

Gender and Textiles: A Personal Overview

THOMAS DUBLIN

Résumé

Cet article offre un aperçu de l'influence grandissante exercée par le souci de noter les différences sexuelles, perceptible dans la recherche et la rédaction de Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860 (1979). On y examine ensuite des travaux récents sur l'industrie textile en Angleterre et aux États-Unis, dans lesquels Nancy Grey Osterud, Ardis Cameron et Jacquelyn Hall utilisent avec bonheur la différenciation sexuelle comme outil d'analyse historique. On y signale enfin l'utilité de ce concept pour l'étude de la place du travail à domicile dans l'histoire des textiles et du développement capitaliste en milieu rural aux États-Unis, au début du XIX^e siècle.

Abstract

This article offers an overview of the growing influence of a concern for gender in the research and writing of Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860 (1979). It then explores recent work on English and American textiles by Nancy Grey Osterud, Ardis Cameron, and Jacquelyn Hall that fruitfully utilizes gender as a tool of historical analysis. Finally, it notes the utility of the concept in examining the place of outwork weaving in the history of textiles and of capitalist development in the American countryside in the early nineteenth century.

The question of gender was far from my mind when I began research on the cotton textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts in the fall of 1970. As an entering graduate student at Columbia University, I was well read in such recent English labour history as *Labouring Men* by E.J. Hobsbawm and *The Making of the English Working Class* by E.P. Thompson. Class issues framed their work and dominated my thinking as I set out to explore the creation of an industrial working class in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In the course of that research, however, I discovered that roughly eighty-five per cent of the work force of the early Lowell mills was female. Eventually I also discovered a rich, growing historiography on the changing place of women in American society. In *Women at Work* I attempted to synthesize an emerging interest in class and gender issues.¹ I traced a group of women mill workers back to their rural roots in farming families in three New

Hampshire communities and explored the place of mill employment in their broader life and family cycles. Furthermore, I discovered what I felt were distinctively female cultural roots to their protest of changing conditions in the mills. While artisanal culture and republican traditions lay behind the emergence of male trade unionism in the 1830s and 1840s, women came to labour protest, I argued, by a different route.² The growth of a close-knit community among women living and working together in boarding house and mill played a unique role in the emergence of their labour protest. Moreover, they drew upon a tradition of independence based on their shared identity as "daughters of freeman." Curiously enough, it was their status as the daughters of freehold farmers, rather than as working-class women, that provided the wherewithal to challenge the power of their employers. It was their freedom to leave the mills and return to the family farm that made them sensitive to their treatment in the mills.

Class and gender are the operative analytic categories that I employed in understanding the emergence of labour protest among Yankee women in the early Lowell mills, but a third element is crucial to an analysis of change over time—what we might call context. While Thompson asserted that his narrative spoke to the making of the English working class, I could make no such sweeping claims. It was not simply because I focused on a single industry within a limited geographical area, but rather because of the changing context of industrialization in the United States. The entry of Irish and German immigrants into the United States in the middle decades of the nineteenth century radically transformed the nature of the working class and of industrialization in this country. Moreover, the availability of westward migration as an alternative for members of New England farming families further distinguished the American from the European story. While the focus of *Women at Work* is clearly on the emergence of labour protest among Yankee working women in the mills—in this sense the making of an American working class—it is also the story of the re-making of that class with the entry of the Irish into Lowell's mills. And if we extend the story further, both geographically and over time, we find, as Herbert Gutman has argued persuasively, that what is distinct about the American experience is how repeatedly the American working class has been made and re-made under the influence of successive waves of migration and immigration.³ It is for this reason that I stress the significance of context along with class and gender in thinking about the history of the working class in the United States.

In writing *Women at Work* I addressed gender issues much more directly than I had anticipated in undertaking my dissertation research, but there were ways in which the particular choice of topic limited my analysis. Since the focus of my study was on the emergence and decline of labour protest among single, Yankee mill workers, I did not explore in depth the immigrant family economy that emerged with the later entry of Irish and French-Canadians into the mills. The first generation of Yankee mill workers typically came to Lowell on their own, and while some certainly contributed to their families back in the countryside, my argument stressed the economic and social independence that mill employment permitted them. I also did not explore in any detail the reshaping of the gender division of labour to which the growth

of factory work contributed. Others have examined both these issues in more recent work and have deepened our understanding of the broader implications of textiles in the industrializing process.

Particularly useful in this respect is the recent work of Nancy Grey Osterud on the nineteenth century Leicestershire hosiery industry.⁴ Osterud examines the impact on women's work of changes in the organization and technology of framework knitting in Leicester and the surrounding countryside over the course of the nineteenth century. Women continued to be engaged in wage labour in large numbers throughout the period, but both the organization and technology of that work were significantly transformed. We see over the course of the century the decline of outwork knitting as a family economic activity and the growth in its stead of factory knitting and seaming. Under the outwork system, the particular nature of women's work was determined in part by gender, but also by the ages and numbers of children as they affected the overall labour capabilities of families. Flexibility in the allocation of specific tasks gave way to a more rigid, sex-stratified division of labour within factory settings. Women no longer worked at home seaming stockings for and with their knitter husbands; increasingly they worked in factories, seaming or knitting on power-driven machinery, in the employ of large-scale stocking manufacturers. Osterud provides a rich and nuanced description of the process of industrial transformation in the hosiery trades with particular sensitivity to the interaction of women's place within working-class families and their status within the industry. She argues, in fact, for the reproduction of gender divisions within working-class families in the more rigid and hierarchical gender divisions of labour and pay within the emerging factory system. Her analysis makes a good case for the importance of casting a wide net in studying the changing organization and technology of the hosiery industry:

The incorporation of the gender division rooted in the family into the social division of labour confirmed, reinforced, and extended the subordinate position of women both within the family and in the labour process.⁵

Ultimately, in Osterud's view, "The interaction of family relations and capitalism over the course of industrialization led to the development of a gender system that simultaneously relied upon and restricted women's labour." Hers is an analysis that simply would

not have been offered two decades ago and shows the way in which a broad concern for gender sharpens an analysis of the process of industrialization.

Gender as a category of analysis has also made important contributions to our understanding of the emergence of labour protest among women textile operatives. Two historians—Ardis Cameron and Jacquelyn Hall—have made particularly good use of this tool in analyzing twentieth century textile struggles in the United States. Both have seen women workers as central to mill protest. Cameron re-examines the famous 1912 Lawrence, Massachusetts strike of woollen mill operatives and finds a need to expand the labour historian's vision to include "the family, the household and what historians of women have called the 'bonds of womanhood.'"⁶ She reconstructs the experiences of women activists in Lawrence, and finds the origin of women's protest in extensive community networks that extended well beyond the mills of the American Woollen Company. She argues that the bonds that women forged in their daily lives in boarding houses and tenements, in groceries and ethnic churches, served as the basis for their unity. Solidarity extended well beyond those who shared mill employment and included those joined by neighbourhood and ethnicity to the strikers. Cameron makes a strong case for the importance of female asso-

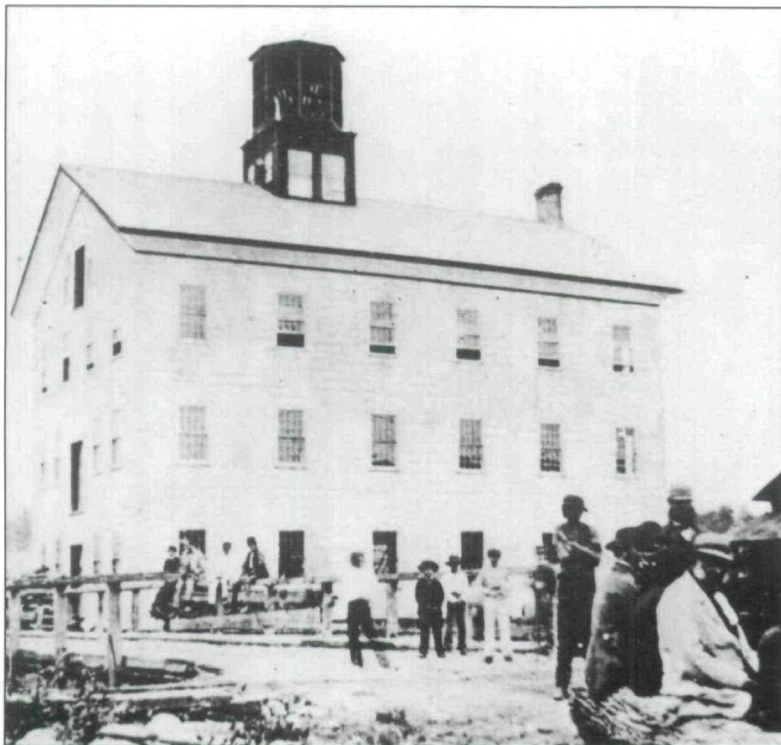
ciational life to the success of the Lawrence strike. In so doing, she has drawn on a rich tradition in recent women's history, and has contributed to our understanding of the range of forces shaping labour protest among textile operatives.⁷

Similarly, Jacquelyn Hall has explored anew women's role in labour protest in the southern textile strikes of the late 1920s.⁸ She places those struggles firmly in the context of the emergence of town-based industry in the southern countryside but views women strikers as neither hillbilly traditionalists nor urban modernizers. She does see women's independence (like that of Lowell mill operatives a century earlier) based in large part on the fact that they could and did return easily to their rural farming roots—they were not totally dependent for survival on mill wages. Women drew on rural and working-class standards that contradicted middle-class notions of feminine propriety. Their militancy upset their opponents but their gender offered them protection that male strikers lacked. They shared in the twenties culture of the flapper but turned their urban experiences to collective rather than individual purposes. Hall uses the experiences of the 1929 Elizabethton, Tennessee, strike to permit a broader understanding of the role of women and women's culture in industrial conflict. Like Cameron, her use of gender permits new understandings of familiar events.

This is simply a sampling of recent contributions made by the concept of gender to our understanding of the place of textiles in American and English societies, and one could fruitfully extend the discussion considerably. At the risk of being overly schematic, I characterize the contributions of a gender-sensitive analysis in two principal areas: first, in the area of economic structures—as in the example of Nancy Osterud's work on the gender division of labour in the Leicester hosiery trade—and second, in the area of workers' consciousness—as in the studies by Cameron and Hall. My own current research focuses on structural questions and a few words about the direction of my own work may be useful.

Since completing *Women at Work*, I have moved back in time and have been exploring the emergence of textile outwork in the countryside. I have reconstructed outwork networks in the southern New Hampshire town of Richmond and the eastern Connecticut town of Preston. What is most striking about outwork textiles in the United States—and this stands quite in contrast, I believe, to the English

Fig. 1
Cotton mill built in Hastings, Ontario in 1861 for Henry Fowlds. In the nineteenth century many North American women moved their cloth-making activities from the home to the mill. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum)



experience—is the way that such employment was integrated within the dominant rural economy of the family farm. American farm families supplemented agricultural income with earnings from hand loom weaving and, later on, palm leaf hat making and shoe binding.⁹ While women, both wives and unmarried daughters, did the vast majority of weaving, most of the credits appeared in accounts in the names of the husbands or fathers. Outwork did permit individual wages for a share of farmers' daughters—they generally comprised about fifteen to twenty per cent of weaving account holders, but they did so in a context that sheltered women from many of the negative aspects of urban factory labour. After all, they did the weaving in their rural homes at their own pace, not subject to the alien discipline of water- or steam-powered machinery or of the mill owner or overseer. Parents, in turn, could view their daughters' earnings as a prop to the family economy, as a supplement to perhaps increasingly inadequate farm income. The dependencies associated with English hand loom weaving did not develop in the United States, hence the consequences of the mechanization of weaving

appear to have been far less dramatic in the United States than in England. New England farmers could not provide all their sons and daughters with future prospects in the countryside, but continued to be able to meet their day-to-day needs.

A concern for gender in the exploration of New England textile outwork permits a more complex and nuanced analysis. It permits an understanding of outwork from the perspective of members of farming families without assuming that their perceptions and experiences were essentially uniform. It permits an appreciation for the interaction of the domestic division of labour within families and the social division of labour in more formal workplaces. It opens up possibilities for a merging of economic and social history in extremely fruitful ways. It simultaneously offers a more complex analysis of work and family while integrating that perspective within a more comprehensive view of the development of early industrial capitalism in the United States. It is a welcome addition to the tools of historians in understanding economic and social change over time.

NOTES

1. Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).
2. For representative treatments of the male side of early labour protest see Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
3. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 3-78.
4. Nancy Grey Osterud, "Gender Divisions and the Organization of Work in the Leicester Hosiery Industry," in *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England, 1800-1918*, ed. Angela V. John (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 45-68.
5. Osterud, "Gender Divisions," 57, 65.
6. Ardis Cameron, "Bread and Roses Revisited: Women's Culture and Working-class Activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912," in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 45.
7. For similar arguments concerning women's activism in an earlier period, see Mary Ryan, "The Power of Women's Networks: A Case Study of Female Moral Reform in Antebellum America," *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 66-86; Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).
8. "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986): 354-82. For a more full development of the context of this analysis, see Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).
9. For more on women's work in these additional outwork industries, see Thomas Dublin, "Women and Outwork in a Nineteenth-Century New England Town: Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire, 1830-1850," in *The Countryside in the Age of Industrial Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America*, ed. Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 51-69; Mary H. Blewett, "Women Shoeworkers and Domestic Ideology: Rural Outwork in Early-Nineteenth Century Essex County," *New England Quarterly* 60 (Sept. 1987): 403-28.