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Forging the National Economy, 1790–1860

Take not from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.

Thomas Jefferson, 1801

Prologue: The Industrial Revolution spawned the factory, and in turn the factory-magnet drew from the hallowed home countless men, women, and even tiny children. Alexander Hamilton himself had stressed the spiritual value of training "the little innocents" in honest habits of industry. But the exploitation of little innocents, as well as their elders, resulted in grave abuses. For more than a century, labor fought an uphill fight against employers for a gradual improvement of its lot. Meanwhile, the spread of the factory was spurred by the canal network, the river steamboat, and then the railroad. The fast-growing states of the Ohio Valley and the Upper Mississippi Valley became less dependent on the mouth of the Mississippi as the outlet for their produce, because the new arteries of transportation carried their exports cheaply and swiftly to the cities of the eastern seaboard. The ties of the Union, conspicuously in an east-west direction, were thus greatly strengthened.

A. The Spread of the Factory

1. Wage Slavery in New England (1832)

Seth Luther, a poorly educated carpenter who helped construct New England textile factories, ranks as one of the most forceful of the early labor reformers. In numerous speeches and pamphlets, he condemned such abuses as paternalistic control, "blacklists" of troublemakers, low wages, and overlong hours. He especially deplored the exploitation of children, who were sometimes dragged to "whipping rooms." His deadly earnestness and biting sarcasm were partly responsible for the United States' first law to control child labor, enacted by Massachusetts in 1842. It prohibited children under age twelve from working more than ten hours a day. What were the most serious abuses that Luther here discusses? In what specific ways were they harmful?

[1]Seth Luther, *An Address to the Working-Men of New-England* . . . , 2nd ed. (Boston, 1833), pp. 17–21.

A [western] member of the United States Senate seems to be extremely pleased with cotton mills. He says in the Senate, "Who has not been delighted with the clockwork movements of a large cotton manufactory?" He had visited them often, and always with increased delight. He says the women work in large airy apartments, well warmed. They are neatly dressed, with ruddy complexions, and happy countenances. They mend the broken threads and replace the exhausted balls or broaches, and at stated periods they go to and return from their meals with light and cheerful step. (While on a visit to that pink of perfection, Waltham [Massachusetts], I remarked that the females moved with a very light step, and well they might, for the bell rang for them to return to the mill from their homes in nineteen minutes after it had rung for them to go to breakfast. Some of these females boarded the largest part of a half a mile from the mill.)

And the grand climax [says the western senator] is that at the end of the week, after working like slaves for thirteen or fourteen hours every day, "they enter the temples of God on the Sabbath, and thank him for all his benefits. . . ." We remark that whatever girls or others may do west of the Allegheny Mountains, we do not believe there can be a single person found east of those mountains who ever thanked God for permission to work in a cotton mill. . . .

We would respectfully advise the honorable Senator to travel incognito when he visits cotton mills. If he wishes to come at the truth, he must not be known. Let him put on a short jacket and trousers, and join the "lower orders" for a short time. . . . In that case we could show him, in some of the prisons in New England called cotton mills, instead of rosy cheeks, the pale, sickly, haggard countenance of the ragged child—haggard from the worse than slavish confinement in the cotton mill. He might see that child driven up to the "clockwork" by the cowskin [whip], in some cases. He might see, in some instances, the child taken from his bed at four in the morning, and plunged into cold water to drive away his slumbers and prepare him for the labors of the mill. After all this he might see that child robbed, yes, robbed of a part of his time allowed for meals by moving the hands of the clock backwards, or forwards, as would best accomplish that purpose. . . . He might see in some, and not infrequent, instances, the child, and the female child too, driven up to the "clockwork" with the cowhide, or well-seasoned strap of American manufacture.

We could show him many females who have had corporeal punishment inflicted upon them; one girl eleven years of age who had her leg broken with a billet of wood; another who had a board split over her head by a heartless monster in the shape of an overseer of a cotton mill "paradise."

We shall for want of time . . . omit entering more largely into detail for the present respecting the cruelties practiced in some of the American mills. Our wish is to show that education is neglected, . . . because if thirteen hours' actual labor is required each day, it is impossible to attend to education among children, or to improvement among adults.

2. The Abuse of Female Workers (1836)

The factory girls of Lowell, Massachusetts, were a showpiece for visitors, notably Charles Dickens in 1842. Having seen the miserable working conditions in England, he wrote almost ecstatically of the fresh air in the Lowell mills and of the cheerful faces and blooming health of the "Lowell girls." He also took favorable note of the girls' cleanliness, clothes, thrift, morals, and educational and recreational facilities. Perhaps he was unduly impressed by the contrast with English factories; certainly he did not investigate as carefully the less savory mills. Six years earlier, a reformist writer in a contemporary American journal presented a strikingly different view. How, in the following account, does this writer evaluate the early factory system?

We have lately visited the cities of Lowell [Massachusetts] and Manchester [New Hampshire] and have had an opportunity of examining the factory system more closely than before. We had distrusted the accounts which we had heard from persons engaged in the labor reform now beginning to agitate New England. We could scarcely credit the statements made in relation to the exhausting nature of the labor in the mills, and to the manner in which the young women—the operatives—lived in their boardinghouses, six sleeping in a room, poorly ventilated.

We went through many of the mills, talked particularly to a large number of the operatives, and ate at their boardinghouses, on purpose to ascertain by personal inspection the facts of the case. We assure our readers that very little information is possessed, and no correct judgments formed, by the public at large, of our factory system, which is the first germ of the industrial or commercial feudalism that is to spread over our land. . . .

In Lowell live between seven and eight thousand young women, who are generally daughters of farmers of the different states of New England. Some of them are members of families that were rich in the generation before. . . .

The operatives work thirteen hours a day in the summer time, and from daylight to dark in the winter. At half past four in the morning the factory bell rings, and at five the girls must be in the mills. A clerk, placed as a watch, observes those who are a few minutes behind the time, and effectual means are taken to stimulate to punctuality. This is the morning commencement of the industrial discipline (should we not rather say industrial tyranny?) which is established in these associations of this moral and Christian community.

At seven the girls are allowed thirty minutes for breakfast, and at noon thirty minutes more for dinner, except during the first quarter of the year, when the time is extended to forty-five minutes. But within this time they must hurry to their boardinghouses and return to the factory, and that through the hot sun or the rain or the cold. A meal eaten under such circumstances must be quite unfavorable to digestion and health, as any medical man will inform us. At seven o'clock in the evening the factory bell sounds the close of the day's work.

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[2]*The Harbinger,* November 14, 1836, in H. R. Warfel et al., eds., *The American Mind* (New York and Cincinnati: The American Book Company, 1937), pp. 390–391. In 1847 this journal became the official organ of the Brook Farm colony.

Thus thirteen hours per day of close attention and monotonous labor are exacted from the young women in these manufactories. . . . So fatigued—we should say, exhausted and worn out, but we wish to speak of the system in the simplest language—are numbers of girls that they go to bed soon after their evening meal, and endeavor by a comparatively long sleep to resuscitate their weakened frames for the toil of the coming day.

When capital has got thirteen hours of labor daily out of a being, it can get nothing more. It would be a poor speculation in an industrial point of view to own the operative; for the trouble and expense of providing for times of sickness and old age would more than counterbalance the difference between the price of wages and the expense of board and clothing. The far greater number of fortunes accumulated by the North in comparison with the South shows that hireling labor is more profitable for capital than slave labor.

Now let us examine the nature of the labor itself, and the conditions under which it is performed. Enter with us into the large rooms, when the looms are at work. The largest that we saw is in the Amoskeag Mills at Manchester. . . . The din and clatter of these five hundred looms, under full operation, struck us on first entering as something frightful and infernal, for it seemed such an atrocious violation of one of the faculties of the human soul, the sense of hearing. After a while we became somewhat inured to it, and by speaking quite close to the ear of an operative and quite loud, we could hold a conversation and make the inquiries we wished.

The girls attend upon an average three looms; many attend four, but this requires a very active person, and the most unremitting care. However, a great many do it. Attention to two is as much as should be demanded of an operative. This gives us some idea of the application required during the thirteen hours of daily labor. The atmosphere of such a room cannot of course be pure; on the contrary, it is charged with cotton filaments and dust, which, we are told, are very injurious to the lungs.

On entering the room, although the day was warm, we remarked that the windows were down. We asked the reason, and a young woman answered very naïvely, and without seeming to be in the least aware that this privation of fresh air was anything else than perfectly natural, that "when the wind blew, the threads did not work well." After we had been in the room for fifteen or twenty minutes, we found ourselves, as did the persons who accompanied us, in quite a perspiration, produced by a certain moisture which we observed in the air, as well as by the heat. . . .

The young women sleep upon an average six in a room, three beds to a room. There is no privacy, no retirement, here. It is almost impossible to read or write alone, as the parlor is full and so many sleep in the same chamber. A young woman remarked to us that if she had a letter to write, she did it on the head of a bandbox, sitting on a trunk, as there was no space for a table.

So live and toil the young women of our country in the boardinghouses and manufactories which the rich and influential of our land have built for them.

3. The "Utopian" Lowell Looms (1844)

Charles Dickens recorded three facts about the Lowell girls that he was sure would startle his English readers. First, many of the boardinghouses had joint-stock pianos; second, "nearly all" of the young women subscribed to circulating libraries; third, the operatives—ultimately about seventy of the more literate—published a journal called The Lowell Offering. *The factory owners, no doubt conscious of its public-relations value, encouraged it—and probably censored it as well. Actually, the matrons of the boardinghouses went to great lengths to keep "fallen women" from entering this "paradise" and tainting the virginal farm girls. The following imaginary and stilted conversation, published in* The Lowell Offering, *is a piece of propaganda probably inspired by the employers and certainly representing the employers' point of view. What serious grievances does it omit mentioning?*

Miss S: I am very happy to see you this evening, Miss Bartlett, for I have something particular to say to you. Now do tell me if you still persist in your resolution to return to your factory employment?

Miss B: I do. I have no objection, neither have I heard any sufficiently strong to deter me.

Miss S: The idea that it is degrading, in the opinion of many, would be objection enough for me without taking into account its real tendency to promote ignorance and vice.

Miss B: By whom is factory labor considered degrading? It is by those who believe all labor degrading—by those who contemptuously speak of the farmer, the mechanic, the printer, the seamstress, and all who are obliged to toil as belonging to the lower orders—by those who seem to think the condition of labor excludes all the capacities of the mind and the virtues of humanity. They forget that circumstances, over which they have little or no control, place them above the necessity of labor; and that circumstances may yet compel them to engage in that at which they now scoff and spurn.

Miss S: There are objections to factory labor, which serve to render it degrading—objections which cannot be urged against any other kind of female employment. For instance, to be called and to be dismissed by the ringing of a bell savors of compulsion and slavery, and cannot cease to produce mortification without having been destructive to self-respect.

Miss B: In almost all kinds of employment it is necessary to keep regular established hours: more particularly so where there are so many connected as in the factories. Because we are reminded of those hours by the ringing of a bell, it is no argument against our employment, any more than it would be against going to church or to school. Our engagements are voluntarily entered into with our employers, with the understanding that they may be dissolved at our pleasure. However derogatory to our dignity and liberty you may consider factory labor, there is not a tinge of slavery existing in it, unless there be in every kind of labor that is urged upon us by the force of circumstances.

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[3]From *American Issues*, vol. 1, *The Social Record, Revised*, edited by Willard Thorp, Merle Curti, and Carlos Baker (Chicago: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1955), pp. 410–411. Copyright, 1955 by J. B. Lippincott Company.

Miss S: Objections have been brought up against the boardinghouses, and, I think, with much plausibility. The large number of females who are there thrown together are, unavoidably, intimately connected with each other. It cannot be denied that some, guilty of immoralities, find their way into the factories and boardinghouses. The example and influence of such must be pernicious, and terminate in the increase of vice.

Miss B: It is true that the example and influence of immorality, wherever it exists, cannot be otherwise than evil. We know, also, that some exceptionable characters occasionally find a place among those employed in factories. We know it from the fact that dismissals do, now and then, occur as the consequence. But, my dear Miss S, did you ever know or hear of a class of people who could boast of perfection? among whom wrong of any description was never known?

Miss S: O, no! And, as I am no perfectionist, I never expect to know one.

Miss B: Then, if in one case the guilt of a few has not corrupted the whole, why should it in the other? Living in a factory boardinghouse, and working in a factory, changes not "human nature": it is susceptible of good, and also of evil, there, as it is elsewhere.

Miss S: I agree with you in thinking that among all classes, and in every condition in life, evil influences are at work. But in some situations in life is not the exposure to these influences much more extensive, and, therefore, more dangerous, especially to the young?

Miss B: I believe there are many kinds of female employment offered in our large towns and cities far more dangerous in this respect than factory employment, although they may be considered more desirable and respectable. . . .

Miss S: You will not acknowledge that factory labor is degrading, or that it is productive of vice, but you must own that it fosters ignorance. When there are so many hours out of each day devoted to labor, there can be no time for study and improvement.

Miss B: It is true that too large a portion of our time is confined to labor. But, first, let me remark that this is an objection which cannot be said to exist only in factory labor. . . . We have abundant proof that unremitted toil is not always derogatory to improvement. A factory girl's work is neither hard nor complicated. She can go on with perfect regularity in her duties while her mind may be actively employed on any other subject. There can be no better place for reflection, when there must be toil, than the factory. The patronage which newspapers and periodicals find in our city, our well-worn libraries, evening schools, crowded churches and sabbath schools, prove that factory operatives find leisure to use the means of improvement both in mind and heart.

4. "Slavers" for New England Girls (1846)

Many of the Lowell girls toiled only a few years—perhaps to help needy parents, to pay off a farm mortgage, to accumulate a dowry, or to send a brother through college. Dickens noted that 978 women workers had deposits in the Lowell Savings Bank

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[4]*Voice of Industry*, January 2, 1846, in H. R. Warfel et al., eds., *The American Mind* (New York and Cincinnati: the American Book Company, 1937), p. 392.

totaling an estimated $100,000. But conditions in other factories were less wholesome, and the following account in a labor journal, though no doubt overdrawn, contains a large element of truth. How free were these New England women to quit their jobs? In what respects is the comparison with slavery plausible?

We were not aware, until within a few days, of the *modus operandi* of the factory powers in this village of forcing poor girls from their quiet homes to become their tools and, like the Southern slaves, to give up their life and liberty to the heartless tyrants and taskmasters.

Observing a singular-looking "long, low, black" wagon passing along the street, we made inquiries respecting it, and were informed that it was what we term a "slaver." She makes regular trips to the north of the state [Massachusetts], cruising around in Vermont and New Hampshire, with a "commander" whose heart must be as black as his craft, who is paid a dollar a head for all he brings to the market, and more in proportion to the distance—if they bring them from such a distance that they cannot easily get back.

This is done by "hoisting false colors," and representing to the girls that they can tend more machinery than is possible, and that the work is so very neat, and the wages such that they can dress in silks and spend half their time in reading. Now, is this true? Let those girls who have been thus deceived, answer.

Let us say a word in regard to the manner in which they are stowed in the wagon, which may find a similarity only in the manner in which slaves are fastened in the hold of a vessel. It is long, and the seats so close that it must be very inconvenient.

Is there any humanity in this? Philanthropists may talk of Negro slavery, but it would be well first to endeavor to emancipate the slaves at home. Let us not stretch our ears to catch the sound of the lash on the flesh of the oppressed black while the oppressed in our very midst are crying out in thunder tones, and calling upon us for assistance.

5. Disaster in a Massachusetts Mill (1860)

The lot of women factory workers in New England seemed less idyllic after an appalling accident in the five-story Pemberton textile mill, described next. George T. Strong, a prominent New York lawyer and public-spirited citizen, poured his indignation into his diary. Who was at fault? Why might the South have taken some secret satisfaction in the tragedy?

January 11 [1860]. News today of a fearful tragedy at Lawrence, Massachusetts, one of the wholesale murders commonly known in newspaper literature as accident or catastrophe. A huge factory, long notoriously insecure and ill-built, requiring to be patched and bandaged up with iron plates and braces to stand the introduction of its machinery, suddenly collapsed into a heap of ruins yesterday afternoon without the smallest provocation. Some five or six hundred operatives went down with

[5]Reprinted with the permission of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, from *The Diary of George Templeton Strong* by Allan Nevins & Milton Halsey Thomas. Copyright © 1952 by Macmillan Publishing Company, copyright renewed © 1980 by Milton Halsey Thomas.

it—young girls and women mostly. An hour or two later, while people were working frantically to dig out some two hundred still under the ruins, many of them alive and calling for help, some quite unhurt, fire caught in the great pile of debris, and these prisoners were roasted. It is too atrocious and horrible to think of.

Of course, nobody will be hanged. Somebody has murdered about two hundred people, many of them with hideous torture, in order to save money, but society has no avenging gibbet for the respectable millionaire and homicide. Of course not. He did not want to or mean to do this massacre; on the whole, he would have preferred to let these people live. His intent was not homicidal. He merely thought a great deal about making a large profit and very little about the security of human life. He did not compel these poor girls and children to enter his accursed mantrap. They could judge and decide for themselves whether they would be employed there. It was a matter of contract between capital and labor; they were to receive cash payment for their services.

No doubt the legal representatives of those who have perished will be duly paid the fractional part of their week's wages up to the date when they became incapacitated by crushing or combustion, as the case may be, from rendering further service. Very probably the wealthy and liberal proprietor will add (in deserving cases) a gratuity to defray funeral charges. It becomes us to prate about the horrors of slavery! What Southern capitalist trifles with the lives of his operatives as do our philanthropes of the North?

B. The Flocking of the Immigrants

1. An English Radical Praises America (1818)

Economic hardship, begotten by the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, laid a withering hand on England. Political reaction under the Tories was hardly less blighting; the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 lay in the future. Of the 24 million souls in the British Isles in 1831, only 400,000 were qualified voters. "Pocket boroughs," controlled by the crown or by aristocratic landowners, sent members to Parliament, while newly mushroomed industrial cities, like Manchester and Birmingham, enjoyed no direct representation. The tax-supported state Church of England rode high. Thomas Hulme, an English radical, here tells his story. Despairing of parliamentary reform and chafing under the rule of "the great insolent" families, he decided to bring his children to America before he should die and leave them "the slaves of such a set of beings." What were his most violent prejudices, and what features of America appealed to him most?

I was well pleased with America, over a considerable part of which I traveled. I saw an absence of human misery. I saw a government taking away a very, very small portion of men's earnings. I saw ease and happiness and a fearless utterance of thought everywhere prevail. I saw laws like those of the old laws of England, everywhere obeyed with cheerfulness and held in veneration. I heard of no mobs,

[1]In William Cobbett, *A Year's Residence in America* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1819), pp. 201–204 (Part 3).