

War

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JO has dirty hands. And readers of *Bleak House* (1853) know the importance of their filth: they spread disease, scar the virtuous, disclose dirty secrets, and point to the necessity for domestic reform over the civilizing mission. The work of Michel Foucault has allowed us to appreciate the distinctly modern form of sovereignty that Jo's hands wield. Texts like *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, and their introjection into British literary studies in the 1980s, have taught us how because there is nothing special about Jo (there are countless like him "dying around us every day"), the population that he belongs to must be "managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum."¹ Such is power in the age of bourgeois modernity—what Foucault calls "power without the king."² Jo's dirty hands—nodes of bourgeois power—cut off the head of the Queen who rules over him.

Discipline and *The History* have transformed Victorian literary and cultural studies in fundamental ways. But far less influential have been the lectures Foucault delivered at the Collège de France between the publications of these two canonical works. Translated and published as *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault's lectures argue that modern forms of power (so central to the arguments of *Discipline* and *The History*) are closely related to the reinvention of war by historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The historical imagination of Europe's emergent civil societies saw war not as a violent conflict but as the most extreme form of power, as "force-relations laid bare."³ For historians like Augustin Thierry, François Guizot, and Montlossier, war is "the motor behind institutions and order. In the smallest of its cogs, peace is waging a secret war . . . we have to interpret the war that is going on beneath peace, peace itself is a coded war" (50–1) Because war rages beneath social and political institutions, it functions less as a conflict and more like an analytic, offering "a field of visibility" into the relations of force that divide and animate civic life (242). War is a "way of speaking," that "formulates," "enumerates," and "deciphers truth" about a "certain historico-political divide" between antagonistic races (70, 71, 72, 77). Not races in the epidermal or biological sense, but as two peoples or social units bound antagonistically to each other: "A binary structure runs through society . . . There

are two groups, two categories of individuals, or two armies, and they are opposed to each other” (51). Seen in this light, the history of nations looks more and more like the history of race struggles within them, where Normans and Saxons, Franks and Gauls (and in a later iteration of this discourse, bourgeois and proletariat) have been irreconcilably linked by a silent war for centuries.

Foucault’s genealogy of war and nationalism recasts two norms of Victorian literary and cultural studies: that the English nation crystallized as a form of political community in the early nineteenth century, and that the Victorian epoch was an “age of equipoise.” Because of its plasticity and commitment to illuminating the asymmetrical workings of power, race war discourse was particularly useful in the early Victorian decades as an analytic of class division. Friedrich Engels sees England’s industrial towns as engulfed in a “social war” where “every man’s house [is] in a state of siege, everywhere reciprocal plundering under the protection of the law.”⁴ The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) and *Capital* (1867) both speak of capitalist modernity as a “veiled civil war.”⁵ Far from the observations of those on the Left, liberals and conservatives also turned to race war as an analytic of class. In his ethnography of London’s working classes, Henry Mayhew characterizes the poor as a parasitic race that preys on the urban bourgeoisie. Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) demonstrates that far more pernicious than the cultural differences between the industrial North and pastoral South are the “battles” that have been fought between factory owners and unionized workers.⁶ Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil, or, The Two Nations* (1845) renders class differences in exclusively racial terms, describing a latent civil war between “two nations,” the “Norman” aristocracy and a “Saxon” peasantry. In each of these cases, war is not an event but an analytic for understanding power in industrial modernity. Foucault helps us see how Victorian England was born split, dualistic, and enveloped in war.

After the mid-century, however, Victorian texts shift away from the optics of race war.⁷ For Foucault, this is because the state transforms from an instrument of warfare into an end in itself: “the essential element is no longer the relationship of domination that exists between one nation and another or one group and another; the fundamental relationship is the State” (“*Society*” 236). *Bleak House*, in fact, registers this shift. Reading Dickens’s novel alongside Foucault’s genealogy of war allows us to look away from Jo’s abjectness towards the spotlessness of Sir Leicester Dedlock. Dedlock is paralyzed by Mr. Rouncewell, the son of

a Dedlock servant and a factory owner in the North who has been invited into Parliament. For Dedlock, inclusion of the “Ironmaster” into the state apparatus signals how “some odd thousand conspirators, swarthy and grim, who were in the habit of turning out by torchlight, two or three nights a week, for unlawful purposes” have colonized the state apparatus.⁸ According to the gouty aristocrat, England’s violent class struggles can now continue by the other means of the bourgeois state. Here, the state is not an instrument of war, but a final battleground whose capture would mean the universalization of class interests—the end to the epoch of race war. It is no wonder that Dedlock sees this as the end of English society.

NOTES

1. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Penguin, 1996), 734; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 24.
2. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 91.
3. Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” trans. David Macey and ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 46. Subsequent citations appear parenthetically in the text.
4. Friedrich Engels, *Conditions of the Working-Class in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37.
5. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 474; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 412–13.
6. Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), 84.
7. This is not to say that war disappears from the Victorian imagination. Nathan Hensley looks at how the countless imperial wars of the nineteenth century were integral to the formal innovations of the Victorian literature. See Nathan K. Hensley, *Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
8. Dickens, *Bleak House*, 107.

