

The condition of the working class in england analysis



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Originally written in German as *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1845 is a study of the proletarians in Victorian England. It was also Friedrich Engels' first book, written during his stay in Manchester from 1842 to 1844. He was only 24 years old and son of a German textile manufacturer. He was sent to Manchester to work in a British textile firm owned by his father. Manchester was then at the very heart of the Industrial Revolution, and Engels compiled his study from his own observations and detailed contemporary reports as he immediately states in the "Preface to the German Edition" that we will analyse further on. It was his research methods which led to the conclusion regarding the structural inequalities which were, and are, inherent in the capitalist system. After considering other historians point of view in this essay I will argue that Engels and his book can indeed be considered reliable.

Engels arrived in Manchester "at almost the worst period of what was certainly the most catastrophic slump of the nineteenth century".[1] He shows that in large industrial cities mortality from disease, as well as death-rates for workers were higher than in the countryside. In cities like Manchester and Liverpool mortality from smallpox, measles, scarlet fever and whooping cough was four times as high as in the surrounding countryside, and mortality from convulsions was ten times as high as in the countryside. The overall death-rate in Manchester and Liverpool was significantly higher than the national average (one in 32. 72 and one in 31. 90 and even one in 29. 90, compared with one in 45 or one in 46).[2]

Engels has been accused of everything: from taking "too gloomy" an interpretation of the conditions of the British working class in 1844, to <https://assignbuster.com/the-condition-of-the-working-class-in-england-analysis/>

handling his material in a way which “ falls below generally accepted standards of scholarship” by two Manchester University researchers W. H. Chaloner and W. O. Henderson in 1958.[3]The British Marxist Historian Eric Hobsbawm, on the other hand, has defended his account vigorously in his book *Labouring Men*. Most of the people accepted Engels’ account as standards, even if they disagreed with the analysis and the conclusions and was consistently in print and widely regarded by non-Marxist historians as a reliable account which they could safely recommend to their students.[4]

Nonetheless gloomy interpretations have been made by a number of other historians or writers such as Elisabeth Gaskell in her social novels *Mary Barton* or *North and South*, J. Philips Kay, contemporaries and contemporary journalists and also official reports like the ones used by Engels himself, the *Report to the Home Secretary from the Poor-Law Commissioners* or *Observations on the Management of the Poor in Scotland and its Effects on the Health of Great Towns* or the *First Report of the Commissioners for Inquiry into the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts*.

Far more gloomy descriptions have been written down in the same year by a number of other people. Engels clearly does not want to impress, scare or disgust his readers, he gives details, facts and numbers, you can tell that he both used his personal experience of living in Manchester, when he says “ I have rarely come out of Manchester on such an evening (Saturday) without meeting numbers of people staggering and seeing others lying in the gutter”.[5]He uses a number of different sources too, from Dr Kay’s *The Moral and Physical Conditions of the Working Class*, to Carlyle’s *Chartism* (London, 1840) and many more.

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Conditions in England were bad, filthy. People lived in an ill-ventilated and abominable state. Engels did not exaggerate at all as he personally states: “ I am forced to admit that instead of being exaggerated, it is far from black enough to convey a true impression of the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterize the construction of this single district (Old Town of Manchester), containing at least twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants.”[6]These descriptions are not even a bit revolting compared to the ones of Edwin Chadwick, Secretary of the Poor-Law Commissioners. He in fact writes: “ The scene which these places present at night is one of the most lamentable description; the crowded state of the beds, filled promiscuously with men, women, and children; the floor covered over with the filthy and ragged clothes they have just put off, and with their various bundles and packages containing all the property they possess, mark the depraved and blundered state of their feelings, and the moral and social disorder which exists. The suffocating stench and heat of the atmosphere are almost intolerable to a person coming from the open air, and plainly indicates its insalubrity.[7]

Even worse is the Report of the General Board of Health on the Epidemic Cholera: “ The worst circumstance about these slaughter-houses is the accumulation of an enormous quantity of animal and vegetable matter in large holes, where they lie festering, fermenting and putrefying together, and from which there is a constant emanation of offensive vapour poisoning the atmosphere (...) I have seen persons heaving and vomiting. As to the houses, it is utterly impossible to keep the stench out by closed windows; every room is pervaded by it. I am myself obliged to put a handkerchief over

my nose and mouth scented with spirits. Most of the neighbours awake with headache, nausea, and loss of appetite. It is one of the most disgusting sights to see the loading of charts; scores of yards of green, blue, or yellow putrid entails hang in festoons over the sides and wheels. I have also seen coagulated blood, and sometimes the whole stuff of a brownish red colour from this addition.[8]

For honesty of intentions I also have to say that other reliable witnesses during the Industrial Revolutions such as British Conservative Statesman and literary figure Benjamin Disraeli or Alexis De Tocqueville in his Journeys to England & Ireland do not regard the conditions of the British workers as significantly as Engels or Elisabeth Gaskell. Journeys to England and Ireland heralds Friedrich Engels' Conditions of the Working Class in England, but although Tocqueville had been struck by the unhappy conditions of the English working people, he does not seem to have been in touch with Chartist activities in those years.[9] Benjamin Disraeli publishes his novel Sybil or The Two Nations trying to trace the difficulties of working classes in England, but then makes one of his characters say that " statistics proved that the general condition of the people was much better at this moment than it had been at any known period of history".[10] This statistical argument was continued and affirmed by Professor Silberling and " for a generation the cheerful school (Chaloner and Henderson) pinned their faith primarily to him".[11] He constructed an index of money wages and of the cost of living for the first half of the nineteenth century and, combining both, arrived at the conclusion that the real wages of the working-class had risen. But he was wrong, because we know that the money-wage rates of a good

many, generally skilled workers on time rates, and a lot on piece rates, which are, of course, not very helpful by themselves. We know next to nothing of what people actually earned. How much overtime or short time did they work? How often were they unemployed and for how long? As for the cost of living theory it was equally shaky because it was largely based on guesswork.

Chaloner and Henderson point out Engels' slips and minor errors, which even Hobsbawm admit that are very numerous. Normally, if a book is full of minor errors and transcription mistakes, it is normal to consider it dishonest, but not in this case. We have to focus on the nature of these inaccuracies. He has been accused to not quote bluebooks textually. A bluebook is a publication that establishes the correct form of case citations or of references to a legal authority showing where information can be found.

[12]For example he wrote " 16 years" when the source said " 17", he wrote that a sample of children was drawn from one Sunday school, whereas it was two, and so on. This could reduce the credibility of the book, it is true, but in any case readers that want to quote blue-books, should go to the original source in any case. Not that Engels' is unreliable: " in actual fact, the concrete cases where Engels' slips or bias are alleged to have led him to give a wrong or misleading impression of the facts, can be counted on the fingers of two hands, and some of the accusations are wrong." [13]

The first point to make is that most of the descriptions in The Condition of the Working Class in England are not those of Engels himself, but are taken from contemporary reports. Engels used a vast amount of material

throughout his book. On a very rough count he used over 30 reports and <https://assignbuster.com/the-condition-of-the-working-class-in-england-analysis/>

articles, a number of the second from the Journal of the Statistical Society of London, over 25 official documents, including those of various Commissions of Enquiry (Children's Employment, 1842 and 1843; Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population, 1842) and reports of Hansard's Parliamentary Debates (1843 and 1844) and almost 60 newspaper articles. It is true that the majority (30) of the newspaper items were taken from the Northern Star, the central organ of the Chartists, but he also used the Manchester Guardian (10 items) and The Times (8 items) quite extensively. Engels himself says in the Preface to the German Edition:[14]

“ Whenever I lacked official documents for describing the condition of the industrial workers, I always preferred to present proof from Liberal sources in order to defeat the liberal bourgeoisie by casting their own words in their teeth. I cited Tories or Chartists in my support only when I could confirm their correctness from personal observation or was convinced of the truthfulness of the facts quoted because of the personal or literary reputation of the authorities I referred to.”

Always in the Preface to the German Edition he says that he may have made some minor mistakes:[15]

“ I know equally well that here and there I may be proved wrong in some particular of no importance, something that in view of the comprehensive nature of the subject, and its far-reaching assumptions, even an Englishman might be unable to avoid; so much the more since even in England there exists as yet not a single piece of writing which, like mine, takes up all the workers. But without a moment's hesitation I challenge the English

bourgeoisie to prove that even in a single instance of any consequence for the exposition of my point of view as a whole I have been guilty of any inaccuracy or to prove it by data as authentic as mine.”

Another way of discrediting Engels is to argue that the sources he uses are unrepresentative or selective. Henderson and Chaloner say: “ These blue-books (or books, or pamphlets, or articles) were not disinterested searches for truth. They were compiled by reformers, passionately anxious to abolish certain abuses (or by revolutionaries, passionately anxious to discredit capitalism). Therefore they picked out the worst cases, because these would cause most public indignation.”[16]But the exact same things and stories came out from nineteenth-century novelist that are reliable without statistics, partly because they are good observers, partly because the episodes described are far from unlikely. There is no strong evidence to the contrary, so why shouldn't we believe Engels? Chaloner and Henderson have tried really hard to shake the gloomy view of the condition of the British labouring people in the first half of the nineteenth-century, they have tried firmly to discredit Engels' book, checking every source, discovering every omission and mistake, not to mention some which are not even there. No other book has been subjected to such systematic and scrupulous hostile examination.[17]Having basically failed in their attempt to discredit the book, they started affirming that the conditions were awful, but it was not the fault of capitalism, but of the workers themselves that ' self-induced' poverty because of the expenditure on drink, gambling and tobacco.

As we already said one of the main reasons that helps us understand why Engels is a reliable witness of the Industrial Revolution is the “ Preface to the <https://assignbuster.com/the-condition-of-the-working-class-in-england-analysis/>

First German Edition” where he clearly explains sources and terminology used. We previously analysed the sources, what is now important to understand is the terminology, that always makes things clear from the beginning and leaves no space to misunderstanding. He therefore states:[18]

“ I have used the word *Mittelklasse* all along in the sense of the English word middle class (or middle classes, as is said almost always). Like the French word *bourgeoisie* it means the possessing class, specifically that possessing class which is differentiated from the so-called aristocracy – the class which in France and England is directly and in Germany, figuring as ‘ public opinion’, indirectly in possession of political power. Similarly, I have continually used the expressions working men (*Arbeiter*) and proletarians, working class, propertyless class, and proletariat as equivalents.”

This shows how careful and precise he was. He was very meticulous even when it comes to the structure of his writing: at the end of every chapter he summarizes and repeats the important parts. He wants no confusion, he wants his writing and therefore what he believes and argues to be as clear as possible. For example in a footnote, he clearly states that Dr Kay occasionally “ confuses the working class in general with the factory workers”, but then underlines how excellent the pamphlet is.[19]

Engels in the fifth chapter, clearly states that he wants to demonstrate that the bourgeoisie is responsible, as a ruling class, for the murder of workingmen. The ruling power of society is the class which holds social and political control and therefore bears the responsibility for the conditions of proletarians. Engels is not surprised about what the workers have become

given the circumstances they are living in. Obviously their physical, mental and moral status is so badly damaged that they cannot reach an advantage age. He consequently states that their only enjoyments are “ sexual indulgence and drunkenness to the point of complete exhaustion of their mental and physical energies.”[20]He blames the society and the bourgeoisie, all throughout his book, making a relation with modern international Socialism, that in 1844 did not yet exist. Engels in the Preface to the English Edition writes that the ideas in his book represent one of the phases of Socialisms embryonic development. Marx, a very good friend of Engels’, used his ideas to build up the theory of Communism as the emancipation of society at large, including the capitalist class, from its narrow conditions. The book was received with great approval in socialist circles. For many workers it was the first time they had been aware of the possibility of a working-class movement. However, the ‘ revolutionary conclusions’ within the text were deplored by bourgeois critics, even though they recognized the accuracy of Engels’ observations. These conclusions might have been revolutionary, but we have to say that they are the result of his research methods and not a preconceived theory of revolution. Engels did not have a theoretical analysis in which to seek the social conditions that would fit his perspective. His early writings such as this book pre-date both his contact with radical thinkers of the time and the formulation of socialist theories. Engels’ life experience and observations illustrate how the theory stated in *The Condition* was informed by reality and shock for what he saw. Engels’ starting point was therefore not theoretical, but the raw observed facts of capitalist society.[21]

However what Marx would have probably never done, is describe the Irish as Engels did in chapter 4: " Irish Immigration". Yes, Engels by writing this book was trying to support the working class, by blaming disease, poverty and bad conditions on the bourgeoisie. Because of this, of his background thoughts and because of him trying to politically agitate and politically condemn the English middle class, he should have described with a bit more tact the condition of ' Little Ireland'. He should have said that it was because of the industrial revolution and because of the society in which they were force to live, that they were in such awful conditions. He sort of did this at the end of the chapter by stating: " What else should he (the Irishman) do? How can society blame him when it places him in a position in which he almost of necessity becomes a drunkard; when it leaves him to himself, to his savagery?"[22]However before that we see that not even Engels was immune to racial prejudice when he describes Little Ireland as a group of a few hundred mean cottages set in " masses of refuse, offal and sickening filth", populated by " a horde of ragged women and children swarming about here, as filthy as the swine that thrive upon the garbage heaps and in the puddles". " The race that lives in these ruinous cottages, behind broken windows (...), this race must really have reached the lowest stage of humanity." That race, he argued, was disposed by nature and environment to careless and feckless behaviour, and had brought its dirty habits with it into the hearts of the great English and Scottish towns. " Filth and drunkenness, too, they have brought with them", importing a mud cabin level of existence into Britain and degrading and corrupting the English workers through their presence and their competition in the labour market.

[23]Engels made the mistake of confusing the effects of poverty and
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ignorance on “ the poor devil”, for the effects of racial characteristics, but the physical conditions of Little Ireland undoubtedly existed as Engels described them.

In conclusion I can affirm, along with historians such as Hobsbawm and using David McLellan words that “ Engels’ descriptions can be taken, by and large, as probably the best piece of contemporary evidence that we have available to us.”[24]The Condition of the Working Class in England is an astonishingly precocious work that recapitulates earlier and contemporary complaints about the damage to human beings created by the rise of industrial capitalism. Seeking to denounce the bourgeoisie for its cruel enslavement and exploitation of the proletariat, his work has still to be considered reliable and accurate. Engels took us through the slums of Manchester and other industrial cities, making us realize and fully understand the disintegration of the individual, the “ demoralizing influences of poverty, dirt and low environment” a “ disorderly confusion” that has been indeed brought by the devastating effects of the industrial society.[25]