and dry land on which there was nothing (except mischief) to be done, and anything to be pocketed", there was a Barnacle. The Barnacles (note the name) are parasites on the ship of state not only at home, but also abroad. Idle and opportunistic, wherever they are they have nothing but contempt for their more lowly compatriots, as becomes clear when Arthur Clennam encounters some retired British diplomats at Mrs. Gowan's dinner party. One of the guests is Lord Lancaster Silkstalking, the "noble Refrigerator", "who had been maintained by the Circumlocution Office for many years as a Representative of her Britannic Majesty abroad", in which capacity he has "[established] a character . . . by treating [his] compatriots with illimitable contempt, else [his Embassy] would become like the Embassies of other countries." He has "iced several European courts . . . with such complete success that the very name of Englishman yet struck cold to the stomachs of foreigners who had the distinguished honour of remembering him, at the distance of a quarter of a century."¹⁰ The same retired diplomat agrees with another guest that if the cavalry had been "ordered . . . out

⁸ There is also criticism of those who, like Mr. Meagles, blindly worship members of noble families like the Barnacles and the Silkstalkings, even while being aware of the havoc they wreak.

⁹ *Little Dorrit*, *ibid.*, 422.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 332.

with instructions to charge” in times of unrest, and that if the newspapers were “muzzled” so that they could not “discuss the conduct of any appointed authority abroad or at home”, “the country would have been preserved”. While the second recommendation reminds us of the attempts by the government of the day to muzzle the reports on the mismanagement of the Crimean War by William Russell in *The Times*, criticized by Dickens on many occasions,¹¹ the first recalls the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 and also Dickens’s sympathy with some Chartist aims, although not with the physical force Chartists.¹² All the retired diplomats agree that without the Barnacles and Silkstalkings, there is “nobody else but mob.”¹³

“Mob” means ordinary people, and they are represented in *Little Dorrit* in the poor inhabitants of Bleeding Heart Yard. They are generally portrayed sympathetically by Dickens. Yet these poor Londoners are, in principle at least, exceedingly xenophobic. “It was”, says the narrator, “uphill work for a foreigner . . . to make his way with Bleeding Heart Yard”, because, first, its inhabitants “were vaguely persuaded that every foreigner had a knife about him”, second, because “they held it as a sound constitutional national axiom that he ought to go home to his own country”, and third, because “they had a notion that it was a sort of Divine visitation upon a foreigner that he was not an Englishman”, in which belief “they had long been carefully trained by the Barnacles and Silkstalkings.”¹⁴ However, in practice, the Bleeding Heart Yarders are less intolerant than this, although they are quite convinced of their own superiority to foreigners. When Cavalletto, the Italian, comes to live among them, they teach him English by addressing him in “sentences, by way of teaching him the language in its purity, such as were addressed by the savages to Captain Cook, or by Friday to Robinson Crusoe.”¹⁵ In this comparison, the English poor become the savages, and their condescension

¹¹ See Graham Storey *et al.*, eds., *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens: vol. VII, 1853-1855* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989 [1977]), 509 n. 2; and K. J. Fielding, ed., *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988 [1960]), 170, 190 n. 1, 201, 245 n. 1, for example.

¹² Dickens’s attitude to Chartism was complex and to some extent contradictory. He disapproved of the physical force Chartists, but sympathized with peaceful protests and with some of the aims of the movement, and wrote a preface to the Chartist John Overs’s *Evenings of A Working Man*, as well as helping provide financial assistance for his widow and children after his death (see *Letters IV, op. cit.*, 237 and n.). See also N. C. Peyroun, “Dickens and the Chartists,” *The Dickensian* lx 343-344 (Spring-Summer 1964):80-81.

¹³ *Little Dorrit, op. cit.*, 333.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

to the foreigner becomes the object of ironic mockery on the part of the narrator.¹⁶

Dickens's critique of the idea of British superiority is also to be found in articles comparing France and England. In "Travelling Abroad" (1860), Dickens tells the reader that "I lay a night upon the road and enjoyed delectable cookery of potatoes, and some other sensible things, adoption of which at home would inevitably be shown to be fraught with ruin, somehow or other, to that rickety national blessing, the British farmer."¹⁷ In marked contrast to this praise of French cookery and inn-keeping and criticism of knee-jerk British patriotism, two of the other pieces in the same collection, "Refreshments for Travellers" (1860) and "A Little Dinner in an Hour" (1869), protest against the bad food and worse service offered to travellers in England by the railways and some inns. In "A Monument of French Folly" (1851), the title is ironic: it is not the French meat markets and slaughterhouses which represent folly, but the English ones. Dickens begins his article by mocking the stereotypes of the French as "a frog-eating people who wear wooden shoes", and an "inferior people" who "have no idea of anything," and he continues with a lengthy comparison of English and French meat markets and slaughterhouses, prefaced by the following paragraph:

Of a great conception like Smithfield, they [the French] are unable to form the least notion. A Beast market in the heart of Paris would be regarded as an impossible nuisance. Nor have they any notion of slaughter-houses in the midst of a city. One of these benighted frog-eaters would scarcely understand your meaning, if you told him of the existence of such a British bulwark.¹⁸

¹⁶ Dickens's attitude towards the English poor was a mixture of pity, patronage and fear. See Peter Ackroyd, *Charles Dickens* (London: Minerva, 1991), 722.

¹⁷ *All the Year Round*, April 7, 1860, in *Dickens's Journalism, volume 4: "The Uncommercial Traveller" and Other Papers 1859-1870*, ed. Michael Slater and John Drew (London: Dent, 2000), 88.

¹⁸ *Household Words*, March 8, 1851, in *Dickens's Journalism, volume 2: "The Amusements of the People" and Other Papers: Reports, Essays and Reviews 1834-1851*, ed. Michael Slater (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996), 329.

The whole article, of course, is an exercise in heavy irony which demonstrates that the folly is not on the French, but the English side of the channel.¹⁹

Dickens sees England as inferior not only to other European countries like France, but also, occasionally, to “savage” cultures. At one point in “A Monument to French Folly”, the writer compares English meat marketing customs to those which “BRUCE found to prevail in ABYSSINIA”, since “there . . . the jackals and wild dogs came at night to devour the offal; whereas, here, there are no such natural scavengers, and quite as savage customs.”²⁰ The idea that some British institutions are in a worse state than those of “savage” cultures dominates “Medicine Men of Civilisation”. Mocking the medical and funeral customs of the English at home and in Italy, as well as those of the French, Dickens compares their practitioners to “North American Magicians, African Magicians, and Tonga Islanders”²¹ and argues that “It is curious . . . to detect the hold of some savage customs on conditions of society rather boastful of being high above them.”²² The end of the article takes the argument one step further, and argues, ironically, that civilized societies would do better to imitate savage ones more than they do. In matters of government, for example, Dickens says:

It is a widely diffused custom among savage tribes, when they meet to discuss any affair of public importance, to sit up all night making horrible noises, dancing, blowing shells, and (in cases where they are familiar with fire-arms) flying into open spaces and letting off guns. It is questionable whether our legislative assemblies might not take a hint from this. A shell is not a melodious wind-instrument, and it is monotonous; but it is as musical as, and not more monotonous than, my Honourable friend’s own trumpet, or the trumpet he blows so hard for the Minister. The uselessness of arguing with any supporter of a Government or of an Opposition is well known.²³

Less metaphorically, but in an equally intransigent tone, Dickens writes in a letter to Bulwer Lytton in 1857: “It appears to me that the

¹⁹ Other examples of comparisons between England and France which generally resound to the credit of the French are to be found in “Insularities” (1856) and “Railway Dreaming” (1856) in *Dickens’s Journalism, volume 3: “Gone Astray” and Other Papers from Household Words 1851-1859*, ed. Michael Slater, (London: Dent, 1998), 338-46 and 369-76.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 331.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 309.

²² *Ibid.*, 308.

²³ *Ibid.*, 314.

House of Commons and Parliament altogether, is just the dreariest failure and nuisance that ever bothered this much bothered world.”²⁴

Advantages of Englishness

Yet sometimes Dickens’s writing asserts the values of Englishness and the English, not only in contrast to non-European or non-Western peoples, but also in contrast to countries like Italy or the USA.²⁵ The most extreme expression of Dickens’s patriotism can be found in *A Child’s History of England*, where, having extolled King Alfred as embodying “all the best points of the English-Saxon character,” he extends his praise to the Saxon race as a whole. Dickens says:

It [the Saxon character] has been the greatest character among the nations of the earth. Wherever the descendants of the Saxon race have gone . . . they have been patient, persevering, never to be broken in spirit, never to be turned aside from enterprises on which they have resolved. . . . Wheresoever that race goes, there, law, and industry, and safety for life and property, and all the great results of steady perseverance, are certain to arise.²⁶

Dickens sounds rather like the patriotic Marlow at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, when he praises the countries represented by the red areas on the map of Africa, that is, British possessions, because, “one knows that some real work is done in there.”²⁷ Dickens’s praise for the Anglo-Saxon character is a far cry indeed from the Barnacles and the Circumlocution Office. It is true that *A Child’s History* was published in 1852, before the Crimean War which increased Dickens’s disillusionment with Parliament, but the book is also contemporary with *Bleak House*, with its critiques of the legal system and of government irresponsibility. The difference lies in the genre: *A Child’s History* is written for children

²⁴ Quoted in Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens on England and the English* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979), 110.

²⁵ I have discussed Dickens’s sense of superiority to non-Western and non-European cultures in “Dickens and Savagery at Home and Abroad, Part 1,” *The Dickensian* 104: 2 (Summer 2008): 123-39. Second part still forthcoming in *The Dickensian* 104:3 (Winter 2008).

²⁶ Charles Dickens, *A Child’s History of England*, in *Master Humphrey’s Clock and A Child’s History of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1852-1854]), 148-49.

²⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, in *Three Short Novels by Joseph Conrad* (New York: Bantam, 1963 [1899]), 10.

and aims to inculcate pride in England, despite various criticisms of the country's past. Dickens begins *A Child's History* with three or four pages describing the original inhabitants of Britain as "savages"²⁸ and the book as a whole makes it clear that Dickens has a negative view of many aspects of the British past, such as the brutality of its rulers or the oppression and persecution of the Jews.²⁹ If he praises certain aspects of the English people and their culture, it is in opposition to many of these past practices.

The same negative view of the past is also evident in Dickens's view of Italy in *Pictures from Italy* and his letters from Italy in 1845-46 and later in 1853, where his appreciation of many aspects of contemporary Italian life is undermined by his awareness of its past cruelties, and of its current repressive government. While the Coliseum is now "GOD be thanked: a ruin", it still reminds him of "the fierce and cruel Roman people," despite his admiration for it as an awe-inspiring sight by moonlight.³⁰ Visiting the council-room and the armoury in Venice he evokes "the old wicked council," and while in Rome he sees "divers instruments of violence" in a chamber dedicated to Saint Peter, "at once strangely in keeping, and strangely at variance, with the place."³¹ Similarly, in Avignon, on his way to Italy, he visits the Tower of the Forgotten and argues that the Inquisition's use of it "in the name of Heaven" is more culpable than the Revolutionaries' use of it "in the name of Liberty", despite the violence of the latter.³² The book ends with the assertion that "Years of neglect, oppression, and misrule" have distorted the "nature" of Italians, and that "in every fragment of her fallen Temples, and every stone of her deserted palaces and prisons, she helps to inculcate the lesson that the wheel of Time is rolling for an end, and that the world is, in all great essentials, better, gentler, more forbearing and more hopeful, as it rolls."³³ Similarly, in a letter to Douglas Jerrold of November 16, 1844, Dickens criticizes those who see "the degeneracy of the times in which a Railroad is building across the water to Venice! Instead of going down on their knees, the drivellers, and thanking Heaven that they live in a time when Iron makes Roads instead of Prison Bars, and engines for

²⁸ *A Child's History of England*, *op. cit.*, 129-32. The book also contains many references to both the Irish and the Scots as "savages": see 215, 414, 431, 463-64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 157, 242, 386, 423, 512 for the brutality of England's rulers, and 223-24, 236, 251, 257 for the persecution of the Jews.

³⁰ Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* (London: Penguin, 1998 [1846]), 118, 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 81-83, 137

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³ *Ibid.*, 187.

driving screws into the skulls of innocent men.”³⁴ Later, on his 1853 visit to the country, he refers to the exile of progressive individuals from Naples as an example of the way in which repression persists in cities like Naples, even though it seems to have been banished in others like Genoa and Turin.³⁵

If Dickens’s attitude to contemporary Italy is ambivalent, his attitude to the USA is, on the whole, one of profound disillusionment, as both *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* show. In the latter, Mrs. Lupin asks why Mark Tapley, to whom she is unwittingly speaking, “didn’t . . . go to some of those countries where the savages eat each other fairly and give an equal chance to everyone?”³⁶ rather than to America. Both *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *American Notes* reveal that it is not the problem of slavery, nor the cheating of the Native Americans that enrages Dickens, although he deplors both. What goads him to fury is America’s crude, no holds barred capitalism, especially the worship of “smartness” and the excessive freedom of the press, including the utter disrespect of copyright laws, as well as the sheer bad manners of many white Americans. For Dickens, “smartness” and the irresponsible press are simply an inglorious mixture of corruption, cheating, lying, and chicanery, while the bad manners—the spitting, the gobbling down of food, the lack of conversation at table, the invasion of privacy—indicates a lack of basic civility. In his “Concluding Remarks” to *American Notes*, Dickens says that in America

the love of “smart” dealing gilds over many a swindle and gross breach of trust; many a defalcation public and private; and enables many a knave to hold his head up with the best, who well deserves a halter; though it has not been without its retributive operation, for this smartness has done more in a few years to impair the public credit, and to cripple the public

³⁴ Kathleen Tillotson, ed., *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens: Volume 4 1844-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989 [1977]), 220.

³⁵ See Graham Storey et al., eds., *The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens: Volume 7 1853-1855* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 222, 221-22. See also the two articles in *All The Year Round 7, Dicken’s Journalism Volume 4, op. cit.*, “My Dungeons. My First Dungeon” (June 14, 1862): 319-23 and “My Dungeons. My Second Dungeon” (June 21, 1862): 354-60, where the narrator is a political prisoner of Ferdinand II of Naples, and “The Country of Masaniello,” *All The Year Round 7* (August 23, 1862) 564-69, where the dying Cavour contrasts Italians and Neapolitans, much to the latter’s disadvantage.

³⁶ Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1844]), 657.

resources, than dull honesty, however rash, could have effected in a century.³⁷

Dickens rejects out of hand the frequently advanced explanation for all these problems—“we are a new country,”³⁸ and it is clear that, compared to the cruelty and oppression of the Italian or the British past, or the incivility and dishonesty of the American present, he prefers England, with all its problems. In a letter to John Forster, written on March 15, 1842, Dickens says: “I don’t like the country. I would not live here, on any consideration. It goes against the grain with me. It would with you. I think it impossible, utterly impossible, for any Englishman to live here, and be happy.”³⁹ It is true that Dickens had a personal interest in the flouting of copyright laws by American publishers, but his disapproval of American *mores* on his first visit in 1842 does not seem to have been entirely the result of the copyright issue. During his later visit, he found the country much improved in some respects, although the detested “smartness” in public life had not entirely disappeared.⁴⁰

Conclusion

As the comment quoted above about the railway to Venice reveals, Dickens is a man of his time. Despite his repeated critiques of institutions like the law, bureaucracy, and Parliament, despite his vituperation against missionaries and philanthropists and what he saw as their misplaced energies in trying to convert the “naked armies” of Africa⁴¹ instead of improving the condition of the poor and ignorant at home, Dickens is still convinced that the present does represent progress in comparison with the past. His ambivalence about Englishness may perhaps be partially clarified by referring to the famous statement he made in a speech to the Birmingham and Midland Institute on September 27, 1869. He declared: “My faith in the people governing us is, on the whole, infinitesimal; my faith in the People governed, is, on the whole illimitable.”⁴² It is true that

³⁷ Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, in *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1842]), 245.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁹ Quoted in Michael Slater, ed., *Dickens on America*, *op. cit.*, 86.

⁴⁰ See John Forster, *Life of Charles Dickens*, *op. cit.*, 557 and K. J. Fielding, ed., *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, *op. cit.*, 380.

⁴¹ “The Niger Expedition,” *The Examiner*, August 19, 1848. *Dickens’ Journalism Volume 2*, *op. cit.*, 125.

⁴² K. J. Fielding, *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, *op. cit.*, 407.

Dickens was speaking at the Annual Inaugural meeting of the Birmingham and Midland Institute, devoted to working class education; still, as Malcolm Andrews says, the statement is “in no way inconsistent with the whole tenor of his writings.”⁴³ If there is hope in England, it lies in the working class and the lower middle class, about whose future participation in politics after the Second Reform Act of 1867 Dickens is cautiously optimistic. In a letter to G. W. Rusden of August 24, 1868, he argues that any changes the Bill may bring about “will be very gradual indeed, and quite wholesome,” because

[n]umbers of the middle class who seldom or never voted before will vote now, and the greater part of the new voters will in the main be wiser as to their electoral responsibilities and more seriously desirous to discharge them for the common good than the bumptious singers of “Rule Britannia”, “Our dear old Church of England”, and all the rest of it.⁴⁴

As Dickens says in a speech made much earlier, on May 10, 1851, “this [is] a great age, for all its faults”⁴⁵ although of course he was frequently much more concerned with the age’s faults than its greatness.

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⁴³ Malcolm Andrews, *Dickens on England and the English*, *op. cit.*, 100.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 133. As Andrews shows, Dickens is not consistent in his attitude to either the working or the middle class. He is relatively optimistic in the letter to Rusden, but writing to W. Macready on October 4, 1855 he criticizes the middle class as “nothing but a poor fringe on the mantle of the upper” (Malcolm Andrews, *ibid.*, 123), and sees “the English people” as “habitually consenting parties to the miserable imbecility into which we have fallen, and will not help themselves out of it.” (quoted in Malcolm Andrews, *ibid.*, 125).

⁴⁵ K. J. Fielding, *op. cit.*, 134.

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