**Factory System**

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The factory system describes the concentration of labor in “manufactories,” as opposed to a “putting out”

system of dispersed labor by outworkers, usually working from home to quotas, with their products collected

on a regular basis by an overseer or taskmaster. The factory system is particularly associated with the textile

industry as a result of mechanization during the so-called Industrial Revolution. Here, inventions such as the

“spinning jenny,” the flying shuttle, and the power loom facilitated huge increases in production but only with

the money to invest in them and the space to exploit their productive capacity, which increased with size and

numbers. Such machines required a central power source, usually water, which drove the machines by a mill

wheel connected to overhead shafts and belts. Early manufactories were generally called “mills” as a result, a

term that has remained in the textile industry. In the nineteenth century water power was slowly replaced by

steam.

Dispersed labor was only effective where the laborers were on a level playing field. Hand looms and

spinning wheels were relatively inexpensive and could be fitted into small domestic rooms. So long as the scale

was limited by technology there was little benefit in concentrating plant and labor. Therefore the dispersed

model remained in many industries and in textiles persisted for high-craft activities, such as lace-making, until

the technology had advanced enough to replicate the craft level of a skilled outworker. A key element of the

dispersed system was that the laborers were in control of their time and were paid only for product.

In the factory system the laborer, or more often “worker,” was paid for time rather than product. The

worker was expected to be in the factory between certain hours and rest breaks and meal times were strictly

defined. Any deviation from these was usually punished by deductions in pay. Moreover, the laborer had to

travel to work, therefore the factory not only concentrated production but also accommodation, as housing

was built close by to facilitate journeying to and from the workplace. Where the factory system took hold new

“industrial towns” sprung up, with rural depopulation a result. Early industrial towns were often entirely

reliant on the factory they served and sometimes this allowed for exploitation by the factory owners, who

could further control and profit from their workforce by paying in tokens that could only be spent in retail

outlets they owned,—“company shops.” Even so, factory work was generally more reliable and therefore often

better rewarded than outworking and agricultural labor.

Unlike dispersed labor, the factory with its surrounding housing made its operation and social

conditions very visible to critics. The scale of plant and property emphasized the scale of capital required to

invest in and support it. This was compared to the lot of the workforce. In particular the strict working hours

were seen to remove autonomy to the extent that humans were reduced to being no more than the machines

they operated. New industrial towns were often built with little regard to services, such as sanitation and

water supply, and problematic social conditions, largely invisible in dispersed systems, were easily seen and

quantified. In design, the consistency of machine-made products began to be seen as representative of the

perceived inhumanity of the factory system, while the inconsistencies of handcraft represented human

autonomy. This was an idea that underpinned the thinking of William Morris from the 1850s onwards and was

central to the Arts and Crafts movement.

The issues of child labor, inadequate facilities, poor rates of pay, and long hours, once a hallmark of

Western factory systems, still blight some parts of the world.

**References and further reading**

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