In Edward Albee’s somewhat underrated 1980 play The Lady from Dubuque, one of the two mysterious visitors to a party, Oscar, declares afterwards that he couldn’t believe that there could be well-educated people these days who had never heard of Marx and Engels. The party’s host, Sam, replies that another guest, Carol, fell into this category, reflecting the diminishing relevance to 1970s capitalist societies of the communist alternative. Some thirty years later, the number of Carols amongst us seem to have risen, and the fall of the Berlin Wall has placed the writings of leading Communists alongside unsuccessful prophecies and betting slips to be shamefully shelved and forgotten.

That is a real shame, but in some disciplines, notably geography, Marx has retained his salience, providing – through Das Kapital – the basis for a sophisticated understanding of uneven regional development. But it is to one of the earlier works of this pair that this first Forgotten Classics turns, to The Condition of the Working Class in England by the German writer Friedrich Engels. I was introduced to this book in my first undergraduate year as one of our compulsory texts, and since then I have returned to it many times for its concise explanations of how unconstrained economic processes can drive social exclusion, immiseration and inequality. But my claim for why this is a truly Forgotten Classic, is for the duality of the writing, the art of the story-telling, and the quality of its logic.

The young Engels was sent by his textiles magnate father to the UK to study at a company in which his father had a financial interest. His father purportedly sought to take Engels away from the radical company into which he had fallen in Berlin, and encourage him to develop into the family business. Instead, Engels found himself at the front line of the industrial revolution, in Manchester, the focal point for a textiles industry linking Liverpool’s docks and Lancashire’s textile firms. What he found there was a city of contradictions, with rich and poor living side by side. But even within the poor he found a highly graded pattern of exploitation, depending on qualifications, trades and also nationality.

When one reads one of the great classics of regional studies, such as Alfred Marshall, Joseph Schumpeter or Vidal la Blache, one is struck by the absence of theoretical footnotes. Engels does likewise, using mainly primary evidence, including surveys under the Poor Laws and for Public Health, directly presented, which greatly adds to the clarity and readability of the work. The book offers a master-class in using data and statistics to develop a perspective upon which an argument can be based.

“Liverpool, with all its commerce, wealth, and grandeur yet treats its workers with the same barbarity. A full fifth of the population, more than 45,000 human beings, live in narrow, dark, damp, badly-ventilated cellar dwellings, of which there are 7,862 in the city. Besides these cellar dwellings there are 2,270 courts, small spaces built up on all four sides and having but one entrance, a narrow, covered passage-way, the whole ordinarily very dirty and inhabited exclusively by proletarians.”

The way the book is written speaks to the human condition, that these 45,000 people living in filthy conditions are precisely human beings, which adds to the sense of injustice which flows out of the book. The book is also lyrical in terms of the stories that it tells about places. The book does not deal exclusively with Manchester, as the above citation shows. In the chapter ‘The Great Cities’, Engels surveys London, Liverpool, Dublin, Nottingham and Edinburgh, and finds the same terrible conditions and privations in each of these cities. But these surveys also – in a tradition continued honourably by Pevsner and Hoskins – convey the rich flavour of these places. Walking around Manchester today, one sees the landmarks of the rivers Medlock and Irwell, the canals, factories and warehouses. These may have been cleaned up and gentrified but Engels’ characters echo around them to this day.

Finally, there is the quality of the logic, by which Engels builds up a series of small provincial stories into a systematic analysis of class relations, exploitation and social justice. As Engels says in his postscript: ‘Above all when it is a question of important consequences, of facts coalescing into principles, when it is not the condition of separate, small sections of the people that has to be described, but the position of whole classes in relation to each other, then facts are absolutely essential’. The book is strongly rooted in facts, and the facts are drawn together to create a compelling and consistent narrative. But at the same time, this book achieves the Holy Grail of regional studies, by demonstrating that these underlying principles produce different configurations in different places which are nevertheless best understood by reference to these underlying principles. For Engels, certainly, the region mattered.

The full text of The Condition of the Working Class in England is available online at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class