

From the Editor

“‘Born bad’: A Past and Present Ideology

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“Born bad” is the constant refrain of Toby Veck, the protagonist of Charles Dickens’s second Christmas book, *The Chimes* (1844). Toby, himself a poor man, has bought into the ruling elites’ propaganda that the poor are born irredeemably bad—lazy, criminal, uncaring, and negligent. Throughout the story, Toby takes the criticisms of his social superiors (specifically Alderman Cute and Sir Joseph Bowley) to heart, lamenting that he and his beloved daughter are only contributing to social deterioration. The social elites cling to “Young England” ideology—a conservative belief that things were better in the Middle Ages when local gentry, rather than centralized government, cared for the needs of their dependents. Of course, in typical Dickensian fashion, the rich and powerful prove themselves to be self-interested hypocrites and the true degenerates of the story. The spirits of this tale criticize Toby for rejecting the social progress of his time and for supporting a social ideology whose day was long past, and whose reality never quite matched the rosy vision that nostalgia had painted of it. The Young England movement—today we might call it “Make England Great Again”—was simply a self-serving ideology promoted by the wealthy to oppose progressive governance and to keep working people poor and powerless.

One hundred and eighty years later, elites are still telling the poor and downtrodden the same thing: “You were born bad.” Do you need assistance for food, housing, or health care? Bad. Do you send your kids to public school? Bad. Did you come to this country looking for work? Bad. This past year saw a billionaire president and his even wealthier henchman lay off hundreds of thousands of government employees so that the rich could pay less in taxes. That same president

initiated several rounds of ill-conceived tariffs that have severely strained household budgets and then claimed that the affordability crisis is a “hoax.” Though nearly two centuries have passed, elites are still pushing the same narrative: the poor lack money because they are born bad. It is surprising to see such close similarities between the anti-progressive rhetoric of the 1840s and now, but what is even more shocking is that, like Toby Veck, so many American voters buy into this propaganda against their own interests. It is a testament to the seductive nature of an ideology that condemns the “bad” nature of individuals rather than criticizing the systemic nature of oppression.

Like so many other fantasy authors of the past two centuries, Dickens wrapped his social reform narratives in supernatural trappings. In both *The Chimes* and *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Dickens uses the unseen spiritual world as a check against the powerful forces of the mortal world, with its vested interests, monopolies, and robber barons of immense wealth and power. In the real world, of course, these powers were fought by unions, progressive legislation, and millions of working-class activists for generations. Now, especially in the past decade, we have seen the world they fought for erode and give way to a nineteenth-century worldview that would be smiled upon by Alderman Cute.

It is no coincidence that science fiction and fantasy (at least in the sense that we know them) evolved around the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Humanity was facing a much-altered world, and we needed new stories to define our humanity against the social and technological changes. As we begin the second quarter of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in a similar predicament. AI forces us to ask what is the worth of human experiences and emotions, and do such things have a chance when pitted against a tech economy, unregulated and driven by greed? Will the decline of democracy continue to the point where we are ruled by robber barons intent on

stripping away our rights and making us nothing more than cogs in their money-making machinery (or perhaps not even that, since AI threatens so many jobs)?

Had Toby Veck not rejected “born bad” ideology, he would have prevented his daughter’s betrothal to her sweetheart, causing tragic results for his family. Likewise, if we do not reject today’s “born bad” rhetoric, our children will suffer, spending their lives in the dystopian future that we are creating for them. In the generations that came after Dickens’s time, the Sir Joseph Bowleys and Alderman Cutes of the world saw their power checked as society rejected *laissez faire* economics, supported workers’ rights, and built a basic social safety net. It was of course never perfect, but at least the order that emerged was one built on more humane principles. Now, as we stand at the threshold of another period of profound change in human history, we must once more choose: do we want a world where we view most people as “born bad” and where the wealthy rule over them to keep them in their place, “putting down” their perceived vices, or do we believe in the intrinsic value of each individual human being, and that everyone has the freedom to strive for a better life? Surely nobody who looks at masked ICE agents—jack-booted thugs if there ever were any—jumping out of vans to arrest people on their way to work could see any semblance of a humane world in the policies of this administration. It took the efforts of the spiritual world to convince Toby Veck of the error of his ways; hopefully all it will take for us will be the evidence of our senses.