

Document Study Questions – Tocqueville

1. Was Manchester in the 1830s a pleasant place to live?

No, Manchester in the 1830s was not a pleasant place to live, whether one was rich or poor, but especially as a poor laborer. In the excerpt from *Journey to England (1835)*, Tocqueville compared the differences between life in the industrial cities of Birmingham and Manchester and determined that life in Manchester was more difficult for everyone, but particularly for the poorest laborers. He even concluded that, “[f]rom the look of the inhabitants of Manchester, the working people of Birmingham seem more healthy, better off, more orderly and more moral than those of Manchester.”

All residents of Manchester suffered from the “complete absence of government,” which resulted in less efficient police, haphazard development of the city, and little completed infrastructure, such as passable roads and sanitation. He described, “stagnant puddles, roads paved badly or not at all. Insufficient public lavatories.... Everything in the exterior appearance of the city attests the individual powers of man; nothing the directing power of society. At every turn human liberty shows its capricious creative force. There is no trace of the slow continuous action of government.”

But Manchester’s “few great capitalists, thousands of poor workmen and little middle class” lived completely separate lives, with the higher classes living outside the city proper. The upper-class people could and did spend most of their lives avoiding the noisy, squalid, rancid areas of the city where the factory laborers lived and worked: “You will never hear the clatter of hoofs as the rich man drives back home or out on expeditions of pleasure.... You will never see smart folk strolling at leisure in the streets or going out on innocent pleasure parties in the surrounding country.”

Meanwhile, Tocqueville referred to the laborers’ living conditions in the city as “this new Hades.” Housing was built as close together as possible with no rhyme nor reason to the alleys and pathways utilized for accessing it. He described how the laborers lived crowded together in dirty, crumbling, dangerously built housing near the factories: “[t]hirty or forty factories rise...[t]heir six stories tower up;... The wretched dwellings of the poor are scattered haphazard around them.” The accommodations of laborers included “one-story houses whose ill-fitting planks and broken windows show them up...as the last refuge a man might find between poverty and death. None-the-less,...[b]elow some of their miserable dwellings is a row of cellars to which a sunken corridor leads. Twelve to fifteen human beings are crowded pell-mell into each of these damp, repulsive holes.” Although I imagine the air, polluted by the exhaust from factories, was rather sickening for most people, those who lived farther away from the factories breathed less lethal air than those who lived alongside the factories. The laborers could not escape it; Tocqueville said, “[a] sort of black smoke covers the city.... Under this half daylight 300,000 human beings are ceaselessly at work.”

2. What was the environmental impact of the early Industrial Revolution?

Early in the Industrial Revolution, farming changed, agriculture changed, and manufacturing changed. Effort became larger and centralized, displacing old ways of doing business with new, more impersonal ways. As machines replaced artisans, and other effects of mechanization and centralization became entrenched, peasants became displaced or unable to support themselves with their old means. Many moved to the new factory towns. Meanwhile, where factories were being erected, often the land surrounding the buildings was laid waste. According to Tocqueville in an excerpt from *Journey to England (1835)*, “[r]ound [the factories] stretches land uncultivated but without the charm of rustic nature.... The soil has been taken away, scratched and torn up in a thousand places.... The land is given over to industry’s use.” Factories were built near water, the initial source of power to run their machines, so towns along water were among the first to industrialize and urbanize. Factories utilized the lands’ natural resources and created large amounts of waste. That waste was indiscriminately emitted into the surrounding waters and environment, resulting in what Tocqueville described as, “fetid, muddy waters, stained with a thousand colours by the factories they pass.” Tocqueville called the water sources flowing around Manchester as “the Styx of this new Hades.” Airborne emissions from factories, particularly from burning coal now more than wood, polluted the air. Tocqueville described it like this: “all around this place you will see the huge palaces of industry. You will hear the noise of furnaces, the whistle of steam. These vast structures keep air and light out of the human habitations which they dominate; they envelop them in perpetual fog;... A sort of black smoke covers the city.” And, of course, there now was noise pollution: “A thousand noises disturb this damp, dark labyrinth,... [t]he footsteps of a busy crowd, the crunching wheels of machinery, the shriek of steam from boilers, the regular beat of the looms, the heavy rumble of carts, those are the noises from which you can never escape.” Transportation networks grew, including train lines and canals and roads. These, of course, changed the environments around them as they cleared trees and, perhaps, dammed rivers, and built bridges. Meanwhile, the increasing populations in growing factory towns taxed the abilities of those towns to deal with the human and farming waste commensurate with a burgeoning city. With little to no appropriate infrastructure to handle such waste, it also contributed to polluting the land and rivers. The positive side to all of this was the eventual development of technologies and policies to deal with sanitation, sewage, water treatment, and other needs of big cities where many thousands of people lived and worked.

3. What were some of the living conditions for workers?

For much of the Industrial Revolution, living conditions for workers were dangerous, unsanitary, unhealthy, and inescapable. The severity of the conditions varied from city to city, and even between England and countries laborers were fleeing. Tocqueville, in *Journey to England (1835)*, provides two contrasts to life in Manchester. He says that “[a]mong the workers are men coming from a country

where the needs of men are reduced almost to those of savages,” – presumably the Irish he mentions later. He also compares conditions for laborers in Birmingham versus Manchester: “a crowd of small tenants huddled in the same house. At Birmingham almost all the houses are inhabited by one family only; at Manchester a part of the population lives in damp cellars, hot, stinking and unhealthy; thirteen to fifteen individuals in one. At Birmingham that is rare. At Manchester, stagnant puddles, roads paved badly or not at all. Insufficient public lavatories. All that almost unknown at Birmingham.... At Manchester workmen are counted by the thousand two or three thousand in the factories. At Birmingham the workers work in their own houses or in little workshops in company with the master himself.” But in Manchester, Tocqueville describes the “noisome labyrinth” that was the layout of the town winding away from each factory and down to the river; how what alleys and roads existed were “full of ruts and puddles into which foot or carriage wheel sinks deep. Heaps of dung, rubble from buildings, putrid, stagnant pools are found here and there among the houses and over the bumpy pitted surfaces of the public places.” Laborers’ housing was generally near the factory, so “[t]hese vast structures keep air and light out of the human habitations which they dominate; they envelop them in perpetual fog.” Tocqueville described dilapidated houses, some without even a chair inside, crowded together and overcrowded with residents. There was little to no infrastructure for waste, so all manner of refuse piled into the streets and alleys and rivers and streams. Surroundings were dirty and “putrid.”