

~ Book Review ~

Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century



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Over a decade ago, an interdisciplinary field by the name of New Working-Class Studies emerged. This novel approach to historical studies integrates Cultural Studies and Labor History to offer a more comprehensive picture of working-class life and culture. Nan Enstad's monograph, Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure, is one of the works that truly exemplifies the progress that New Working-Class Studies has made. Since the late 1890's, young working-class women of New York embraced a pleasure-seeking popular culture that centered on flamboyant fashion, thrilling dime novels and adventurous silent films. Yet, these were the same women who staged some of the most dramatic strikes of the twentieth century. Where did their unprecedented militancy come from? Enstad succeeds superbly in providing a plausible answer: these working-class women used unique meanings and practices they attached to consumer products, namely, fashion, dime novels and movies, to creatively invent themselves as "working ladies," in order to counter the conventionally honorable categories of "women," "worker," and "American," from which they were excluded; in short, consumerism was an essential ingredient in the making of political subjectivity and consciousness.

Industrialization at the start of the 1900's brought working girls low grade imitations of fashion in the latest styles. The substandard quality of these garments meant that they wore out quickly, but the young Jewish and Italian girls took up this opportunity to perform some creative mending with a profusion of laces, trims and plumes. Middle-class women, in an attempt to neutralize the class-line-blurring effect of these clothes, called working-class fashion cheap, immoral, and unfit for true ladies with virtuous values and a good taste. The garment workers asserted that labor did not make them masculine or degrade them, and thus wore elaborate

dresses to work, demonstrating their femininity and ladyhood. Practices of saving up for dresses and hats, and talking about fashion spread quickly among the young girls.

The middle-class, at the turn of the twentieth century, demanded morally uplifting reading materials. As a result, they had access to reform literature portraying women on strike, such as James Oppenheim's "Bread and Roses." On the other hand, money-hungry publishers gave the working-class formulaic dime novels devoid of political content because they maximized profits. These novels usually featured an orphaned working girl, who after a series of adventures, finds out she is an heiress and ends up marrying a wealthy man. In the eyes of the garment workers, such stories confirmed the unassailable inner virtue of the working-class, placed physical strength in high esteem and rewarded adventurous girls. Reading and talking about dime novels written in English made the Jewish and Italian girls feel American, while using high-sounding names from the novels made them feel like ladies.

Movies were also standardized for profit. Taking plot lines from dime novels that eschewed politics, these films presented young, physically active women who engaged in heroic acts such as outmaneuvering criminals and preventing catastrophic train crashes. With the rise of the film industry, young working-class women enjoyed augmented liberty within the doors of the nickelodeons, and perhaps even more importantly, they found hope in this newly-carved out public space. A dream world in which young garment workers magically transformed into ladies and valued workers began to take shape as working-class women collectively fantasized about a glamorous career as a movie star.

The above practices, Enstad argues, bolstered the working girls' self-esteem, encouraged solidarity and affirmed their independence when they purchased items with their wages. On November 22, 1909, leaders of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and

the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) gathered to discuss a general strike of the New York garment industry. One day later, the 1909 shirtwaist strike, also known as "The Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," began. Female garment workers brought their "working ladyhood" identity to the strike. Thousands walked out of their jobs in stylish attires, demanded not only higher wages, but better treatment from bosses and foremen, and many even fought off violent police officers. Their "walkout in style" and list of grievances were indications of a sense of entitlement that grew out of the consumption of fashion, whereas the strikers' aggressiveness on the picket lines paralleled dime novel tropes that lauded ladies and respectable workers who demonstrated adventurous spirits and physical prowess.

The popular press, eager to print sensational stories, focused on the glittering assortment of garments and depicted the girls as out of control. Union leaders, conforming to the middle-class ideal that frivolity and irrationality contradicted political seriousness, hastened to portray the strikers as thinly-clad, mostly peaceful and in need of charity. Neither image was correct, Enstad argues. Because the working-class women were excluded from the "workers, ladies and Americans" of New York, their political action was incited by "working ladyhood," a subjectivity constructed from the available resources of popular culture. In the case of the 1909 shirtwaist strike, consumer behaviors did not hinder political consciousness; in fact, the two went hand in hand.

The strongest and certainly most creative part of Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure is Enstad's recognition that the meanings average female garment workers gave to consumer products had political implications. Take fashion for example. During an inspiring speech at the general strike meeting, Clara Lemlich said: "We're human, all of us girls, and we're young. We

like new hats as well as any other young women. Why shouldn't we?"¹ Then, a Jewish working woman wanted to wear the label of her new dress in front and Mary Anderson, a garment worker, in response to union leaders' tirade against obsession with fashion, angrily replied "...if the girls dress fairly, well, why not? Have they not worked hard enough? ...we may well trust them to spend the money wisely."² Lastly, Dorothy Richardson, a middle-class undercover reformer, recalled her co-workers urging her to protect her garments from the dirt of the shop floor. With these and many other similar proofs, Enstad, very logically and rather ingeniously, comes to the conclusion that working women regarded fashion as a symbol of their humanity, ladyhood and entitlement to respect as well as better treatment.

In order to understand the roles films and dime novels played in the strike, Enstad again calls on her talent of deriving credible interpretations based on written records. From a striker's decision to see a picture show in order to forget about the death of a nameless garment worker, Enstad cleverly sees films as an escape from the harsh working-class realities and a crucial element that sparked the garment workers' political movement because going on strike, Enstad wisely explains, is to be "caught in a utopian hope of betterment"³. Her most brilliant move, however, is to suggest that dime novels gave female workers a means of naming and challenging what would later be called "sexual harassment." Enstad insightfully links worker grievances such as "we'd rather be orphans"⁴ and "[t]he bosses in the shops are hardly what you would call educated men"⁵ to dime novel plots in which *orphaned* girls were able to escape paternalism, battle workplace harassment and marry wealthy, *well-educated* gentlemen. It is clear that

¹ Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 119.

² *Ibid.*, 115.

³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

working-class women's tactics during the 1909 strike contained traces of the rhetoric and practices from consumer culture and Enstad is one who had the acumen to unveil the connection.

Along with written testimony, Enstad employs a variety of illustrations from photographs to newspaper caricatures. The most effective collection of reproduced visuals is the combination of photos showing strikers in dresses with various degrees of lavishness, and cartoons printed in the New York Call, such as "Two Phases to Yuletide." From these graphics, the readers can see for themselves that union leaders did indeed laboriously attempt to remove what they believed to be politically debilitating – the associations of affluence and frivolity that came with fashion and physical strength on the picket lines. Enstad's visual aids offer indispensable endorsement to her arguments, especially since they are all well-explained and referred to by her writing at appropriate places. Furthermore, these fascinating additions to the text greatly enhance the reading experience.

The evidence that Enstad presents in her book is extracted from a wide range of sources. Her list of secondary sources is extensive, ranging from books and journals to museum exhibit catalogues and lectures. The primary sources are a salubrious mix of middle-class documents (writings of Lillian Wald, Dorothy Richardson, Rose Pastor and Gertrude Barnum, the New York Evening Journal, etc.) and working-class materials (writings of Clara Lemlich, Rose Schneiderman and Elizabeth Hasanovitz, the Yiddishes Tageblatt, etc.). Enstad is well aware that the true perspectives of the working girls were obscured by union leaders who conformed to the middle-class ideal of political actors. She points out in her endnotes that even the article published by Clara Lemlich, the most authoritative source from the garment workers, was mediated by a reporter.

If Enstad were to extend the time period of her study, however, she may find the unions to be more cooperative. During the late 1910's and early 1920's, many labor reformers and socialists underwent drastic changes in their outlook toward working-class culture. Stephen H. Norwood's Labor's Flaming Youth mentions that the Boston WTUL was able to establish a successful and stable union of female telephone operators, mainly by catering to these workers' desire to participate in consumer culture. The organization held frequent dances and opened its own dress shop, Le Syndicat, which sold the latest fashions to workers in order to finance its union activities.⁶ Researching into developments that did not occur immediately after the strike might bring to light a union with fewer rifts between its leaders and members; and perhaps then, official union records might provide some corroboration to the previously lost experiences of the workers. Nevertheless, with the resources available to her, Enstad achieves what she sets out to do and constructs a truly compelling story that is undoubtedly original.

Other than innovative arguments, Enstad brings an unconventional format to the historical monograph. Instead of stating her claims in the first chapter and then subtly slip in disputes with other scholars in the endnotes, Enstad openly confronts these historians. She disagrees with Kathy Peiss, Elizabeth Ewen and Steven Ross, among others, who regard consumer culture as incompatible with serious politics. To make such a statement, according to Enstad, is to make the same pitfalls as the union leaders who blindly accepted the preconceived and at the same time insular definition of politics and political actors. Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure indeed gives new meanings to these words and makes a good case for the possible relationship between popular culture and political activism.

⁶ Richard Oestreicher, "Labor's Flaming Youth: Telephone Operators and Worker Militancy, 1878-1923 (Review)" *Journal of Social History* 27, no.2 (1993): 399.

Two small points of weaknesses surface in Enstad's monograph. Structurally, the book could have been better organized. The author understandably attempts to eradicate the apparent dichotomy of consumer culture and political consciousness by refraining from writing about one strictly after the other. Unfortunately, in its current position, not only does the chapter on the film industry seem incongruent with the rest of the piece, Enstad is prevented from tracing the effect of movies on the strikers as she does so well with fashion and dime novels. The ideas presented in the monograph would be more coherent if this chapter came before the discussion of the 1909 strike instead of appearing almost as an afterthought at the end of the book. The second blemish is in the form of an unanswered question. On several occasions, Enstad touches upon the fact that response toward fashion, dime novels and films may very likely have differed from person to person. In one instance, some girls simply refused to strike on the grounds that it was inappropriate for ladies to engage in political actions. But what were some of the other variations? Did they have any impact on group solidarity? Throughout the book, the possibility of this difference in opinion leading to individualism rather than collective political consciousness is not scrutinized.

Regarding the readability of Enstad's work, the audience should be warned of the author's abundant use of theories ("interpellation," "unrepresented histories of situated embodiment," etc.). In some cases, theories are extremely valuable. For example, by explaining the phrase "structural relations of desire" before analyzing the ways in which working-class women identified with dime novels and films, Enstad shows very clearly how this concept supports her argument and gives the reader a deeper understanding of the material. At other times, the unpacking of theoretical terminology, such as Fraser's "subaltern counterpublic," do not add much to the evidence already present and becomes quite disruptive to the reading. As a

result, this book may be rather difficult to read for leisure; however, anyone who is studying Enstad's subject for research purposes or in a specialized history course will undoubtedly find the reading experience intensely revealing and worthwhile.

Overall, Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure is a path-breaking achievement. With sound logic and an acute awareness of the larger social context, Enstad hews out a road from working women's material culture to "The Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," a feat accomplished by making sense of multitudes of contradicting sources to unearth the complex relationship between consumers, commodities and political subjectivities. As assistant professor Andrea Friedman from Washington University observes, "a blouse [is never] just a blouse, a department store just a department store, or a hat just a hat."⁷ This monograph is proof that lives aren't compartmentalized and neither are Cultural Studies and Labor History isolated terrains. Enstad's monumental contribution to historical studies will, without a doubt, encourage many to follow in her footsteps and explore the myriad possibilities of New Working-Class Studies - they will be guided, of course, by the illuminating beacon that is both Enstad's imagination and her willingness to probe the crevices of historical records for hidden clues.

⁷ Andrea Friedman, "Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure (Review)" *Journal of Women's History* 13, no.2 (2001): 168.

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