



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: G
LINGUISTICS & EDUCATION
Volume 14 Issue 2 Version 1.0 Year 2014
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Capitalism with a Conscience: A Marxist Echo Found Voice in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol"

By Puja Chakraborty

Kolhan University, India

Abstract- Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol' works to thwack the idiosyncracies of the capitalist bourgeoisie; mirroring their deficiencies it emphasizes the need for "spiritual change". Apart from being a pivotal voice of Marxist ideologies, it harbours a simple message, which is that capitalism can coexist with a self-conscience. The present paper endeavours to explore the plausibility of this fact with reference to Dickens's timeless novella.

Keywords: thwack, bourgeoisie, deficiencies, capitalism, self-conscience.

GJHSS-G Classification : FOR Code: 200499, 339999p



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



© 2014. Puja Chakraborty. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Capitalism with a Conscience: A Marxist Echo Found Voice in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol"

Puja Chakraborty

Abstract- Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol' works to thwack the idiosyncracies of the capitalist bourgeoisie; mirroring their deficiencies it emphasizes the need for "spiritual change". Apart from being a pivotal voice of Marxist ideologies, it harbours a simple message, which is that capitalism can coexist with a self-conscience. The present paper endeavours to explore the plausibility of this fact with reference to Dickens's timeless novella.

Keywords: *thwack, bourgeoisie, deficiencies, capitalism, self-conscience.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Marx's ideologies never gained their due momentum until his death, after which they took the shape of a widespread movement named Communism. His ideas profoundly influenced later political leaders like, V.I. Lenin and Mao Tse Hung and communism was enforced on more than twenty countries (Janet Beales Kaidantzis). However, it was Dickens who systematically gave voice to these ideas in a less radical and more pertinent form. Marx himself wrote of Dickens and the contemporary novelists as "the present splendid brotherhood of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together." (Qtd. in Ami E. Stearns and Thomas J. Burns) In 'A Christmas Carol', Dickens attempts to arouse and stimulate the conscience of the capitalist so as to make him familiar with the "social reality" and his own moral responsibility.

Text. "All that glitters is not gold;
Often have you heard that told;
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold;
Gilded tombs do worms enfold."
(The Merchant of Venice)

Ebenzer Scrooge is a greedy, selfish and lonely old man. He is also one of a kind and the phrase, "lonliest in a crowd" seems to befit him. He used to have a friend and Jacob Marley was that "sole" friend. The pun on the word is, he was the sole everything to Scrooge, just as Jacob was his. Scrooge is shown to be

cold, morose and secretive. One on whom neither nature nor its creatures could have any sway or command. There is nothing more dear to him than money as he spends hours in his "counting-house" wrapt up from the rest of the world. But he is a miser. No matter how much he earns, he is peevish and reluctant to part with it, even in the name of charity. When two solicitors approach him for a generous donation in the name of the poor and destitute, he flatly refuses them. He irrelevantly remarks that they should be stuffed in "prisons" and "union workhouses". Since he is a self-made businessman, he prides in his own ways; driven by capitalism and materialism he downcasts others who are relatively poor and driven by emotions. His behaviour fraught with insensitivity and indifference causes horror, shock and disappointment to those who try to approach him congenially. But old Scrooge is cynical and disinterested. He likes "to edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance." He is unkind and unobservant towards his assistant clerk, who assiduously works in a dark little "cell" under a meagre income. Scrooge also ill treats his nephew Fred, the only son of his deceased sister Fan. He is rude; when the good-willed Fred wishes him "Merry Christmas", Scrooge crossly replies, "humbug". He even turns down Fred's dinner invitation on the pretext that he (Fred) is "poor" and therefore, has no right to be "happy". Fred is hurt, but he wishes his uncle well all the same and departs without even a tiny peck of bitterness or resentment towards him.

That fateful night, the night of Christmas Eve, something curiously mysterious occurs. After discharging his poor clerk for that day and the day after, Scrooge quickly retires to his chambers. But he is taken aback to see the ghost of Jacob Marley come to visit him. At first, he chooses to disbelieve it, considering of it as a failed digestion. But soon, the rattling, clamping, squealing and wailing did way and Scrooge was obliged to reconsider. Scrooge noticed to much surprise and horror that Marley was bound with "cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel." Marley said that Scrooge should renounce his ways or else he would have to endure the same fate as (Jacob) himself; and that he would be visited by three

Author: Kolhan University, India. e-mail: poo_p3@rediffmail.com

apparitions who would be instrumental in bringing on this transition.

"Without their visits...you cannot hope to shun the path I tread."

The ghost of Christmas past at first snubs Scrooge for his resistance to purview the divine light glowing out of its head and his plea to cover it with a cap, at which the ghost retorts:

"Would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give? Is it not enough that you are one of those whose passions made this cap, and forced through whole train of years to wear it low upon my brow!"

The idea if light presented here by Dickens as the ultimate source of human wisdom, bears a deeper significance and substance. One remembers in this connection, Milton's classic observation as in "heaven's first born" (Paradise Lost) and Cardinal Newman's "Lead Kindly Light".

This ghost then leads Scrooge to his childhood days, where he sees himself as a solitary boy abandoned by his friends, reading quietly at a corner of a room. The child is found reading some delightful stories. Scrooge gets overwhelmed by nostalgia and starts discussing with the ghost each and every character of the story in vivid details. He speaks as though nothing else matters. It is later that he realizes that he should have been kinder to a little boy (singing a carol at his door), whom he recently scared away.

"I wish", Scrooge muttered, putting his hand in his pocket, and looking about him, after drying his eyes with his cuff: "but its too late now".

The ghost then takes Scrooge, to a place where the boy was pacing up and down, anxiously looking towards the door, until a girl came in, embraced the boy in all earnestness and announced that she had come to take him away from there forever, to live with the rest of the family in their house. It was the holiday season and all the boys of the school had gone home, leaving him behind. The girl was his dear sister Fan and it was she who relieved him from that awful situation. It is again here with some restlessness of emotion, that Scrooge recollects his nephew Fred, Fan's only son; who loved him as much, but was ill treated by his uncle Scrooge. He feels terribly culpable for his smallness and neglect.

He is then taken to an old warehouse, where he was first apprenticed under one Fezziwig. This Mr. Fezziwig was the owner of the warehouse and also the employer of Scrooge. He was an old gentleman who was kind, benevolent and jovial. On Christmas Eve he would gaily discharge his workers from their duties and engage them in making preparations for a grand Christmas ball and gala dinner, where people from all walks of life would join in and make themselves merry.

"In came a fiddler with a music book....In came Mrs. Fezziwig, one vast substantial smile. In came the three Ms fezziwigs, beaming and loveable. In came the

six young followers whose hearts they broke. In came all the young men and women employed in the business. In came the housemaid, with her cousin, the baker. In came the cook, with her brother's particular friend, the milkman..."

The table was furnished with such Christmas delicacies as mince pies, cake and "Cold Roast". Everyone danced to their heart's content, more elegantly Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig. Moreover, after the ball was over Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig, like the perfect host and hostess were humble and courteous enough to wish all their guests, big and small, a hearty "Merry Christmas". When the ghost points out the triviality and wastefulness of such a thing, Scrooge immediately counters him by saying:

"It isn't that, Spirit. He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count them up: what then? The happiness he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune."

Here again Scrooge is overcome with emotion and recoils at the thought of the poor treatment meted out to his clerk by him.

The ghost then takes Scrooge to a place where a fair young woman seems to be bemoaning the loss of her lover, i.e., Scrooge at the hands of money. Scrooge seems to have taken an ambitious turn in his life and sacrificed priceless emotions in the blind pursuit of material profit. There is a shift of place again, and he finds himself in "a room not very large or handsome, but full of comfort." Here, the young woman had grown into a full and becoming lady, surrounded by her children and a loving husband. They were relishing every moment of domestic bliss and comfort. Scrooge felt terribly uneasy in his head, reminiscing the opportunities he had missed.

The ghost of Christmas past leads Scrooge to the house of his employee, Bob Cratchit, where he gets to view the poor and wretched conditions, under which Bob and his family lived. Yet, Bob was always gay and hearty, never betraying a sign of suffering and discontent. He (Scrooge) saw the whole family gather at the table on Christmas Eve and pray happiness to the despicable old man, namely Scrooge. Then there is Tiny Tim, Bob's favourite son who would walk with crutches. The sight of all this unaccountably touches and melts Scrooge's once cold heart. When he grows anxious about the child's health and asks the spirit whether he will live or die, the spirit coldly answers:

"...What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it and decrease the surplus population." Scrooge at once realizes his mistake and is filled with shame and grief. Scrooge gets a glimpse of the fun and games going on in Fred's house. All the guests, here again drink to the health of uncle Scrooge and wish him a

"Merry Christmas". Then, Scrooge is shown a boy and a girl named "Ignorance" and "Want" respectively as the produce of "man". In their appearance they look wretched, distraught, horrendous and dishevelled. When Scrooge inquires about their shelter and security, the ghost observes, "Are there no prisons?... Are there no workhouses?" Scrooge is covered with shame and regret.

The last of the ghosts, the ghost of Christmas future speaks nothing, yet it takes him to a place where a dead man seems to be left alone with no one to mourn him. His bed curtains and all his valuables seem to have been looted and sold off. Some hideous men and women appear laughing at the prospect. Scrooge cannot help wonder at the plight of this unfortunate man, until he is shown his own grave, implicating the dead man to be him. Scrooge is shaken and begs mercy to the ghost. He is as if struck by a lightning bolt and he promises to reform and renew himself.

"I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will shun out the lessons that they teach."

Dickens's novella is as charmingly amusing as it is a scathing satire on contemporary social and economic conditions of England. More than a "spiritual journey", one that is accompanied with the help of spirits and magic (see Peter Orford), it is an emotional and psychological journey (one that Orford claims to be connected with the memory) in which every experience and its counter experience is of equal value and therefore, requires copious mention in order to suitably assess the work.

Karl Marx born in Trier upon the river Moselle in Germany on May 5, 1818 was one of the greatest revolutionaries that ever treaded earth. Marx studied law and achieved a doctorate in philosophy. His ideas on social, political and economic conditions never attained their due acknowledgement in his own lifetime, although he wrote volumes and spoke emphatically on each of them. (See Steven Kreis, 2000) His first radical critique went against Christianity and the Prussian autocracy. This in turn closed his avenues for a university career. So he moved on to journalism and edited the famous *Rheinische Zeitung*. This again infuriated the Prussian government, typically for its criticism of economic conditions; and he was banished. Marx went to France and was also expelled from there, after a brief span of time. It is however notable that it is here that he found a life long companion in Engels. Then he moved to Brussels, where he did an extensive amount of research on history and "elaborated what came to be known as the materialist conception of history". (Kreis) After a "wave of revolutions" broke out in Europe, he moved back to Paris and again Germany, where he re-established "*Neue Rheinische Zeitung*", which went to condemn the Prussian autocracy. He was again

banished and he went to London, where he continued to live for the rest of his life. He died on 14th March 1883.

Karl Marx has been hailed as the father of Modern Communism. Jointly with his friend Engels he wrote a series of books in which he analysed the historical development of human society. His ideas later came to be known as Marxism. According to him, the history of man has been the history of class struggle. Society has always been divided into different classes. Roughly speaking it may be divided into two main classes-those who possess capital for means of production and those others who have nothing to sell except the labour. In the feudal times, there were the land owning feudal class and the landless labourers. In the French Revolution, the feudal class lost its power in France and modern capitalism appeared on the scene. Then came a tussle between the capitalist class and the proletariat. Marx said that there would be a final struggle; a revolution and a classless society would emerge. This however, has properly failed to materialize.

Marx said that the infrastructure of the society was constituted by the technique of production and the pattern of capital ownership. He believed that, in this struggle no body could be impartial and that the superstructure of religion, literature, philosophy and the arts are bound to be influenced by class loyalty.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and Karl Marx were contemporaries. Dickens too like Marx was born in a middle class family, but one amply plagued by debt. He had to leave school and get admitted in a shoe-polishing factory to relieve the economic burdens of his family. As he grew up, he grew more and more concerned towards the plight of the poor and wrote accounts of them in his novels. To Marx and Engels, literature was a positive and expansive medium of spreading social awareness and class consciousness among the proletariat. (See Ami E. Stearns and Thomas J. Burns, 2011) Dickens himself has been called "a Marxist manqué" by T.A. Jackson and "a revolutionist without knowing it" by G.B. Shaw. Yet, his political stance remains elusive. Although he voices social and political opinions, he does not appear to have been any party enthusiast. Marx and Dickens do not move along the same line, although they do see eye to eye on many matters. Since, both could perceive the social evils and injustices prevalent during the time, their thoughts coincided only to work towards improving the lot of humanity. Speaking of Dickens being an enormous influence on Victorian social reforms, Teachout writes:

"While he advocated social reform, he did not advocate specific social reform legislation. Instead, it was through his enormous popularity as the foremost British author of his day that the influence was wielded for the eventual betterment of the working classes in Victorian England."

England from 1714-1760 was in no means different from the age of the Pharaohs. The economy

was solely built up on a traditional feudal system, with the feudal lord being the master and farm labourers, his subservient. Trade, commerce, travel and manufacture remained the same as it was in the age of Chaucer. People were content and wholly absorbed in their life and work and chose to remain cut off from the rest of the world. People of those times wore clothes derived from the wool of their own flock, spun and wove in their own cottage, and carried the produce of the yarn to sell in markets. In one word, everything was done by the hand. The methods and techniques of production were antiquated and development moved at a slow pace, until about 1733, with the arrival of the flying shuttle, the spinning jenny "along with the power-loom which was followed by the application of steam to all the uses of industry through new and marvellous machinery; then came also a revolution in travel and transportation by means of canals, Macadam's turnpikes, railroads and steamships." (See Jeffrey Frank Teaachout, 1981) Manufacture shifted from villages to big cities. Factories started appearing on what was once barren heath land. Within 50 years, England changed from a state of being medieval to modern. By the middle of the 19th century, she became the wealthiest nation in the world, with a thriving industrial system and people grappling to find a foothold in its bustling economy. A large majority of people (men, women and children) began to migrate into big cities "tenanting rented houses", "working in factories not their own" and "operating machines" that required "less skill" and more tending". The age of the exploitative master and exploited worker had come. Child labour was rampant as it was cheap, accessible and perfectly suitable for industrial purposes. A number of evils grew out of this. The factories under which the child laboured were unsafe, unhealthy and unhygienic. Moreover the tortures they were subjected to were unthinkable. Children aged between 5 to 9 were employed into factories, where they worked for 14-16 hours at a stretch without any breaks or meals. The employers permitted the overlookers to thrash them and themselves took an active part in this animosity.

In March 1843, Dickens received a copy of the Second Report of a government investigation into the employment of children in factories and mines.

"The report was graphically illustrated with horrific images of naked children pulling coal carts twice their size to which they were chained, buried deep in mine shafts not even tall enough for the children to stand up straight." (See Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, 2001)

Dickens was highly shocked and aggrieved by such a revelation. He announced that very day on his eagerness for producing "a very cheap pamphlet" entitled "An Appeal to the People of England, on behalf of the Poor Man's Child". Four days later he changed his mind and decided to wait till the end of the year, so that a "Sledge Hammer" could "come down with twenty

times the force". This sledgehammer was none other than 'A Christmas Carol', which Dickens wrote and produced in December of that year. 'A Christmas Carol' shows Dickens's growing concerns towards the evils of urbanization, which had simultaneously introduced "greed, alienation and exploitation". If his novels so far recorded social evils and injustices, 'A Christmas Carol' seemed to provide a just solution to those problems. He created Ebenezer Scrooge encumbered and fraught with all the ills mentioned above; yet to his lack of knowledge. It is when he comes face to face with the social reality and his own portrait as a wretched and hated man that he pronounces to reform himself. It is this what Dickens wanted to nail down that the bourgeoisie were blind and unconscious of the gruesome realities of their own making. "Enclosed trains zipped the bourgeoisie to and from the centre of town, keeping them ignorant of the smells of disease and stagnant water that represented the innards of the working class world. Behind the small shops lining the main corridors lurked the "man behind the curtain": the displaced person, the child labourer, the hungry factory worker, who all kept the wheels of capitalism turning." (See Ami E. Stearns and Thomas J. Burns, 2011) Dickens believed that when a mirror would be held up to them, they would shrink away from their own appearance on account of its loath ability and then try invariably to reform that image. In agrarian feudal societies, the rich landlord would generously bestow largess among the poor serfs. (Rosalynde Frandsen Welch) It was a part of the festivities of Christmas which sanctified the virtue of the joy of giving implicating "sharing is caring". Dickens wanted to imbibe and inculcate the same qualities in Industrial England. Karl Marx believed that when the proletariat would become conscious of their rights, they would collectively stand up against the bourgeoisie and topple their supremacy; thus laying the foundation of a classless society. Contrary to such a vision, Dickens believed in a society not harrowed by the question of class conflict and class supremacy; where all classes irrespective of their differences would live affably and amiably with each other, allowing room for fellow humans. Fred's view of the adequacy of Christmas time spearheads a crucial message, which is "...to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys." Capitalism if celebrated as a tarnished evil is also a means of sustenance for the striving multitude and therefore, a necessity. "If the industrial Revolution inflicted upon the proletariat suffering indignant enough to fill the pages of novels, it also offered, through advanced printing techniques and capitalist marketing efforts, the advantage for mass distribution of these tales." (Ami E. Stearns and Thomas J. Burns) In 'A Christmas Carol', Dickens presents in Scrooge the ideal "economic man", who is greedy, indifferent and

exploitative. It is when he partakes this "emotional journey", lives every virtual experience in the past, present and future, that he grows conscious of his own ignorance and callousness. His emotional torment and agonization cannot be ruled out, as they play a potent part in his transformation. At the end, Scrooge appears to have achieved a triumph over his "past self" and emerges as a man of warmth, love and caring. This process of transformation is useful and relevant. Dickens as if tries to establish that within everyone lies a selfish ambition in pursuit of which he sometimes overrules and suppresses others, dependent on him. Michel Foucault observes how a whole class of people are victims of the social superior's search for power. In this sense, he causes misery. Unknowingly, he becomes a victim of his own domination, a slave in the hands of his own will. This is very reminiscent of the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's 'Waiting For Godot'. Thus, this self-destructive "self" needs to be confronted and eliminated in order to achieve "moksha" or salvation. It is when one is able to surpass or go beyond one's material needs that one is able to achieve this salvation. Scrooge has achieved that. It is then that he is ready to share and willing. Individual choice ought to be supported by moral acknowledgement and wilful dispersion not by some idealized, whimsical notion. Until then, an act of charity remains an inanimate object lacking emotion and feeling. "Fundamental Marxism asks man to sacrifice his material goods, giving all to the revolution for the benefit of the social collective." (Ami E. Stearns and Thomas J. Burns) To this end, 'A Christmas carol' fulfils the basic Communist criterion and acts as a powerful mouthpiece against social and economic inconsistencies. Dery Silvyia however, inverts this phenomenon and suspects "bourgeoisie ideologies" manifest in the "philanthropic" conformation, which is shown to be a manipulative underhand plotting of the bourgeoisie. (See Dery Silvyia, 2011) This is a highly conservative, nihilistic and lopsided argument, for it rules out all emotional and psychological possibilities that may bring about a positive transformation or even transcendence in the individual. "Self-Interest" and "social good" can coexist, provided one does not quash and undermine the interests of the other. (Rosalyde Fransen Welch)

II. CONCLUSION

Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol' serves as a powerful Marxist bandwagon intended to arouse indifferent people from their selfish slumbers. 'A Christmas Carol' not only sets out to transform Scrooge, but also a particular brand of people who resemble him and worship his materialistic virtues. The novella asks for nothing less "on behalf of the Poor Man's Child" than the "spiritual conversion" of its readers by the "written word". A "sledgehammer" would act effectively only

when the tale qualifies to level an "experience", so as to elevate the reader to a "mortal high". As Nietzsche fondly remarks, "I teach you the overman. Man is something to be surpassed." At the end Scrooge realizes that in order to validate his presence in the new urban world, he must acknowledge his responsibility in shaping the future of all those neglected children "Ignorance" and "Want". "He must adopt them as his own son and daughter" (Rosalynde Frandsen Welch). An exemplar of this attitude, Scrooge characteristically adopts "Tiny Tim" and acts as a "second father" or a godfather to him.

REFERENCES RÉFÉRENCES REFERENCIAS

1. Becket, Samuel. *Waiting For Godot. A tragicomedy in Two Acts*. Grove Press, 2011.
2. Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. (Online) Available: www.gutenberg.org/files/46/46-h/46-h.htm (1843)
3. Kaidantzis, Janet Beales. "Karl Marx". www.econlib.org/library/Enc/bios/Marx.html
4. Kreis, Steven. "Karl Marx". *The History Guide*. www.historyguide.org/intellect/marx.html
5. Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. (Vol. 1) Online Available: <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx/mrxCpA.html>
6. Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. (Vol. 2) Online Available: <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx/mrxCpB.html>
7. Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. (Vol. 3) Online Available: <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Marx/mrxCpC.html>
8. Orford, Pete. "The Ghosts and the Machine: A Christmas Carol and Time Travel". www.academia.edu/.../The_Ghosts_and_the_Machine_A_Christmas_Car
9. Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works. ELBS*. London and Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1964.
10. Stearns, Ami E; and Burns, Thomas J "About the Human Condition in the Works of Dickens and Marx." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.4 (2011): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1689>
11. Silvyia, Dery. "The Bourgeois Ideologies in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol: A Marxist Study*". (2011) repository.unand.ac.id/.../The_Bourgeois_Ideologies_in_Charles_Dicken
12. Teachout, Jeffrey Frank. The Importance Of Charles Dickens In Victorian Social Reform (1981) soar.wichita.edu/bitstream/handle/10057/355/t06035.pdf?sequence=3
13. Welch, Rosalynde Frandsen. "Cultural Carol: Dickens's Influence on LDS Christmas Fiction". *BYU Studies* 40, No.3 (2001)

14. Wolff, Jonathan. Wolff, Jonathan, "Karl Marx", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/marx/>>.

