

## City, work, and urban segregation: notes from Engels

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### Abstract

This essay analyzes some elements discussed by Engels in his study "*The Condition of the Working Class in England*". To this end, aspects related to the material conditions lived by workers and their employment situation are discussed. It seeks to relate both to the broader economic and social process, mainly expressed in the industrial revolution, and to aspects that remain in the process of proletarian exploitation even in the 21st century. The text draws on bibliography that dialogues with elements presented in Engels' text, especially Marxist authors who developed their research in the 20th and 21st centuries.

*Keywords:* Engels; Proletariat; Industrial Revolution; Capitalism.

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## 1. Introduction

Considering a work such as *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, originally published in 1844, to be current may seem contradictory, insofar as it is a study by Friedrich Engels about a particular social context that existed more than a century and a half ago. Considering the interpretation that the working class no longer exists or that Marxism has failed as a method of explaining reality, this work from Engels' youth would certainly be outdated. However, the relevance of this work is evident if capitalism is understood as a mode of production that is still in force or if it is understood that the logic of worker exploitation, despite changes in form, remains similar to that described by Engels in the 1840s.

This relevance can be pointed out from the fact that, although written at a time when Marx and Engels' analyses were still in their early stages, the work points out, through its description of the concrete situation of the English working class, elements that support the development of economic analyses associated with historical materialism, especially in the development of explanations about the contradictions and dynamics of capitalism. Engels' book is a detailed empirical study of the situation of the English working class, and is fundamental in showing both the contradictions of capitalism in the 19th century and elements that are still valid in the 21st century. We owe to Engels

[...] the analytical key to the conceptualization of the working class, whose *starting point* is an understanding of the central role played by the proletariat in *the production and reproduction of social life*, as well as its effective presence in *the class struggle* that characterizes capitalist society (Antunes, 2021, p. 94).

Capitalism and the exploitation of workers continue to exist, but in this process, "it has been complicating its instruments of domination, its forms of accumulation, causing profound changes both in the forms of production and in the composition of social classes" (Antunes, 2021, p. 96). However, despite these changes, which have occurred with greater intensity in recent decades,

[...] the contradictions of the capitalist system have not diminished. In fact, they have intensified greatly, concomitant with a profound process of exploitation of the workforce that is marked by the precarious conditions of salaried workers (Soares, 2010, p. 36-7).

One factor that stands out in Engels' book is his careful analysis of the sources used—oral accounts, various documents, press reports, among others—showing his concern with rigorous analysis of reality, which is central to the development of historical materialism. Engels (2008, p. 41) stated in his study on the

working class in England that “knowledge of the living conditions of the proletariat is therefore essential, on the one hand, to provide a solid foundation for socialist theories and, on the other, to support judgments about their legitimacy.”

The meaning of the term class has always generated considerable controversy, even though studies such as Engels’ make this understanding quite obvious. In this sense, from a methodological point of view, as Engels did, class must be analyzed “as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes that can only be studied when they themselves operate over a considerable historical period” (Thompson, 2018, p. 13). Workers can be understood as the class exploited by the owners of the means of production, producing more value, that is, selling their labor power to the bourgeoisie, whether industrialists, merchants, bankers, or even other segments of the ruling classes.

In this essay, we analyze some of the elements discussed by Engels in his study *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. To this end, we discuss aspects of the material conditions experienced by workers, their employment and exploitation situation, and even their health. Furthermore, it seeks to relate both to the broader economic and social process, expressed mainly in the industrial revolution, and to aspects that remain in the process of exploitation of the proletariat even in the 21st century.

## 2. Workers in the industrial revolution

One of the aspects Engels studies in his work is the cities that became large industrial centers, undergoing economic, political, and social transformations. Engels understands that the *industrial revolution* transformed society as a whole, with the organization of the economy shifting from small home workshops to large industries. In the period prior to the introduction of machines, the spinning and weaving of raw materials was carried out in the workers' own homes. According to Engels (2008, p. 45-6)

[...] these weaving families generally lived in the countryside near the cities, and what they earned was perfectly sufficient for their livelihood because the domestic market—almost the only market—was still decisive for the demand for fabrics and because the overwhelming power of competition, which developed later with the conquest of foreign markets and the expansion of trade, did not significantly affect wages.

With the introduction of the mechanical loom and, later, other technological innovations, workers were grouped into large industrial plants, gradually reducing the number of artisan workers. Engels (2008, p. 48) points out that "it became possible to produce much more yarn: if before a weaver always employed three

spinners, never had enough yarn, and had to wait to be supplied, now there was more yarn than the number of workers employed could process." Faced with the establishment of large industries, workers were forced to work for others, selling their labor in the large factories that were emerging. According to Engels (2008, p. 50), "it was decided in the main sectors of English industry that *mechanical labor would triumph over manual labor*, and its entire recent history reveals how manual workers were successively displaced from their positions by machines."

In this process of capitalist production dynamics, capital and production are centralized, that is, industry concentrated ownership in a few hands. This new form of production required enormous amounts of capital, with which it created gigantic establishments, ruining the small artisan bourgeoisie and putting natural forces at its service, expelling isolated manual workers from the market. One of the consequences of this process of transformation in the organization and division of labor was the emergence of large urban concentrations. According to Engels (2008, p. 64), "the large industrial establishment requires many workers, who work together in the same building; they must live close together—and, therefore, where a medium-sized factory arises, a village soon springs up." Engels (2008, p. 65) points out that in large cities, progressively, "the centralization of property has reached its highest degree," so that "there is only a rich class and a poor class, with the petty bourgeoisie disappearing day by day."

In later works, the theme is taken up again by both Marx and Engels. Marx, in particular, in one of the best-known passages of *Capital*, analyzes the so-called primitive accumulation, a historical process of capital accumulation. According to Marx, "the process that creates the capitalist relationship can only be the process of separating the worker from the ownership of the conditions for carrying out his work," converting "direct producers into wage workers" (Marx, 2013, p. 786). In this analysis, he points out that "the expropriation of land that previously belonged to rural producers, to peasants, constitutes the basis of the entire process" (Marx, 2013, p. 787). This led to the formation of a mass of unemployed workers, many of whom found themselves in poverty, forced into begging, or even theft. Marx (2013, p. 805-6) describes the situation of the proletariat as follows:

Expelled by the dissolution of feudal retinues and by the violent and intermittent expropriation of their lands, this entirely free proletariat could not be absorbed by emerging manufacturing as quickly as it had been brought into the world. On the other hand, those who were suddenly torn from their customary way of life could not adjust to the discipline of the new situation either. They turned en masse to begging, robbery, and vagrancy, partly out of predisposition, but in most cases out of necessity.

Therefore, as Engels points out in his classic work, the rural exodus led a large number of peasants to migrate to impoverished areas of large cities, where workers were concentrated. It can be observed that in this process,

[...] general social and political unrest reflected not only material poverty but also social impoverishment—the destruction of old ways of life without their being replaced by anything that poor workers could consider a satisfactory equivalent (Hobsbawm, 2011, p. 85).

This process continues to unfold today, considering that perhaps the main feature of the contemporary world of work is precariousness. However, although “it is a global feature and is present in the central capitalist economies, precariousness affects countries that industrialized later and have a higher degree of dependence on these central economies in different ways” (Mattos, 2019, p. 77). It is also observed that “there are social sectors that are more affected, such as women and young people, and countries that industrialized later are still fertile ground for the precariousness of labor relations” (Mattos, 2019, p. 82).

### **3. Workers in large cities**

In Engels' book, the so-called "big cities," especially London, with its 2.5 million inhabitants, then considered the "commercial capital of the world," are given great prominence. Engels (2008, p. 68-9) saw in this city,

[...] everywhere, barbaric indifference and gross selfishness on the one hand, and indescribable misery on the other; everywhere, social warfare: everyone's home under siege; everywhere, mutual plunder under the protection of the law; and all this so shamelessly and openly that we are appalled at the consequences of our social conditions.

This situation also occurred in Manchester, Leeds, and other large cities, where, according to Engels (2008, p. 69), a "social war" is being waged in which "the weapons of combat are capital, direct or indirect ownership of the means of subsistence and the means of production." The burden of this situation fell on the workers. Unemployment was a permanent condition among the poor, because “if you are lucky enough to find work, that is, if the bourgeoisie does you the favor of enriching itself at your expense, you can expect a wage that is just enough to keep you alive” (Engels, 2008, p. 69). In a situation of greater despair, “if you cannot find work and do not fear the police, you can steal; you can also starve to death, in which case the

police will take care to ensure that your death is silent so as not to shock the bourgeoisie” (Engels, 2008, p. 69).

In these large cities, there were “neighborhoods of ill repute” where workers were concentrated. In general, workers were assigned “a separate area, where, far from the gaze of the more fortunate classes, they must get by, for better or worse, on their own” (Engels, 2008, p. 70). These neighborhoods had “the worst houses in the ugliest part of the city; almost always, a long row of brick buildings, one or two stories high, sometimes with inhabited basements and generally arranged in an irregular manner” (Engels, 2008, p. 70). In these neighborhoods, “the streets are neither flat nor paved, they are dirty, littered with vegetable and animal debris, without sewers or drainage channels, full of stagnant and fetid puddles” (Engels, 2008, p. 70). The book describes in vivid detail the situation experienced by workers.

Engels points out in his work some cases reported by the press that describe very dramatic situations experienced by people living in these areas. One such case concerns two boys who, "hungry, had stolen a piece of half-cooked beef from a store, which they devoured immediately" (Engels, 2008, p. 74). The judge, gathering more information about the case, discovered that "the boys' mother, the widow of a former soldier who had later served in the police, lived in poverty with her two children after her husband's death" (Engels, 2008, p. 74). The situation of a family is then described, consisting of six children, living “literally piled up” in a tiny room, without furniture, and with little to eat. As Engels (2008, p. 74) describes, “the poor mother said that, in the previous year, she had sold her bed to buy food; she had pawned the sheets at the grocery store—in short, she had given everything away in exchange for bread.”

These are merely illustrative situations, with some workers in slightly better situations and others in even worse situations. In London, for example, there were around 50,000 people who had nowhere to live. According to Engels (2008, p. 75), paid accommodation was “filled with beds from top to bottom: in one room, four, five, and six people, as many as could fit, and in each bed, four, five, or six people were piled up, also as many as could fit—healthy or sick, old and young, men and women, sober and drunk, all mixed together.” Those who cannot afford this type of accommodation “sleep anywhere, on street corners, under an archway, in any corner where the police or landlords let them rest in peace” (Engels, 2008, p. 75). Faced with this situation, Engels (2008, p. 115) pointed out that

[...] large cities are inhabited mainly by workers, since, at best, there is one bourgeois for every two, often three, and in some places four workers; these workers have nothing and live on their wages, which, in most cases, only guarantee their daily survival.

Engels showed in detail the conditions experienced by the proletariat, including their living quarters. According to his description, the houses

[...] are poorly located, poorly constructed, poorly maintained, poorly ventilated, damp, and unsanitary; their inhabitants are confined to a minimal space and, in most cases, *an entire family lives in a single room*; the interior of the houses is miserable: there is even a total absence of the most indispensable furniture (Engels, 2008, p. 115).

Engels, showing another fundamental aspect of his work, also highlights issues related to workers' health. In his study, he associated illness with the adversities "to which workers are exposed due to fluctuations in trade, unemployment, and miserable wages in times of crisis" (Engels, 2008, p. 141). For Engels, this situation had serious consequences for workers' health:

It often happens that, with the weekly wage running out before the end of the week, in the last few days the family lacks food or has only what is strictly necessary to keep from starving. It is clear that such a way of life can only give rise to all sorts of diseases; when illness strikes, when the man—whose work supports the family and whose physical activity requires more food and, consequently, is the first to fall ill—when this man falls ill, that is when great misery begins (Engels, 2008, p. 115).

Engels also problematized alcohol abuse among workers, understood as a form of consolation and leisure, given the need to endure the dehumanization caused by their own work. Engels drew attention to the issue of alcoholism, relating it to the situation to which workers were subjected:

All illusions and temptations combine to induce workers to alcoholism. Spirits are their only source of pleasure, and everything conspires to keep them handy. The worker returns home tired and exhausted; he finds a dwelling without any comforts, damp, unpleasant, and dirty; he has an urgent need for distraction; he needs something to make his work worthwhile, to make the prospect of the bitter next day bearable. He is depressed, dissatisfied, feels ill, and is driven to hypochondria; this state of mind is mainly due to his poor health and poor diet and is exacerbated to the point of intolerability by the uncertainty of his existence, his absolute dependence on chance, and his inability to personally do anything to bring some security to his life. His body, weakened by the unhealthy atmosphere and poor diet, urgently requires an external stimulant; the need for company can only be satisfied in a tavern, because there is no other place to meet friends (Engels, 2008, p. 142).

This scenario of population growth, increased exploitation and poverty, and physical and mental exhaustion of workers is still an inherent feature of capitalism. In the 19th century, it was observed that, “with the significant expansion of capitalism in its new industrial phase, the proletariat not only advanced *quantitatively*, in exponential proportion, but also *qualitatively*” (Antunes, 2021, p. 92). These features of capitalism have been analyzed by historiography produced after Engels' work. In the context of the early development of industrialization, “cities and industrial areas grew rapidly, without planning or supervision, and the most basic services of city life failed to keep pace” (Hobsbawm, 2013, p. 317). In this process, “urban development was a gigantic process of class segregation, pushing the new poor workers into large concentrations of misery, away from the centers of government and business, and from the new residential areas of the bourgeoisie” (Hobsbawm, 2013, p. 318).

#### 4. Competition and employment

Another point addressed by Engels in this work, which would later be highlighted in Marxist writings, has to do with what appears in the text as *competition*, that is, “the most complete expression of the war of all against all that reigns in modern bourgeois society” (Engels, 2008, p. 117). This war “is waged not only between the different classes of society, but also between the different members of these classes,” that is, “the workers compete with each other just as the bourgeois compete” (Engels, 2008, p. 117). Thus, according to Engels (2008, p. 117-8), “the weaver who operates a mechanical loom competes with the manual weaver; the unemployed or poorly paid manual weaver competes with the one who is employed or better paid and seeks to replace him.”

The situation of the proletariat can be described in more detail. In the words of Engels (2008, p. 118), they find themselves “devoid of everything.” after all, in capitalist society, “the bourgeoisie has arrogated to itself the monopoly of all means of subsistence, in the broadest sense of the term,” that is, “what the proletariat needs, it can only obtain from this bourgeoisie, whose monopoly is protected by the force of the state.” This situation is even reflected in the education of children. According to Engels (2008, p. 119), “the factory worker must be guaranteed a wage that allows him to educate his children for regular work—but only enough so that he cannot dispense with his children’s wages and make them anything more than workers.”

The Capital also finds mechanisms to reduce wages, which involves the use of child and female labor. Engels (2008, p. 119) points out that

[...] in a family where everyone works, each person can be content with a proportionally lower wage, and the bourgeoisie, with a view to reducing wages, took

full advantage of the opportunity provided by mechanization to employ women and children.

Therefore, labor exploitation occurs intensely and even cruelly. According to Engels (2008, p. 119), wages "end up leveling off at an average, on the basis of which a family in which everyone works lives reasonably well, while one with few employed members lives quite poorly." The worker ends up submitting to this logic, even if it means living in a worse place or even struggling to support himself and his family. As a result, the bourgeoisie obtains the number of workers necessary to ensure the functioning of its industries, but, according to Engels (2008, p. 119),

[...] if there are more workers than the bourgeoisie is interested in employing, if, at the end of the competitive struggle between them, there is still a contingent without work, that contingent will starve to death, because the bourgeoisie will only offer them employment if it can sell the product of their labor at a profit.

Engels presents here, in discussing the situation of unemployment, in a still very preliminary form, one of the fundamental ideas later expounded in *Capital*:

[...] if the demand for workers increases, their price rises; if it decreases, their price falls; and if the demand falls to the point where a certain number of workers cannot be sold, they remain *in stock*, so to speak, and, as there is no employment to provide them with the means of subsistence, they starve to death (Engels, 2008, p. 119).

This is a first attempt to present what would come to be called the *industrial reserve army*. Marx (2013, p. 707) stated in *Capital* that this "surplus working population is a necessary product of the accumulation or development of wealth on a capitalist basis," constituting "an available industrial reserve army, which belongs to capital as absolutely as if it had created it on its own account."

This process of constituting a sector of the proletariat in search of employment remains a structuring element in capitalism. In this reality, "the active stimulation of competition among workers across space has also worked in favor of the capitalist advantage" (Harvey, 2006, p. 57). Thus, we observe the

[...] capacity of capital to fragment, divide, differentiate, absorb, transform, and even exacerbate old cultural divisions, to produce spatial differentiations, to mobilize geopolitically, within the general homogenization produced by wage labor and market exchange (Harvey, 2006, p. 52).

Engels, in his work, realizes that labor (or the worker, or the workforce, it is not entirely clear in the text) is also a commodity, inserted in the capitalist market. Engels is able to develop these conclusions precisely because of his empirical observation of the situation of workers, their difficulties, and, above all, the relationship between the two fundamental classes in the process of value production, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

## 5. Engels and his work today

These elaborations formulated by Engels are relevant today in different ways. First, because they demonstrate the situation of English workers in a specific period, highlighting their struggles and constituting an important document of the social and political situation that preceded important achievements for workers, such as the reduction of working hours and the prohibition of child labor, among others. Second, Engels' work can be used as a reference to analyze the changes and continuities in the conditions of the working class, including the situation of urban marginalization and its incipient participation as a politically organized force in the different phases and processes of the industrial revolution.

A third aspect relates to the fact that Engels' book points out central elements about the functioning of capitalism, such as competition between different classes and their own contradictions, whether or not they own the means of production. It is thus possible to understand elements of the transformations that have taken place in capitalism over the last two centuries, as well as the continuities in this form of production and reproduction of human life. Furthermore, based on Engels' analysis of the fundamentals of capitalism, it is possible to understand the forms of labor production and value production, comparing these aspects with what occurs in contemporary society.

It is also noteworthy that this was the first empirical analysis of the contradictions of capitalism, based on the method that would later be perfected and known as *historical materialism*. Engels' work presents the foundations of the analyses in *Capital*, such as the value of labor power, the laws of accumulation, and the industrial reserve army, among other points. Without the conceptual depth that would later be developed, the method used by Marx in his masterpiece is applied here for the first time. On the other hand, although still in an incipient form, elements that would later be widely used in historical studies, such as oral accounts and the press, are consistently present in this early work by Engels.

This work by Engels is a classic for anyone who wants to learn about the history of the working class and become familiar with the development of Marxism, especially with regard to the exploitation of labor,

the situation to which workers are subjected, and, above all, how they organize their reaction against capitalist exploitation.

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