

Carl Siracusa, "Industry and Society in 19th Century Massachusetts: A Commentary"
Historical Journal of Massachusetts Volume 9, No 1 (January 1981).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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Industry and Society in 19th Century Massachusetts: A Commentary

Carl Siracusa

The history of textile manufacturing in New England has been seen as a paradigm of industrialization in America.¹ It is also a poignant tale of a noble experiment destined to founder. Early visions of a benevolent system of communities of laborers under the paternalistic regard of their bosses gradually dissipated. The operatives reacted bitterly. Haltingly, they joined in resistance against their treatment, and it is this resistance that is the subject of these papers. How, they ask, did it come about that the female cotton workers of New England, and woolen mill operatives in western Massachusetts, finally rejected the paternal order, the work regimen and conditions offered them, took matters into their own hands, and lashed out in a series of strikes and other episodes of obstruction and protest?

The answers given this thorny question reflect the professional orientation of the two authors. Professor Nisonoff, an economist, directs our attention almost exclusively to the increased exploitation of the labor force, largely between the 1820s and 1840s, deriving from efforts to maximize profits in an ever more competitive industry. It had as its results a long, rigorously supervised work day, periodic and severe wage cuts, and a growing tendency to burden the operatives with more tasks. There is abundant evidence in the standard secondary sources that most of these things in fact occurred. She then goes on to correlate these trends with strikes and other forms of collective protest which the women engaged in, until they were finally replaced by seemingly more docile Irish immigrants.

It is hard to deny that labor conditions were important in fomenting worker resistance. But by making a largely mechanical connection between the two, in a "dialectic process," Professor Nisonoff posits a model of economic man (or in this case, woman) that recent labor historians have been at pains to correct. Resistance to employers is a difficult choice, involving far more than the circumstances workers confront on the job. It issues also from their expectations, outlook, background, experiences—in a word, from their culture.

Two factors, mentioned only in passing by Professor Nisonoff, would seem to be crucial in this case. The first is the operatives' sense of themselves as women. The

informal sisterhood they developed in the mills undoubtedly did help promote collective action, but it is hardly the whole story. Over the past decade feminist historians have convincingly demonstrated that the first half of the nineteenth century saw a flowering of a "cult of domesticity," largely among middle-class women, which defined women's sphere as the hearth and home, her family and church. Explicitly excluded was employment outside the home, with the occasional exception, for unmarried women, of community-centered odd jobs. The life style of New England mill girls suggests that, in many ways, they aspired to this sort of genteel existence after they left their jobs (which were, for almost all, temporary). If that is true, their attitude toward their work must have been, to say the least, ambivalent. It was, after all, "men's work," by the standard of their day, and probably regarded by respectable women as a somewhat unnatural, even degrading thing for a woman to be doing. One suspects that was why the operatives made such heroic efforts to follow ladylike pastimes like reading, writing poetry, attending lectures, and church affairs—to reassure the world (and themselves) that they had not come unsexed, and would be fit to assume their rightful place after they returned home. It is in this context that we must see their strikes, which were, clearly, violations of all codes of propriety.

Then there is the workers' paternalistic environment, about which they must have had mixed feelings. As much as possible their employers had reproduced for them the protective cocoon and respectable circumstances of home life, and for this they were no doubt grateful. Yet there is evidence also that they chafed against these restrictions. Going into the mills was a brave adventure, a time of unprecedented independence from family ties and of testing one's powers to survive on one's own. Lucy Larcom recalled: "I felt that I belonged to the world, that there was something for me to do in it, though I had not yet found out what. Something to do: it might be very little but still it would be my own work."² This building of confidence in their capacities was buttressed by their sense of being what Professor Nisonoff terms "Daughters of the American Revolution"; by the stress on equal rights and the dignity of the worker in contemporary political rhetoric; and finally by their own activities on behalf of their church and against slavery. The paternalism of the mills was probably, for the stronger spirits among them, a shelter they were quickly outgrowing.

The mill girls, in short, were driven by conflicting goals, desires, and ideals. They were pulled at the same time toward a ladylike acceptance of their lot and vigorous defense of their "rights." Purely economic considerations were but part of a complex array of forces that, at the time, tipped the balance in favor of resistance.

Ms. Baker, trained as an historian, shows a subtle awareness of how these factors came into play. Sanford Blackinton had no dreams of a new industrial order. He furnished certain basic services and facilities for his employees, and watched carefully their performance. Still, his long association with a firm he built from scratch, coupled with close personal relations with the laborers, produced an arrangement in which the expectations of employer and employee were regularly met. While there was some grumbling in 1858 and 1865, the first confirmed instance of a strike did not occur until 1876, a marked contrast to the turbulent labor relations in the state's cotton mills.

It is the breakdown of this system that concerns Ms. Baker, and she tells the story well. Boom and slack times in the industry, Blackinton's advanced age, the installation of "imported" superintendents who had not earned the workers' respect, all unsettled the structure of their working lives. The paternal arrangement came apart, as a new "work ethic" took shape among them to challenge employer edicts. Here, one would have liked more elaboration. What, exactly, did Blackinton want of his employees; what did he feel he owed them; and how does all this relate to his Baptist religion? Did his paternalism imply an "absolute authority," as Ms. Baker writes, or were there implicit in his dealings an understanding with his hands concerning specific responsibilities towards them? Did his (and his firm's) policies in 1876 contravene those responsibilities? If so, should it be said that workers were resisting out of a new "ethic," or rather out of a sense of betrayal of the old rules? Assuming there was a new ethic, of what, precisely, did it consist? Simply the notion of a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, or a more elemental conviction of an antagonism of interest between worker and boss? In any case, did it arise simply out of anger at new pay scales, or did it have other sources? Two possibilities come to mind: the impact of the Civil War, which left workers across the nation with a tougher, more skeptical outlook and a restlessness exacerbated by their return to humdrum civilian life; and the fact that Welsh immigrants were a group with a strong tradition of collective labor action³ (not to mention few ties of sentiment or obligation to Blackinton). Whether these questions can be answered (the evidence simply may not be there), Ms. Baker has supplied a convincing explanatory scheme within which one can start to discover how workers came to choose between acceptance and resistance.

NOTES

1. How accurately, has recently been called into question by such works as Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1978) and Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980).
2. Quoted in Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977), p. 57.
3. Samuel Walker, "Varieties of Workingclass Experience: The Workingmen of Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1855-1885," in Milton Cantor, ed., *American Workingclass Culture: Explorations in American Labor and Social History* (Westport, Conn., 1979), pp. 361-376.