Harsh Discipline and Awful Conditions

In factories in both Europe and America, strict rules governed daily routines, regulating workers’ lives from sunup to sundown. In Berlin metalworking factories, workers who arrived late lost wages, and employers locked the doors after work began and subjected workers to an almost military reglementation. These work rules for men employed in the foundry and engineering works of the Royal Overseas Trading Co. in Moabit, Germany, in 1844 illustrate how nineteenth-century employers controlled their workers in order to extract the most labor in the most efficient way possible. Employers also tried to use workers to discipline each other.

The following rules shall be strictly observed.

1. The normal working day begins at all seasons at 6 A.M. precisely and ends, after the usual break of half an hour for breakfast, an hour for dinner and half an hour for tea, at 7 P.M., and it shall be strictly observed.

   Five minutes before the beginning of the stated hours of work until their actual commencement, a bell shall ring and indicate that every worker employed in the concern has to proceed to his place of work, in order to start as soon as the bell stops.

   The doorkeeper shall lock the door punctually at 6 A.M., 8.30 A.M., 1 P.M. and 4.30 P.M. . . .

2. When the bell is rung to denote the end of the working day, every workman, both on piece- and on day-wage, shall leave his workshop and the yard, but is not allowed to make preparations for his departure before the bell rings. Every breach of this rule shall lead to a fine . . . Only those who have obtained special permission by the overseer may stay on in the workshop in order to work. If a workman has worked beyond the closing bell, he must give his name to the gatekeeper on leaving, on pain of losing his payment for the overtime.

3. No workman, whether employed by time or piece, may leave before the end of the working day, without having first received permission from the overseer and having given his name to the gatekeeper. Omission of these two actions shall lead to a fine.

4. Repeated irregular arrival at work shall lead to dismissal. This shall also apply to those who are found idling by an official or overseer, and refuse to obey their order to resume work.

So strict are the instructions that if an overseer of a room be found talking to any person in the mill during working hours he is dismissed immediately—two or more overseers are employed in each room, if one be found a yard out of his ground he is discharged . . . everyone, manager, overseers, mechanics, oilers, spreeders, spinners, and reelers, have their particular duty pointed out to them, and if they transgress, they are instantly turned off as unfit for their situation.

—Employee’s description of the discipline at a British flax mill, Information Regarding Flax Spinning at Leeds, 1821
REGULATIONS

To be observed by all Persons employed by the
Proprietors of the Tremont Mills.

The Overseers are to be punctually in their Rooms at the starting of the Mill, and not to be absent unnecessarily during working hours. They are to see that all those employed in their rooms are in their places in due season, and keep a correct account of their time and work. They may grant leave of absence to those employed under them when there are spare hands in the room to supply their places; otherwise they are not to grant leave of absence except in cases of absolute necessity.

All persons in the employ of the Proprietors of the Tremont Mills, are required to observe the regulations of the room where they are employed. They are not to be absent from their work without consent, except in case of sickness, and then they are to send the Overseer word of the cause of their absence.

They are to board in one of the Boarding houses belonging to the Company, and conform to the regulations of the house where they board.

The Company will not employ any one who is habitually absent from public worship on the Sabbath.

All persons entering into the employment of the Company are considered as engaging to work twelve months.

All persons intending to leave the employment of the Company are to give two week’s notice of their intention to their Overseer; and their engagement with the Company is not considered as fulfilled, unless they comply with this regulation.

Payments will be made monthly, including board and wages, which will be made up to the last Saturday of every month, and paid in the course of the following week.

These Regulations are considered a part of the contract with all persons entering into the employment of the Proprietors of the Tremont Mills.

J. AIKEN, Agent.

(5) Entry to the firm’s property by any but the designated gateway, and exit by any prohibited route, e.g. by climbing fences or walls, or by crossing the [River] Spree, shall be punished by a fine . . . for the first offences, and dismissal for the second.

(6) No worker may leave his place of work otherwise than for reasons connected with his work.

(7) All conversation with fellow-workers is prohibited, if any worker requires information about his work, he must turn to the overseer, or to the particular fellow-worker designated for the purpose.
(8) Smoking in the workshops or in the yard is prohibited during working hours; anyone caught smoking shall be fined... for every such offence.

(9) Every worker is responsible for cleaning up his space in the workshop, and if in doubt, he is to turn to his overseer. All tools must always be kept in good condition, and must be cleaned after use. This applies particularly to the turner, regarding his lathe.

(10) Natural functions must be performed at the appropriate places, and whoever is found soiling walls, fences, squares, etc., and similarly, whoever is found washing his face and hands in the workshop and not in the places assigned for the purpose, shall be fined...

(12) It goes without saying that all overseers and officials of the firm shall be obeyed without question, and shall be treated with due deference. Disobedience will be punished by dismissal.

(13) Immediate dismissal shall also be the fate of anyone found drunk in any of the workshops...

(15) Every workman is obliged to report to his superiors any acts of dishonesty or embezzlement on the part of his fellow workmen.

Most factory conditions were terrible. Metalworkers worked with toxic materials; in spinning, the air was so damp that workers easily contracted respiratory infections. Until the end of the nineteenth century, workers toiled for a grueling thirteen to fourteen hours a day with only short periods for rest and meals. Such conditions were strikingly similar all over Europe and America. British journalist and politician William Cobbett published these observations in his journal the Political Register in November 1824. Cobbett compared factory workers in Britain to the condition of enslaved workers in the United States, but he believed that the conditions of industrial labor were even worse than the conditions of plantation slavery.

Some of these lords of the loom have in their employ thousands of miserable creatures. In the cotton-spinning work these creatures are kept, fourteen hours in each day, locked up, summer and winter, in a heat of from EIGHTY TO EIGHTY-FOUR DEGREES...

Now, then, do you duly consider what a heat of eighty-two is? Very seldom do we feel such a heat as this in England. The 31st of last August, and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of last September, were
very hot days. The newspapers told us that men had dropped
down dead in the harvest fields and that many horses had fallen
dead upon the road, and yet the heat during those days never
exceeded eighty-four degrees in the hottest part of the day. We
were retreating to the coolest rooms in our houses; we were
pulling off our coats, wiping the sweat off our faces, puffing, blowing,
and panting, and yet we were living in a heat nothing like
eighty degrees. What, then, must be the situation of the poor
creatures who are doomed to toil, day after day, for three hundred
and thirteen days in the year, fourteen hours in each day, in an
average heat of eighty-two degrees? Can any man, with a heart in
his body, and a tongue in his head, refrain from cursing a system
that produces such slavery and such cruelty?

Observe, too, that these poor creatures have no cool room to
retreat to, not a moment to wipe off the sweat, and not a breath
of air to come and interpose itself between them and infection.

Steelworkers in a Pittsburgh foundry stand clear of the sparks and flames
released into the air as molten metal is converted into steel. This new process of
steel production, developed in England in the mid-1820s, made it possible to
remove impurities from steel and make a stronger product, but the working
conditions remained dangerous.
The door of the place wherein they work, is locked, except half an hour, at tea-time; the workpeople are not allowed to send for water to drink, in the hot factory, even the rain-water is locked up, by the master's order, otherwise they would be happy to drink even that. If any spinner be found with his window open, he is to pay a fine of a shilling! Mr. Martin of Galway has procured Acts of Parliament to be passed to prevent cruelty to animals. If horses or dogs were shut up in a place like this they would certainly be thought worthy of Mr. Martin's attention.

Not only is there not a breath of sweet air in these truly infernal scenes; but, for a large part of the time, there is the abominable and pernicious stink of the gas to assist in the murderous effects of the heat. In addition to the heat and the gas, in addition to the noxious effluvia of the gas, mixed with the steam, there are the dust, and what is called the cotton-flyings or fuzz, which the unfortunate creatures have to inhale; and the fact is, the notorious fact is, that well-constituted men are rendered old and past labour at forty years of age, and that children are rendered decrepit and deformed, and thousands upon thousands of them slaughtered by consumptions, before they arrive at the age of sixteen. And are these establishments to boast of? If we were to admit the fact they compose an addition to the population of the country; if we were further to admit that they caused an addition to the pecuniary resources of the Government, ought not a government to be ashamed to derive resources from such means?

The French novelist Émile Zola was outraged by the conditions of French mine workers. Although the French government passed legislation in 1874 forbidding women and children to work underground in mines, many continued to do so. In his novel Germinal, published in 1885, Zola described the work of two young mine workers, Étienne and Catherine, who worked in the mine shaft pushing loaded tubs of coal to the surface. Zola based the novel on the Le Creusot coal mines in south central France, where workers struck for higher wages and shorter hours in 1870.

Étienne, whose eyes were getting used to the darkness, looked at Catherine... he was amazed by the strength and speed of the child, which was based more on skill than on muscle. She filled her tub quicker than he could, with short, quick, regular thrusts of her shovel; she then pushed it up to the incline, with one long, smooth movement, slipping effortlessly under the overhanging
rocks . . . [while] he kept banging and scraping himself, crashing his tub and grinding to a halt.

To tell the truth, it certainly wasn't an easy trip. The distance from the coal face to the incline was fifty or sixty metres; and the passage, which the stonemen had not yet widened, was hardly more than a gully, whose very uneven roof bulged and buckled all over the place: in some places there was only just enough room to get the loaded tub through. [They] had to crouch and push on hands and knees to avoid splitting their heads open. Besides, the props had already started to bend and split. You could see long pale cracks running right up the middle of them, making them look like broken crutches. You had to watch out not to rip your skin on these splinters; and under the relentless pressure, which was slowly crushing these oak posts even though they were as thick as a man's thigh, you had to slip along on your belly, with the secret fear of suddenly hearing your back snap in two.

She had to show him how to walk with his legs apart, bracing his feet against the timbers on either side of the tunnel in order to get some solid leverage. His body should be bent forward, and his arms stretched out straight in front of him so as to use all his muscles, including those of his shoulders and hips. He spent one whole trip following her, watching her run . . . with her hands placed so low she seemed to be trotting on all fours, like some small circus animal. She sweated and panted, and her joints were creaking, but she didn't complain, displaying the dull acceptance acquired by habit, as if it were mankind's common lot to live in this wretched, prostrate condition. But he was unable to follow her example, for his shoes hurt, and his body ached, from walking in that position with his head bent down. After a few minutes, the position became clear torture, an intolerable anguish so painful that he had to stop and kneel down for a moment so as to straighten his back and breathe freely.
A barefoot little boy in London sells matches from a wooden box strapped to his neck in this 1884 photograph. The box reads "Bryant and May's," one of the largest manufacturers of matches in England. Selling manufactured goods on the streets of large cities such as London was a common form of child labor during the industrial revolution.
A postcard from the end of the nineteenth century shows women and young girls of seven or eight employed in a silk spinning factory near Aubenas, in the Cévennes Mountains in southern France. Their job was to plunge raw silk cocoons into boiling water in order to separate the silk fibers. The factory appears to be lit by daylight streaming in through the skylight and the open windows. In these cramped conditions, it must have been incredibly hot, especially in summer.

Two boys stand barefoot on a mechanized spinning frame in a textile factory in Macon, Georgia, in 1909. The boys' job was to pull off the finished bobbins, drop them into the metal basket at the bottom of the machine, and replace them with empty bobbins. Both boys appear almost dwarfed by the size of the machines.
Two young boys work in the Cumberland glassworks in Bridgeton, New Jersey, in 1909. Their job was to work for hours at a time holding the molds into which experienced adult glass blowers blew the molten glass. The workshop is cramped and relatively dark.
This 1908 photograph, taken in the Catawba Cotton Mill in Newton, North Carolina, shows a group of boys who took finished bobbins from the spinning machines and brought them to the weavers. A large mechanized spinning frame stands at the right of the picture. The youngest boy looks to be nine or ten years old. The man with the mustache and the hat, the superintendent, towers over them. The cotton dust on the floor filled the air—and workers’ lungs—when the machines were running. Children as well as adult workers suffered severe respiratory problems, today known as white lung disease.

A Chicago Daily News photographer snapped this image of girls sitting at a sewing table in Chicago, Illinois, in about 1903. The photograph was taken during a sweatshop inspection by labor inspectors. The girls are sewing men’s suit jackets by hand. In the background several men work at other tasks. The gender division of labor was common in this industry.
weavers has been removed to great factory rooms of late, or that steam-weaving has become pretty general; a forward movement of the factory system in either case. Most unwholesome of all is the work of the runners, who are usually children of seven, and even of five and four, years old. Commissioner Grainger actually found one child of two years old employed at this work. Following a thread which is to be withdrawn by a needle from an intricate texture, is very bad for the eyes, especially when, as is usually the case, the work is continued fourteen to sixteen hours. In the least unfavourable case, aggravated near-sightedness follows; in the worst case, which is frequent enough, incurable blindness from decay of vision. But, apart from that, the children, in consequence of sitting perpetually bent up, become feeble, narrow-chested, and scrofulous from bad digestion. Disordered functions of the uterus are almost universal among the girls, and curvature of the spine also, so that ‘all the runners may be recognized from their gait’. The same consequences for the eyes and the whole constitution are produced by the embroidery of lace. Medical witnesses are unanimously of the opinion that the health of all children employed in the production of lace suffers seriously, that they are pale, weak, delicate, undersized, and much less able than other children to resist disease. The affections from which they usually suffer are general debility, frequent fainting, pains in the head, sides, back, and hips, palpitation of the heart, nausea, vomiting and want of appetite, curvature of the spine, scrofula, and consumption. The health of the female lacemakers especially is constantly and deeply undermined; complaints are universal of anaemia, difficult childbirth, and miscarriage. The same subordinate official of the Children’s Employment Commission reports further that the children are very often ill-clothed and ragged, and receive insufficient food, usually only bread and tea, often no meat for months together. As to their moral condition, he reports:

All the inhabitants of Nottingham, the police, the clergy, the manufacturers, the working people, and the parents of the children are all unanimously of opinion that the present system of labour is a most fruitful source of immorality. The threaders, chiefly boys, and the winders, usually girls, are called for in the factory at the same time; and as their parents cannot know how long they are wanted there, they have the finest opportunity to form improper connections and remain together after the close of the work. This has contributed, in no small degree, to the immorality which, according to general opinion, exists to a terrible extent in Nottingham. Apart from this, the quiet of home life, and the comfort of the family to which these children and young people belong, is wholly sacrificed to this most unnatural state of things.
time. Of the irregular cramming together of dwellings in ways which defy all rational plan, of the tangle in which they are crowded literally one upon the other, it is impossible to convey an idea. And it is not the buildings surviving from the old times of Manchester which are to blame for this; the confusion has only recently reached its height when every scrap of space left by the old way of building has been filled up and patched over until not a foot of land is left to be further occupied.

To confirm my statement I have drawn here a small section of the plan of Manchester - not the worst spot and not one-tenth of the whole Old Town.

This drawing will suffice to characterize the irrational manner in which the entire district was built, particularly the part near the Irk.

The south bank of the Irk is here very steep and between fifteen and thirty-feet high. On this abrupt slope there are planted three rows of houses, of which the lowest rise directly out of the river, while the front walls of the highest stand on the crest of the rise in Long Millgate. Among them are mills on the river, in short, the method of construction is as crowded and disorderly here as in the lower part of Long Millgate. Right and left a multitude of covered passages lead from the main street into numerous courts, and he who turns in thither gets into filth and disgusting grime, the equal of which is not to be found - especially in the courts which lead down to the Irk, and which contain unqualifiedly the most horrible dwellings which I have yet beheld. In one of these courts there stands directly at the entrance, at the end of the covered passage, a privy without a door, so dirty that the inhabitants can pass into and out of the court only by passing through foul pools of stagnant urine and excrement. This is the first court on the Irk above Ducie Bridge - it case any one should care to look into it. Below it on the river there are several tanneries which fill the whole neighbourhood with the stench of animal putrefaction. Below Ducie Bridge the only entrance to most of the houses is by means of narrow, dirty stairs and over heaps of refuse and filth. The first court below Ducie Bridge, known as Allen's Court, was in such a state at the time of the cholera that the sanitary police ordered it evacuated, swept, and disinfected with chloride of lime. Dr Kay gives a terrible description of the state of this court at the time. Since then, it seems to have been partially torn down and rebuilt; at least looking down from Ducie Bridge, the passer-by sees several ruined walls and heaps of débris with some newer houses. The view from this bridge, mercifully concealed from mortals of small stature by a parapet as high as a man, is characteristic for the whole district. At the bottom flows, or rather stagnates, the Irk, a narrow, coal-black, foul-smelling stream, full of débris and refuse, which it deposits on the lower right bank. In dry weather, a long string of the most disgusting blackish-green slime pools are left standing on this bank, from the depths of which bubbles of miasmatic gas constantly arise and give forth a stench unendurable even on the bridge forty or fifty feet above the surface of the stream. But besides this, the stream itself is checked every few paces by high weirs, behind which slime and refuse accumulate and rot in thick masses. Above the bridge are tanneries, bonemills, and gasworks, from which the court is supplied with the deposit it receives further the contents of all the neighbouring sewers and privies. It may be easily imagined, therefore, what sort of residue the stream deposits. Below the bridge you look upon the piles of débris, the refuse, filth, and offal from the courts on the steep left bank; here each house is packed close behind another, and in each is visible, all black, smoky, crumbling, ancient, with broken panes and window-frames. The background is furnished by old barrack-like factory buildings. On the lower right bank stands a long row of houses and mills, the second row being a ruin without a roof, piled with débris; the third stands so low that the lowest floor is uninhabitable, and therefore without windows or doors. Here the background embraces the pauper burial-ground, the station of the Liverpool and Leeds railway, and, in the rear of this, the Workhouse, the 'Poor-Law Bastille' of Manchester, which, like a citadel, looks threateningly down from behind its high walls and parapets on the hilltop, upon the working people's quarter below.

Above Ducie Bridge, the left bank grows more flat and the right bank...