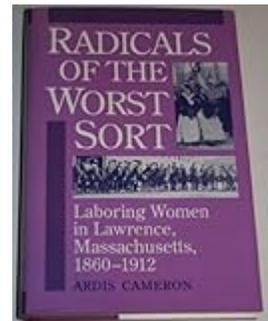


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ardis Cameron.** *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. xix + 229 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02013-1.



**Reviewed by** Elizabeth Faue (Wayne State University)

**Published on** H-Women (October, 1995)

*Radicals of the Worst Sort* is a new account of the triumphs and travails of the laboring women of the Lawrence textile mills, associated most frequently in labor history with the “Bread and Roses” strike of 1912. Ardis Cameron’s book, however, is more than about the women who came “marching, marching” to the rhythm of the reformers and syndicalists. Rather, it asserts that a good portion of the strategy, wit, effort, and innovation of labor activism in Lawrence—and by implication elsewhere—should be credited to working-class women. In her coverage of the now familiar ground of women’s labor militancy, Cameron reiterates women’s construction of class identity in gendered terms. While much of the material on Lawrence is not new to labor historians, Cameron’s perspective on the women of Lawrence foregrounds the contradictory position of women working in a society that denied them a socially sanctioned role as wage-earners.

Cameron’s book serves as well to reclaim the territory of labor history from those who seem at best resistant to admitting the connections between gender and class, community and workplace. As her study amply demonstrates, labor conflicts seldom affected those on the production line in isolation from community, rarely centered on men to the exclusion of women or individuals abstracted from families, and pointed to the con-

tradition of a labor movement committed to a man’s family wage while the great bulk of the working class—men as well as women and children—were hardly earning enough collectively to support themselves as individuals.

At her most effective and convincing, Cameron provides us with new insights, methods, and meanings with which to invest the conflicts between Lawrence mill workers and management. In her discussion of the 1882 Lawrence strike, for example, Cameron argues that what was at stake was the legitimacy and possibility of women being self-supporting workers. Like Mary Blewett, Cameron finds that the labor movement of the Gilded Age was largely indifferent to the plight of women and heavily dependent on family ideology to sanction male wage demands. Cameron devotes more attention than Blewett to the moral and cultural reception of self-supporting women workers in New England. She forcefully argues that it was in the Gilded Age that women became seen as illegitimate in the role of wage-earners. Thought either frivolous or immoral, working women became the target of the animosities of the age.

Cameron’s narrative of the famous Lawrence strike of 1912 strike takes a different tack. Her retelling of the Bread and Roses strike centers on women in their role as mothers and family members (both inside and outside the workplace); by 1912, arguments for working-

class women's economic independence were, theoretically, moot. While I am inclined to disagree with this point, Cameron's argument that the creation, maintenance, and use of community was at the heart of progressive era struggles, which permits her to place the involvement of the I.W.W. in Lawrence in proper perspective, is one worth reiterating. At the same time, Cameron's community focus leads to some of her more innovative uses of geographical method, cultural analysis, and practical skepticism.

Her argument in this section successfully rebuts progressive associations of working class violence only with maleness. In contrast to presumed female passivity, Cameron posits that the working women of Lawrence were the principal source of community level violence during the 1912 strike. Their strident reactions, company tactics and the treachery of those who returned to work was sanctioned by community moral codes and legitimated by the indifference with which employers treated human lives. While I.W.W. leaders like Big Bill Hayward tried to suppress community led violence, they were rightly thwarted by the community's own moral economy that responded with outrage to the failure of solidarity. Empowered by traditional codes of justice, the immigrant women of Lawrence sought to drive out those who would have robbed them of a legitimate victory. The I.W.W., on the other hand, proved to be a timid partner in the strike. The besieged union both sought to end the strike without broad consent and to suppress grassroots militancy when it interfered with the logic of the strike.

In its investigation of women and labor militancy, Cameron's treatment of Lawrence's history raises some important questions for labor history as a whole. To begin with, her discussion of the women in the 1912 strike echoes a familiar—if not wholly accepted—theme in labor history: the odd celebration of “just” class warfare, which responds to violence with escalating violence. Given how many times workers were on the losing end of these struggles, such celebration is deeply troubling. The romanticization of violence in some studies is enough to make pacifists quail at the prospect of teaching labor history at all. Even its narrative structures seem to require the introduction, retelling, and memorialization of violence. Apart from the inevitable use of state repression, however, violence often appears to come at no cost. Showing that women were militant, too, in their willingness to use violence to enforce community norms, at times seems to be one of the major points of *Radicals of the Worst Sort* (and Cameron is certainly not alone here).

Ironically, the exclusion of women from the narrative of the “great strike” (whether it be in 1886, 1922, or 1936) often has been sanctioned by the absence of women from episodes of violence. Because working women seldom demonstrated the same capacity and willingness to engage in “class warfare” as men, women became the absent mothers of labor's own story. When women carried baseball bats, threw stones, or counseled violence, as did Mother Jones and Emma Goldman, they became icons and exceptions in the lusterless mass of women workers, victimized by capitalism but far too quiescent (embedded in the family or inhibited by their own timidity) to fight back. The history of women and work sometimes leads to the perverse desire to have “happy stories” which will transform the pacific reality of working women into a landscape of amazons fighting for the rights of men and the safety of children.

There are real problems posed for historians not simply in the absence of women fighting back but in their failure to problematize violence. Should violence (rails ripped up, looms destroyed, people beaten or killed, or policemen struck) be used uncritically (as often it has been under the influence of the New Left) to weigh the historical significance of people, places, and events? While women's violence might entitle them to make it onto the billboard of labor history, shouldn't we also ask ourselves what the cost of violence was and is, not simply for capital but for labor solidarity? Is it politic—or even realistic—to argue without question that labor won (or lost) only when it physically confronted employers and the state?

Another major question Cameron's book raises is the connection between the public and private arenas in history. While Cameron argues that working women's experience undermines the distinction between what constitutes “personal” and “political” in history, the balance of the argument rests on an analysis of public and private in women's lives alone, showing how community and family shaped their public world. As in many recent accounts, however, this is not exactly an equal opportunity endeavor; one might look to books as distinct as David Montgomery's *The Fall of the House of Labor*, Patricia Cooper's *Once a Cigarmaker*, or even Louise Tilly and Joan Scott's *Women, Work, and Family* to see how incomplete the picture is. In all these studies, solid as they are, there is an uneven standard for the exploration of the personal, the familial, and the cultural. Working women dance, gossip, and care for children as well as work and protest, while men seem to have no private identity, no family role, and no communal conscious-

ness at all. It defies all sense, and historical evidence, to see women's lives as the only place where "public" and "private" meet. Despite sex role differentiation, men danced, gossiped, and occasionally took care of children, too. Having opened up the doors between the worlds of family and work, personal and political, for working women, it is now time we do that for working men.

Finally, a word toward Cameron's treatment of language and culture. Reading cultural analyses of labor history, I remain struck by how we remain unable to resolve the contradiction between wanting to have the insights of the linguistic turn and our will to write a social history. We now experience a tension between being skeptical of "the authority of experience" and remaining dependent on that "experience" to render our politics and scholarship intelligible. Our dilemma is deepened by the fact that the medium in which we research, understand the past (including the "objective experience" of class), and communicate our understandings is language. That means that we are stuck in a double bind; even material analyses use evidence rooted in "language" to account for economic determination.

Anyone seeking to use linguistic analysis in labor history has been intermittently frustrated both by gut-level resistance to "cultural" explanations and by ideas of historical significance rooted in monumental change and strong causal relationships. We assume a limited fixity in subjects, places, and meanings that poststructuralists would scorn; for without fixed points, we cannot measure change. This fixity stands in the way of what linguistic analysis had to offer labor history in challenging categories and narrative forms. In common with most historians, those who write the history of the working class are not theorists who can emancipate meaning from context or give completely free play to our imaginations. We may be informed by and even contribute to theory but are neither driven by its mandates nor corralled by its limitations. Instead, we teach and understand through stories, which in their very structure assert relationships among

phenomena and "explain" change. That leads to its own set of frustrations.

When Cameron sets out to describe, for example, the pre-Civil War cultural system in which self-supporting women had a public role, she runs into the arguments of Jeanne Boydston about the viability of women as workers in the same era. Boydston's cultural evidence in *Home and Work* suggests the opposite of Cameron; the antebellum period saw the introduction of a wage labor market that effectively effaced women's work, since what happened in the "home" was not labor. In that scenario, working women were an anomaly circumscribed by the cultural assignment of "wage work" to "men." "When it changed," our founding question as historians, is particularly difficult to answer when measured by language practices and cultural symbols, the very media in which we write. Thus, we can only approximate changes; serious deconstructionists would suggest that the historical meanings are only those we have constructed for ourselves.

For all the difficulties of her task, Ardis Cameron does a credible job of balancing her analysis of the historical distortions and linguistic depredations on the laboring women of Lawrence with a fairly good social historical sense of what we need to know about what the women did. It is a balancing act not usually rewarded but one on which the future of labor history depends. While we can no longer be naive about the linguistic and social construction of subjects, categories, and meanings, we still have a need—an avocation if you will—to present our insights in the form of stories that catch the imagination of our readers at the same time they provide them with questions about what the meanings of our stories are. To a great extent, *Radicals of the Worst Sort* meets both these purposes.

Copyright (c) 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact [reviews@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:reviews@h-net.msu.edu).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Elizabeth Faue. Review of Cameron, Ardis, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. October, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=185>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).