

Teaching American History
University of Massachusetts Lowell
Summer Session 2008
Professor Patricia Fontaine

Book Review of
*Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts 1860-
1912*
By Ardis Cameron

Submitted by
Stephen Cassely

The struggles and triumphs of labor in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts have been well documented by historians. In *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860 – 1912*, author Ardis Cameron does not attempt to retell this familiar tale, but instead hopes to broaden the narrative to include the contributions of those characters she views as essential: working women. By examining the intersections where the private and public lives of these women crossed, coupled with the myriad of ways in which they cooperated with and relied on one another, Cameron hopes to not only alter how we view these women, but also the ways in which they shaped the world they lived in.

Early in the book, the author makes clear her contention that the real story of these working women has yet to be fully told. Historically, these women have been exposed to us only as actors playing minor roles in the narratives of others. As victims of what Cameron refers to as “the vocabulary of marginality”, working women of the past have been stigmatized to such a degree by labels and categorization, their lives have been pushed to the periphery of history. Traditionally relegated to “the domestic dustbin of labor history”, the author sees her study as part of a recent movement to view these women “as a central frame of reference” when examining the history of labor in America.

Cameron attempts to answer several questions as she recasts these women as central players in the working class struggle that took place in Lawrence. How did the collective efforts of women foster a sense of cohesion and discipline in an ethnically diverse community? How did the mutual strategies of survival developed by women assist in forming a collective response to the grievances of workers? And perhaps most importantly, how did the collective acts of women alter the power structure of the home,

community and workplace? In addressing these and similar questions, Cameron establishes the crux of her book: The “latticework of female exchange and reciprocity” provided a foundation upon which the working class community of Lawrence could build the “cohesion, identity and collective power” needed to respond to the challenges they faced.

Radicals is divided into two parts, with each being framed loosely around the collective response of the working women of Lawrence to the strikes of 1882 and 1912. In part one, *Self-supporting Women and the Struggle for the Real*, Cameron places the female workers of Lawrence in the context of perhaps the most pressing social issue of the era, the “Woman Question”. The author shows that while reformers were just beginning to call for women to be seen as individuals distinctly separate from their roles as daughters, wives and mothers, many of the laboring women of Lawrence were well on their way to living lives free from dependence on men, (excluding of course their employers). In one table Cameron provides data from 1880 which shows 70 percent of female mill hands sampled to be single. The same sampling has 13 percent of the women divorced, widowed or married but living without a husband. Cameron provides additional data demonstrating that many of the single workers were not living under their father’s roof, but instead were boarders in “establishments headed by non-kin, usually widows or married women whose husbands were absent.”

It quickly becomes obvious that the subjects of Cameron’s study bear very little resemblance to well established perception of the “factory girl”. Where the “factory girl” was a term constructed to describe a stage in a woman’s life, a transitional phase, the world of a working woman in Lawrence was much more static. By 1880 almost 60

percent of the females working in Lawrence's mills were over the age of twenty six and could hardly be considered girls. Moreover, many women found themselves immersed in the culture of mill life long after they stopped working full time. As Cameron points out, women often covered one another's shifts and "also helped secure jobs for neighbors and kin and remained in the social network of mill life long after active participation ended." The permanence of textile culture in the lives of these women cut across ethnic, marital and generation boundaries and helped establish a sense of solidarity among the workers as they struggled to survive.

This solidarity was reinforced on the neighborhood level as women, living in extreme close proximity to one another, utilized a system of "reciprocity, dependence and cooperation" to complete the various tasks associated with daily life. Through the shared completion of these tasks, the working class women of Lawrence created "autonomous social spaces within which they could develop and sustain an independent sense of worth and self esteem." In direct contrast to the hierarchy of the factory, women dominated the working class neighborhoods where they lived and in doing so created an atmosphere in which they could define their womanhood on terms of their own making.

The commonalities of their work and home lives served to strengthen the connections between these women and helped fashion the cohesive response they had to the March 1882 news of pay reductions and production speed-ups at the city's largest factory, the Pacific Mills. According to Cameron, it was their participation in the strike precipitated by the changes at Pacific Mills "that transformed most women by encouraging them to question not only immediate wage but the whole of corporate power itself." Cameron contends that by challenging established corporate culture of the time,

these women began to earn the descriptor used by the author for the title of her book. They were radicals of the worst sort because they had the temerity to confront not only the mills, but also the contradictory nature of “a system dependent on their labor yet unwilling to pay them because of their sex”.

Cameron chronicles examples of the women’s collective action during the strike, from their movement to garner support from key allies (shopkeepers, market owners, the police), to their often physical reaction to scabs. However, the author sees in the results of the 1882 strike the “eclipse of the self-supporting woman”. Firstly, Lawrence’s factories led by the Pacific Mill moved to limit their reliance on female hands, instead moving toward automated machinery and more efficient methods of production. Meanwhile, the notion of economically independent women (and for Cameron, this is what was really at stake), met with the ire of both city officials and mill owners. Caught up in the larger movement to domesticate politics, the laboring women of Lawrence found themselves diametrically opposed to the ideals being espoused by many around them, including feminists and reformers. The call had been made for a “family wage”, one which would allow a man to earn enough to keep his wife and children out of the mills. The Lawrence Cameron describes would find the notion of the “family wage” odd given not only the sheer number of women in the city, but also the number earning the money to keep themselves and their children alive.

The second section of the book, *Immigrant Women and the Fight for Bread and Roses*, sees Cameron spending a good deal of space exposing how the way of life of immigrant women in Lawrence lent itself to the textile culture pervading the city. While being convincing, possibly to the point of redundancy at times, the author provides

examples demonstrating how “Old World practices and principles of collectivity” carried over to the New World and manifested themselves in both the public and private spheres of the immigrant women’s lives. The seemingly benign acts of purchasing and preparing food, practicing cooperative child care and even hanging laundry, coalesced into something of a critical mass that guided these women’s lives. It is a main contention of Cameron that this lattice work of female connectedness served as a well-spring from which action against that many “powers that prey” could initiate.

Naturally Cameron’s account of the Lawrence Strike of 1912, the fight for Bread and Roses, frames women in the center of the battle. In doing this the author achieves one of her main objectives, recasting these women as central players in the drama. It is perhaps here that she is at her most convincing, bringing to life the almost ubiquitous nature in which these women formed and developed enduring bonds. By keeping the focus on women’s contributions to the strike, Cameron alters the way we view labor’s ability to respond to the situation in Lawrence. *Radicals* doesn’t eschew the influence of the International Workers of the World (IWW) and its leadership, but instead portrays their role as critically augmented by women in ways not mentioned in other studies of the strike. In Bruce Watson’s 2005 *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants and the Struggle for the American Dream*, women and men are mentioned to be “equal in influence”, with *Radicals’* author Ardis Cameron herself being lauded for bringing attention to the strike’s more colorful and militant women leaders,(including Sara Axelrod and the “dynamic” Annie Welzenbach). But the true measure of what women brought to bear during the strike is never fully measured by Watson, much less other authors who’ve viewed working women as attendant to the strike and not central to its success.

However in her own book, Cameron works to focus the historian's gaze on not just a few female leaders, but laboring women in their totality. When the whole of their collective relations are examined, the women of Lawrence become an essential force in the fight for Bread and Roses, capable of everything from acts of violence and sabotage (once solely the responsibility of men), to providing a much needed hegemony among the disparate ethnicities of the workers (something the IWW is often credited for). The totality that Cameron calls for when examining the lives of these women makes it impossible to view them as historians traditionally have. No longer should we look at them as either workers on the shop floor *or* mothers in the home. Instead, they should be viewed in the full context of the web of reciprocal and cooperative connections they formed and maintained. Cameron successfully makes the case that in their daily lives these women couldn't separate the issues of home and community from those of work. It is only logical to examine their lives in ways that recognizes this fact.

Cameron concludes *Radicals* by placing the laboring women of Lawrence in the larger context of the move to "Americanize" the immigrant worker. City officials were convinced of the need to respond to the grievous examples of poverty exposed by the strike of 1912. While neglecting to explore the degree to which industrialists were culpable in the creation of the poverty in Lawrence, city leaders nonetheless actively courted manufacturers as key components in the response to the situation. The International Institute for Women was opened in the Plains neighborhood hoping to hasten the period in which the "ignorant foreigner woman" of the city could be Americanized. The city fathers and mill owners may have funded the project (and others like it), but it was their wives and sisters who supplied a good deal of the human capital

needed for the job. At its worse, the push to Americanize these women comes across to the reader as a misguided attempt to instill domesticity and teach the art of “mothercraft”. At their best, the programs, such as those that taught English showed how to deal with an unscrupulous landlord, underscored the methods and behaviors immigrant women needed to advocate for themselves.

The “Americanization” movement doesn’t escape Cameron unscathed for the same reason she bristles at the way women have been traditionally seen in the struggles in Lawrence (and beyond). Just as working women on the pages of history have struggled to overcome “the vocabulary of marginality”, the immigrant women who were to be “Americanized” fell victim to the “politics of representation”. A vocabulary was developed and defined through a dialogue of which they were not part. As Cameron points out, it was “mill owners, craftsman, Americanizers, and reformers” who moved to “construct the world of the laboring woman and her place in it”.

Teachers of American history can utilize *Radicals* when covering various aspects of history (labor, women’s, The Progressive Era). While standard three of The National Center for History’s Historical Thinking Standards, *Historical Analysis and Interpretation*, may have the most applications to the book, it can be tailored to most any curriculum standards or frameworks. Regardless of the type of history taught, *Radicals* serves as a reminder to students that the contexts in which the stories of people are told and the language used to tell them, need to be constantly considered.