

The Virus Doesn't Discriminate, But Society Does: Class Warfare from Dickens to COVID-19

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Abstract

Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities remains one of the most prophetic novels in literary history, offering a devastating critique of class warfare that resonates powerfully in the age of COVID-19. Through his depiction of the French Revolution of 1789 and Victorian society's stark inequalities, Dickens exposes how systemic oppression creates cycles of violence and suffering that transcend centuries. The novel's iconic opening—"it was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—captures a fundamental truth about human society: technological progress and material comfort for some coexist with exploitation and misery for others. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare this same paradox, revealing that while the virus itself may be indiscriminate, societal structures determine who suffers most, who receives care, and who is deemed expendable. Just as the two cities of London and Paris struggled with issues of liberty, equality, and fraternity during revolutionary upheaval, contemporary society faces its own reckoning with class division, healthcare access, and economic justice. This article examines how Dickens's portrayal of class struggle in revolutionary France and Victorian England illuminates the social inequities exposed by the pandemic, demonstrating that the fight against systemic injustice remains as urgent today as it was two centuries ago.

Keywords: French Revolution, COVID-19, class struggle, Victorian society, social inequality, systemic injustice, healthcare access, essential workers

Introduction: The Eternal Paradox of Progress

The novel *A Tale of Two Cities* opens with one of the most symbolically rich passages in English literature:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair" (Dickens 1).

These opening lines capture the profound contradictions inherent in moments of social crisis. The French Revolution represented both the pinnacle of Enlightenment ideals and the depths of human brutality. Similarly, Victorian England experienced unprecedented industrial development alongside grinding poverty for the working classes. The same duality defines our current pandemic era: medical science produces life-saving vaccines with remarkable speed, yet millions die because societal structures determine who receives treatment and who does not.

Dickens understood that progress is never evenly distributed. The "best of times" of industrial development in England meant employment and prosperity for some, but the "worst of times" for lower-class people who labored in dangerous conditions for subsistence wages. The "age of wisdom" brought scientific advancement and intellectual enlightenment, yet it was simultaneously an "age of foolishness" because rulers failed to ensure that these benefits reached all citizens. The rights of "liberty, equality and fraternity" remained rhetorical ideals rather than lived realities for the oppressed.

This pattern of selective progress continues in the twenty-first century. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that society possesses the wisdom and technology to protect human life, yet the foolishness of unequal healthcare systems, inadequate labor protections, and profit-driven policies has resulted in preventable deaths concentrated among the poor and marginalized. The season of light—represented by medical innovation and community solidarity—coexists with the season of darkness—marked by overwhelmed hospitals in poor neighborhoods, workers forced to choose between income and safety, and governments prioritizing economic metrics over human lives.

The spring of hope and winter of despair coexist today just as they did during the French Revolution. There is hope in the resilience of healthcare workers, mutual aid networks, and calls for systemic reform. Yet there is despair for families who have lost loved ones, for workers whose livelihoods disappeared overnight, and for communities that bore disproportionate burdens of illness and death. Dickens's opening lines thus provide not merely historical commentary but a diagnostic framework for understanding how societies respond to crisis—and how class structures determine who experiences the "best" and who endures the "worst."

Class Warfare in Revolutionary France: The Seeds of Dickens's Critique

Dickens uses *A Tale of Two Cities* to expose how evil becomes normalized, rendered invisible, and accepted as inevitable when perpetrated by those in power against the powerless. The aristocracy of revolutionary France had enslaved the peasantry economically and psychologically, reducing human beings to mere instruments of aristocratic pleasure and profit. Dickens's writing provides a keen, sympathetic chronicle of the plight of the urban poor in nineteenth-century England, yet he sets his narrative in France to achieve critical distance and avoid direct censorship while making his revolutionary critique.

The major historical events that frame the novel—the Fall of the Bastille (1789), the September Massacres (1792), and the Reign of Terror (1793-1794)—serve as Dickens's compressed account of how oppression breeds violence and how violence, once unleashed, becomes indiscriminate. The novel portrays both the justified grievances of the oppressed and the dangerous excesses of revolutionary fervor, holding these contradictory truths in productive tension.

Sydney Carton's prophetic vision near the novel's conclusion articulates Dickens's hope for genuine social transformation:

"I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out" (Dickens 329).

This passage acknowledges that liberation from oppression is a protracted struggle marked by both victories and setbacks. The "evil of this time and of the previous time" refers to the accumulated injustices that generate revolutionary violence—what we might now call systemic or structural violence. Carton sees that true freedom requires not merely the overthrow of individual tyrants but the gradual "wearing out" of oppressive social structures themselves. This vision remains incomplete, as contemporary class divisions demonstrate. The aristocrats of Dickens's era may have fallen, but new forms of elite power have emerged, maintaining hierarchies that determine whose lives matter and whose suffering remains invisible.

Victorian England: Industrial Progress and Working-Class Suffering

Though set in France, *A Tale of Two Cities* speaks directly to Victorian England's own class warfare. The nineteenth century witnessed extraordinary technological advancement—the steam engine, the railway, industrial manufacturing—that increased productivity and wealth. Yet this wealth concentrated in the hands of factory owners, financiers, and landowners, while those who labored in factories, mines, and mills endured dangerous working conditions, poverty wages, and precarious existence. Children worked in coal mines; families lived in overcrowded slums without sanitation; workers had no legal protections, no right to organize, and no voice in governance.

Dickens witnessed these conditions firsthand. His own childhood experience working in a boot-blackening factory after his father's imprisonment for debt shaped his lifelong concern with economic injustice. Throughout his novels, Dickens documented how industrial capitalism created a class of human beings deemed expendable—valuable only for their labor, discarded when injured, aged, or surplus to economic requirements.

The Victorian era's rhetoric celebrated individual merit, hard work, and social mobility, yet structural barriers ensured that birth largely determined destiny. The aristocracy and emerging capitalist class enjoyed leisure, education, political power, and long life, while the working classes experienced exhaustion, ignorance (denied education), political exclusion, and early death from preventable diseases and workplace accidents. The system was not accidental but deliberately structured to extract maximum labor while providing minimum support—a calculus that valued profit over human dignity.

COVID-19: The Virus That Revealed What Was Always There

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create inequality; it revealed inequality that already existed and made its consequences impossible to ignore. The virus itself is biologically indiscriminate—it infects human cells regardless of wealth, race, or social status. Yet the pandemic's impact has been devastatingly discriminate, following the fault lines of class, race, and economic power with precision.

Essential workers—grocery clerks, delivery drivers, meatpacking workers, agricultural laborers, transit operators, nursing home staff—faced disproportionate exposure because they could not work remotely. These jobs, often low-paid and lacking benefits, suddenly revealed themselves as the foundation of society. Those who could afford to stay home did so, protected by their class position, while working-class people risked their lives to keep society functioning. This dynamic mirrors the class divisions of revolutionary France and Victorian England, where aristocrats and factory owners benefited from systems sustained by the suffering of those below them.

Healthcare access followed class lines. Wealthy nations stockpiled vaccines while poor nations went without. Within wealthy nations, affluent neighborhoods had well-resourced hospitals while poor communities faced overwhelmed facilities and longer wait times. Private insurance and ability to pay determined quality of care. Those with savings could afford to miss work when sick; those living paycheck to paycheck faced impossible choices between health and economic survival.

The pandemic economy further enriched billionaires while devastating working-class people. Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and others saw their wealth increase by hundreds of billions as small businesses failed, workers lost jobs, and families exhausted savings. The stock market—representing ownership by the wealthy—reached record highs even as unemployment, food insecurity, and evictions surged. This wealth transfer demonstrated that economic systems are designed to protect capital, not people, and that crisis intensifies rather than reduces inequality.

Border closures, lockdowns, and government regulations—necessary for public health—imposed vastly different burdens based on class position. Those with spacious homes, yards, and financial security experienced lockdown as inconvenience. Those in crowded apartments, lacking outdoor space, facing job loss and inability to pay rent, experienced lockdown as intensified suffering. Government aid often reached those who needed it least while bureaucratic barriers prevented it from reaching those most desperate.

The rhetoric surrounding the pandemic echoed Victorian-era moralizing. Workers were told they were "essential" and "heroes," language that obscured the reality that they were deemed expendable. Appeals to individual responsibility ("stay home," "social distance") ignored that many people's material conditions made compliance impossible. The language of shared sacrifice masked the reality that sacrifice was not shared but concentrated among those who already had the least.

The Mirror of Social Injustice: Characters as Class Archetypes

Dickens's characters in *A Tale of Two Cities* function as archetypes that illuminate class dynamics relevant to the pandemic era. Doctor Manette, imprisoned for eighteen years in the Bastille for witnessing aristocratic crimes, embodies how authoritarian power destroys individual lives to protect systemic interests. His psychological trauma and eventual partial recovery through his daughter Lucie's care demonstrate both the lasting damage of oppression and the redemptive potential of human connection. In contemporary terms, Doctor Manette represents those whose lives have been destroyed by systems of power—the

imprisoned, the disabled by workplace injury, those whose health collapsed under the stress of precarious labor—and whose recovery depends on community support that society often fails to provide.

Madame Defarge represents justified rage transformed into indiscriminate vengeance. Her family destroyed by aristocratic cruelty, she becomes the revolution's most implacable force, knitting names of those condemned to the guillotine. Dickens neither excuses her victims nor endorses her methods, instead showing how cycles of violence perpetuate themselves. The oppressed, once they gain power, may become oppressors if they pursue vengeance rather than justice. This cautionary tale resonates in contemporary movements for social change, which must navigate the tension between demanding accountability and avoiding retributive excess that undermines transformative goals.

Sydney Carton's journey from dissolution to self-sacrifice represents individual redemption within corrupt systems. His famous declaration that his death in place of Charles Darnay is "a far, far better thing" than he has ever done illustrates that personal moral choice retains meaning even when structural change seems impossible. Carton acknowledges systemic injustice yet acts to preserve individual lives within it. In the pandemic context, Carton represents the healthcare workers who knowingly risked their lives treating COVID-19 patients, the mutual aid organizers who supported neighbors despite personal risk, and all who chose solidarity over self-preservation. Their heroism is real, yet we must not allow celebration of individual sacrifice to obscure the structural failures that made such sacrifice necessary.

The Marquis St. Evrémonde, who runs over a peasant child with his carriage and tosses a coin in compensation, epitomizes elite indifference to suffering. His position in the social hierarchy makes him incapable of recognizing the humanity of those below him. Contemporary equivalents include corporate executives who denied sick leave to infected workers, landlords who evicted families during moratoriums, politicians who prioritized business reopening over public health, and pharmaceutical companies that pursued patent protections over global vaccine access. The Marquis shows us that individual cruelty is less significant than systemic structures that enable some people to treat others as expendable.

The Best of Times: Pandemic Solidarity and Human Resilience

Just as Dickens's era contained both oppression and resistance, the pandemic revealed humanity's capacity for compassion alongside its structural cruelties. Healthcare workers became "Corona Warriors," risking their own health to care for the sick. Many died in service to others, demonstrating that dedication to healing transcends self-interest. Doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, janitors, and support staff worked exhausting shifts in overwhelmed hospitals, often lacking adequate protective equipment because profit-driven healthcare systems had minimized stockpiles to reduce costs.

Mutual aid networks emerged globally as people organized to support vulnerable neighbors. Volunteers delivered groceries to immunocompromised individuals, checked on elderly residents, distributed masks and sanitizer, and created community care networks independent of government systems. These grassroots efforts demonstrated that ordinary

people, given the opportunity, choose solidarity over individualism. They also revealed that official institutions had failed in their responsibilities, necessitating community self-organization.

Scientists worldwide collaborated on unprecedented scale to develop vaccines in record time. The achievement represented human ingenuity at its finest—proof that when society directs resources toward collective problems, solutions emerge. Yet this triumph was immediately undermined by intellectual property regimes that treated vaccines as commodities rather than public goods. Wealthy nations hoarded doses while poor nations went without, repeating historical patterns where medical advances benefit the privileged first—or exclusively.

Families adapted to protect one another, maintaining social distance from loved ones, canceling weddings and funerals, reorganizing households to shield vulnerable members. Parents became teachers overnight when schools closed. Young people sacrificed social experiences to protect elders. These acts of care showed that people value community welfare when given accurate information and meaningful choice—a stark contrast to the narrative that individual freedom requires refusing collective responsibility.

The pandemic thus disclosed humanity's dual nature. The same society that allowed preventable deaths among poor and marginalized populations also contained countless individuals committed to mutual care and collective survival. This paradox reflects Dickens's central insight: human nature encompasses both cruelty and compassion, but social structures determine which tendencies predominate. Systems that concentrate power and wealth cultivate indifference and exploitation. Systems that distribute resources and power nurture solidarity and justice.

The Worst of Times: Systemic Failures and Structural Violence

COVID-19 exposed failures across interconnected systems—healthcare, economic, political, and social. Public health infrastructure, deliberately underfunded by decades of austerity politics, proved inadequate to the crisis. Hospitals lacked beds, ventilators, and protective equipment. Testing and contact tracing, essential for containing outbreaks, remained insufficient. These failures resulted not from lack of knowledge or resources but from political choices that prioritized tax cuts for the wealthy and military spending over public health investment.

Healthcare systems organized around profit rather than care predictably failed during crisis. In the United States, employment-based insurance meant that job loss during the pandemic caused millions to lose healthcare access precisely when they needed it most. Hospital consolidation and closure of facilities in poor neighborhoods meant that communities hit hardest by the virus had the least access to treatment. The system valued the wealthy paying patient over the poor uninsured patient, allowing economic status to determine who lived and died.

The pandemic's impact on mental health revealed inadequate support systems and stigma surrounding psychological suffering. Isolation, grief, economic stress, and uncertainty

caused widespread depression and anxiety. Yet mental healthcare remained inaccessible to many due to cost, lack of providers, insurance limitations, and social stigma. Suicide rates increased, particularly among young people, demonstrating that physical disease was only one dimension of the pandemic's harm. The societal response prioritized economic reopening over psychological wellbeing, treating mental health as expendable compared to economic productivity.

Food insecurity surged as unemployment rose and safety nets proved inadequate. Millions of people who had never previously needed assistance found themselves relying on food banks, which struggled to meet demand. The contradiction was stark: farmers destroyed crops and dumped milk because supply chains to restaurants and institutions had broken, while families went hungry because they lacked money to purchase food. The economic system could not adapt to distribute abundance where needed, revealing its fundamental irrationality.

Eviction moratoriums provided temporary protection, yet landlords found ways to force out tenants, and many people fell months behind on rent with no path to catching up. Housing insecurity during a pandemic that required staying home demonstrated the absurdity of treating shelter as a commodity rather than a right. Unhoused populations faced impossible situations—told to stay home when they had no homes, unable to maintain hygiene when public facilities closed, vulnerable to infection in crowded shelters.

Educational inequality widened as schools moved online. Children from wealthy families had private tutors, dedicated study spaces, high-speed internet, and devices. Children from poor families shared devices among siblings, lacked quiet space to study, struggled with unreliable connectivity, and often had to work jobs to help support families. The achievement gap expanded, setting back a generation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and ensuring that class advantages perpetuate into the future.

The prison and detention system became COVID-19 hotspots. Incarcerated people, disproportionately poor and racial minorities, faced impossible conditions—crowded cells, poor ventilation, inadequate medical care, inability to social distance. Releases came slowly if at all. Immigration detention centers similarly trapped vulnerable populations in conditions conducive to viral spread. These outcomes reflected systemic devaluation of certain lives, deeming them less worthy of protection.

Standing Against Injustice: Dickens, King, and the Imperative of Action

Dickens considered *A Tale of Two Cities* his finest work, and its enduring relevance validates that judgment. The novel's major themes—revolution, resurrection, violence, the centrality of women in social movements, and the conflict between aristocracy and peasants—remain urgently contemporary. The work challenges twenty-first-century readers to cultivate qualities increasingly rare in individualistic societies: kindness, loyalty, ethics, sacrifice, and commitment to collective liberation. These values counter the narrow self-interest that contemporary capitalism cultivates, offering an alternative vision of human possibility.

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. articulated a complementary vision when he stated:

"The ultimate measure of man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy" (King 25).

King's words echo Dickens's understanding that crisis reveals character—both individual and societal. Maintaining silence in the face of injustice is itself an injustice, a betrayal of human solidarity and moral responsibility. True character manifests not during easy times but during periods of challenge when standing for justice requires risk and sacrifice.

King insisted that human beings must respect one another's dignity and defend one another's rights, particularly when doing so is difficult or dangerous. Initial failures are inevitable in struggles against entrenched power, yet persistence ultimately enables transformation. This message speaks directly to contemporary social movements confronting structural inequalities that the pandemic exposed. The struggle for healthcare justice, economic security, racial equity, and democratic participation requires sustained commitment despite setbacks.

The pandemic tested societies' commitment to these principles. Those who organized mutual aid, demanded policy changes, provided care despite risk, and insisted that all lives matter equally demonstrated the human capacity for solidarity that both Dickens and King celebrated. Those who hoarded resources, prioritized profit over people, dismissed others' suffering, and refused minor inconveniences to protect vulnerable populations revealed the persistence of selfish individualism that both writers condemned.

Conclusion: The Unfinished Revolution

Dickens's vision in *A Tale of Two Cities* remains incomplete. The "beautiful city and brilliant people rising from the abyss" have not yet fully emerged. The evils of his time and previous times have not entirely worn themselves out. Class struggle continues, manifesting in new forms but following familiar patterns: those with power and wealth structure society to preserve their advantages while externalizing costs onto the powerless and poor.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents another chapter in this ongoing story. Like the French Revolution and Victorian industrialization, the pandemic functioned as a crisis that revealed existing injustices and created potential for transformation. The question remains whether societies will use this moment to restructure systems toward justice or will allow existing hierarchies to reassert themselves once immediate crisis passes.

The motifs Dickens emphasized—darkness and light, death and resurrection, sacrifice and selfishness—continue to structure human experience. We possess the knowledge, resources, and technology to ensure that everyone has healthcare, housing, food, education, and meaningful work. That these goods remain unequally distributed reflects political choices, not natural scarcity. The virus does not discriminate, but every human society chooses how to structure its response, and those choices determine who lives and who dies, who suffers and who remains comfortable, who is protected and who is expendable.

Dickens's genius lay in recognizing that these patterns transcend particular historical moments. The specific details change—Bastilles become prisons, aristocrats become billionaires, peasants become essential workers—but the underlying dynamics persist. Power concentrates, inequality grows, suffering intensifies, until crisis forces confrontation with fundamental questions of justice. These moments offer opportunities for genuine transformation, yet they also risk repeating cycles of violence and oppression under new banners.

The pandemic has forced such a confrontation. The inadequacy of existing systems stands exposed. The rhetoric of shared humanity rings hollow when translated through structures that value some lives over others. The question is whether recognition will produce change or whether societies will revert to comfortable illusions once the immediate threat recedes.

Dickens would likely recognize our contemporary moment as yet another turn in the spiral he depicted—neither pure repetition nor decisive break, but rather continuation of struggles whose resolution remains perpetually deferred. His opening paradox—best and worst, wisdom and foolishness, light and darkness—describes not aberrational moments but the permanent condition of societies organized around inequality. Only by fundamentally restructuring these systems, dismantling hierarchies that deem some lives expendable, can we move beyond the cycle toward the genuine liberty, equality, and fraternity that revolutions promise but class societies cannot deliver.

The relevance of *A Tale of Two Cities* in the age of COVID-19 lies precisely in this recognition: that human liberation requires not merely removing particular tyrants or surviving particular crises but transforming the social structures that make tyranny and preventable suffering possible. Until we undertake that transformation, we will continue to inhabit Dickens's paradox—experiencing simultaneously the best and worst of times, the season of light and the season of darkness, the spring of hope and the winter of despair. The choice of which future to build remains, as it was in Dickens's time and during the pandemic, fundamentally a question of whose lives we value and whose suffering we refuse to accept.

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