

The Evils of the Factory System

*Journal Entry
January 21, 1830*

I returned from my visit to the cotton mill in low spirits. Although I shall continue to petition Parliament to take action against heartless owners and the deplorable conditions in their factories, I shan't quickly return to that horrible den of misery and child slavery. Safe and warm in the drawing room of my home, I felt guilty as I sank into my comfortable chair in front of the fire. My mind could not shut out the image of those poor children toiling away, many of them chained to their machines. The hopeless yet pleading look in their eyes pierced my very soul.

I was especially saddened to hear of the death of little Emma. I understand she died from the complications of pneumonia and was bound to her spinning machine almost until the hour she succumbed. Perhaps, however, I should feel joy that such a precious little girl has at last been freed from bondage and has now found peace with her Maker.

Little Emma had been brought into the mill at the age of 5. She was a pauper child bound out to Mr. R. from the local poorhouse. She never received one farthing for the 16 hours a day she labored in that abominable place. If she fell asleep at her machine, she was severely scolded or beaten. Sometimes cold water was thrown in her face to revive her. This she endured six days a week throughout her abbreviated life.

Other children like Emma are sentenced to the same existence. They have no opportunity to go to school or to engage in play. Fresh air is a luxury they never see. Some children are more fortunate, for at least they can return home when their shifts are concluded. These are the children who are unwillingly sentenced to the mill by their parents. But one can't be too harsh on parents for taking such heartrending steps. After all, families must eat.

I have put down my pen, for I can write no more. My heart is broken and tears are streaming down my cheeks. Where do I go now? To the bedrooms of my own children—to gaze upon their sleeping countenances and to thank God for my good fortune.

There were two sides to the Industrial Revolution. One was a bright side that saw wonderful advances in machinery, transportation, and communications. The other was a dark side characterized by the evils and abuses of the factory system. This dark side of the revolution was tolerated even in the United States. But it was much worse in Europe.

The factory system robbed skilled workers of their pride and craftsmanship. Forced to work in mills and mines because they could not compete with machines, workers soon became automatons

who simply pushed buttons and turned knobs. So simple were the tasks they performed that even the youngest of children could master them. Children, in fact, were preferred over adult workers because their tiny fingers were more adept at operating the machines. And they could be paid much less than adults, or as in the case of children bound out from orphanages, nothing at all. It is small wonder that many of these youngsters grew up anemic and vicious. Robbed of their childhood and deprived of love and education, how else could they have turned out?

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The previous paragraphs provide you with a good idea of what it was like to work in the mills and mines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Picture workers crammed into noisy, dirty, and poorly ventilated factories and coal mines. Picture those in the cotton mills constantly inhaling the tiny cotton fibers that in time caused many of them to contract cancer and other diseases. Picture those in the coal mines breathing the

coal dust that either ruined their health or took their life after a few years. Picture the accidents and deaths that resulted from early machines having no safety devices. And picture the struggle for injured workers to survive in an age before workmen's compensation and accident insurance. Considering these wretched conditions under which they toiled and lived, it is not surprising that workers occasionally sabotaged and destroyed the machines responsible for their tragic plight. When such incidents occurred, however, those deemed guilty were hanged.

You may be wondering why governments permitted the evils and abuses of the factory system to continue unchecked. Why were laws not passed limiting the power of owners and guaranteeing certain rights to workers? In time, such laws were



enacted, but for many years, governments followed the economic policy of *laissez faire*. *Laissez faire* is a French term meaning "let alone." And that is exactly the position governments took toward business and industry during the Industrial Revolution. The *laissez faire* theory of economics held that business and industry functioned best with little or no interference from ruling authorities. Factory and mine owners, unencumbered by government restrictions or limitations, were left free to impose their will on the hapless workers in their charge.

Although the majority of owners were heartless and uncaring, a few were not. One who tried to help the worker was Robert Owen, a Welsh-born manufacturer and reformer. In 1799, Owen bought several

cotton mills in New Lanark, Scotland, and embarked on a bold experiment. He provided housing for workers and their families and raised their wages. He shortened working hours and did not permit children under the age of ten to work. Instead, he built schools for the younger children of his mill workers. Owen believed it was good business to consider his workers' welfare, and his theories proved him right. To everyone's surprise, his mills turned out to be highly profitable.

Owen was one of a breed of socialists called *utopian socialists*. The name is derived from the

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mythical island of Utopia of which the Englishman Sir Thomas More wrote in 1516. On More's Utopia, an ideal society existed. Everything was perfect: government, laws, justice, and society. Owen and others envisioned communities established on the principles espoused by More in his sixteenth-century book.

Convinced that an ideal community was possible, Owen came to America in 1825 and bought the Village of Harmony in Indiana from a religious leader named George Rapp. Rapp and his followers, originally from the kingdom of Württemberg in Germany, had founded the community in 1814. Owen renamed it New Harmony and established what he hoped would become an ideal agricultural society.



Internal conflicts doomed New Harmony from the start. The idea of socialism, where property is owned in common by all the people, did not appeal to every inhabitant of the town. Disillusioned, Owen gave up on the project and returned to England after two years. But his experiment served a purpose by representing the efforts of one early reformer to address the evils brought about by the factory system and the Industrial Revolution. Unfortunately, his was a voice in the wilderness for many years to come, as manufacturers and owners

continued to reap high profits while completely ignoring the needs of their laborers.

The abuses and conditions Owen and other reformers sought to correct lingered well into the second phase of the Industrial Revolution, which began about the time the Civil War in America ended. Although some owners attempted to improve the lot of their workers, little progress was made. And the same wretched conditions that existed in the factories and mines of the period were also characteristic of workers' tenements that sprang up in industrial cities everywhere.

Workers' tenements were built almost overnight and of any available material. No building codes regulated where they could or could not be constructed. Tenements were often built next to factories, and workers' families lived amid the foul air and limited space. Streets were dark, dirty, and dangerous at night. Crime ran rampant, and epidemics of cholera, tuberculosis, typhoid, and other diseases were commonplace.

The influx of workers moving to the cities from rural areas taxed the amount of housing to the limit. It was not unusual to find entire families living in one room. Often the room had no window, and the entire building had no running water or toilet facilities. Raw sewage and waste from factories and mines littered the



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streets, magnifying the health problems that already existed. Under such deplorable conditions, it is not surprising that both the death rate and the suicide rate were high. Many young children never lived to see their second birthday.

In desperation, men turned to alcohol, creating an additional social problem. Women, for their part, were equally affected by the wretched conditions under which they lived. Sometimes, to give their shattered nerves a brief respite, mothers gave their babies opium to make them stop crying. In many instances, impoverished parents turned their young children out into the streets to fend for themselves. These pitiful urchins then went from house to house begging for food. Some older ones managed to support themselves by selling newspapers or by becoming bootblacks.



Again, the social problems bred by the Industrial Revolution were not limited to England and other European countries. Many of the same conditions were prevalent in the United States. It's reported that Charles Dickens, the well-known English author whose novels told of the plight of poor children in England, noted on a visit to New York in the 1840s that that city contained as many homeless, starving children as did London. The truth was that every nation touched by the factory system was guilty of permitting deplorable conditions.

Discuss . . .

- how young children—other than health-wise—were adversely affected by employment at a very early age.
- the correlation between poverty and social problems such as alcoholism and crime.
- whether government should exert more or less control over business and industry, and why.
- whether an ideal society, as espoused by Robert Owen and others, is possible. Why or why not?

Extension

There were several reasons why people during the time of the Industrial Revolution were reluctant to come to the aid of the poor—even the pitiful, destitute children who roamed the streets of large cities. One was the Calvinist belief—widely held at the time—that some people were predestined to poverty and were therefore best left alone. Another was the assertion that the poor had none but themselves to blame for their plight.

How do you feel about such beliefs? Do you think people at that time were exceedingly cruel and heartless, more so than people today? Write a one-page paper expressing your thoughts on the subject.