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BOOK REVIEWS

We Are What We Make

Todd Harris

Joshua B. Freeman, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018).

The shirt on your back. The phone in your hand. The shoes on your feet. What do these three items have in common? Each of them was very likely made in a factory. For better or worse, we live in a factory-made world, or at least many of us do. Modern life is built on three centuries' worth of advances in manufacturing efficiency, productivity and technology. *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* written by Joshua B. Freeman, is a cogent, novel and accessible overview of how the modern factory system developed. Freeman, a distinguished professor of history at CUNY-Queens College, claims that large factories impact almost everything that we touch, see and experience, and underpin the modern consumer economy. Many people would find it difficult to survive, even for a short time, without factory-made products.

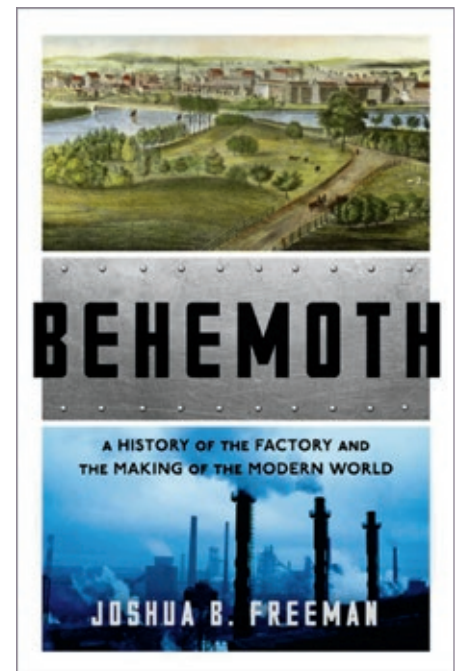
Freeman ranges widely across place and time, transporting the reader from eighteenth-century England to twenty-first-century China. In his superb telling, Freeman deftly connects the factory, which he defines as “a large workforce engaged in coordinated production using powered machinery” to important cultural, social, political and economic consequences.

Freeman's book can be read as a *cri de Coeur* to push the factory back into modern consciousness. In the United States, it is typically the *absence* of factories garners attention. The

United States lost nearly five million factory jobs between 2000 and 2016. In 1970, more than a quarter of U.S. employees worked in manufacturing. By 2010, only 1 in 10 did. This trend is not restricted to the United States. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data, Germany's share of manufacturing jobs has been halved since the early 1970's, and Australia's has dropped by two-thirds. These jobs are commonly seen as “good jobs”—relatively stable and comparably high-paying. The steady erosion of factory jobs in the western

world has been the subject of withering critiques from the political left and right alike and has been implicated in tectonic political plate-shifting such as Brexit and the 2016 election of Donald Trump. As the factories went dark, something else was extinguished as well—a vision of the future where material prosperity is widely shared and children outpace the accomplishments of their parents.

Freeman's sure-handed exploration reminds readers that factories used to elicit strong emotions—awe, wonder, hope and fear. The powerful psychological responses many people had to factories was at least partly attributable to their sheer size. Ford's River Rouge plant, designed by Alfred Kahn, the foremost factory designer of the twentieth century, had a building with a floor area of 1,450,000 square feet, 142 miles of conveyors and monorails, and was situated on a 1,096-acre site. At its peak, in 1929, it employed 102,811 workers. It was the largest and most complicated



factory ever built, a testament to human ambition, problem solving and creativity. Another Ford plant, Highland Park, where the workforce numbered 55,300, seemed small by comparison.

Freeman treats at length the prominent role of women in factories, especially after concentrated manufacturing made the leap from the “old” England to the “new.” European writers visiting New England textile centers such as Lowell in the mid-nineteenth century were often struck by the sharp contrast of the soot-belching urban factories in

countryside to draw labor from. The women tended to be young, unmarried, well educated and used to doing hard work. Additionally, to the mill owners’ liking, they also were a revolving labor force. If and when they became unhappy or economic conditions deteriorated, they could return to their families rather than staying nearby and fomenting discontent and disorder.

Paternalistic mill owners did their best to provide morally uplifting and culturally enlightening environments, with some mills even publishing

of the sun, but by the clock. Instead of spending the day with a relatively small number of friends and family members, the factory worker interacted in some form with thousands of strangers. The ability to do highly structured, largely repetitive work, often in harsh conditions and for low pay, became prized. In 1914, Henry Ford’s assembly line reduced the time needed to assemble a car from twelve and half hours to ninety-three minutes, but also led to a nervous condition that employees labeled “Forditis,” as well as a staggering employee turnover rate of 370%.

Factory work proved more physically and psychologically demanding than other types of labor. A “desirable” worker was no longer one with deep knowledge and a mastery of a craft, but one possessing speed, manual dexterity and endurance. This shift in how work was done and the required attributes of those doing it may have reached its apotheosis in Frederick Winslow Taylor’s “Scientific Management,” which posited that there was “one best way” to do a job. Workers’ autonomy was reduced, and more cognitively demanding tasks such as work planning and coordination became strictly the province of management. Contrast this approach with what contemporary management scholarship counsels regarding increasing work motivation and job satisfaction—paying workers equitably and giving them a sense of autonomy, purpose, and progress.

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English cities such as Lancashire and Manchester. In *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States: Being a Series of Letters on North America*, Michael Chevalier, a French political economist, described manufacturing as “the canker of England,” while he found the sight of Lowell to be “new and fresh like an opera scene.” Freeman informs us that in some New England mills, women constituted 85% of the workforce. As a point of comparison, today across the United States women account for 29% of manufacturing employment. Mill owners in New England largely recruited young women from farms as a workforce due to a paucity of alternatives. Owners sought to avoid the social disapproval that accompanied the wholesale employment of children. Contrary to Britain, New England did not have large numbers of urban male workers or an over-populated

journals of poetry and fiction and hosting lectures. For these workers, the mill gave them an opportunity prior to marriage to broaden their perspectives, lead a more cosmopolitan and independent life, and to assist themselves and their families financially. Unfortunately, jobs in the mills were strictly segregated by sex, with women holding almost all of the jobs involving operating machinery, and men doing all of the construction and holding all of the management positions.

Freeman also shows how the shift from an agrarian economy to a manufacturing economy impacted the nature and meaning of work. The physical conditions, organization and the required competencies of employees in a factory differed drastically from those on a farm. For example, for the first time, an employee’s schedule was dictated not by the seasons and the rising and setting



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