Sweatshop Subjectivity and The Politics of Definition and Exhibition

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Abstract

When factory inspectors first used the word "sweatshop" at the turn-of-the-last century, they sought to describe much more than the cramped garment workplaces where immigrants labored. They also tried to explain the social dangers posed by these workplaces. Inspectors relied on their sensory responses. Citing odors as evidence, inspectors united fears of poverty, pestilence, and promiscuity in their definition of the sweatshop. Clothing produced in filthy shops by diseased workers could infect consumers and male and female immigrants working in close quarters were becoming an enfeebled, immoral race. Workers eschewed the language of racial decline, but pointed to their weak bodies as evidence of the exploitative nature of the sweatshop.

The subjectivity of definitions of the sweatshop presents a challenge, especially to public historians. How, in the process of exhibition and reconstruction, can public historians represent the competing moral judgments and racial, class, and gendered fears that shaped initial definitions of the sweatshop?

In 1994, the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) defined a sweatshop as a workplace "that violates more than one federal or state labor law governing minimum wage and overtime, child labor, industrial homework, occupational safety and health, workers compensation, or industry regulation." In reducing the definition of the sweatshop to something quantifiable, the GAO estimated that 2,000 of 6,000 garment shops in New York City were sweatshops. The situation was even worse in other major garment centers in the United States; according to the GAO, 4,500 of 5,000 shops in Los Angeles were sweatshops, 400 of 500 in Miami, and 50 of 180 in El Paso.[1] But this legalistic and quantifiable definition of the sweatshop ignores that ways in which perceptions of the sweatshop are intermingled with a range of political and cultural anxieties. Workers, employers, politicians, and factory inspectors have relied on contrasting definitions of the sweatshop for more than a century.

Historians, more than the GAO, have come to recognize that the sweatshop is not an objective label for a particular kind of workplace. Leon Stein described the sweatshop as a "state of mind as well as a physical fact." Nancy Green called it a "metaphor"; the meaning of the sweatshop, she asserts, lies in the everyday labels assigned to it by a host of historical actors.[2] The word "sweatshop" was first used at the turn-of-the-last-century in the United States by factory inspectors describing those workplaces where European immigrant women and men worked in close quarters. While factory inspectors and immigrant

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workers both used the word "sweatshop" to describe the same workplaces, they associated it with very different dangers.

Inspectors relied on their personal sensory responses to these strange and "foreign" workshops to describe the threats posed by the sweatshop. Citing the filthy odors they encountered on their visits as evidence, inspectors argued that sweatshops represented moral and public health dangers to the nation. Inspectors brought together fears of poverty, pestilence, and promiscuity in their definition of the sweatshop. Clothing produced in filthy shops by potentially diseased workers could infect consumers. Male and female immigrant workers laboring in close quarters were becoming an enfeebled, immoral race.

Immigrant workers' definition of the sweatshop was no less sensory than that of factory inspectors. But where inspectors focused on the smell of the sweatshop, highlighting their position as outside visitors, workers focused on the effects on their bodies. The sweatshop, they insisted, took healthy immigrants and turned them into frail proletarians. Workers cited their weak bodies as evidence of the exploitative nature of the sweatshop system and of the need for collective resistance, not as examples of the negative results of immigration.

A century after the first use of the word "sweatshop," its definition remains highly contested. The GAO's definition willfully ignores the range of subjective responses to working conditions that have created multiple and historically specific understandings of the sweatshop. The task and challenge of the historian and, perhaps, even more so of the public historian is to recognize the inherent subjectivity of the sweatshop. This essay explores the initial use of the word "sweatshop" in the United States in the context of turn-of-the-last-century nativism, immigration, industrialization, labor activism, and reform. It looks at how the biases, moral judgments, and political ambitions that have shaped and continue to influence understandings of the sweatshop present a particular challenge for public historians seeking to create exhibits about America's sweatshop past and present and for historians seeking to write the American sweatshop's history.[3]

From "Sweating" to "Sweatshop"

The use of the word "sweated" and "sweating" to describe noisome, physically challenging labor has a long history stretching back to the 9th century. Even in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* tiresome, draining labor becomes "sweat": "The Oxe hath therefore stretch'd his yoake in vaine. The Ploughman lost his sweat."[4] The specific connection between garment work and the labor of immigrants with "sweat" and "sweating" can be dated back at least to the 1840s with the initial rise of readymade clothing industry in both the United States and Great Britain.[5] In New York, for example, as Christine Stansell documented, female Irish immigrants composed a pool of "sweated" homeworkers who completed garments destined for the Southern slave or Western frontier markets.[6]

The first uses of "sweatshop" and "sweating system" can be dated very pre-

cisely to the late 1880s and early 1890s in the United States. The transition from talking about work as "sweated" to labeling a particular kind of workplace as a "sweatshop" and a form of production as a "sweating system" reflects the insertion of concerns about the workplace into an ongoing discourse about work and the body. In 1888, New York factory inspectors announced the emergence of a "sweating system" and described it as "nearly akin to slavery as its is possible to get. The work is done under the eyes of task-masters, who rent a small room or two in the rear part of an upper floor of a high building, put in a few sewing machines, a stove suitable for heating irons, and then hire a number of men and women to work for them."[7]

The word "sweatshop" (or in its earlier form, "sweat-shop") seems to have appeared first in 1891 in the *Fifth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York.* The report noted that: " . . . the trouble with the 'sweater' workshops of New York is this: The hours of labor are too long, being sometimes as high as ninety a week; the ventilating and sanitary arrangements are nearly always vile to the last degree, and the work-rooms are excessively overcrowded."[8] The next year, the House of Representatives Committee of Manufactures conducted highly-publicized hearings about the "Sweating System," because, in their own words, "the dangers to the public welfare of the 'sweating' system are . . . serious."[9]

By the late 19th century, the words "sweatshop" and "sweating system" had crossed the Atlantic to Europe.[10] The word "sweatshop" was used in Britain to describe English and American garment shops and it was translated literally in French, Italian, and Yiddish. Garment shops that were similar in size and organization appeared almost simultaneously in the United States, Britain, and France and, in all three countries, employed Eastern-European, Jewish, and Italian immigrants.[11]

The discursive shift from "sweated work" to the "sweatshop" coincided with a growing concern on both sides of the Atlantic about industrial working conditions. By 1880, France, Germany, and Britain had passed significant pieces of factory legislation which they further strengthened between 1892 and 1901.[12] By the 1880s, American progressive social scientists were importing information about European laws and factory inspection methods and, by 1900, most highly-industrialized and urbanized American states had created at least the infrastructure of factory inspection.[13] The sweatshop was central to this emerging factory reform movement and a crucial topic of a transatlantic dialogue about the role of the state in the regulation of work.[14] However, the specific language used by American factory inspectors suggests a local story within this larger transatlantic narrative.

The Sweatshop and American Anxiety

Although the United States, and New York in particular, had the fastest growing garment industry in the North Atlantic economy, they came to factory inspection later than many European countries. New York did not "regulate the

employment of women and children in manufacturing establishments" or appoint factory inspectors until 1888.[15] Only in 1892 did New York amend its factory inspection laws to regulate specifically "the manufacture of clothing, etc., in Tenements and Rear Buildings," banning sewing in tenement apartments except by permit or by family members.[16]

New York factory inspectors had little in common with the immigrants who labored in the garment workshops they inspected. Garment workers in New York were overwhelmingly immigrants. In 1897, seventy-five percent of all workers were Eastern-European Jews and fifteen percent were Italian.[17] In addition, while in some trades, cloakmaking for example, the workforce was almost entirely male, in others like waistmaking it was largely female.[18] In contrast, New York's factory inspectors were native-born, middle-class, and, until 1890, all male. Despite their efforts to create a form of factory inspection based on legal standards and informed by a supposedly objective contemporary social science, their personal and cultural distance from and hostility towards sweatshop workers shaped their annual reports. These reports not only enumerate major labor violations, but also detail personal reactions to the sweatshop and sweatshop workers.[19]

One such inspector was George McKay, a prolific critic of the sweating system and the principal factory inspector for the Lower East Side in the late 1880s and early 1890s who played a key role in shaping the official, middle-class definition of New York's sweatshops. Like other inspectors, McKay relied on his personal sensory reactions to the sweatshop in his reports. In particular, he described the smell. McKay insisted that sweatshops "smell as powerfully and poisonously as the wretched toilers themselves" and that they are "rarely healthy or clean, while filth and noxious odors are abundant." In one place he described the smell as "nauseating . . . and the stench abominable."[20] In a similar fashion, the anti-tenement activist John Crowley described what he claimed was a "typical" sweatshop among the 300 he had inspected: "the stench would almost force you down the stairs and it would almost make you sick when you got there." It came from "decaying vegetable matter, filth and dirt of all kinds, animal exudations, and a little of everything almost."[21]

This preoccupation with foul odors reflects turn-of-the-century factory inspectors' profound anxiety about the effects of the sweatshop, not only on workers, but also on those who came in contact with them, as well with the goods they made. This anxiety was shaped by germ theory and fears of social degeneration.[22] The sweatshop, McKay and others worried, would be the breeding ground of germs and weakened immigrants would be the vectors of disease. And, those foreign workers, enfeebled in body and mind, would produce an inferior and immoral race of workers. The "exudations from overheated and unclean human bodies," McKay argued, created a "physical environment laden with such foulness, disease and death as is simply a disgrace to God and man." The evil of "material substances in fine, subtle, microscopial forms floating in the air which is already poisoned" were a particular problem, for they "paralyze . . . vital nerve-centers in the human system, controlling and destroying those very physical organs and activities upon which the unfortunate toiler depends for his

very existence."[23] McKay and other inspectors believed that the sweatshop posed a significant public health menace. In one report, he argued that "the steam from breath and body, the poison from surrounding putresence and unsanitary plumbing . . . permeates everything present, and it needs only the single bacillus of disease to start into life a horrible death for thousands."[24] In another report, he stated that "the danger from the . . . obnoxious smells that abound therein to those employed is only equaled to that which may be caused by the spread of infectious disease through clothing . . . made up under those conditions."[25]

The threat of disease, according to these inspectors, was increased by what they perceived as the "filthy" habits of foreign "swarms of helpless and ignorant cheap labor." Their habits contributed as much to the smell of the sweatshop as the poor conditions. As one inspector put it: "[I]t does seem to me that they are to blame for the unclean condition in which we find very many of them, as well as the often very filthy condition of the immediate room or rooms in which they work and live. They seem to care nothing about the observance of proper sanitary conditions."[26] As a result, Factory Inspectors worried in 1889 that "should any disease of a contagious nature ever occur among these clothing workers, the opportunities for developing and disseminating it throughout the country are such that no amount of diligence on the part of boards of health could check it from spreading with frightful rapidity. This is no lightly-drawn possibility, but a matter of the most serious importance . . . "[27]

For McKay the medical effects of the sweatshop could not be distinguished from the moral. Work in a "crowded and unhealthy district" would inevitably lead to "low morals and low intelligence, where the condition of human beings is scarcely above that of animals."[28] Crowding produced nauseating stenches, germs, and sexual impropriety, especially as immigrant men and women worked together: ". . . so far as morals are concerned, under even favorable circumstances, young girls are increasingly employed among older persons of their own sex, and young boys and youths are mixed and crowded at work with men of advanced years, prompting premature curiosity in young minds, and turning their attention to matters of sexual significance."[29]

In his descent from personal revulsion to shrill nativism, McKay came to see the sweatshop as a threat to American racial purity and to American "civilization."[30] The moral and mental destruction wrought by the sweatshop would be genetically passed down to workers' children, producing a physically "a race ignorant, miserable, and immoral as themselves."[31] For inspectors like McKay, the sweatshop itself was a form of contagion. It was "a foreign method of working" imported into the United States from "the least civilized sections of Europe" by racially and morally suspect immigrant vectors.[32] Some inspectors even feared a shadowy conspiracy in which Eastern-European Jewish immigrants were brought to the United States simply to work in sweatshops.[33] Thus, one inspector saw his role as "sweeping back new social evils which follow the evercoming tides of lower and lower classes of labor every generation."[34]

New York's factory inspectors directly contrasted the "foreign" sweatshop

to the "American factory," where "you find everything in keeping with the American idea . . . there is cleanliness and every accommodation provided for the health, comfort, and convenience of the workman; no task system; wages by the day or week; work commencing and ending at certain hours; machines run by steam or other power and not by the crippling process of foot power used by workers in 'sweat-shops.'"[35] Through this juxtaposition, McKay and other inspectors connected the sweatshop to a project of American nationalism that aimed, all at once, to protect American health and civilization, to glorify what they saw as exceptionally American forms of industrialization, and to control the acculturation of recent immigrants.[36]

Contesting the Inspectors' Sweatshop

The definition of the sweatshop born of inspectors' noses, eyes, mouths, and pens effected the way immigrant workers thought about their work and workplaces. After the turn-of-the-century, workers' understanding of the sweatshop came to influence that of inspectors.[37] The word "sweatshop," first used by factory inspectors, made its way into immigrants' everyday vocabulary. In describing the sweatshop, immigrants focused not on foul and dangerous smells but on workers' bodily decline. In turn, they used images of weakness and disease to advance political claims.[38] In his memoirs, the cloakmaker Abraham Rosenberg described his fellow sweatshop workers as "pale, overworked shadows."[39] Sweatshops "swallowed healthy immigrants."[40] The worker and unionist Abraham Bisno simply declared that sweatshops "[work] to the destruction of health."[41]

Where inspectors described workers' physical weakness as a threat to the nation's health, immigrant unionists saw the un-American nature of the sweatshop as the primary justification for workplace organizing. Thus, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) resolved: "That we concentrate all efforts upon the movement for stamping out of the disease-breeding infamous and un-American 'sweating system.'"[42] Immigrant unionists employed the term "sweatshop" as a shorthand for a set of abominable working conditions and as a justification for continued militancy. They raised the specter of the sweatshop in appealing both to workers and to the larger public. In 1921, for example, ILGWU President Benjamin Schlessinger publicly accused manufacturers of reintroducing the "sweat-shop in the garment trades."[43] Similarly, during a 1926 cloakmakers' general strike, the ILGWU appealed to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) for support: "[The Cloakmakers] are fighting against the threatened revival of the notorious sweat shop system which in the past has disgraced the industry and kept the workers in a condition of indescribable misery and oppression."[44]

In arguing that the sweatshop could always reemerge in the New York garment industry, ILGWU leaders introduced a fluidity into their definition of the sweatshop. "The sweatshop, of course, need not be understood [as] the kitchen production of twenty-five years ago," they argued. "The present-day sweat shop has sprouted out in small establishments in big loft buildings which have the out-

ward appearance of decent shops but in which conditions of labor are such that the majority of workers employed in them find it impossible to make even a meager living."[45] In arguing for a flexible understanding of the sweatshop and in using the sweatshop as a gauge of union success as well as a symbol of legitimacy, union leaders implicitly challenged inspectors' definition of the sweatshop. They downplayed the sweatshop as a threat to national health, civilization, and racial purity while highlighting the sweatshop as a menace to proletarian bodies.

(Re)constructing the Sweatshop?

The evidence cited here reveals that the same space labeled as "sweatshop" was experienced in and described in markedly different ways by workers and inspectors. The subjectivity of this evidence poses a challenge to public historians seeking to create exhibitons about sweatshops. Reconstructing a sweatshop is especially difficult. Should historians create the inspector's sweatshop, in which smells and germs are the most visible and most shocking characteristics, or the proletarian sweatshop, in which the bodily decline of workers hints at abominable working conditions? Should visitors experience the sweatshop as workers concerned with using their bodily decline as a rallying call for organizing or as inspectors worried about the larger effects on American civilization?

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is facing precisely these questions as it seeks to reconstruct a turn-of-the-century sweatshop. The museum is located in a tenement building on New York's Lower East Side, the city's principle turn-of-the-century and contemporary sweatshop district, and its exhibits are reconstructions of historical moments that have occurred in the building's rooms. One exhibit, for example, shows the apartment of an immigrant Jewish family mourning their father and husband, a garment worker who died of tuberculosis. The exhibit on sweatshops, opening in the winter of 2001–2002, will rebuild the three room apartment of Harris Levine, an immigrant who lived in and owned a particularly small sweatshop in the building in 1895. The front room recreates the sewing room with workbenches for a sewing machine operator, a baster, and a finisher surrounded by bundles of pre-cut garments, scraps of cloth, and dust. In the small kitchen, the presser's irons are heating next to a meal being cooked for Levine's family and workers. In the bedroom, a midwife's tools are spread about to capture the moment when Levine's wife Jennie has given birth. The reconstruction is based on limited notes from inspectors' visits to the shop, sketchy details about the Levines' lives, and primary evidence from inspectors and workers about New York's sweatshops at the time.

Of course, the Levine sweatshop exhibit does not reconstruct the "true" shop. The rooms will be quiet and odorless and there will be no immigrant workers. Those issues most regularly cited by inspectors will not be present in the exhibit and, similarly, visitors will not experience the physical trauma described by workers. Still, a tension between the objectivity implied by reconstruction and the subjectivity of historical evidence remains, a tension the museum hopes to

address by guiding visitors through the space. Changing art projects, a printed handout to visitors, audio-visual presentations using words of contemporary actors in the garment industry, and the docents' scripts are designed to help visitors see reconstruction as interpretation, not re-creation. The museum can represent subjectivity by foregrounding the difficulty of reconstruction. In this way, they can suggest how the same space had different meaings for the historical actors whose papers the museum used. This helps visitors compare turn-of-the-century sweatshops with contemporary sweatshops, including those in the surrounding neighborhood, and evaluate the relative success and failures of a century's efforts to combat sweatshops.[46]

While the Tenement Museum seeks to capture the politics of representation by guiding visitors through its exhibit, the Smithsonian retreated from reconstruction in its 1999 exhibit *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820–Present.*[47] In the heat of the "culture wars" and just after the Smithsonian's controversial *Enola Gay* exhibit, curators Peter Liebhold and Harry Rubensteiin strove to create a "balanced and fair" exhibit that would—and did—withstand the inevitable harsh attacks from corporate garment industry groups. The curators replaced, for better or worse, interpretation with the presentation of "authentic" artifacts and multiple voices speaking on the issue of sweatshops. Unlike the Tenement Museum's exhibit, the Smithsonian's did not reconstruct a specific sweatshop. Indeed, while the exhibit centered around the story of the infamous El Monte, California sweatshop where Thai immigrants were held in captivity until the shop was raided in 1995, the curators quickly gave up their original idea of reproducing the El Monte sewing room. Instead, they used "artifacts" acquired by the museum and placed them in a "stage-like setting," not in a "recreation."[48]

While this gesture was a tactical retreat in the culture wars, it helped render visible the sweatshop's subjectivity. The Smithsonian sought to capture the spectrum of subjective responses to the sweatshop through a "Dialogue" section in which visitors were introduced to contrasting views of sweatshops from different figures in the garment industry and visitors were asked to respond in notebooks to the question "What should Americans know about sweatshop production in the United States?"[49] Between April 22 and October 26, 1999, 1600 people recorded their responses in these notebooks. While the "Dialogue" section served to confirm the Smithsonian's "commitment to a balanced presentation," it also captured the discursive nature of the sweatshop. As Liebhold put it, "it was like listening to a public debate."[50]

Like Harris Levine's tenement shop, El Monte as a sweatshop cannot be divorced from its representations. The sweatshop is neither a quantifiable physical space nor a discursive construct. The sweatshop seems suspended between the socially constructed and the material and its definitions are rooted in differing subjective responses to physical spaces and to those who worked and work in them. Those responses that grouped certain disparate workplaces together under the rubric of the "sweated system" were themselves part of larger, historically specific discourses around, among others things, race, nation, and the state.

One of the challenges for scholars of sweatshops is to locate the politics of representation within this broader context while recognizing that their analysis and that of their readers is filtered through ongoing discussions and redefinitions of the sweatshop.

NOTES

1. General Accounting Office (GAO), Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer, and Monetary Affairs, Committee on Government Affairs, Committee on Government Operations, House of Representatives, "Garment Industry Efforts to Address the Prevalence and Conditions of Sweatshops" GAO/HEHS-95–29 (November 2, 1994); Andrew Ross, ed. *No Sweat: Fashion Free Trade and the Rights of Garment Workers* (New York: Verso, 1997), 12–3.

2. Leon Stein, ed. *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), xv–xvi; Nancy Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready-To-Work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 137–60.

3. The last few years have seen the emergence of a recognizably cohesive field of sweatshop studies. Grounded in multiple disciplines and located as much in the activist and labor community as in the academy, sweatshop studies have traced the global nature of sweatshop production, consumption, and resistance. For an example of this global focus, see Ross, ed., *No Sweat.* The global focus, though, does tend to minimize the significance of local experiences and discourses. One of the challenges of the new sweatshop studies is to explain the place of the local in the global.

4. William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1979), 32, Act II, Scene i.

5. For a larger analysis of the use of the words "sweat," "sweated," and "sweatshop," see *Oxford English Dictionary, Volume XVII* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1989), 369–74.

6. Christine Stansell, "The Origins of the Sweatshop: Women and Early Industrialization in New York City" in Michael Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1983), 78–103.

7. *Third Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York for the Year Ending December 1st 1888* (Albany: The Troy Press Company, 1889), 27–8.

8. *Fifth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York* (Albany: James B. Lyon, State Printer, 1891), 27–8.

9. House of Representatives, Committee of Manufactures, 52nd Congress, 2nd Session, Report No. 2309, "Report on the Sweating System under House Resolution, February 13, 1892," v–vi.

10. *Westminster Gazette,* November 2, 1895, 2–3. See, also, Shiela Blackburn's article in this issue and N.N. Feltes, "Misery or the Production of Misery: Defining Sweated Labor in 1890" *Social History* 17 (3, 1992): 441–52.

11. Selma Berral, *East Side/East End: Eastern-European Jews in London and New York, 1870–1920* (Westport: Praeger, 1994); Green, *Ready-To-Wear and Ready-to-Work;* David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 163–4; Joseph Buckman, *Immigrants and the Class Struggle: The Jewish Immigrant in Leeds, 1880–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

12. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge; The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 235–6.

13. Rodgers argues that the movement for factory inspection began in the United States only in the 1890s. However, by 1890, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, and New York had created system of factory inspection aimed to regulate working conditions and the hours of labor of women and children. He is correct in noting that these systems were essentially rudimentary and would be expanded dramatically after the turn-of-the-century and after the decisions in *Muller v. Oregon.* On pre-1910 American factory legislation, see *First Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York for the Year Ending December 1st, 1886* (Albany: The Argus Company, 1887), 41–58.

14. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings.* On the global impulse towards factory inspection and protective legislation, see Ulla Wikander, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Jane Lewis, eds., *Protecting Women: Labor Legislation in Europe, the United States, and Australia, 1880–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995). See also, Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

15. The original text of the 1886 law is reprinted in full in *First Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 6–7. The law, which was amended and, in general, strengthened in subsequent years, set out a series of guidelines to restrict and regulate the work of women and children. In doing so, however, it also sought to establish guidelines for working-conditions for all laborers, including adult men. The original law prohibited the employment of minors under eighteen and women under twenty-one for more than sixty hours per week and no child under thirteen was allowed to work in manufacturing. Firms hiring women were required to post a notice listing the number of hours women were allowed to labor. Violators of the law faced fines of not less than $50 but no more than $100.

16. *Seventh Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York* (Albany: James B. Lyon, State Printer, 1893), 11–2; 41–3.

17. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York* (Albany: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, Co., State Printers, 1898), 45.

18. Joint Board of Sanitary Control, *Special Report on Sanitary Conditions in the Shops of the Dress and Waist Industry* (New York, May 1913), 6–7.

19. In 1890 New York State appointed a host of female inspectors, including three assigned to the Lower East Side. *Fifth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 90–1.

20. George McKay, "The Effect Upon the Health, Moral and Mentality of Working People Employed in Overcrowded Work-rooms" in *Fifth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 77–80; George McKay, "The Sweating System" in *Eighth Annual Report of the Factory Inspector* (Albany: James Lyon, State Printer, 1894), 787–97.

21. "Report on the Sweating System," 108–9.

22. There is an important and growing literature on the social application of the germ theory of disease. Katherine Ott describes how by the 1890s the idea of germs had entered common language, dramatically altering the way policymakers and public health advocates talked about contagion. Katherine Ott, *Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture since 1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 53–68. See also Nancy Tomes, "Moralizing the Microbe: The Germ Theory and the Moral Construction of Behavior in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Antituberculosis Movement," in Allan M. Brandy and Paul Rozin, eds., *Morality and Health* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 271–89; Alan Kraut, "Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes and American Efficiency, 1890–1924" *Social Science History* 12 (Winter, 1988): 377–89.

23. McKay, "The Effect Upon the Health, Moral and Mentality of Working People Employed in Overcrowded Work-rooms," 77–80.

24. George McKay, "Evils of the Sweating System" in *Seventh Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 667–9.

25. McKay, "The Sweating System," 794.

26. Factory inspectors declared filthy habits as particularly "Jewish" and "Italian" characteristics. They insisted that other immigrants, like Swedes and Germans, possessed much healthier habits. State of New York, Department of Factory Inspection, *Testimony of Daniel O'Leary, Factory Inspector of the State of New York, before the United States Industrial Commission, Wednesday, March 8, 1899* (Albany: Brandow Printing Company, 1899), 14–6; *Eleventh Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 28.

27. *Third Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 27–8.

28. McKay, "The Effect Upon the Health, Moral and Mentality of Working People Employed in Overcrowded Work-rooms," 84–5.

29. McKay, "The Effect Upon the Health, Moral and Mentality of Working People Employed in Overcrowded Work-rooms," 88–9.

30. On turn-of-the-century discourses around civilization, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

31. McKay, "The Effect Upon the Health, Moral and Mentality of Working People Employed in Overcrowded Work-rooms," 84–5.

32. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 47.

33. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 43–5.

34. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 759.

35. *Twelfth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 47.

36. *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York,* 38–43.

37. See Daniel Bender, "From Sweatshop to Model Shop: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor and Organizing, 1880–1934" Ph.D. Dissertation: New York University, 2001.

38. I explored the way images of sweatshop workers' disease and weakness were used by Jewish labor organizers in an earlier article. See Daniel Bender, "'A hero . . . for the weak': Work, Consumption, and the Enfeebled Jewish Worker, 1881–1924." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 56 (Fall, 1999), 1–22. Hadassa Kosak does note that the sweatshop was a target of union organizing but tends to underestimate the importance of anti-sweatshop activism for the early immigrant Jewish labor movement. See Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881–1905* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 125–7.

39. Abraham Rosenberg, *Memoirs of A Cloakmaker,* trans. Lynn Davison (New York: Unpublished, 1920), Martin P. Catherwood Library; Cornell University, 25.

40. Rosenberg, *Memoirs of A Cloakmaker,* 25.

41. "Report on the Sweating System," 94.

42. "3rd Annual Convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Report of Proceedings" (1903), 6.

43. The ILGWU was adamant in their association of piecework with the sweatshop; the union "declared the system of piece-work to be a relic of the abominable sweat-shop system." Alexander Trachtenberg, "The 'Glory' of Piece Work," *Justice,* December 9, 1921, 3; Alexander Trachtenberg, "The 'Glory' of Peace [sic] Work," *Justice,* December 16, 1921, 3.

44. Morris Sigman to William Green, September 20, 1926, ILGWU Archives; Morris Sigman Papers, Box 1, Folder 20; Isidore Nagler to Morris Sigman, October 4, 1926, ILGWU Archives; Morris Sigman Papers, Box 1, Folder 21.

45. "Report of the General Executive Board to the 20th Convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union" (1929), 7; "Report of the General Executive Board to the 19th Convention of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union" (1928), 278.

46. I am indebted to the Lower East Side Tenement Museum staff with sharing their curatorial materials with me. In attempting to make the production of evidence itself a subject of analysis, I am influenced by Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer, 1991): 773–97.

47. Materials from and pictures of the exhibit can be viewed on the internet at www.americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops and in the exhibition catalog, Peter Liebhold and Harry R. Rubenstein, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820–Present* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance in Cooperation with the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, 1999). See also, Peter Liebhold and Harry Rubenstein, "'Between a Rock and a Hard Place': The National Museum of American History's Exhibition on Sweatshops, 1820–Present" *Labor's Heritage* 9 (Winter, 1999): 4–25.

48. Peter Liebhold, "Experiences from the Front Line: Presenting a Controversial Exhibition During the Culture Wars" *The Public Historian* 22 (Summer, 2000): 67–84.

49. See Mary Alexander, "Do Visitors Get It? A Sweatshop Exhibit and Visitors' Comments" *The Public Historian* 22 (Summer, 2000); 85–94. Liebhold notes that they came under attack especially from visitors for not having the voice of a worker in the dialogue section. Liebhold writes that they could not find a "representative" worker. This argument seems strange; after all, were the featured voices—a manufacturer, community, activist retailer, union representative, government official, and celebrity endorser—representative? This is reminiscent of what Ethel Brooks describes in her article in this issue of how workers are used as emblems and images in anti-sweatshop campaigns. See Liebhold, "Experiences from the Front Line," 75–7. The text of the dialogues is reproduced in Liebhold and Rubenstein, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place,* 81–6.

50. Liebold, "Experiences from the Front Line," 76–7. Liebold notes that in the notebooks visitors often wrote about other visitor's responses.