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Dr. Reagan

TS History

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This week, readings included “Band of Sisters: Class and Gender in Industrial Lowell” by Michael Reagan and “Early Factory Labor in New England” by Harriet H. Robinson.

In “Band of Sisters: Class and Gender in Industrial Lowell”, Michael Reagan argues that feminism – the struggle for gender equality – was closely tied with class struggle. As corporations emerged and a demand for labor rose, industrialists looked to marginalized labor sources, choosing women. However, industrial work directly conflicted with preconceived notions that women should stay in the ‘domestic sphere’; hence corporations created a socially accepted place for female industrial work by implementing high wages and heavy moral regulation, redefining the ‘social good’ to align with their own interests. The former solution encouraged women to come work; the latter served not only to comfort the public in the protection of the uncorrupted and pure female ‘nature’ but to quell strikes and unrest. Working-class feminism emerged as a rebuttal to this intersection of gender and class oppression.

Harriet H. Robinson recalls in “Early Factory Labor in New England” factory life in Lowell, Massachusetts. Although initially women embraced the independent and almost pleasant nature of factory life, they were subjugated to harsh treatment, Robinson writes, seen by overseers as brutes and slaves. Women, even with increased independence, still had little to no recognition in the law of their new positions as money-earners. The 1836 Lowell strike, an attempt to fight against wage cuts, was inevitably unsuccessful because women tired of holding

out eventually went back to work, setting a disappointing precedent for future strikes. The increased physical independence women achieved from working, Robinson argues, was still dependent on and hindered by cultural and legislative restraints.

Michael Reagan writes in “Band of Sisters: Class and Gender in Industrial Lowell” that the 1836 Lowell strike “was successful”<sup>1</sup>. Harriet Hanson Robinson, on the other hand, wrote in an excerpt from her autobiography “Early Factory Labor in New England” that the same 1836 strike was, “as practical results are concerned, . . . no good.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Reagan attests that the 1836 strike was a *point of pride* for Harriet Hanson Robinson, who was “delighted” by the bold rush of striking, using evidence drawn directly from her autobiography. Robinson remarks, similarly, on the revolutionary nature of the strike in “Early Factory Labor in New England”, yet concludes on the disappointed note that she deems it “hardly necessary to say that”<sup>3</sup> the strike yielded no results. What, then, what accounts for this drastic disparity in the evaluation of the 1836 Lowell Strike? I believe this inconsistency reflects the two writers’ different constructions of the relationship between concrete evaluation (e.g. pay) and the societal perception (e.g. a woman’s ‘place’) of women; specifically, they differ in which drives the other in the fight for equality. Robinson’s source of dispiritedness comes from her observation that “the corporations would not come to terms . . . The girls were soon tired of holding out, and they went back to their work at the reduced rate of wages.”<sup>4</sup> The loss, in Robinson’s view, comes not only the immediate defeat of giving in to a reduced wage, but the dangerous precedent it sets for corporations to continue ignoring demands for higher payment. By “practical results”, she refers to concrete steps companies – legislation, both corporate and political – could have taken to recognize the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Reagan, “*Band of Sisters: Class and Gender in Industrial Lowell*”, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet H. Robinson, “Early Factory Labor in New England” (1883), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, “Early Factory Labor in New England”, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, “Early Factory Labor in New England”, 4.

value of women. This would inevitably impact societal perception and acceptance, which she writes branches off of legislation – for example, fathers not recognizing daughters’ right to an inheritance out of cultural habit as directly downstream of property laws<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Robinson views the fight for equality as one from “practical results” *to shift* public perception. Alternatively, Reagan emphasizes auxiliary gains in labelling the strike a victory: almost 2,500 operatives left the mill compared to the measly 800 that participated in the 1834 strike, production was obstructed for several months thanks to more strategic organization than in 1834, and a (temporary) union was formed<sup>6</sup>. While a few – and the smallness of “few” is so important that Robinson deems it equivalent to “none” – corporations gave in, most didn’t. Corporations continued to exert control over women, for instance with the boardinghouse system: the matron of one factory girl who led several in the 1836 strike was fired for not regulating them closely enough<sup>7</sup>. When corporations abandoned systems of control and power like boardinghouses, it was not because of strikes or similar action<sup>8</sup>; the 1836 strike did not have a direct impact on concrete evaluation. Instead, it is societal perception, Reagan argues – the spreading of “working-class feminist consciousness”<sup>9</sup> through, for instance, cultural mediums like newspapers<sup>10</sup> – that led to and secured legislative victories such as the 10-hour workday<sup>11</sup>. Hence, Reagan’s standard of success is premised on changes to public perception that would affect legislation – something the revolutionary nature of the strike, both writers admit, affected.

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<sup>5</sup> Robinson, “Early Factory Labor in New England”, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Reagan, “*Band of Sisters*”, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Reagan, “*Band of Sisters*”, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Reagan, “*Band of Sisters*”, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Reagan, “*Band of Sisters*”, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Reagan, “*Band of Sisters*”, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Reagan, “*Band of Sisters*”, 32.

On the other hand, Robinson, whose direction of causality is opposite that of Reagan, sees the lack of concrete action as a loss in public perception.