

Laboring Classes (1840)

ORESTES BROWNSON

Factory Girls (1840)

THE LOWELL OFFERING

Despite a growing discourse in the North that equated productive labor with masculinity, ironically it was women laborers who ushered in the industrial age in the United States. In scattered small mills radiating through Rhode Island's Blackstone River valley, where Samuel Slater established the nation's first textile mills, and then in larger-scale mill towns such as Lowell, Massachusetts, manufacturers relied on women's labor to create a market revolution. And farm families, such as the Patches, relied on young women's earnings to ease their transition to a dependence on wage labor. By the 1840s, tens of thousands of young New England women labored in the textile and shoe industries, and many more women on farms and in big cities depended on piecework in their homes or in sweatshops to make ends meet. From the outset, Americans often expressed their ambivalence toward manufacturing by raising concerns about how this work might corrupt the morals of workers, especially women. Samuel Slater had hoped to avoid disrupting the traditional household economy by paying the wages of his young women employees directly to their fathers. When the Waltham and Lowell mills opened in the 1820s and 1830s, however, the owners paid the women directly, thereby opening the door to women's independence. To alleviate fears of women's unregulated freedom, the Lowell mill owners tried to fill the role of supervisory parents, insisting that "factory girls" live in company boardinghouses, attend church services, abide by curfews, and keep their minds active. The association of women workers with suspect morals, however, never vanished. Orestes Brownson offered his critique of factory work in the Boston Quarterly Review in 1840. A minister, activist, and essayist, Brownson was also a labor radical who had supported the Workingmen's Party in the 1830s. Brownson's criticism of female factory workers prompted women workers in Lowell to pen a defense of their fellow laborers in their own newspaper, the Lowell Offering.

PROBLEMS TO CONSIDER

1. How do you account for Brownson's apparently demeaning comments about factory laborers, when his intent was to offer a defense of labor against the cruelties of a capitalist system?
2. How are Brownson and the Lowell women arguing more about ideas of manhood and womanhood than about industrial labor?

LABORING CLASSES

What we would ask is, throughout the Christian world, the actual condition of the laboring classes, viewed simply and exclusively in their capacity of laborers? . . .

All over the world this fact stares us in the face, the workingman is poor and depressed, while a large portion of the non-workingmen, in the sense we now use the term, are wealthy. . . . The whole class of simple laborers are poor, and in general unable to procure anything beyond the bare necessities of life.

In regard to labor two systems obtain; one that of slave labor, the other that of free labor. Of the two, the first is, in our judgment, except so far as the feelings are concerned, decidedly the least oppressive. If the slave has never been a free man, we think, as a general rule, his sufferings are less than those of the free laborer at wages. As to the actual freedom one has just about as much as the other. The laborer at wages has all the disadvantages of freedom and none of its blessings, while the slave, if denied the blessing, is freed from the disadvantages. We are no advocates of slavery, we are as heartily opposed to it as any modern abolitionist can be; but we say frankly that, if there must always be a laboring population distinct from proprietors and employers, we regard the slave system as decidedly preferable to the system at wages. It is no pleasant thing to go days without food, to lie idle for weeks, seeking work and finding none, to rise in the morning with a wife and children you love, and know not where to procure them a breakfast, and to see constantly before you no brighter prospect than the almshouse. Yet these are no infrequent incidents in the lives of our laboring population. . . .

We pass through our manufacturing villages, most of them appear neat and flourishing. The operatives are well dressed, and we are told, well paid. They are said to be healthy, contented, and happy. This is the fair side of the picture; the side exhibited to distinguished visitors. There is

a dark side, moral as well as physical. Of the common operatives, few, if any, by their wages, acquire a competence. . . . But the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these factory villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. The average life, working life we mean, of the girls that come to Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. "She has worked in a Factory," is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl. We know no sadder sight on earth than one of our factory villages presents, when the bell at break of day, or at the hour of breakfast, or dinner, calls out its hundreds or thousands of operatives. We stand and look at these hard working men and women hurrying in all directions, and ask ourselves, where go the proceeds of their labors? The man who employs them; and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs [*i.e., persons of great wealth*], revelling in luxury; or he is a member of our legislature, enacting laws to put money in his own pocket; or he is a member of Congress, contending for a high Tariff to tax the poor for the benefit of the rich; or in these times he is shedding crocodile tears over the deplorable condition of the poor laborer, while he docks his wages twenty-five per cent; building miniature log cabins, shouting Harrison and "hard cider." And this man too would fain pass for a Christian and a republican. He shouts for liberty, stumbles for equality, and is horrified at a Southern planter who keeps slaves. . . .

The actual condition of the workingman today, viewed in all its bearings, is not so good as it was fifty years ago. If we have not been altogether misinformed, fifty years ago, health and industrious habits, constituted no mean stock in

trade, and with them almost any man might aspire to competence and independence. But it is no longer. . . .

Now the good work for this age and the coming, is to raise up the laborer, and to realize in our own social arrangements and in the actual condition of all men, that equality between man and man, which God has established between the rights of one and those of another. In other words, our business is to emancipate the proletariats, as the past has emancipated the slaves. . . .

Orestes Brownson, "Laboring Classes," *Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1840): 367-73.

FACTORY GIRLS

"SHE HAS WORKED IN A FACTORY, is sufficient to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl."

So says Mr. Orestes A. Brownson, and either this horrible assertion is true, or Mr. Brownson is a slanderer. I assert that it is *not* true, and Mr. B. may consider himself called upon to prove his words, if he can.

This gentleman . . . may now see what will probably appear to him quite as marvellous; and that is, that a *factory girl* is not afraid to oppose herself to the *Editor of the Boston Quarterly Review*. True, he has upon his side fame, learning, and great talent; but I have what is better than either of these, or all combined, and that is *truth*. Mr. Brownson has not said that this thing should be so; or that he is glad it is so; or that he deeply regrets such a state of affairs; but he has said it is so; and I affirm that it is *not*.

And whom has Mr. Brownson slandered? A class of girls who in this city alone are numbered by thousands, and who collect in many of our smaller towns by hundreds; girls who generally come from quiet country homes, where their minds and manners have been formed under the eyes of the worthy sons of the Pilgrims, and their virtuous partners, and who return again to become the wives of the free intelligent yeomanry of New England, and the mothers of

factories; and it is the wages which are in a great degree to decide the characters of the factory girls as a class. . . . Mr. Brownson may rail as much as he pleases against the real injustice of capitalists against operatives, and we will bid him *God speed*; if he will but keep truth and common sense upon his side. Still, the avails of factory labor are now greater than those of many domestics, seamstresses, and school-teachers; and strange would it be, if in money-loving New England, one of the most lucrative female employments should be rejected because it is toilsome, or because some people are prejudiced against it. Yankee girls have too much *independence* for that.

But it may be remarked, "You certainly cannot mean to intimate, that all factory girls are virtuous, intelligent," &c. No, I do not, and Lowell would be a stranger place than it has ever been represented, if among eight thousand girls there were none of the ignorant and depraved. Calumniators have asserted, that *all* were vile, because they knew *some* to be so; and the sins of a few have been visited upon the *many*. . . . The erroneous idea, wherever it exists, must be done away, that there is in factories but one sort of girls, and that the baser and degraded sort. There are among us *all sorts* of girls. I believe that there

are few occupations which can exhibit so many gradations of piety and intelligence; but the majority may at least lay claim to as much of the former as females in other stations of life. . . . The Improvement Circles, the Lyceum and Institutes, the social religious meetings, the Circulating and other libraries, can bear testimony that the little time they have is spent in a better manner. Our well filled churches and lecture halls, and the high character of our clergymen and lecturers, will testify that the state of morals and intelligence is not low. . . .

And now, if Mr. Brownson is a *man*, he will endeavor to retrieve the injury he has done; he will resolve that "the dark shall be light, and the wrong made right," and the assertion he has publicly made will be as publicly retracted. If he still doubts upon the subject, let him come among us: let him make himself as well acquainted with us as our pastors and superintendents are; and though he will find error, ignorance, and folly among us, (and where would he find them not?) yet he would not see worthy and virtuous girls consigned to infamy, because they work in a factory.

A FACTORY GIRL

"Factory Girls," *Lowell Offering*, December 1840, 17-19.