

Working For a Fair and Just Future: The Imbalance of Rights and Responsibilities Between the
Working Class and Business Owners During the First Industrial Revolution

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Paper

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The First Industrial Revolution is an exceptionally interesting period to analyze the rights and responsibilities of economic classes. It was an era of completely unrestricted capitalism, with government intervention in business virtually nonexistent for some time. These unique circumstances make this period an intriguing study. During this era the differences between the rights each party had and the responsibilities each party possessed were some of the starkest in modern times. My topic explores these discrepancies and examines how we can prevent these huge imbalances from appearing in developing and industrialized countries today in order to craft a fairer future.

I spent a great quantity of time conducting research for this project. I combed through trusted internet sources, reading, gathering ideas, and taking notes. I visited the library and went online to browse books about the Industrial Revolution. It was difficult to locate primary sources, given that this period was roughly two hundred years ago, but I worked hard to find as many as I could. It took many hours of skimming, searching, and reading to conduct my research, find all of my sources, and then integrate them into my paper.

I created my project by bringing all of my research, notes, and sources together into one cohesive paper. I began by writing my context so that I could better understand where this huge imbalance came from, and then it was easier for me to dive into crafting my argument. While I was able to utilize many of the sources from my research, I often hunted for new sources during

the writing process to strengthen my evidence. After drafting my writing, I edited, refined, and reorganized it until I had achieved the flow and phrased my argument as I wanted.

My historical argument is that analyzing the rights and responsibilities of the working class and business-owning class during the First Industrial Revolution is important because it can help prevent such imbalances from occurring today, both in industrialized countries and developing nations that are still facing new and early waves of industrialization. We must ensure we learn from the mistakes of the past so they cannot happen again if we want to form a fairer future, where everyone can benefit from the many positives industrialization brings. The First Industrial Revolution serves as a case study, or a cautionary tale, of when society strays too far in one direction, with relatively no business oversight.

The First Industrial Revolution has had an extremely powerful impact on history. It was a huge turning point where many countries shifted from rural, agrarian nations into wealthy, manufacturing, urban nations. It kicked off a series of innovations that formed the many technologies we take for granted today. It fundamentally transformed our economy, as wage-labor and mass production became the central focus. Life before the Industrial Revolution was drastically different from life today in terms of technologies, economies, everyday life, and more. It is what transformed our world from what it was into the modern world we know today.

The Industrial Revolution is widely regarded as one of the most essential turning points in world history.¹ This explosion of industry and manufacturing was made possible by millions of workers, many of whom endured long work days in strikingly dangerous conditions for scant pay. Factory owners and those in the upper class witnessed their wealth boom at the expense of their employees and the lower classes. Workers fulfilled their responsibilities but had few rights, while factory owners, who possessed the many rights their money bought them, carried a moral responsibility to protect and not abuse their workers. This imbalance between rights and responsibilities still has significant impacts today. Understanding this polarity can help us ensure a fairer future where all classes can experience gains from economic advancement. Not only does this matter in countries going through the initial waves of industrialization, but also in wealthier, developed nations. To better understand these rights and responsibilities, it is first essential to understand the Industrial Revolution and how it began.

Samuel Slater was a British mechanic who traveled to the United States in 1789. He worked with others, including Moses Brown, to establish the Slater Mill. This mill was based on the models in Britain that Slater knew well, and it became the first commercially successful water-powered textile mill in the country.² The mill was located in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Children worked at the Slater Mill, and families inhabited the mill villages nearby. This mill defined what early mills in the United States would look like. During this earlier period of the Industrial Revolution, New England cotton mills were small and often existed on river banks. The Slater Mill initiated the process of textile mill expansion throughout New England.³

¹ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*. Avalon Publishing, 2013, pg. 1

² Leavitt, Sarah. *Slater Mill*. Edited by Sarah Leavitt, Arcadia, 1997, pg. 7

³ Leavitt, Sarah. *Slater Mill*, pg. 7

The New England textile industry was the first in America to evolve, with textile production moving from households and small workshops to factories, which could output many times more goods. The construction of these factories accelerated during the War of 1812, when embargos protected them from competition from more developed British enterprises.⁴ These factories could produce much more material than a family or individual could. A steam loom weaver, for example, could produce three and a half times more product than a hand loomer over the course of a week.⁵

One follower of the Slater Mill was the Lowell Mills, which opened in 1823 in Lowell, Massachusetts. Many “mill girls,” as young New England women who labored in cotton factories were called, hailed from New England farming communities.⁶ The mills needed to attract workers, and many of these women were enticed by their lucrative offers, as their rural lives offered limited economic opportunities without full-time work for fixed wages.⁷ While women gained more economic freedom and had social opportunities and experiences they could not receive at home, over time, the conditions of working in the mills deteriorated. As competition increased, the living standards and attractive conditions of the mills at Lowell and nearby mills, like Lawrence, Chicopee, and Fall River, devolved into the same grueling hours and terrible working and living conditions that came to define factories during this period. The town of Lowell, once a model for industrial development in the United States, became a slum blighted with deteriorating tenements and poorly-run mills.⁸

⁴ Leavitt, Sarah. *Slater Mill*, pg. 8

⁵ Guest, Richard. *Compendious History of the Cotton Manufacture*. Manchester, 1823, pp. 44-48

⁶ Dubofsky, Melvyn, and Joseph A. McCartin. *Labor in America: A History*. Wiley, 2024, pg. 33

⁷ Deane, Phyllis. *The First Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 1979, pg. 147

⁸ Eisler, Benita, editor. *Lowell Offering: Writings By New England Mill Women 1840-1845*. WW Norton, 1998, pg. 215

Before the advancement of the Slater Mill model, economies ran utilizing the artisan system, which later evolved into the putting-out system. Artisans would produce goods after spending years learning their craft from skilled masters. Once they were proficient enough, they could open their own shop where they would specialize in making one good, performing all of the steps in the production process.⁹ The putting-out system involved an entrepreneur “putting out” materials to local families who would be paid by the piece to perform one step in the production process.¹⁰ The families would earn a set wage for this labor. The entire family would pitch in, including children, who would assist their parents.¹¹ This was the beginning of the production process as industrialization began to evolve from the artisan systems. A “team process” began, as each family would perform one step in the production process before the goods were transported to another family, who would then perform another step. This process was found to be more productive than the artisan system. This was one of the first implementations of the specialization of labor, an idea birthed by Scottish economist Adam Smith in his influential book *The Wealth of Nations*.¹²

After some time, merchants began to bring the workers to the goods instead of bringing the goods to the workers through the establishment of the factory.¹³ Factories developed in England first and then crossed the Atlantic to America, when Slater and others traveled there. Sir Richard Arkwright, one of the leading inventors during the first Industrial Revolution, owned several factories in England, including mills at Cromford and Nottingham. Wealthy investors like Arkwright were able to purchase their factories outright, but oftentimes, an informal group of

⁹ Langlois, R. N., and Axel Leijonhufvud. *Economics as a Process: Essays in the New Institutional Economics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pg. 211-212

¹⁰ Langlois, R. N., and Axel Leijonhufvud. *Economics as a Process*, pg. 204-205

¹¹ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 5

¹² Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. vol. 1, Strahan, 1776, pg. 21-22

¹³ Langlois, R. N., and Axel Leijonhufvud. *Economics as a Process*, pg. 205-211

leading wealthy citizens would pool their money to fund costly projects.¹⁴ The Cromford Mills were built in 1771, making it one of the first major mills of the Industrial Revolution. In the following decades, many more steam-powered factories opened their doors in Great Britain.¹⁵

Mill and factory workers during this period in both countries were subject to awful treatment. Working conditions were exceedingly dangerous. Workers often risked serious injury, including losing a hand, while at work.¹⁶ The modern safety standards that exist today were nonexistent. Workers wore loose clothing with their hair untied and had no protection while working with hazardous machinery.¹⁷ Workers labored in loud, unventilated areas and inhaled dust, lint, filaments, and other materials that irritated or damaged their lungs.¹⁸ The loud noise not only made the factory conditions unpleasant but also could permanently damage their hearing. The work days were long, often extending to fourteen hours.¹⁹ Oftentimes, workers were not allowed to take breaks or even sit down.²⁰ Employees were frequently fined for doing little wrong. One minor mistake or infraction, such as walking in a few minutes late, could erase an entire day of pay.²¹

The conditions children endured were even harsher. Children were forced to fit into areas where adults could not in order to troubleshoot and free jams in mechanical gears. Injuries

¹⁴ Morris, Charles R. *The Dawn of Innovation: The First American Industrial Revolution*. PublicAffairs, 2012, pg. 164

¹⁵ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 10

¹⁶ Capuano, Peter. *Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body*. University of Michigan Press, 2015, pg. 47

¹⁷ Brown, John. *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe, an Orphan Boy*. R. Carlile, 1832, pg. 18-26

¹⁸ Gaskell, Peter. *The Manufacturing Population of England: Its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery; with an Examination of Infant Labour*. London, Baldwin and Cradock, 1833, pg. 247-249

¹⁹ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 125

²⁰ Brown, John. *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe, an Orphan Boy*. R. Carlile, 1832, pg. 21

²¹ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 125

occurred often, leaving countless young children with mangled hands or lost limbs.²² Children were strictly disciplined, often being thrashed or beaten if they did not please their managers, and they had many unnecessary rules to follow.²³ Despite all of this, children made just a fraction of an adult man, and adult men were still paid extremely little. Children during this time were no strangers to work, but as historian Peter N. Stearns put it, “Children had moved from providing supplemental labor to being beasts of burden.”²⁴

Even outside of the factories, lower classes felt the impacts of this societal shift toward urbanization greatly. Since thousands of workers were needed to be employed in these new factories, rapid urbanization occurred. Many workers inhabited tenements, which had extremely tight living quarters, where over a dozen people could share one room. Diseases ripped through cramped neighborhoods, as trash and human waste piled and festered in the open streets due to a lack of sewers.²⁵ Coal was widely used in cities, which led to extreme air pollution, resulting in a marked increase in sickness and death.²⁶ Cities were cramped, unsanitary, and polluted. Surgeon Peter Gaskell wrote, “The moral condition of the labouring population, in the manufacturing districts, is in itself deplorable; neither is the physical condition less so.”²⁷

Living in cities and working in factories was more convenient for the business owners, but it was quite a drastic change for workers. Instead of earning some extra money by doing a

²² Brown, *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe, an Orphan Boy*, pg. 26-30

²³ Children’s Employment Commission. *The Condition and Treatment of the Children Employed in the Mines and Collieries of the United Kingdom*. London: William Strange, 1842, pg. 30

²⁴ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 5

²⁵ Kearns, Gerry, et al. “Duncan and The Cholera Test: Public Health in Mid Nineteenth-Century Liverpool.” *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 1994, pg 101-102

²⁶ Beach, Brian, and W. Walker Hanlon. “Coal Smoke and Mortality in an Early Industrial Economy.” *The Economic Journal*, vol. 128, no. 615, 2017

²⁷ Gaskell, Peter. *The Manufacturing Population of England*, pg. 214

little additional work with their family in their own house and property, they now lived in awful tenements and toiled in the factories. Skilled artisans also suffered from this trend, as their expensive, high-quality goods struggled to compete with the much cheaper goods mass-produced in factories.²⁸

When a factory went up in flames, the factory owners contributed to the deaths of many workers. While laws may not have held them responsible, it was the moral responsibility of these owners to keep their employees safe while on the job. One example of a factory fire was in 1775, at Colne Bridge Mill, when the cotton factory just outside Huddersfield, England, experienced a devastating fire.²⁹ It commenced when a ten-year-old was given a naked candle and tasked with collecting unspun scraps of cotton in a dark room, the air thick with cotton and dust fibers. The candle accidentally started a fire, and the nearby cotton supply went up in flames, trapping workers on the upper floors of the mills. Seventeen of the 26 women and girls working that night lost their lives.³⁰ Another example is the Albion Mills fire in 1791. The accidental fire burned the mills and nearby houses and left 500 people unemployed.³¹

Some factory owners, like Robert Owen, treated their workers differently. His mills, constructed in Lanarkshire, Scotland, treated workers much more fairly than any of his contemporaries. The children who worked there attended school with a focus on character development and were not punished. The 2000 people who worked at the factory lived in a community, as Owen himself put it, that “exhibits the general appearance of industry,

²⁸ Dubofsky, Melvyn, and Joseph A. McCartin. *Labor in America*, pg. 39

²⁹ *Leeds Mercury*, 21 February 1818

³⁰ *Leeds Mercury*, 21 February 1818

³¹ “The Albion Mills Destroyed by Fire.” *The Times*, no. 1942, 3 March 1791, pg. 3

temperance, comfort, health, and happiness.”³² This kind of mill, where cleanliness, thrift, and order were encouraged among workers, was revolutionary at the time. Owen, being a utopian socialist, had a worldview that contrasted with the vast majority of mill owners at the time. While the term would not be coined until the late 1800s, most factory owners possessed a Social Darwinist perspective, where they believed they were inherently superior to their workers, which justified the low pay and poor conditions.³³

In 1833, the English Parliament passed the Factory Act, which increased protection for children working in textile mills.³⁴ This piece of legislation improved the rights of child workers but did little to help the massive inequity that had arisen. Under the act, those under nine were no longer permitted to work in the mills, those under twelve were limited to eight hours a day, and those under eighteen were limited to twelve hours a day. It established a committee to enforce these laws through inspections.³⁵ More relatively modest reforms were passed in the following years. This marked the beginning of a turning point, where social attitudes pertaining to workplace responsibilities began to morph into legal ones.

Most of these workers were laboring to support their families. Many were toiling to support themselves, as factories provided economic opportunities not found elsewhere.³⁶ Workers generally treated the factories, their employers, their fellow employees, and their jobs with respect. This is what they were responsible for doing. The factory-owning class was responsible for protecting the safety and health of their workers. Many of them failed miserably

³² Owen, Robert. *A New View of Society*. vol. 2, Cadell & Davies, 1813, pg. 31-32

³³ Bannister, Robert. *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought*. Temple University Press, 2010, pg. 86-90

³⁴ UK Parliament. *Factories Act 1833*. 1833, Chapter 102, pg 985-997

³⁵ UK Parliament. *Factories Act 1833*. Chapter 102, pg 988-990

³⁶ Deane, Phyllis. *The First Industrial Revolution*, pg. 147

at this task. Workers often fell ill, became injured, or even died working in unsafe conditions. Although the responsibilities of factory owners were not written into law for some time, they carried a moral responsibility to protect and not abuse their employees. While many failed, there were some standouts, like Robert Owen, who treated their workers well and believed others should do the same.³⁷ They certainly had a right to own factories and make them profitable. Yet they did not possess the right to take unfair advantage of their workers.

While the first Industrial Revolution is now just a period in history, there have been multiple waves of industrialization, like ripples on a pond, around the globe. These industrialization waves continue today. During the 1880s, Russia, Japan, Australia, Canada, and select regions of eastern and southern Europe experienced a wave. In the 1960s and 70s, the Pacific Rim and China saw a wave of industrialization. In the 1980s, Turkey, India, Brazil, and other parts of Latin America witnessed an industrial revolution.³⁸ While we cannot predict where the next waves of industrialization will occur, there are still many regions of the world that will go through an initial or secondary wave of industrialization.

These waves of industrialization bring many benefits. They turn agrarian, rural nations into wealthy, productive, prosperous nations, and they bring positive fundamental changes to society.³⁹ In the past, as demonstrated by the First Industrial Revolution, these changes have brought wealth and prosperity to the upper classes while largely leaving the lower classes behind. Lower and middle classes did gain some social mobility and the ability to work for wages and purchase possessions with those wages, but their progress was minimal compared to the huge

³⁷ Owen, Robert. *A New View of Society*. vol. 2, pg. 31-32

³⁸ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 1-2

³⁹ Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 2

gains of the upper classes.⁴⁰ Ensuring that workers have fair wages, safe working conditions, and enacting other laws can make sure that all classes can gain from future waves of industrialization, and no one will be left behind.

While earlier waves of industrialization exaggerated the worker-corporation struggles, even in countries like the United States and Britain, which initially industrialized over 200 years ago, these conversations remain ongoing today. Workers continue to fight for the right to unionize and collectively bargain, while corporations attempt to prevent and break up such unions.⁴¹ When corporations break profitability and revenue records, workers campaign for higher pay and better benefits, wanting their slice of the pie. The struggles over workers' rights and responsibilities and business owners' rights and responsibilities still rage on today.

Discussions related to minimum wage, worker protections, quality standards, regulation, deregulation, and more continue in these industrialized nations. Countries and governments seek to find a balance that maximizes economic growth, output, innovation, and freedom while still ensuring everyone can live fairly. It is an important topic in countries that are new to industrialization, and also to developed countries, making the study of the first Industrial Revolution and the differences in rights and responsibilities between classes vital. It can serve as a cautionary tale of moving too far to one side of the spectrum.

In the first Industrial Revolution, the working class was responsible for making money to keep themselves and those who relied on them afloat. They had a responsibility to be respectful

⁴⁰ Deane, Phyllis. *The First Industrial Revolution*, pg. 147

⁴¹ Dubofsky, Melvyn, and Joseph A. McCartin. *Labor in America*, pg. 441

to their employers and workplaces, which the vast majority of them were. Yet they possessed very few rights due to the lack of oversight and accountability. They were subject to cruel and unfair treatment by their employers, and it took decades before any modest reforms were observed. While the first Industrial Revolution is a period in history at this point, there are countries today that have recently been, are, or soon will be going through the early or later stages of industrialization.⁴² By glancing into the past and analyzing the vast differences and inequalities in rights and responsibilities between workers and factory owners during the first wave of industrialization, we can identify and learn from the missteps taken, avoid the pitfalls, and in doing so better prepare ourselves to guarantee rights to each party in future waves so all involved can gain from industrialization.

⁴² Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*, pg. 1-2

Works Cited (MLA)

Primary Sources:

Brown, John. *A Memoir of Robert Blincoe, an Orphan Boy*. R. Carlile, 1832.

This book aided my research by discussing some of the conditions that people, children in particular, faced while working in the mills. The details it contained of the grim experiences and circumstances of life in the mills advanced my understanding of mill conditions.

Children's Employment Commission. *The Condition and Treatment of the Children Employed in the Mines and Collieries of the United Kingdom*. London: William Strange, 1842.

This source outlines some of the abuses and conditions that children faced while working during the Industrial Revolution, which I highlighted in my paper. Children who worked were part of the working class during this era, and this information helped me understand the conditions working-class citizens faced.

Gaskell, Peter. *The Manufacturing Population of England: Its Moral, Social, and Physical Conditions, and the Changes which Have Arisen from the Use of Steam Machinery; with and Examination of Infant Labour*. London, Baldwin and Cradock, 1833.

I used this source to learn about the effects felt by the general population due to the Industrial Revolution outside of the workplace.

Leeds Mercury, 21 February 1818.

This source informed me about the Colne Bridge Mill fire. I learned how the neglect of owners could have severe consequences, like the serious injury or death of employees.

Richard Guest, *Compendious History of the Cotton Manufacture* (Manchester 1823).

From this source, I was able to compare the speed and efficiency of hand loomers compared to steam loomers. This aided my understanding of the development of factories and the impact of new inventions and technologies.

Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. vol. 1, Strahan, 1776.

This source helped me understand the underlying economic philosophies that led to the formation of the putting-out and later factory labor systems.

Owen, Robert. *A New View of Society*. vol. 2, Cadell & Davies, 1813.

I utilized this source to learn about Robert Owen and some of the positive things that he did at his mills. This showed me how not all factory owners were cruel and did not care about their workers.

“The Albion Mills Destroyed by Fire.” *The Times*, no. 1942, 3 March 1791.

My research was advanced by this source as it showed me how mill fires can have a huge impact on the employees of the mill and the citizens living nearby. I used it to help show how the negligence of mill owners could have large impacts on their employees and people living near the mill.

UK Parliament. *Factories Act 1833*. 29 August 1833.

The Factory Act allowed me to see when new laws and reforms began to be passed that improved the lives of workers, and what exactly they did. I used it in my paper to show when moral arguments and social ideas began to become legal regulations.

Secondary Sources:

Bannister, Robert. *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought*.

Temple University Press, 2010.

This source helped me understand why many factory owners treated their employees so poorly. I used it to contrast the thoughts of Owen with the prevailing thoughts of the time by many in the upper class.

Beach, Brian, and W. Walker Hanlon. "Coal Smoke and Mortality in an Early Industrial Economy." *The Economic Journal*, vol. 128, no. 615, 2017.

I utilized this source to show one large negative impact of factories: air pollution. This source helped me understand some of the awful living conditions in cities containing factories.

Capuano, Peter. *Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body*. University of Michigan Press, 2015.

This source helped me understand some of the awful conditions workers endured while laboring in the mills. I incorporated this source to illustrate the unfair and dangerous working conditions at the time.

Deane, Phyllis. *The First Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 1979.

This source advanced my understanding of why people were enticed to work in mills. I used it to show the economic opportunities factories offered that could not be found in other places. This allowed me to understand the roots of the First Industrial Revolution and how it spread.

Dubofsky, Melvyn, and Joseph A. McCartin. *Labor in America: A History*. Wiley, 2024.

This source helped me understand some of the effects of the Industrial Revolution throughout the entire time period, from early on to the present day. I included this source to comprehend some of its wide-reaching effects.

Eisler, Benita, editor. *Lowell Offering: Writings By New England Mill Women 1840-1845*. WW Norton, 1998.

I was able to learn about the Lowell Mill through the eyes of mill workers, and I learned how the good conditions of the mill devolved into the same grueling conditions that were a staple of mills. It helped me understand the decline of the Lowell Mills.

Langlois, R. N., and Axel Leijonhufvud. *Economics as a Process: Essays in the New Institutional Economics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

I used this source to understand the economic systems in place before the First Industrial Revolution. It helped me understand the conditions that allowed for industrialization to take place.

Kearns, Gerry, et al. "Duncan and The Cholera Test: Public Health in Mid Nineteenth-Century Liverpool." *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 1994.

This source helped me learn about conditions in cities outside of the factories and how they deteriorated and had an impact on everyone who lived in them, even if they did not labor in the factories.

Leavitt, Sarah. *Slater Mill*. Edited by Sarah Leavitt, Arcadia, 1997.

This source helped me understand how the Slater Mills were constructed and came to be, which helped me understand how early New England textile mills were built and how they spread. I used it to show early mill development in the United States.

Morris, Charles R. *The Dawn of Innovation: The First American Industrial Revolution*. PublicAffairs, 2012.

This source included information on investment during the American Industrial Revolution. It helped me understand where all of the money that funded these factories and economic growth came from.

Stearns, Peter N. *The Industrial Revolution in World History*. Avalon Publishing, 2013.

This source contained important information about the effects of the Industrial Revolution on both factory owners and workers, including child workers. This helped me understand how the revolution affected certain classes and the rights and responsibilities each class had.