

The Crusader as a Chronicler: Friedrich Engels and the Working Class in England

One hundred and seventy-four years after its first publication, Engels' book remains a valuable social and historical document.



Friedrich Engels. Photo: Wikipedia



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Friedrich Engels was 21 when his father decided that Germany was getting too hot to hold his young son any longer. In Berlin in 1841, Friedrich had taken the usual road of progressive young German intellectuals of his time: he had first become a 'left Hegelian', then veered away from that position to lean increasingly towards

radical socialism/communism, and had begun writing for various magazines and periodicals in which the German Left critiqued society and religion.

In fact, even before his sojourn in Berlin, when he was apprenticed, at his father's insistence, at a firm in Bremen during 1839-40 so that he could learn the ropes of business and finance, Engels wrote often for local newspapers on a wide range of social and cultural issues. Already, he had shown himself to be a combative atheist and a caustic critic of the capriciousness and hypocrisy of the propertied classes.

As early as October 17, 1840, still shy of his nineteenth birthday, Friedrich wrote a pungent piece titled '*Rationalism and Pietism*' for the Bremen daily *Morgenblatt für Gebildete Leser* in which he decried the rise of narrow religious fundamentalism:

The pulpit became the presidential chair of a court of inquisition whence the eternal curse was hurled against all theological trends which the inquisitor did and did not know. Anyone who did not accept this crass mysticism as absolute Christianity was delivered up to the devil. And with a sophistry which emerged as strangely naive, Krummacher always managed to shelter behind the apostle Paul. "It is not I who is cursing, nay! Children, reflect, it is the apostle Paul who condemns you!"

So as not to hurt the sentiments of his churchgoing,

prosperous parents, the young man signed off on many of his articles as 'Friedrich Oswald'. His parents, however, had a fair idea of what their eldest child was up to, and were mortified. Political nonconformism was not only not respectable in Germany, it was rapidly becoming dangerous. The parents had to do something.



Friedrich Engels in his early 20s. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Their choice proved to be providential. To insulate

Friedrich from the corrupting influence of radical politics, they decided to ‘banish’ him to England. He was to be a trainee at the Weaste office in Manchester of the family firm *Ermen and Engels*’s Victoria Mills. What this did was to locate Engels at the very heart of 19th century industrial capitalism. No place in Europe or elsewhere was capable of providing a ring-side view of the gargantuan societal changes driving early industrial capitalism comparable to what Manchester, the world’s textile capital, facilitated.

In the process, his parents’ gambit not only failed spectacularly, it achieved the result they dreaded most. In quick time, Friedrich transitioned from being an observer of contemporary society to a socialist revolutionary. In other words, young Friedrich became Friedrich Engels, one of the two foremost leaders of modern-day socialism. Engels reached Manchester in the autumn of 1842, and remained there uninterruptedly for just under two years. By the early months of 1844, he was at work on a book that would cement his place as one of the great commentators of industrial capitalism. *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was not to be published in its English edition until 1892 (the American edition came out in 1887) – or very nearly half a century after the first German edition which made its appearance in Leipzig in the summer of 1845, with a dedication (in English) ‘to the working classes of Great Britain’.

Ever since then, the book has seldom been out of print in one edition or another, and even today it remains one of

the best-known documents of what, in its early years, the Industrial Revolution meant for the lives of its foot-soldiers. As an analysis of the evolution of industrial capitalism, of the social impact of large-scale industrialisation and its political consequences, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* remains unsurpassed nearly 174 years after its first publication.

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The book is spread over 11 chapters, plus a preface, an introduction and a postscript. An appendix was added to the 1887 American edition to take stock of the broad changes in the landscape of industrial capitalism over the intervening forty years, for example, the emergence of American, German and French competition to what in early 19th century was a virtual English monopoly over world markets.



First Edition of Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Photo: Wikimedia

It also recorded a confession: that the prognostication of “an imminent social revolution in England” which Engels’s “youthful ardour (had) induced (him) to venture upon” in 1844-45 had been misplaced. Engels also points to the changes in his own understanding of the dynamic of social revolution. He now knew that class

contradictions were irreconcilable, and the proletariat's struggle for emancipation stood little chance of finding a potential ally in even those segments of the bourgeoisie whom Engels had earlier seen as enlightened fellow-travellers.

The Introduction draws the broad contours of the Industrial Revolution 'beginning in the second half of the 18th century with the invention of the steam-engine and of machinery for working cotton'. The emphasis here is on how this revolution, unlike all the other changes that went before it, 'altered the whole civil society' beyond recognition and gave rise, for the first time, to the 'Industrial Proletariat', which happens to be the caption (and subject-matter) of the first chapter.

The rise of industrial capitalism destroyed petty commodity producers, the small-time cottage industry, and even, in substantial measure, the peasantry, consigning large swathes of the population to this new social class of wage workers whose only means of livelihood consisted in selling physical labour to the large machine owner.

For the first time in history, *producers* were transformed whole-sale into *labourers* who owned virtually nothing save the shirts on their backs. The Industrial Revolution did not stop at only creating the proletariat as a social class; concentration and polarisation was in the very nature of the revolutionary process, which worked by creating an increasingly small bourgeoisie of increasingly large capitalists and pushing increasingly bigger

segments of the population into the ranks of the proletariat. The whole phenomenon played out to an unending process of urbanisation.

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Large-scale mechanised industry requires steadily-growing capital investments, while its division of labour necessitates the accumulation of large communities of wage-workers. So, increasingly, sleepy villages morphed into busy towns, and small towns into bustling megacities. Large communities of proletarians create a surplus labour force, which helps push wages down and attracts investors to set up new industrial units. Industry tends to migrate from the higher urban to the lower rural wages, and this in turn plants the seeds of urbanisation in the countryside.

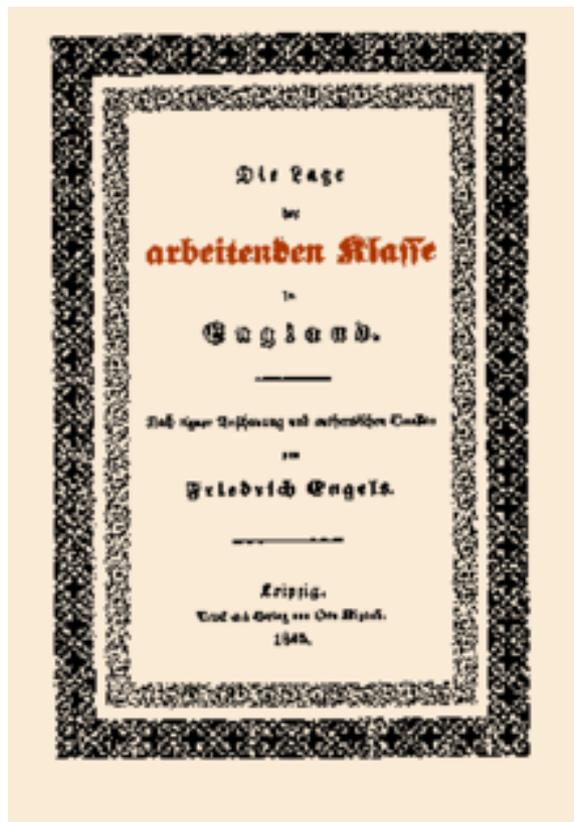
Thus, the great cities with their large armies of proletarians who are obliged to sell their labour at whatever happens to be the going price, become, for Engels, the symbol of industrial capitalism. The system is built around relentless competition, a competition which is

the completest expression of the battle of all against all which rules in modern civil society. This battle, a battle for life, for existence, for everything, in case of need a battle of life and death, is fought not between the different classes of society only, but also between the

individual members of these classes.

Here, the proletarian is forced back upon his own measly devices, so that even within a large community, he can be utterly alone and helpless.

(E)verywhere barbarous indifference, hard selfishness on one side, unspeakable misery on the other, everywhere social war, every man's house a fortress, everywhere marauders who plunder under the protection of the law.



Title page of the first (German) edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Photo: Wikipedia

And what is life in a big city like, at any rate in the workers' districts? What kind of human beings are

shaped by such a life? Chapters 3 through 11, with a brief detour in chapter 4 into an examination of Irish immigration into the English workforce, look at these questions at length.

Engels shows capitalism pitchforking the proletariat, often composed of migrant workers from pre-industrial backgrounds, into a living hell “in which they are ground down, underpaid or starved, left to rot in slums, neglected, despised, and coerced, not only by the impersonal forces of competition but by the bourgeoisie as a class, which regards them as objects and not as men, as ‘labour’ or ‘hands’ and not as human beings”.

Since all the laws of the land are stacked against the worker, he is fined, penalised, jailed or dismissed from his job at the factory owner’s pleasure. Malnutrition, poor health and disease are the worker’s constant companions, and the fear of being thrown out of his job dogs him at all times. Child mortality is staggeringly high: 53% among under-five-year-olds in Leeds where only 13% of the population live to be older than 59 (the corresponding numbers in the healthy agricultural district of Rutlandshire being 28% and 37% respectively). Illiteracy, drunkenness and crime are the inescapable concomitants of a life of poverty and squalor and the proletariat is plagued by them all.

But the dehumanised, brutalised worker does in truth mirror the ever-expanding material prosperity and progress of the bourgeoisie, albeit perversely.

Engels' account is based on first-hand observation as well as other sources such as reports of factory inspectors and sundry government commissions, newspaper articles and court proceedings, on all of which he draws copiously. He builds his case against the utter inhumanity of predatory capitalism assiduously, by not only collecting telling data but also quoting extensively from sources essentially aligned with the established order.

Also read: [Can the 21st Century Reader Read Karl Marx in the Original?](#)

He was a manufacturing businessman living in a thriving business environment, came to know the workers' districts of Manchester quite well, and paid visits to Leeds, Sheffield, Bradford and London to study conditions in those centres. He also worked with the Chartists and other early socialists in England who were agitating and organising for workers' rights. The help provided in all this by his partner, the Irish factory girl Mary Burns, was invaluable, and Engels' account suffers from none of the inadequacies of a rush job by an outsider who gets to know his milieu only minimally.



Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Photo: Aleks Ka/Shutterstock.com

How does the worker react to the cruel injustice of the system? Engels points to three broad responses. One, that of succumbing to it by allowing himself to be demoralised and debased, and sink into a life of hopelessness and crime. Second, by submitting to it passively, accepting life as it comes and trying to live life like a law-abiding citizen, thus tightening the chains that tie him to the system.

Finally, there is the option to rebel, either as an isolated machine-breaker or by uniting with other workers in a broad labour movement that seeks to bring dignity and the hope of a better future to their lives. Engels stresses the third option with force.

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Individual Choice in a Vastly Unequal World

He shows how, by dehumanising the proletariat, the bourgeoisie also alienates it from bourgeois ideology and illusion, for example from religion and conventional morality. Besides, progressive industrialisation and concentration of working people in close-packed communities help foster workers' unity and a sense of their own power.

In other words, the worker can develop 'class consciousness', a term that Engels does not use yet, though he explores its underlying idea at some length. Lenin saw this as an important contribution to socialist theory. Engels, said Lenin,

was among the first to say that the proletariat is not only a class that suffers; that it is precisely its shameful economic situation which irresistibly drives it forward, and obliges it to struggle for its final emancipation.

There are also other important ways in which *The Condition of the Working Class in England* remains an important historical document. This was probably the first comprehensive analysis of the conditions in which the working-class of a country as a whole lived under early capitalism, though there had been studies by a few others earlier into specific industry segments and localised trade.

Engels also introduced here the concept of periodic

cycles of prosperity and crisis, and showed how such cycles are an essential component of capitalism itself. Also, though he does not use the term ‘industrial reserve army’, he clearly recognises how capitalism must maintain a permanent reserve of workers so as to cut costs and plan for boom-period production levels.

Engels’ hope of a social revolution emerging in the near term out of a serious crisis in English capitalism was not to be fulfilled, but that is a separate discussion. What is striking about *The Condition of the Working Class in England* is that it was the first comprehensive effort to analyse the Industrial Revolution and its social and political consequences in their entirety. Indeed, it was the first-ever application of the Marxist method to the study of society. And it pre-dated the *Capital* by over two decades. Even the *Communist Manifesto* was not to appear till three years after this remarkable book.

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