

Module 01: Can Humans Control the Natural World? Urban Landscapes and Perceptions of Nature

Evidence 5: Description of Manchester: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, 1835

A

Introduction

In this excerpt, the French social critic Tocqueville describes the tactical sensation of observing the booming mill town of Manchester.

Question to Consider

- How does Tocqueville invoke images of the natural world to criticize the impact of early industrialization on working and living conditions?

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An undulating plain, or rather a collection of little hills...On this watery land, which nature and art have contributed to keep damp, are scattered palaces and hovels. . . .Thirty or forty factories rise on the tops of the hills I have just described. Their six stories tower up; their huge enclosures give notice from afar of the centralisation of industry. The wretched dwellings of the poor are scattered haphazard around them. Round them stretches land uncultivated but without the charm of rustic nature, and still without the amenities of a town. The soil has been taken away, scratched and torn up in a thousand places, but it is not yet covered with the habitations of men. The land is given over to industry's use. . . .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. . . .

On ground below the level of the river and overshadowed on every side by immense workshops, stretches marshy land which widely spaced muddy ditches can neither drain nor cleanse. Narrow, twisting roads lead down to it. They are lined with one-story houses whose ill-fitting planks and broken windows show them up, even from a distance, as the last refuge a man might find between poverty and death. None-the-less the wretched people reduced to living in them can still inspire jealousy of their fellow human beings. Below some of their miserable dwellings is a row of cellars to which

a sunken corridor leads. Twelve to fifteen human being are crowded pell-mell into each of these damp, repulsive holes.

The fetid, muddy waters, stained with a thousand colours by the factories they pass, of one of the streams I mentioned before, wander slowly round this refuge of poverty. They are nowhere kept in place by quays; houses are built haphazard on their banks. Often from the top of their steep banks one sees an attempt at a road opening out through the debris of earth, and the foundations of some houses or the recent ruin of others. It is the Styx of this new Hades. Look up and 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; here is the slave, there the master; there the wealth of some, here the poverty of most; there the organised effort of thousands produce, to the profit of one man, what society has not yet learnt to give. Here the weakness of the individual seems more feebly and helpless than even in the middle of a wilderness; here the effects, there the causes.

A sort of black smoke covers the city. The sun seen through it is a disc without rays. Under this half daylight 300,000 human beings are ceaselessly at work. A thousand noises disturb this damp, dark labyrinth, but they are not at all the ordinary sounds one hears in great cities. The footsteps of a *busy* crowd, the crunching of wheels of machinery, the shriek of steam from boilers, the regular beat of the looms, the heavy rumble of carts, these are the noises from which you can never escape in the sombre half-light of these streets. You will never hear the clatter of hoofs as the rich man drives back home or out on expeditions of pleasure. Never the gay shouts of people amusing themselves, or music heralding a holiday.

You will never see smart folk strolling at leisure in the streets, or going out on innocent pleasure parties in the surrounding country. Crowds are even hurrying this way and that in the Manchester streets, but their footsteps are brisk, their looks preoccupied, and their appearance sombre and harsh. Day and night the street echoes with street noises. . . From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilise the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish; here civilisation works its

miracles, and civilised man is turned back almost into a savage.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, J.P. Mayer, ed.,
George Lawrence, trans. (New York: Arno Press, 1979).