A COAT OF MANY COLORS

IMMIGRATION, GLOBALIZATION, AND REFORM IN
NEW YORK CITY'S GARMENT INDUSTRY

EDITED BY
DANIEL SOYER

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in the New York City Garment Industry*

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Daniel Soyer

Preface

What's the Use of History?

Ruth J. Abram

President, Lower East Side Tenement Museum

PARTLY BECAUSE I spend a large portion of my time asking people to give money to support the work of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, I have given considerable thought to the question: What's the use of history? I'm painfully aware that many prospective donors have had perfectly dreadful experiences with history—usually in some high school history class. For these students and their teachers, history remains a chronology of places, persons, and dates devoid of any meaning for their lives. During one memorable solicitation, the moment I entered the philanthropist's office he bellowed, "I hate history. It's all about the past. It's dusty. Why would anybody support it?" It seemed not to have occurred to this man that the autobiography he had recently published was, in fact, a history. *That* history, presumably, he found interesting.

At the Tenement Museum, where we have worked to interpret the history of immigrant families in compelling ways that draw connections between historical and contemporary issues, we meet many Americans who have nothing good to say about the kind of history they took (and hated) in school. Yet they stand uncomplainingly in long lines to get into the Museum. Whether they are purchasing a historical novel or biography or viewing a historical film or engaging in a family genealogy project or visiting a historic site, it is history Americans are after. And why not? Without history, it is difficult to answer the age-old questions: Who am

I, and what am I doing here? Without history, the historian Arthur Bestor once said, “We do not know who we are.” Nor do we know where we are going, or what steps to take to get there. The work of history museums and scholars is to make history available in such a way that it can be used by the public to live more consciously and effectively.

Years in the making and owing so much to the incredible persistence of its editor, Daniel Soyer, *Coat of Many Colors* provides numerous examples of just how crucial history is to understanding our present predicament—within and outside of the garment industry. Here are a few examples:

Things don’t just happen. *Coat of Many Colors* makes clear that neither the fact that New York City was once the largest manufacturer of clothes in the nation nor the fact that it is no longer dominant in this industry is a fluke. Rather, this change is the result of specific events and influences in the world.

What, you might ask, is the benefit of knowing this? Well, if you are considering investing in this industry, knowing its history and the factors that have made it prosper and/or collapse could help you decide whether or not to invest. If you are in a business which is dependent on the garment industry for its own success, you will want to understand that industry before your business is buffeted by outside influences.

If you work in a garment factory, you will benefit from knowing what factors are likely to control your fate. You will also want to know that at certain times, when the industry abused its workers, those workers united to great effect. Perhaps you’re a union organizer. This volume addresses your twofold challenge: how to grow the union, and at the same time find a way to reform the industry in such a way that your members will flourish and see value in continued union membership.

Perhaps you feel your relationship to the garment industry is more tenuous. You’re a student who wears clothes. You’ve seen the advertisements asking you to “Look for the Union Label.” You’ve heard campus organizers exhorting you to “Buy American.” But is that really the answer? Is the fact that *you* buy items made in Hong Kong, Ecuador, or the Dominican Republic the primary problem?

Investor, contractor, worker, union organizer, reformer, consumer, or student, this volume will help you understand the garment industry and your relationship to it. But there are so many other lessons as well.

Middle- and upper-class arguments and concerns, though not necessarily the same as those of the working class, may nevertheless be important to articulate in order to build support for reform among people in the power structure.

Two examples from this volume come to mind. In their effort to end piecework in tenement apartments, middle- and upper-class women in the Consumer League argued that the substandard conditions in which these garments were made contributed to the spread of tuberculosis, because the disease remained on the garments as they moved uptown and infected the ladies who bought and wore them. Although science later discovered that TB could not survive the trip, the argument was powerful in its time. So too was the argument that women who worked in tenement shops risked undermining women's role in society and compromised their virtue. Had they asked Italian female workers, the reformers would have discovered that immigrant women felt that working at home actually preserved their role. But the argument wasn't meant to persuade workers, but rather middle-class public opinion makers. In a world in which "respectable" middle-class women did not work for pay, the argument won the day. The editor of this volume, Daniel Soyer, points out that the issue persists to this day. When negotiating to get a photograph taken of a contemporary garment shop, he was told that some union members resent being depicted as victims "in need of rescuing by reformers."

Tragedies can be effectively used to symbolize the urgency and rightness of a cause and galvanize support.

Although labor reforms had been won before 1911, the movement was given a great boost by the terrible Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, in which 146 workers, mostly young women, were killed. None of the reformers' efforts to draw attention to the issue of workplace abuse could ever have galvanized public opinion in the way the pictures of young women jumping from the flames to their death did.

Leaders who identify with a specific racial or religious group have not always proved to be the best advocates for the rank and file of a different group. Similarly, women workers have discovered that they cannot assume that their concerns will be addressed simply because the men in charge are progressive.

Many factors that may seem tangential can in fact influence an industry. In this volume, we watch as highways made it possible and profitable to move manufacturing outside New York City to areas with depressed wages. Then, too, when the growing informality of dress made skilled

sewers or quick turnaround no longer a necessity, New York's skilled and more highly paid workers and nearby factories were transformed from advantages to liabilities.

Unions have been strongest when they have solidified their relationship to their workers by providing services such as housing, recreation, culture, and education. Progressive organizations that refuse to change when faced with new workers and new needs risk becoming irrelevant. In this volume, we see a union discovering that it had to respond to the demand for day care by Chinese garment workers or face a mass defection.

Timing can make all the difference. For instance, Chinese and Dominicans were able to enter the garment industry because they came at a time when older generations of Jews and Italians were dying or retiring and Puerto Ricans and African Americans, having despaired of any chance of advancement, had moved to other lines of work.

Readers of *Coat of Many Colors* are in store for a fascinating journey through the garment industry past and present. Beyond that, they will discover a cornucopia of ideas and insights they can use to be more effective citizens of the world. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum is proud to have had a hand in bringing this book to the public.

A COAT OF MANY COLORS

A “push boy” guiding a hand truck through the busy midtown Garment District streets, 1944. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York. Gift of the Office of War Information.

Introduction

The Rise and Fall of the Garment Industry in New York City

Daniel Soyer

FOR MORE THAN one hundred and fifty years, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, the garment industry was the largest manufacturing industry in New York City. For much of that time, the needle trades employed more New Yorkers than any other sector, and New York produced more clothing than any other city in the country. While the local apparel industry's size and vitality have declined sharply in recent decades, the garment industry remains a significant part of the city's economy, especially for certain ethnic communities; and it has made a deep imprint on New York's history and self-image. It therefore merits continued attention, not only by historians but also by economists, sociologists, and others who are interested in the ongoing life of the city and its people. The essays in this book examine the garment industry's impact on such immigrant groups as Jews, Italians, Dominicans, and Chinese; the different experiences of men and women in the needle trades; the social and economic forces that led the industry to move around the city and, ultimately, out of it; and the struggles against the sweatshop.

Indeed, the garment industry has attracted the most attention precisely in periods when concern over the sweatshop, an outgrowth of the industry's peculiar hierarchical structure, has been greatest. In an industry characterized by seasonality and fashion instability, the largest firms at the

top of the clothing hierarchy have usually sought to minimize fixed costs and farm out much of the work to small independent contractors—who, as Daniel Soyer discusses in this volume, depend on keeping down labor costs and overhead in order to eke out a profit on the narrowest of margins. At the bottom of the hierarchy, shop- and homeworkers toil away in terrible conditions for low wages. As Eileen Boris shows below, unions, consumers, students, feminists, and others have mounted periodic campaigns against the sweatshop but have had a difficult time finding the point of greatest leverage from which to reform the industry. Although they have met with occasional success, the problem has returned repeatedly.

It should be noted that the industry's tendency toward supporting a myriad of small shops with little capitalization has well suited it for New York City, with its limited real estate. Small garment factories have been found in various neighborhoods at various times, stacked on top of one another in tenement apartments, in storefronts and lofts, and even in office buildings. Despite its great aggregate size, then, the industry has often blended seamlessly, almost invisibly, into the cityscape. As economist Roy Helfgott noted, even the buildings of the famous midtown Garment District in its heyday looked much like office buildings, betraying little of what was happening inside.¹

The apparel trade's close ties with a succession of immigrant groups also helped make New York an especially good fit. Irish and Germans in the mid-nineteenth century, Jews and Italians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth, African-Americans and Puerto Ricans in the mid-twentieth, and Chinese, Dominicans, and others at the turn of the twenty-first all supplied the cheap labor vital to the growth and survival of this low-wage industry. Some of these groups—in particular, Jews, Chinese, Dominicans, and Koreans—have also provided most of the industry's entrepreneurial initiative. Ethnic culture in New York City has therefore been intimately bound up with the garment industry, and the chapters in this book reflect this close connection. In their contributions to this book, Hadassa Kosak, Ramona Hernández, and Xiaolan Bao demonstrate just how embedded the experience and language of the needle trades became among Jews at the turn of the twentieth century, Dominicans at mid-century, and Chinese at the turn of the twenty-first century, respectively. Nancy Carnevale, in her chapter on Italian homeworkers,

argues that ethnic culture must also be recognized for its influence on the structure of the industry itself.

The absence of large factories with smokestacks belching smoke has distinguished the garment industry from the common image of American manufacturing, and so has the fact that most clothing workers have been women. True, the ratio of women to men has been lower in New York, where many Jewish and Dominican men, in particular, have taken up sewing at various times. But even there, some branches of the industry and some trades have relied almost completely on female labor. As Margaret M. Chin shows, the gender division of labor has often been arbitrary, based on ethnic preferences as well as on unsubstantiated stereotypes concerning the natural abilities and acquired skills of women and men. Generally, men have monopolized those jobs—such as cutter and presser—regarded as more skilled and, therefore, better paid. But it may be that these trades have been defined as skilled in large part *because* men have taken them.

Ultimately, as Florence Palpacuer writes, the New York industry fell victim to the same sorts of global social forces that led to its rise in the first place. Nevertheless, New York retains an important niche in the world garment trade.

The Rise of New York City as a Garment Center

At the start of the nineteenth century, clothing that was not made at home was bought from custom tailors or acquired secondhand. By the 1820s, some enterprising tailors began to use their slack time to make crude, low-quality garments to be worn by slaves and sailors. Later, some of this “slop work” was sent west, to be worn by miners as well. But as the century approached its midpoint, more and more respectable Americans began to buy some of their clothes—mostly loose-fitting ones like shirts—off the rack. This was especially true of men, whose dress tended to be less precisely tailored and not nearly as subject to the volatility of fashion as that of women.

Several important technological changes spurred the growth of the ready-made industry. First, the invention of the sewing machine and its widespread use by the 1850s made possible the mass production of cloth-

ing, not only by increasing the speed at which seams could be sewn, but also by guaranteeing that those seams would be stronger and more even than hand-stitched ones. The sewing machine and the cutting knife, which made possible the simultaneous cutting of multiple layers of fabric after 1876, were the most revolutionary technological innovations in the manufacture of clothing. Subsequent developments, including steam and electric power or computerization, simply represented improvements in the same basic technology. Other technological advances included the steam press and specialized machines for making buttonholes.²

Business innovations also played an important role in the rise of clothing manufacture. A whole class of clothing firms arose to supply the need for uniforms during the Civil War. Most crucially for the future growth of an industry with ambitions to supply consumers who cared how they looked (that is, *not* slaves, sailors, or miners), manufacturers used the war to devise a system of standard sizing. After the war, new methods of marketing and distribution, such as department stores and mail-order catalogs, further spread the acceptance of ready-made garments, particularly among men. Women's clothing lagged behind men's, but by the end of the nineteenth century it began to catch up. Again, the process began with looser-fitting items, such as cloaks. Then, in the 1890s, the shift from closely tailored dresses and suits to the more easily sized skirts and shirtwaists pushed ahead the women's industry.

New York exploited its well-established position as the country's leading port to become the greatest center of the new garment industry. For one thing, the city was the premiere point of entry for European (especially French) fashions—a factor which, together with its status as an artistic and media capital, gave it cultural cachet and made it a trendsetter in fashion. Of course, the millions of European immigrants that poured through New York harbor also provided it with an unsurpassed pool of cheap labor to assemble the garments. New York was also the center of the textile trade from European and New England mills and enjoyed excellent transport connections with major markets. Finally, as the leading financial center of the United States, the city possessed ample capital to invest. Conversely, New York's most significant defect, its lack of space, did not prove a hindrance to an industry based on tiny units of production.³

New York quickly came to dominate women's wear. By 1899, New York supplied 65 percent (by value) of the nation's ready-made women's cloth-

ing. The city's strengths as a fashion, communications, and transportation center suited it especially for the production of women's garments, whose higher sensitivity to shifts in style always demanded a quicker turnaround, an ability to produce shorter runs, and closer supervision of contractors' work. Articles of clothing that followed more standardized lines—underwear, housedresses, work clothes, and men's wear—allowed for more economies of scale and were more often produced in large factories outside of New York. Nevertheless, the city also captured a significant share—27 percent in 1890—of the men's market.⁴

Early on, the industry took on the distinctive hierarchical structure that still characterizes it today. Manufacturers (later, jobbers and large retailers) designed and marketed clothing under their own labels. They generally bought and cut the fabric. But they wanted to avoid high fixed costs for either capital or labor, so they contracted out much of the sewing work. Depending on the specific trade and current business conditions, firms might contract out all of their sewing or some of it. Early incarnations of this structure included the “putting out system” under which contractors distributed bundles of cut garments to Irish and German seamstresses to sew at home.⁵ A little later, the “German tailor” system evolved, under which skilled male tailors would put their entire families to work assembling garments given to them by larger firms. By the 1880s and 1890s, contractors kept minuscule shops, often in their own tenement apartments, and hired a handful of workers, including their own relatives and compatriots. These tenement shops were the archetypal sweatshops, where workers labored long hours in terrible conditions for little pay. The development was cyclical. Small contractors grew into manufacturers, pushing aside older firms and increasing the average size of shops. Later, the new manufacturers would establish ties with a new crop of contractors, and the average shop size dropped again. In any case, small shops remained the norm. In 1913, three-quarters of garment shops in New York had five or fewer workers. The following year, the average men's wear shop had thirty-six employees.⁶

The upsurge of the garment industry and the maturation of the contracting system at the end of the nineteenth century coincided with a wave of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe came to play an especially important role in the industry. Arriving in great numbers beginning in the 1880s, they went

to work for German Jewish employers who had moved from dealing in secondhand clothing to manufacturing ready-made apparel. One survey in the mid-1890s showed that more than half of employed Lower East Side residents, mostly Jews, worked in the garment industry.⁷ By 1900, Eastern European Jews constituted a majority of both workers and employers. Among their other accomplishments, Jewish contractors solidified the enduring importance of ethnic ties in the industry, as they hired mostly members of their own community. Among workers, the majority were young, unmarried women, though a larger percentage of Jewish men also entered the needle trades than did their counterparts in other ethnic groups.⁸

Italians, especially Italian women, followed closely behind the Jews. Less inclined to go into business for themselves, Italian workers clustered at opposite ends of the industry. On the one hand, they worked in the large, relatively modern shirtwaist factories that used the most formal means to recruit their largely female workforce. On the other hand, they made up perhaps 98 percent of homeworkers, who stood in the same relationship to the contractors as the contractors did to the manufacturers.⁹ As the lowest members of the clothing industry hierarchy, homeworkers finished garments, assembled artificial flowers, and willowed plumes (processed feathers) for hats. Working by the piece, they often put the members of their families to work so as to maximize their production and their meager wages.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, workers were forming unions destined to become powerful forces not only within the garment industry, but also in the city as a whole. In the 1880s and 1890s, Jewish workers had gained a reputation for waging dramatic and bitterly fought strikes that sometimes led to temporary improvements in wages or conditions, but seldom to stable organizations.¹⁰ The turning point came with a wave of spectacular strikes between 1909 and 1913. Strikes of shirtwaist makers in 1909 and of cloakmakers in 1910 established the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU, founded in 1900) as a permanent presence in the women's wear industry. Out of the 1913 men's tailors' strike emerged the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), founded in 1914 to supplant the older and more conservative United Garment Workers (UGW). Unlike the UGW, the ILGWU, the ACWA, and related unions of furriers and hatters actively organized new

immigrants, including women, and often came under Socialist leadership.¹¹

The strike wave began with the famous “Uprising of the 20,000”—which, according to some estimates, actually involved some 30,000 shirtwaist makers, more than 90 percent of them young women. From November 1909 to February 1910, the young women battled employers, police, and hired thugs, often with the support of middle- and upper-class supporters mobilized by the Women’s Trade Union League. The strike gave rise to some ethnic tension, since the disproportionately Jewish strikers and organizers viewed their Italian counterparts as insufficiently militant. This reputation stuck even though, as historian Jennifer Guglielmo has recently pointed out, Italian workers demonstrated considerable militancy when the union hired Italian organizers and paid attention to their concerns.¹² The strike ended in partial victory: Although the union did not gain official recognition, it did win higher wages and shorter hours for its members. Perhaps most significantly, it retained many of those members after the strike.

Just months after the end of the shirtwaist uprising, some 60,000 women’s cloakmakers walked off the job for three months. Out of the cloakmakers’ strike came the Protocol of Peace, devised largely by Louis Brandeis. Though the union failed to win a guarantee of a “closed shop,” which would hire only union members, it succeeded in gaining a “preferential shop,” in which union members would be given priority. Furthermore, the Protocol called for several joint commissions representing the union, employers, and the public that would police conditions in the industry and settle grievances. Hailed by the union and many progressives as a harbinger of industrial democracy, the Protocol has been criticized by radicals ever since for bringing the union into common cause with the bosses and for putting bureaucratic restraints on workers’ ability to strike and protest. At the very least, the Protocol reflected the union’s early recognition that in a chaotic and complex industry, it would have to take the lead in imposing order if it hoped to enforce its contracts. By 1912, the ILGWU claimed 84,000 members, a nearly elevenfold increase over 1908.¹³

At the tail end of 1912, about 60,000 men’s clothing workers struck under the reluctant aegis of the United Garment Workers, an old-line AFL union that represented mainly native-born, skilled, male tailors. The

strike was marked by ongoing conflict between the strikers and their national union: At one point, union leaders entered into an agreement with the bosses and called off the strike, only to be rebuffed by their members. When the strike finally came to an end, the union had won small gains in hours and wages. But the most enduring outcome of the strike was the eventual split that led to the founding of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in 1914 under the leadership of Sidney Hillman.

The unions were not alone in their struggle to improve the lot of the garment workers. Middle- and upper-class reformers, especially women who felt a sense of solidarity with the largely female workforce, also sought to ameliorate conditions in the industry. Groups such as the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and the National Consumers League (NCL) hoped to stamp out the sweatshop and homework, which they viewed as a threat to the sanctity of the home and to the reproductive health of women.¹⁴ Although both organizations supported union organizing efforts, the NCL also argued that consumers had the power to force improvements in conditions by refusing to buy goods made in sweatshops. (Sometimes it seemed that anti-sweatshop crusaders worried more about the health of consumers who might become infected from garments made in unsanitary conditions than about the well-being of the sweated workers themselves.) For a time, the NCL issued a "white label" to be affixed to garments made in factories that met the NCL's specifications, but it gave up this program in 1918, when it became apparent that the standards won by the unions had surpassed those of the NCL.

In the midst of these victories, a horrible tragedy dramatized the necessity for concerted effort by workers and the public to regulate industrial conditions. On Saturday, March 25, 1911, as workers prepared to leave for the day, a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory near Washington Square. By the time the fire was contained, 146 workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian women, had died, either from the fire and smoke or by leaping to their deaths. Ironically, the Triangle factory was no tenement sweatshop but a modern factory, in a "fireproof" loft building. The state Factory Investigating Commission appointed in the wake of the fire exposed the inadequacy of workplace health and safety regulations and led to an overhaul of state laws. Among those who participated in the investigation were Assemblyman Al Smith, later governor of New York, State Senator Robert F. Wagner, who as United States senator

later introduced some of the most important pro-labor legislation of the New Deal, and Frances Perkins, who went on to serve as secretary of labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Triangle Fire is still remembered as one of New York City's worst disasters and remains a symbol of unchecked capitalist greed.¹⁵

The Maturing of the Industry, 1920–1945

Earlier periods had seen a cyclical process of concentration and dispersal, as contractors with tiny shops grew into larger manufacturers and then, in turn, sent work out to a new generation of contractors. The 1920s saw the rise of the “jobber,” who took the place of the manufacturer as the primary mover in the industry. The jobber designed garments and sometimes cut fabric but never did the sewing, which he contracted out to either a contractor or a “submanufacturer,” another new category of employer who

The ninth floor of the Asch Building in the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, 1911. Photo courtesy of Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University.

Pressers in a dress factory during the 1930s. While the majority of garment workers have always been women, some trades, including cutting and pressing, have been reserved mainly for men. Photo by Trustman, Federal Art Project. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

sometimes also took over the job of cutting. These new arrangements were intended, at least partly, to get around the unions, since union contracts covered neither jobbers nor submanufacturers. The rise of the jobbers led to a renewed emphasis on contracting and another dip in the size of the average shop.

The jobber also represented an important step in the decoupling of the production of clothing from its design and marketing—a separation that would grow in later decades, to New York City's detriment. New York's dominance of the women's wear trade peaked in the 1920s, at 78 percent of the market.¹⁶ But almost imperceptibly an outward movement had begun, as jobbers and manufacturers sent more and more work to contractors "out of town"—in New England, elsewhere in New York State, in Pennsylvania, and, especially, in the South. (Shops also sprang up in the

“outer boroughs” of New York City itself.) Wages were lower in these places—where the union was weak—and space was much cheaper. The men’s wear industry in New York also suffered.

From the hustle and bustle of the recently developed midtown Garment District, one would not have been able to tell that the industry had begun its move out of the city. By this time, most shops had left the downtown tenements and older loft buildings for newer quarters. As Nancy Green has demonstrated, a number of factors encouraged the move, including a real estate boom and bust that left in its wake cheap space in the new midtown area; the dispersal outward of the immigrant workforce, now moving to new neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and upper Manhattan; the development of the subways after 1904, which enabled that workforce to commute easily to the West Side of Manhattan; the opening of Pennsylvania Station, which became the main point of arrival for out-of-town buyers after 1910; government regulations that discouraged tenement production; and the industry’s need for more modern facilities with access to adequate electrical connections. The resulting Garment District, stretching from Thirtieth Street to Forty-second Street between Fifth and Tenth avenues, remained famous for the rest of the century.

For the unions, the 1920s were a period of both great tumult and significant achievement. On the one hand, internal factional conflicts nearly tore apart the ILGWU as Communist-led insurgents battled the old-guard Socialist leadership. By 1926, the “Left” had captured important positions in the New York Joint Board and led the cloakmakers out in a raucous general strike. The collapse of the strike, partly because of an intransigent position taken by its leaders on orders from the Communist Party, enabled the “Right” to reclaim power. The union had suffered tremendous damage, with membership declining from 129,000 at the end of World War I to 23,800 in 1931.¹⁷ The new administration rebuilt the union but was left with a lingering distrust of rank-and-file activism and a determination to keep control of the union in its own hands.

On the other hand, the Amalgamated avoided debilitating factionalism, partly because of Hillman’s adroit leadership. With its vision of a “new unionism,” the ACWA pioneered the provision of services designed to empower working people and improve their lives even within a capitalist system that it distrusted. Among the union’s undertakings were a bank

and a cooperative housing project in the Bronx, both of which still exist today. Despite its problems, the ILGWU acted along similar lines, opening a summer resort in the Poconos and a health center in New York. (The Amalgamated later followed the ILGWU's example by opening its own clinic; for its part, the ILGWU emulated the Amalgamated by building a housing cooperative.) Both unions undertook a wide range of cultural and educational work among their members.

By the 1930s, the needle trades unions had begun to flex their muscles in support of progressive politics on both the local and national scenes. The pro-union provisions of the New Deal's National Industrial Recovery Act (1933) and National Labor Relations Act (1935) helped spark a huge surge in membership in the ILGWU, to 250,000 in 1940.¹⁸ Both the ILGWU and the ACWA helped found the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), though the ILGWU soon returned to the AFL. With ILGWU President David Dubinsky seeking to break out of the political isolation of the Socialist Party by supporting President Roosevelt and other pro-labor liberals, Dubinsky and Hillman joined with other labor leaders, pro-Roosevelt Socialists, and independent liberals to found the American Labor Party (ALP). The ALP, which operated only in New York State, allowed pro-New Deal voters to support the president, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, Senator Wagner, Governor Herbert Lehman, and other progressive politicians without entering into the Tammany-dominated Democratic Party or the conservative Republican Party. Meanwhile, Hillman became a major power broker nationally as head of the CIO Political Action Committee. When the Communists seized control of the ALP, Dubinsky and the ILGWU split to form the Liberal Party, a fixture on the New York political scene until the early twenty-first century.

To their discredit, the leaders of both unions viewed women as an unstable element—as temporary workers with little stake in the future of the industry or the union. The male leadership therefore marginalized women, allowing very few to reach positions of influence. Historian Daniel Bender has suggested that female dissatisfaction with this state of affairs helped fuel the 1920s Communist insurgency in the ILGWU.¹⁹ Those few women who did achieve prominence in either the ILGWU or the ACWA—women like Pauline Newman, Rose Pesotta, and Fannia Cohn—were barred from real power. Rather, as men moved up the union

hierarchy and made careers as officers and staffers, union leadership remained overwhelmingly male.

By the 1930s, the workforce in the industry had begun to change noticeably. Jewish immigrants left the ranks of the workers for better jobs or to go into business, and second-generation American Jews betrayed a distinct lack of interest in their parents' trades. Jews had once made up as much as 75 percent of needle trades workers in New York, but by the mid-1930s they were in the minority.²⁰ Italians were now the largest group in the shops, where a significant number of second-generation Italian women joined their mothers. By this time, early tensions between Jews and Italians had dissipated and Italians had been incorporated into the union power structure. In the ILGWU, Italian-speaking Locals 48 and 89 enrolled tens of thousands of members, creating their own infrastructure and providing a power base for leaders like ILGWU vice president Luigi Antonini. Still the unions remained intimately bound up with the Jewish community, making large contributions to Jewish causes, especially those with a labor slant.

Also in the 1920s and 1930s, African-Americans and Puerto Ricans had begun to trickle into the industry, especially into the new dress trade—where there was less resistance from older workers—and into low-paying, low-skill sectors. The ILGWU provided programs for Spanish speakers and emphatically supported civil rights measures for blacks; in one celebrated case, the union marched out of its convention hotel when the place refused to accommodate black delegates. Nevertheless, the ILGWU turned away demands for a Spanish-speaking local, and tensions between the union and its newest ethnic members arose, becoming sharper as time went on.

The Post-War Years, 1945–1970

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the New York City garment industry seemed to be thriving. With 200,000 employees in women's wear alone, it produced 66 percent of national garment sales. But by the end of the 1950s, New York's decline was beginning to be apparent. As Roy Helgott pointed out, when American women completed their conversion to ready-mades in the early 1920s, overall growth in the industry slowed.

New York now began to compete with other localities not just for new jobs but for old ones as well. By the end of the 1950s, the number of garment jobs in New York had begun to fall. The reasons for the exodus remained the same: the high cost of real estate and, especially, labor in New York City. Helfgott calculated that a dress made in the depressed anthracite region of Pennsylvania cost 17 percent less to produce than one made in New York.²¹

The increasing separation between design and marketing, on the one hand, and production, on the other, abetted the exodus. Designers, cutting rooms, showrooms, and distribution centers remained in the midtown Garment District, while contractors' workshops moved out of town. Ironically, traffic in the Garment District became all the more congested as the industry turned to truckers to bring uncut fabric into the city, take the cut goods to contractors out of town, haul the finished garments back to New York, and then distribute them to markets around the country. The ever more elaborate, federally funded network of highways enabled the industry to look farther and farther afield for its sewing shops. The reliance on truckers also exacerbated a problem that had entered the industry during the labor wars of the 1920s—that of racketeering and organized crime.²²

Also in the 1950s, some articles of clothing began to be produced overseas, first in Japan and then in Hong Kong as well. These were mostly cheap, standardized lines, since the turnaround time was long and the skill level low. In 1960, imported garments still held a small share of the domestic market—perhaps 10 percent of women's wear—and observers believed that they hurt other areas more than they did New York. Nevertheless, the unions took notice of the phenomenon and helped to negotiate the first agreements attempting to protect the domestic industry by limiting imports. These later evolved into the so-called "Multi-Fiber Agreement" that rather ineffectually imposed quotas on imports from various countries.

Into this troubled industry came a new influx of migrants. During the 1940s and 1950s, the number of Puerto Ricans on the mainland increased exponentially. Puerto Rican women, many with sewing experience back home, entered the New York skirt, blouse, sweater, casual dress, and underwear industries in women's wear and the neckwear, children's, rainwear, belt, and embroidery industries in men's wear. Many worked in

nonunion shops in Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, where they faced all of the problems of the classic sweatshop: paternalistic but intimidating and abusive bosses; low wages, which were often not paid in full; and unsanitary conditions.²³ By the early 1950s, Puerto Ricans made up 13 percent of the ILGWU's New York City membership.²⁴

African-Americans from the South also arrived in great numbers at this time and found their way into the garment industry, which they saw as a step up from domestic work. By 1950, some 20,000 African-Americans worked in the needle trades, constituting about 10 percent of the workforce.²⁵ Black women clustered in the low-wage, low-skill end of the dress trade, in children's wear, and in undergarments. They also made skirts and snowsuits, lines in which deskilled "section work," with each worker sewing only a particular part of the garment, had replaced the more prestigious "tailor" system, under which a single worker assembled the entire piece. African-American men also worked in relatively low-prestige, low-paying jobs as shipping clerks, helpers, and "push boys," who pushed racks of clothes through the streets of the Garment District.

In the early 1960s, African-Americans and Puerto Ricans together made up a majority of ILGWU membership in New York, but they soon ran into a very low glass ceiling. In an industry consisting mainly of small enterprises, there was very little room for advancement except to move into more skilled trades or to go into business for oneself. Ethnic networks, all-important in the garment industry since employers depended on their workers to recruit and train newcomers, now functioned to keep blacks and Hispanics out of skilled positions.²⁶ Older workers displayed hostility toward them, and employers refused to intervene for fear of disrupting production. The unions recognized the problem, but did very little about it. With a hierarchy of Jewish men that increasingly had more in common socially and culturally with the employers, many of whom were at this point still Jewish, the unions displayed a distinct lack of sensitivity to the needs of the new groups. Accusations of discrimination by the NAACP and others embarrassed the ILGWU and tarnished its liberal credentials, even as it remained a mainstay of the civil rights coalition on the national level.

The experience of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans in the garment industry was not a happy one, and African-Americans in particular soon left. In addition to direct discrimination, they suffered from the in-

dustry's falling wages: The union, frightened by job loss, attempted to keep work in New York partly by moderating its wage demands. In 1947, New York garment workers had made 95 percent of the city's average manufacturing wage; in 1956 they made only 75 percent, and in 1977 only 64 percent.²⁷ As other sectors opened up in the wake of the civil rights movement, blacks, who once saw the needle trades as a step up, moved into low-level white- and pink-collar jobs instead. Altagracia Ortiz has also suggested that the decline in the garment industry contributed to falling labor-force participation rates among Puerto Rican women in the 1960s, and even to increasing return migration to Puerto Rico.²⁸

Post-Industrial City, 1970–2004

In the last decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, big retailers and designers with their own labels dominated the garment industry, together with a handful of firms with established brand names. Many of them were based in New York, but seldom did they do any manufacturing themselves. Preferring to maintain flexibility and keep costs down in a highly competitive market, they let an army of contractors do the work for them—even the cutting—and sent more and more of their orders overseas. Imports grew steadily—to over 70 percent in 2002. So did the range of countries that made clothing for American consumers. By the turn of the century, the clothing came from China, Mexico, and other countries in Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

The decline of the New York garment industry, therefore, accelerated. In 1970, the industry still employed 173,304 workers locally; by 1987 there were 105,000, and by 1997 only 84,000.²⁹ The needle trades were in some respects not much different from other manufacturing industries disappearing from a city ever more dependent on the so-called FIRE (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate) and service sectors. For decades the clothing industry had retained its position as New York's largest manufacturing employer; but by the end of the 1990s it had lost even that distinction to its longtime rival, printing and publishing.³⁰

This is not to say that New York severed its connection to clothing entirely. The city retained its advantages as a cultural capital, media cen-

ter, and fashion trendsetter. The design and marketing of clothing, therefore, continued to concentrate there. Moreover, local contractors' ability to provide quick turnaround, highly skilled workers, and close supervision of the production process all enabled them to retain some high-end business, especially from retailers and designers needing short runs to bolster supplies of hot-selling items.

But otherwise, the city was losing its advantages for manufacturing. New York had always made a smaller proportion of such standardized items as jeans and tee shirts than it had of high-fashion apparel. Now the increasing trend toward informal dress meant that highly standardized garments captured a greater share of the market. But the main difference remained labor costs. Despite the losses suffered by local garment workers over the decades, they remained much more expensive than workers in developing countries. Standardization of fashion, and the ability to make large runs of items, combined with improved communications and shipping to globalize the industry.

Even as it continued its slide, however, the industry was able to absorb yet another wave of new immigrants. This time, Dominicans and Chinese entered as both workers and employers, while Koreans became owners who mainly employed members of other ethnic groups. Unlike the African-Americans and Puerto Ricans who came before them, these groups were able to carve out a niche in what was left of the New York needle trades. The reasons they could do this where earlier arrivals had failed had much to do with timing: Chinese and Dominicans entered the business in large numbers just as older generations of Jews and Italians were finally disappearing from the industry and as Puerto Ricans and African-Americans were looking elsewhere for advancement. Ironically, the newcomers therefore entered an industry with an acute labor shortage even as it was losing jobs by the tens of thousands. Moreover, they did not face the hostility of older workers that had obstructed the advancement of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans.³¹

A majority of Dominican immigrants who came from the 1970s to the 1990s were women, many of whom worked as factory operatives. Their experience in the industry was a mixed one. Some Dominicans, both men and women, opened shops of their own in Washington Heights, in Upper Manhattan. (Shops belonging to men tended to be much larger than those run by women, many of which barely extended beyond homework.)

Anthropologist Patricia Pessar has argued that Dominican women were largely satisfied with their jobs and that their income gave them more independence and authority in the household than they would have had traditionally.³² Nevertheless, as Ramona Hernández argues in this volume, the Dominican experience resembled that of the Puerto Ricans in some ways. For example, while Dominican women and men first turned disproportionately to manufacturing, their meager wages kept them in poverty. Moreover, their livelihoods suffered further and their labor force participation fell as factories left the city.³³

Chinese contractors proved more successful at exploiting opportunities in the industry. Cheap real estate in and around Chinatown in the 1970s enabled them to rent space at low cost, even as Midtown jobbers anxious to cultivate a new crop of contractors extended generous credit. The Chinese sector of the industry grew rapidly: from 35 Chinese firms in 1965 to 247 in 1975 and 430 in 1980, employing more than 20,000 workers.³⁴ The Chinese reasserted the importance of the ethnic network in hiring and training: Most Chinese contractors hired only Chinese women to work in their shops. Many of the workers, most of whom were married, had husbands who worked long hours in restaurants for wages insufficient to support their families. Working wives thus made absolutely vital contributions to the family economy, contributions enhanced by the health benefits the women acquired through the union. Chinese employers also offered flexible hours that enabled women to care for their children as they worked. By the late 1970s the garment industry had become a major factor in the Chinese community, with the needle trades employing 85 percent of wage-earning Chinese women. Forty percent of area Chinese households included at least one garment worker.³⁵

The ILGWU campaigned to limit imports and to convince consumers to buy American, but with little success. The unions shrank along with the industry. In 1950 the ILGWU had claimed 430,000 members, nearly half of them in New York City; by 1986, only 196,000 remained nationwide.³⁶ The unions' reach also remained limited: The ILGWU had a hard time penetrating shops in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, let alone in the South or overseas. More new members joined the union because of top-down agreements affecting their bosses, who worked for unionized Midtown firms, than because of grassroots organizing drives. Many members viewed the union simply as a species of insurance society that was other-

wise lethargic, unsympathetic, and even, in some cases, corrupt. The union's lack of sympathy for the female Chinese workers was brought home for many when it rejected out of hand their demand for a union-sponsored daycare center. Ironically, the union that had once built health clinics, resorts, and low-cost housing for its members now argued that unions should not be distracted by such extraneous concerns as daycare centers. (The center was eventually opened, but only after a struggle.)³⁷

The unions did, however, occasionally show signs of life. One such moment came in 1982, when 20,000 Chinese female members of Local 23-25 turned out for two massive demonstrations in Chinatown and then held a one-day strike. The importance of this strike was threefold. First, it represented an unprecedented public expression of protest by Chinese women—an example of how even low-wage work (and membership in a lethargic union) could broaden horizons and empower women within the family and the community. Second, the Chinese contractors had provoked the strike by refusing to go along with a settlement that the union had reached with the general contractors' association. Charging racial discrimination because of their lack of representation in the association's leadership, the Chinese contractors fully expected that their workers would back them up on ethnic grounds. The workers' preference for the union signaled the limits of ethnic solidarity and reaffirmed the lack of common interests between contractors and workers. Finally, after the strike, the ILGWU recognized the need to better represent its members and appointed several Chinese staff members and officers.³⁸

Structural changes also helped revitalize the unions. From the outside, the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association (CSWA), a militant grassroots advocacy organization founded originally by restaurant workers in 1979, prodded the unions to be more responsive, partly by threatening to take over some of their functions and win over the loyalty of their members. In addition, a 1995 merger brought the ILGWU's 125,000 remaining members together with the 175,000 members of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (itself a merger of the old Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America with the Textile Workers' Union). Though the merger was a symptom of both unions' decline, it gave the new Union of Needle Trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE) new resources. UNITE also retained some of the Amalgamated's more activist culture. Taking a page from the CSWA, for exam-

ple, UNITE opened Workers' Centers in Manhattan and Brooklyn to improve outreach and establish contact with nonmembers, including undocumented workers. In 2004, UNITE merged with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) to form UNITE HERE.

The last two decades of the twentieth century also brought renewed concern with sweatshops, both foreign and domestic. UNITE, the National Consumer League, and local politicians once again campaigned for legislation and for consumer awareness of the issue. A new organization, the National Labor Committee, specialized in exposing conditions in factories producing garments abroad for American retailers and designers. A student movement called on universities and colleges to have school merchandise made only by manufacturers that adhered to strict standards regulating conditions and accountability. President Bill Clinton's secretary of labor, Robert Reich, attempted to bring manufacturers together with the union and consumer groups to address the issue. But the resulting Apparel Industry Partnership foundered when UNITE and militant student organizations withdrew support, charging that manufacturers had used their veto power to stymie any hope for real regulation.

As it entered the twenty-first century, the New York garment industry was a shadow of its former self, employing only 51,800 workers, or 9.2 percent of the national total. California, especially Los Angeles, now produced more clothing than did New York. The local industry was further buffeted by the World Trade Center attack of September 11, 2001, losing thousands of jobs—especially in Chinatown, where 40 percent of shops closed and production declined by 60 percent.³⁹ The tragedy only emphasized the degree to which New York's fate was intimately tied up with social, economic, and political developments around the world.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the industry hung on to its small niche: producing high-quality women's wear quickly.

Overview

The chapters in this book offer a variety of perspectives on the New York garment industry, from the end of the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries. In Part I, Nancy Green, Florence Palpacuer, and Xiaolan Bao

trace the rise of the New York industry, its migrations through the city, and its place in the global apparel trade. In her analysis of the formation of the Midtown Garment District, Green examines the interaction of the industry with immigrant neighborhoods and populations, arguing that the industry has always been shaped by conflicting forces of concentration and dispersion. Florence Palpacuer points out that with the triumph of the forces of dispersion, the production of garments has become truly global. Still, she argues, there have been winners and losers in the process, even in New York. While local contractors, manufacturers, and workers have suffered, New York-based designers and retailers have done quite well. Bao brings up to date Green's analysis of the relationship of industry to immigrant communities by tracing the rise of the Chinese apparel trade, first in Chinatown, Manhattan, and then in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. She shows how the Chinese managed to find a niche even in a declining industry, and asks how workers might develop new forms of militancy even under the pressure of job loss and downward pressure on wages.

The chapters in Part II examine the workers and bosses who have made up the industry, as well as the ways in which they have interacted. Given the importance of immigrant labor in the needle trades and the importance of ethnic networks in keeping the industry going, it is fitting that most of the articles focus on the ethnic context. Daniel Soyer takes a look at the much-maligned contractor, focusing on the early Jewish period. He argues that the contractor was the embodiment of the industry's contradictory nature as both avenue of mobility and arena of exploitation. Haddassa Kosak argues that class conflict within the early garment industry provided a "political vocabulary" that pervaded Jewish communal life and helped shape Jewish American ethnic identity even after Jewish involvement with the industry waned. Conversely, Nancy Carnevale emphasizes the impact of ethnic culture on the industry. Whereas reformers viewed homework as a threat to the family, Italian homeworkers thought that it enabled women to make an economic contribution without threatening their role in the household. Ramona Hernández puts Dominican participation in the garment industry in the context of Dominican immigration in general; she shows how Dominicans first achieved a foothold in the shrinking industry, but then suffered because of their association with it. Margaret M. Chin examines the interaction between ethnicity and gen-

der, demonstrating that definitions of women's and men's jobs often depend on ethnic culture.

Finally, Eileen Boris looks at the history of attempts to stamp out, or at least control, sweatshops. She argues that consumer movements against sweatshops have often walked a tight line between maternalist calls for "fair labor" and the solidarity model of "workers' rights."

Part I

*The Local and the Global: The
Geography of New York's
Clothing Trades*

A busy Garment District street scene by artist Don Freeman for the federal Public Works of Art Project, 1934. The midtown Garment District became nearly synonymous with the New York industry. Image courtesy of New York Public Library.

1

From Downtown Tenements to Midtown Lofts

The Shifting Geography of an Urban Industry

Nancy L. Green

THE GARMENT INDUSTRY is one of the best reminders that not every New York building is a brownstone or a high-rise. One of the last manufacturing sectors to remain in the urban center, it provides a link between past and present. This multimillion-dollar industry provides riches to top designers and below-standard wages and conditions for immigrant workers. The industry today is a hybrid, both a reminder of New York's past and heralded as a model for the future. Is the flexibility which characterizes the fashion industry a prototype for the twenty-first century or a throwback to the nineteenth?

From Chinatown to Seventh Avenue, garments and their makers, buyers, and sellers are a ubiquitous feature of the New York landscape. The flexibility of fashion and the labor subcontracting that is its corollary are also linked to a flexible use of space. Garments are displayed and made everywhere, from boutiques to showrooms and from homes to workshops. Debate has raged over the persistence of sweatshops.¹ We can learn something about today's garment geography by looking at how shop and home

Nancy Green's chapter in this volume is a revised version of Nancy L. Green, "Sweatshop Migrations: The Garment Industry between Home and Shop," in *The Landscape of Modernity*, edited by David Ward and Olivier Zunz. Copyright 1992, Russell Sage Foundation, 112 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10021.

have migrated around Manhattan since the turn of the century. I will first examine the industry's space needs and then look at the urban neighborhoods of its immigrant work force. Both have interacted to affect the industry's place within the city and to construct the Lower East Side, Seventh Avenue, and Chinatown as garment districts.

The Geography of Garment Making: Concentration and Dispersion

Two forces characterize the urban implantation of New York's twentieth-century apparel industry. On the one hand, women's garment making has, for the last century, migrated toward the urban core—be it New York or Paris—where fashions are created. On the other hand, garment manufacturers have sought to escape to the “provinces” or beyond, in search of lower labor and rent costs and of more space.

Concentration. By the late nineteenth century, New York City had become the fashion capital of America. The growth of the ready-made trade—first in men's wear, then in more fashionable women's wear—was accompanied by a relative concentration of production. Sewing migrated from local tailors' shops and rural outworkers to urban factories and shops. As homemade clothes gave way to store-bought ones, sewing became the occupation of industrial *homeworkers* instead of individual *homemakers*. By 1890, 44 percent of all ready-made clothes in the United States were produced in New York City. This was even truer with respect to women's wear: 53.3 percent of all women's garment industry workers in the United States worked in New York City in 1899, increasing to 65 percent in 1904 before dropping back to a still healthy 57.3 percent in 1925.² New York's market share was even greater than its concentration of workers. Sixty-five percent of the total value of American-made women's wear came from the city in 1899, and 78 percent in 1925. (By contrast, in 1925, Chicago employed only 5.2 percent of the nation's women's wear workers and accounted for only 4 percent of the sector's value.³)

The concentration of women's fashion in New York City (as in Paris⁴) occurred largely because it—like Paris—was a capital of other things: finance, manufacturing, transportation. And, as we know, it was the first port of arrival both for the immigrants who made up the majority of the

work force and for imported Parisian patterns. Insofar as style is a game of both imitation and differentiation, it is best to be at the hub of both design and labor. The proximity of satellite services (button or zipper specialists, sewing machine repairmen) only reinforces the advantages and the economics of the urban industrial neighborhood.⁵

Dispersion. Nevertheless, as ready-to-wear spread, so did the decentralization of production. The current debate and despair over New York's loss of garment jobs is not solely of recent vintage. Industrial restructuring and Manhattan's relative decline as a garment center have been occurring since the 1920s. It is one of the paradoxes attending the industrialization and standardization of clothing manufacture.

Early ready-made manufacturers hoped that serial production of pre-made clothing for anonymous bodies would both regulate the ups and downs of the production seasons and make production more efficient than in the made-to-measure trade. Yet, standardization meant, to a certain extent, concentration of production and increased space needs. Indeed, those items that were most easily standardizable (and furthest from quickly changing fashion) increasingly moved out of town. Thus, men's wear rather than women's wear, work clothes rather than fashion items, underwear rather than outerwear, migrated out of the financial capital; they could all take advantage of mass production in larger factories. A veritable "exodus" of men's wear occurred in the 1920s, along with a relocation of women's housedresses, uniforms, and aprons.⁶

The specter of decline (in New York) has thus accompanied this centrifugal motion since the interwar period. Growth began slowing in the early 1920s. The Depression then hastened job loss to some extent (although heavy industry was more heavily hit than light manufacturing). But, especially since the 1940s, decline has been a recurrent issue on the New York City apparel landscape. Chicago and Rochester became the centers of men's wear before World War II. Ever since the war, the California market has been New York's major domestic competitor.⁷

At the same time, there was also movement *within* the New York City area. Garment shops relocating from Manhattan to the outer boroughs constituted a microcosm of the larger outward momentum. Brooklyn's proportion of New York City's women's wear production grew from less than 6 percent in 1899 to 14.6 percent in 1937 and 17.8 percent by 1954. This was due to an increase in both the number and size of contracting

shops there, which coincided with a greater specialization in less expensive items. A similar migration of shops headed toward the Bronx and Queens.⁸

Thus, ever since the initial period of growth and concentration, and well before the current trend toward overseas manufacturing, the garment industry has been moving outward from New York's urban center. First to outlying boroughs and suburbs of Manhattan, then across the river to New Jersey, to Pennsylvania, to upstate New York and beyond, the industry has increasingly shifted outward—to the Midwest, to the Southwest, and overseas.

Space was not the only factor in these successive movements "offshore" (that is, from the island of Manhattan). Labor costs and union avoidance were paramount in the setting up of "runaway" shops. New York labor is expensive, and the precocious development of the garment unions made it all the more so. An inexpensive and noncombative labor force has been as much a clothing industry imperative as the desire to standardize production. At the same time, clothing manufacturers looked with a dim eye on labor and housing legislation. In this respect, the New York garment landscape has been shaped by two competing tendencies. Progressive reformers, labor leaders, and state legislators have tried to push through laws in order to better conditions within the industry, while manufacturers have continually threatened that too many constraints would make the industry leave New York altogether.

The Limits to Going Offshore

Nonetheless, the highest-priced dress lines remained closest to the fashion core, and two major factors have limited the dispersal of garment production: the advantages of concentration and the imperatives of fashion. New York's (or Paris's) reputation alone serves to attract garment makers. Skilled labor and skilled management, along with a critical mass of showrooms, designers, and support industries, constitute the positive aspects of concentration, outweighing for many the much-decried congestion that is part of its negative side. Although dress racks moving samples at a snail's pace through the streets may be aggravating to taxi drivers, they symbolize the persistent *raison d'être* of a centralized location.⁹

Fashion itself has limited outward movement and reinforced the urban industry. For items highly sensitive to style, it is important to be able to adjust production to the latest craze and to make rapid changes during the season. Only close-in production makes this possible for quick, short runs. Those garments needing fast shifts in production, short production schedules, and speedy deliveries are those that have hung on with most tenacity in the urban core. Thus, high-fashion women's garments have kept manufacturers together in the urban center. Housedresses went, but silk dresses stayed. More style-oriented, more expensive, needing greater skill and supervision, these were the goods that made Seventh Avenue's reputation during the interwar period. Manufacturers may continue to bemoan the inscrutability of female whims and the impossibility of foreseeing fashion trends, yet they have nonetheless clung together in order to defy and define those trends.

This simultaneous history of outward movement from and inward concentration within the fashion capital is the tale of over a century of ready-to-wear as seen from New York City. Parallel to it is the story of the industry's migrations *within* the city. The industry's needs and those of its immigrant work force have intersected to impose their own particular grid on the city. If Manhattan has remained an important site for garment manufacture to this day, garment making within the city has had its own peregrinations. From downtown to midtown, movement around the island has been a function of industrial needs, urban planning, and shifting immigrant neighborhoods.

The Rise of Downtown: Home and Work

Since the nineteenth century, home and work have been closely connected in garment making. This has been true for three reasons: the nature of the city, the work process, and the workforce.

The proximity of home to work was characteristic of most nineteenth-century cities. People lived near their work and worked near their home. The "urban village" was one in which daytime and evening activities took place within the same perimeter. Without extensive urban transportation, people walked. And the city neighborhoods were sufficiently diversified so that one could find work, food, lodging, and social life within nearby range.

The close relationship between home and work was especially true in the case of light industry. The making of garments in particular, which began in the home, continued there even as garments became industrial-made rather than homemade articles. Whether in factories, workshops, or tenement homes, garment making at the turn of the twentieth century was often a neighborhood activity. Shops and factories were frequently within walking distance for those who worked outside the home, but there were many who took work in; rather than the worker going to work, the work came to the worker. In either case, the distance traveled was not far. With contractors, manufacturers, and workers all located relatively near one another, a geographically close, integrated network served everyone's interests. The Garment District became identified if not symbolized by the bundles carried through the streets by men, women, and children.

The proximity of home to work was especially important to immigrants new to the city. Ethnic networks helped newcomers find both work and housing, which was all the easier when the two were near one another. Just as earlier immigrants settled on or near farms or lumber camps that were also their work sites, so the urban immigrants of the late nineteenth century took up residence near prospective employment or took up occupations in or near their neighborhoods.¹⁰ Proximity to ports, and the availability of low-cost housing and of jobs, helped create immigrant neighborhoods, just as those neighborhoods themselves helped create industrial districts. For immigrant families or women working in their own tenements, home and shop were identical. Homework for women, then as now, meant being close to (whimpering?) children and (boiling?) pots, but it also provided a solution for those whose cultural norms frowned upon work outside the home. Ethnic shops also provided easy access to jobs that did not need new language skills. And setting up a small garment shop could be a first step of upward mobility for the immigrant entrepreneur.¹¹

The rise of the women's ready-made industry in New York City coincided with the arrival of new waves of immigrants: Jews from Eastern Europe and Italians from Southern Europe. The first great garment district in New York grew up precisely where these immigrants lived, in lower Manhattan. From 70 to 80 percent of women garment workers in New York in 1900 worked below Fourteenth Street, near to where most

of them had settled.¹² Small family or ethnic neighborhood workshops, along with homework, became synonymous with the industry. Downtown had become garment town as far as the immigrants were concerned.

How then did “Seventh Avenue,” as symbol and center of the new Garment District, take hold? Why the decline of the downtown tenement workshop and the shift northward in the 1920s?

From Downtown to Midtown

The move to Seventh Avenue heralded the decline of the downtown garment manufacturing area, although not its disappearance. The move was a combined industrial, architectural, and commercial endeavor on the part of manufacturers, jobbers, and urban planners, reflecting both the needs of the industry and the visions of city planners. It was also, as we will see, related to the interurban peregrinations of the immigrant work force.

Industrial needs

As space needs changed, so did the location of the industry within Manhattan.

A first, important factor was the restructuring of industrial production itself. The rise of the jobbers in the 1920s exacerbated the subcontracting structure and cutthroat competition endemic to the industry. As jobbers pitted contractors against each other, they also expanded the growing separation between production and sales. Whereas pre-World War I manufacturers had assumed every aspect of garment production—from design to cutting, sewing, finishing, and sales—interwar jobbers directly supervised cutting and perhaps finishing, but subcontracted out the sewing. Their small cutting shops and showrooms became increasingly concentrated in the midtown Garment District, while the sewing was still sent out to lower Manhattan, to the outlying boroughs, and over state borders. Overnight hauling defined the outer perimeter of contractors’ shops, which extended to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. Manufacturers, too, moved northward within Manhattan as well as to these bordering states, especially those small firms that could not afford the double overhead represented by separate sales and production sites. In a microcosm of the nationwide trend, the geographic “center” within Manhattan

became increasingly consolidated at the same time that production was becoming decentralized around the city.

Second, urban renewal and space availability helped draw the industry northward while overcrowding and state laws helped “push” the industry out of the Lower East Side. The construction of newer loft buildings in midtown “pulled” the industry in that direction in the 1920s and 1930s. According to the embittered version of the Fifth Avenue Association, office space had been overbuilt, leading owners to entice cloak and suit manufacturers into their vacant square footage.¹³ But the newer steel-framed buildings above Fourteenth Street had their own appeal: They were better fireproofed and had more floor space than the older, cast-iron structures below Houston Street. And some of the larger and lighter loft buildings were constructed by successful coat and suit manufacturers themselves—who, along with some Jewish builders, began turning to real estate invest-

A cramped and cluttered downtown tenement shop around the turn of the century. Brown Brothers photo, courtesy of Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University.

A spacious midtown loft factory, 10th Avenue and 36th Street, 1937. The contrast with older downtown tenement shops is striking. Photo by Andrew Herman, courtesy of Museum of the City of New York. Gift of the Federal Art Project, Works Projects Administration.

ment.¹⁴ These lofts provided more space, and they could also be subdivided into smaller units (familiarily called “Coney Island shops,” after the summer bathhouses near the ocean in Brooklyn). The move also enabled manufacturers to overhaul their operations and replace foot-activated treadle machines with electric-powered ones. By the end of the 1920s, a shortage of space led to taller and taller loft buildings—from the sixteen-floor norm of 1920 to buildings of eighteen and twenty floors and “monsters” thirty floors high.¹⁵

And third: At the same time, the garment industry was simply joining in the general relocation of the shopping district further north that occurred in the 1920s. The opening of Pennsylvania Station in 1910 (between Seventh and Eighth avenues and Thirty-first and Thirty-third streets)

had already led many garment wholesalers to move toward that neighborhood in order to be closer to the buyers' new point of arrival. Cutting rooms and other manufacturing space would follow the showrooms, bringing in their wake a certain amount of close-in production sites.

By the early 1950s, the shift from the turn of the century was clear. While manufacturing still occurred on the Lower East Side, approximately 65 to 80 percent of garment manufacture in Manhattan now took place in the area bounded by Thirtieth and Forty-second streets, from Tenth to Fifth avenues.¹⁶

Two other factors chased the industry from downtown and drew it to midtown, although not without controversy. On the one hand, reformers and health inspectors sought to regulate tenement manufacture and homework. At the same time, urban planners and retailers sought to limit manufacturing within the city.

Reformers

Reformers and health inspectors began a steady campaign against conditions in the sweatshops in the late nineteenth century. Tenement homework in particular caught the progressives' imagination as a symbol of all that was dangerous to both workers and consumers. Images of garment bundles used as bedclothes accompanied widespread fear of vermin and germs. Consumers' leagues worried that garments could transmit smallpox. Labor leaders castigated the effects of tenement manufacture on workers' health and on their working and living conditions.¹⁷

State and federal laws began regulating homework and tenement production. The New York State Factory Act of 1892 set up a licensing procedure for tenement production, which the 1901 Tenement House Law sought to strengthen. In 1911, the State Factory Investigating Commission Report suggested the complete abolition of tenement work (but then only recommended reinforcement of existing licensing laws).

Not only homework but shop work came under scrutiny in 1911, when all eyes turned in horror to conditions in the industry after fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory on March 25. The shirtwaist workers' "Uprising of the 20,000" the previous year had already included demands for greater safety precautions. The fire in the ten-year-old, ten-story Asch building and the widely reported images of young girls jumping to their

death now focused attention on other work and health hazards in the lower Manhattan infrastructure.¹⁸

Though the Triangle Fire marked a turning point with respect to fire regulations in New York City, homework in tenements nonetheless continued. A number of factors militated against the effective abolition of homework. For all of its faults, the system did, to a certain extent, suit workers as well as manufacturers and contractors. Manufacturers protested that severe regulation would drive wages up and business out of town. Others argued that women's place was in the home, and that forcing them out to the shop would only cause hardship. In a telling example, the Industrial Commission dramatically contrasted a female shop worker with one who worked at home. The woman who went out to work and was obliged to leave her children alone all day virtually abandoned them "with absolutely no one to look after them or keep a fire to warm them"; whereas the three-year-old child of a homemaker may have had to help its mother fix trimmings, but was thereby "never out of her sight and . . . where the mother could attend to its wants and allay its fears and suffering."¹⁹ For many, the 1911 fire only increased suspicion vis-à-vis shop conditions and encouraged arguments in *favor* of homework. In any case, inspectors had difficulty in tracking down "the nomads of the tenements"—perhaps, as one report stated, because conditions were so bad that the inspectors themselves hated to penetrate the foul atmosphere.²⁰

Effective controls may have been long in coming; but in the meantime, both home and shop conditions continued to be the target of reformers' writings, giving a bad name to sweatshop conditions in lower Manhattan. It took the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 to regulate homework. As Lazare Teper and Nathan Weinberg commented, anti-sweating legislation to protect the consumer had finally given way to anti-homework regulations to protect the worker. Ninety-four percent of homeworkers were taken into factories after the codes were adopted.²¹ This new deal was short-lived, however; the Supreme Court declared the codes unconstitutional, and homework reappeared, as strong as ever. A 1936 study found that 194 New York manufacturers were sending work out to 1,661 homeworkers in sixteen states and Puerto Rico.²²

Other attempts were made at the industry, state, and federal levels to control conditions in garment production. An industry-run National Coat and Suit Recovery Board was set up in 1935 to try to police contracting

competition. A 1935 New York State law set up a mechanism for strictly controlling industrial homework, with a view toward eliminating it entirely. In 1938, the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) (the “Wage and Hour Law”) set minimum standards for factories and homework alike. As in the earlier period of regulation, the years 1936 to 1940 saw a greater relative consolidation of big inside shops and a decrease (by 26 percent) in the number of contracting shops.²³ In 1945 further restrictions were extended to all other industries, and it is estimated that between 1935 and 1955 the number of homeworkers in New York State dropped from 500,000 (in all fields) to less than 5,000.²⁴

These repeated and combined attacks on tenement sweatshops and homework inexorably led jobbers to look beyond the increasingly dilapidated Lower East Side. As they were doing so, urban renovation was transforming the face of midtown and offering more space for manufacture.

Planners and Retailers: Fifth Avenue versus Seventh Avenue

Urban planners, however, had another vision for the twentieth-century financial city. Two staples of the nineteenth-century image of the city were to be overturned. On the one hand, the concomitant use of space by commerce and manufacturing became anathema as plans were drawn up to expel factories from the city. At the same time, the close proximity of home to work was not one of the planners’ priorities. On the contrary.

While sweatshop reformers tried to propel the garment industry out of lower Manhattan tenements, central business district planners did not necessarily want to welcome the industry as their neighbor. The latter wanted to preserve their midtown domain for commerce. Early twentieth-century planners and midtown merchants envisaged a commercial city free from the mess of manufacturing. Their discourse was infused with a language of separation and “segregation” (of commerce from industry) in order to counter the “invasion” of the sewing machines. The “tragic consequences” of factory “encroachment” were perceived as a “menace” to individual retail property owners—and, beyond that, as a “threat” to the common good. “Public welfare” was at stake, and not simply the welfare of Fifth Avenue. It would be a “public calamity” for the city and even the nation, the planners and retailers argued, if the country’s greatest retail

district were destroyed.²⁵ From 1913 to 1916, the Fifth Avenue Association of retail merchants and hotel and other property owners tried to impose their view of a loft-free retail environment.²⁶

Ultimately, however, the locational needs of light industry prevailed. Thriving on the congestion around a central locus of fashion, the garment industry forswore the decentralization of design. Trucks became the life-line between the garment industry's inner and outer zones in and around the city. The garment industry, a nineteenth-century manufacturing "mess," thus stayed in the twentieth-century city. The result was, nonetheless, a compromise between two visions of the city. The Fifth Avenue merchants were able to keep their street manufacturing-free, but the manufacturers won, too, in that the industry moved northward, toward expanded space in midtown, while staying within the city center. The Garment District—henceforth mostly showrooms—huddled around Seventh Avenue. No planner was able to keep the manufacturing lofts out of Manhattan altogether—and to this day, manufacturers' cutting and design shops are a reminder of the nineteenth-century mixed-use city model.

Intra-urban immigrant migrations

Industrial needs, reformers' pressures, and urban planning all help account for the shifting geography of garment making. However, the story of the industry's relocation within Manhattan also corresponds to the movement of the immigrant workforce around the city. The rise and demise of tenement manufacture and the increasing twentieth-century separation of home and work space had an important impact on immigrant neighborhoods just as those neighborhoods were responding to the continuing influx of new immigrants. While the growth of the downtown district corresponded to the first generation of Jews and Italians there, the dispersion of those immigrants and their children to new neighborhoods within Manhattan and their subsequent departure to the more spacious outer boroughs would also explain the industry's movements around the city.

At first, the link between home and work held. As the first generation of industrial garment-working immigrants dispersed, so did their site of labor; as they moved, they took garment manufacturing with them. The sewing machines moved to Harlem and beyond. Yet, inversely, as the in-

dustry moved, so did the immigrants, but for reasons that were both connected to and semi-independent from the movement of the industry. Two factors affected the geography of the immigrants' work and home place. The first one has already been mentioned insofar as it affected homework and tenement shops. The reform movement and the state and federal legislation mentioned above, however uneven in results, had an impact both on the location of the industry and on the immigrants who worked in it. Tightened restrictions on homework and urban renewal that caused the great garment industry migration uptown also led immigrants to seek jobs and better housing elsewhere.

Another factor must be considered, however: the internal transformation of the immigrant neighborhoods themselves. Within these neighborhoods other elements were at work, loosening the bonds between home and work or militating in favor of moving both home and work out of the Lower East Side.

The early immigrant districts downtown, in which garment manufacture was located, were in themselves being transformed and were participating in the decentralization of the city. As the Heckscher Plan razed blocks of tenement buildings and realtors pressed own-your-home campaigns, first- and second-generation garment workers moved to Brownsville, East New York, Coney Island, Bensonhurst, Van Cortlandt Park, and northern New Jersey.²⁷ Immigrants dissatisfied with their areas of first settlement sought more space and more light in other parts of town. As Deborah Dash Moore and Donna Gabaccia have shown, Jews and Italians began moving from the Lower East Side well before World War I. Intra-urban migration was related to new housing as well as to job opportunities.²⁸ While the law was increasingly discouraging work at home and shops were moving away from the old immigrant neighborhoods, the immigrants and their children were themselves moving "off-shore," to the outer boroughs and to the suburbs, in search of a better environment. Social life was transplanted and transformed there. For some this now meant commuting to work via the expanding subway system; for others, new garment shops recreated the proximity of home and shop.

Immigrants followed jobs, and jobs followed workers. But the 1920s were increasingly characterized by a growing separation of home and work. Production was shifting from residence to factory, from downtown

to midtown, and out of town. Already by 1917, 68.6 percent of women's garment workers worked in the midtown garment district, compared with only 17.5 percent in lower Manhattan.²⁹ A 1925 survey estimated that some 53,000, or 40 percent, of the women's garment workers employed in Manhattan now lived in Brooklyn and the Bronx and another 15,000 to 16,000 had settled in upper Manhattan.³⁰

By the early 1950s, three-quarters of metropolitan-area apparel jobs were still in Manhattan, but only one-quarter of the workforce still lived there. Furthermore, about half of all jobs were located between Fourteenth and Forty-second streets, where only one-half of 1 percent of the workers lived. Garment workers thus commuted from northern Manhattan and the Lower East Side as well as from Brooklyn and the Bronx. Garment manufacturers now living on the posh Upper West Side had a direct link to the midtown Garment District via the IRT. Brooklyn was the only other county with significant employment as well as residence.³¹

Transportation and the garment hub. The subway was what made it all possible. All of this meant a greater separation between home and workplace for many garment workers at the same time that a greater separation between sales and manufacture was taking place. For some workers in contractors' shops in the new neighborhoods, this could still mean walking to work. But for most workers, it meant increasing dependence on urban transportation. Thanks to the new mode of intra-urban transit, workers as well as work opportunities, separately or together, took part in the general movement out to the boroughs. Clifton Hood has shown how the IRT and the BMT had an impact on residential expansion. The subway also affected industrial locations. As Emanuel Tobier has pointed out, the fact that the IND line did not reach the Lower East Side until the 1930s left that neighborhood at a relative disadvantage compared with the newer working-class areas of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and upper Manhattan.³²

The subways that provided the new link between home and shop gave new meaning to the concentration around Seventh Avenue. The area now became the hub of garment activity. And it became a center to which garment workers living in the periphery were attached. In response to a survey concerning the possible decentralization of the Garment District in the early 1950s, apparel workers were adamantly opposed. They had by now become accustomed to the central location of the midtown district

and were against any move elsewhere. The labor market was conveniently concentrated there; employers only had to put up a sign, and job seekers had a relatively circumscribed area in which to look for work. Public transportation was important—as long as it remained convenient and cheap. As one manufacturer commented, “Workers are particular, they want to avoid excessive fares and train changes.” Some said they would never work below Thirtieth Street; others, on the IRT line, refused to go west of Eighth Avenue because it would mean paying a crosstown fare. Finally, workers said they did not want to give up their friends—and Seventh Avenue was also a social network to which many were attached.³³

But if the development of the Garment District meant subways for workers, it meant increased reliance on *trucking* for Seventh Avenue manufacturers. To get piece goods and finished goods to and from subcontractors in the boroughs or beyond, the bundles on backs now had to be motorized. Trucking filled the new space between production and sales and permitted this evolution. And truckers in turn encouraged geographic expansion of the industry. For better or for worse, they became the lifeline between in-town manufacturers and out-of-Manhattan contractors and workers, linking the center to the periphery.³⁴

Conclusion: Change and Continuity

In the 1920s, the garment industry moved northward, creating the Seventh Avenue (midtown) Garment District. As we have seen, several factors explain this in-town reshaping of the garment industry landscape. Three phenomena in particular affected the (re)location of the New York City industry: 1) Contracting expanded both quantitatively and geographically; 2) activity became concentrated in the new Garment District; and 3) the workforce itself became dispersed, as immigrants and their neighborhoods moved outward. Industrial migration and workforce relocation went hand in hand, fulfilling a new, twentieth-century vision of the metropolis in which sales and production, home and work, would become increasingly physically separate.

The consolidation of the Seventh Avenue Garment District nonetheless represented a compromise between nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas of the city. The tenacity of the garment lofts epitomizes this

link between past and present. Some of the tenements have become residential lofts, while other manufacturing lofts have become showrooms. But the persistence of the loft, even when gentrified, is still testimony to the integrated commercial and manufacturing city of the nineteenth century. The resurgence of immigration, combined with “new” old forms of production, has given new life to the urban industry. The new immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean may be moving massively into the ever-expanding service “industry,” but they are also helping maintain a New York “tradition” in the urban light industrial sector.³⁵

The New York City landscape thus reflects a remarkable continuity. City planners and developers continue to reshape the New York skyline in their image, but many aspects of the garment industry landscape have remained: high turnover, poor working conditions in immigrant neighborhoods, low margins for contractors and low pay for employees. Bundles may have moved off backs onto trucks and workers may now head underground to get to work, but elements of continuity persist. Pockets of rundown buildings which no one ever got around to redeveloping, and which are therefore cheap enough for new immigrant families to rent, still exist. The dynamics of immigrant neighborhoods, language difficulties and needs, and traditional attitudes about women’s work still encourage small immigrant contracting shops to flourish. Homework, in between the pots and pans, also persists. The industry needs cheap workers, and poor immigrants need jobs and cheap housing. The “urban village” continues to produce neighborhoods in which home and work coexist side by side even while the subway and trucks link the hub(s) to outlying neighborhoods.

The Garment District is as congested as ever, while jobbers on Seventh Avenue or Broadway send work to contractors’ shops in Chinatown, northern Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens. Light industry, which planners in 1916 complained was “scattered indiscriminately over the entire city throughout the business and residential sections,”³⁶ still shows an amazing adaptability in its usage of space, from converted storefronts to basements to dilapidated lofts.

A garment factory in El Salvador producing for the growing North American import market at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Photo by Jim Harney.

In a high-end New York shop at the start of the twenty-first century, a UNITE member sews sequins onto a dress. Even as imports captured an ever-growing share of the American market, New York continued to produce high fashion goods. Photo by Sam Hollenshead.

2

The Globalization of New York's Garment Industry

Florence Palpacuer

THE NEW YORK garment industry brings together a highly diverse set of people, firms, and activities. It includes small concerns rooted in the new immigrant communities of the city, along with large firms, such as Liz Claiborne and Polo Ralph Lauren, expanding on international markets. The former predominantly employ women immigrant workers to perform traditional, labor-intensive manufacturing activities, while the latter use sophisticated information technologies to design and market their products but do not own any production facilities. This contrasting landscape can be seen as a miniaturized version of the global apparel industry, in which manufacturing has become increasingly dispersed to factories located in newly industrialized and developing countries, while product development, branding, and retailing activities are predominantly performed by large firms in developed countries.

The coordination or “functional integration” of complementary activities across locations constitutes a distinctive feature of globalization in contemporary capitalism.¹ In industries such as apparel, electronics, and automobiles, it has led to the emergence of “global value chains” governed by large leading firms that arrange for the manufacturing of their products through complex transnational networks. In such chains today, a garment might be designed in New York, produced from a fabric made in South Korea, spread and cut in Hong Kong, assembled in China, and eventually distributed in Canada. From a traditional macroeconomic perspective,

globalization tends to be understood as a rise in international competition that translates into a surge of apparel imports to the American domestic market. By contrast, a value chain perspective shows that globalization involves a transnational reorganization of apparel activities, in which American firms play a diversity of roles.

This chapter analyzes the roles played by New York garment firms in the processes of globalization. It seeks to identify the variety of ways in which local firms have contributed, or responded, to globalization, and to assess how their strategies have transformed the structure of the local industry over the last two decades. A value chain perspective will first be used to highlight the dominant organizational characteristics of the global apparel industry. Employment trends in the New York garment industry will then be considered, together with a traditional analysis of New York's role in the clothing sector. The next three sections will propose a complementary analytical approach that looks at major changes in local firms' strategies in the 1980s and 1990s. These include the emergence of global market strategies in terms of brand management, product lines, and retailing, new production management strategies involving the development of global subcontracting networks, and manufacturing strategies implemented by local producers. This overview of local firms will highlight the heterogeneity of their positions and roles in the global apparel industry. Some of these firms actively contributed to the processes of globalization and others managed to build a niche for themselves in the global industry, while many failed to adapt to, or barely survive in, this new environment. Such analysis thus identifies winners and losers in the processes by which the New York garment industry became integrated within global apparel networks. Overall, these processes allowed for the international expansion of New York brands and design innovations but also contributed to firms' failures, and to massive job losses at the local level.

Organizational Patterns in the Global Apparel Industry

The global value chain perspective seeks to explain the dynamics of international trade, production, and employment within an industry by highlighting the organizational mechanisms by which complementary activities are coordinated across locations. Building on Gary Gereffi's conceptual framework, four dimensions can be distinguished to characterize a global value chain.² They include:

- its *input-output structure*, or sequence of interrelated value-adding activities, including product design, manufacturing, logistics, marketing, and sales,
- its *governance structure*, or power relations within and between firms that determine how financial, material, and human resources are allocated and flow within the chain,
- its *geographical configuration*, referring to the spatial dispersion or concentration of activities across locations, and
- its *social and institutional context*, formed by the norms, values, and regulatory and policy frameworks of the communities within which firms operate.

The *governance structure* plays a key role in the distribution of activities and profits among firms operating in the apparel value chain. It involves close *network* relationships, where *lead* firms are engaged in selecting network members, sustaining network relationships, and positioning the network as a whole in the final market. Three types of lead firms can be identified in the global apparel industry³:

- retailers coordinating the external production of garments sold under their own labels,
- branded marketers, such as Liz Claiborne and Donna Karan, that specialize in designing and marketing fashion-sensitive products and arrange for outside manufacturing, and
- branded manufacturers, such as Levi Strauss and Sara Lee, that specialize in more standardized product types, such as jeans and underwear, and increasingly outsource production in order to cut costs and increase flexibility.

These three types of lead firms share a common characteristic: They internally perform the most intangible activities of the apparel value chain—product design, branding, and the management of outsourced production—which constitute superior sources of market power in the global economy. Intangible activities both provide substantial scale economies, as expenses in product development and marketing can be spread over large volumes of sales, and require complex, hard-to-imitate competencies involved in building a brand or managing a global production network.⁴ By contrast, garment manufacturing requires less complex skills

and offers limited opportunities for scale economies, particularly with respect to quickly changing, fashion-oriented products. Garment factories thus operate under intense competitive pressures, and are able to appropriate little of the value created within the overall apparel chain.

Since the mid-1980s, the rise of large discount chains such as Wal-Mart, the wave of concentration among department stores, and the growth of specialty chains such as The Gap and The Limited have also substantially increased retail power within the apparel chain. More recently, enhanced retail competition in the face of declining apparel consumer expenditures has combined with the growing importance of mass merchants to generate price deflation in the U.S. apparel market.⁵ Passed on to suppliers, these price pressures are deteriorating firms' profitability along the apparel chain. Even large firms developing strong brand strategies have had difficulties maintaining a brand price premium in this new environment.⁶

While product branding and design remained concentrated in major fashion centers such as New York and Los Angeles, manufacturing activities spread around the world at a rapid pace over the second half of the last century, transforming the *geographical configuration* of the apparel chain. Such changes can be traced by charting the growth and origins of apparel imports to the United States. In the 1950s and 1960s, apparel products sold in the U.S. were primarily manufactured in this country, with imports accounting for less than 10 percent of the value of national apparel consumption.⁷ Japan was a major exporter to the U.S. market at that time, but was displaced by the "Big Three" apparel producers (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea) during the following decades. Imports grew from \$1 billion in 1970 to \$10.4 billion in 1984, with 63 percent of import volume coming from the Big Three in 1984. Asian firms were, and still are, essentially working as subcontractors to manufacture garments designed in the United States, following the detailed specifications provided by American retailers and branded marketers.⁸

Since the mid-1980s, new shifts have occurred in the geography of apparel production. As production costs increased in Asian Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs), local producers relocated their manufacturing activities to cheaper nearby areas, including China, Southeast Asia, and South Asia.⁹ Both U.S. and Asian NICs firms also developed production activities in Latin American countries. Benefiting from its proximity to the U.S. and boosted by the passage of NAFTA, Mexico's share alone

increased from 5 to 13 percent between 1986 and 1998.¹⁰ In recent years, however, China has outpaced Mexico to become the main clothing supplier for the U.S. market. Total U.S. apparel imports surged to \$66.7 billion in 2002,¹¹ and their share of national apparel consumption increased from 44 to 74 percent between 1994 and 2002.¹²

The organization of apparel production is strongly affected by its *social and institutional context*. Most notably, the quota system restricting exports of apparel products toward Europe and the United States since 1974, under the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA), has contributed to shape the geography of global production. It motivated large East Asian producers and their U.S. clients to expand their production networks over the years to include cheaper, quota-free countries, thus contributing to the global dispersion of production activities. By restricting exports on the basis of volume rather than value, the MFA also provided incentives for East Asian firms to increase the unit value of local production by manufacturing higher-priced garments. It thus contributed to a process of “industrial upgrading” by which these firms have improved their competitive position within the global apparel industry.¹³

Under the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing concluded during the Uruguay Round of WTO negotiations, the phasing-out of quotas on textiles and apparel, launched in 1995, should be completed by 2005, with a significant portion of the remaining quotas to be eliminated during this last year. With its massive workforce and low labor costs, China is expected to be the main beneficiary of these regulatory changes, at the expense of lesser-producing countries with intermediate labor costs.¹⁴ Further threatening the thin domestic manufacturing base left in the U.S. clothing industry, trade liberalization is subject to a major debate within the context of the 2004 U.S. presidential elections.¹⁵

In developing countries, apparel production for foreign markets typically takes place in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) offering special incentives to attract foreign clients and investors. EPZs have multiplied since the 1970s, from 79 in 1975 to 3,000 in 2002.¹⁶ They predominantly attract the labor-intensive assembly operations involved in apparel and electronics production and employed 43 million people in 2002, 30 million of them located in China. EPZs are characterized by weak institutional constraints on firms' operations and the predominance of young, low-educated, docile women workers whose exploitative employment conditions have been reg-

ularly brought to public attention by labor and by nongovernmental organizations over the last decade.¹⁷ Despite some common characteristics, such as the predominance of women in assembly operations, strong differences persist in employment conditions between developed and developing countries, particularly regarding labor costs. Since the 1970s, globalization has thus translated into a massive decline in employment in developed countries and an increase in apparel jobs in developing countries.¹⁸

Accordingly, global apparel chains include both highly concentrated marketing and retailing segments controlled by powerful firms in the European Union and the United States and dispersed manufacturing segments in developing countries, where exacerbated competitive pressures are passed on to the lowest-skilled, most vulnerable firms and workers.¹⁹ In between, countries such as the NICs have evolved from low-value, low-skilled assembly operations in the 1970s and 1980s to a more profitable role as production coordinators and higher-value producers for large American clients in the 1990s. What has been New York's trajectory over the last two decades, and what position and role does it occupy within the global apparel chain? The following sections will attempt to answer such questions by considering changes in local employment and in apparel firms' strategies.

New York's Fashion Niche in the Clothing Sector

New York City remains an important pole of the American apparel industry, with 51,800 jobs in 2001 or 9.2 percent of national employment, despite strong job losses ever since the late 1940s.²⁰ This overall decline results from two distinct phases of industrial transformation, when New York redefined its role and competitive position vis-à-vis other locations of the apparel industry. In the postwar period up to the mid-1970s, New York was primarily losing jobs to the benefit of Southern states, where high-volume standardized production could be more efficiently performed within large factories serving steadily growing mass markets.²¹ As a result, New York's share of national employment decreased from 30 to 12 percent between 1947 and 1975, while apparel jobs kept growing, on average, in the country as a whole.

From the mid-1970s up to the late 1990s, apparel employment declined not only in New York but also more broadly in the United States, with

the notable exception of California. As noted in the previous section, such job losses were accompanied by a steady increase in apparel imports from Asian and Latin American countries. During this second phase, New York City became increasingly specialized in the women's wear segment of apparel, which accounted for 72 percent of local apparel jobs in 2001, up from 47 percent in 1975. In this fashion-sensitive segment, the city's share of national employment increased from 17 percent in the 1980s to 23 percent in the first years of the twenty-first century. Accordingly, the women's wear industry in New York City has better resisted foreign competition in the 1980s and 1990s than have other locations in the country. California now appears as its strongest domestic competitor, with an increase in women's wear employment from 52,700 in 1975 to 104,700 in 1997, followed by a decline to 81,200 in 2001. Taken together, New York State and California accounted for 76 percent of national employment in women's wear in 2001, with most of the jobs in New York City and Los Angeles. Nevertheless, massive job losses have affected these two industrial poles, like the rest of the country, in the early years of this century.²²

What transformations have favored New York City's growing specialization in women's wear since the 1970s? In the mid-1980s, Roger Wal-dinger convincingly argued that the specialized small firms making up the bulk of the local industry were better equipped than large Southern factories to respond to the new competitive conditions of the 1970s and beyond.²³ Changes in market demand—the growing influence of fashion trends and increasing diversification in consumer needs—helped intensify competition,²⁴ as they translated into greater requirements on the part of garment firms in terms of product renewal and product differentiation. Consumer expenditures in apparel are also more volatile and have been slower-growing than overall expenditures over the last decade, so that market demand is both less dynamic and less predictable than in other consumer goods industries.²⁵

Compared with large, vertically integrated producers, networks of small specialized firms can better react to market changes by providing short runs of differentiated products. By focusing their resources on distinct stages in the overall value chain, New York women's wear firms were able to reduce fixed costs and increase operational flexibility. Almost since its inception, the New York women's wear industry has indeed been organized on the basis of a subcontracting system in which so-called jobbers

and manufacturers²⁶ specialized in garment design and marketing, while contractors performed production activities. The development of contracting firms has historically built on social networks in immigrant communities, and was facilitated by low-entry costs into sewing activities. As shown by Waldinger, immigration flows played an instrumental role in allowing for the continuation of manufacturing activities in the city in the 1970s and 1980s, as new ethnic groups of Asian and Latino origins entered the contracting segment of the local industry.²⁷ The geographical proximity of New York firms to their final market also gave them an edge vis-à-vis foreign producers in quickly responding to consumer demand. The factors of speed, product differentiation, and versatility are of particular importance to the fashion-driven women's wear industry, in which New York has become increasingly specialized. Likewise, lower labor costs in new immigrant communities contribute to the competitiveness of major urban centers in the United States vis-à-vis low-wage country producers.

The flexibility of small firms and the existence of ethnic-based networks certainly play a role in explaining the growing specialization of New York City in the women's wear industry over the last decades, but Waldinger's thesis tells only part of the story. What remains to be understood is how small firms have become integrated within global production networks in the apparel chain—and, more generally, what role New York firms have played in the processes of globalization. The following three sections will shed light on these matters by highlighting the diversity of strategies on the part of New York firms—from global players to small local producers.²⁸

Global Market Strategies in New York's Women's Wear Industry

Historical studies show that the development of New York's garment industry was characterized by a predominance of small firms.²⁹ Clustered in the Garment District, local manufacturers were typically organized on the basis of strong product specialization, meaning that firms designed and marketed one type of product, such as dresses or suits, in a particular price category—ranging, according to the industry's terminology, from “popular” to “design” and “couture.” Consequently, the task of combining products into broad lines meeting the diversified needs of customers was left to retailers, who bought complementary items from a variety of manufactur-

ers. As humorously observed by Irving Bernstein, specialization exacerbated the vulnerability of manufacturers in this highly unstable industry:

With a talented designer (or a sneaky ability to copy a Paris creation from Bonwit's window) and a little luck, a Seventh Avenue manufacturer could make a small fortune overnight. . . . By the same token, a bad designer (or a pregnant good one) and a little bad luck could put him into bankruptcy. The combination of easy entry, tiny shops, and rapid turnover gave the dress industry the stability of a rowboat in a hurricane."³⁰

Specialized businesses remain typical of the contemporary local industry. Some manage to achieve good performance in terms of sales and profits on a short-term basis, but most remain in an unstable and marginal position within the buying networks of retailers. As discussed above, changes in the landscape of retailing have exacerbated the vulnerability of small manufacturers. Major retailers have also restructured their supply network through rationalization and streamlining and built so-called "partnerships," based on joint inventory management, merchandising, and product development, with large producers able to meet their new buying requirements.³¹ The New York-based firms that entered such partnerships have established much stronger positions than their traditional counterparts in the women's wear market. They have implemented a growth strategy based on brand building and the development of broad product lines.

Created in 1976, Liz Claiborne championed this strategy in the "better" price category, with total revenues growing to \$1 billion in 1987, \$2.2 billion in 1992, and \$4.2 billion in 2003. In higher-price segments, a number of sportswear designers, such as Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, and Donna Karan, established their companies beginning in the late 1960s and reached revenues over \$100 million in the early 1990s. To support their growth strategy, Donna Karan International and Polo Ralph Lauren became publicly traded at the New York Stock Exchange in 1996 and 1997, respectively. Total revenues amounted to \$662 million in 2000 for Donna Karan International, acquired by French luxury goods multinational LVMH in 2001, while Polo Ralph Lauren's revenues reached \$2.4 billion in 2003.³²

According to one CEO, such a growth strategy is based on "turning [a] designer name into a consumer franchise."³³ Sportswear designers initially boosted their sales by developing "bridge" lines that amounted to cheaper

derivatives of their designer lines, such as DKNY or Anne Klein II. They have done so by building strong competencies in product development and marketing, and they are also involved in retailing, either by means of their own stores or through “store-in-store” activities by which they assist department stores in merchandising, advertising, and selling their products. The largest of these firms later expanded earnings and market power by stretching their brand coverage in three directions: 1) lower-price segments, through product lines such as DK Jeans, DK Active, Chaps, Lauren, or CK Calvin Klein; 2) non-apparel products, such as fragrances, watches, footwear, or home products; and 3) international markets in Asia and Europe. Such expansion predominantly relied on the use of licensing arrangements, although owned stores are also located in prestigious foreign locations.

Polo Ralph Lauren had developed a network of twenty product licenses by 2000, applying both to apparel and non-apparel products, as well as ten international licensees that were granted the right to source, produce, and sell, in a given geographical area, the products designed by the company and its product licensees. Its licensing revenues accounted for \$236.3 million, or nearly 14 percent of total revenues. The later-initiated licensing strategy of Donna Karan increased revenues from \$18.5 to \$45.2 million between 1998 and 2000, to reach 6.8 percent of total revenues.

Accordingly, large New York-based sportswear designers have managed to leverage their internal investment in design and marketing through external networks, thus creating significant barriers to entry into their segment of the market. As a result, smaller design firms lack the resources to compete with these strong brands on the shelves of department stores or, as illustrated by the trajectory of designer Isaac Mizrahi, have difficulties following their strategic lead when such resources are made available to them. Isaac Mizrahi closed his business in late 1998 after Chanel withdrew the financial support that it had granted the designer since 1992. The investor’s retreat has been explained by Mizrahi’s inability or unwillingness to transform his business into a large consumer franchise by expanding its brand coverage through licensing arrangements and product diversification, which would have increased its sales volume and the financial return that external investors could expect from it.³⁴ Other smaller designers such as Nicole Miller have adapted to the new retail environment by refocusing their sales toward small specialty shops, thus restricting their sales volume but freeing themselves from the growing price pressures exerted by large department stores.³⁵

In lower-price segments, large women's wear firms such as Leslie Fay or the Gitano Group also emerged in the postwar period but have faced important difficulties since the 1990s. Their market position has been challenged by the strong growth of private label products that retailers advantageously developed in lower-price segments.³⁶ Consequently, these firms attempted to reposition themselves either as product licensees for the lower-price lines of large designers or as private label manufacturers for retailers' product lines.³⁷ The latter strategy puts them in a difficult and precarious market position in the face of direct competition from retailers' own product development and sourcing capacities, such as Federated Merchandising Group, a division of Federated Department Stores, or Mast Industries, a subsidiary of The Limited.

This overview of market strategies does not account for the large variety of competitive positions, falling somewhere in between those of traditional manufacturers and those of large sportswear designers, that might be adopted by local firms. In particular, niche strategies followed by firms such as Nicole Miller can be devised in almost infinite configurations depending on firms' innovation capabilities, and they are of particular relevance to the many small firms that still make up the bulk of the local industry. This approach serves to identify what can be considered to be the dominant competitive advantage of New York City's garment industry in a global context: the capabilities of its designers and marketers to develop unique sportswear products conveying their image and style over the world, thanks to strong brand-building strategies. The second facet of New York firms' global strategies will now be analyzed as we focus on developments in outsourcing over the last decades.

New York Firms' Global Production Networks

Small New York manufacturers have traditionally relied on local subcontracting in order to see to the actual manufacture of their products. During the 1970s, however, the rise of large firms favored a geographical expansion of subcontracting networks in foreign countries. Liz Claiborne pioneered such a strategy by progressively establishing a global production network involving the complex coordination of complementary activities performed in various locations.³⁸ By the early 2000s, the company sourced

products from about seven hundred suppliers located in thirty-five countries, increasing its geographical coverage to fifty countries in 2003. Foreign sourcing has become standard practice among large New York-based firms. It could be estimated to have accounted for 60 to 90 percent of their annual sales by the mid-1990s, and its share has most probably increased in recent years. However, few firms are able to simultaneously achieve consistent quality, meet short delivery times, and control costs through complex foreign sourcing arrangements. Indeed, doing so requires consistent strategic choices regarding the location of production activities and the nature of relationships developed with suppliers.

Locational choices aim to match lead firms' requirements in terms of garment quality, fabric type, lead times, and production volumes with the specific capabilities of producers in various locations. Because production quality remains higher in the Big Asian Three than in Latin America, firms operating in higher-price segments outsource a greater part of production in the former region than do lower-price so-called manufacturers. For instance, the two main suppliers of Polo Ralph Lauren, accounting for 20 percent of its production in 2000, are located in Hong Kong, although their production activities have spread over Asia in recent years. By contrast, Leslie Fay relies more heavily on production in the Caribbean Basin countries of El Salvador and Guatemala. Foreign production also involves longer lead times and is not economical for small-size orders, so that New York retains a competitive advantage in the low-volume manufacturing required by the collection lines of designers, as well as with respect to market tests and reassorts in lower-price categories. Indeed, lead times remain substantially shorter in New York (typically two to five weeks) than in offshore locations (typically eight to twelve weeks).³⁹

The nature of the relationships developed with production contractors plays a central role in allowing lead firms to simultaneously achieve quality, flexibility, and cost control through their sourcing networks. In order to maintain consistent quality, successful companies have developed long-standing relations with selected core contractors that have acquired a specific knowledge of their product styles and manufacturing requirements over the years and account for a substantial part of their outsourcing activity. The social dimension of these relationships serves to ease the flow of exchanges. Over time, trust develops between the two parties and promotes cooperative versus adversarial behavior. The production manager

of a leading designer explains: "The contracting relation is like a marriage, but constantly reviewed and justified: We have constant discussions about lead times, productivity, margins. . . ." ⁴⁰ Combining social trust and rational economic thinking, lead firms and their core suppliers jointly plan production activities. Because product styles quickly change according to fashion trends, firms cannot specify in advance the nature of their production needs, but commit to use an estimated share of contractors' manufacturing capacities. Liz Claiborne, for example, indicates that it typically makes such advance commitments seven months prior to receiving orders from its customers. ⁴¹

By providing a regular flow of production orders to core suppliers and taking their financial needs into account when negotiating contract prices, lead firms have reduced the volume flexibility and cost advantage that could be obtained from outsourcing. In order to compensate for the rigidities occasioned by such "quasi-fixed" costs, Liz Claiborne and other branded marketers have been continuously searching for new, lower-cost suppliers over the world, outsourcing production to an ever-growing range of countries. Their relationships with such peripheral suppliers are more adversarial and short-term-oriented, allowing them to exert strong price pressures and meet unexpected quantitative variations in production volumes. Because peripheral suppliers have little knowledge of their clients' product specificities, production needs to be closely monitored and the contracting terms precisely defined *ex ante* between the parties. The relative importance of core versus peripheral suppliers in a lead firm's network is likely to vary depending on its size and market position. Larger firms operating in higher-price segments are better able to shape and forecast product demand thanks to strong brand-building policies, and higher margins allow them to pay better prices for production contracts. By contrast, lower-price marketers and retailers are subject to greater market volatility and exert stronger price pressures on suppliers, so that the share of peripheral suppliers is likely to be greater in their production network.

During the 1980s and up to the late 1990s, large, higher-price marketers were selecting peripheral suppliers with good learning potential in order to help them achieve, through continuous coaching and monitoring, a core status based on higher quality levels. ⁴² Such a training process played an instrumental role in allowing suppliers located in Hong Kong or South Korea to upgrade their skills and capabilities. Such an upward movement

from periphery to core status is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve in the early 2000s, however, owing to the consolidation of contracting relationships within the American-Asian apparel nexus. First, large producers in the East Asian Big Three countries have developed “full-package” capabilities that allow them to provide a finished garment to their clients, by internalizing activities, such as component purchasing, pattern making, and grading, that were previously performed by their American clients. Big Three Asian suppliers have also expanded their production facilities into new locations that are either cheaper than their home base, such as China, and/or closer to the U.S. market, such as Caribbean Basin countries, so as to develop worldwide production networks of their own. A recent study of the Mauritius garment industry, for example, indicates that Hong Kong-owned factories accounted for a substantial part of local production activities, assembling garments for American brands such as Tommy Hilfiger and Polo Ralph Lauren.⁴³ Major Asian contract manufacturers are thus able to offer a diversified array of services in terms of price, quality, volume, and lead times. The increasing gap between services provided by established versus new, peripheral contractors might reduce incentives for New York lead firms to further develop their own supply base.

Second, as large, New York-based firms further externalize production-related activities, they become more dependent on full-package supply services and lose their ability to teach new suppliers how to manufacture quality products. Such “hollowing out” is accentuated by generational changes among the production managers of large lead firms, as new recruits lack the direct experience in production-related activities that their elders acquired years ago when entering the garment industry. In addition, growing pressures on lead firms from consumer groups, the media, and labor activists to control apparel supply chains and to account for working conditions within their contractors’ factories should encourage lead firms to concentrate outsourcing activities on their core contractors. Liz Claiborne, for example, has increased its reliance on its top ten suppliers—whose share grew from 24 to 35 percent of outsourced production between 1994 and 1999, remaining stable afterwards up to 2003. By contrast, the range of countries covered by the company’s sourcing network steadily increased over the same period, indicating that existing suppliers are now entering new countries on behalf of Liz Claiborne.

As we observed with regard to global market strategies, the global outsourcing pattern identified above does not fit all New York-based marketers or so-called manufacturers—nor do they all take an active part in the globalization of outsourcing. A variety of local and foreign intermediaries offer to arrange for the offshore manufacture of apparel products, so that many local firms are resorting to foreign production without playing an active role in this process, and without rigorously assessing the relative costs and advantages of global versus local sourcing. As retailers' pressures increase, however, problems such as late delivery and unreliable quality motivated some local firms to shift production back to New York in the late 1990s.⁴⁴ Firms pursuing a niche market strategy also preferred to focus on local sourcing in order to better control quality and lead times. Nevertheless, lead firms like Liz Claiborne played a key role in defining the frontiers and organization of global production chains through the development of outsourcing. Today, their relationships with major foreign suppliers build on decades of cooperation. Some producers such as the Hong Kong-based Fang Brothers Group have leveraged these relationships to become multinationals involved in full-package production, design, and retailing activities. How did New York-based contractors fare vis-à-vis these foreign competitors, and how has their role evolved as the industry has become global?

The Renewal of the Production Base in New York City

In many ways, the mental stretch involved in shifting our attention back from the NICs to New York City producers is easier than is connecting the world of Seventh Avenue to that of downtown Chinatown, where production in the city is predominantly organized. Although these two local spheres interact daily and build on each other, the cultural, institutional, and economic distance between contractors located in New York City and in Asia appears smaller than the distance involved between marketers and contractors within the city. Such a paradox can be explained by looking at the historical construction of the local industry and the central role played by immigration in this process. As documented by Waldinger, the older ethnic groups of Eastern European and Italian origin that developed the local industry at the turn of the twentieth century have progres-

sively retreated from manufacturing, although they continue to dominate design, marketing, and sales activities.⁴⁵ Since the 1960s, production has been revitalized by ever-growing immigration flows from Asia and Latin America.⁴⁶ The massive entry of new immigrants thus happened concurrently with the growing outsourcing of production toward their regions of origin. According to Sassen, these parallel trends are not fortuitous.⁴⁷ The disruptive impact of Export Processing Zones (EPZs) on traditional work structure contributed to the formation of a pool of migrant workers in developing countries, while a strong American representation among foreign clients and investors reinforced the appeal of the United States as a country of destination. Her perspective emphasizes the interplay of social and economic forces in the processes of globalization, as well as the interdependence of local industrial restructuring trajectories among places involved in global production networks.

The proportion of foreign-born workers among operatives in New York City's garment industry increased from 50 to 90 percent between 1970 and 1990, thanks to a growing representation of Asian and Hispanic immigrants, whose share jumped from 0 to 38 percent and from 13 to 29 percent, respectively. While the total number of operatives declined in the local industry from 105,800 to 64,476, the number of Asian and Hispanic immigrant workers actually increased over the same period.⁴⁸ However, Asian and Latino immigrants have not followed the same pattern of integration within the local industry. First, occupational statistics indicate that Asians held a greater proportion of managerial and administrative positions than Hispanics in the local garment industry—15 versus 8 percent, respectively, according to the 1990 census. Second, Waldinger found that Chinese-owned firms were outperforming Dominican-owned firms in terms of size, longevity, economic performance, and managerial capabilities.⁴⁹ (Such differences could be explained by the higher educational levels, longer business experience, and more stable settlement status in the United States of Chinese versus Dominican entrepreneurs.) Third, from a geographical perspective, Hispanic firms have not formed a dominant cluster and remain scattered in various neighborhoods throughout the city; by contrast, the involvement of Chinese immigrants has translated into the rise of Chinatown as a major production pole over the last few decades.⁵⁰ The number of garment firms in this ethnic enclave increased from 8 to 540 between 1960 and 1993,⁵¹ and Chinatown satellites devel-

oped in Queens (Long Island City) and Brooklyn (Sunset Park). Faced with growing real estate prices in Manhattan, Chinese contractors increased production in these outer boroughs during the 1990s. By the early 2000s but before September 11th, an estimated 14,000 workers were employed by 246 garment factories in downtown Chinatown, accounting for about half of the textile and apparel workforce in Manhattan, while another 347 textile and apparel factories employed 22,700 workers in Queens and Brooklyn.⁵² The 9/11 attack paralyzed downtown Chinatown apparel operations for several weeks, and a follow-up survey indicated that sixty-five factories remained closed a year later, while about two-thirds of respondents were still suffering from a business decline.⁵³

The development of a large production pole in Chinatown constitutes one of the most striking developments in New York's garment industry over the last three decades, not only in terms of jobs and business generation, but also in terms of the ways in which Chinese immigrant firms have inserted themselves within global production networks. Chinatown specializes in sportswear products, the fastest-growing segment of the women's wear industry. Chinese contractors initially entered the industry through the simple assembly of lower-price products; work organization and employment were highly flexible and informal.⁵⁴ By the mid-1980s, however, a group of larger, more established firms had emerged in this ethnic enclave, and during the late 1980s and 1990s these firms followed an industrial upgrading strategy by which they learned to master the skills needed for higher-value production. As a result, the Chinatown garment industry has become increasingly segmented between large, core contractors such as the John Lam Fashion Group and Tech Sew Manufacturing, which have stabilized their position in the local industry, and small, peripheral contractors that continue to absorb seasonal and cyclical demand fluctuations.⁵⁵

Core contractors are typically organized in semiformal groups in which members of the same family run a variety of specialized factories under a central leadership. The groups can offer a wide variety of services, responding to the needs of their New York client base. Group leaders have developed stable relationships with large sportswear designers, still referred to as manufacturers in the local industry. As one group owner explains: "I do not take a one-shot deal. I want a certain percentage of manufacturers' work that gives a surface [scale] to my business. We build

a program together for the season; in return I give them quality and strict delivery." Another owner states: "We like to be able to predict the work flow in order to know how much we can absorb from manufacturers. We expect quality, responsibility, and steadiness from the workers."⁵⁶ Such positions stand in sharp contrast to the dominant view of Chinatown as a highly unstable and dynamic labor market, in which workers move from one factory to the next according to the fluctuating needs of producers. Although such a view still reflects employment conditions in smaller factories, the largest firms attempt to attract and retain higher-skilled workers by offering above-average wages, safer working conditions, and steadier employment prospects. Nevertheless, these contractors also resort to less-skilled temporary workers and subcontractors in order to meet demand fluctuations, so that work stability only applies to their core group of higher-skilled, regular workers.

Although the main family groups of Chinatown have substantially increased the quality of their operations over the last decades, by the late 1990s they lagged behind their most advanced East Asian competitors, as illustrated by these comments from the production manager at a major New York-based sportswear firm:

New York contractors are small boutique shops. You get flexibility in lot size, but the price is higher. . . . Far East factories are self-contained, vertical companies like those in the South. They're large companies; you never see the owner sitting behind a machine. They have a finance department; some have worldwide manufacturing operations. We buy a finished garment from them, whereas in New York we buy only labor.⁵⁷

A central challenge for New York contractors is thus to further rationalize their operating systems and develop full-package capabilities in order to keep up with the industrial upgrading strategies of their Far Eastern competitors. Because they cannot rely on the large production volumes attracted by Asian factories, local producers need to devise alternative production models combining quick turnaround and full-package services. To that end, the Garment Industry Development Corporation (GIDC) established a modernization center in Chinatown in 1998. This development agency also maintains an online database of local contractors' services, in which only a few firms provide the full-package services needed by retailers and branded marketers.

The largest contracting firms in Chinatown are surrounded by a fluctuating number of peripheral contractors characterized by high turnover rates among both owners and workers as well as limited financial, managerial, and manufacturing capabilities. Using obsolete second-hand machines, unable to retain workers during the slow periods of the industry's seasonal cycles, subject to intense competitive pressures, these firms and their employees can be considered the main losers of globalization. The deterioration in employment conditions in this segment of the local industry has raised concerns about the return of sweatshops—emblematic of the industry's early days at the turn of the nineteenth century—and motivated political action by New York State, and by labor-related organizations such as UNITE and the National Labor Committee. In 1987, the state established an Apparel Industry Task Force, which now conducts an average of 1,200 annual inspections of factories for compliance with labor laws. In 1996 and 1998, legislation was passed to make manufacturers responsible for employment conditions in their suppliers' factories.⁵⁸ Enforcement is made difficult by the highly unstable nature of peripheral suppliers and by the blurred and shifting frontier between core and peripheral segments in local production activities. Indeed, core contractors resort to the services of peripheral contractors during peak times, and their factories are not all run according to the same standards.

Some of the factories that currently operate under substandard conditions might prove able to upgrade their capabilities and contribute to revitalizing local production activities. For instance, a new production pole has emerged during the 1980s in the Garment District, with Korean ownership and a Hispanic workforce. The Korean Apparel Contractors of Greater New York estimate that this pole increased from a few dozen to 500 contractors between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, specializing in the assembly of low-price sportswear products. The largest of these firms might follow the lead of Chinese contractors and improve their position in the local industry.

The operating modes of the contemporary apparel industry in the city stand in sharp contrast to the patterns established by older immigrant groups in the 1930s and 1940s. Still represented by a few aging firms, this former generation of contractors used to operate in a more regulated manner than do their Asian competitors. Having helped, through employers' and workers' associations, to establish the labor laws and collective agree-

ments that reduced price pressures on contractor and employee relations, these firms are less prone to break the rules in order to meet manufacturers' costs and flexibility requirements.⁵⁹ They also specialize in high-price couture segments, where such pressures are less intense than in the sportswear segment.

Overview and Outlook

As shown in this chapter, the globalization of the New York garment industry is a multifaceted phenomenon involving the penetration of leading brand names into international markets, the outsourcing of production activities to foreign countries, and the entry of new immigrant groups in the local production base. The extension of the industry's geographical and social boundaries occurred through the development of new relationships both between firms, as New York marketers and Far East suppliers learned to work together in the global production chain, and within firms, as improvement in competitive position served to transform internal work organization and employment practices as they were applied to the firm's core competencies. From such a perspective, both Polo Ralph Lauren and the John Lam Fashion Group are learning organizations that stretched themselves to master new skills in design, marketing, network management, or manufacturing over the last few decades.

The combination of globalization and retail concentration intensified competition in the garment industry, by increasing the power of large buyers and the number of suppliers available on a global scale while such regulating mechanisms as labor laws and collective agreements remained in effect only at the local level. In such a context, those lacking the capabilities to compete on a basis other than costs—including traditional manufacturers, new immigrant contractors, and their workers—are subject to much stronger competitive pressures than they would be in a locally circumscribed industry. Regulating mechanisms typically restrict entry into an industrial community, however, so that there might be a trade-off between strong competition and global openness on the one hand and protection linked to entry barriers on the other.⁶⁰ The institutional context of globalization is likely to evolve in the future, and new mechanisms such as global codes of conduct might help alleviate competitive pressures on

the most vulnerable firms and workers, provided that these codes can be strengthened in their scope of application and binding character. At the moment, issues of workers' wages and collective representation are typically left out of codes adopted by retailers and marketers.⁶¹ Moreover, conditions are not yet in place for an effective monitoring of codes' implementation.

Enhanced competitive pressures are thus engaging the global apparel chain into a spiral of price deflation fed by the massive price-cutting practices of discount chains and mass merchants at one end and by the overabundance of cheap labor at the other, predominantly Chinese, end of the chain. In between, the most successful firms in New York's garment industry are struggling to maintain their global competitiveness. A key issue for lead firms revolves around the need to boost sales growth while enhancing innovative capabilities—or, to put it differently, to combine New York's fashion spirit with the steady generation of financial returns. Publicly traded corporations such as Liz Claiborne and Polo Ralph Lauren have failed to meet financial markets' expectations in recent years; and to simultaneously respond to shareholders' demands, retailers' price pressures, and consumers' expectations will not prove an easy achievement. The ownership of prestigious brand names such as Calvin Klein and Donna Karan has fled New York over the last several years, raising further questions about the changing role and structure of the local garment industry. While design and marketing activities will certainly remain anchored in the city in coming years, they are also becoming embedded within intricate financial corporate networks spanning across local and national boundaries.

Production activities have recently faced serious drawbacks owing to the combination of overwhelming import growth, the repercussions of the September 11th attack, and a lack of affordable space in the city.⁶² On the employment side, suppliers are being caught between continuous immigration pressures on the one hand and a tougher, repressive policy from the New York State Apparel Industry Task Force on the other. Policy support to improve manufacturing capabilities will certainly prove instrumental in allowing the New York manufacturing base to escape the "bad jobs versus no jobs" dilemma in the future. Such local policy can only be effective, however, if a global regulatory architecture makes possible both the stabilizing of competition and improvement in employment conditions across the global apparel chain.

Members of Local 23-25, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, gather for a demonstration during the Chinatown strike of 1982. Photo courtesy of the Kathy Andrade Papers, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

A worker eats lunch at her machine in a Chinatown factory, 2002. The sight of workers eating at their machines has been common in New York garment shops for over a century. Photo by Bonny Ng Mui Leung.

3

The Geographical Movement of Chinese Garment Shops

*A Late-Twentieth-Century Tale of the New York Garment Industry*¹

Xiaolan Bao

THE GARMENT INDUSTRY, characterized by its mobile nature, has long been part of the landscape of New York City. A number of historical studies have examined the characteristics of its geographical movement and analyzed factors that are conducive to its relocations along with the impact of those relocations on various ethnic communities in the city.² For example, focusing on the period from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, Nancy Green reveals that although “labor costs and union avoidance were paramount in the setting up of ‘runaway’ shops,” there were also other historical forces that led to the northward movement of the city’s garment industry in the early twentieth century. These forces included “the reform movement, state and federal legislation, and the internal transformation of the immigrant neighborhoods” that together “pushed” the industry out of the Lower East Side, and the restructuring of industrial production, the opening of Pennsylvania Station, and the building of spacious new lofts in midtown that “pulled” the industry northward and led to the formation of the Garment District there.³

Donna Gabaccia’s study “Little Italy’s Decline,” though not solely about the garment industry, suggests that the relocation of the garment

industry, coupled with the construction of rapid transit that made garment industry relocation possible but bypassed Little Italy, led to the resettlement of Italian working-class families along developing subway lines in other boroughs, thus contributing to the decline of Little Italy.⁴ Focusing on a later period and a newer ethnic group of workers, Altagracia Ortiz points out that although sweatshops in Harlem, the Bronx, and Brooklyn largely resulted from the search for inexpensive inner-city labor, it was not accidental that many Puerto Rican women workers, who formed the majority of the workforce that enabled the city's garment industry to survive the economic crisis of the 1950s and early 1960s, have *chosen* to work in these runaway shops since the late 1960s. Among many reasons that drove them out of the legal labor sector, the major ones were low wages, intense competition among various groups of new ethnic workers in the industry, and racial discrimination in the shops and in the union.⁵ Together, these studies have demonstrated not only the forces that shape the geography of the city's garment industry, but also the reciprocal and interdependent nature of the relationships between the industry and its workforce and its workers' communities.

This chapter attempts to contribute to the existing understanding by focusing on the geography of the Chinese garment industry, a new ethnic segment of the city's industry that did not take off until the late 1960s. It is primarily based on the author's historical research into the Chinatown garment industry in New York City over the last ten years; her visits to a number of garment shops in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, from 1997 to 1998; and her interviews with several dozen workers there for a larger project.⁶ Like previous studies on other ethnic segments, this chapter explores the multiple forces that have shaped the geography of the Chinese garment industry in New York City; it traces the industry's rise in Manhattan's Chinatown and the recent creation of runaway shops in other parts of the city.

Although many aspects of the Chinese experience resemble those of other ethnic groups in the previous history of the city's industry, there are differences. A major difference is the new challenge the Chinese industry faced shortly after it took off in the late 1960s. As the big garment and retailing firms increased their search for inexpensive labor in other parts of the world, the globalization of U.S. garment production had a retarding impact on the industry at home. All segments of the garment industry in

New York were severely affected; the Chinese garment industry was no exception.

However, as the Chinese experience shows, as the highly competitive structure of the garment industry was generating sweated labor on the floor, the dehumanization of working conditions was also turning shops into hotbeds of labor activism among their workers. How can workers develop new strategies and join forces with their counterparts in other parts of the world in their battle to defend their interests? This is a major challenge that organized labor, and garment workers in particular, face in this new age of the global economy.

The Chinatown Garment Industry: A Brief History

It was not until the late 1960s that the garment industry became a major part of the landscape of New York's Chinatown.⁷ One of the principal reasons for its absence until then was the scarcity of women in the community. The Chinese gender ratio was unequal in almost all parts of the U.S. before the end of the Second World War, but it was even more so in New York City. In 1940, for example, when the Chinese gender ratio had dropped to about three men for every one woman nationally and two for every one in California, it remained more than six to one in New York City, and nine to one among those fifteen years of age and older.⁸ Given the garment industry's long-standing tradition of relying on low-paid female immigrant labor, it was not surprising that the industry had not been a significant part of life in New York's Chinatown.

The gender ratio of the community began to change in the immediate post-World War II era, thanks to a series of changes in U.S. immigration law.⁹ Women constituted an overwhelming majority of the Chinese immigrants who came to the United States during this period, and many settled in New York City.¹⁰ As a result, the Chinese gender ratio in the city dropped from more than six men to one woman in 1940 to 1.7 to one in 1960.¹¹

The most significant demographic change took place after 1965, however, when U.S. immigration law was amended to eliminate the discriminatory nationality quota system and to emphasize family reunions. Massive Chinese immigration in the late 1960s brought to New York City

not only a large number of working-class Chinese women who were in the prime of their lives but did not have marketable skills in the United States, but also a group of Chinese entrepreneurs who had managerial skills and were eager to seek their fortune in their new land. These two groups constituted highly favorable human resources for the growth of the garment industry in the community.

The growth of the Chinatown garment industry also resulted from changes in the Chinatown area and in the development of the city's garment industry. Beginning in the 1960s, the Chinatown area witnessed a dramatic exodus of the earlier Jewish and Italian residents from the tenement apartments and of manufacturing industries from the industrial lofts.¹² As the vacated lofts furnished the future garment industry with ample space to grow at favorable rents and lease terms, the area's low-cost housing provided its workforce with residences proximate to their workplace.

Importantly, these changes in the Chinatown area took place at a time when the city's garment industry was facing a severe labor shortage. Beginning in the 1950s, an increasingly large number of workers left the industry—in part owing to the aging of the earlier labor force, in part on account of the problems that the new ethnic workers faced in the industry.¹³ Manufacturers were anxious to locate a new ethnic group in the city in order to revitalize the industry. Recent changes in the Chinese community and the Chinatown area thus caught their attention.

With abundant work supplied by midtown manufacturers and favorable terms offered by manufacturers and other garment-related business firms, the number of Chinese garment shops began to increase rapidly. Between 1969 and 1980, while the number of jobs in the large midtown garment center fell from 40,000 to 25,000, jobs in the Chinatown area doubled, growing from 8,000 to 16,000 and reaching almost 20,000 in 1982. By the end of 1981, there were already 441 Chinese garment shops in the Chinatown area. Using some of the oldest remaining industrial space in New York City, they lined up along Canal Street and Broadway, reached into Little Italy along Mulberry and Elizabeth Streets, and extended into the Lower East Side along East Broadway and Allen Street. Contributing \$125 million annually to the city's economy, the Chinatown garment production center became a mainstay of the city's economy in the early 1980s.¹⁴

The growth of the Chinatown garment industry was vital to the city's garment industry. Although the growth of garment production in Chinatown did not arrest the continuing decline of the city's industry, which had begun as early as the 1920s, it was able to moderate it.¹⁵ By the early 1980s, the Chinatown garment shops produced two-thirds of the sports-wear for the manufacturers affiliated with the ILGWU Local 23-25, work that might have otherwise been shipped out of the city—and had effectively anchored the garment industry in New York City.¹⁶

The growth of the Chinatown garment industry had a strong impact on the Chinese community in the city. It revitalized the economy of the community by replacing the traditional Chinese laundry business and, together with the restaurant business, becoming one of the two major sources of income for Chinese working-class families.¹⁷ By the early 1980s, it was providing a livelihood to four out of ten Chinese households in the city, and six out of ten Chinatown families had members who worked in a Chinatown garment shop. Contributing at least \$32 million annually to the shops in Chinatown and about \$14 million to those in other Chinese neighborhoods in the city, the Chinatown garment industry was crucial to the economy of the Chinese community in New York City.¹⁸

The growth of the garment industry also stimulated the growth of other businesses in Chinatown. Since the late 1960s, small restaurants and grocery stores, catering to the needs of workers in the garment shops, have mushroomed in the Chinatown area. By the early 1980s, it was estimated that about 40 percent of the \$57 million that was received in wages and salary by workers and owners who lived in Chinatown was spent on retail shopping for food, for other goods, and for eating out in Chinatown. Since many owners of the above-mentioned small businesses tended to reinvest the capital that they accumulated in real estate and in other, larger businesses, the garment industry boosted the economic growth of Chinatown as a whole.¹⁹

The impact of the garment industry on the community was not only economic but also cultural. With plenty of employment opportunities provided by the Chinatown garment industry, the number of Chinese women in the labor force grew rapidly. As early as 1970, almost half of adult Chinese women in the city were gainfully employed. The percentage continued to rise in the following decade.²⁰ Like their European predecessors in the city's garment industry, Chinese immigrant women workers

were hard-working and were determined to build a better life in their new homeland. Unlike their predecessors, however, more than 86 percent of them in 1980 were married, and many had young children.²¹ In a community more than half of whose households were working-class and had members working in the ethnic economic sector, this high rate of married women's labor participation in the garment industry inevitably had a strong impact on transforming its working-class family culture. This cultural transformation has to be understood in the context of both the economic structure of the community and women's increasingly important role in their families.

Since most working-class Chinese men worked in the low-paying labor sector, which offered no employment benefits, women's employment in the garment industry became indispensable for the well-being of their families, on account of both their economic contribution and the benefits, particularly the family health insurance, that came with their employment in the unionized garment industry, which their families would not otherwise have been able to obtain. The prolonged absence of their husbands from the home, caused by their long hours of work, also led many women garment workers to play a dual role as both the major "rice winner" and the major care provider in the family. Hence, a new type of mother-centered culture began to emerge in many Chinese working-class families.

Their increasingly important role in the lives of their families had a mixed impact on these working women. Like working mothers almost all over the world, they had to shoulder double and even triple burdens in their lives.²² However, their contributions to their families also won them growing respect from their family members, particularly their children.²³ In a new social environment that offered them very few alternatives, the growing respect they enjoyed in their families instilled in them hope and confidence in their new land. It was this hope and confidence that encouraged them to fight against any injustice that they perceived might jeopardize their families' interests.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) began to organize Chinatown garment workers in the early 1950s. The early efforts to unionize Chinatown shops did not meet with significant resistance, because unionization could guarantee sufficient work for Chinatown shops and provide workers with union benefits at practically

no cost to their employers. The recollection of a longtime Chinatown worker can help us understand the situation at the time.

I joined the union in 1958. It was because the midtown manufacturers told my boss that if his shop were not unionized, he would get no work. So the boss came to us and said if we joined the union we would have lots of work to do, and in addition we would have vacation checks and all kinds of benefits. So we joined the union. As a bonus, the boss even subsidized every one of us \$18 to cover our first union membership dues.²⁴

With Chinese workers joining the union in increasingly large numbers, in the early 1970s Local 23-25 became the largest local of the ILGWU and the local that had the largest Chinese membership of any American trade union. As a part of the city's garment industry that was unionized by a major national labor organization, the Chinatown garment industry was structurally tied to the city's and the nation's economy and to the labor movement in the United States.

Unionization exposed Chinese women workers to conditions outside their own ethnic community, which allowed them to envision a better life in their new land. However, problems were also embedded in the unionization of the Chinatown garment industry, including the union's indifference to the particular interests of its Chinese members and its failure to enforce labor laws in many Chinatown shops. Learning to pressure leaders of their labor organization and other institutions in order to improve their lives thus became an important component, as well as an index, of Chinese workers' acculturation in the United States.

The Chinese Garment Workers' Strike in 1982: A Turning Point

From the outset of the Chinese garment industry, employers and employees shared the same ethnic identity, and most Chinatown garment shops were contract shops.²⁵ Anyone who understands the basic structure of the New York City garment industry will not fail to notice the dual nature of contractors within this structure, as it has developed over time. The contracting system has freed manufacturers from the potential risks associated with the volatile nature of garment production by shifting those

risks to contractors. That system also provided an important opportunity, however, for contractors to climb up the ladder of proprietors—an opportunity most of them otherwise would not have had. Confined to a particular segment of an industry characterized by high risks and low profits, contractors had to drive hard to make profits out of the margin between the prices offered by manufacturers and the wages they offered their workers. Their profit-oriented endeavors thus very often led them to overstretch the limits of labor laws on the floor.

The Chinese garment shop owners, who were also contractors in the industry, in many ways resembled their counterparts elsewhere in the city. There were, however, some differences between them and their counterparts in the history of the city's garment industry, owing to the point at which they entered the industry and their position as a new ethnic group in the trade.

As mentioned above, as early as the 1920s, garment production began to flow out of New York City. In the following decades, manufacturers sped up their efforts to find low-wage areas elsewhere in an attempt to avoid the high costs of labor in New York City, which were largely an outcome of the successful unionization of the city's industry. From nearby northeastern areas in the 1930s and the South and the West Coast in the 1940s and 1950s, capital began to flow beyond the boundaries of the United States and soon became internationalized. From Japan in the 1950s to Hong Kong and South Korea in the 1970s and early 1980s, U.S. garment production had fanned out to almost every continent in the world by the mid-1980s.²⁶

The relocation of garment production outside New York City, however, had its limitations. A major drawback of offshore production was the time added to production. Production in Asia, for example, required at least six to eight months of orders in advance, which could hardly address the unpredictable nature of changing fashions. To meet last-minute demands for rapidly changing styles and the miscalculations inevitable with foreign sourcing, manufacturers chose to retain a certain portion of garment production at home—namely, exactly the kind of production that New York City's garment industry had concentrated on since the 1970s. By producing increasingly less standardized garments, the city's garment industry managed to carve a niche for itself in the highly competitive clothing market, both in the nation and the world.

The nature of this special niche was reflected in the changing components of garment manufacturing in New York over the last three decades. Women's outerwear, which is much less standardized than men's clothing, had constituted an increasingly large proportion of the city's industry, growing from 47 percent in 1974 to 53 percent in 1980.²⁷ Significant changes also occurred in the mix of the city's other products. While production of the relatively standardized lines declined greatly, the dress industry, with the least predictable market in the trade, remained an important part of the city's industry, declining only slightly—from 54.9 percent in 1969 to 46.5 percent in 1980.²⁸

From the outset, most of the Chinatown garment shops produced low-cost sportswear, blouses, and dresses. Chinese employers were not only subjected to the risks associated with garment production but were also under severe pressure to suppress labor costs. Stimulated by the dynamics embedded in the structure of the industry, however, they found it difficult to resist the temptation to reap much higher profits from their operations. This was especially the case in the late 1970s, when the number of garment shops in Chinatown grew rapidly and competition among them intensified. They became even more eager to reap immediate profits by fending off any attempt to regulate labor conditions on the floor, thus escalating tension between labor and management in the industry.

This tension came to a head in 1982, when a new union contract was being negotiated for the industry. Chinese employers believed that they were discriminated against and underrepresented in both the contract negotiations and the contractors' organization in the city, the Greater Blouse, Skirt, and Underwear Association (GSUA), an organization dominated by the earlier immigrant groups. They balked after a contract was signed by manufacturers and seemed likely to be accepted by the GSUA. Counting on the acquiescence of their workers, who shared their ethnic identity and were mostly women with very few opportunities to have their voices heard in the community, they decided to veto the contract.

To the employers' great astonishment and with the support of other locals of the ILGWU, a total of more than 20,000 Chinese garment workers took to the streets. They turned out for two union rallies on June 24th and July 15th and marched in the streets of Chinatown after the second rally, which led to the largest labor strike in the history of New

York's Chinatown. It effectively ended the labor dispute and forced the dissident Chinese employers to sign the new contract.

Although the strike forcefully demonstrated to the world Chinese women workers' capacity for labor militancy, its success did not lead to positive changes in the industry. Workers in many Chinatown shops soon found themselves working in shops with smaller and smaller bundles of work at lower prices, subject to frequently changing styles and arbitrary demands for quick delivery. Instead of a regular eight-hour workday, workers in many Chinatown shops began working ten to eleven hours a day in busy seasons, but for only eight months a year.

The situation in Chinatown was not an isolated case in the city's garment industry. It was partially a result of the continuing outflow of the industry's capital from the United States and the inflow of imported clothing to the U.S. retail market, stimulated by a series of free trade treaties concluded by the government. As imports increased from 50.1 percent of the U.S. market in 1980 to 66.9 percent by 1993, employment in the national garment industry dropped by 39.9 percent, falling from 1.4 million in 1973 to 864,000 in 1996, and wages for the nation's garment workers declined by 18.2 percent between 1968 and 1996.²⁹

New York City, as the garment manufacturing and fashion center of the nation, bore the brunt of these changes. With its high wages, the city could not compete with the rest of the nation or the world. As offshore production continued to grow, the city's garment industry lost 73.8 percent of its jobs between 1958 and 1996, and its share of national employment fell from 23.6 percent to only 8.4 percent. Since 1968, real wages for New York garment workers accordingly dropped. By 1996 they had lost 20 percent of their value.³⁰

The decline of real wages in the city was also caused by a significant change in the power relations within the industry. By the late 1980s, retailers had successfully replaced manufacturers to become the major players in the industry. In 1988, *Business Week* magazine estimated that while material costs and manufacturers' profits and overhead accounted for 22.5 percent and 12.5 percent of retail prices, respectively, retailers added 50 percent in expenses and profit. Only 15 percent went to labor, which included contractors and workers. In the following years, with retailers extracting an increasingly large share of the retail price and management endeavoring to squeeze out a little extra, labor had to pay the price. By

1997, when the percentages for manufacturing overhead and profits and retail mark-up grew to 16 percent and 54 percent of retail prices, the percentages remaining for manufacturing materials and labor dropped to 18 percent and 12 percent.³¹

Situated at the bottom of the managerial echelon of the city's garment industry, Chinatown garment shop owners inevitably felt the pain. To maintain their competitive edge, they were more than ever determined to shake off any barriers to their pursuit of lower labor costs. Particularly after the strike, with wages increased and the number of ILGWU-affiliated manufacturers dropping drastically, they saw no reason to bother keeping a relationship with the union and maintaining their businesses in Chinatown, a stronghold of the union shops.³²

It should come as no surprise that the years after the strike witnessed a gradual departure of Chinese garment shops from Chinatown. In the mid-1980s, several aggressive Chinese employers were already exploring the possibility of moving their businesses outside New York City, but to no avail. By the late 1980s, encouraged by the city government, a number of Chinese employers had relocated their businesses to the city's special garment manufacturing zone in midtown. Since the early 1980s, Chinese garment shops have also emerged in Queens and Brooklyn, and most were non-union shops.³³ All this posed a severe threat to the union shops in Chinatown.

Sweatshop Migrations: The Rise of Chinese Garment Shops in Sunset Park

Although there were Chinese garment shops in Brooklyn's Sunset Park in the early 1980s, long-time Chinese residents in the area recalled that their number remained small, not more than a dozen even by the late 1980s. There were also some major efforts to transplant the Chinese garment industry to the area around the Brooklyn Army Terminal in the late 1980s, but none of them could establish a foothold in Brooklyn.³⁴ However, in the 1990s the number of garment shops in Brooklyn began to grow rapidly. By the mid-1990s, with more than two hundred Chinese shops in the area, Sunset Park had become the second Chinese garment production center in New York City.

What accounts for the growth of the Sunset Park Chinese garment industry in the last ten years? When interviewed by the Chinese press, owners of the Chinese garment shops cite low rents, roomy industrial lofts, and ample space as the major reasons. Indeed, even by the end of the 1990s, when the average rent for industrial lofts in the area had increased considerably, it remained less than half that in Manhattan's Chinatown.³⁵ The roomy industrial lofts enabled production to flow more efficiently, and the spacious environment of the area made transportation much easier than in the overcrowded Manhattan Chinatown.³⁶ However, the reasons given by the Chinese employers were not sufficient to explain why, despite the same advantages, the rapid growth of the industry did not take place in the area until the end of the 1980s.

My interviews revealed that difficulty in recruiting Chinese workers in the area was the most important reason that had limited its growth. Although the earliest Chinese employers in Brooklyn had deliberately offered better terms to accommodate the needs of workers, such as higher piece rates, flexible work hours, and union benefits, they did not lead to any impressive results. The reasons given by a Ms. Liu, who is a long-time resident of Brooklyn and a veteran garment worker in the Chinatown shops, shed important light on workers' reactions in those earlier years:

Of course, the bosses here [in Brooklyn] had tried to talk me into working in their shops, but what was the point of doing that? In any case, I had to go to Chinatown to do grocery shopping for the family. Brooklyn at that time, you know, was not like now. There were hardly any Chinese grocery stores or other Chinese businesses in this neighborhood. In addition, my husband worked in an uptown Chinese restaurant, and the restaurant picked up its employees from Chinatown around noon every day.

I had two young kids at that time [the early 1980s]: My daughter had just started going to a day care center and my son was still an infant. My husband worked eleven to twelve hours a day, but he did not have to go to work until noon . . .

So every morning I would drop my daughter at the day care center at about eight o'clock and then go to work in a Chinatown shop. My husband took care of the baby at home. He would bring him to my workplace in Chinatown around noon before he left for work. After the baby came, I would put him in a carton box next to my sewing machine and work for

about three more hours. Around three in the afternoon, I left the shop with my son and returned to Brooklyn to pick up my daughter from the day care center. I would bring two big bundles of work with me from the shop, and my son! Amazing, isn't it?! Now I simply can't imagine how I managed to do that at that time! Well, not only did I do it, but I also finished the grocery shopping in Chinatown on my way home.

Things worked out pretty well for me at that time. I did not miss anything working in Chinatown. I could buy groceries for my family, had a place to work, and received additional garments to sew at home, after my kids got settled in the evening. Yes, it seems that I lost time, since I had to leave the shop earlier than my fellow workers, but I could work at home as long as I wanted to make up my lost time—or even longer, if I needed more money. So what's the point of working in Brooklyn? Brooklyn was a dead town for us Chinese at that time. I enjoyed the life in Chinatown, full of life, full of conveniences and information that I needed.³⁷

Her reaction was shared by many of her fellow workers whom I interviewed. No wonder that, by 1982, even though half of the Chinese garment workers in New York City resided in Brooklyn and other boroughs, they continued to travel to Chinatown in Manhattan to work in a garment shop there.³⁸

As with the situation in Manhattan's Chinatown, the rapid growth of Chinese garment shops in Brooklyn since the end of the 1980s occurred in direct relationship to Chinese immigration to the city and demographic change in the Chinese population in the borough over the last two decades. U.S. immigration statistics showed that between 1986 and 1995 a total of more than 125,000 Chinese immigrants came to New York City.³⁹ Eighty-two percent of those who entered the city between 1982 and 1994 were family members or relatives of U.S. citizens or permanent residents.⁴⁰ Like their predecessors in the late 1960s and 1970s, a majority of those who entered New York City with occupations had working-class origins. Most of them settled in Manhattan's Chinatown or in the areas of Sunset Park, Bay Ridge, and Bensonhurst in Brooklyn.⁴¹ Among the Chinese population in Brooklyn, most of those with the least marketable skills or financial security chose to live in the Sunset Park area, either to join their predecessors or simply because of the area's low living costs.⁴²

Although proximity between home and work did not carry much weight for the early Chinese settlers in Sunset Park, it did for the new-

comers. This had a lot to do with changes in the working conditions in the Chinatown industry. As a result of the shrinking number of union-affiliated manufacturers, the union began to face deficits in its budget on account of the decline in manufacturers' contributions to its funds. To solve its financial problems, the union began to set a minimum benefit eligibility requirement for its members. The requirement grew from a minimum annual income of \$4,400 in 1984 to \$5,000 in 1989, and continued to grow by \$200 each year in the three-year period from 1992 to 1994.⁴³

The union had its justifications for doing so. As some union officials have argued, the increase in eligibility requirements helped not only to improve the union's financial status but to curb unlawful practices on the floor. Indeed, as long-time garment workers confirmed in interviews, in the absence of any eligibility requirements, it had long become a common practice in a number of Chinatown garment shops for workers' checks to be issued under more than one name. Besides the worker herself, the checks were also issued, most often, in the names of her family members and, sometimes, those of the family or friends of her employer. These people could enjoy union benefits without having to work in the shops. By issuing payments to workers in more than one name, Chinatown employers not only could strengthen their ties with their employees by catering to their family needs, but could also benefit financially by providing their own family members with health care at no cost. Some employers even engaged in illegal monetary transactions by selling union benefits within their own social network. These illicit practices had significantly drained the local's health and welfare funds over the years.

Understandably, then, the union was eager to take action. The outcome, however, did not turn out as desired, owing to the lack of a strong mechanism to enforce the union contract on the floor. Some workers described the situation as "*dao gao yi chi, muo gao yi zhang*" (a Chinese saying meaning: The devil can always find a way to get the upper hand over the moralist). Since workers' union benefit eligibility was based on the amount of work their employers had reported to the union, and the union, having accepted the reality that union-affiliated manufacturers were no longer able to provide Chinatown shops with sufficient work, allowed them to accept a certain portion of work from non-union sources but still mandated them to contribute to the union's benefit funds for that portion

of non-union work, Chinese employers began to develop their own rationale and strategies to meet these new challenges by shifting their financial burdens to their workers.

Since the mid-1980s, with the assistance of accounting specialists in the Chinese community, an increasing number of Chinatown employers had tailored the amount of payment by check strictly according to the union benefit eligibility requirements and paid the rest in cash. The remaining payment in cash to each of their workers usually reflected a 5 to 10 percent deduction from their actual wages. The employers claimed that the deduction was used to cover their expenses in several areas, including buying checks that showed workers' official wages under the union contract from underground dealers because the work supplied by the union-affiliated manufacturers was not sufficient to cover workers' benefits; paying contributions to the union benefit funds in compensation for taking on non-union work; and paying taxes at various levels in the process of reporting a certain volume of their production to the government so as to be able to issue payments by check to their workers.⁴⁴ Hence, the minimum union benefit eligibility requirements have, ironically, become workers' *maximum* reported income—and their employers' justification for extracting additional profit from them.⁴⁵

Around the same time, cases in which employers withheld their workers' payments or simply closed down their shops after withholding a lump sum from their workers' pay also began to grow. The practice became so widespread that by the early 1990s, Chinatown garment workers had learned to ask about the length of time their payments would be held when they applied for a job. Having their payments withheld for two or three weeks after they completed the work was considered to be "normal" by workers in a number of Chinatown shops.

Although the union's health care benefits were considered to be one of the most important reasons why workers chose to work in union shops in the 1970s and early 1980s, that was not necessarily so with respect to the new immigrant workers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Having no previous working experience in union shops, many found the benefit eligibility requirement both difficult and cumbersome to meet. Some simply ignored it—particularly those who were in the prime of their lives but needed to struggle for survival in their new land. Health care benefits were the last thing they were concerned with.

Disappointed by the deteriorating labor conditions in Chinatown and not having to worry about how their interests as long-term union members would be jeopardized by working in a non-union shop, new immigrant workers came to see the merits of the better terms offered by the earlier garment shops in Brooklyn and began to appreciate the advantages of working at a place close to home. As a result, the number of Chinese garment shops in Brooklyn, particularly in the Sunset Park area, began to soar.

As was the case in Manhattan's Chinatown in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the growth of the Chinese garment industry in Sunset Park boosted other Chinese businesses in the area. With garment workers and their families as their regular customers, Chinese restaurants, grocery stores, and other shops and services began to grow, thus giving birth to a Chinese commercial center in Brooklyn. Roughly covering a territory along Eighth Avenue and between Fiftieth and Sixty-fourth streets, this center became the core of New York's third Chinatown by the end of 1992.⁴⁶ The conveniences provided by this new Chinatown, coupled with the relatively low living costs in the area, helped anchor Chinese working-class families to this part of the city.⁴⁷ By 1994, Sunset Park already had the third largest Chinese concentration and the second greatest increase in average annual Chinese immigration in New York City.⁴⁸

Following the growth of the Chinese population in the borough, Chinese garment shops also mushroomed, clustering primarily along the B, F, M, N, and R train lines that ran through the neighborhoods of Sunset Park, Bay Ridge, and Bensonhurst, where most of the Chinese population resided. The physical size and working conditions of the Chinese shops in Sunset Park, or in Brooklyn generally, were not all the same. Even in Sunset Park, there were shops that had about thirty workers but covered a space of over 10,000 square feet, but there were also shops that were packed with a dozen sewing machines and filled with cut garments but covered less than 4,000 square feet. These big and small shops were sometimes located side by side. While smaller shops tended to be housed in storefronts or residential units, most of the larger ones were in former warehouses or garages and had very few or virtually no windows. The conditions were even worse when the employers covered the few windows there were with rags or newspapers or simply locked the main entrance to conceal their operations. In these shops the air was stifling and filled with

lint and dust, and workers had to sew under fluorescent lights in the daytime.

Working conditions were, however, no longer the primary concern of employers there. With sufficient labor supply available in the area, even owners of the few earlier union shops did not see the need to cater to the needs of their workers and endeavored to strip themselves of the union label. As a result, most Chinese garment shops in the Sunset Park area were non-union. Since the influence of the ILGWU in Brooklyn was weak, garment shops in the area served as an opportunity for the city's Chinese employers to extract quick profits without having to comply with any labor laws. In fact, as is well known in the community, a number of Chinatown employers deliberately opened branches of their businesses in Brooklyn in order to increase their leverage in dealing with the unionized situation in Chinatown and to avoid contributing to the union's funds for work done on non-union garments.

No wonder that cases of labor law violation increased with the growth of garment shops in the area. Workers who were previously lured by the better terms offered by the earlier garment shops soon found themselves trapped in a working environment that demanded sweated labor to make a living. Fierce competition among workers was generated not only by the growing Chinese working-class population in the area but also by the increasing number of undocumented immigrant workers in the industry. The weak influence of organized labor and of law enforcement agencies in the area turned Sunset Park into an oasis for undocumented garment workers, which is illustrated in the response of a young Miss Li whom I interviewed:

Yes, I came from Fuzhou in 1991 and worked in Chinatown when I first came. But the situation there made me nervous. I was told, time and again, that the Labor Department would come to check. I could not stand the threat. In addition, I heard about the higher piece rates in Brooklyn. Although they were not that much higher, they could make a difference if we were talking about producing a large amount of work. If I was paid one more cent each piece, I might be able to earn at least a hundred dollars more a month by sewing at least several hundred pieces each day. It meant a lot to me at that time, because I needed to pay back my debt as soon as possible.

Plus, my former fellow workers from Fuzhou had moved out of Chinatown and settled in Brooklyn. Everyone talked about Brooklyn. So why shouldn't I come?⁴⁹

The undocumented immigrant workers in Brooklyn came not only from Fuzhou, Wenzhou, and other parts of China, but also from Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. Most of them owed a large sum of money to the smugglers in both the United States and their native lands.⁵⁰ With the credibility and even the lives of their families held hostage in their native lands, they were eager to pay back their debts. For them, the long-term benefits of becoming law-abiding workers or union members, such as the Social Security benefits every taxpayer was entitled to enjoy in their later years and the health insurance provided by the union, held no meaning at all. Since every penny they earned counted toward paying back their debts, they were ready to accept whatever working conditions they were offered and work as many hours as they could.

The undocumented workers became even more vulnerable after the employer sanction law was enacted in 1986. Although this law was initially passed in order to protect workers, it ended up driving undocumented workers underground and amplifying the unlawful employers' power to exploit them. Fully realizing the workers' vulnerable situation, many Chinese employers in Sunset Park purposely sought them out and used them as a bargaining chip against other workers in their shops to further suppress wages on the floor and undermine workers' solidarity.

As competition heated up on the floor and working conditions further eroded with the growth of the industry, Chinese garment shops in the Sunset Park area also began to draw the attention of the organized criminals in the city-wide Chinese community.⁵¹ Ko-lin Chin reported that by 1992, "business owners in Brooklyn's Chinatown reported a higher level of attempted gang extortion than merchants in Manhattan's Chinatown."⁵² Too often, employers would shift their losses to their employees, which further reduced workers' incomes in their shops.

Starting in the late 1980s, as a result of the intense competition between the Sunset Park Chinese employers and their counterparts in other boroughs, a growing number of Chinese garment shops in the city were labeled by law enforcement agencies as "sweatshops," the most notorious term in the history of the city's garment industry—even though "there is

no hard-and-fast official definition of what constitutes a sweatshop,” as historian Daniel Soyer has aptly pointed out.⁵³ In 1988, a special action undertaken by the State Apparel Industry Task Force found that 60 percent of Chinese shop owners, scattered in Queens, Brooklyn, Chinatown, and other parts of the city, had in one way or another violated labor laws.⁵⁴ Among the Chinese garment shops scattered in various parts of the city outside Chinatown, those in Sunset Park have drawn the most sensational coverage in recent years.⁵⁵ This situation continues to this date.

Like their counterparts in Manhattan’s Chinatown, however, workers in Sunset Park also did not sit back in the face of their employers’ growing illicit practices. Almost from the beginning of the Sunset Park Chinese garment industry, they began to organize and strike back. With the support of the Workers’ Center run by the union or the Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association, a cross-trade Chinese community-based labor organization, activist workers at Sunset Park filed complaints with the State Department of Labor for back pay withheld by their employer. They staged work stoppages on the floor and spoke at public hearings in various venues.⁵⁶

Workers also joined with the Brooklyn Chinese community and collaborated with their fellow workers in Manhattan’s Chinatown to fight against adverse conditions in the industry. On Father’s Day in 1995, for example, as a result of their effort, hundreds of people turned out for a rally to denounce the unscrupulous owners of Chinese garment shops. Beginning in March 1998, shortly after the union decided to send volunteer workers to monitor Chinatown union shops to keep them from working on Sundays as a first step toward enforcing the union contract, Sunset Park labor activists have also formed their own watchdog teams. With ten members in each group, they patrol the Chinese garment industrial district in Sunset Park every day, in solidarity with their fellow workers in Manhattan’s Chinatown, to defend workers’ rights and redress the deteriorating conditions in the industry. Although often ignored, the workers’ struggle also constituted an important part of the landscape of the Chinese garment industry in New York City. The importance of this part of the landscape is likely to grow, particularly when a quarter of the Chinese garment shops have reportedly been closed down in Manhattan’s Chinatown but those in Sunset Park remain intact.⁵⁷

Chinese Workers and the Garment Industry: Past, Present, Future

The above study shows that many aspects of the Chinese experience resemble that of other ethnic groups in the history of the city's garment industry: for example, the tension between ethnic culture and the structure of the garment industry in determining not only the location of the industry but also its conditions; "labor cost and union avoidance" being "paramount in the setting up of 'runaway' shops"; and workers' various forms of resistance to labor law violations on the floor.⁵⁸

There are differences, however. A major difference is the severe challenge posed by the increased globalization of garment production in the world. Unlike the situation in the early twentieth century, the Chinese sweatshops' migrations were shaped not only by forces within the United States, but also by those beyond the boundaries of this nation. Particularly since the 1980s, when retailers increased their influence in the industry and workers' income was further reduced, the domination of imported goods and offshore production, made possible by the free trade treaties signed by the U.S. government with various countries, posed a severe threat to the survival of the garment industry in this nation. As a result, Chinese garment workers and their counterparts in the late twentieth century had to fight an uphill battle to defend their rights. As the problems they faced could no longer be solved within the borders of the United States, the forces that they fought against were much more complex than before.

Like their predecessors, however, Chinese garment workers in New York were persistent in defending their rights. This was forcefully demonstrated by their historic strike in Manhattan's Chinatown in 1982 and their continual struggles in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, in the 1990s. Their experience indicates that the runaway shops, with their exploitative nature, could also become hotbeds of labor activism. Although the big garment and retailing firms were able to multiply their wealth by recklessly searching for inexpensive labor in other parts of the world, the garment industry, with its production sites being increasingly globalized, also has the potential to offer an important venue for internationalizing the *labor* movement in different parts of the world.

This potential of the garment industry poses new challenges both to organized labor and to scholars. It challenges organized labor to develop more effective strategies in this age of the global economy and to join forces with workers in other parts of the world to battle against big interests and protect workers' rights. It also challenges scholars of the U.S. garment industry and its labor force to broaden their scope of study to encompass the situation in the world in order to better understand the multiple forces that have shaped the recent development of the U.S. garment industry and the potential of the garment industry to become a rallying site for the international labor movement. The latter is likely to be an important part of the future landscape of this industry in the world.

Part II

Workers and Entrepreneurs: Home and Shop

A typical contractor's shop in a tenement apartment on Hester Street, the Lower East Side, ca. 1898. Photo courtesy Museum of the City of New York, Jacob Riis Collection.

4

Cockroach Capitalists

Jewish Contractors at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Daniel Soyer

SINCE ITS INCEPTION, New York's garment industry has been both a scene of brutal exploitation and an arena for remarkable opportunity. Although these two facets may seem antithetical, they are in reality intimately linked. All of the factors that observers associate with the plight of workers in the sweatshop—the low wages; the long hours in a labor-intensive, low-technology industry; the cramped conditions; the insecurity of seasonal work in small shops—have also contributed to the upward mobility of a few individuals who have taken advantage of the industry's relatively low-capital and low-skill requirements to go into business for themselves. The experience of the entrepreneurs—primarily contractors, but also small manufacturers—forms the link between the two contradictory sides of the garment industry.

The small garment industry employer has always been a controversial figure. An immigrant like his employees, he has been both blamed for all of the abuses of the industry and praised for his aggressive entrepreneurial attitude. As the historian Nancy Green has noted, as more attention has been paid in the last two decades to conditions in the garment industry, the “image . . . of the garment shop entrepreneur [has shifted considerably]. From exploiter of men and women in grim, turn-of-the-century sweatshops, he . . . has become the hero of a new era. Mobilizing kith and kin within the immigrant neighborhood, the ethnic businessman is

the modern job-giver within . . . the ‘ethnic enclaves.’”¹ In fact, the role of the immigrant garment contractor today closely resembles that of his predecessor of a century ago.

This chapter explores the place of the immigrant contractor in the New York garment industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when a majority of both workers and bosses were Eastern European Jewish immigrants. It discusses the contractor’s function in the industry, his relationships with manufacturers and workers, and his role in shaping the workplace. It also takes a look at the image of the contractor from various viewpoints, including those of the worker, the manufacturer, the reformer, and the contractor himself. Even at the turn of the last century, this paper will show, the “tough breed of underfinanced adventurers,” as Irving Howe called them, held highly ambiguous positions in both the hierarchy of the industry and the eyes of its observers.²

The contractor’s role in the garment industry arises from its need to respond to the demands of seasonality, fashion, and competition. All of these factors lead manufacturers to seek flexibility, and to avoid a lot of fixed capital investment. Because clothing and fashions are seasonal and production goes through annual cycles of “busy” and “slack,” manufacturers want to avoid having to maintain large amounts of space and machinery that will sit idle for several months each year. Neither do they want to take the trouble of hiring and training workers who will be laid off a few months later. Furthermore, fashions change quickly, and producers need to respond quickly: At a moment’s notice they may need to turn out small runs of a certain item to meet unexpected consumer demand. Conversely, they seek to avoid overproduction of styles that may not catch on as anticipated. Finally, the industry is highly competitive, and consumers are very conscious of price. Manufacturers therefore strive to keep down the cost of producing their garments while at the same time guaranteeing a stable profit margin for themselves.

Manufacturers passed all of these costs, risks, and worries on to the contractor, whose small shop lent itself to the industry’s need for flexibility. In fact, for much of the industry’s history, “manufacturers” in many trades have done very little of the actual work of assembling garments. In the early twentieth century, manufacturers normally took responsibility for designing, cutting, and marketing their garments. Contractors and their employees sewed them together, made buttonholes, and attached

buttons and trimmings. Cutting, a skilled craft that largely determined the shape of a garment, provided the most basic distinction between contractors and manufacturers: Manufacturers employed cutters; contractors did not. Rather, they received cut goods from the larger firms for whom they worked, and returned to them the finished items. Contractors thus assumed responsibility for hiring and training the labor force, absorbing the costs of expanding during busy seasons and contracting during slack, and, since they were paid a set price per unit, guaranteeing a fixed return for each item.³

The contracting system grew with the industry itself, but it evolved over time. Its earliest incarnation was the “putting out” system, which was firmly in place by the mid-nineteenth century. At that time, “outside” workers, mainly Irish and other immigrant women, received goods from manufacturers to sew in their own homes. Contractors, who at this time did not necessarily maintain their own shops, sometimes served as brokers between the sewing women and their employers. In the middle of the century, German tailors came to constitute an important part of the labor force. They also took work home, where they enlisted the help of their families in assembling garments for the manufacturers. In the 1880s a new type of contractor arose, distinguished by the fact that he hired workers and organized a small “inside” shop of his own.⁴ This sort of contractor never disappeared entirely, but his role in the industry waxed and waned over time. Around 1900, for example, the size of the average garment factory was growing, as many contractors emerged as manufacturers in their own right. No sooner had the “moths of Division Street” arisen to challenge the “giants of Broadway,” however, than a new crop of small contractors took their place.⁵

Moreover, specific conditions within the industry sometimes gave rise to new forms of enterprise. Some contractors turned some workers in their shops into independent subcontractors. These “inside contractors” then each hired as many as three or four assistants of their own. Defenders of this system argued that it gave individuals with no capital a chance to advance. Others pointed out, however, that it created layers of bosses and middlemen, each with an interest in keeping wages down.

Sometimes, new complications in the structure of the industry were intended quite clearly to help employers avoid regulation. For example, when union contracts began to govern conditions in contractors’ shops

during the second decade of the twentieth century, manufacturers evaded those provisions by farming out work to “submanufacturers,” who differed from contractors only in that they cut the garments. Being an entirely new category, however, the submanufacturers were not covered by union contracts. Likewise, the 1920s saw the widespread return of the contractor, sometimes in the form of a “social” or “corporation” shop, in which workers pooled their resources to go into business independently. The 1920s also witnessed the rise of a new form of garment entrepreneur, the “jobber,” who furnished goods to retailers, farming out the actual production work to submanufacturers and contractors.⁶

This complicated hierarchy of entrepreneurship has allowed the industry to serve as an important avenue of mobility for some of those who have worked in it. The path from worker to contractor, or even to small manufacturer, was not a particularly difficult one to take. For one thing, the industry’s relatively simple technology meant that the capital requirements for entry into the business were low. The contractor only had to buy or rent a couple of sewing machines, find a space to put them, and supply a pressing table and a stove on which to heat the irons. A small manufacturer had to acquire a cutting knife and table as well. At the turn of the century, it took as little as \$50 or \$100 to set oneself up as a boss. In the 1920s, according to one estimate, \$2,000 to \$3,000—“and even less”—was all that was necessary.⁷

New York’s garment industry thus consisted of thousands of tiny shops, most of them belonging to contractors. The historian Steve Fraser has called the men’s clothing industry at the beginning of the twentieth century “a sea of worker-entrepreneurs.” The same could be said of the women’s apparel industry—which, if anything, was even more fashion-conscious, and thus more unstable, than the men’s. The need for flexibility and the simple technology required also meant that there was little economy of scale in the garment industry. In many ways, small shops were better adapted to conditions in the clothing trade than were large factories, although the proportion of each in various branches of the industry differed. In 1899 the average women’s garment shop employed thirty-one workers, but most shops employed twenty or fewer. By 1919 the average number of workers per firm had dropped to twenty-one. Similarly, the average men’s clothing shop in 1914 employed thirty-six workers, but the average contractor employed twenty, and three-quarters of all shops had

five or fewer employees. In 1920, 60 percent of all New York needle trades workers were employed by contractors.⁸

The spectacular growth of the American garment industry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and particularly of the branch that produced women's apparel, corresponded with an influx of East European Jews into the country. Between 1870 and 1914, some two million mainly Yiddish-speaking Jews left the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, as well as the kingdom of Romania, and came to the United States. The majority settled in New York City, already the country's largest clothing manufacturing center, and a large number of them entered the needle trades. Their entry was facilitated by the presence in the city of Central European Jews, who had already shifted from their original niche as sellers of second-hand clothing to carve out a leading role as employers in the ready-made garment industry. (The important role that German-speaking Jews played in bringing Eastern Europeans into the industry is illustrated by the fact that the United Hebrew Charities actually paid employers to train new immigrants in the needle trades. Ultimately, little training took place, however, and some complained that these shops paid particularly low wages and took on work to help break strikes.⁹) Many of the newcomers also had experience in small-scale clothing production in the old country, though hand-tailoring skills were not always transferable to the mechanized industry in New York. Indeed, many of those who claimed sewing skills upon arrival were really "Columbus tailors" who learned the trade in this country.¹⁰ According to one estimate from the first decade of the twentieth century, some 53 percent of Russian-Jewish men and 77 percent of Russian-Jewish women worked in the needle trades. Since many immigrants passed through the garment industry before moving on to other occupations, the impact of the industry on Jewish life was even greater than those figures suggest.¹¹

The entry of Yiddish-speaking Jews into the industry also corresponded with the rise during the 1880s of contractors with their own shops. In fact, a number of observers and subsequent historians attributed the system to peculiarly Jewish habits. More sympathetic writers pointed out that Jews coming with artisanal or commercial backgrounds from small towns in Eastern Europe were unused to large-scale industry and, being unfamiliar with American society, preferred to cluster together in small shops run by fellow immigrants within the immigrant residential quarter,

where they could uphold their distinctive customs.¹² There was some truth to these arguments: Small contractors' shops were more likely than large modern factories to close on the Jewish Sabbath, to use Yiddish as their primary language, and to allow workers to sing as they worked.

A common assessment saw Jews as being inherently "individualistic," a trait that led them to prefer to work for themselves rather than for another, and that made it difficult for them to organize into trade unions. (This view of the Jewish nature was more common before the great general strikes of 1909–1916, which put the garment unions on a firm footing.) Whether this characteristic was seen as a good thing or a bad thing depended on the biases of the observer. The renowned labor historian John Commons was one observer who associated the rise of the contract system and of sweatshops with Jewish "racial characteristics." Commons believed that the Jewish worker's individualism led him to accept degraded conditions in the industry.¹³ On the other hand, conservatives like Simon Wolf, a leader of both the predominantly German-Jewish fraternal order B'nai B'rith and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, boasted that the "Jew is innately individualistic, optimistic, and ambitious," positive traits that suited him well for American life.¹⁴ Jesse Pope, an early historian of the garment industry, believed that Jews had both positive and negative traits. They were, for example, "timid, conservative, cowering and exclusive," "helpless and inefficient." But they could also be "thrifty, temperate . . . and determined to succeed." Unlike Commons, Pope thought that Jews could make excellent trade unionists as well as entrepreneurs.¹⁵

The most hostile contemporaneous observers connected Jewish cultural traits to the worst feature of the contracting system—namely, the sweatshop. Jacob Riis pinned the terrible sweatshop conditions on the "constitutional greed" of Jewish workers, who allowed themselves to be overworked because they too hoped someday to become "sweaters." He also complained about the "unhesitating mendacity" of both bosses and employees. Some reformers simply believed that Jews had inferior hygiene. Thus, one factory inspector in Pennsylvania firmly believed that Jews "prefer filth to cleanliness."¹⁶ Dr. Annie Daniel, a public health crusader in New York, concurred, suggesting that the arrival of the Eastern European Jews, a "dirtier class of people," had exacerbated conditions in the industry.¹⁷

In truth, however, it is hard to pin responsibility for the contracting system on the culture of any one group. The putting out system, which presaged the small contractor's shop, predated the arrival of large numbers of Eastern European Jews. Moreover, the tendency of the industry toward a hierarchy resting on a large number of small shops has survived the Jewish phase of its history. As the historian Nancy Green has pointed out in her comparative history of the garment industry in New York and Paris, the contracting system and the abuses it seems to engender have at various times been blamed on a wide variety of ethnic groups. Moreover, the seeming cultural affinity of immigrants for certain forms of business often arises from limitations on their ability to choose, growing out of such factors as their lack of knowledge of local languages. That the burgeoning industry required relatively little capital or skill to enter, and that entrenched groups offered little resistance, was probably more important than any particular cultural traits in encouraging the rapid influx of Jews into the industry at the turn of the century, as both workers and employers.¹⁸ Indeed, another comparative study, this one of Eastern European Jews in London and New York by economic historian Andrew Godley, shows that the entrepreneurial cultures of receiving societies influenced immigrant career choices more strongly than did immigrants' native culture.¹⁹

The true causes of the sweatshop lay not so much in the cultural traits of any specific group as in the economic structure of the industry, as some observers recognized early on. The Jewish labor movement, for example, preferred to emphasize capitalist exploitation, along with individual avarice, as the causes of sweatshops.²⁰ As a congressional committee reported in its 1893 report on the "sweating system," "giving opportunity for one or more middlemen between the wholesale 'manufacturer' (so called) and the actual operative, has facilitated the cheapening of manufacture, the degradation of the labor engaged in it, and the growth of a serious menace to the general health of the country."²¹ As the committee understood, the sweatshop really formed part of a system. Indeed, early observers spoke more often about the "sweating system" than about the "sweatshop" *per se*. Contractors and their small tenement shops were just one of several levels of an industrial hierarchy, each of which "sweated" profit from the level below. At the top stood the manufacturers. At the bottom stood the

sweatshop workers and homeworkers. The small contractors occupied the rung just above the bottom.

It was, of course, possible to make good money as a contractor; this is what led many immigrants to try their hand at the business. The historian Irving Howe has provided this account of the economics of one “typical” shop. According to Howe, the contractor received an order for three hundred coats for a set price of \$225. In order to fulfill the order he hired twelve workers, at wages ranging from \$9 to \$15 a week, and he also worked alongside his employees. He further contracted out some of the tasks to homeworkers. With total labor costs of \$177.90 and additional costs of \$9, the contractor was left with a handsome profit of \$38.10, on a margin of 12.7¢ cents per coat. Certainly, this particular shop was the kind of success that immigrant entrepreneurs dreamed of when they entered the trade; many contractors hoped that such profits would eventually help them rise to the more exalted status of manufacturer. Riis calculated that the family of a “sweater” could save as much as \$30 a month on the narrow margin of 5¢ per dozen pairs of kneepants. There was certainly some truth to his characterization of the small contractor’s desire to exploit himself, his family, and his workers in order to move up in the world.²²

But while it was relatively easy to enter business as a contractor or small manufacturer, it was just as easy to fall *out* of business. The average firm in the men’s clothing trade in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century lasted seven years. One-third of all contractors went out of business each year.²³ Contractors operated on very close margins. One manufacturer reported in 1892 that a contractor who received \$1.62 to make up a particular garment spent \$1.5425 of that on various costs, of which labor was the largest. He was left with a profit of less than 8¢ per piece. A trade union official testifying before a congressional committee displayed a men’s coat that retailed for \$7. The contractor had received 45¢ for each such coat he produced, out of which he had to pay his workers. Jacob Riis reported narrow margins of 5 or 6¢ per dozen pairs of boys’ trousers.²⁴ The contractor’s profit thus consisted of the difference between the fixed price he received for each garment and his costs in producing that item—and he therefore had every incentive to save on space, equipment, sanitary measures, and, especially, labor.

Aware that their chances for success depended on extracting as much labor from their employees for as little pay as possible, many bosses anx-

iously drove their workers. Rose Cohen, who entered the needle trades while still in her teens, describes one of several small bosses for whom she worked.

In my next shop there was only a single set. . . . [T]he boss himself was the machine operator. . . . He was an ill-natured young man. He was tall and so thin that he looked all dried up. He did not trust anyone, any further than he could see. Instead of having his machine face the window, like other operators, he sat with his back to it and faced the room, so that he could see every one of us. Me he kept at his machine, making me use a corner of it as my table, so that he could have me constantly under his eye. He scolded and teased and swore from morning until night. He told us every day in the week that we were not earning our money, that we were botchers, that we had nothing to worry us, while his hair was turning grey, that every year he was losing a hundred dollars while we risked nothing and lost nothing. We were getting money which we were not earning. His voice as he talked sounded through the shop like the drone of a bee—except that it was full of poison.²⁵

The contractor resented the workers because they could not possibly share his interest in the enterprise. Fearful that any bit of lost work could cost him his hard-won business, the small boss anxiously scrutinized every stitch his own employees made. Knowing that the average garment shop had a very short life span only increased his sense of unease. Cohen's employer eventually went under, disappearing without paying his workers their last week's wages. (This, unfortunately, was not an uncommon occurrence.)

In the early years, until state regulations in the 1890s made it more difficult to do so, contractors also saved money by using their own apartments as shops. The layout of any particular shop depended, of course, on the apartment that housed it. The number of workers depended on the amount of work the contractor had been able to obtain from the manufacturer. A typical shop might employ anywhere from four to as many as thirty workers in a three- or four-room flat. At a minimum, the contractor required a team consisting of a sewing machine operator, a baster (who prepared the garments for the operator by fitting the pieces together), and a finisher (who put the finishing touches on the garment by hand). He also needed a presser. According to one observer, the "most economically

arranged shops” employed two teams, since this is what it took to keep one presser busy. There might be one or two additional workers to do miscellaneous “low-grade” jobs, for a total of eight or nine workers. The boss or members of his family might perform some of these tasks themselves, but most of the workers were hired hands. The operators’ foot-powered machines stood by the windows of the front room, where the only natural light entered the apartment. The basters sat on chairs to the side; the finishers sat on the floor or on the piles of goods that littered the room, while the pressers worked on tables set up in the kitchen, where they heated the irons on the stove. The pressers worked by gaslight, since the interior tenement rooms usually had no windows.

The atmosphere in the shop could be oppressive. Sometimes the machines and pressing tables were crowded so closely together that it was hard even to walk between them. Work might spill over into the hallway, or onto the roof or the fire escape—especially in the summer, when the temperature inside became intolerable. It was then that the sweatshop truly lived up to its name in the most literal sense. Great bundles of cut fabric or finished garments lined the walls or lay in the center of the room. Garments mingled with scraps of cloth and thread on the floors and tables. Dust and grime covered most of the surfaces. Terrible odors issued from filthy and overtaxed water closets, where such amenities existed at all. The machines emitted a terrible din. In the midst of this chaos lived the contractor, his family, and their boarders. They often made little distinction between work and living space. The family might sleep in the narrow and dark back bedroom, but some residents may also have made their beds each night among the machines. The same stove that heated the irons also cooked the family’s meals. Children napped on top of the bundles of goods.²⁶

Bernard Weinstein, a labor leader, provided this description of a shop at 7 Ludlow Street. Like many buildings on the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the time, this address housed several small factories in addition to residences:

The delegate of the knee-pants makers’ union led us into a yard. Mountains of dirt were piled up by the windows. The narrow, dirty stairway of the building was covered with bits of cloth and all sorts of rags. The first shop that we entered consisted of a small room with two small grimy windows,

and another room that had once been a bedroom. It was without windows, having only grates that looked out onto the dark hallway. Several sewing machines stood in this small room. It was so crowded there that we could barely reach the operators, who sat closely together. Under the mantelpiece was a fireplace, where a lit oven was covered with pressing irons. The floor was covered with dirt and pieces of cloth. Several girls sat working on the floor. These were the finishers of the knee-pants.²⁷

Not every small tenement shop exhibited all of the worst characteristics commonly associated with sweatshops. Congressional investigators in 1892, for example, found some contractors eager to show off their tidy home-shops. The wives of some contractors labored mightily to keep their living spaces separate from those of the business. For most, however, this proved an impossible task. Home and shop remained intertwined, each interfering with the smooth functioning of the other.²⁸

Although the contractor himself was always a man, the shop was really a family enterprise. The boss's wife had probably invested as much money, labor, and concern in the business as her husband had, and she shared his ambitions and anxieties. As Abraham Cahan suggested, the average worker's wife dreamt of "successive rises through ten, fifteen, twenty-dollar apartments until her husband, now a baster or presser, [might] become a clothing contractor of importance."²⁹ In the meantime, since the shop was located in their apartment, the "missus," as she was known, was a constant presence. In some ways her role resembled that of the wife in a preindustrial artisan's household. She sometimes prepared meals not only for her own family, but also for workers who paid her to do so. Conflict in such close quarters was nearly inevitable. The same stove that kept the irons hot also heated the housewife's soups and stews. The meal spilled by a clumsy presser, or ruined by the accidental addition of tailor's chalk, became part of standard sweatshop lore. Ephraim Wagner, a presser, recalled one such incident:

Mrs. Roll [the boss's wife] and myself were using the same fireplace; she was cooking her meals and I was warming my irons. As long as the grate above the fire was in good condition, our relations too were all right. But fire is stronger than iron and slowly the fire has burned the iron bars of the grate. A few bars at the center were split and bent down and my irons had plenty of fun sliding down hill, all the time.

My partner . . . was always snatching the best places for her pots, always at the center. But one day it happened that my iron forgot to be careful and glided down to the center with such force that the pot was turned over, and the soup with the meat went into the fire. Unfortunately, this happened on a Friday and the soup was cooked for Saturday; and there was double trouble . . . No wonder that my mistress grew fierce like a tigress and grasped the empty pot and made a gesture to throw it at my head. I quickly grasped my hot iron—which was weighing eighteen pounds—and threatened to throw it at her. She became scared and ran away but from the half opened door of her room, she was shouting bitter curses at me.³⁰

The missus resented the workers, and they resented her. On at least one occasion, workers even went on strike to demand an end to the cursing and scolding of their boss's wife.³¹

After the law restricted work in residential tenements to licensed members of the immediate family, contractors relocated their shops to tenement buildings converted entirely to manufacturing. Conditions in these places did not necessarily represent an improvement over those in the residential shops. The writer Theodore Dreiser accompanied a factory inspector on a visit to one such factory, run by a "Syrian Jewish" contractor. His description touches on many of the themes emphasized by outside observers of such shops, including the darkness, the heat, the stench, and the ethnic exoticism of workers and bosses alike:

His shop is on the third floor of a rear tenement which was once used for dwelling purposes but is now given over entirely to clothing manufacturers or sweatshops. A flight of dark, ill-ordered, rickety stairs gives access to it. There is noise and chatter audible, a thick mixture of sounds from whirring sewing machines and muttering human beings. When you open the door a gray-haired Hebrew, whose long beard rests patriarchally upon his bosom, looks over his shoulders at you from a brick furnace, where he is picking up a reheated iron. Others glance up from their bent positions over machines and ironing boards. It is a shadowy, hot-odored, floor-littered room.³²

By the second decade of the twentieth century, many factories were finding their way to the midtown Manhattan loft area that became known as the Garment District. Even then, downtown tenement shops re-

mained, often populated by new immigrants, older workers, or those bosses and workers who disliked the commute, refused to work on Saturdays, or feared the new electrical machinery or change in general.³³

Like his workers, the contractor was an immigrant. In other respects, contractors came from a variety of backgrounds. Some, perhaps especially in the early days, had training as skilled tailors in the old country. Understanding how to put together a garment certainly helped in this line of work. Others were former shop workers who had saved enough money to go into business for themselves. Many, however, had been peddlers or small storekeepers with no prior experience in the garment industry before they opened their shops.

The contractor raised what little capital he needed in several ways. He might dip into the savings he had put aside from his wages as a worker or his profits as a peddler. It was not unusual for a small entrepreneur to have both worked long hours for wages and peddled on the side in order to make enough money to go into business for himself. Members of his immediate family also contributed their income to the cause. If this was not enough, he might borrow from members of his extended family or from friends. Finally, he might take out a small loan from his mutual aid society or from a free-loan fund.³⁴

The contractor's main role in the industry was to take responsibility for recruiting the low-cost immigrant labor on which the industry thrived. His most important assets were, therefore, his social network and his knowledge of the language and conditions in the community.³⁵ Contractors staffed their shops in a variety of ways. In the smallest shops, the boss and his family labored alongside the paid workers. He may also have employed other relatives. Perhaps most importantly, he hired his compatriots, people from his hometown in Europe. People who shared old hometowns formed vital social networks within the broader immigrant population, often organizing formal societies to provide mutual aid and social interaction. Employers took advantage of these networks, and entire trades were filled with people from the same region in the old country. Finally, if all of these networks failed, the contractor would go to the so-called "Pig Market" on the corner of Hester and Essex Streets. This was the Lower East Side's main informal labor exchange, where crowds of unemployed garment workers milled around waiting to meet prospective

employers. It was called the “Pig Market,” some people said, because one could get anything there except a pig.³⁶

Besides organizing a workforce of fellow immigrants, the contractor also had to secure goods on which to work. To do this he went to one of the big wholesale houses on Broadway and convinced it to give him several bundles of cut garments. It helped if he was a persuasive talker. Social connections with someone in the manufacturer’s firm helped even more. Some fledgling contractors took advantage of previous experience hauling bundles to the warehouses for their former bosses. When it came time to open their own shops, they simply returned to the same houses, where they were already familiar figures. Still, the manufacturer might require a deposit.

Those who went into business directly as small manufacturers in their own right could avoid dependence on the larger houses. Otherwise, they differed little from contractors. This path was less common, but it certainly was available to those with slightly more capital than it took to become a contractor. To become a small manufacturer, one might have to invest \$500–\$600, less if two or more partners pooled their resources. The new firm would make up some patterns and samples and advertise its existence to wholesalers and jobbers; on the basis of orders received, it would buy materials and hire workers on credit from the bank. The new entrepreneurs would cut corners by designing their own clothes (or copying styles from established houses), and by taking advantage of low rent and cheap labor in the immigrant neighborhood.³⁷

Among the characteristics that small manufacturers shared with contractors was the desire to be independent. M. Havelin tells of how he and two fellow hat workers went into business for themselves with a total capital of \$300:

In 1909 . . . I decided that working for someone else was no good. I left with two other guys from the shop and we took a place on Bond Street for \$25 a month. We had \$300. Each invested \$100. . . . One was a cutter. The other was an operator. And I was given the honor of being the businessman, the buyer and seller and bookkeeper. To make a long story short, at the beginning of 1910 we already had quite a large shop on Cooper Square with ten machines.³⁸

Likewise, an anonymous fur manufacturer reports that after going into business for himself he never made much money, but “had the satisfaction of working for myself, of not being subordinate to a boss or, worse yet, a foreman.”³⁹

What distinguished small manufacturers from contractors was that the former had to peddle their own wares on the market. Sometimes they did so quite literally, especially when they were just getting started. Louis Borgenicht, who eventually became a wealthy manufacturer, started out by investing his entire capital of \$125 in a batch of aprons that he made with his wife and sold on Hester Street. Similarly, the Yiddish writer Sam Liptzin told of how one worker became a boss by renting an apartment in Brooklyn for a \$5 deposit, acquiring three sewing machines, and buying cloth remnants. He himself went out on the street to sell the kneepants he produced.⁴⁰

In some ways, Isaac Benequit typified the small garment contractor, but in other ways he was very different. Tremendously ambitious, Benequit had both a practical knack for business and a theoretical distaste for it. Beginning as a shirtmaker and peddler, Benequit put in several stints as a contractor, eventually moving on to a succession of other businesses. At the same time he remained a committed Anarchist and supporter of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party. After a life of entrepreneurship, his last words were, “My soul is with the labor movement.”⁴¹ But although his ambivalence about the morality of what he was doing may have distinguished him from most of his colleagues, the process by which he decided to become a boss was a common one.

Like many immigrant Jews who worked their way up in the garment industry, Benequit had no background in the trade when he arrived at Castle Garden in 1888. A couple of weeks after settling in to his new home, Benequit went to work as a buttonhole maker in a shirt shop for \$1.50 a week, largely because his family’s boarder was a shirtmaker. Within six weeks, he recalled, he had learned to make sleeves, and then other parts of the shirt. All the while, he helped his boss carry bundles to the “warehouse,” as they used to call the firm for whom the contractor worked. Soon he was a well-known figure at the warehouse and was taking in \$4 each week. But when he asked his boss for a 50 percent raise, the contractor refused and Benequit quit.⁴²

Benequit then convinced the boarder that they should go into business for themselves. The process by which they did so illustrates the ease with which one could become a contractor. Only a couple of months after arriving in the country, Benequit raised the requisite capital, found space for a shop, and mobilized a workforce. For all of these things, he depended heavily on his family. As he recalled telling his partner, "We wouldn't need to rent a shop, because my mother would let us use the house for free. She and my sister, a thirteen-year-old girl, would be able to sew the buttons and earn a little money as well." He raised the necessary capital by peddling on his days off from the shirt shop and by borrowing from his mother. In order to secure work for his new firm, Benequit went to the same manufacturer who supplied his former employer. There he spoke with "the principal himself, a certain German Jew," convincing the man to give him goods to work on by telling him that he "had a family and that he should have no fear." Convinced (or nearly so), the manufacturer gave Benequit work "for several machines" in exchange for a deposit of \$100.⁴³

Benequit had ideas about working his way up to become a manufacturer, but he soon realized the difficulties involved in making the jump from "small boss" to large one. For one thing, one needed to have more capital than Benequit had. In addition, one needed a better command of the English language and more skill in the trade. Moreover, Benequit discovered that as a contractor he worked "three times as hard" for himself as he had as a hired hand. He only made "somewhat more" money, partly because he paid his workers better than others did theirs, partly because he received a lower price per unit than others received. In any case, he concluded, "none of the 'small bosses,' as they used to call them, became rich. The rich ones were the manufacturers." Even as he began to develop the typical consciousness of a contractor—seeing himself as a powerless victim of the manufacturers, even as he aspired to become one—Benequit was coming to the conclusion that such enterprise was immoral. He gave up his own business and reassumed the status of shop worker.⁴⁴

Sometime later, Benequit decided once again to open his own contracting shop. Returning to the same firm that had employed him before, Benequit negotiated for a better price and for more work. His discussions with the principals of Korn Brothers shed some light on the relationship between manufacturer and contractor, and on the anxieties of each. Be-

nequit's concerns were to get a better price for his work—equal to what others received—and to get as much work as possible. The Korn brother with whom he negotiated objected mildly to the demand for an equal price but quickly acceded. But when Benequit argued that he could barely make a living off the work of seven or eight machines, Mr. Korn became serious. Looking Benequit over “from head to foot,” he responded, “Yes, you will someday be my competitor.” Nevertheless, after further discussion, Korn showed him a new style of shirt that he thought would be a big seller, and the next day he sent Benequit fifty dozen to be made up. The fact that Benequit spoke good German helped him get on the good side of the brothers Korn, as did the fact that he was well versed in Jewish religious issues, as they were not. He made sure to hide from them his habit of reading German-language socialist and anarchist newspapers.⁴⁵

But Benequit once again began to worry about the conflict between his status as an employer and his ideals as a radical. Some of his comrades began to call him a “parasite” and an “enemy of the workers.” As a contractor, though, Benequit knew three things that they did not: 1) He did not make any more money than his workers did; 2) his workers made more than those in other shops did; and 3) he worked a lot harder than they did. Indeed, he continued to peddle on days when his shop was closed. Nevertheless, he took the criticisms to heart and once again gave up his own business. This time he joined the union and helped lead a strike.⁴⁶

Benequit made one more go at contracting. This time he opened a sizable modern shop with twenty steam-driven machines, a rarity for small contractors' shops. A number of manufacturers expressed reluctance to give him work: They did not want to take work away from their regular contractors; and besides, he had not only gained something of a reputation as a radical by this time but was also known for his inconsistent attitude toward business. He won them over by promising to supply his own thread and his own buttons, unusual services that made their lives easier. Benequit recalled that he got along very well with his workers; although all were union members, he did not suffer a single strike. In fact, he served for a time as his shop's delegate to the United Hebrew Trades! Engaging in some paternalism, he sometimes lent money to his workers—money that he never recovered when he went out of business for the last time.⁴⁷

Benequit's committed radicalism may have been unusual among contractors, but it was not unique. In an industry in which today's workers might become tomorrow's bosses and today's bosses could easily fall back into the ranks of the proletariat, class lines were necessarily blurred. Some radical bosses took pains to treat their workers well. One small manufacturer, a Socialist sympathizer, seems to have felt some of the same compunctions as Benequit. In his autobiography he explained that he had never been more than a "little boss": "First, I was really never a big boss. I never employed more than 3-4 people. Second, I did very, very little bossing. . . . I mean, I did not exploit the people who worked for me. These people themselves can testify to that."⁴⁸ Jacob Schoen, another example, was a former yeshiva student from Hungary. An early member of the Socialist Labor Party and the Knights of Labor, he worked his way up from presser to contractor in the dress trade. He always maintained a union shop.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the thinking of an anonymous autobiographer probably developed along a more typical trajectory. When he had been a worker, he reported, he had fervently supported the union and its strikes; after becoming a boss himself, he had cursed the workers for their militancy.⁵⁰

Even if Benequit's radicalism was unusual, however, his paternalism was quite typical. Many bosses saw themselves as benevolent patriarchs, helping their compatriots with the problems of migration and resettlement in return for loyal service. Fictional accounts of the time played up this aspect of the employers' self-conception, often in the service of satirical ends. In Sholem Asch's novel *Uncle Moses*, for example, the title character employs only fellow immigrants from his hometown of Kuzmin and has provided them with a synagogue, of which he serves as president. When his workers threaten to unionize, Uncle Moses admonishes them, "Here we are *landslayt*, family." Likewise, Abraham Cahan's hero in *The Rise of David Levinsky* hires his compatriots and organizes the Levinsky Antomir Benevolent Society to take care of their needs.⁵¹

But critical observers saw bosses as paternalistic exploiters who got much more out of their workers than they gave back. Bernard Weinstein recalled that contractors were "mostly ignorant louts who like leaches sucked the blood of their green brothers and sisters who had come in search of fortune in golden America." M. Feigan, a sleeve maker in the men's clothing industry, reported of one boss that, despite his paternalistic

pretensions, he “exploited [his fellow townspeople] but good. He had helped several of them come to America, and in return he skinned them alive. He became so rich off of them that he eventually became a manufacturer himself.” Jacob Riis and John Commons both accused the contractors of purposefully working to keep their fellow immigrant workers in ignorance.⁵²

The kind of language that labor organizers and some others used to describe the small bosses betrayed the contempt in which the latter were held. Reformers, both within and without the Jewish community, described the small employers as “beggar employers,” “ignorant,” and “scarcely able to write their own names.”⁵³ If Weinstein likened contractors to leeches, others compared them to “parasites,” “insects,” and “termites.” Cahan variously labeled them “cockroach capitalists” and “cockroach pharaohs.”⁵⁴ Cockroaches seemed a particularly appropriate comparison, given the contractors’ individually tenuous but collectively ineradicable existence in the interstices of the urban environment.

J. Dyenson’s account of his relationship with a landsman (compatriot; more often, someone from the same hometown) boss illustrates the ease with which one might become a contractor, the ways in which a boss might try to use personal connections with his workers to extract more work from them, and the differences between work in a small contractor’s shop and work in a large inside factory. By March 1894, Dyenson, a relatively inexperienced sewing machine operator, had been un- or underemployed for several months. So when he and a landsman happened on a grocery store on Canal Street with a sign soliciting operators to take work home, they jumped at the chance. The storekeeper agreed to give them a bundle of three dozen precut dresses, and Dyenson, the landsman, and the landsman’s wife got to work. Their machines disturbed the neighbors, however, and they found that they could not work late enough into the night to make a proper living. So the landsman went out and rented a shop in a rear-yard tenement—thus, in effect, becoming a full-fledged contractor with Dyenson as his employee. Soon the landsman left behind the small storekeeper and received work from a large manufacturer.

One day during slack, the landsman-boss asked Dyenson to get the other workers in the shop to agree to a lower piece rate. If they agreed, the boss promised, they would have enough work to keep them busy twenty hours a day. The workers refused, and Dyenson refused to stay on

if the boss fired the rest. Instead, he went out and secured a job with a larger firm in the “factory district” on Greene Street. When the landsman-boss discovered Dyenson’s perfidy, he became enraged, shouting, “Just wait, you green beast, you will yet come back to me begging, and I won’t take you back.” But Dyenson, who now worked for weekly wages, felt as if he had passed “from slavery to freedom.”⁵⁵

As workers like Dyenson related to the contractor from one side, so did the manufacturers from the other. Prominent clothing manufacturers explained their own view of the system to the congressional committee investigating the “sweating system” in 1892. Their testimony shows that one of the most important services that the contractors rendered to the manufacturers was the ability to deny responsibility for conditions in the industry. Although Benequit’s memoirs indicate that manufacturers and contractors sometimes engaged in enough conversation to know something about each other, most of the business leaders testifying before the committee pled ignorance concerning the contractors and their shops. As Lewis M. Hornthal, a New York men’s apparel maker representing the Clothing Manufacturers’ Association, put it, his colleagues were “not in a position to give evidence concerning the so-called ‘sweating system.’ We are manufacturers. We give our work out by contract. If any pernicious system exists we do not know anything about it. . . . The contractors who employ these people are the ones who should be summoned.” H. S. Mendelson, of Banner Brothers, claimed of his contractors, “We know the addresses of these people. We know nothing of the places in which the work is done.” Eugene Benjamin, of Arthur, Benjamin and Co., further distanced himself and his fellows from the contractors by stressing the Americanness of the former and the foreignness of the latter. He could get a list of all of his firm’s contractors, he told the committee, “but you will need an interpreter to make out some of the names.”⁵⁶

Despite the manufacturers’ professed ignorance with regard to their contractors, their testimony does shed further light on the relationship between the two sets of entrepreneurs. Mendelson reported, for example, that Banner Brothers had all of its clothing assembled by contractors. Albert Hochstadter’s firm did the same. Though Hochstadter farmed out 15 percent of his work to one contracting company made up of former workers in his firm’s defunct inside shop, he also used shops in New York, Brooklyn, Williamsburg, Long Island, Staten Island, and Maine. Like-

wise, Mendelson used “hundreds” of shops, and Benjamin used perhaps seventy-five, mostly in and around New York. Hornthal added Newark to the list of places where work was carried out. Benjamin also mentioned Maine. According to Benjamin, more skilled work was done in the city, while less skilled work was carried out in the “country districts.” While Mendelson and Hornthal reported that their companies did \$1 million to \$2 million worth of business each year, each of their contractors turned over anywhere from \$10,000 to \$25,000. The manufacturers believed that most contractors did work for more than one house, and that drumming up such jobs took up much of the contractor’s time. As Hornthal put it, “A man comes in, and we give him one hundred or two hundred coats.” Each deal was concluded separately. There was no agreement covering the entire trade.⁵⁷

Situated in an ambiguous position between manufacturers and workers, contractors often believed themselves to be as exploited as their workers. Certainly, they felt that they should not bear responsibility for the conditions in their shops. As a group of contractors put it in one statement addressing their employees, “We work harder than you. We earn sometimes less than you, in any case never more than you. We suffer from the hands of the manufacturers, what kind of exploiters are we?”⁵⁸ Bernard Weinstein might call them a “misfortune for the workers,” but others were inclined to agree that the contractors had little influence. “The employer or boss of a little shop,” Dreiser wrote, “is but a helpless agent in the hands of a greater boss. He is no foul oppressor of his fellow man.”⁵⁹ The real responsibility for conditions in the industry lay with the large manufacturers. The contractors were little more than employees themselves.

Following this logic, contractors sometimes sought to join the same unions as their workers, or at least to cooperate with the labor movement against the large firms that set the prices. This was especially the case in the early years before the turn of the century. Thus, in 1883 and 1885 some cloak contractors supported strikes in their trade. Likewise, in 1884 some contractors were members of the shirtmakers’ union. In Baltimore, the Knights of Labor signed contractors up as members during a jurisdictional dispute with the United Garment Workers’ Union. In a number of cases contractors sought to tie the issue of higher pay for their workers to that of higher prices for themselves.⁶⁰

Very soon, however, the unions came to see the contracting system as one of the chief problems in the industry. The unions' chief complaint was that contractors willingly signed contracts at the beginning of each season because they knew that the agreements were impossible to enforce against the thousands of minuscule shops that produced garments for the big firms. Instead of going after the contractors, therefore, the unions began to see a need to regulate conditions by focusing on the large manufacturers that controlled the flow of work. Workers called for the abolition of the system as early as 1885, during a strike of ladies' tailors. Workers in other trades made similar demands at various times over the next several decades, with very little success. At the very least, however, the unions established the principle that contractors were bosses who did not belong in the same movement as their workers.⁶¹

Beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century, as unions such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) gained a foothold in the industry, they set out to stabilize and regulate what one early historian called an "industrial jungle." They did so in order to protect the jobs and safeguard the wages and working conditions of their members. Ironically, although they started out by accepting the logic of class struggle, the unions quickly came to see the need to cooperate with more progressive employers in their efforts to regulate the industry. The ILGWU's 1910 "Protocol of Peace" with cloak manufacturers implied the existence of warring sides even as it set up elaborate joint mechanisms to police conditions. Likewise, the ACWA's rhetoric of "industrial democracy" in the 1920s called for the workers, through their union, to share in responsibility for managing the industry.⁶²

An integral part of this effort to bring order out of chaos was an attempt to eliminate the contract system altogether. The unions would much rather have faced a small number of larger firms than a myriad of tiny ones. At the very least, the unions sought to regulate the contractors by making manufacturers responsible for conditions in their contractors' shops. The unions also tried at various times to establish minimum sizes for shops and to control the flow of work between the different levels in the industrial hierarchy.⁶³

Although they had some success in regulating the flow of work, the unions certainly did not drive the contractors out of business. In fact,

the historian Nancy Green has called the interwar period the “heyday” of contractors. In 1936, 75 percent of workers in the dress trade worked in contractors’ shops.⁶⁴

In the 1920s, too, new forms of contracting shops arose. In this period, so-called “corporation” or “social” shops were a bane to the unions, though they were sometimes formed by the labor organizations’ own members. In a corporation shop, workers pooled their resources to go into business for themselves. M. Feigan, for example, was a sleeve maker and belonged to the ACWA. When he was laid off one year, he contributed \$100 to become a partner in a corporation shop, where he served as bookkeeper. Union contracts did not cover such firms, however, and manufacturers used them to drive down prices. Feigan later recalled that he and his fellows kept their shop “secret from the union,” using one member who was a contractor as a cover. The new firm got little work, and the union soon found out about it and closed it down. Some workers used corporation shops as pathways to businesses of their own, where, at least according to Sam Liptzin, they ended up exploiting their landslayt (compatriots, often from the same hometown; plural of landsman).⁶⁵

Contractors thus remained a fixture in the New York garment industry, despite the best efforts of the unions, and some of the manufacturers, to eliminate them. Most manufacturers continued to find their services too valuable to give up. And too many workers continued to aspire to use the industry’s hierarchical structure as a path of upward social mobility. However problematic, the status of contractor seemed preferable to that of machine operator, and beckoned to those with a minimum amount of capital and the ambition to climb out of the working class. The best that unions and regulators could hope for was to regularize the contractors’ position in the industry, and to do away with the worst abuses that the contract system seemed to foster.

Two shirtwaist makers on picket duty during the famous Uprising of the 20,000, 1909–1910. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

A demonstration, with signs in Yiddish and English, during the cloak makers' strike of 1910. Photo courtesy of Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University.

5

Tailors and Troublemakers

Jewish Militancy in the New York Garment Industry, 1889–1910

Hadassa Kosak

JEWISH IMMIGRANTS who arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth century came to dominate the clothing trades as employers, workers, and labor leaders, and they also came to be identified as the restive rank and file of the garment industry. During those years, labor unrest in this industry became a hallmark of life in the newly settled Jewish immigrant community, whose majority earned their livelihood in tailoring and dressmaking. This article explores the interrelationship between industrial militancy and the political evolution of the Jewish community. It examines not only the causes and conditions of this militancy but the ways in which this activism helped to create, and articulate, a new political vocabulary used by the immigrants as a benchmark to guide, explain, and evaluate their encounters with the new society and its norms.¹

The Jewish ethnic minority engaged in social turbulence that symbolized a particular type of industrial agitation. Starting in the 1880s strikes became a common occurrence, although unions did not take root until after 1909. The central themes of these struggles were wages, hours, and other issues of employment. Equally prominent, however, were the flashpoints of social unrest related to political questions of social structure and social organization, the role of the market in economic life, the legitimacy of profit, and the relationship of the individual to society. Thus, the

residents of the Lower East Side were active participants in industrial actions over employment issues, but they were also vocal actors in rent strikes and consumer boycotts, and in practices of communal ostracism—involving public humiliation and victimization of opponents. Strikebreakers, landlords, butchers, and even law enforcement agencies, as well as employers, were fair game for community agitation that linked immigrants from different walks of life in fluid alliances.

These early spontaneous struggles in the garment industry contributed to a unique blend of work culture and community militancy. The frequent instances of unrest embodied a drive for the articulation of a political platform that may not have benefited the garment workers directly but did lend a distinct voice to the emerging Jewish community. Public strife over labor and social issues marked an evolving process of constructing a new ethnic identity through protests that questioned a host of societal assumptions. The emerging language of fairness and justice was largely shaped by the experience of exploitation in the all-pervasive garment industry; its vocabulary and appeal, however, were shared by other members of this particular community in addition to workers. Thus, two simultaneous processes were at work during the years of the first generation of immigrants: industrial protest that ultimately defined and articulated the future trade unionism of post-1909, and a process of formation of a new ethnic identity marked by a distinct political language. Both unfolded in the public sphere, where community participation by men and women redefined them both as members of a social class and as an ethnic group claiming recognition from the rest of American society.² The combination of labor struggles and community protest helped the participants to articulate their demands as a distinct ethnic group, which had experienced immigration and grasped the political possibilities offered by industrial capitalism.

This was not an orderly process by which the host society bestowed rights on immigrants. It was an unruly, if highly participatory, struggle in which newcomers questioned social norms as represented by the new economic system they had entered. While contesting some basic assumptions of the new society, they laid claims to the rights of citizenship and of democratic participation. For example, women, who during that period were part of the large army of casual homeworkers in the garment industry, played an important part in the process of construc-

tion of the new ethnic community. They were highly visible in street struggles and in rent and consumer strikes as well as on picket lines—and by 1909, they were the major actors in the shirtwaist makers' strike they initiated.³

By 1910, labor militancy had assumed a new form. The shirtwaist makers' strike in the previous year had started out as a traditional mass walkout but had transformed itself into an industry-wide movement striving for the establishment of stable unions and for tighter control over the process of collective bargaining. The Protocol of Peace that followed this phase ushered in a more orderly structure, was favored by medium-scale to large employers, and was made possible by a relative decline in contracting shops and by the strong advocacy of influential Progressives. After 1913, the ILGWU and ACW (Amalgamated Clothing Workers) became the beacon for the industry's workers, never to disappear again despite the unions' mixed fortunes and internal turmoil in the 1920 and 1930s.

These organizational successes notwithstanding, the impact of the political culture forged during the first waves of immigration continued to vex union leadership, which strove to achieve organizational strength and a disciplined membership. The blurred class lines and fluidity of identities that characterized the early years of the Jewish community continued to frustrate the leadership's drive to define a separate and distinct workers' identity and interest. Instead, the disaffected rank and file challenged the principles of unionism by questioning the leadership's attempt to centralize union affairs, especially with respect to matters of strikes and strike funds, collective agreements, and the compulsory arbitration procedures achieved during the Protocol years.

The Immigrants and the Garment Industry

The modern garment industry, the traditional employer of immigrant groups in metropolitan centers, provided the material base for the formation of the immigrant Jewish community in New York. The period 1880–1910 was particularly significant, as it marked a dramatic moment in the expansion of ready-made clothing and the high point of absorption of the Jewish newcomers. Ultimately, most employers were Jewish, and so were

most of the workers; Jews constituted the largest group to find employment in the clothing industry's workforce in the 1880s–1920s. In the mid-1890s, 75 percent of the 65,000 workers recorded were Jewish; in some branches, they represented an overwhelming majority. In cloakmaking, for example, in 1900, 12,000 of the 15,000 cloakmakers were Jews. By 1910, Jews represented 75 percent of workers in the coat and suit industry; and 55 percent of the workers, mainly women, in the shirtwaist strike of 1909 were Jewish, with Italians accounting for 35 percent.⁴

The Jewish immigrant workers had arrived with few skills and no capital. In their native lands, some had been bespoke tailors who made garments from start to finish, but most of the newcomers became newly apprenticed “Columbus tailors,” who had “discovered” the industry on arrival in the United States. Immigrants of that period were able to gain employment in the industry because of communal and familial ties that drew them to New York City and facilitated their entry into the ranks of mostly unskilled labor in an industry marked by a growing subdivision of the labor process. Soon the industry became the largest single employer in the immigrant community. In 1890, according to the Baron de Hirsch census, out of a sample of 26,058 interviews, 14,770 residents of the Lower East Side were engaged in some aspect of the clothing-making process.⁵

Employment in the industry was marked by seasonal fluctuations and by falling wage or piece rates owing to an unlimited reserve of unskilled workers. On the average, workers in the industry lost three to four months of work a year. In 1897, for example, the average number of days worked fluctuated between 217 to 255 for men and 228 to 272 for women.⁶ The intensified subdivision and simplification of tasks had penetrated all aspects of the industry and ushered in an era of ever-decreasing wages and increasing working hours. This tendency was further exacerbated by the presence of contractors.

Serving as middlemen who undertook the responsibility of hiring men and women to finish precut clothes, these contractors became indispensable to the entrepreneurs as overseers and administrators of the manufacturing process. The contracting system cut manufacturers' costs by saving on management, rent, fuel, and sewing machines. The contractor's profit, on the other hand, came from the difference between the pay he received from the manufacturer and the wages he paid to workers or subcontrac-

tors. Identified as the most exploitative element of the industry, the contracting system was a source of persistent conflict between capital and labor. As the contractors' profits came from the continued undercutting of workers' wages, not surprisingly, contractors became a target of attack in the immigrant Yiddish socialist press. In 1888, the *Yudishes Volkszeitung*, the first socialist Yiddish paper, described contractors as "parasites who suck whatever leech number one [the manufacturer] has left the worker."⁷ This process of production not only cut manufacturers' costs; it also enabled many owners of capital to distance themselves from the details of production and thus maintain a degree of invisibility.

Contractors were the organizers of a flexible and casual labor force. They could set up shop on a shoestring, recruiting workers for specific jobs and overseeing the work in "inside shops," in hired premises, or in homes. Contracting shops varied in size. While some units (for example, those producing coats and pants) employed as many as two to three hundred workers, others employed only ten. Still smaller units produced garments using the labor of a single family, including women, children, and lodgers.⁸ Although the large shop did not guarantee less exploitation than homework did (since in either case contractors were free to dictate wages and conditions), the worst abuses occurred in small establishments. Free from public scrutiny and manufacturers' supervision, the tenement shop was a symbol of unrestrained competition and exploitation. In these "kitchen and bedroom" shops, wages and hours were entirely unregulated, pay was low, and sometimes the boss and his wife abused and maltreated workers. Moreover, since small contractors were more likely to stay in business for only a short time, they frequently absconded after one season without paying wages.

Contractors may have successfully graduated from the ranks of ordinary workers and attained the status of self-employment. Some, who were quick to tap into the growing demand for ready-made, especially in women's clothing, followed the entrepreneurial route to success. For the vast majority of unskilled immigrants, however—the operators, pressers, finishers, basters, and button sewers—concentrated in a crowded urban setting and in one industry, the tyranny of decreasing wages and increasing hours became a common experience. The declining wages, increasing tasks, and speedups, along with the bosses' claim to total authority in the workplace, inspired a rhetoric of opposition to a value system that pro-

moted the norms of individualism and the free pursuit of profit. Not only the workplace, but also the streets, the organizations, the synagogues, the tenements, and even the theaters of the Lower East Side became the platforms where immigrants contested these values.

The Jewish contractor represented a certain contradiction of class and function, and the relationship between workers and contractors was ambiguous. The contractor was, on the one hand, a familiar face in the neighborhood and in the synagogue; at the same time, he was an agent of exploitation, who used abusive language, who meted out physical punishment, and who dismissed employees for insubordination. Paradoxically, however, the contractors' precarious status, predicated on market swings, sometimes elicited sympathy from the people whom they were exploiting. Those being exploited might reserve their antagonism for the true capitalist—usually a figure outside the working-class community.

Not surprisingly, some leaders of the labor movement considered small-scale contractors as much a part of "labor" as the workers. Israel Barsky, a one-time employee in men's clothing and one of the first union leaders to emerge in the 1880s, called for all those involved in the industry—from the lowliest baster to the highest-paid cutter, and including the contractor—to set up a single general union to embrace all grades of work. Only real bosses, those who "do not put their hand in cold water and like to put out fire with other people's hands," had no place in the union, according to Barsky.

The ambiguity of the contractor's position was matched by a similar lack of clear categories of trade and craft, especially since the divisions of skills were not yet clearly established among immigrants who had been newly introduced to work in the industry. Switching trades was common in the early years. According to Barsky, for example, "pantsmakers, cloakmakers, vestmakers, shirtmakers, all should belong to the same union. . . . We see very often that a cloakmaker becomes a vestmaker, a pantsmaker becomes a jacketmaker, a shirtmaker becomes a pantsmaker, and the other way around."⁹

Barsky's call stands in contrast to the organizational principle embraced by established mainstream American labor politics, which was based on craft unionism. While advocates of craft unionism believed that craft structures were the most effective model, Barsky aspired to an all-inclusive union, one similar to the organizational model adopted by the Industrial

Workers of the World (IWW). Barsky's view reflects the reality of Jewish immigrants, who were employed for the most part in unskilled jobs and who developed organizational strategies based on an industry-wide, fluid, and diverse identity on the part of the workers.

The prevailing contract system was a source of continuing conflict between capital and labor. Workers consequently made consistent demands, first voiced by cloakmakers in 1886, for employer-provided, regulated workshops and for the abolition of contractor-owned rooms. Similarly, in 1890, shirtmakers demanded a minimum shop size of fifteen sewing machines. In one strike, a modest objective was the installation of a clock to stop exploitation by regulating the hours of work.¹⁰

In the more ambitious strikes, however, workers demanded the abolition of the entire system of contracting, subcontracting, and sweated labor. Their aim was to bring the process of production out of the tenements and into larger factories accessible to public scrutiny. Manufacturers opposed these demands by claiming that the "system [of contracting] is a necessity, having been an adjunct of the cloak trade for fifty years," while Meyer Jonasson, their spokesman and one of the biggest employers in cloaks, argued that Jewish immigrants, particularly religiously observant ones, were better off working in small workshops, where Sunday laws did not apply.¹¹ Paradoxically, the demand to abolish the contracting system was also deemed misguided by contemporary labor leaders. In 1886, John Swinton, the labor activist and editor, criticized the Jewish cloakmakers' strike, which aimed to eradicate the system, as an ill-advised and an over-ambitious attempt to reform the core of the industry.¹² Repeated attempts to reform the system continued to draw criticism on the part of labor leaders who advised moderation. A mass strike of 25,000 tailors in 1901 initially demanded the abolition of contracting; under pressure from Henry White, general secretary of the United Garment Workers, the demand was dropped.¹³

In many other instances, however, the counsel of American labor leaders was not heeded, and workers challenged employers' unlimited powers in the workplace in spontaneous rebellions. The established American unions considered demands for immediate redress, especially in cases that did not deal with concrete issues of wages and hours, as futile and wasteful, while Jewish immigrant workers were determined to seek redress for harassment, abusive language, and insults to personal dignity and sought

fundamental changes in the system of production. The critics of this rank-and-file militancy preached careful planning and restraint as the appropriate strategy to guarantee a stable, dues-paying membership, capable of waging sustained battles against capital. Periodic social unrest, seemingly lacking coherence and focus, was unpopular with labor leaders and the public alike. Work stoppages appeared impulsive and vindictive, and their victories invariably ended in short-lived unions. "We do not think that these strikes do any good," stated Henry White of the United Garment Workers in 1901. Despite the ability of the Jewish strikes to mobilize thousands of workers, he warned, the unions that spring up overnight are "not in any position to reap the benefit of their victory," and are soon to disappear when victory is achieved.¹⁴ Similarly, John Swinton advised Jewish workers to be less violent and more patient—as, he noted, were their forefathers, the ancient Israelites, who suffered forty years in the desert.¹⁵ In 1890, during a riotous cloakmakers' strike, even the Jewish socialist newspaper *Arbeiter zeitung* cautioned strikers who demanded dismissal of scabs as a condition for settling a strike. The paper admonished the strikers that "a strike is a battle against capital under the control of capital. In a revolution one can achieve anything, in a strike one must want only that which is possible to achieve."¹⁶

The tension between the call for disciplined activism and the militancy of the rank and file remained a pervasive element in the labor unrest of the period. In one 1909 walkout, strike rhetoric and agitation were seen as motivators for recruiting new members for the union. In the planning of the walkout, the often cautious and hesitant leaders of the ILGWU decided to take advantage of this "restlessness" and embraced the idea of a strike that "might catch the fancy of the workers."¹⁷

Labor Struggles and the Making of a Community

Collective actions to redress labor grievances erupted regularly and sometimes violently on the Jewish Lower East Side. In an industry that thrived on cost cutting, on ever-growing availability of labor force, and on subdivision of the labor process, the goal of achieving standardized pay rates or hours remained elusive, if not unattainable. Nevertheless, the Jewish working community continued its wildcat agitation, to the dismay of trade

union organizers who opposed such anarchic expressions of militancy. Strike fever fueled community activism, spreading like wildfire through the Lower East Side and even further to other Jewish communities in Brownsville, Harlem, and Astoria. It was in this vein, that, in 1893, the *New York Tribune* described this brand of labor and community militancy as the “strike of a race.”¹⁸

Strikers and their supporters appropriated the neighborhood to promote their campaigns—by spilling out onto the streets, markets, and other public spaces. They attracted wide support and participation by advertising their grievances through violent clashes in the street and personalized denunciations in synagogues and in the widely read Yiddish press. No home was sacred, or safe from the crowd; in some notable instances, militants invaded private dwellings belonging to employers, contractors, and strikebreakers. These contests generated a new political language, interchangeable between industrial struggles and community campaigns and used equally by tenants, consumers, and workers. An ethnic community culture sprang from this blend of workplace and community militancy, with immigrant cultural institutions contributing significantly to the articulation and formulation of a new language of dissent and critique.

This particular political expression was reinforced by the growth of the Yiddish press on the Lower East Side. Yiddish newspapers were sympathetic to the cause of labor and devoted pages of newsprint to issues related to unions and labor unrest. Founded in 1890, the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, the first socialist paper of significance, dedicated itself to the struggles of working immigrants by providing its readers with extensive reporting on strikes, recalcitrant employers, scabs, boycotts, and other labor concerns. Similarly, the *Jewish Daily Forward*, founded in 1897, ultimately the prime Yiddish newspaper in America, became the unqualified supporter of labor and socialism. Poets and writers who had started out as garment workers were widely read, some attaining star status in the community. Most popular was the group known as the “sweatshop poets,” who drew their inspiration from the realities of the Lower East Side and used their art to communicate directly and forcefully with their audiences. Most famous of the group, Dovid Edelstadt and Morris Rosenfeld, gained first-hand familiarity with the sweated garment industry as workers. Rosenfeld (1862–1923), for example, transformed everyday

immigrant life into artistic expression, touching deeply on the plight of the immigrant and on his own sorrows.¹⁹ His subjects included love, death, and loss; sweated work; the Russian revolutionary movement; and the nationalism of the new Zionist movement. He enjoyed celebrity status, often reciting and singing his own poems, such as “A Tear on the Iron,” or “Fire!” a poem about a tragic fire in Newark that claimed forty lives, to working-class audiences.

His popularity, as well as the popularity of other bards of the Lower East Side, was enhanced when his words were set to music. Music was a popular vehicle for disseminating political and social views, since there were many occasions for singing: gatherings at clubs, workers meetings, lectures, and the theater. Song sheets were hawked in the street and displayed in shopwindows, enjoying a “strong and consistent market,” according to one account. Although only a few could read music, it was the lyrics, often set to already existing and familiar Polish, Ukrainian, or Russian melodies, that most influenced the growing popularity of these songs.

One such sheet, entitled “Morris Rosenfeld’s Poetry in Song,” was copyrighted in 1899. Among the most famous of Rosenfeld’s sweatshop poems in the collection was “My Resting Place” (“*Mayn rue plats*”): Don’t look for me where myrtles are green./You will not find me there, my beloved./Where lives wither at the machines,/There is my resting place.”²⁰ Rosenfeld’s poetry achieved great fame in the U.S. and in Europe when translated into English in a collection entitled *Songs from the Ghetto*, published in 1900. This collection included the drawings of Ephraim Moses Lilien, whose illustrations etched powerful images on the minds of the Jewish and non-Jewish public.

Operas and operettas on historical and classical themes, some performed on the commemorative days of the Jewish calendar, also enjoyed a strong following. For example, Abraham Goldfaden, the most famous of the composers/playwrights, wrote *Bar Kochba*, extolling Jewish heroism; *King Ahasuerus*, in celebration of Purim; and a biblical pageant entitled *Akeydas Yitsbok* (“The Binding of Isaac”). Songs and lyrics composed to mark current as well as historical events resonated strongly among the masses. In 1900, for example, the music of a two-step entitled “Dreyfus March” celebrated the retrial of the falsely accused Captain Alfred Dreyfus and the announcement of his innocence.

The tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 25 March 1911, which claimed 146 lives, had an especially powerful impact. The event was immediately chronicled by updating and adapting the song "Mamenyu!" ("Dear Mother") and adding the subtitle "Including an Elegy to the Triangle Fire Victims." Its lyrics read: "Oh, the sorrows of mothers who struggle/and the anguish of orphans left alone/Woe for those victims who perished/and for those families desolated in grief."²¹ Yet another example that represents both current and national/historical interest was published in 1915 on a two-sided sheet of lyrics only. Both sides of the sheet were of relevance to the Jewish community in that year. One was devoted to the cloakmakers' strike of that year, extolling the power of the union, praising Mayor John Purroy Mitchel for his efforts to settle the strike, and calling for the "traitor/bosses" to surrender and to recognize the union. But present-day oppression was also linked to memories of a historical character. Thus, taking note of the events in the war theater of Europe in that year, the lyricist entitled one song "Long Live Franz Josef and Wilhelm II," praising both emperors for their punishing attacks on Russia and on its hated autocrat, Czar Nicholas II. Most probably, both songs were set to the same music.²²

The ubiquitous agitator, the haranguing speaker, the union organizer, the street corner orator, who displayed remarkable talents for linking familiar passages from the Bible or the Talmud with present-day concerns, earned admiration and followings for their oratorical skills and for their abilities to explain and interpret the inequities perpetrated by the employer class. The speeches resonated with familiar idiom, and with imagery rooted in Jewish religious and historical experience. In the new context of wage work, a particularly suitable metaphor that reverberated poignantly was the evocation of the biblical language of enslavement that legitimized rebellion and provided a shared understanding of modern experience. The imagery of slavery was invested with new content and urgency when strike leaders evoked the familiar metaphor of Pharaoh's power to convey the attempts of autocratic employers to enslave immigrants in modern-day America. "Fellow slaves," was Joseph Barondess's greeting to striking cloakmakers in 1894, urging them to rebel against "slave wages," which were allegedly lower than the wages paid to black slaves.²³ Similarly, industrial slavery was made highly intelligible to 20,000 coatmakers on the ninth day of the month of Av. In 1899, on

that fast day—a day of mourning in the Jewish calendar, marking the destruction of the Second Temple and the enslavement of the Jews by the Romans—workers in the coat industry issued a call for rebellion against the modern “brutes of Rome” who tyrannized and starved workers and their families.²⁴

An especially popular venue for dissemination of political ideas was the theater, both dramatic and musical. The Yiddish theater of the Lower East Side embraced the message of political realism. The sweatshop worker endlessly at his machine, the homemaker and her baby, the toiling day laborer who never saw his children, the petty Hester Street peddler: These were frequently the central dramatic characters.²⁵ Theater audiences came to see themselves portrayed on the stage, as readers recognized themselves in novels, short stories, and poetry. Politics was never far away from cultural production.

Community as a Social Weapon

The new language of dissent that questioned the existing social relations and allocation of power emerged within a sharply bound geographical and social space. The Lower East Side Jewish community occupied a new type of densely populated urban area. The newcomers were almost its exclusive inhabitants: Their numbers—reaching 225,000 in 1890—surpassed any comparable urban concentration in modern Jewish history, while the density of the area surpassed that of Bombay.²⁶ These factors contributed an explosive element to the quality of social relations in the community. Public practices—such as strikes, parades, even attacks on police—all relied on drawing instantaneous crowds of sympathizers. These expressions of activism flourished in a world of residential closeness, old-world ties, and religious tradition. Rapid communication was facilitated by the fact that Jewish newcomers lived, worked, and socialized in close proximity, and the space they occupied served multiple uses. Homes often doubled as workplaces, and even as synagogues. Of the hundreds of Lower East Side synagogues, only sixty to seventy were located in buildings designated for worship; others were housed in informal premises. One witness, who came to the U.S. in 1899 at the age of sixteen, recalled of his place of work: “On Friday, we would move the sewing machines aside and cover

them, and the *shames* (caretaker of a synagogue) would set up benches and sweep and we used to come and pray.”²⁷ Synagogues not only served as places of worship and as workplaces, but even more significantly, in some instances, synagogue members were all in the same trade and originated from the same hometown, and the synagogue served as a meeting place for both a union and a *landsmanshaft* (hometown association). For example, Bernard Weinstein, a secretary of the United Hebrew Trades (an early federation of Jewish fledgling unions), described a meeting in a synagogue on Norfolk Street, where the bearded elderly participants worked as pressers who belonged to the Children’s Jacket Makers’ Union and were affiliated with the same synagogue.²⁸

The inhabitants of the Lower East Side were rooted in multilayered communities of synagogues, tenements, unions, hometown associations, and the shop floor. The interchangeable use of space and the multiple memberships provided the basis for effective strategies in forging a new politics of democratic rights. A face-to-face community with overlapping public arenas, which were open to popular participation, developed a corresponding political language. Whether in the form of voluntary associations or street protests, participants from all walks of life collectively articulated their demands, advertised their grievances regarding matters of social and economic justice, and publicized and stigmatized their opponents.

The residential links that bonded workers to their sympathizers existed alongside a common interpretation of immigrant expectations and experience. The origins of that experience were rooted in the immigrants’ aspirations to remold their lives free of the restrictive religious, economic, and political forces of czarist Russia. No less important was the drive to leave behind the rigid power structure and traditionalism that marked their old world communities.²⁹ In the United States, the immigrants were thrust into an unfamiliar economic system of wage labor and a new industrial setting. The new experience and the socioeconomic dynamics of the urban setting provided the immigrants with a fresh context for manifold manifestations of collective actions and practices.

Public expressions of economic grievances were frequent on the Lower East Side. Strikes were prominent, often festive events. Meeting halls were filled to capacity during strikes, with Jewish speakers “haranguing” eager listeners. Crowds surged from one meeting place to another, filling

the available space to capacity. Strike meetings tended to be informal, with no set agenda, with wives voting in a show of hands on formal motions, and with children in attendance.³⁰

Industrial labor actions were celebrated with dancing, while victories were colorful, community-wide events. During the 1886 cloakmakers' strike, when strikers were promised the abolition of the contracting system, they took to the street with brooms symbolizing the sweeping away of the hated system.³¹ The triumph of the mass strike of 1910 was a particularly joyous occasion that mobilized thousands into the streets and onto the square near the *Forward* building, jamming the streets and the square.³²

Immigrants appropriated public space to broadcast their grievances. In 1885, in one of the first accounts of the many spontaneous strikes, the *New York Sun* reported a contingent of ill-dressed men marching down Rivington Street, headed by "a small man with a roll of paper." This was the leader of a scouting committee calling on all cloakmakers to stop work.³³ On another occasion, workers brandishing scissors, flatirons, revolvers, clubs, and old European bayonets threatened to invade workplaces and assault bosses and scabs, sometimes pursuing them through neighborhood streets while hurling loud insults.

Neither scabs nor unpopular employers could escape revenge, despite police protection. The 1894 strike was particularly violent because of the growing unemployment in the wake of the 1893 economic depression. Scabs hired by Meyer Jonasson, the leading manufacturer of cloaks in the country, were confronted daily by demonstrators, many of them women, who gathered in front of the factory to taunt the strikebreakers as they arrived at or left work. Women ignored the police, attacked the strikebreakers, and tore their whiskers, while others "made a rush for non-union girls, tore their clothes and pulled their hair."³⁴ In the same strike, striking workers carried out punitive raids against an employer and his hired scabs by breaking into the home of two women strikebreakers and beating them up.³⁵ Similarly, during the celebrated 1910 waistmakers' strike frequent intimidation campaigns were carried out, with strikers taking the law into their hands and raiding the homes of scabs and their families. In one instance, a menacing crowd threatened one manufacturer: "We have killed generals in Russia and may be able to do better in this country."³⁶ These acts took place despite strict rules

laid down by the ILGWU intending to present the Jewish workers to the American public as “organized, disciplined, well-behaved . . . law abiding citizens.”³⁷

To evade intimidation, employers tried to pass work along to subcontractors in Brooklyn, but community and union surveillance frustrated these attempts and contractors were followed wherever they went—as in the 1891 cloakmakers’ strike, when police were alerted to a group of one hundred defiant strikers who reportedly were leaving Manhattan “to do some persuading” in Brownsville shops.³⁸

Strikes and industrial militancy depended on the community’s generosity and support, which proved essential in the absence of stable unions with large strike reserves. “The neighbors on the East Side in strike affairs are not stingy,” was one contemporary’s impression. The cloakmakers’ strike of 1890 was particularly memorable. When the cloakmakers voted against a settlement because of the employers’ refusal to fire strikebreakers who were hired during the strike, all those who participated in the meeting, whether workers or not, donated all they could afford—earrings, watches, rings—for the benefit of the strikers.³⁹ In 1893, during a strike in a year of high unemployment and a general economic crisis, striking workers managed to get support from sympathizers from other trades, such as butchers, shopkeepers, bakers, doctors, barbers, and restaurant owners.⁴⁰

Intimidation, as a strategy in labor conflict, spread to consumer campaigns. The 1902 kosher meat riots were triggered by a 50 percent increase in meat prices. The ensuing meat boycott, initiated and organized by women of the Lower East Side, Harlem, and Brooklyn, used the streets and synagogues to legitimize their campaign and to stigmatize and punish those who infringed on an unwritten community code.⁴¹ Throughout the boycott, women boycotters besieged butchers’ shops, pouring kerosene, oil, and carbolic acid on their merchandise. Those who persisted in buying meat were pursued through the neighborhood and forced to return their purchases. Some boycotters invaded private homes, “picking up whatever meat they could find to throw on the street where it was caught and pitched about and trampled upon.”⁴² When arrested and brought in front of a judge, one woman defended herself by pointing to the indissoluble bonds between individuals and the community. She argued that those who ignored the meat ban were abandoning the commu-

nity: "It doesn't matter to me what others want to do. But it's because of others that we must suffer."⁴³

In similar fashion, the working community questioned the legitimacy of unduly high rents charged by landlords. The anti-landlord campaigns occurred first in 1894, when striking cloakmakers maintained that payment of rent was wrong in principle and that they would not furnish income to a landlord while they themselves were deprived of their wages.⁴⁴ Rent wars against landlords who raised rents erupted again in 1905–6 and peaked in 1907–8. Initiated on the local block, the campaign engaged sympathizers who protested the steep raises in rent at a time of economic distress. While landlords maintained their right, bestowed by the principle of the free market, "to ask for whatever rent" they wished, the striking tenants called for a resolution to force the landlords to lower rent "to affordable levels." These demands were accompanied by calls to the community to boycott landlords who evicted tenants and by an openly defiant attitude on the part of the strikers, who hung red flags from their windows and fire escapes.⁴⁵

Strikes and communal actions turned into pitched battles between strikers and other community members on one side and employers and the police on the other. New York police were the target of crowd fury because in industrial disputes they provided protection to employers and scabs. During the bitter strike of 1894, Police Superintendent Thomas Byrnes guaranteed full cooperation to employers by extending his protection to strikebreakers, who were escorted by the police to their homes every night.⁴⁶ The ire against police was also fueled by their failure to defend the Jewish ghetto when it was attacked by local Irish thugs described as "loafers."⁴⁷ When local police moved to quell violent clashes that frequently erupted on the Lower East Side and in the new neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Jewish crowds reacted to these police "provocations" by pelting the policemen with a variety of objects, clubbing them, and beating them as well as cursing them loudly.⁴⁸ In one case, strikers and demonstrators asserted that a "police riot" occurred when force was used against demonstrators. This "riot" occurred when three thousand strikers and sympathizers who marched to assemble at Rutgers Square in support of striking cloakmakers in 1894 were stopped by the police and told to disperse. When those assembled refused, according to the attorney for

the strikers, police “rioted,” attacking the protesters by firing into the air.⁴⁹

During the meat boycott, officers, who moved in to protect the butchers and their property, were greeted by flying pieces of meat. A policeman making an arrest confronted a crowd who “tore his clothing to rags, broke his helmet and tried to pull him down on the ground.” He finally managed to escape under a shower of rocks, vegetables, eggs, and meat. On another occasion, a crowd attacked a policeman, grabbing his helmet and club and parading these as trophies.⁵⁰ In a related accident, a crowd gathered in front of the Essex Market Police Court, hissing and shouting insults at the police who were protecting the butchers.⁵¹

The *New York Times* in 1902 interpreted these outbursts, and similar displays of public violence, as “un-American” resistance to authority meriting immediate and determined retribution.⁵² Swift arrests were intended to discipline the newcomers and teach them respect for the law. Cloak-maker leaders of the 1890 strike were branded as “socialists and anarchists of the most pronounced types” who were planning destruction and riot. “[N]o man has a right to fix wages for others,” declared Judge Duffy of the Essex Market Court. Considering Siberia as the appropriate punishment for those who defy the authorities, Judge Duffy recommended that equivalent prison sentences be imposed on strikers and their leaders.⁵³ Demonstrations in front of the courts where strikers were being tried bore witness to the widespread hostility against the police and the justice system. Arrests provoked protests by workers and bystanders, who followed those arrested through the neighborhood to police stations, demanding their immediate release.⁵⁴ Those who invoked the law to press charges against workers or strikers attracted hostility and were met with threats of serious reprisals, often with effective results.⁵⁵

Crowd militancy, decried by upholders of the law and established opinion, did not consist in arbitrary acts of violence but constituted expressions of the community’s claim to geographical and political space. In contrast to Eastern Europe, where the autocratic rule of the czars and the oligarchic government within the Jewish community denied citizens access to the political process, on American soil Jewish immigrants grasped opportunities to make political gains by extending their range of civic participation in the workplace and in the streets, with the aid of organic community institutions. Public censure was one such institution. In con-

tests with employers or against unfair profiteers, immigrant workers resorted to strategic agencies to spread the names of the transgressors. Most effective were the Yiddish labor press, unions, local networks, and public shaming. Workers “blacklisted” bosses and scabs by publicizing their grievances. Boycotts against shops, theaters, music halls, and landlords were widely broadcast, and reviling and denouncing publicly those who offended against communal norms were much-used strategies.⁵⁶

Carefully organized “picketing” intended to shame adversaries was a powerful tactic. In 1894, the big cloak manufacturers imported strike-breakers from Brownsville, which was fast becoming an important center for Jewish expatriates—both contractors and workers—from the Lower East Side. The imported scabs got a “welcome” they never forgot when they returned home on weekends. For safety, but also in shame, they had to ride in police vans, which were greeted by crowds of men, women, and children from Brownsville carrying black candles—an old-world symbol alerting the community to the dangers of a plague, as well as a sign of social ostracism. In addition, the “welcoming” crowd shouted in Hebrew: “Righteousness delivers from death.” This tactic achieved its desired effect: The scabs did not dare leave their homes and needed police protection on Sundays when they had to be re-escorted to Manhattan.⁵⁷

Family loyalties dissolved under the impact of labor conflicts. Familial bonds were ignored by a woman striker who, in 1904, denounced her own father and brother as cowards in front of a crowd of tailors.⁵⁸ Nowhere was the effectiveness of these and other campaigns of social blackballing more dramatically illustrated than in the tragic case of Joseph Katzman. A union member in good standing, in 1897, as the sole wage earner in his family, he felt he had to continue working despite pleas from his fellow workers to join a walkout. According to a contemporary newspaper report, the striking tailors turned Katzman’s life into “a burden” by jeering and calling him “hard names” whenever he appeared in the street. Ultimately he was forced to leave his family, possibly to spare them embarrassment; he took a room in a hotel and committed suicide by jumping from a third-floor window.⁵⁹

The effective amalgam of the community and its working people was manifest when labor unrest became a signal for community action. During the reefermakers’ strike of 1907, non-strikers and workers from other branches of the industry left their jobs to assist in picketing. Streets ad-

joining the shops “were beleaguered by crowds,” and men and women guarded the shops to prevent strikebreakers from entering.⁶⁰

The fiercely fought bakers strike of 1905 mobilized sympathizers in large numbers, among them many women. Baking was no less a “sweated” trade than garment manufacturing, and bakers worked without exception in tenement house cellars, subject to cost cutting resulting from the fierce competition among the small bakeries dotting the Jewish neighborhood. Those who identified with the bakers’ plight stuffed old quilts into chimneys and poured oil into ovens, thus effectively stopping all baking of bread. Workers found kneading bread “were dragged out and disciplined,” while others formed street crowds, smashing carts and trampling upon loaves of bread brought from other locations. As a result, many of the retailers on the Lower East Side, fearing reprisals, refused to sell bread imported from outside bakeries.⁶¹

Synagogues were important strategic platforms for agitation, and for condemnation of those who trespassed the moral code. During the 1894 cloakmakers strike, workers followed scabs to the synagogue, where they denounced them to other congregants. Such actions brought police into synagogues to protect scabs during an 1896 strike; and in 1907, cloakmakers striking against Simon and Co. resorted to similar tactics during prayer services attended by their employers. They informed the congregation of their employers’ “virtuous” acts and pleaded with members of the congregation to banish and blacklist Simon. The pressure proved effective: Simon stopped attending the synagogue, fearing for his safety, and subsequently had to suffer the humiliation of a police escort in order to attend services on the High Holidays.⁶² In 1902, women meat boycotters used synagogues to plead with male congregants to discourage their wives from buying meat.⁶³

Labor concerns and concomitant social tensions permeated all kinds of immigrant institutions. The popular institutions of *landsmanshaften* (hometown associations) reflected a community’s conflicts and aspirations. These mutual benefit organizations, based on the principles of reciprocity and sociability, provided material assistance and a modicum of economic stability. In some cases bitter struggles over strikes tore apart the membership, as in the case of the Melnitzer Benevolent Society, which decided in 1907, under the pressure of members belonging to the employer class, to terminate the membership of striking fur workers for

nonpayment of dues. In other instances, *landsmanshaftn* developed a distinct working-class character and adopted a working-class ethic. Strike-breakers were denied membership in the Progressive Slutzker Young Men's Benevolent Association, for example. Others were known to grant assistance to strikers, as in the case of reefer workers in 1905 and 1907, fur workers in 1907, and the mass strikes of 1909 and 1910.⁶⁴ Significantly, ideological rifts in the community, reflected in the *landsmanshaft* culture, led to the founding of the Workmen's Circle (Arbeter Ring) in 1892. As a national secular federation of workers' benefit societies, it ultimately came to represent working people's needs. Red banners, socialist hymns in Yiddish, and festivals celebrating world socialist events, such as May Day and the Paris Commune, became its hallmarks.⁶⁵

The connectedness between the community and workers' concerns was also reflected in the popular use of code words of work-related origin. In a period when boundaries between public and private, shop floor and the community, were fluid and permeable, the language of labor was freely adapted to communal conflicts. The term "scab," for example, gained rapid currency among newcomers. Although the consumer meat boycott of 1902 was aimed at combating high meat prices and had no obvious connection with the workplace, women boycotters applied the charged language of words like "strikers" and "scabs" in their campaign against the meat trade. The boycott's women leaders and their supporters described themselves as community "soldiers" and "strikers," terrorizing those who did not join the struggle by calling them "scabs."⁶⁶ This language was also applied in 1904 to tenants who continued to rent rooms from a landlord who had evicted nineteen families.⁶⁷ In another case, a worried reader inquired of the popular advice column "Bintel Brief" (bundle of letters) in the *Jewish Daily Forward* whether it was moral to buy cheaper coal from a new coal merchant who had been called a "scab" for undercutting a more established competitor.⁶⁸

The crowd activity and collective actions of the first generation of immigrants, then, reveal a process of creating a new political vocabulary, with distinct roots in material struggles. The workplace was linked to all aspects of life, and the indivisibility of workplace and public and private space facilitated the making of a new language. The new symbolic code became a familiar metaphor, and an instrument to mobilize sympathizers

in broad communal disputes over the interpretation of fairness, justice, and citizens' rights.

The years 1909–1913 represent a landmark in the history of Jewish labor. The community-intensive eruptions of earlier years gave way to more orderly channels for regulating labor practices. The triumph of stable unions over the chaos of spontaneous and unruly work stoppages has been heralded as the crowning achievement of a process of political maturation of a people long engaged in futile attempts to correct social and economic wrongs by means of ill-conceived strikes and seasonal unions. Large and successful strikes preceded these organizational achievements, however. First, there was the much celebrated shirtwaist makers' strike in 1909, known as the "uprising of the twenty thousand," led by a group of young Jewish women workers, followed by the cloakmakers' strike of 1910, which witnessed a fifty-thousand-strong walkout. Later in the same year an upheaval of similar proportions took place in Chicago, initiated by the workers of Hart, Schaffner and Marx; and finally, in New York, there was a strong show of twelve thousand fur workers in 1912.

Structural changes in the industry, especially in the ladies' garment trades, played a significant role in finally establishing stable unions. With the growing market for women's clothing, large units of production gradually became more prevalent. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which employed over five hundred workers at the time of the 1911 fire, was indicative of this trend.⁶⁹ These structural changes; the militancy of the young, mostly unmarried Jewish women; and a sustained decline in earnings in the years 1909 and 1910—along with grievances related to arbitrary fines and the demand that workers pay for needle and thread—"boiled over," resulting in a chain of spontaneous strikes beginning in 1909.⁷⁰ These strikes marked the beginnings of union organization. Ultimately, with the mediation of public figures representing the Progressives' quest for industrial peace and the cooperation of larger manufacturers who had a stake in moderating the anarchy of cutthroat competition, a semblance of order in the garment industry was achieved.

Union stability was dependent on structural factors in the garment industry, where a pervasive, highly fractionalized organization of production dominated even in the period after 1910. The difficulties of enforcing collective bargaining procedures and authorized strike actions depended as much on employers as on employees. Both were driven by market forces

to abide by agreements in periods of trade buoyancy, when it paid to continue stable production. While the larger employers were willing to negotiate with unions, small contractors whose profits depended on an unregulated labor market and competition opposed the drive to standardize hours and wages through collective bargaining.⁷¹ Hence wage and cost cutting continued to inflame industrial relations, and stable unions with official agents continued to coexist with wildcat strikes.

As of 1910, the politics of Jewish garment workers moved into more legitimate channels, characterized by orderly negotiations, membership dues, and binding arbitration procedures. The identification between garment workers and the community was at odds, however, with the work-centered union policies, whose main role was to protect workers' rights and to lend stability to a diverse industry. Mass strikes of earlier years had

At a rally at Carnegie Hall during the shirtwaist makers' strike of 1909–1910, strikers who had been arrested while picketing sat on the stage behind the speaker's platform. Photo courtesy of Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University.

temporarily united groups of workers divided by trade and locality. The ILGWU successfully captured the strike fever that spread into other branches of the garment trades, while simultaneously tightening and centralizing its control over organizational activity.⁷² However, while the cloakmakers' strike was in its active stages, the degree of community involvement frustrated union organizers. Intimidation of strikebreakers continued despite clearly stated rules of orderly picketing. Furthermore, the strike committee in 1910 was forced to recognize the rights of the unemployed, nicknamed "orphans," who threatened to scab if not included among the full-fledged strikers. Difficulties further multiplied when the leadership faced meeting halls filled not only with workers and strikers but with their families, as was the custom on the Lower East Side.⁷³

The right to declare a strike was, in itself, an issue that had traditionally pitted union leadership against the rank and file. The ILGWU's attempts to centralize its power through close supervision of local finances and distribution of strike funds clashed with wildcat communal industrial unrest and unofficial industrial actions. The "scrapping" spirit, noticed already within the first months following the inception of the ILGWU in 1900, continued despite strict rules; between March 1911 and July 1913, there were 304 shop strikes against 131 firms belonging to the Protective Association, whose members were bound by the Protocol.

In 1912, John Dyche, the newly appointed chief union clerk and a firm believer in the efficacy of cooperation with employers and in the Protocol's philosophy, promised employers to discipline the membership and put an end to wildcat strikes—a promise he found hard to fulfill.⁷⁴ In 1912, women finishers employed by J.C. Stratton protested against their foreman's behavior and were soon joined by other workers. Thereupon the Joint Board (the arbitration committee) issued a directive to return to work within fifteen minutes. When this call was ignored, Dyche sent replacements, a sure provocation. Gradually, therefore, workers saw themselves as "slaves of the Protocol" and its politics as being biased toward employers. This trend persisted, and even after concluding the Protocol of Peace in 1913, workers continued to express deep dissatisfaction with its goals.

The Protocol, essentially a no-strike agreement, was signed by both sides of the industry with an eye to maintaining industrial peace on the basis of compulsory arbitration. It was intended to guarantee job security

to the workers in return for giving up the closed shop. It obliged employers to observe the “preferential shop,” whereby employers agreed to hire union members if they were “equal in efficiency” to non-unionized workers, thus opening loopholes to non-union labor recruitment.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the persistence of small units of production, which were notoriously difficult to organize and were never a central concern in the ILGWU’s membership drives, contributed to the pervasiveness of non-union shops and local strikes.

Although dependent on the goodwill of the manufacturers and on structural shifts within the industry, the success of member recruitment, especially after 1913, signaled a new era in the needle trades. The ILGWU and the ACW were unions based on broad industrial principles and were among the first to reject the traditional craft divisions. Initially, the new industrial unions witnessed a dramatic surge in membership. By 1914, 88 percent of workers in the women’s clothing industry were members of the ILGWU. Significantly, the unionization rate in the clothing trades remained considerably higher throughout the second decade of the twentieth century than the national average for all organized wage earners.⁷⁶

The rise of the long-awaited and effective Jewish unionism after 1910 has been celebrated as “forward-looking” and “modern,” as if it progressed to an apogee of fulfillment through periods of unnecessary turbulence. This view of the development of the Jewish labor movement overlooks the fact that union organization was only one of many collective practices developed by immigrants for gaining a political voice. The period between 1880 and 1910 impressed a distinguishing ideological identity on the Jewish community. Throughout those years, immigrants responded to industrial grievances and to perceived injustices by asserting their own social code.

These years of conflict were marked by strategies of broad participation and the engagement of members of the community as active historical agents in the forging of the new community’s identity. Fairness, social responsibility, and social justice were at the heart of the emergent political, social, and cultural landscape of the Jewish community. The legacy of the battles fought over an alternative set of societal norms in the streets of the Lower East Side transformed itself into the universalist political vision that became the hallmark of Jewish political culture.

Not surprisingly, Jews represented the numerical “core” of the Socialist Party, enthusiastically confirming their support in November 1912, the year of Eugene V. Debs’ presidential candidacy, and in 1914, marking Meyer London’s victory in the Congressional elections.⁷⁷ Socialist ideals continued to imbue the ideology of the ILGWU, which was hailed as aspiring to achieve an “ultimate economic emancipation,” in contrast to the narrower goal of “a bargaining partnership with capital” pursued by mainstream American unions.⁷⁸ The union ultimately adopted goals which were globally more political than those of other unions, dedicating its educational efforts to the building of a new society founded on principles of democracy and social justice, ideals of transformative influence during the 1930s.

Mrs. Totoro, a New York Italian homemaker, making lace for a contractor as her husband and children watch, 1911. Photo by Lewis Hine. Courtesy of U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

Italian homeworkers at work. Photo by Lewis Hine. Courtesy of Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University.

6

Culture of Work

Italian Immigrant Women Homeworkers in the New York City Garment Industry, 1890–1914

Nancy C. Carnevale

THE GARMENT INDUSTRY of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conjures up images of the sweatshop—newly arrived immigrants cutting, sewing, and pressing clothing in crowded, squalid tenement apartments under the watchful eye of their often exploitative compatriot, the contractor. The sweatshop, thus conceived, was indeed a major part of the experience of some immigrant groups, most notably the Jewish immigrants who dominated the industry, but it constituted only a minor part of the experience of Italian immigrants, the second largest immigrant group in the needle trades. Some Italians could indeed be found in small tenement workshops, but these were more often in rooms separate from the living quarters—unlike the situation in the typical sweatshop, which combined work and living space. Many Italians also found work in the new garment factories.¹

There was one part of the garment industry, however, over which Italian immigrants held a virtual monopoly. Married Italian women overwhelmingly dominated the homework aspect of the trade, especially the finishing of garments, in their tenement apartments. By the first years of the new century, Italian women and their children represented as much as 98 percent of all home finishers in New York City. Estimates of the actual number of Italian women engaged in finishing garments at home varied widely, owing to the likelihood that many were operating illegally

and so would not be included in any official counts. We can say that anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 home finishers were operating legally by the early years of the century.² Within their own homes, they worked individually or with the help of their children (and occasionally that of husbands or extended family members on a specific task), rather than as part of a group of workers on the production of a complete garment. Although they worked independently, the conditions these homeworking women faced were comparable to those found in the sweatshops. As one scholar describes it, the homework system “created a sweatshop in every kitchen.”³

This essay looks at the work lives of these women and the Southern Italian cultural values and practices that help account for the predominance of Italian immigrant women as home finishers. Scholars in recent years have emphasized the structural constants in the garment industry to explain its continued lure for immigrants from all over the globe for over a century.⁴ The case of Southern Italian home finishers serves as a reminder of the role of culture in influencing the ways in which different groups enter the industry and exert their own influence on it.⁵

Italian immigrant women came to New York as part of the massive migration that resulted in over 4.1 million Italians entering the U.S. between 1880 and 1920. They came fleeing the poverty and hardship of agricultural life in the southern provinces from which the vast majority of these immigrants hailed. For many, New York City was the first and last stop on their ocean voyage. Initially it was a largely male migration, with three men immigrating for every one woman, but the character of Italian immigration began to change as the stream of young men who had earlier migrated back and forth between the two countries turned into a more permanent settlement, as they sent for their wives and children or created families in the New World.⁶

Southern Italians constituted a sizable portion of the Lower East Side and maintained a significant presence in other parts of Manhattan, including East Harlem and the South Village. They moved into the tenements that formed New York’s “urban canyons”; they also formed enclaves in Brooklyn and the Bronx. They completely dominated some neighborhoods, such as Manhattan’s 14th ward, while in others they coexisted with other immigrant groups.⁷

Southern Italians quickly came to constitute one of the largest ethnic populations in the city. By the 1920s, New York was home to some 800,000 Italian immigrants and their children, making it second only to Rome in its Italian population. Most found work as manual laborers, the “pick and shovel” men who performed the excavation work on construction sites. Some were skilled workers in the building trades. Petty entrepreneurs—barbers; bootblacks; peddlers of vegetables, fruit, or fish; and grocers—catered to the needs of their compatriots. And because their arrival coincided with the period during which the city’s garment trade was booming, many Italian immigrants also entered the garment industry.

Italian immigrants found work throughout the garment industry, including within the sweatshops. Italian men worked in cloak shops during the 1890s, for example, in an industry characterized by sweatshops at the time. In testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System in 1893, one clothier testified that most of his workers were Italians who were employed through contractors from Staten Island and Hoboken, New Jersey. An early study of Italian immigrant women in the garment industry noted that they could be found in a variety of settings within the industry, including “sweat shops where workers were crowded together under the worst conditions.”⁸

Narrowly defined, the sweatshop was a small shop located in tenement living quarters—sometimes the contractor’s—where clothing was produced using the task system in crowded, unsanitary conditions and employees worked long hours for very low wages.⁹ Though it is not always clear how contemporary observers defined sweatshops—whether they meant workshops located in living quarters of tenement apartments, separate small workshops within the tenements, or larger “inside shops” where sweatshop-like conditions prevailed—it is clear that Italians could be found in some form of the sweatshop.

Italian immigrants began successfully bidding for contracts against Russian Jews as early as 1890. As one 1891 report notes:

The Russian Jews have had a practical monopoly of the sweating trade up to a year or so ago, at about which time the Italians commenced to bid for the privilege of making clothing, and they easily underbid the Russians. There are now hundreds of Italian sweater dens in New York, where a couple of years ago there was scarcely one.¹⁰

The presence of Italians in the sweatshops in the 1890s was substantial enough to prompt a New York State factory inspector in an 1898 report to accuse the Italian contractors of being more ruthless exploiters of labor than their Jewish counterparts. In testimony which reveals the depth of anti-immigrant sentiment in this period, Italians are depicted as

the new problem in "sweating." The cupidity of greedy Italians, who make more money than ever the "padrones" did out of their ignorant imported fellow countrymen, is responsible for worse evils than ever existed under the Jewish phase of that problem. Comparatively speaking, the Jewish sweating is humane, and that is saying a good deal . . . those Italians already in the clothing business as sweaters, have graduated from the garbage heaps, the ash barrel and the rag cellar, and, having constitutions of iron, work harder than Jews, eat less, or more cheaply, for they certainly beat the Jews at cheap living, and when presenting themselves to claim their unfortunate relatives, or pretended relatives, and promising they will keep them from being a charge upon the public, seem to be able to blind the officials of the immigration department. Beyond question, the Italian sweater is a much greater industrial enemy to the growth of a proper American standard of living among the unskilled workers than ever the Jew was, and the end is not yet.¹¹

The fears of nineteenth-century officials were misplaced; Italians did not become sweaters or sweatshop workers in great numbers. *Why* they did not is somewhat curious. Given the prominent figure of the Italian *padrone* in the immigrant community—a labor recruiter who used his limited knowledge of English and of American ways to recruit and often exploit new immigrants, largely for outdoor work—it seems logical enough to assume that his position would translate easily into that of the contractor who performed a similar function within the garment industry. Like the Italian *padrone*, the strength of the Jewish contractor lay in his position as an insider in the immigrant group, one who knew the immigrant language—and enough English—to engage workers as well as to navigate the garment industry. Yet not only did Italian contractors fail to dominate the industry as Jewish contractors did, but Italian immigrants were known to work in Jewish shops, if not sweatshops. This calls into question the assumption that worker recruitment proceeded along intraethnic lines.¹² It is interesting to speculate how Jewish contractors

might have recruited Italian immigrants, and/or whether Italians sought out Jewish contractors to secure work. We do know that immigrants sometimes learned each other's languages, which facilitated recruitment as well as day-to-day life on the job.¹³ While the evidence is not conclusive, the sweatshop appears to have been a more intercultural workplace than is commonly assumed.

Several other factors besides the possibility of interethnic workplaces help us understand why more Italians did not become contractors, which in turn would have resulted in more Italians in the sweatshops. Unlike Jewish immigrants, Italians initially saw their stay in America as temporary. It was not uncommon for men to travel back and forth between Italy and the U.S. numerous times, returning to America when they could not find work in Italy. Given the transitory nature of their stay in the U.S., it is not surprising that more Italians did not have the ethnic networks necessary to become contractors or to make the initial investment in equipment—specifically, a sewing machine—that would have been necessary.¹⁴

Southern Italian peasants, who constituted the vast majority of Italian immigration to the United States, came from an agricultural setting, which helps explain why they initially gravitated toward outdoor jobs—primarily digging for construction projects—as opposed to seeking employment within the garment shops. The *padrones* typically recruited for this kind of outdoor work. Additionally, Italian immigrants did not come to the U.S. with the entrepreneurial tradition that Jewish immigrants brought with them. The legacy of Southern Italy, where many of the former immigrants had endured lives of abject poverty as tenant farmers or small landowners whose fortunes were at the mercy of landlords and other forces beyond their control, was a sense of powerlessness. So while some enterprising Italians did become contractors, these were few in comparison with the Jewish immigrants who may have been small business owners or tradesmen in their countries of origin and for whom the desire and ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder was a staple of their background.

The fact that the early manufacturers were Central European Jews could only have facilitated the ability of Eastern European Jews to become contractors, given the contact between the two groups and their cultural affinity.¹⁵ Contemporary observers, on the other hand, explained the disparity between Italians and Jews in the garment industry, as they often

explained all differences between immigrant groups, in racial terms: Jewish immigrants were seen as naturally ambitious and shrewd, while Italians were depicted as innately less intelligent and generally more complacent.

Although Italians entered the industry on the heels of Jewish immigrants, they were nonetheless second both in timing and in numbers. Indeed, the history of Jewish-Italian relations in the unionization of the garment industry was marked by tension for many years owing to the sense on the part of the Italians that they held a secondary position in relation to Jewish workers. Jewish contractors who dominated the industry in the 1890s had the advantage over the Italians, whose numbers did not swell in the industry until the early 1900s. By the time the Italians began entering the garment trades in greater numbers, the sweatshop had already been under attack for some time, and attempts at reform had been made, which contributed to its decline. Legislation such as the 1892 law forbidding the manufacture of garments in tenements by non-family members was already showing results by 1893.

The decline of the sweatshop coincided with the rise of factories, which began to draw Italian immigrants and their children. Many of the same tenements that formerly housed sweatshops were turned into shop buildings. Clothing factories were also being established in midtown, drawing the center of the garment trade away from the tenements of the Lower East Side.¹⁶

Comparatively speaking, conditions were fairly good in the new garment factories, and certainly better than those in the tenement shops. Italian immigrants may have gravitated toward the factories—particularly the shirtwaist factories, the best known of which was the site of the famous 1911 Triangle Fire—precisely because they were less “sweated” than the tenement sweatshops. Italian young women in their teens and twenties populated the shirtwaist factories, along with men—primarily as operators, although some men were also engaged as pressers. The Italians were second in number only to Jewish workers; by 1909, Italian young women constituted 35 percent of all dress and shirtwaist makers in New York City. In addition to offering better conditions, the modern factory may have also exerted a symbolic pull on younger immigrants and the adult children of immigrants, who may have equated a bona fide factory

job—as opposed to working in a tenement apartment—with a move up and into American society.¹⁷

But while young, unmarried Italian women flocked to the factories, *married* Italian women quickly took over the homework aspect of the needle trades. Rather than Italians entering the sweatshops, the sweatshop entered the homes of Italian immigrants, through homeworking Italian women.

Tenement Homework

There is a class of tenement-house workers who are never visited by the factory inspector, whose hours are limited only by their physical strength and the amount of work they can obtain; who pay for the rent, light, and heating of their workshop; who eat, sleep, are sick, and die in the same rooms in which they manufacture goods.¹⁸

Italian homeworkers in the garment industry were concentrated in specific neighborhoods. Like shop workers, they preferred to live near the shops to save on travel expenses. The area with the greatest concentration of Italian homeworkers was the Italian section of Lower Manhattan: Mulberry, Mott, and Elizabeth streets on one side of the Bowery and Chrystie and Forsyth on the other side were known to be filled with homeworkers from the needle trades, mainly home finishers. Homework on artificial flowers was concentrated on the lower West Side, including Barrow, Bedford, Carmine, and MacDougal streets; while the Upper East Side was known to house homeworkers who willowed plumes.¹⁹ This geographical division of labor lends further credence to the notion that Italian women recruited each other into home finishing and other homework within the garment industry.

An observer in these areas at the time would have noticed boards lining the landings and railings of the fire escapes—creating fire hazards, but making them safe for children to play on. Also visible on the fire escape might be bedding, laundry strung out on a line, plants and chairs, food, buckets of swill or ashes, and any number of other items that the tenement dwellers might want to store outside their apartments. One might even see the home finisher herself working on the fire escape during the day; and on hot nights, members of the family could be found sleeping on

them. These neighborhoods were characterized by their congestion, which was aggravated by the presence of street peddlers and pushcarts near the curb, along with what one observer called the “picturesque dirtiness” of the tenements.²⁰

As the passage quoted above attests, conditions for tenement homeworkers were often comparable to if not worse than those found in the sweatshop. Who were the homeworkers, and why did they enter this area of the garment trade in such numbers? Italian home finishers were generally between the ages of 21 and 45, with an average age of 34.²¹ They were mainly married women, although young Italian women from the factories could often be found in the evenings working at home with their mothers. Though not technically sweatshop workers, home finishers performed the final operations on garments made in the sweatshop or the factory, since it was cheaper to farm out this part of the job than to do it in-house. The work consisted mainly of finishing coats and pants, but Italian homeworkers also dominated artificial flower production and the willowing of plumes, items that were used to decorate hats.

Given the nature of homework—poor conditions, long hours, and low pay—Italian women faced little competition within the garment industry; but the willingness of Italian women (and men) to work for less than others undoubtedly helped Italian women corner the market on homework, and on home finishing in particular. Italian women were known as the scabs of homework, willing to accept wages that other immigrant women would not. Jewish immigrants, the other major “new” immigrant group in the industry, were not dependent on the extra income a homeworking wife could provide to the degree that Italians were. Cultural preferences also figured into the relative absence of Jewish women homeworkers: Jewish immigrants generally did not approve of married women working in the factory or at home. This preference for married Jewish women to remain full-time housewives and mothers, coupled with somewhat better economic circumstances, enabled Jewish wives to largely avoid homework by the time Italian women began flooding the trade. Unless prodded by economic necessity, Jewish wives remained unemployed, while their young daughters, eager to enter the modern American world, flocked to the factories in even greater numbers than did Italian girls. Thus, cultural prohibitions against married Jewish women performing this type of work, together with the tendency of Italians to underbid oth-

ers and the sheer numbers of Italian women available, led to Italian women taking over homework within the needle trades.²²

Besides offering employment, homework within the needle trades appealed to Italian women and their families for a number of reasons. The income of the women was needed to supplement their husbands' wages. Many Italian men worked outdoors, most often as unskilled day laborers but also as bricklayers, masons, and the like; this meant that in bad weather they were unable to work. It also meant that they experienced slack time during certain periods of the year. Injury and illness from this very physical labor and from exposure could also mean long bouts of unemployment. And even when they *were* working, Italian men's wages were not enough to sustain their families. This was also the case for husbands who worked as fruit peddlers or even as tailors. Although members of other immigrant groups certainly suffered from low wages, the kind of work Southern Italians found made their families more likely to require other sources of income. A 1911 government-sponsored survey of immigrant women homeworkers reveals the differences between Italian and non-Italian homeworkers. Non-Italian immigrant homeworking women gave a variety of reasons for their employment: Some said they worked to supplement a more than adequate family income; others cited a need to keep busy, to avoid shop discipline, or to allow time for housework and to gossip with neighbors. Still others claimed to work at home on account of age, poor health, or an inability to tolerate the strain of inside shop work. But few, in contrast to the Italian immigrant homeworkers, cited financial necessity.²³

The need was great; and in any case, the idea of a family income was not foreign to Italian immigrants. Women and children in Southern Italy were used to contributing to the family's economic well-being; this helps to account for the frequent use of Italian children in homework, a practice that contemporary observers attributed to extreme greed and neglect on the part of Italian parents. Homework was also a practical alternative for these women, whose options for employment were limited in part by their inability to speak English. As Nancy Green notes regarding homework, in her comparative, long-term study of the garment industry: "Language (the tip of the cultural iceberg) may be the determining factor in choice." Italian immigrants had particularly low rates of literacy in Italian as well as English-language fluency, and Italian women lagged behind the men.

One contemporary observer noted in a study of Italian immigrant women that after a full year in this country, two-thirds of the women still did not know even a single word of English. Indeed, Italianized words related to work, such as “operatrici” for “operators” and “pressatori” for “pressers,” often constituted the first “English” words learned by Italian immigrants in the needle trades.²⁴

This was to some extent the result of the insular nature of the Italian community. Italians also took little advantage of the extensive adult education programming by the New York City Board of Education, no doubt in part because of the long hours of work they put in each day, but also perhaps owing to their lack of schooling in Southern Italy. Southern Italians also had a deeply held suspicion regarding the merits of education that only gradually began to change, in part through the experience of immigration itself and the recognition of the additional hardships that illiteracy imposed. In some cases, Italian husbands prevented their wives from taking language courses, which could have been seen as a step on the way to American-style emancipation. The limitations posed by language played a significant part in keeping Italian women out of other industries, such as domestic service—which largely became the province of English-speaking Irish immigrant women—and keeping them within the home, finishing garments.²⁵

The need to care for young children was also a major consideration. Even those most critical of homework recognized the predicament faced by mothers who would have had to leave even very young children alone to go out to work in the factories. In this passage from a government report, a factory inspector considers the alternatives for homeworkers and their children in the case of a woman who was denied a license for homework and had to go to the shop, leaving her three children, all under five years of age, alone all day:

On the one hand we have the three-year old child helping its mother in the home—never out of her sight—always where the mother could attend to its needs and allay its fears and suffering. While, on the other hand, we see the mother compelled to desert her three little ones of very tender years, going out to the shop to work, because the law prohibited her bringing the work into her home. As a result thereof these unfortunate little ones are thus deprived of the scant care a hard-working mother could bestow upon

them, they are left alone in a tenement, shut up in a fireless room, with no one to attend to their needs . . . We do not attempt to mitigate the frightful conditions existing in places that our inspectors have not up to this time reached, but we do say that the strict and unrelenting enforcement of our present law will cause untold misery and suffering.²⁶

While women of other nationalities shared similar concerns and problems, Italian women may have been particularly drawn to homework because it satisfied certain cultural imperatives. The Italian family structure has been described as both patriarchal and mother-centered. That is, while male heads of households had ultimate authority, women, as mothers, exercised a considerable amount of control, both in practical matters relating to the management of the household as well as in emotional terms. And while mothers may have wielded some power within the family, daughters were closely monitored in accordance with Southern Italian notions of honor and shame, which placed a premium on female purity. The idea of women—whether married or single—mingling with strange men in factories was distasteful to male heads of households, and probably to the immigrant women themselves. Italian girls were permitted to work in factories only out of financial necessity, and often they were escorted to and from work by male members of the family. Indeed, organizers of the famous 1909 uprising of the 20,000 eventually realized that Italian young women were not coming to union meetings in part because the meetings were held late in the evenings, when it would have been considered unseemly for these girls to walk about the streets unchaperoned. Although this interpretation of the lack of participation by Italian women in the famed uprising has recently been challenged, the premium placed on female purity in traditional Southern Italian culture has been well established. Homework, then, enabled women to maintain their own sense of respectability and power within the household and to care for their young children while making an important contribution to the family income.²⁷

Homework under any conditions may have appeared more desirable to Italian women than the largely agricultural work they had left behind in Italy. The ability to avoid work in the fields and remain indoors was a privilege of artisan wives in Italy. Homework, then, provided at least a superficial approximation of an elevated social status. That homework represented a choice (albeit among limited options) by married women

and their families is borne out by the low percentage of unmarried women who did this work; by one estimate in 1913, less than 10 percent of Italian home finishers were unmarried, and that number includes widows. The impossibility of supporting oneself on the wages of a home finisher ensured that only married women would “choose” this form of employment.²⁸

The Southern Italian predilection for being among his or her own also figures into the prevalence of married Italian women in homework. The intense regionalism of these immigrants has been described by the term *campanilismo*, a reference to the village bell, suggesting that loyalties extended no farther than the boundaries of the *paese* or village. *Campanilismo* bred suspicion of outsiders, broadly defined, and contributed to insularity both within the family and within the larger Italian immigrant community. The factories were considered a corrupting, Americanizing influence, an opinion held by the Italian government as well as by the Italian-American community itself. This suspicion led to the sanctioning of boarding houses and homework no matter how bad the conditions, since they allowed married women to remain cloistered within the home, keeping them and their children away from any outside influences.²⁹

Working at home not only reinforced the central position of the Italian mother within the family, a position from which she derived some power; it also enabled these women to establish and maintain strong contacts with neighboring women who could in turn be a source of support for them in caring for children and securing other forms of aid. Finally, working at home gave these women an opportunity to instill a sense of economic responsibility in their children which would pay off in later years, when elderly parents could count on the support of their adult children.³⁰

While few among the Italian women homeworkers were full-fledged seamstresses, many had some experience with hand sewing, considered a necessary skill for young women to have in Italy. There is evidence that Italian women were sought out for their basic familiarity with sewing, and with embroidery in particular. According to one contemporary source, 90.9 percent of Southern Italian women who worked in lace-making, embroidery, and sewing in Italy worked in the needle trades in the U.S. Others who might not have had experience sewing were nevertheless drawn to the trade, and to homework in particular, because it conformed to Southern Italian notions of a woman's role as a homemaker. Nor did

homework threaten the traditional roles of husband and wife. Since the work was performed in the home on a part-time basis and for little pay, it did not pose a challenge to traditional male economic dominance.³¹

As noted above, Italian women were able to corner the market on homework by underbidding other immigrants. The practice of pooling family earnings made this possible. Italians throughout the industry were often accused of bringing down wages by accepting pitifully small amounts for their labor, even to the point of husbands and wives offering their services to employers for the price of one worker. As another example, Italian home finishers accepted two-thirds of what German women had been earning in previous years.³² Yet, seen in the context of their lives in Italy, where hours of arduous farm labor yielded little if anything in the way of monetary reward, their willingness to work for less is understandable.

At the time, one argument used to explain the prevalence of Southern Italians among the tenement homeworkers in the garment industry was an inherent conservatism with regard to new modes of production. This is belied by the range of employment Italians found within the garment trades, from within the tenement shops to the most mechanized shirt-waist factories. Still, it is possible that the flood of Italian immigration beginning in the late 1800s and the willingness of married Italian women to work for lower wages in the tenements retarded Italians' movement toward modern factories and away from sweated labor.³³ This is difficult to know for certain, since prior to the 1892 law requiring homeworkers to obtain licenses there was little way to keep track of the numbers employed at home, and it is precisely this period that is needed for a comparison.³⁴ Yet we do know that as Italian women were entering the garment trades in the 1890s, the industry was already starting to become more mechanized. And the existence of this large force of tenement homeworkers contrasted sharply with the new modern factories.

The Work and Its Toll

Finishing consisted of basting; felling (stitching flat seams); sewing buttonholes; adding buttons, hooks, and eyes, along with trimmings (such as bows); and removing threads. The process varied somewhat, depending on the garment:

The work done on a coat in the home consists normally of felling the bottom of the coat, felling around the arm-holes and sometimes under the arms, and felling around the collar and cuffs. Sometimes there is extra work on pockets and down the front. The amount of this work done on different coats varies, but its general nature is in all cases the same, the only difference appearing in the relative fineness of the stitches taken.

By “finishing” a pair of pants is usually meant turning up the bottoms of the pants and basting or felling them down, finishing them around the band, and sewing on all buttons, buckles and sometimes extra tapes. In the case of the coat finishers, sewing on buttons does not form part of their work.³⁵

Although, as we have seen, many Italian women had some previous knowledge of sewing, the finishing of garments required little in the way of special skills or training. Indeed, when questioned as part of the study cited above, “Many of the women laughed when asked who taught them [finishing]. The idea that teaching was necessary seemed absurd.”³⁶

Even though we are mainly concerned here with home finishing, it is worth noting the tasks involved in the production of artificial flowers and plumes, the two other homework industries in the needle trades that were also dominated by Italian immigrant women. Artificial flower makers, the most poorly paid of homeworkers in the garment industry, were occupied in pulling apart the precut petals of artificial roses, violets, or poppies; securing them onto the stem; pinching them into place; and occasionally pasting leaves onto the stem. All steps leading up to this were performed in the factory. The work of women in the feather trade consisted of wil-
lowing plumes—that is, “tying to every ‘flue’ or filmy strand of a good ostrich feather two strands stripped from inferior ostrich feathers.”³⁷

Home finishers most often received work through a contractor, though it was not unusual for them to receive bundles directly from the manufacturer, as was most often the case with artificial flower makers.³⁸ As noted, contractors were not necessarily members of the same ethnic group. Given that Italian contractors were far outnumbered by their Jewish counterparts, it is likely that many Italian home finishers received work from Jewish contractors and manufacturers. In fact, some Jewish contractors were known to hire only Italian women to finish garments at home. One report from 1900, while relying on ethnic stereotypes of the era, neverthe-

less acknowledged the role of the Jewish contractor in giving out work to Italian homeworkers by noting: "The tenement workers are mostly Italians. Among the shop workers and contractors the Hebrews predominate. The dense ignorance of the Italians make [sic] them an easy prey to the shrewd Hebrew contractors."³⁹

Although factory jobs were advertised in the Italian-language newspapers, jobs for home finishers were not advertised, suggesting that Italian women were most often recruited by other *paesani* in neighboring tenements. A home finisher might also find work through a sign in the window of a shop, again suggesting the ease with which employers were able to recruit Italian immigrant women for home finishing work.⁴⁰

Women who went directly to manufacturers for work often had to waste precious hours waiting for their bundles. The use of children to ferry unfinished and finished bundles between tenement apartment and factory saved their mothers' time, which could then be spent working on garments. Once the work was in the home, the homeworker was able to set her own pace, depending on how great her need for the income and how much time she could find between caring for young children and performing household tasks. In the absence of a foreman, the amount of time worked and how it was allocated was up to the individual worker. But out of sheer necessity, many if not most women found themselves working up to eleven hours per day.⁴¹

As with other aspects of the needle trades, the pace of homework was unevenly distributed throughout the course of the year. Artificial flower production, for example, was carried on primarily between January and June. Home finishers, too, experienced periods of slack time. They might work long days for weeks and months and suddenly find themselves with little to do in the way of paid work.⁴²

The influx of Italian immigrants proved a boon for manufacturers, who found they could substantially cut costs by shipping out the final stage of production to Italian immigrant women. Even when sweatshops were more common, contractors often preferred to send garments out to be finished. Since they worked at home, the women absorbed the cost of light, heat, and rent—and even, sometimes, of needles—saving contractor and manufacturers those expenses.

Children as young as four and five years old aided their mothers with homework in a number of ways. As noted, they transported bundles of

clothing back and forth between their apartment and the manufacturer; they participated directly in the making of artificial flowers; and they helped with the finishing of garments by pulling out bastings. The degree to which they participated in the actual work varied, depending on the skill level required; the willowing of plumes, for example, required more dexterity than most young children were capable of. At the very least, children freed up their mothers to do homework by performing household tasks and looking after younger children. Though it would be easy to dismiss the contributions of children as incidental, children played a crucial economic role in the homeworking Italian family. Without their assistance, it is unlikely that Italian women could have worked for the meager piece rates they accepted. It was children's labor that allowed Italian women to underbid other immigrants.⁴³

Reports like the following indicate the toll homework took on these children:

Children four years of age and upwards were found working after school hours, during meal hours and on Saturdays. The school work suffers and is neglected, and the education of the child seriously interfered with. In one case, a child eight years of age was reported for the defective class because she slept in the classroom in the morning. Investigation showed that the child was obliged to sew buttons on knee pants, and had to do a certain amount of work at home, irrespective of the time it took, so that every morning the child came to school in an exhausted condition. "There was nothing wrong with the child; she was not defective, simply tired."⁴⁴

As the above suggests, the children of Italian immigrants were more likely than other children to find themselves in so-called "steamer" classes. These classes were designated for slow learners—often immigrant children who did not know English. Sluggishness and poor performance on the part of Italian children were mistaken for low intelligence when in fact children were suffering from lack of sleep—and, in some cases, malnourishment from living in impoverished homes. Italian children were also disproportionately represented among truants, because of the need to stay home and work.⁴⁵ The following testimony from homeworking children reveals the degree to which work took precedence over all else, including recreation:

Angelina says, "When I go home from school I help my mother to work—I help her earn the money—I do not play at all. I get up at six o'clock and I go to bed at ten o'clock." Camilla, 9 years old, says, "I have no time for play, when I go home from school, I help my mother. Half hour I make my lessons. Every morning I get up at 6 o'clock—I go to bed at 11 o'clock." Maria: "I have no time to play when I work by my mother, but when I don't work, I mind the baby and clean the house."⁴⁶

Indeed, some children were so involved in homework that their existence was unknown to other children in the building, since they rarely went out to play. While boys participated to some degree in homework with their mothers, girls within the family shouldered a greater share of the responsibility. And although home finishing was largely the work of women and children, Italian men who were unable to find employment for health or other reasons, or during slack periods on their own jobs, sometimes also worked alongside the rest of the family, as did extended family members within the household.⁴⁷

Homework had the advantage of keeping children with their mothers, who could exercise some control—even if only in theory—over the amount of hours they worked. Nevertheless, homework was viewed by some contemporary observers as the most sweated form of garment work, even in the absence of a contractor. Indeed, the report of one Italian commentator suggests that the term "sweatshop" was used interchangeably with "homework" by Italian immigrants themselves.⁴⁸

The conditions, as described in numerous reports and articles of the period documenting the home and work lives of homeworkers in the garment industry, were often abysmal. Apartments tended to be dirty, with little fresh air or light. Poor sanitation facilities, limited to either out-houses in the courtyard or a single toilet for numerous apartments, along with so many people living in such close quarters and the use of courtyards, cellars, and even hallways for the disposal of foodstuffs all contributed to a pervasive stench. In warm weather, tenement dwellers would sleep on fire escapes to get some relief from the overpowering odors of the building.

The following description conveys the dark, spare, and cramped nature of these tenement living quarters that doubled as work spaces:

The typical Italian home . . . is the two-room tenement. . . . The larger room of the two, which is used as a kitchen, dining-room, and general living-room, possesses two windows through which the room is in general fairly well lighted. On those lots where there is a rear tenement building the supply of light both for the rooms in this building and for the back rooms in the front building is generally less satisfactory. The smaller room, which is used as a bed-room, is not lighted from outside at all, but has a little window opening into the public hall-way, which in turn has no opening for light and air between the first floor and the roof. . . . The furniture of the living-room consists generally of a stove, table, a few chairs, sometimes a shelf, with varied articles on it, a few cooking utensils, some dishes, and images or pictures of the saints. Before the last are frequently placed artificial flowers or candles, for all these women are Catholics. In four of the living-rooms beds were found, and in the same number, cots. That these did not appear more frequently was doubtless due to the orders of the factory inspectors, for in several other cases it was evident that these rooms served at night as bed-rooms.⁴⁹

While some were no doubt able to keep their apartments more tidy than others, contemporary commentators often noted the disorderliness of the tenement apartments of homeworkers: “L'accatastamento di stracci, utensili di cucina, lavoro a domicilio, ecc., e indescrivibile. Non si capisce come il lavoro possa esser tenuto pulito in tali condizioni.” (The stacks of rags, kitchen utensils, homework, etc., is indescribable. It is difficult to understand how the work [i.e., the clothing] can be kept clean in these conditions.) Few observers seemed to appreciate the near-impossibility of maintaining middle-class standards of cleanliness in overcrowded apartments that doubled as workrooms.⁵⁰

Italian tenement homeworkers and their families were plagued by disease, but the presence in the home of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis did nothing to halt production. Some of the blocks inhabited by Italian home finishers investigated in a 1911 study had the highest rates of disease and death in New York City. Italian children had a death rate from measles five times higher than that of the city as a whole and the highest mortality rate from scarlet fever and whooping cough; homeworkers in the Italian district of the city were fourteen times more likely to die from tuberculosis than people in the wealthy neighborhoods near Central Park. Numerous examples exist of women either ill themselves or with

sickly children present who continued their work unabated. Clothes were sometimes used as bed coverings, further exacerbating the fear of contagion spreading to the public through clothing manufactured in the tenements. Among the most common and worrisome diseases were tuberculosis, scarlet fever, consumption, measles, and typhoid fever.⁵¹

The prevalence of disease was related to the crowded and unsanitary conditions in the tenements. Though tenement apartments were small, the problem of overcrowding was aggravated in Italian families, who often resorted to doubling up with other families or taking in boarders to help meet expenses. The overcrowding in these small apartments was frequently commented upon by contemporary observers like this factory inspector:

In these places where quantities of ready-made clothing are finished, we have found many instances of the very worst kind of over crowding. Two, and sometimes three, families are herded together in apartments of two, three and four rooms. The aggregate number of persons living promiscuously in this manner ranging from eight to fourteen.⁵²

Living in such close quarters, in poorly ventilated apartments with minimal sanitation, contributed to high levels of disease. The diet of Italian families—which by necessity was often limited to macaroni and bread, with little in the way of protein or fresh vegetables and fruit—was also a factor. In addition to major diseases, homeworkers suffered from some of the same work-related health problems that their fellow factory workers did, such as eye strain and nervous tension.⁵³

The unhealthful conditions of Italian tenements were reflected in a high infant mortality rate. Italian immigrant women, who tended to marry young, had high fertility levels, and it was not unusual for home finishers to work throughout their pregnancy, even up until the day of the delivery. Once the baby was born, mothers tended to nurse for several years, as a matter of both economy and convenience, and the poor physical health of the mothers undoubtedly contributed to the large number of deaths among infants born into Italian immigrant families in New York City.⁵⁴ The conditions which contributed to the contraction of disease, and the untimely deaths of Italian immigrant homeworking women in the garment industry and their families, are summarized in the following

excerpt by Dr. Antonio Stella, an Italian-American physician writing in the May 4, 1904, issue of *The Survey*:

Six months of life in the tenements are sufficient to turn the sturdy youth from Calabria, the brawny fisherman of Sicily, the robust women from Abruzzi and Basilicata, into the pale, flabby undersized creatures we see, dragging along the streets of New York and Chicago, such a painful contrast to the native population! Six months more of this gradual deterioration, and the soil for the bacillus tuberculosis is amply prepared. In many of those occupations [in the factories and shops], besides the direct irritation to the bronchial mucous membrane from the inhalation of dust, the work itself requires a sitting position in which the chest is bent forward, and thus prevents the expansion of the lungs, and directly interferes with the proper aeration of the pulmonary apices.⁵⁵

But no matter how poor the conditions—no matter how “sweated” the work—the homeworkers, contractors, and manufacturers knew that there were always more Italian women willing to take the place of any who might question the load.

The compensation that women received for their homeworking efforts was pitifully low. Poor wages were not unusual in the garment industry at large, but as one government observer noted in a 1902 report of the New York State Department of Labor, “the wages earned by workers in the factory, however inadequate, are princely beside the earnings of those who take work home.”⁵⁶ Homeworkers in the industry were paid by the piece. At the turn of the last century, home finishers received between \$.05 and \$.07 per coat, with each coat taking between forty-five minutes and an hour to complete. Each pair of pants required an average of an hour’s work, for which a home finisher would receive between \$.04 and \$.07.⁵⁷ At these rates, a home finisher would have to put in ten-hour days to earn about \$3 a week, if she worked on coats, or \$2.40 a week, if she worked on pants. To get some idea of how low this wage was in real terms, consider that an Italian family of between four and five people spent \$59.28 a month to rent a three-room apartment and pay for food, clothing, and medicine.⁵⁸ The husbands of home finishers earned on average between \$6 and \$8 a week and sometimes as little as \$3 a week.⁵⁹ Additionally, lengthy periods of unemployment among husbands or slack time for

home finishers meant no income whatsoever. Despite numerous hours of work each week, it would have been impossible for a home finisher to support herself without the help of her family. It is easy to see both why Italian women worked and the importance of their wages to the family's survival, no matter how meager their income.

As we have seen, it was common for Italian women to supplement the family income by taking in boarders. Although boarders typically contributed only about \$1 or \$2 at most a week toward the rent, that income could mean the difference between meeting monthly expenses and falling short. Similarly, the wages of adult Italian-American children were often crucial to the family's economic survival. Italian-American children, in contrast to the children of other immigrants, who used their wages for entertainment and personal items, often turned over their unopened pay envelopes to their parents—some willingly, others less so.⁶⁰

Artificial flower making and the willowing of plumes ranked near the bottom of homework tasks in any industry in terms of low wages. One homemaker claimed to have taken one and one-half days to produce a finished plume which retailed for \$25; her pay was \$0.72.⁶¹

Despite the low wages and irregularity of work, however, Italians were rarely found on charity rolls, and they turned to charitable organizations only as a last resort despite the grinding poverty many endured. This can be seen as a testament both to their resourcefulness and to the strength of family and community support. But it also reflects a deep-seated distrust among Southern Italians of charitable agencies outside of the Roman Catholic church.⁶²

Reforming the Homework System

Homework faced vocal opposition from reformers, unions, and regulatory agencies, but ultimately nothing was able to eradicate the practice completely in this period. This speaks to the economic importance of homework at the time, both to the garment industry and to the workers themselves. Contrary to common understanding, homework was not “a residual form of production” left over from preindustrial times; rather, it was “integral to the industrial revolution in the core of capitalist economies.”⁶³ It also reflects the weakness of unions—which, together with the

New Deal government of the 1930s, were finally able to bring homework to an end, at least for some time. Italian homeworking women remained largely invisible to New York State legislators, who in essence refused to recognize the women as workers and legislate accordingly. Just as in the case of the sweatshops, most legislation around homeworkers in the garment industry was aimed at protecting consumers rather than workers.

Early legislation attempting to curb the abuses of the sweatshops had little effect on homeworkers. In 1892, legislation banning residential manufacturing in tenements by members outside of the immediate family was instituted, but since homework usually involved only the immediate family, the law had little impact. The law did, however, require licensing of tenement homeworkers. Various attempts were made at reforming homework itself. An amendment to the 1892 law authorized the use of tags to identify clothing that had been exposed to contagion in the tenements. Sometimes these clothes were destroyed outright. In 1904, legislation was passed requiring all tenements with homeworkers to obtain a license, placing the onus on tenement owners rather than on the homeworkers themselves, whose frequent movement from building to building strained the recordkeeping and inspection capacity of the authorities. Under the law, the apartments of homeworkers were subject to inspection every six months.⁶⁴

Later legislation was aimed at the specific populations and products involved in homework. In 1912, a fifty-four-hour workweek for women was passed—with little effect on homeworking women, who could not be monitored. A 1913 law prohibited the manufacture of certain items in the home—but, significantly, neither home finishing nor homework on feathers and artificial flowers was outlawed. In the same year, a law preventing children under fourteen from working in tenement manufacturing was implemented; but it, too, was easily evaded. Compulsory education laws in this period were also aimed at keeping children from participating in home manufacturing. These were some of the more notable examples of legislation against homework, but most legal measures were hidden in the form of sanitary and health regulations rather than aimed directly at homework itself.⁶⁵

Homeworkers and manufacturers were able to circumvent most restrictions without apparent difficulty. The insufficient number of inspectors and loopholes in the legislation made this fairly easy. The law regarding

child labor, for example, stipulated that manufacturers could be prosecuted only if it could be proven that they knew child labor was being used to make their goods.⁶⁶

Italian workers responded in various ways to these attempts at regulation. Many seem to have complied with the registration law, probably the least restrictive measure taken by the authorities. Other laws met with occasional resistance. At least one exasperated inspector who “was threatened with bodily harm” while attempting to tag tenement clothes remarked, “It will be remarkable if the law can be successfully enforced without the enactment of a tragedy, as we have to deal with a class of people who are impulsive and hot-headed.”⁶⁷ Others took a more subtle approach to evading the law. A 1911 article in a social work journal described the experience of an Italian-speaking representative of a reform organization who visited a tenement in search of a young female homemaker. The girl’s mother, unaware that the woman knew Italian and thinking that she had come from the Board of Health to close down their operation, led her slowly up the stairs to her apartment while calling to her daughter in Italian to hide the plumes she was working on in another apartment.⁶⁸

Many government officials and reformers realized early on that, owing to the difficulty of ensuring compliance, reform would not end the abuses of the homework system in the garment industry. Only by making homework illegal nationally could the problems associated with it be eradicated. But the interests of the manufacturers who relied on cheap labor in the form of homeworking immigrant women prevailed. Nor was there complete indifference to the plight of the homeworking mother—who, despite homeworking’s poor conditions and low wages, would have had no other way of contributing to the family income and caring for her children in the absence of tenement homework. The situation was summed up in one report which noted that abolishing homework would “cripple certain industries and would work great hardship to thousands of workers engaged in them.”⁶⁹

The unions saw in homeworkers—and home finishers, in particular—a threat to factory workers, who could not compete with the low wages home finishers accepted. Out of self-interest, they chose to oppose homework at every turn, rather than attempting the difficult task of organizing the overwhelmingly non-English-speaking Italian home finishers and

other homeworkers in the garment industry. The logistical obstacles to organizing a dispersed workforce were also considerable. In any case, Italian home finishers initially demonstrated little interest in trade unionism, and Southern Italians as a group, rightly or wrongly, were identified early on as particularly difficult to organize, which may have inhibited attempts at unionization among homeworkers.⁷⁰ The efforts of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) in the early 1900s to organize Italian women in the garment industry, along with the experience of the organizers of the uprising of the 20,000, suggest that when unionists paid attention to the cultural and other specific concerns of Italian women and their families and the larger Italian community, their chances for bringing Italian women into the union improved. The WTUL, for example, a unique organization of working-class and middle-class women which promoted unionism, formed a special Italian Committee to recruit Italian women. They recognized the importance of taking the customs and concerns of Italian women and their families seriously—by, for example, offering dowry benefits and, unlike the organizers of the 1909 strike, avoiding late-night meetings.⁷¹

Middle-class women reformers took a special interest in the plight of homeworking mothers and their children. Child labor and the threat of contagion posed by clothing made under unsanitary conditions were the stated concerns of reformers, but they tended to look at these issues from the perspective of the consumer and the larger society rather than from the perspective of the homeworker herself. Organizations such as the New York Consumer League (NYCL), a local branch of the National Consumers' League, campaigned for various forms of regulation, including a League tag to identify clothing made under proper conditions by manufacturers who did not use child labor or homeworkers. They also worked for legislation limiting the hours women and children could work. They were supported in their claims about the exploitative and unhealthy conditions homeworkers toiled under by the press, and by the reports of government committees established to investigate immigrants, the sweating system, and the garment industry.⁷²

In this era of profound xenophobia and ethnocentrism, when Southern Italians were seen as members of an inferior racial group, both reformers and legislators sometimes seriously misconstrued the motivations of the Italian immigrant family. Fathers were accused of "sweating" their wives

and children while they loafed around the house or drank their families' money away. The practice of having children work in the home, sometimes at the expense of attending school, was attributed to the extreme greed of the parents rather than to dire need. As one example, an 1898 report accuses Italians of abusing their children by making them work for a pittance while their parents "hoard" money to return to Italy. According to the report, the desire of Italian parents to return to Italy "makes them oblivious of their duty as parents. As soon as a child is able to add a few cents to their coffers, directly it is placed at work in its home, and no thought of bringing it up in a manner destined to develop it into a healthy, intelligent American citizen occurs to them." Indeed, the Italian "swarms" were accused of causing a decline in the standards of American citizenship. The NYCL itself drew a direct connection between child labor in the garment industry tenements and the decline of American citizenship. The conflation of certain immigrant groups with the sweating system and its related problems led some to call for restrictions on immigration.⁷³

The accusation that Italian parents kept their children at home to work for the enrichment of the parents instead of sending them to school was particularly onerous. In some cases parents did purposely keep children at home to help with the workload. More often, however, children attended school by day and worked with their mothers at night. This was especially true of daughters. Southern Italian parents were also often ignorant of compulsory education laws, which would have kept their children in schools and away from homework. Some undoubtedly could not see the use of sending their children to school when they could be contributing to the family income, since schooling was rare in Southern Italy and, in any case, few escaped lives of manual labor.⁷⁴

Reformers' attempts to ameliorate the poor conditions associated with homework were not always appreciated by the homeworkers themselves. Legislation passed as a result of the work of reformers may actually have served only to further restrict the choices of immigrant women and has, in any case, never been fully effective, with homework re-emerging again and again within the industry. While some reformers no doubt approached the issue with the best of intentions, the debates over homework were often thinly veiled discussions regarding the nature of motherhood and the home and issues other than the abuses suffered by workers. Indeed, much of the reformers' outrage over homework was rooted in the

perceived threat it posed to traditional notions of middle-class home life and gender roles rather than in concerns over the living conditions of immigrant families.⁷⁵

Ethnicity and the Needle Trades

Because of the immigrant character of the garment industry and particularly the way in which different ethnic groups have tended to dominate the industry at different times, exactly how ethnicity affects which groups enter the industry and in what capacity has long been a question. The example of Italian home finishers and other homeworkers in the garment industry suggests that while there are certain structural constants which encourage immigrants to enter the garment trades, cultural imperatives can operate in conjunction with those constants to determine how a given immigrant group fits into the industry. The fact that Italian and Jewish workers entered the turn-of-the-twentieth-century garment industry at about the same time and quickly came to represent the two largest ethnic groups in the industry provides a point of comparison. As we have seen, a combination of factors, including cultural norms specific to Southern Italians of the time, helps to account for the domination of Italian mothers in home finishing and the relative lack of Italian men as contractors, for example.

But the example of Italian home finishers also suggests the ways in which the industry itself may in turn be shaped by different ethnic groups. The large numbers of Italian women who knew embroidery, for example, led the fashion industry to create styles that took advantage of this skill. Similarly, the willingness of so many Italian women to work at home for less than other homeworking women at a time when the industry was beginning to become more mechanized contributed to the continuation of this form of sweated labor even as the sweatshops were dying out. As Eileen Boris notes in her full-length study of homework, "the cheap labor of Italian homeworkers competed successfully with factory efficiency."⁷⁶ Had an abundance of cheap labor in the form of immigrant Italian mothers not flooded the garment industry when it did, the industry might have taken a different turn.

That homework enabled Italian women to uphold certain cultural ideals points to the importance of evaluating the work lives of immigrants

from their own vantage point as well as from that of middle-class reformers, government officials, and others involved in efforts to ameliorate the abuses of the garment industry. As we have seen, representations of homework from this period reveal as much if not more about middle-class understandings of gender and ethnic differences, for example, than about the reality experienced by homeworking women. Middle-class reformers saw in homework “the destruction of the home,” whereas for Italian homeworkers it was a means for “the fulfillment of familial duties,” including caring for small children while contributing to the family economy. Manufacturers clearly exploited the cheap labor provided by Italian homeworkers, and by choosing homework in such numbers, Italian women themselves contributed to the lack of other forms of employment available to them.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Italian homeworkers themselves, homework was a desirable option, a largely successful economic strategy among limited choices that enabled them to maintain their cultural values.

Women waiting for employment at a union office in the 1960s. Latino workers, first Puerto Ricans and later Dominicans, started entering the industry in large numbers in the 1930s. By the 1960s, they were a major segment of the workforce. Photo courtesy of the Kathy Andrade Papers, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, CUNY.

7

On Dominicans in New York City's Garment Industry

Ramona Hernández

Reasons for Leaving Home

MASSIVE EMIGRATION from the Dominican Republic to the United States began in 1966 with the coming to power of President Joaquin Balaguer. As indicated in Graph 1, below, the number of people leaving home increased annually. The numbers began to decline only in 1996, when the effects of new legislation initiated in the mid-1980s to curtail general immigration began to be felt among those waiting for U.S. visas.

A large contingent of Dominicans left their native land between 1963 and 1965 in the wake of the political instability triggered by the assassination of dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo in 1961 and the discontent that culminated in a military coup d'état in 1963 and a civil war at the beginning of 1965. No doubt many of the Dominicans who left home during these tumultuous years were bona fide members of the well-to-do social classes in the Dominican Republic. In 1966, however, migration from the Dominican Republic took on another character; it could no longer be associated with political instability or discontent, but was more the product of uprooted blue-collar and jobless people put into motion by a social system incapable of absorbing them.

Upon assuming the direction of the Dominican government in 1966, Balaguer tackled two principal concerns: economic development and po-

GRAPH 1
Dominicans Admitted to the U.S., 1965–2002

Source: Office of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security.

litical stability. During his first two four-year terms (1966–1974), Balaguer implemented an economic model that eased the entrance of United States investments and tended to emphasize industrial production, via free trade zones, commercial trade, and finance, to the detriment of agricultural production. Politically, Balaguer put in place a reign of terror that virtually dismembered the opposition through frequent incarcerations and assassinations and the expatriation of political dissidents. The modernization of the army and the national police force, with assistance from the Pentagon and the CIA, provided the necessary infrastructure to ruthlessly impose order by the sword in the country, as may be gathered from the fact that Balaguer's first two terms in office left a toll of over three thousand people killed.¹

During Balaguer's first twelve-year regime, from 1966 to 1978 (he later returned to office), the Dominican Republic would be characterized by dichotomous tendencies. On the one hand, there was unprecedented economic growth, via the expansion of industrial production and the business sectors. On the other hand, there were growing unemployment levels provoked by the intensification of industrial capital, the lack of a policy of job growth, and a growing pool of people who had been uprooted from the countryside by a dual process involving mechanization and land tenure. In the end, Balaguer's economic policies resulted in a growing surplus of laborers unabsorbed by the expansionist economy. Similarly, the government encouraged the formation of an urban middle class associated with the expansion of public jobs and of the commercial and financial sectors. Its purchasing power activated and expanded the levels of consumption of the internal market, while at the same time, growing numbers of the working class, unemployed and underemployed, remained disenfranchised, since they could not afford even basic necessities.

From 1970 to 1974, during Balaguer's second term, the Dominican Republic experienced the highest economic growth rate of any Latin American country, with an average net profit of over 54 percent in the industrial sector. Yet, during the same years the country had an official unemployment rate of over 20 percent, and over half of the working people were underemployed; the bottom fifth of the population in terms of income lost over half its income, and 75 percent of the people did not consume the number of calories and nutrients required to maintain an adequate diet.

By 1978, the import substitution economic model, the leading developmental strategy implemented during these years, had reached its limits. It was obvious that the country was importing much more than it was producing, and the number of unemployed continued to grow. Capitalists accumulated capital mainly on the basis of commercial trade (particularly through the import market), activity that was subsidized by the government, and by reselling at high prices and paying extremely low wages. While inflationary prices affected most workers, the government increasingly borrowed money from foreign institutions to pay for capital goods, industrial inputs, and normal public expenditures and for the creation of nonproductive jobs. In the end, money was borrowed to repay interest accrued on these debts. By 1982, unable to pay its foreign creditors, the country was placed under an austerity plan by the International Monetary Fund—which, as one measure to repair the troubled economy, froze workers' wages.

During the 1980s, emphasis was placed on the development of the tourist and agribusiness industries, both connected to a new economic orientation which sought to clean up the economic mess left by the import substitution and export-driven economic models implemented over the past two decades. But, as critics have argued, the problems of increasing poverty and unemployment remained. The new economic policies, like the others, continued to emphasize foreign investment, encouraged the use of foreign inputs in the process of production, and functioned as economic enclaves without much articulation with other economically productive sectors.

Take, for instance, the tourist industry, presently the country's most dynamic economic sector, which, since the mid-1980s, has become the single largest contributor to the country's gross national product. Tourism is a volatile, seasonal, and highly competitive economic activity that depends on tourists' financial ability, time, and willingness to visit the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, its multiplying effects on the economy are highly limited. The services it renders are consumed right at the time of "production" and do not afford room for resale. At the same time, the tourist industry imports most of the products it uses, from beds, linen, and silverware to most of the food tourists consume, thus increasing the country's overall imports. But most of all, tourism is a capital-intensive

activity that functions on the basis of a skilled and semiskilled labor force, leaving very little room for the employment of unskilled workers. Thus, the number of jobs generated in this area has shown only a modest increase, from 10,000 in 1980 to 17,258 in 1987 and 24,000 in 1989. By 1996, the number of direct jobs generated by the tourist industry had increased to only 35,000.²

Open unemployment had reached 24.2 percent by 1984, 27.2 percent by 1985, and 28.7 percent by 1986. Inflation, on the other hand, increased from 7.7 percent in 1983 to 38 percent in 1984 and 47 percent in 1985.³ Any accurate analysis of the performance of the Dominican economy must evaluate two distinct sectors: the people and the capitalists. For most Dominican people, the national economy has been in a constant state of crisis. For capitalists, however, the economy has gone through stages reflecting the exhaustion of given economic modalities and reorientations in search of expansion of capital accumulation.

Neither the administrations of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano, which ruled the country from 1978 to 1986, nor that of the returning Balaguer in the period 1986–1990 generated any improvement in the lives of most people at home. During the 1980s—“the lost decade,” in the words of the reputable economist Bernardo Vega—most workers who needed to work for a living suffered. Many were displaced from the process of production by an economy that systematically introduced technology into production and increasingly depended on a labor force that possessed formal schooling and training. In addition, many workers, uprooted from the countryside, began to move to the urban centers and cities in search of jobs. In 1950, less than 24 percent of the Dominican people were considered to be urban. During the following decades, however, the internal migration of people accelerated dramatically, and by 1985 the proportion of urban dwellers had already reached almost 58 percent.

In spite of the economic boom of the last years of the 1990s, unemployment has remained consistently high. In 1993 the unemployment rate in the Dominican Republic was 26.2 percent; by 1996, it had increased to 37.6 percent.⁴ In a study conducted by the International Labor Organization it was found that the informal economy provided 50 percent of all urban

jobs in the Dominican Republic. The same study found that among the seven countries studied, the Dominican Republic, with a GNP annual average growth of 4.1 percent, experienced the highest economic growth since 1994 but the lowest growth in the labor force during the same years.⁵

Assessing Those Who Come

During the 1970s, arguably one out of every four Dominicans migrating to the United States was likely to be a blue-collar worker—specifically, an operative—and three in fifty had a professional or technical career. During the same decade, less than one out every two Dominicans was likely to have an occupation at the time of migrating to the United States. During the 1980s the pattern slightly changed, since many more Dominicans, particularly males, were reported to have an occupation before departure. Although blue-collar workers continued to dominate the migratory flow in the 1980s by a very large margin, that decade featured more professional and technical workers migrating than during the 1970s. Such change is consistent with the economic crisis associated with the 1980s, which affected larger segments of the Dominican people.⁶ In addition, there have been more women than men emigrating from the Dominican Republic at any given period. The majority of those who leave home tend to have low educational attainment. In 1990, 52.3 percent of Dominicans in New York City who were twenty-five years of age or older did not have a high school diploma; by 1996, 54.7 percent of the same age group did not have such a certification.⁷

Dominicans as Workers in New York City

According to the U.S. census, in 1990 there were 511,297 Dominicans living in the United States, and over 65 percent of them were residing in the state of New York alone. In 1990, New York City in particular accounted for over 93 percent of those Dominicans who were living in the New York State area. As indicated in Table 1, from 1980 to 1990 the Dominican population of the city increased from 125,380 to 332,713, becoming the ethnic group with the largest growth in the city over that period. As indicated in Graph 1, their remarkable numerical gain was the result of a constant and growing immigration influx combined with high fertility rates among

TABLE 1
The Dominican Population of New York City, by Borough

<i>New York City Borough</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>% of Total Dominican Population for 1980</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>% of Total Dominican Population for 1990</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>% of Total Dominican Population for 2000</i>
Manhattan	62,660	50.0	136,696	41.1	185,808	33.5
The Bronx	17,640	14.1	87,261	26.2	181,450	32.7
Brooklyn	21,140	16.8	55,301	16.6	89,567	16.1
Queens	23,780	19.0	52,309	15.7	95,267	17.2
Staten Island	16	0.1	1,146	0.4	2,545	0.5
Total	125,380	100.0	332,713	100.0	554,638	100.0

Sources: For 1980 and 1990, Hernández, Ramona, Francisco Rivera-Batiz, and Roberto Agodini, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 1995). For 2000, Hernández, Ramona and Francisco Rivera-Batiz, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2003).

Dominican women, particularly in New York City.⁸ The massive arrival of Dominicans occurred at a time when New York City was undergoing a socioeconomic restructuring in the labor market. This transformation would have a remarkable impact on the need for and value of labor as well as on the creation of jobs.

The socioeconomic restructuring of New York City, which has been well studied and documented by other scholars, is beyond the scope of this article. The present study will only look briefly at those details that may help explain the position of Dominicans in the labor market of the city, particularly their situation in the manufacturing industry. The restructuring of the city has involved a transformation from an economy based predominantly on manufacturing production to one based on services. As a result of this change, New York City is commonly classified today as a postindustrial city.

Scholars generally agree that at some point during the 1950s the large manufacturing sector that had characterized the economic life of the city began to shrink, resulting in the disappearance of hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs—particularly in the garment industry, the largest area of industrial production. From 1969 to 1985, for instance, the city

lost 465,000 manufacturing jobs.⁹ The restructuring process dislocated not only manufacturing jobs themselves but a variety of other jobs that were tangentially connected to the manufacturing sector. Entire industrial headquarters moved out, and with them their employment opportunities. From 1969 to 1989, for instance, employment in wholesale trade declined from 309,000 to 229,000, and in trucking and warehousing from 41,000 to 26,000.¹⁰ Overall, the decline in employment occurred primarily among blue-collar and unskilled workers, who suffered from 1970 to 1986 the loss of 510,000 jobs in fields that required less than twelve years of education.¹¹

As indicated in Table 2, in 1980 the manufacturing sector constituted by far the single largest employer of Dominicans, employing almost one out of every two Dominican workers in New York City.¹² Although the number of Dominicans in the industry dramatically declined from 48.6 percent in 1980 to 25.7 percent in 1990 (see Table 3), nonetheless, the sector still employed the second largest contingent of Dominicans in 1990. By 2000, however, the decline continued, and the presence of Dominicans in the manufacturing industry dropped precipitously to 12.4 percent, as

TABLE 2
Industrial Distribution of the Labor Force in New York City, 1980

<i>Industry</i>	<i>% of Dominican Workers</i>	<i>New York City Average (in %)</i>
Agriculture, Forestry, & Mining	0.3	0.4
Construction	1.8	3.8
Manufacturing	48.6	18.0
Transportation, Communications, & Public Utilities	2.9	9.0
Trade	20.1	19.2
FIRE (finance, insurance, real estate)	6.3	10.5
Professional Services (Health, Education)	7.7	22.8
Business Services	4.8	6.5
Personal/Entertainment Services	6.4	5.6
Public Administration	1.4	4.9

Source: Hernández, Ramona, Francisco Rivera-Batiz, and Roberto Agodini, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 1995).

TABLE 3
Industrial Distribution of the Labor Force in New York City, 1990

<i>Industry</i>	<i>% of Non- Hispanic White</i>	<i>% of Non- Hispanic Black</i>	<i>Hispanic</i>	<i>Dominican</i>
Agriculture, Forestry, & Mining	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.3
Construction	4.9	4.2	4.9	4.3
Manufacturing	10.9	8.2	18.6	25.7
Transportation, Communi- cations, & Public Utilities	8.2	11.7	7.6	6.6
Trade	17.9	14.1	22.5	27.6
FIRE (finance, insurance, real estate)	13.1	10.1	8.6	5.5
Professional Services (Health, Education)	28.7	32.0	19.7	14.4
Business Services	6.2	7.1	7.0	6.8
Personal/Entertainment Services	5.5	5.8	7.0	7.0
Public Administration	4.1	6.5	3.6	1.9

Source: Hernández, Ramona, Francisco Rivera-Batiz, and Roberto Agodini, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 1995).

reflected in Table 4. It is important to add that Dominican women tend to predominate in manufacturing: Almost one out of every two Dominican workers employed in the manufacturing industry in 1990 was a woman.

In addition, most Dominicans associated with the manufacturing sector in 1980 and 1990 were employed as operators, fabricators, and laborers in the garment industry. The entrance of Dominicans into the industry has been explained from two parallel perspectives: as needed workers and as thriving entrepreneurs.

As Workers

It has been argued that the shifting of the economy from manufacturing- to services-based generated a need for unskilled migrant workers. The

TABLE 4
The Industrial Distribution of Employment in New York City, 2000

<i>Category</i>	<i>Persons in the labor force</i>	
	<i>Proportion of New York City Labor Force (in %)</i>	<i>Proportion of Dominican Labor Force (in %)</i>
Agriculture, Forestry, & Mining	0.1	0.1
Construction	4.3	3.8
Manufacturing	6.6	12.4
Transport, Utilities, & Communications	8	8.6
Trade	12	19.0
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	11.4	7.0
Service Sector	52.7	46.9
Public Administration	4.5	2.2

Source: Hernández, Ramona and Francisco Rivera-Batiz, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socio-economic Profile* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2003).

argument is that contrary to what many believe, cheap immigrant labor is employed not only in decaying economic sectors but also in growing, productive areas. The shifting of the economy created global cities wherein the development of advanced service sectors resulted in the creation of new blue-collar, low-paying jobs and the expansion of the informal economy. Similarly, industrial production did not just disappear; instead, it was transformed, generating in the process new low-paying jobs.¹³ In the transformation process, large manufacturing industries, characterized by highly expensive technology and standardized production, were slowly replaced by another type of industrial option, represented by small industrial settings, scarce mechanization, and intensive use of labor. On account of the recurrence of sweatshops and industrial homework, low wages, dead-end jobs, and lack of unionization, sociologist Saskia Sassen has referred to this industrial option as a “downgraded” manufacturing sector.¹⁴

Jobs became available at a time when the native supply of low-value and powerless workers decreased, insofar as the formerly available pool consisted of workers who “have become politicized, are unwilling to take

highly undesirable jobs even if they pay minimum wage, and have access to welfare as an alternative to low-wage jobs.”¹⁵ Moreover, unionization among some, and “weak labor-market attachments” among others, affected the availability of a native cohort of cheap workers.¹⁶ In addition to their function as workers in a society facing a relative shortage of labor, immigrant workers were attractive to employers on account of their low-wage status as well as their lack of negotiating power.¹⁷ Other authors have argued that immigrant labor played a fundamental role in the resurgence of the garment industry in particular.¹⁸

Thus, the competitiveness of the “downgraded” manufacturing sector is generated by the effective reduction of costs of production. Indeed, in the eyes of Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, the process of deindustrialization, or the shifting from a manufacturing to a service economy, generated a loss of good-paying blue-collar jobs and an explosion of low-paying, low-skilled jobs in the service sector.¹⁹ The drop in wages was particularly felt in the apparel industry, which by the end of the 1960s paid wages below the average paid by other manufacturing industries in the city. In a 1984 ethnographic study conducted among Dominican women in New York City, Patricia R. Pessar found that the \$4.36 hourly rate earned by those women who worked in the garment industry was significantly lower than the average rate paid in the area. In addition, the author found that “a common strategy employed by owners to control . . . salary hikes is to augment piece rate quotas to ensure that increases in productivity do not lead to appreciably higher wages for individual workers.”²⁰ Data from U.S. censuses reflect that in both 1990 and 1996, Dominican women, when compared with other major ethnic groups, including Hispanic women, had the lowest earnings in New York City.²¹

As Entrepreneurs: Owning Garment Factories

An examination of self-employment among Dominicans residing in New York City was tackled, first, by Roger Waldinger, to be followed later by Alejandro Portes and Luis E. Guarnizo.²² These authors believe that self-employment among immigrants comes as a direct response to dead-end and low-paying jobs in the receiving society. Waldinger explains the en-

TABLE 5
The Annual Earnings of Workers in New York City, 1999

<i>Employed persons 16 years of age or older</i>		
<i>Population Group</i>	<i>Median Annual Earnings (in \$)</i>	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Dominican	18,589	12,923
New York City	29,155	24,469
Non-Hispanic White	41,717	31,488
Non-Hispanic Black	26,220	24,882
Hispanic	20,938	16,300

Source: Hernández, Ramona and Francisco Rivera-Batiz, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socio-economic Profile* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2003).

trance of Dominicans into the manufacturing business as the result of the city's economic restructuring; the relocation of capital, particularly in manufacturing; and the exodus of Italian and Jewish owners from the garment business. Portes and Guarnizo, on the other hand, explain the development of Dominican entrepreneurship in New York City from the perspective of the enclave economy. The enclave economy, as defined by Portes and Bach in an earlier study of Cuban and Mexican immigration in the United States, refers to a conglomerate of firms of any size owned and managed by members of a differentiated cultural or national minority.²³ While Waldinger's study focuses on Dominicans who specifically own garment industries, Portes and Guarnizo's study looks at business ownership in general among Dominicans.

In *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Trades*, Roger Waldinger discusses the entrance of two ethnic groups into the garment business in New York City: Chinese and Dominicans. In his view, the restructuring of the city's economy created structural factors, such as a demand and appropriate niche for garment production, that would encourage the proliferation of small industrial factories owned by immigrant capitalists. Besides, in the author's view, Chinese and Dominican immigrants shared a few characteristics that also enabled them to enter the garment industry as petty proprietors. They were inclined to hard work and are described as being able to withstand

extreme working conditions. While Chinese, for instance, worked an average of 51.8 hours and 5.8 days a week, Dominicans, for their part, worked 51.4 hours and 5.5 days a week.²⁴ In addition, both Chinese and Dominicans showed a good disposition for starting their own businesses with little investment and for running incredible risks. Yet, Waldinger's study reveals that Chinese owners have a higher success rate than Dominican owners.

In effect, from 1960 to 1985, the number of Chinese garment shops grew from 8 to 480. Similar data to describe the growth of Dominican garment businesses in the city are not provided by Waldinger, however.²⁵ Chinese garment owners were ahead of Dominicans because their firms were considerably larger, much older, and more numerous.

Why were Chinese more successful than Dominicans in the business if they both were immigrants and shared the same willingness to work extremely hard and take incredible risks to succeed? Waldinger's various answers to this question boil down to this: Chinese immigrants were more successful than Dominicans because the former possessed more of the "business relevant attributes" required for attaining success.²⁶ The attributes alluded to by Waldinger refer specifically to a number of qualifications, including the cultural and employment backgrounds that the two groups brought with them:

Comparisons of Hong Kong and Taiwan with the Dominican Republic show higher levels of urbanization, of employment in non-agricultural pursuits, and of literacy among the Chinese than among the Dominicans. Moreover, levels of prior professional and managerial experience were far higher among those Chinese immigrating to the United States between 1970 and 1979 than among those Dominicans who arrived during the same period.²⁷

Similarly, the decision to remain in the United States or return home is identified by Waldinger as a variable which not only influences the rate of success of these immigrants in the garment industry but also reflects the perception of the entire community to which these immigrants belong. The author found that Chinese success in the garment industry is related to the community's firm decision to settle permanently in the

United States. Dominicans, he argues, wanted to return home, and their community is perceived by the author as transient:

While the Chinese community by all accounts is a settlement of permanent immigrants. . . . Considerably fewer Dominicans seem ready to abandon their homeland, and after a stay in the United States that has averaged almost 17 years, more than half [of his sample] still planned to return at some future time Indeed, more than half of the Dominicans came with the intention of returning home. . . . This unsettled, almost transient nature of the [Dominican] owners' status strengthens their orientation toward their homeland.²⁸

Let us now turn our attention to Portes and Guarnizo's work. In *Capitalistas del trópico: La inmigración Dominicana en los Estados Unidos y el desarrollo de la pequeña empresa en la República Dominicana*, the authors examine the development of an entrepreneurial sector among Dominicans in New York City and in the Dominican Republic. The authors propose that the development of this ethnic entrepreneurial sector has been a means of upward social mobility of Dominicans. The business sector, conceived initially to satisfy the needs of immigrants, soon becomes a source of employment that compensates for the dead-end and low-paid jobs in the secondary labor market. The sector is perceived as an economic enclave, and the authors conclude that the "patterns of social interaction within the immigrant community create opportunities that, if not available to every one or in equal measure, offer to many a means of escaping the drudgery and stagnation of jobs in the secondary sector."²⁹ In addition, the authors contend that the accumulation of capital resources, business knowledge, and skills among Dominican entrepreneurs in the United States has spread to the Dominican Republic, where a capitalist sector with strong ties to the Dominican business enclave in the U.S. has developed.³⁰

Investments in manufacturing among Dominicans began in the early 1970s. The production of garments among Dominicans takes place under subcontracting arrangements. Larger garment firms, seeking to reduce their costs of production, delegate part of their production to smaller factories, many of which are owned by an emergent immigrant capitalist

sector but whose centers of operation are often located outside the boundaries of the Garment District and, in many instances, are associated with informal business practices. Indeed, Portes and Guarnizo's ethnographic study documents the proliferation of an informal enterprise sector in Washington Heights, the largest Dominican neighborhood in New York City, comprised of grocery stores, taxi companies, auto repair shops, restaurants, and subcontracting garment centers.³¹

Dominican garment factories are mostly owned by men; Dominican women involved in the production of garments tend to own much smaller production units than their male counterparts. Women's operations are often established in their own homes, are for the most part informal, and specialize primarily in tedious sewing jobs or in a part of the production process that does not require any sewing experience (for example, cleaning the garment or making sure the garment is free of unnecessary threads). While factories owned by men may have on average around twenty-seven workers, garment operations owned by Dominican women may have from one (the owner herself) to five workers, who are paid on a piecework basis.³²

Another Perspective

On the Business Owners

Waldinger's analysis seems to reflect a Weberian notion of cultural attributes and endowments associated with socioeconomic upward mobility among given ethnic groups.³³ In this sense, structures tend to lose their significance, since immigrants are seen as actors whose particular situations are defined or influenced by their cultural backgrounds and aspirations. In the case of migrant workers, however, it has been argued that whether or not a migratory movement is dominated by a "brain drain" or by unskilled workers, the degree of success or failure of that group in the receiving society is intrinsically connected to how that group is *perceived* and *received* in the host society.³⁴

Waldinger's analysis proposes a methodological approach that creates a dichotomy between individuals and society. The United States is presented as a series of pieces, disconnected and independent, and as a realm

within which one's attitudinal and cultural attributes operate over structures. This nonholistic approach overlooks the importance of inequality among immigrants in American society, and construes social mobility among these groups as the product of their particular background or outlook on life. A view that emphasizes cultural attributes over social structures may overlook the importance of racial and ethnic discrimination among immigrants in American society, and may construe social mobility among immigrant groups as a product of their particular background or outlook on life.

Similarly, we would agree with Waldinger that there are many Dominicans who do not see their migratory process as final and who may want to go back home, no matter what—even if just to be buried there near their family, as many frequently say. But we argue that if over thirty years of residency in the United States have left many Dominicans undecided about returning home or remaining in the receiving society, it is not necessarily because they have been unable to overcome their psychological transience. Rather, they have found it hard to adopt as their home a society in which precariousness and hostility await many of them. The typical Dominican community is not imagined by Americans as a tourist attraction: a rich zone of exotic, spiced foods and enchanted sites. It is not even perceived as a therapeutic retreat where white Americans go to quench their thirst for what is understood as “culturally ethnic.” The typical Dominican community is perceived more as a place where deviant acts are abundant, where even cops are prompted to violate the law, and where even food stores are thought to be centers of criminal activities.³⁵

Portes and Guarnizo's account of Dominican businesses in Washington Heights leads many to believe that entrepreneurial activities among Dominicans afford this group economic prosperity. Similarly, the impressive number of businesses established in Dominican neighborhoods, which are presumably owned by Dominicans, prompt some observers to suggest that Dominicans may have a natural inclination for business and that they are good at it. The truth of the matter is that in 1990, the census reported that only 7 percent of Dominican New Yorkers classified themselves as self-employed. The low percentage of Dominican entrepreneurs reported by the census data suggests that either the volume of economic enterprise among Dominicans is lower than empirical observation reveals

or that a good portion of Dominican businesses simply operate within informal channels.³⁶

It is important to add that none of the ethnographic studies conducted thus far of the Dominican business sector have measured their level of investment, their effectiveness and competitiveness, and most importantly, their rate of failure. In the ethnographic studies reviewed, however, one finds descriptions that clearly suggest that economic competitiveness among Dominicans rests more on the high levels of exploitation to which Dominican workers are subjected by Dominican business owners than on the economic capacity (i.e., expansion, level of investment, etc.) and possibilities of the Dominican business sector. In any case, an accurate appraisal of self-employment among Dominicans would require an analysis of their working conditions, including a calculation of the direct and indirect benefits (medical insurance, vacations, personal days, maternity leave, payment for overtime, etc.) rendered by their source of employment.

On the Need for Workers

Standard thinking on migration studies assumes that jobs await migrants in the receiving society. From that perspective, the migratory process invariably appears as a successful enterprise on the part of job seekers, whose mobility from society A (the home country) to society B (the host country) affords them the opportunity to become active members of the labor force. By implication, this viewpoint overlooks the possibility of marginalization and long-standing poverty among immigrants in connection with their exclusion from the process of production.

This study of the relationship between Dominicans and the New York City labor market questions the presumed smooth relationship between supply and demand in the immigrant labor market. The Dominican case, contrary to what many have imagined, reveals a group facing economic hardship as result of unemployment and underemployment. Once in New York City, Dominicans confront the reality of a changing labor market that increasingly requires workers with skills and training they do not have. As Dominicans came, the jobs they had the best chance of qualifying for were rapidly disappearing, and the competition for the remaining

jobs grew. In Washington Heights, the neighborhood with the largest concentration of Dominicans in New York City, peddling various tropical products and other low-priced consumer goods has become pervasive. But the two largest job markets, for both street vendors and taxi drivers (whether regulated or unregulated), appear to have become saturated. As the largest group of workers there, Dominicans often complain about other newcomers, their compatriots included, who also come to share their space to make a living.

By the 1960s, it was clear to many that labor supply had begun to exceed demand. Economic changes, particularly the flight of manufacturing capital out of New York City, had begun to produce noticeable effects, as we have seen—including the loss of both manufacturing jobs and a variety of other jobs only tangentially related to the manufacturing sector. Entire industrial headquarters moved out, and with them employment opportunities. From 1960 to 1980 the total number of jobs in New York City had decreased from 3,538,000 to 3,302,000; from 1966 to 1976, the employment-to-population ratio declined from 55 percent to 48 percent.³⁷ The manufacturing sector alone, by far the single largest employer of Dominicans in New York up to 1970, lost over 600,000 jobs between 1960 and 1990. This loss, the repercussions of which would be felt among most members of the labor force, would have far more devastating effects among blue-collar low-skilled and unskilled workers, for whom the manufacturing sector provided the greatest number of jobs. A vast number of the displaced workers would find no reentry into the expanding service sector.

As Sassen correctly notes, the manufacturing industry began a process of change which eliminated many jobs and generated others. A reflection of that change is the proliferation of thousands of small firms, established throughout New York City and the neighboring suburb of Long Island, whose production is not standardized or oriented to a general public. These customer-oriented small firms cater to the needs of particular clienteles. However, these new firms, ranging from electronics (particularly intended for the defense industry) to apparel and furniture, manage to employ only a small fraction of the total labor force of the city.³⁸

The limited capacity for job creation exhibited by the new industries accords with the fact that many of them do not require a large workforce for production. Generally, these industries produce for small or selected

clienteles whose primary requirement is quality, not quantity. Moreover, production in these industries is organized around what is called intellectual capital, meaning the combination of "patents, processes, management skills, technologies, information about customer and suppliers, and old-fashioned experience" defined by O'Neill and Moss.³⁹ That is to say, although these industries may rely on intensive use of labor rather than of capital, their level of output is reduced in scale. Moreover, their production remains linked to an overall labor force that ultimately cannot be completely unskilled.

Tables 3 and 4 also indicate that in the 1980s and 1990s Dominicans began to move into the service sector, as evidenced by their increasing participation in trade and professional services. Compared with other ethnic groups, Dominicans had the highest percentage of people employed in trade in 1990. While for Dominicans employment in trade represented 27.6 percent of (Dominican) workers, for non-Hispanic whites it represented 17.9 percent of their workforce, for non-Hispanic blacks 14.1 percent, and for Hispanics 22.5 percent. Trade among Dominicans is associated with employment in retail trade, particularly in eating and drinking establishments, grocery stores, apparel and shoe stores, and accessory stores.

The movement of Dominicans into the service sector, however, has in no way compensated for their loss of jobs in manufacturing. On the contrary, their movement has been characterized by a net loss of jobs—as reflected, as we will see, in an increase in unemployment and a decrease in labor force participation rates. If one follows closely Dominicans' sectoral movement, one sees that a clear pattern begins to emerge, a pattern which reflects that Dominicans are caught in a no-win situation. They are faced with both expulsion from a declining job market and inclusion into sectors of a job market that happen to be characterized by slow or negative growth.

During the past decades, substantial growth in the service sector has occurred within the FIRE (finance, insurance, real estate) industries as well as in government jobs, but not in trade or TCPU (transportation, communication, and public utilities), two of the three service sector job markets in which the participation of Dominicans has moderately increased. Trade and TCPU, in fact, were characterized by absolute job losses in the 1980s. Table 3 also indicates that compared with other ethnic

groups, in 1990, Dominicans had the lowest representation in FIRE industries as well as in public administration jobs. For example, while a total of 5.5 percent of Dominicans gained employment in FIRE industries, the percentages for the other groups were 13.1 percent for non-Hispanic whites, 10.1 percent for non-Hispanic blacks, and 8.6 percent for Hispanics. In short, while Dominicans have increased their participation rate in the service sector, their participation is quantitatively limited and involves an association with the least dynamic job markets of the service sector.

The scenario described thus far would suggest that the period of economic transformation was a tough time for blue-collar low-skilled and unskilled workers. Not only were well-paid manufacturing jobs exiting the city, but the restructuring process also seems to have reduced employment options at all levels. Economist Andrés Torres estimated that from 1960 to 1970 the secondary sector in effect lost 10 percent of its share, declining from 38.8 percent to 29.9 percent. More importantly, the proportion of jobs generated through the development of what Sassen has called “downgraded jobs,” associated with the manufacturing and service sectors during the restructuring process and filled primarily by immigrants, could not do much to increase the proportion of secondary sector jobs, which was the same in 1980 as it had been in 1960.⁴⁰

Indeed, data on unemployment and labor force participation rates among Dominican workers in New York City reflect a complex labor market that exhibits saturation and is less dynamic than what some migration scholars have suggested. In effect, in 1980, 1990, and 2000, Dominicans in New York City, both males and females, experienced the highest unemployment rates when compared with the New York City average rate and with the rates for non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, and Hispanics overall. Similarly, while in 1980 Dominican males had the highest labor force participation rates as compared with these same groups, in subsequent years their participation rate significantly dropped, from 73.1 percent in 1990 to 60.9 percent (the lowest among the groups) in 2000. Dominican women, for their part, had a labor force participation rate that was more or less comparable to that of other women in the city in 1980 and 1990, with the exception of non-Hispanic black women, who exhibited a higher participation rate as compared with all other women for both decades. By 2000, however, Dominican women had a labor force

participation rate that was comparable only to that of other Hispanic/Latina women (49.1 percent).⁴¹

On the Exploitation of Workers

If the transformation of the economy from one based primarily on the production of industrial products to one oriented more to the provision of services left many Dominicans without the possibility of finding a job, many of those who have been lucky enough to find jobs in the manufacturing industry experience high levels of exploitation and earn insignificant wages that are incapable of satisfying their needs. The “downgraded” manufacturing sector, associated with sweatshops and informal labor practices, means more than just the development of an industrial sector made up of small and less mechanized shops that came to replace an expensive and highly unionized type of industrial setting. It also means that workers who operate in these kinds of infrastructures often live below the poverty level, and that such conditions remain even when more workers are added in a given household. Indeed, as indicated in Table 6, in many cases the simple addition of an extra wage earner to a given household may not necessarily alleviate its state of poverty. Between 1980 and 1990, for example, the proportion of Dominican households with two workers that still fell below the poverty level increased by over 3 percentage points.⁴² Similarly, in the ethnographic study mentioned earlier, the au-

TABLE 6
Number of Workers in Dominican Households, 1980–1990

<i>Percentage of Dominican households</i>		
<i>Number of Workers</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>
0	9	10
1	26	22
2	30	28
3	23	25
4	12	15

Source: Candelario, Ginetta, Nancy López, and Ramona Hernández, “Working Papers on Census Data,” Working Group in Migration Studies (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 1996).

thor found that Dominican women who worked in the garment industry had difficulty fulfilling the basic needs of their households.⁴³

Dominicans who employ Dominicans in the enclave economy exploit their compatriots. In this sense, contrary to what has been suggested, the enclave economy does not necessarily offer Dominican workers a safe haven. Most Dominican enterprises are small capitalist ventures that capitalize precisely on cheapening further the value of labor. A good example of this is offered by the small garment units owned by Dominican women. These small centers of production tend to be subcontracted by larger Dominican-owned factories which, like the larger non-Dominican firms, effectively reduce their costs of production by delegating part of their production to units that may operate with complete informality, including with respect to the number of hours workers work and the conditions under which such work occurs.

Concluding Thoughts

Conditions in the labor market in the United States have changed. The nation's factories continue to shed jobs. In the garment industry, the number of jobs created does not match the number of those lost. More importantly, jobs requiring no or low skills, or skills that could be easily acquired on the job, are being replaced by jobs that require knowledge of pattern, design, and fabrics; these are jobs connected to the booming manufacturing market controlled by renowned designers. But the other jobs, those taken by immigrants and associated with a production system, dominated by sweatshops, in which workers earn wages that menace their own reproduction as well as the reproduction of their families, are not necessarily easy to get. More and more immigrants, possessing similar skills as Dominicans, full of hope, and eager to work, have continued to arrive. And the labor market continues to demand fewer and fewer workers who possess these skills.

Such realities complicate things further for Dominican workers: They increase competition and encourage substitution of workers in the labor market. Right now, we could safely say that most Dominican workers who work for others in the garment industry are not doing well. And we do not really know with certainty how Dominicans who own garment

factories are really faring. The potential of the Dominican business sector must be measured, in comparison with others and with representative and larger samples.

Regarding the service sector, it seems that for now the transition of Dominicans into the service sector is not as smooth as one would like it to be. The new economy has its problems, too, for those who do not have a college degree. Only time will tell whether Dominican workers, whether in the garment industry or elsewhere, will fare better.

Men and women working in a men's wear factory on Broadway in the 1970s. While trades have always been labeled as belonging to either men or women, ethnic culture and other factors have often determined which jobs were given to which gender. Courtesy of Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University.

8

Expanding Spheres

Men and Women in the Late Twentieth-Century Garment Industry

Margaret M. Chin

THIS PAPER WILL FOCUS on placing gendered meanings in a local context and using the global context as a way to explain workers' positions in New York City. Researchers have noted the unpredictability, inconsistency, and flexibility of gender. The question of how these representations vary in different arenas remains unexplored. Most feminist scholars of work go beyond recounting the fate of women workers to reveal processes through which the gendered character of labor power itself has been established.¹ This paper will suggest that gendered meanings can be constructed on more microlevels—that is, influenced by the local context.

I am arguing for the importance of the local context—the structural and cultural circumstances of what it means to be an immigrant or an illegal immigrant garment worker in New York City—in the formulation of gendered meanings. I will describe two types of garment factories: one in which mostly Mexicans and Ecuadorians work for Korean owners and the other, in which Chinese work for Chinese. The cases draw upon two years of field work, comprising observations and interviews completed from 1994 to 1996.

Within these local contexts, we can trace the consequences of the emergent gendered meanings. For example, in New York City's Chinatown, where the garment industry is mostly female, it supports a division

of labor wherein immigrant Chinese women work in the garment industry and Chinese men work in restaurants. Flexible hours in these garment shops allow these women to manage housework and child care responsibilities. Culturally, these women can maintain their roles as mothers. Yet, these women are also providing health insurance for their whole families, because the garment industry is unionized and provides health benefits that these women's husbands cannot obtain in the restaurant industry.

On the other hand, in the Korean sector of the garment industry, Latino men and women work side by side sewing. The undocumented Latinas who come to work in New York City already challenge the traditional role of the male migrant. They come, just like the men, to support their families at home. They aggressively look for work. At the same time, the Latino men who work in the garment industry are challenging the traditional notion that sewing is only a female job. In the sewing factories, men and women are both recasting another image of themselves. In both the Korean and Chinese sectors, then, local structural circumstances push men and women into new roles and propel a reconceptualization of sewing as gendered work.

A New International Division of Labor

The theory of the New International Division of Labor (NIDL) implies that all production will be divided among countries so that advanced countries would have service industries and all manufacturing would be moved overseas to countries with cheaper labor. Cheaper labor, it is explained, is the main attraction for the movement of capital,² especially when American corporations have been able to achieve a new level of control and decentralization, with mostly production moving overseas and control functions remaining in the United States.³

As a result of these international movements, the condition of United States jobs has worsened. There has been a steady decline in the number of manufacturing jobs for U.S. residents and a worsening of job conditions owing to increased competition from foreign-made goods.⁴

The main criticism of this theory is that it overemphasizes the significance of cheap labor. Because of this overemphasis, it is argued, these theorists anticipate a continued migration of manufacturing out of ad-

vanced countries to developing countries with cheaper labor. Other weaknesses in the theory are the absence of an explanation of how and why manufacturing remains in advanced countries, where production is usually more expensive, and that it neglects factors that may cause an internal division of labor based on race or class or immigration status.

If we look at the United States as an example, we find that there is a new, downgraded manufacturing sector that employs new immigrants. There seems to be a domestic division of labor, with the newest immigrants working in the very same manufacturing sectors that should have left the country. Most of these immigrants cannot speak any English, and often they are undocumented. Industries such as garments and electronics remain in high-waged countries like the United States precisely in order to employ the newest and most vulnerable immigrants.

The Mobility of Labor and Capital

The other theory that is most significant to this research is expressed in writings on the restructuring and the mobility of labor and capital. This theory extends the ideas in the NIDL theory and discusses not only why corporations move overseas, but why new immigrants are moving *into* advanced countries.⁵

This theory states that technological advancements have allowed large corporations to invest their capital overseas in order to create production factories. In so doing, corporations have managed not only to advance industrialization in developing countries, but also to disrupt local employment.⁶

Workers who can move elsewhere do so to look for new jobs. In their new countries, jobs in the downgraded sector often await them: illegal work, homework, and other low-paying jobs. Manufacturers within the advanced country need their labor.

Restructuring that includes new technological developments has also made it profitable for some manufacturers to remain in the U.S. This is especially true for manufacturers who rely on higher-quality work and quick turnaround. Technology has allowed them to monitor sales, production, and shipping and to be profitable. Garment manufacturing, with all its subcontracting and smaller-batch production, is an example.

The Global Context of the Garment Industry

As international production moved beyond the First World in recent decades, young Third World women became the new model worker. Gender was re-elaborated to encourage women onto manufacturing shop floors. Women's sewing ability in the home was reconceptualized. Dexterity became a requisite for assembly-line workers.⁷ Beginning in the 1970s, maquila (foreign-owned assembly plant) managers in Mexico developed the idea of the superiority of women workers. By the late 1980s, however, rural men made up half of the maquila workforce, owing to shortages of women workers.⁸ While the managers of the sewing factory maquilas expected that women would be the best workers, men also learned how to sew. Rural farm worker men wanted jobs, and working in factories did not seem emasculating.

The mobility of capital and the increasing availability of technology able to coordinate production in developed nations created more factories overseas. In places like Mexico and China, movement of both men and women to look for jobs in cities increased, especially on the part of rural men. As a result, corporations managed not only to advance industrialization in developing countries, but also to disrupt work in rural communities.⁹ Men often left their agricultural jobs to look for work in the cities. Women who were never in the labor force were recruited to take low-paying manufacturing jobs that were created for them.¹⁰

These disruptions, moreover, caused many, both men and women, to look overseas to find better jobs. In particular, they looked to the advanced countries that sent their production companies abroad, because of the ideological and cultural attractions that they may have become accustomed to while working in these foreign companies or while living in urban sectors. Thus, we see increasing numbers of Mexican, Central American, and Ecuadorian workers in New York City.

At the same time, in Asia, women still dominate in the assembly plants. Immigration from Asian countries is still driven by the desire family reunification. We see families coming together from Asia, with children or younger couples planning to have children in the U.S. There still is an increasing migration of Chinese from China and Hong Kong who come to New York City to work in the garment industry.¹¹

Women and Migration

This study presents a different story from those that focus on male industries and male migrants, thus challenging the underlying assumption that a migrant is an economically motivated male.¹² With the exception of domestics, women were assumed to migrate in order to create or unite a family.¹³ Massey and his colleagues found that females, especially of childbearing age, were very unlikely to migrate; if women migrated, they were a secondary flow, following the flow of men.¹⁴ Foner, on the other hand, in her study of Jamaicans found that women frequently came on their own, later followed by their children and spouses.¹⁵ It was easier for Jamaican women to get legal certification for domestic work and professional jobs like nursing; and in addition, many undocumented women could find domestic jobs in private households.

My interviews show that Latina women may still not come first, but they do come for economic reasons, like the men. My findings indicate that Latina women of childbearing age are likely to migrate if work opportunities are available. Women of childbearing age who are capable of working can earn large sums of money. Younger Latinas, those who are newly married, and single women coming to join their parents, as well as older Latinas who are widowed or divorced, are just as likely as men to migrate so as to earn money to support a family at home. They are even more likely to migrate if they can come with a spouse or male friend, or if passage can be arranged for them. This should not be surprising, because an illegal trip made alone can still be dangerous for a woman. Chinese women, on the other hand, immigrate to the United States legally. They travel most often with their husbands and family and enter via legal means, which is relatively safe. Latinas come with their husbands, or they come after their husbands or other relatives have arranged safe passage.

Although women still migrate to enable family reunification, they also migrate in order to be wage earners. This finding is significant, because if more women migrate with their husbands or family, then more Latino couples and families may remain in the U.S. for the long term. From my interviews, couples are more likely to stay than are single males. According to work produced by Grasmuck and Pessar and by Hondagneu-Sotelo, Latina women want to stay because of increased independence.¹⁶ Their husbands feel differently, however. If women and men come as a

couple, they are also more likely to have children in the near future. And the existence of American-born children increases the likelihood that families will remain in the United States. (Both men and women want to stay in New York City.) The process of migration and expectations about settlement will be altered from what we know now.

The Local Context: New York City Garment Industry Skills and Women

The local New York City context has changed tremendously over the past hundred years. What notions we have today of the garment industry as providing deskilled work for women have been partially conjured up to explain why women are in these jobs.¹⁷ Men and women's cyclical participation over time in the needle trades allows us to dismiss the claim that the special nature of sewing is suited for women.¹⁸

Men and women's sewing work has been constructed from historically specific circumstances. Both men and women worked at tailoring and customizing clothing in the 1800s.¹⁹ But as clothing moved to production in factories by the mid-1850s, our concept of skill changed. Both men and women experienced deskilling as their craft became mass production. Women became the majority in the ready-made industry, working in both the large inside shops for manufacturers and in the outside family shops.²⁰

Women were engaged in cutting and pressing as well as operating and less skilled tailoring work during the 1880s.²¹ Cutters and pressers were among the two best-paid positions: In 1872, cutters and pressers were paid \$635 and \$513 yearly, while operators and finishers were paid the identical wage of \$151 a year. Toward the end of the 1880s, there was a crowding out of women.²² Employers used gendered arguments to justify a less than equitable division of labor. Many thought of cutting and pressing, which were physically strenuous, as unfit for women,²³ and men invoked their physical strength to gain a hold on these better-paying areas in garment production. Thus, cutting was claimed by men to require the most strength, which women were alleged not to have.²⁴ By 1900, few if any women remained cutters. Even as late as 1913, Odencrantz reported that practically all of the workers doing simple finishing, trimming of threads, and cleaning, and earning from \$6 to \$10 a week, were Italian women.²⁵

The few who were “working side by side with men operating machines were earning up to \$26 a week.”²⁶

As women joined the factory floor with the advent of the sewing machine, their work was not necessarily unskilled.²⁷ Even piecing together a whole garment requires skill and experience. Moreover, to run the machine with sufficient speed while using your feet to control the speed and your hands to guide the cloth is not something that can be learned in even a week.²⁸ According to Odencrantz, great speed combined with accuracy was necessary for the job, and workers would normally take about two years to become skilled.²⁹

In the contemporary garment industry we see a repetition of this process. Latino men are redefining certain areas of work to include themselves. Men who need the work are appropriating sewing work—especially the heavier work, which they claim to be better at than women, even though both men and women have sewed these items in the past. These men are claiming that they are more capable of sewing the heavier clothing because they are stronger, hence faster at guiding the material through the machines. Korean owners are allowing men into their factories because they are capable and can compete with the women for these jobs. There is a demand for workers who can become “skilled.” Thus, Latino men in the Korean sector are creating a space for themselves.

The Local Context: A Contemporary Overview

In the mid- to late 1990s, in New York City’s Chinatown there were about five hundred Chinese sewing shops; during the same period, four hundred sewing shops run by Korean owners, employing mostly Ecuadorian and Mexican workers, operated in midtown Manhattan.³⁰ These groups are the dominant groups in garment production, holding forty thousand jobs with a majority female workforce.³¹ While the Chinese sewing shops are 99 percent unionized, none of the Korean shops are.³²

The contemporary configuration of these garment shops has to be placed within the context of the globalization of apparel production and the rise of a post-industrial New York City. Within this formulation, the continuing presence of garment factories in industrialized nations like the United States—in which immigrants figure prominently—is the result of

direct competition with lower-cost labor in the Third World, along with the profits allowed by technological advancements. It is reasonable to see a relationship between the recruitment of workers into manufacturing in the Caribbean and Asian countries and the employment of immigrants and the undocumented in industrialized countries, particularly in cities which have undergone the shift to a service economy.

This global perspective not only helps to explain why these garment shops continue to exist; it also helps account for their current configuration, whereby garment shops that hire undocumented workers exist side by side with those that are unionized and hire legal immigrant workers. Manufacturers who sell higher-quality and higher-priced goods and who want a union label as well as a "Made in the USA" label contract work to the unionized shops. The other shops remain available for manufacturers who will settle for just a "Made in the USA" label.³³

The Chinese

The majority of the Chinese women I interviewed were legal immigrants who had immigrated within the past ten years. These women immigrated with their families to settle permanently in the United States. The majority came to the U.S. via family preferences categories in the immigration classification. The Chinese immigrants that I interviewed did not speak English, and most did not attempt to look for work outside of Chinatown; thus, they were limited to the Chinese sector of the economy. There were few choices available to them. The majority of jobs were either in the garment industry, which is mostly female, or in the restaurant industry, which is mostly male. Newcomers were most often directed by family or friends into these industries, since the Chinese already held jobs in these two industries—and they were always willing to hire others who were recommended by friends and kin.

In the Chinese garment sector, there is a latent gender effect that is culturally defined. Everyone that I have spoken to indicated that over 97 percent of the workers are women; thus the industry is organized around the women and some of their needs. Sewing is recognized as a gendered occupation for women; the majority of Chinese men that I have spoken to said that they did not enter the garment industry because those jobs are women's jobs. The two men who did sew in the garment industry com-

plain that the restaurant business is too physically strenuous for them and that there are fewer jobs available overall in the restaurant business. One told me:

The economy is bad, people go out less and so there are fewer restaurants. Plus in each restaurant, there are fewer people working than in each shop. There may be only a couple of cooks, two to three waiters, a few busboys, a dishwasher, and a cook's helper. In a garment shop you may have forty [people] working, from sewers to merrowers to finishing people. Many shops have more people than that.

The women, for their part, prefer not to enter the restaurant industry because they see it as men's work. Waitering or waitressing is regarded as too physically strenuous as well as unfeminine. And according to these women, there are few waitress jobs available. The only time women serve food is during dim sum hours, when they can push carts around. The garment industry, on the other hand, is seen as a women's industry. Except for the two or three presser's jobs that are available in every garment shop, the rest of the positions in sewing and finishing are held by Chinese women.

Two other factors, flexibility of hours and the availability of health insurance, attract Chinese women with children to the garment industry. Women with children in fact make up the majority of the women in this industry. Flexibility of hours allows these women to arrange their schedules around child care and household as well as work responsibilities, and is especially important for them. The availability of health insurance attracts these women because they are usually married to immigrant men who, because of their status, lack of English, and lack of experience, are usually workers in the Chinatown restaurant industry, which is not unionized and does not provide health insurance. As one female worker told me:

I don't make that much money sewing, but I sew because I can get the Blue Cross [health insurance]. My whole family depends on that coverage. I cannot afford it when my child gets sick. It would cost me over \$150 to pay for a doctor's visit and medicine. That is sometimes what I make in a week.

The garment industry enables a Chinese woman to become the provider of an important commodity for her family: She not only brings home income, but is depended on for the health insurance she can provide through her job. So while culturally one may see her as fitting perfectly into the stereotype of the “sewing women,” she is actually providing an important and crucial benefit for her immigrant family under the structural conditions that limit her. Chinese women believe and say that their role in the family is more valued because of the combination of these factors.

Latinos

Mexican and Ecuadorian migration to New York City reached about 90,000 in 1990.³⁴ Smith explains that as the labor market for Mexicans became saturated in California, they started migrating to New York City.³⁵ According to my interviews, Mexican migrants also believed that undocumented immigrants were more welcome in New York City and that employers were less prejudiced against them. Moreover, all of the Mexican migrants stated that they received higher wages in New York as compared with California. As for the Ecuadorians, many of my interviewees never thought about going to California first; New York had always been their first choice, and their family networks, though small, directed them to New York. Like the Mexicans, they felt that being undocumented did not hamper their ability to get a job in New York. For both groups, there has been an increase in the number of women who migrate to New York. The women often come on planes and enter the United States with temporary visas. They become undocumented when they overstay their visa deadlines.³⁶

In the Korean garment sector many of the workers are men. One-third of the Latino workers are men. Though it is not as well known, the garment industry is a significant source of jobs for men outside of the restaurant, grocery, and delicatessen industries. Latino men who cannot or who do not want to find jobs in those areas will look into the garment industry. Latino men have told me that working in a garment factory is working in a “*factoria*,”³⁷ and that wages are good. Men who have worked in many industries have told me that there is more mobility in the garment industry than in the other industries and an ability to earn higher wages in the long term.

Latinas who work in the industry, like the Chinese women, also indicate that this is the only industry where they can find work. They tell me that jobs in grocery stores and restaurants are for men, and most do not hire women because of the physical labor required. Only two of the women I interviewed mentioned the availability of work in other sectors, such as housecleaning or babysitting.³⁸ Moreover, many of the women have experience in the garment industry from working in the maquilas in their homelands. Thus, garment industry work is the choice job for Latinas. An Ecuadorian woman told me that she was trained on much more complicated sewing machines than the ones they use in the Korean sewing factories in midtown Manhattan, in New York City. When she was hired on a street corner by a Korean owner, she thought she was being brought in to sew on a very fancy machine that she had never heard about. When she arrived at the shop, she saw that the machine was just an old-fashioned single-needle machine. She was clearly overqualified.

Latino men who are not stigmatized by the notion of garment work as female work join the industry easily because they can find jobs. Because they come to the United States to find work and earn money, they will work in any industry that will give them a job; they are less likely to think of a gendered reason to exclude themselves from the garment industry. Moreover, because men usually come alone or come with their wives as couples without children, the two of them need not play out their gender roles as household supporter and wife/caretaker. Here in the U.S., they are both money earners.

Moreover, the garment industry, with its high turnover and large number of jobs per factory, provides more opportunities for Latino men than restaurants, delicatessens, and groceries. As one Mexican man tells me,

It's not that hard to find work; you can find work anywhere if you're undocumented. People work in restaurants, delis, grocery stores, and you can always find a job. So we are not afraid of leaving our jobs. But the garment factory gives you more of an opportunity to do better. In a deli, there may only be two levels. In a garment shop you can always improve yourself and learn to make more.

Thus, for Latino men there are advantages to sewing relative to the grocery and restaurant businesses—and as a result, more of them will

compete with women for jobs in the garment industry. Competition and the consequent shift in the composition of the workforce will force a redefinition of gendered work. So far, indications are that Latino men are recasting their jobs as more masculine even though they do the same work as the Latinas.

Women in the Garment Industry: Flexible Hours and Child Care

Flexible hours are important for Chinese women because they allow them to accomplish some of their household duties as mother and housewife during the course of their workday. If their children are of school age, they can save money on valuable child care expenses; and they can shop or accomplish other household errands during the course of the day. A Chinese worker told me: "When I first got here, we lived in Chinatown and sent the kids to school. I would leave work early to pick them up and didn't come to work until I dropped them off at school."

Many Chinese garment workers who are mothers manage on account of flexible hours. On the other hand, flexible time is not as important to the Latinos as it is to the Chinese, because Latinos usually do not come with children. Therefore, they can work in the Korean-owned sector, which requires set hours every day for six days a week.

Men in the Garment Industry

The Latino women I interviewed said little about the men who worked as sewers in the garment shops. The women who have been in the U.S. longer say that it is a relatively new phenomenon. The more recent Latino migrants say that men in the shop are not a surprise. They told me that men have been working in the maquilas in their home countries for the past ten years.

Whereas women explain their presence in the garment industry as a gendered division of labor in immigrant communities—that is, women do not work in restaurants or groceries—men avoid or do not use any gendered interpretation. Men just assume that they have always been and have a right to be in the industry, with or without women. The garment industry to them is just another place where jobs are available. And the majority of the men that I interviewed said it was easier to get a job there

than in any other industry. Men turn to the garment industry, however, after they have been turned down by the small delicatessen/grocery stores that often hire Latinos.³⁹ Latino men also come into the industry seeking job mobility and quick advancement up the salary ladder. Men do not acknowledge that they are entering an industry that is dominated by women; in fact, many men refer to the garment shops as “factorias,” thus recasting the garment factories as more masculine places, where heavy machinery is used. They do realize that working with machinery in a sewing factory is automatically a way to earn higher wages.

More males are coming to the shops with sewing experience, either from their homeland or from work in Los Angeles. Men with experience quickly realize that these factory jobs can be profitable. More often than not, they are as qualified as the women.

Garment shops offer more opportunity by offering advancement and higher wages if one learns more or sews faster. According to these men, there is very little chance for advancement working in small stores or restaurants. “Once hired as a worker/sorter/washer in a deli or restaurant, always that” is what I heard. So few are hired in these small stores that it is very difficult to find a job unless you are personally brought in as a trainee under the guidance of a trusted worker.⁴⁰

Moreover, the young men that I interviewed—those that have come most recently—express a less rigid perception of gendered work. Work both at home and in the workplace is not gendered as it once was. Lack of English and status as an undocumented migrant relegate men to particular jobs in the U.S. that may be equivalent to jobs that Latinas had in their homeland. It is part of the racial-ethnic experience of the United States.

One Mexican male summarized:

I’m not macho because I was raised very differently, and even if you are, when you come here you can’t remain that way. Because you learn fast that you have to help with different things around the home and do [accept?] whatever job they give you.

According to the Korean owners, they hire men only to do the heavy work; women are still the ones that are better at the fine work. Even though owners still see a gendered division of labor and draw on gendered

meanings in hiring, the truth is that interviews with the male workers indicate that men do not do just the heavy work; in reality, they do all that is necessary, including the fine work.

To conclude, gendered meanings are fluid, and when we examine these two situations, we can only conclude that the owners are doing what they can to effectively control labor and to have access to the most efficient labor for their work—even while they still have gender biases and beliefs, especially in regards to whom they hire. The reality of the situation is that Chinese and Korean owners will do what is necessary—hiring whomever and allowing new gendered meanings to appear in order to keep their work profitable—so long as members of the Chinese and Latino communities are willing to do the work.

Gender and Wages

Gender and wages cannot be neglected in this context. While 96 percent of the Chinese workers I interviewed (53 of the 55) were women, only 62 percent of the Latino workers (34 out of the 55) were women. First of all, as many feminist scholars have noted, wages tend to be higher for men in general, so by virtue of having men in the Korean sector, average wages in that sector would be higher. This does not entirely explain, however, why Latino women's wages are higher than those of Chinese women.⁴¹ It may be that men in the Korean sector are leading the push for higher wages because they have been able to get higher wages by gaining experience and changing jobs; Latino women may be following their example. Chinese women working for male owners are less likely to protest low wages, especially since the flexible hours of work, combined with piece-work pay, is structured for women with children. Protesting wages might also mean a change in the organization of work, which has advantages for women. Thus, there is a tension that cannot be resolved at this moment.

Conclusion: Gender Roles and the Garment Industry

Gender is a relational concept that should be able to incorporate the varying experiences of men and women from different ethnic groups, classes, and immigrant statuses. Thus, in this particular case, men and women in the same industry approach their self-identifications differently, redefin-

ing their roles and gender notions. Chinese men in New York City have jobs—and notions of gendered sewing remain, because the economic situation for these Chinese immigrants has not forced it to be changed. Mexican immigrants in New York City, on the other hand, still have limited job opportunities. Thus sewing in garment factories has not been labeled by Mexicans as a conventional women's job.

Gender is relational, and gender roles are often defined by those who need to define them. Historically, both men and women immigrants entered the garment industry. Over time, as immigrant groups' access to economic opportunities changed, so did the makeup of the workforce, especially with regards to the labor of men and women. Women and men were found to enter and leave certain industries. Thus gender notions are flexible and are used as necessary.

Part III

Taking Responsibility for Conditions in the Industry: Unions, Consumers, Public

DISCRIMINATE AGAINST

**INFERIOR
UNCLEAN
SWEAT-SHOP
CLOTHING.**

**INSIST UPON
THIS LABEL**

**ENDORSED BY ALL TRADES UNIONS
AND LEADING REFORM SOCIETIES.**

A poster advertising the United Garment Workers' label. Unions and reformers have often used labels to inform consumers that garments were made under union contract or under prescribed conditions. Image courtesy of Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

9

“Social Responsibility on a Global Level”

The National Consumers League, Fair Labor, and Worker Rights at Century’s End

Eileen Boris

HISTORY NEVER QUITE repeats itself, but sometimes it provides a second chance. At the end of the twentieth century, campaigns against sweated labor returned to the tactics of the Progressive Era. Outraged over reports of ten-year-olds assembling tennis shoes in Indonesia, teenagers sewing clothing for a pittance in the Americas, and immigrants locked into unsanitary and unsafe factories in California, coalitions of consumer, student, labor, human rights, and solidarity groups fought to curtail the worst excesses of an unregulated global marketplace. They embraced voluntary codes of conduct, “No Sweat” labels, labor standards legislation, and unionization. But they also took to the streets in the name of the people, through protests against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The call for fair labor morphed into a demand for worker rights.¹

A new global capitalism seemingly had made obsolete the national labor laws forged in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a coalition of trade unions and middle-class white women exhorted consumers to demand products manufactured under decent working conditions. Now, as then, the National Consumers League (NCL) played a leading role. Having developed after World War II into

more of a Washington lobby than a membership organization, the NCL remained a champion of fair labor—an ally of, though separate from, trade unions.² Unlike the exposé-generating National Labor Committee (NLC), the direct action United Students against Sweatshops (USAS), and numerous solidarity groups involved with cross-border organizing, the NCL signed in 1998 the final agreement of the Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP), which its Executive Director, Linda Golodner, had co-chaired. It parted from its trade union allies to unite with employers and the Clinton administration on behalf of what it saw as the possible accepting of “half a loaf” rather than continuing to strive for the ideal.³

In doing so, the NCL alienated itself from a growing student activism that was pushing universities to reject licensing agreements with companies that refused to provide living wages and to subject their factories to independent monitoring. Instead, it worked with notable apparel and shoe firms, like Nike, that other activists personified as the enemy. In increasingly polarized circumstances, the NCL attempted to carry on its historic mission to harness the power of consumers—now, to push corporate “social responsibility on a global level.”⁴ Whether or not its promotion of voluntary standards, pressed by the Clinton administration in a period hostile to government regulation, represented yet another devolution of the welfare state, and a turn toward privatization of the regulation of labor standards, remained to be settled by the actual operation of the AIP’s enforcement mechanism, the Fair Labor Association, which it had brokered.

The Origins of the National Consumers League

From the start, the NCL appealed to the buying public; its membership worked to better the conditions of others, not to improve the lives of its members. Thus even during its pre-World War I grassroots stage, when it had local chapters in nineteen states, the NCL was removed from the objects of its efforts through the chasm of class.⁵ Its founders—middle-class, and wealthy, educated women, some male social scientists, and a number of charity and labor reformers of both sexes—combined a belief in ethical consumption with an astute understanding of political economy. Its leaders were social justice feminists who, as historians have come to

understand that term, "sought structural changes in the social, political, or economic status quo, particularly by intervening in the marketplace or familial relationships to establish new standards of fairness."⁶ But they also were the class betters of the objects of their reform.

"If the crowds of well-dressed women who push and fight and struggle with each other to get to a bargain counter could realize that they are pushing and struggling to take the living away from helpless ones of their own sex, they would be ashamed to continue," Maud Nathan, president of the Consumers League of New York, declared in 1906.⁷ A wealthy suffragist, philanthropist, and clubwoman, Nathan was a Sephardic Jew married to a stockbroker. A cofounder of the New York League in 1890 and a leading force behind the formation of the National League eight years later, she sought to mobilize the power of women of her class to transform working conditions in department stores, factories, and tenements. Nathan drew upon the moral environmentalism of the British Victorian John Ruskin, whom she quoted—"Show me what a man's tastes are and I'll tell you what character of man he is"—in promoting the idea of ethical consumption that lay behind the League, along with the first interventions of middle-class and society women against tenement homework and sweated labor.⁸

The origins of the League lay in the efforts of Charity Organization Society reformer Josephine Shaw Lowell, a mentor to Nathan, and in the struggles of New York's department store clerks to improve the conditions of wage-earning women. Lowell had turned to philanthropy and charity work out of the grief of losing her brother and husband in the Civil War, and she developed into a reformer and an innovative organizer of social assistance. She combined elite concern for the masses with calls for protective labor laws for women and children; she also demanded living wages. Investigation, education and publicity, mobilization, and legislation would become weapons of choice as reformers politicized consumption, turning to legislatures for relief against exploitative working conditions. Lowell's testimony proved crucial, for example, in passing the 1896 New York Mercantile Inspection Act, which shored up state inspection of department stores.⁹

The Working Women's Society of New York, formed in 1886, enlisted her aid; its members would help organize the New York branch of the Women's Trade Union League nearly two decades later. Led by garment

worker Leonora O'Reilly, the Society called upon Lowell and other activist society women in 1888 to help them win just working conditions, such as seats for department store workers. Church leaders exhorted better-off women "to feel it their personal duty to go on doing whatever and as much as they could to correct the social evil that permits their unfortunate sisters to be so frightfully overworked and badly paid." Two years later, in 1890, the Consumers League of New York was organized, following the model of a group in London which first established a "white list" of places treating employees "fairly."¹⁰ What was fair, however, did not necessarily correspond to the demands of trade unionists. Sanitary manufacturing, proper homes (that is, homes free from manufacturing), and the absence of child labor loomed as important, if not more so, as wages or union recognition in attracting elite women to the cause of wage earners.

By 1898, the year that the national league was organized, consumers leagues had spread to Illinois, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, and Wisconsin and throughout New York State. The National Consumers League focused on goods sold in stores rather than on the storekeepers themselves. It concentrated on eliminating tenement homework and the sweatshop, which it sought to end through consumer boycotts. Its energetic new national secretary, Florence Kelley, explained: "If the people would notify Marshall Field . . . and others that they would buy from them no clothing made in sweatshops, the evil would be stopped."¹¹

The daughter of the radical Republican congressman from Pennsylvania, William "Pig Iron" Kelley, Kelley belonged to the first generation of college-educated women who gained training in the social sciences. She became a socialist while studying abroad in the 1880s and had found her way to Hull House in the 1890s, where she spearheaded the establishment of factory inspection in Illinois. She moved to New York and took up residence at the Henry Street settlement upon assuming the NCL post. Kelley was a tireless crusader against the sweatshop until her death in 1932.¹²

Kelley grounded her ethical appeal in the economics of garment production. Denying that sweating cheapened goods, she argued that lower prices actually resulted from the use of cheap materials, the availability of mechanical power, and improved industrial organization. Child labor and tenement manufacturing actually added to the human cost of industry,

she argued, jacking up the final price of products and discouraging mechanization. The moral power of consumers, then, could augment the laws of economics and speed technological change.¹³ But ethics was not enough; self-protection was to join reason, sentiment, and guilt to motivate the ethical shopper. The "Rights of Purchasers" included freedom from diseased and dirty products—and these rights merged into the duties of citizenship. "Before the individual purchaser can vindicate his own personal rights, the whole body of purchasers are constrained to save childhood for the children, and home life for the workers who dwell in tenements," Kelley proclaimed. Rights were seen as socially based and collectively obtained. Eschewing individual solutions to removing the germs thought lurking in clothes, the program of the NCL would guard consumers by improving the conditions of producers. It would not only protect less fortunate women and children, but also eventually secure "ethical gains through legislation."¹⁴ Women lacked the vote, but they were the family shoppers; they could exercise citizenship through their choices as consumers.

Kelley herself modeled the consumers label after the union label. Introduced in 1899 for women's white muslin undergarments, the "white label" distinguished the NCL. The label was accorded manufacturers who met the League's labor standards—obedience to state factory laws, production on the premises, no overtime, and no children employed under sixteen—and who passed inspections conducted by the League or by state departments of labor. By 1904, sixty factories had earned the white label, which emphasized production "under clean and healthful conditions."

The League even entered into a "partnership" with one department store magnate, John Wanamaker (who also manufactured his own line, an early example of the retail-driven production that would dominate garment manufacturing by the late twentieth century); the agreement served as a precedent for the League's current cooperation with retailers. Then, as now, its campaigns could dovetail with the interests of manufacturers able to achieve economies of scale.¹⁵ Wanamaker promoted the white label in window displays that compared sweatshop and model factory conditions—much like the industrial exhibits of reformers—and showed off his products adorned with the League's label.

Reformers developed such material culture lessons as window displays out of the belief that they would precipitate social action. The NCL pion-

eered in social investigation as a first step toward reform, relying on the exposé but also on the power of documented facts.¹⁶ But the white label was never an end in itself; it was, from the start, a tactic—a tangible symbol of fair labor standards that gave the chapters something to do and provided those who adhered to those standards with an outward sign of approval.

The Consumers League may have begun with voluntary compliance, but it soon moved to championing state regulation. From her studies of the sweating system in Chicago, Kelley had learned that that “regulation of working conditions through organized persuasion was not enough”; laws and law enforcers were essential.¹⁷ The NCL accordingly began to promote labor standards legislation. The League also helped develop state enforcement agencies, especially branches devoted to women and children—and staffed such agencies with its members. Its leaders served on government commissions, as Kelley did during World War I. Then it defended labor laws and agencies in the courts.

Through numerous state campaigns the League secured maximum hour and minimum wage laws for women and curbs on child labor, though courts restricted most legislative limits for men on the basis of “freedom to contract.” It played a key role in the development of sociological jurisprudence through its brief for *Muller v. Oregon*, the 1908 Supreme Court case that upheld maximum hours for women workers. Written by New York leaguer Josephine Goldmark but associated with her brother-in-law, the attorney Louis Brandeis, the NCL brief compiled overwhelming evidence on health, work, and fatigue to argue that long hours injured wage-earning women and undermined their efficiency on the job and in their homes. Between 1912, when Massachusetts established the first minimum wage board, and 1923, when the Supreme Court struck down the District of Columbia’s law in *Adkins v. Children’s Hospital*, fifteen states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico provided minimum wages for women. The NCL spearheaded this drive, aided by the National Women’s Trade Union League, other trade unionists, social workers, settlement residents, and male industrial relations specialists.¹⁸

The National League under Kelley embraced trade unionism, although the founding convention had rejected a proposal to make “the trade union standard of hours and wages” the standard. John Graham Brooks, the first president of the national group, noted its contradictory politics: “To work

with trade unions is to antagonize much of present [League] membership; to ignore them is to antagonize working people."¹⁹ The fear of disease, not unionization, had motivated some better-off women to join the consumers' crusade. Before the organization of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the League's white label signified the best available labor standards. By World War I, however, manufacturers who sought to stymie unions were promoting the label, whose standards by then lagged behind those negotiated through collective bargaining. Kelley recommended that the League retire the white label, the effectiveness of which had clearly passed; it did so in 1918.²⁰

During its first decades, then, the National Consumers League moved from voluntary to state solutions; it never would drop its appeal to the ethical consumer, but it increasingly saw itself as an upholder of labor standards and a watchdog for them. By the 1920s, it already devoted considerable energy to legislative lobbying in the states and in Washington. It fought for amendments to ban child labor and for legislation to extend labor standards to men as well as children, to blacks as well as whites, to Southern as well as Northern workers. Amid the general breakdown of labor standards during the Great Depression, the NCL marshaled reform and labor forces to mobilize for state interference in the employment contract. It helped put Frances Perkins, one of its own, into the position of Secretary of Labor and helped form the Division of Labor Standards, essentially run by another NCL activist, Clara Beyer. It pushed for major legislation, especially the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, which codified minimum wages, maximum hours, and limits on child labor for employment involved in interstate commerce—the only Constitutional basis for such regulation at the time.²¹ The NCL continued to act on "the conviction that consumers have a far-reaching responsibility to use their buying power and their power as citizens to advance the general welfare of the community," as then executive secretary Mary Dublin explained in 1940: "What is not paid in wages, the community is called upon to pay in relief; in wage subsidies; in contributions to meet the cost of illness, dependency, delinquency, and numerous other social ills which these conditions produce," she claimed.²²

The Consumers League had become, as historian Landon Storrs has aptly noted, "agents of the New Deal."²³ Though often disappointed by

restrictions on coverage, limited enforcement mechanisms, and the general meagerness of standards, the NCL pushed a Rooseveltian laborite agenda in the states as well as in Washington. During World War II, it briefly changed its name to “the National Consumers League for Fair Labor Standards” to differentiate itself from those who focused on the rights of consumers, like Consumers Union and Consumer Research.²⁴ Still, by 1940 it had expanded its portfolio to embrace consumer protection issues such as “the growth of monopolistic practices and arbitrary price rises” since the solution of these problems seemed interconnected with legislating labor standards.²⁵

The NCL in the 1930s and early 1940s seemed staid compared with the militant and left-feminist League of Women Shoppers. Founded in 1935, the Shoppers would investigate working conditions in stores and factories; educate and organize consumers to support union organizing and to press for better wages and working conditions; and seek to protect and improve American living standards through grassroots actions, such as boycotts and buyers’ cooperatives, and legal regulations, like rent and price controls and labor legislation. On paper, except for its Hollywood and literary celebrity members, the Shoppers appeared as an update of the NCL. They offered a pocketbook politics based on increasing purchasing power, combining Keynesian economics with support for an organized working class. But the politics of the Shoppers was to the left of the League. While the NCL relied on its insider status to influence those with political or administrative power, the LWS stood outside (literally), on picket lines. It would fade in the atmosphere of Cold War hysteria. In contrast, the NCL, supported by trade unions, foundations, and anti-Communist liberals, remained closely aligned with the Democratic Party for the rest of the century.²⁶

A Transformed Political Economy

By 1980, the NCL described itself as “a national consumer advocacy organization primarily dedicated to achieving effective representation of the consumer interest in both private and public decision-making.”²⁷ During the preceding thirty years, its attention had focused increasingly on consumer protection. It took the revival of the sweatshop in the 1980s for the

League to redirect some of its energy back to the impact of consumption on labor standards. In the 1990s, the League would become a major player in the fight against the global sweatshop.

Scholars debate whether sweatshops faded away after the 1930s under the dual regime of state regulation and unionization. They also disagree as to whether the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a revival of the sweatshop. On the one hand, reformers and unionists have generated a progress narrative wherein the organization of the industry and the establishment of state regulation banished the evils of the sweatshop. On the other hand, the sweatshop as metaphor retained its moral power to outrage; labor organizers deployed it even during the 1950s, supposedly the period of its decline. Part of the problem is definitional: What some call a sweatshop, others call the informal sector.²⁸

On the basis of the official governmental definition of the sweatshop ("a business that regularly violates both wage or child-labor and safety or health laws"), Robert J. S. Ross refutes those who find few sweatshops. He has determined with respect to New York City "that sweatshops in the apparel industry are real, new, and encompass[ed] about 60 percent of the industry, involving over four hundred thousand workers" by the 1990s. This return of the sweatshop occurred amid the decline of apparel jobs in the city, from an estimated 340,000 in 1950 to 90,000 in the mid-1990s, so that "the number of sweatshop workers thus increased both relatively and absolutely."²⁹

There is no doubt, however, that runaway shops and import substitution combined to create a new industrial geography. Companies had left New York increasingly from the 1920s, heading South to escape labor laws and unions; by 1974, 44 percent of apparel industry jobs were in that region.³⁰ The power over production that giant retailers, like Wal-Mart, had attained by the 1990s further atrophied the chain of responsibility that ran from manufacturer to worker, as did the emergence of branded labels like Liz Claiborne—apparel businesses that designed but did not technically manufacture.³¹ Although new immigration from Asia and the Americas would revitalize New York as a center of garment production, labor standards fell through the sieve as "Third World conditions of work" arrived.³² At century's end, the industry consisted of "transnational subcontracting networks that link local manufacturers to contractors in a variety of countries."³³

Changes in social policy during the post–World War II era encouraged the movement of production beyond U.S. borders and the growth of sweatshops at home. Deregulation has taken place with the decline of wage-and-hour inspectors enforcing the law. Greater concentration in market share has forced contractors to compete with the lowest bid, no matter if that entails violating existing labor standards, while increased imports (over 60 percent by 1997) have further encouraged a race to the bottom. Increased immigration has brought a desperate workforce to major U.S. centers, like New York and Los Angeles. But however much unionization protected the vulnerable immigrant in the past, the breakdown of collective bargaining and of the joint policing of contractors by unions and manufacturers, once aided by social justice organizations with a widespread membership, like the NCL, distinguishes the current period as much as does the decline in state enforcement.³⁴ As the economist Michael Piore has explained, “the people who suffer from these deplorable working conditions are more accurately the victims of the reaction against unions and ‘big government’ of the last two decades,” not the inevitable by-product of the quest for fashion.³⁵

Not only neglect but positive state action has encouraged outsourcing of garment making. Tax breaks allowed U.S. firms to take advantage of Export Processing Zones in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore and encouraged investment in the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico. After 1963, Item 807 taxed only the value added to garments cut in the United States but exported for assembly. The Caribbean Basin Initiative of 1983 ended tariffs for many goods made in that region; and in the 1990s, the Clinton administration pushed through Congress the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). A renegotiated General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) rewrote international rules so as to drop trade barriers. Labor standards and the right to unionize suffered in the process.³⁶

The power of the garment unions has diminished along with their membership. The once proud International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) declined from 457,517 members in 1969 to 308,056 in 1980 and a mere 146,506 a decade later. By the 1970s, even manufacturers with union contracts found it cheaper to pay a fee to compensate for removing work from union shops than to continue production in the United States.³⁷ With less power, the ILGWU and its counterpart for men’s

wear, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), entered the "Crafted With Pride in the USA" coalition, dominated by protectionist textile manufacturers.³⁸ Such economic nationalism often obscured the presence of sweatshops.³⁹ The ILGWU in the 1980s, however, maintained enough political clout to stop the Reagan administration from removing prohibitions on industrial homework in ladies' garments, although all other homework bans incorporated in 1949 into the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) were lifted.⁴⁰

Chief among the union supporters in this fight was the Consumers League. The FLSA, and the subsequent homework bans, represented a culmination of the agenda that the League had pushed since the turn of the century. During the 1980s, the NCL found itself having to reiterate its strong opposition to industrial homework. Spokeswomen emphasized how manufacturing in the home interfered with minimum wages, fair competition, child labor laws, and occupational health and safety. Even Social Security and other income maintenance systems would suffer, because employers of homeworkers rarely paid their "fair share" into them. The NCL called for extending the ban on homework to all industries during 1982 House hearings on "The Reemergence of Sweatshops and the Enforcement of Wage and Hour Standards." Board member Ruth Jordan reaffirmed that "no item, service, or garment is a bargain item if it is purchased at a cost of a laboring person," and reminded Congressmen that "this issue is a woman's issue; it is more a woman's issue than anything else. Women already earn less. . . . They are denied the ability to upgrade their skills and economic well-being."⁴¹ Homework provided the illusion of independence while generating economic *dependence*, and inhibited collective action possible through unionization by isolating workers from each other. The sweatshop had returned, the NCL charged, not only because of the presence of frightened undocumented laborers, unaware of the law, but, even more, because severe budget and staff reductions under Ronald Reagan had undermined enforcement of the entire labor standards regime.⁴²

The 1980s fight against lifting the homework bans publicized the existence of a new generation of sweatshops at home; it represented only the beginning of a revived concern with the conditions under which garments were produced. The competitive dynamics of the fashion trades required flexibility and quality control, leading to "just-in-time" and small batch

production that often brought manufacturing back to the United States, but to sweatshops. Department of Labor (DOL) investigators discovered in August 1995 the El Monte, California, “slavesshop.” There, seventy-two Thai women, chained to their machines behind barbed wire, produced clothes for Nordstrom, Sears, Montgomery Ward, and other brand-name stores.⁴³ This discovery dramatized the human consequences of the garment industry’s global marketplace at precisely the time that the garment unions recommitted themselves to activism with their merger into UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees.⁴⁴ UNITE would play a central role in the new anti-sweatshop movement, initially in alliance with the NCL.

Harnessing Celebrity Power: A Movement Spreads

The Consumers League would benefit from but did not initiate the new campaign against sweatshops that the publicity surrounding El Monte stimulated. The new anti-sweatshop crusaders, however, shared the NCL’s faith in public scrutiny as a tool to force employer compliance with “human rights” and labor standards. Dependence on mass marketing, logos, and corporate image had left business vulnerable to reformer appeals to ethical consumption in ways only dreamed of by the NCL in the past.⁴⁵ Consequently, in the 1980s and early 1990s some brands, like Levi Strauss and Nike, sought to ward off public exposure by developing firm-based codes of conduct monitored by their own people or by accounting agencies, like Ernst & Young, that also conducted other operations for these businesses.⁴⁶ But as Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee (NLC) charged, “they never even translated these codes of conduct into foreign languages. . . . It was meant for public relations, the Congress, for advertisements, and for some concerned consumers.”⁴⁷

Trade unionists opposed to U.S. intervention in Central America formed the NLC, which turned into an independent labor rights group after the Salvadoran peace accords in 1990. The NLC could draw upon close relationships with Central American trade unionists, grassroots activists, churches, women’s groups, and human rights organizations; it had the credibility to gather from workers their own stories and has been able to expose conditions inside factories too easily hidden from government

inspectors and corporate-backed monitors, neither of whom have been able to break through layers of employee intimidation and fear. Through campaigns against the personal label of television personality Kathie Lee Gifford, whose products are made in Honduras and sold by Wal-Mart, or against Gap clothing sewn in El Salvadoran sweatshops and Disney logos produced in Haitian ones, the NLC has perfected the politics of disclosure. "It's pressure, public relations work, reaching the media, making something an issue that actually changes the system," Kernaghan has observed. Social movements, he felt, could force Congressional action and open plant doors for unions to walk in. Like other "solidarity" groups, the NLC personalized facts by sponsoring tours by *maquiladora* workers. A meeting with fifteen-year-old Wendy Diaz, it claims, led Kathie Lee to ask "forgiveness." Gifford's subsequent testimony against sweatshops generated publicity for the cause, even if a desire to rehabilitate her image as a supporter of children lay behind her performance.⁴⁸

In the wake of the Kathie Lee incident, in August 1996 Secretary of Labor Robert Reich initiated a Presidential task force of apparel and footwear makers, trade unions, the NCL, and religious and human rights groups.⁴⁹ Already the DOL had revived use of the "hot goods" provision of the FLSA to seize products manufactured in violation of wage, hours, child labor, or health and safety regulations. It had started a "No Sweat" label and a "Fashion Trendsetters List" of retailers and manufacturers who "pledge to help eradicate sweatshops in America and to try to ensure that their shelves are stocked with only 'No Sweat' garments." The reliability of this list, however, was questionable. By joining the task force or Trendsetters, companies—especially those "outed" by the NLC, like the Gap, Phillips-Van Heusen, and Starbucks—tried to disassociate themselves from pictures of child laborers and stories of starvation wages and brutality while still reaping the financial benefits of offshore production.⁵⁰

Over the next two years, the NCL's Linda Golodner cochaired the Presidential Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP) with Roberta Karp of Liz Claiborne. The AIP struggled to forge a system of self-regulation for U.S. companies. With a Republican Congress hostile to unions and a Democratic administration committed to free trade, volunteerism under the mantle of the White House opened an avenue that the NCL could embrace. Often called upon by the DOL to serve on task forces, the NCL had previously chaired the 1988 Advisory Committee on Child Labor.

The next year it began publishing the *Child Labor Monitor* and helped establish the Child Labor Coalition, which it managed out of its offices. This coalition was committed to ending child exploitation abroad as well as at home.⁵¹

The composition of the Child Labor Coalition helps explain its policy divergence from the AIP. There were no manufacturers in this coalition of labor, women's, religious, social worker, education, and human rights organizations, which constituted a who's who of liberal lobbyists and policy makers from United Methodist Women to the Children's Defense Fund and the AFL-CIO. Thus the Coalition faced no opposition to adopting independent monitoring as a prerequisite for factory certification and the display of labels under its aegis. It served as the U.S. promoter of the "RUGMARK" label, originated by the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude in New Delhi. Unannounced inspections by "non-industry RUGMARK representatives" solidified the credibility of this label. By late 1997, 15 percent of Indian and nearly 70 percent of Nepalese hand-made carpets met its standards. Not satisfied with providing better conditions, the RUGMARK foundation also supported the schooling of over one thousand children in those countries.⁵²

Before Reich assembled the AIP, the NCL had formed with UNITE "A Partnership for Responsibility" to "Stop Sweatshops" in the fall of 1995. Over the next eighteen months, this coalition expanded to some sixty groups, consisting of women's, ethnic, veterans, student, environmental, labor, civil rights, and religious organizations.⁵³ Consumer education and mobilization remained a central strategy. Flyers advised how "to organize a 'Let's Go Shopping' action at a local mall, using the Consumer Guide to Decent Clothes" prepared by UNITE. They presented a sample letter to the local Gap store, for women's groups and religious organizations to use. It asked:

If you know how the workers who sewed the clothes for your store were treated. . . . if your store has a code of conduct, and if so, if we could receive a copy . . . if the code forbids child labor, if it requires a living wage, and if it is translated and posted for all workers in every factory . . . if there is an independent monitoring agency to make sure that everybody lives up to the code.

Urging local groups to report back, the NCL sought to graft an older tradition of middle-class women's investigations onto new forms of grassroots campaigns for corporate responsibility. Thus, as geographers Rebecca Johns and Leyla Vural point out, "the point of sale" replaces the point of production as the site of worker struggle. Linda Golodner told the *Washington Post*, "if enough people ask the question . . . it's bound to trickle up to management that customers care." Though individuals might feel better engaging in personal boycotts of tainted goods, "if you do it scattershot and just not tell anybody, it doesn't do any good," she warned.⁵⁴

Yet the NCL and UNITE recognized that action had to move beyond citizen efforts to include "stronger enforcement of the law" by state and federal DOLs. Both lobbied for the Stop Sweatshops Act, introduced in 1997 to make manufacturers "civilly liable for their contractors' violations of the minimum wage, overtime, child labor, and industrial homework provisions" of the FLSA.⁵⁵ Action also had to become global, which meant that "trade agreements must include enforceable labor standards and workers' rights, including the right to free expression and freedom of association." This globalization of labor standards both supplanted the protectionist defense and fed into it: Free trade had to be fair trade, which by definition was impossible under the neoliberal regime in control of international monetary and trade organizations. Finally, as had been so the first half of the century, unionization appeared necessary for eliminating sweatshops. The NCL joined UNITE in demanding removal of "barriers that prevent workers from standing up for their rights, here and abroad." They condemned use of immigration law to "discourage workers from asserting their rights and reporting abuse."⁵⁶ The discourse of human rights overshadowed any call for unionization, however, as the campaign sought to mobilize moral righteousness rather than worker power to stop sweated production.

Two assumptions justified the NCL's approach. As Linda Golodner told the Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Religious Values in Business in October 1997, "consumers should not expect a problem to be solved just because a law has been passed," and "consumers want an uncomplicated, easy means to identify products made under decent conditions."⁵⁷ The first statement expressed the NCL's commitment to what has come to be called the public sphere—neither the realm of state nor that of fam-

ily—in which civic organizations work for the larger good. But it also reflected the persistent necessity of having watchdog groups monitor the enforcement of labor and consumer legislation, a situation particularly acute when politicians of all stripes declare that “the era of big government is over.”⁵⁸ The second credo invoked the rationale behind the original turn-of-the-century “white label.”

Golodner was well aware of the failure of corporate codes of conduct. Variations among them “bred confusion,” she charged. Moreover, “implementation has been ill-conceived and ill-executed,” and they suffered from a “lack of transparency”: That is, corporate practices remained hidden from public scrutiny. She demanded not only full disclosure but independent, external monitoring; “sweatshop-free” practices that applied to company operations around the globe; and employer fixing of subcontractor violations rather than canceling of contracts, which “does not help workers.”⁵⁹

Given these criteria, Golodner’s enthusiasm for the April 1997 “Workplace Code of Conduct” of the AIP appears to have been an attempt to maintain what already seemed to be a tenuous coalition. Flanked by Nike CEO Phil Knight and Kathie Lee Gifford, President Bill Clinton proclaimed on April 14, 1997, with characteristic overstatement, that “the voluntary code will improve the lives of millions of garment workers around the world.” Golodner echoed his pledge by claiming, “The benefit for everyone is what the whole task force was about: that’s to make sure consumers can purchase goods that have not been made in a sweatshop and make sure that there’s a process in place to check that factories are not sweatshops.”⁶⁰ But as the AIP worked on its enforcement mechanism, Roberta Karp (of Liz Claiborne), not Golodner, spoke to the press. Amid conflict among partnership members over monitoring standards and wages, which delayed the final agreement for nearly a year, Karp reminded, “This is really a chance for meaningful change. The critics say, ‘It’s not enough, it’s not enough.’ But it’s a heck of a lot more than anyone else has done.” Golodner may have preferred UNITE’s standards—but, by signing on, she agreed with Michael Posner of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, who admitted, “this [is] a first step and we have a lot of work to do to make this work.”⁶¹

Indeed, human rights organizations, led by Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange, harshly judged the accord. The code initially permitted a sixty-

hour workweek—forty-eight hours as standard with twelve hours of overtime—and a minimum working age of fifteen, but fourteen if allowed by law—lesser standards than in the United States. The resulting Fair Labor Association (FLA), established to enforce the code, also fell short, according to activist critics. It was structured so that the corporate delegates essentially had a veto over decertification of companies; corporate members threatened to walk out unless they could fill half the slots. Monitoring appeared tied to accounting firms that had created their own market niche out of this very demand; and disclosure succumbed to bureaucratic layers of secrecy. Moreover, monitors would check only 30 percent of member factories the first year, with another 5 or 10 percent slated for each subsequent year.⁶²

The final accord tilted enough toward the corporate partners that UNITE and the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility refused to sign. Tepid commitment to the right to organize and rejection of a living wage led unions and faith-based NGOs to drop out of the Partnership in November 1998, when the FLA was announced. Regarding the code's acceptance of the prevailing or minimum wage, whichever was higher, UNITE's chief economist asked, "How can you talk about eliminating sweatshops without making a commitment to pay a living wage?" Declared the union's president, Jay Mazur, "The best kind of independent monitoring is a good union. The next best is good laws to defend the rights of workers."

What constituted "independence" was up for grabs. For the union, the term meant separate from the corporations. But NGOs, including the Consumers League, seemed to embrace "a classless good government group idea that is often used against us," as one UNITE official explained:

Doesn't independent also mean independent of the workers? . . . Union as one outside group instead of unions as the real voice of workers. It invalidates the union, painting us as a special interest that is not to be trusted. The workers can't speak for themselves but need some "independent" validation. . . . It is one thing to have societal standards and government inspectors. It is another to let capital pose as independent.

The code emphasized fairness rather than worker rights—and employers would ultimately interpret the definition of fairness.⁶³

"There aren't a lot of teeth in this code," concluded Bud Konheim of the New York firm Nicole Miller. Konheim operated on the premise that "good products are made by good people with good materials." So a sweatshop became a place that "makes bad things." But less upscale garment lines could dismiss his worries over bad seams and "fits not quite right" to seek out the cheapest costs of production. Reflecting his own interests, Konheim suggested adding "a quality issue onto the workers' rights requirement" to produce "a very powerful label." He would have an agency of trained fashion designers subject products to random testing. Konheim, like Edward Filene nearly a century before, was a rare capitalist who believed that "the bottom line could be ethical."⁶⁴

Even the weak standards of the FLA, however, proved too stringent for most manufacturers, including one original AIP member, Warnaco (a conglomerate holding Calvin Klein among its labels). All along it had opposed independent monitors for proprietary reasons, an excuse long given by corporations who opposed government regulation. Others, like Tracy Mullen of the National Retail Federation, felt that overseas monitoring is "a manufacturing responsibility, not a retailing responsibility."⁶⁵ But retailers had *become* the manufacturers through production chains that they ultimately controlled, undermining this distinction. What a century ago had been a strategy—get to the manufacturers through the retailers—had become a necessity.

Needing to expand the initial group of signatories so as to gain credibility, the FLA turned to universities, reserving for them a single seat on its fourteen-person board. For over a year, students had been calling upon schools to end logo and athletic licensing agreements with companies who produced apparel and sneakers under substandard conditions.⁶⁶ Hip politicians in the field of cultural studies transformed the tradition of ethical consumption into a deconstructive critique of branded imagery.⁶⁷ But it was students returning from Union Summer and UNITE internships, more than professors in English department seminars, who fanned the emerging movement.⁶⁸

Duke University, the site of the first Students against Sweatshops, led the way in March 1998 with a "code of conduct" that included the right to unionize, disclosure of factory locations, inspection by independent monitors, workplace safety, minimum wages, and bans on child labor. Soon students were demanding living wages and women's rights, not only

with respect to equal pay and maternity leave but also in terms of freedom from sexual harassment and forced birth control. From California to the Ivy League, from small liberal arts schools to sports-centered state universities like Wisconsin, Arizona, and Michigan, students forged a network in which e-mail lists and websites became preferred means of communication. Forming United Students against Sweatshops (USAS) in the summer of 1998, they elected supporters to student councils, staged protests at homecomings, and took over buildings.⁶⁹

Initially membership in the FLA promised administrators a way to pacify student demands without disrupting university routines. By the summer of 1999, over one hundred universities had joined. But USAS judged FLA undemocratic and its code inadequate. Georgetown University became the first to withdraw from the FLA following a "sleep-in" in November 1999.⁷⁰ In 2000, USAS formed a rival organization, the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), committed to independent monitoring and full disclosure of manufacturing sites.

Fearing a mass withdrawal from the FLA, its NGO members—the NCL as well as the International Labor Rights Fund, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, and the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights—sent an "Open Letter to the University Community" soon afterwards. These NGOs defended the FLA, arguing that its code and monitoring system "provide schools with an essential framework." They sought to counter the impression that corporations dominated the group by touting the balance between industry and NGOs on the board, along with a university representative and the chair, and mentioning recruitment of an NGO/labor advisory committee. On the one hand, they claimed that the FLA had a more encompassing system that extended to the entire industry, not merely to those who held collegiate licenses. On the other, they stressed their commitment to collective bargaining and worker rights.

But if these NGOs sought thereby to assuage student uneasiness, in other statements they cast themselves as the real experts, putting down the students. Regarding a plan to collect data on living wages proposed at a University of Wisconsin symposium, the NGOs warned, "If the follow-up studies produce information that assists workers to negotiate higher wage levels, they will have contributed to overall worker welfare. If, however, the studies lead to external demands on producers that do not reflect

the realities in which workers seek employment, or if the advocates of 'living wages' utilize market studies as a substitute for worker empowerment, the studies could endanger the livelihood of the very workers they are designed to benefit. . . . They could set back efforts of workers themselves to achieve collective bargaining rights." Portraying themselves as the true defenders of worker rights, the NGOs warned that "[p]roponents of living wages must be extremely careful to base their actions on solid collaboration with garment industry workers and their organizations in order to avoid this hazard."⁷¹

Unlike the FLA, the WRC assumed "that work conditions will not be changed by codes and monitors that come from industry, but by involvement of workers, through collective bargaining with management." So explained one activist after Nike CEO Phil Knight's retaliatory withdrawal of a \$30 million donation to the University of Oregon.⁷² The number of schools in the WRC had grown to 57 by the summer of 2000, when *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman argued that "the F.L.A. was formed to make a difference. The WRC was formed to make a point."⁷³ Friedman embraced self-regulation of the global economy. The students thought otherwise. Rather than calling for boycotts and plant closures, they demanded improvement of working conditions. Rather than privatizing labor law enforcement through a permanent system of factory policing, they sought to "open up the space for workers and their allies to advocate on their own behalf." The WRC challenged in its very name the meaning of "fairness" embraced by the FLA.⁷⁴

Sitting on the WRC Advisory Council was the director of the Corporate Affairs Department of the AFL-CIO; the director of the Industry Development Department of UNITE; representatives from South African, Asian, and Nicaraguan labor unions; and the director of the Trade Union Program of Harvard University. Its governing board consisted of six members selected by the Advisory Council, three from universities, and three from USAS. Responding to Nike's decision in April 2000 to release "the complete audits" and locations of six hundred plants, *Business Week* declared, "Who Says Student Protests Don't Matter?" By April 2004, the WRC counted 122 university affiliates.⁷⁵

By then the FLA had over 170 participating universities and colleges.⁷⁶ Two years before, it had responded to critics by revamping its monitoring process. The FLA would select factories to monitor through random sam-

pling, choose monitors whom it would pay directly, and make its visits unannounced. Companies no longer would receive the monitor's report before the FLA did and would be required to present a remediation plan. FLA would post monitoring information on its website—but although the name of the company using a monitored factory would appear, the factory's name would not. FLA would also add suppliers and agents to its purview. Factories would have to abide by what it called the core components of ILO (International Labor Organization) standards, including wages suitable to meeting basic needs and freedom from abuse and harassment.⁷⁷

WRC proponents, however, rejected these changes as inadequate because the FLA still relied on for-profit accounting firms, did not reveal the actual factories under investigation, and accepted internal corporate monitoring. The NLC and Kampagne für Saubere Kleidung (Clean Clothes Campaign [CCC], Germany), for example, complained in 2003 that FLA-approved factories in El Salvador were curtailing freedom of worker association by creating worker-management committees in lieu of recognizing trade unions. The FLA response to this charge typified the kind of realism it embraced: Unions, it admitted, served "as worker representatives with regard to collective bargaining, which no other form of organization can replace." But, it went on, "other forms of representation can be an improvement in factories that otherwise have no formal channels for communications between workers and management." Its inability to involve NGOs or the workers they represented limited the credibility of the FLA among those seeking global solidarity.⁷⁸

The NCL continued to belong to the FLA's NGO Advisory Council, with Golodner serving on the board of directors. But on its website, the League highlighted its child labor initiatives, not mentioning its involvement with the FLA in its current activities. By 2004, the League considered itself "a private, nonprofit advocacy group representing consumers on marketplace and workplace issues."⁷⁹ By emphasizing the workplace as well as the marketplace, it continued to advocate ethical consumption as a tool for worker rights.

Global Responsibility, Global Solidarity

Whether even truly independent monitoring will be enough to promote worker power remained questionable at century's end. Some called for

labor rights as part of the regulatory regime of global institutions, including the World Trade Organization, as a means to raise labor standards within nations of the “South.” Labor standards, if enforced, would then offer a more friendly terrain on which to conduct unionization.⁸⁰ The trend toward NGOs, like FLA and WRC, with their own codes of conduct in fact represents a privatization of labor standards in a period when global and transnational institutions are weak.

Consumer organization, though, has become an international phenomenon—including numerous European “clean clothes” campaigns—although few truly transnational organizations exist. Cross-border solidarity groups link activists around the globe—human rights workers, trade unionists, and sweatshop laborers themselves—and have introduced U.S. consumers to their struggles.⁸¹ The U.S./Labor Education in the Americas Project, for example, sponsored tours of former *maquiladora* laborers with STITCH (Support Team International for Textileras), whose steering committee was dominated by trade unionists and had a representative from USAS. At a time when the gendered dimensions of sweating have either disappeared or manifest themselves only in victimized portrayals of women, STITCH consists of women who support “Central American women who are organizing to improve their lives.” Updating the appeal of Florence Kelley, feminist activist Barbara Ehrenreich solicited funds for this group by reminding more prosperous U.S. women that they “reap the benefits of an unfair economic system that exploits and degrades women.” Other feminists have condemned Nike for supporting “Women in Its Ads but Not Its Factories.” “Just like the feminists at the turn of the century fought [sweatshops],” argued Eleanor Smeal of the Feminist Majority, “it’s incumbent on us to do the same.”⁸²

Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange could be seen as a new century’s version of Florence Kelley in her investigations into labor exploitation and passionate denunciations of corporate greed. Global Exchange—founded nearly a century after Kelley, in 1988—asked modern consumers, “Do you know where your shirt was made? By whom? And under what conditions?” But Benjamin’s agitprop style contrasts with Kelley’s legal reasoning, even if her embrace of fair trade and fair labor standards harkens back to the early NCL.⁸³

A century ago, Maud Nathan exhorted “the women who spend” to “take Ruskin’s advice to heart, and ‘in all their buying consider first what

condition of existence they cause in the producers of what they buy.’”⁸⁴ Today’s grassroots activists worry “whether we see ourselves merely as enlightened reformers or as true allies of labor.” Rejecting the “reform” model of the past that “makes workers the objects of reform, rather than the agents of their own liberation,” that “sees change emanating from above,” student radicals have opted for the “solidarity” model in which “activists respond to workers’ calls for solidarity and take their direction from those workers.”⁸⁵

Cross-class solidarity has never been easy, however. Too often reformers portray “the woman who toils” as a victim needing rescue. With production increasingly located in countries where the state suppresses freedom of speech and association, solidarity movements have to *create* conditions for unionization as much as support already existing campaigns. That is, they face a situation not so unlike those faced by their counterparts in the past, who joined with working people to generate a balance between worker actions, exemplified in strikes, and state support, such as labor standards. Organizing the garment industry under twenty-first century globalization appears to be an even more difficult task.

Notes

Introduction

The Rise and Fall of the New York Garment Industry

1. Roy Helfgott, "Women's and Children's Apparel," in *Made in New York: Case Studies in Metropolitan Manufacturing*, ed. Max Hall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 98–99.
2. Nancy Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 37–38.
3. For the best accounts of the rise (and fall) of New York as a garment center, see Green, *Ready-to-Wear and Ready to Work*; Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986); Jesse Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York* (Columbia, MO.: E.W. Stephens, 1905); Helfgott, "Women's and Children's Apparel," 19–134.
4. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 48.
5. Christine Stansell, "The Origins of the Sweatshop: Women and Early Industrialization in New York City," in *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society*, ed. Michael Frisch and Daniel Walkowitz (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 78–103.
6. Steven Fraser, "Combined and Uneven Development in the Men's Clothing Industry," *Business History Review* 57 (Winter 1983): 535.
7. See Hadassa Kosak, "Tailors and Troublemakers: Jewish Militancy in the New York Garment Industry, 1889–1910," in this volume.
8. Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
9. See Nancy Carnevale, "Culture of Work: Italian Immigrant Women Homeworkers in the New York City Garment Industry, 1890–1914," in this volume.
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11. For histories of the unions, see Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: Huebsch, 1924); Melch Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the U.S.A.*, 2 vols. (1950–53; reissue, Ktav, 1969); Gus Tyler, *Look for the Union Label: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995); Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Jo Ann Argersinger, *Making the Amalgamated: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Baltimore Clothing Industry, 1899–1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

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13. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 53.
14. See Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Daniel Bender, *Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
15. Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962); David Von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Books, 2003).
16. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 48.
17. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 56; Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the U.S.A., 1914–52* (1953; Ktav, 1969), 124–56; Stanley Nadel, "Reds versus Pinks: A Civil War in the Garment Industry," *New York History* 66:1 (1985): 48–72.
18. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 64.
19. Bender, *Sweated Work, Sweated Bodies*, 155–66.
20. Helfgott, "Women's and Children's Apparel," 93; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 204.
21. Helfgott, "Women's and Children's Apparel," 23, 110–14.
22. *Ibid.*, 60, 105–8.
23. Altagracia Ortiz, "En la aguja y el pedal eché la hiel": Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry of New York City, 1920–80," in Ortiz, ed., *Puerto Rican Women and Work: Bridges in Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 55–81.
24. Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000), 45.
25. Roger Waldinger, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 138, 142–43.
26. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 205; Waldinger, *Still the Promised City?*, 148.
27. Ortiz, "En la aguja y el pedal eché la hiel," 65; Carmen Whalen, "Latinas and Latinos in New York City's Garment Industry" (unpublished report to Sweatshop Project, 1998), 7.
28. Ortiz, "En la aguja y el pedal eché la hiel," 70, 72.
29. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 67; Xiaolan Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948–92* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 262–63, n.1.
30. Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky*, 262–63, n.1.
31. Waldinger, *Still the Promised City?*, 153.
32. Patricia Pessar, "The Dominicans: Women in the Household and the Garment Industry," in *New Immigrants in New York*, ed. Nancy Foner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 103–30.
33. See Ramona Hernández, *The Mobility of Labor under Advanced Capitalism: Dominican Migration to the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); also, Whalen, "Latinos and Latinas."
34. Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky*, 61, 67.
35. *Ibid.*, 2.

36. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 66; Freeman, *Working Class New York*, 43; Tyler, *Look for the Union Label*, 289.
37. Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky*, 143–70.
38. *Ibid.*, 171–212.
39. Immanuel Ness, “Globalization and Worker Organization in New York City’s Garment Industry,” in Bender and Greenwald, *Sweatshop USA*, 170–71.
40. See Florence Palpacuer, “The Globalization of New York’s Garment Industry,” in this volume.

Chapter 1

From Downtown Tenements to Midtown Lofts

The Shifting Geography of an Urban Industry

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2. New York State Department of Labor, *Annual Report*, 1901, 1:119; Mabel A. Magee, *Trends in Location of the Women’s Clothing Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 39. Cf. Roy B. Helfgott, “Women’s and Children’s Apparel,” in *Made in New York: Case Studies in Metropolitan Manufacturing*, ed. Max Hall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 56; B.M. Selekmán, Henriette R. Walter, and W. J. Couper, *The Clothing and Textile Industries in New York and its Environs* (New York: Regional Plan of New York and its Environs, 1925), 18.
3. Magee, *Trends in Location*, 39. See Wilfred Carsel, *A History of the Chicago Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union* (Chicago, 1940).
4. See my comparison of the two cities’ industries in Nancy Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
5. Helfgott, “Women’s and Children’s Apparel”; Edgar Hoover and Raymond Vernon, *Anatomy of a Metropolis* (New York: Doubleday, 1959); Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York’s Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986).
6. Leonard A. Drake and Carrie Glasser, *Trends in the New York Clothing Industry* (New York: Institute of Public Administration, 1942), 58, 83. The correlation of more standardized production with larger factory space, and the differences between women’s wear and men’s wear, can be seen by comparing New York, Chicago, and Cleveland. In 1921, garment firms in New York averaged 17.9 workers, those in Chicago 22.1, and those in Cleveland (home of Brooks Brothers), 47.8. Louis Levine, *The Women’s Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924), 521.
7. On the theme of decline, see Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 67–73, along with Magee, *Trends in Location*; Drake and Glasser, *Trends in the New York Clothing*

Industry, Larry Smith and Company, *Garment District Study*, 2 vols. (New York: Larry Smith and Company, 1957); Helfgott, “Women’s and Children’s Apparel”; Charles S. Goodman, *The Location of Fashion Industries with Special Reference to the California Apparel Market* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948); Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum, *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

8. Drake and Glasser, *Trends in the New York Clothing Industry*, 50; Larry Smith, *Garment District Study*, 1:13.

9. Larry Smith, *Garment District Study*, passim. See also Helfgott, “Women’s and Children’s Apparel”; Hoover and Vernon, *Anatomy of a Metropolis*; Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*.

10. On the relationship between home and workplace, see, for example, Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); David Ward, *Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

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12. Magee, *Trends in Location*, 104; Emanuel Tobier, “Manhattan’s Business District in the Industrial Age,” in *Power, Culture and Place: Essays on New York City*, ed. John H. Mollenkopf (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), 87–88.

13. City of New York Board of Estimate and Apportionment, Committee on the City Plan, *Final Report* (June 2, 1916), 110 (statement by Bruce M. Falconer, attorney for the Fifth Avenue Association).

14. For example, see the chapter on the Jewish architect Ely Jacques Kahn in Robert A. Stern et al., *New York 1930* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1987), 550–63.

15. Larry Smith, *Garment District Study*, 1:23, 24; Levine, *The Women’s Garment Workers*, 171; Stern, *New York 1930*, 556. On the general development of lofts, see Chester Rapkin, *The South Houston Industrial Area* (New York: City Planning Commission, 1962); Charles R. Simpson, *Soho: The Artist in the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

16. Larry Smith, *Garment District Study*, 1:22, 31–32. It has been difficult to establish fixed boundary definitions, however. Cf. Roy Helfgott, “Women’s and Children’s Apparel,” 22; Joel Seidman, *The Needle Trades* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), 7; Waldinger and Lapp, “Back to the Sweatshop.”

17. See, for example, Elizabeth Sergeant, “Toilers of the Tenements: Where the Beautiful Things of the Great Shops are Made,” *McClure’s Magazine* 35 (July 1910): 3 (reprinting a report of the Consumers League of the City of New York). More generally, see Alan Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes and the “Immigrant Menace”* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

18. Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962); *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Commission* (Albany, NY, 1912); *Second Report of the Factory Investigating Commission* (Albany, NY, 1913); David Von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003).

19. *Reports of the Industrial Commission*, 19 vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900–1902), 15:372.

20. “Report of the Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System” (1893), cited in *Report on the Garment Industry in New York State* (New York State Department of Labor, 1982), 7, II. In 1903, ten thousand licenses were surrendered or canceled due to change of residence.

21. Lazare Teper and Nathan Weinberg, *Aspects of Industrial Homework in the Apparel Trades* (New York: ILGWU Research Department, 1941), 23–30. See also Miriam Cohen and Michael Hanagan, “The Politics of Gender and the Making of the Welfare State, 1900–1940: A Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Social History* 24 (Spring 1991): 469–84.

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23. Florence S. Richards, *The Ready-to-Wear Industry, 1900–1950* (New York: Fairchild Publishers, 1951), 27; Teper and Weinberg, *Aspects of Industrial Homework*, 34–37.

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25. “Statement of the Fifth Avenue Association on the Limitation of Building Heights to the New York City Commission and the Testimony of the Association’s Representatives at a Conference” (June 19, 1913); City of New York Board of Estimate and Apportionment, *Report of the Heights of Buildings Commission* (December 23, 1913); idem, Committee on the City Plan, *Final Report* (June 2, 1916). I would like to thank Marc Weiss for communicating these documents to me.

26. See articles by Keith Revell, Marc Weill, Robert Fishman, and Daniel Bluestone in Ward and Zunz, *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900–1940*. See also Tobier, “Manhattan’s Business District.”

27. New York City Board of Education, *Vocational Survey*, GIV, 105.

28. Donna Gabaccia, “Little Italy’s Decline: Immigrant Renters and Investors in a Changing City,” in Ward and Zunz, *The Landscape of Modernity*, 235–51; Deborah Dash Moore, “On the Fringes of the City: Jewish Neighborhoods in Three Boroughs,” in Ward and Zunz, *The Landscape of Modernity*, 252–72. See also Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), esp. chaps. 3 and 4; Cohen, *Workshop to Office*; and Xiaolan Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948–1992* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881–1905* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

29. Magee, *Trends in Location*, 104. See Selekmán et al., *Clothing and Textile Industries*, for more conservative figures, cited in Tobier, “Manhattan’s Business District,” 88.

30. Cited in New York City Board of Education, *Vocational Survey*, GIV, 107.

31. Larry Smith, *Garment District Study*, 2:36–37.

32. Tobier, “Manhattan’s Business District,” 91; Clifton Hood, *722 Miles: The Building of the Subways and How They Transformed New York* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

33. Larry Smith, *Garment District Study*, 2:35.

34. Truckers began lowering their costs in the interwar period in order to encourage out-of-town production, which meant good business for them. (The ILGWU's attempt to organize the truckers, in Local 102, was not very successful.) By the 1980s, however, the trucking lifeline became a veritable stranglehold on many jobbers and contractors, who found themselves "married" to racketeering truckers. Trucking companies provided financial backing to start shops and arranged work for them, but they also charged inflated rates. Senator Franz S. Leichter denounced organized crime in the garment industry in his report "The Return of the Sweatshop" (see note 1), parts 2 and 3. The "sting" operations of the 1990s led to the indictment of several organized crime leaders for having imposed a "mob tax" on garment trucking. *New York Times*, March 20 and October 19, 1990; February 28, 1992; and June 12, 1995.

35. See Nancy Foner, ed., *New Immigrants in New York, New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Nancy Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Noonday Press, 1987); and Min Zhou, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

36. Committee on the City Plan, *Final Report*, 17.

Chapter 2

The Globalization of New York's Garment Industry

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2. G. Gereffi, "International Trade and Industrial Upgrading in the Apparel Commodity Chain," *Journal of International Economics* 48 (1999): 37–70; idem., "The Organisation of Buyer-Driven Global Commodity Chains: How U.S. Retailers Shape Overseas Production Networks," in *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*, ed. G. Gereffi and M. Korniewicz (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1994), 95–123. Gereffi refers to "commodity" chains in his own work, but proponents of this approach, as well as consulting firms and the business press, increasingly refer to "value" chains.

3. G. Gereffi, "The Mexico–U.S. Apparel Connection: Economic Dualism and Transnational Networks," in *Poverty or Development: Global Restructuring and Regional Transformations in the U.S. South and the Mexican South*, ed. Richard Tardanico and Mark B. Rosenberg (New York: Routledge, 2000), 59–89.

4. F. Palpacuer, "Competence-Based Strategies and Global Production Networks: A Discussion of Current Changes and Their Implications For Employment," *Competition and Change: The Journal of Global Business and Political Economy* 4, no. 4 (2000): 353–400.

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8. E. Bonacich and D. V. Waller, "The Role of U.S. Apparel Manufacturers in the Globalization of the Industry in the Pacific Rim," in *The Globalization of the Garment Industry in the Pacific Rim*, ed. E. Bonacich et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 80–102; P. Steele, *Hong Kong Clothing*, special report no. 2028 (London: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 1990).

9. Gereffi, "International Trade and Industrial Upgrading."

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12. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Industrial Reports*, "Apparels, Imports for Consumption," various years.

13. Gereffi, "International Trade and Industrial Upgrading."

14. R. Appelbaum, "Assessing the Impact of the Phasing-out of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing on Apparel Exports from Developing Countries" (unpublished manuscript, Institute for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research, University of California at Santa Barbara, 2003), www.isber.ucsb.edu; "Quotas and Beyond: A Look Ahead," just-style.com, October 27, 2003.

15. See, for instance, *Women's Wear Daily*, "New World Order," January 8, 2004; "Trade-Job Debate Heats Up," February 24, 2004; further press articles are available at <http://www.sweatshopwatch.org/global>.

16. International Labor Organization, "Employment and Social Policy in Respect of EPZs," *Governing Body Report* (Geneva: International Labor Office, 2003).

17. See, for example, the National Labor Committee (<http://www.nlcnet.org>) or Sweatshop Watch (<http://www.sweatshopwatch.org>).

18. International Labor Organization, "Globalization of the Footwear, Textiles and Clothing Industries," *Sectoral Activities Programme* (Geneva, 1996).

19. F. Palpacuer and A. Parisotto, "Global Production and Local Jobs: Can Global Production Networks Be Used as Levers for Local Development?" *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 3, no. 2 (April 2003), 97–120.

20. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Current Employment Statistics*, SIC codes, various years. Unless otherwise indicated, this source is used for historical employment data in the rest of the chapter. In the peak year of 1948, 354,000 people were employed in New York City's garment industry.

21. Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986); I. Taplin, "Struggling to Compete: Post War Changes in the U.S. Clothing Industry," *Textile History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 90–104.

22. Recent statistics using the new NAICS codes (North American Industrial Classification System) highlight a strong decline in U.S. employment in apparel manufacturing since 2000—especially in New York City, where 25,500 jobs have been lost, reducing the local manufacturing workforce to 33,200 in 2003. New York City accounted for 13.9 percent of U.S. job losses in apparel manufacturing between 2000 and 2003 while representing 10.6 percent of total U.S. apparel manufacturing employment; by contrast, California accounted for 28.5 percent of total U.S. apparel manufacturing employment in 2003 and 18.3 percent of U.S. job losses between 2000 and 2003.

23. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*.

24. T. Bailey, "Organizational Innovation in the Apparel Industry," *Industrial Relations* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 30–48; P. Pashigian, "Demand Uncertainty and Sales: A Study of Fashion and Markdown Pricing," *American Economic Review* 78, no. 5 (1988): 936–53.

25. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis; between 1991 and 1997, real personal expenditures in clothing and shoes increased by 11.7 percent versus 38.2 percent for total expenditure. The average absolute deviation of annual growth rate is 1.3 percent for these products versus 0.8 percent for all products over the same period.

26. Firms that specialized in garment design and marketing but did not perform any manufacturing activities were initially referred to as “jobbers” in the local apparel industry of the 1920s, while “manufacturers” referred to vertically integrated firms. Over the years, “manufacturers” increasingly outsourced production activities, so that the term came to be used with reference to firms involved in design and marketing but performing little or no manufacturing activities.

27. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*.

28. Unless otherwise indicated, the firm-level analysis developed in the next three sections of this chapter is based on information provided either in the 10-K annual reports of publicly traded corporations or by CEOs and managers interviewed at forty local firms, including sixteen manufacturers and twenty-four contractors, in 1995. The analysis focuses on firms operating in the women’s wear segment of the local industry.

29. Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970); Roy B. Helfgott, “Women’s and Children’s Apparel,” in *Made in New York: Case Studies in Metropolitan Manufacturing*, ed. Max Hall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

30. Bernstein, *Turbulent Years*, 86.

31. F. Abernathy, J. T. Dunlop, J. Hammond, and D. Weil, *A Stitch in Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

32. Company’s 10-K report, fiscal year ended in April 2003. Calvin Klein, Inc., was sold to large basics producer Philips Van Heusen in 2003 for \$425 million (Philips Van Heusen 10-Q report, 2003).

33. Interview, 1995.

34. C. C. White, “Mizrahi, Designer Most Likely to Succeed, Doesn’t,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1998.

35. S. R. King, “Staying in Vogue: Clothing Designers Adjust to a Vastly Changed World,” *New York Times*, November 4, 1998.

36. *Women’s Wear Daily*, “What’s in a Name?” Supplement, November 1983. Private labels were estimated to account for 45 percent of U.S. apparel unit sales in 2002, compared to 39 percent in 2000 and 35 percent in 1997 (“Measuring the Brand Premium,” *Textile Consumer*, 2004).

37. The Gitano Group went bankrupt in the mid-1990s; Leslie Fay retreated from the stock market in 2001 and now operates predominantly as a licensee business.

38. J. A. Chazen, “Notes from the Apparel Industry: Two Decades at Liz Claiborne,” *Columbia Journal of World Business* 31, no. 2 (1996): 40–43; James Lardner, “Annals of Business: The Sweater Trade,” *The New Yorker*, January 11 and 18, 1988.

39. Estimates based on interviews conducted in the mid-1990s.

40. Interview, 1995.

41. 10-K report, 2003.

42. F. Palpacuer, “Subcontracting Networks in the New York Garment Industry: Changing Characteristics in a Global Era”, in *Free Trade and Uneven Development: The North American Apparel Industry after NAFTA*, ed. G. Gereffi, D. Spener, and J. Bair (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 53–73.

43. P. Gibbon, "Back to the Basics through Delocalisation: The Mauritian Garment Industry at the End of the Twentieth Century," unpublished manuscript, Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen, 2000, <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/global/bella.html>.

44. J. Abend, "U.S. Contractors Diversify to Meet Global Competition," *Bobbin Magazine*, December 1999.

45. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*.

46. Official immigration to the United States increased from 3.3 million in 1961–70 to 4.5 million in 1971–80, 7.3 million in 1981–90, and 9.1 million in 1991–2000, although part of the increase since 1981 reflects the regularization of previously undocumented immigrants. In 1991–2002, newcomers were predominantly of Asian (31 percent) and Latin American (42 percent) origin, and New York was their second most likely state of intended residence after California (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*).

47. Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

48. U.S. Census of Population, *Public Use Microdata Sample 1990*, and Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*. The proportion of immigrants in New York City's total apparel employment was 42 percent in 1980 and 73 percent in 1990. More recent statistics at a broader level of analysis indicate that in 2000–2002, 54,160 immigrants were employed in New York's apparel and accessories manufacturing, accounting for 89 percent of total employment in these sectors (Economic Policy Institute, "Current Population Survey," pooled data, in Fiscal Policy Institute, *Immigrant Workers and the Minimum Wage in New York City* [2004]).

49. Waldinger's study focused on Chinese and Dominican immigrants as dominant groups among Asian and Hispanic immigrants in the New York garment industry in 1986.

50. M. Chin, "A Peek into the New York Chinatown Garment Industry," unpublished manuscript, Department of Sociology, Columbia University, 1992; M. Zhou, *Chinatown: The Socio-economic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

51. Abeles, Schwartz, Haeckel, and Silverblatt, Inc., *The Chinatown Garment Industry Study* (New York: International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Local 23–25 and the New York Skirt and Sportswear Association, 1983); C. Struense, "A New Contract for Chinatown: A Cleaner Image," *Women's Wear Daily*, July 8, 1993.

52. S. Grear, "New York City's Garment Industry: A New Look?" (Fiscal Policy Institute, 2003).

53. "Chinatown One Year after September 11th: An Economic Impact Study" (Asian American Federation of New York, November 2002).

54. T. Bailey and R. Waldinger, "Primary, Secondary, and Enclave Labor Markets: A Training System Approach," *American Sociological Review* 56 (August 1998): 432–45; T. Bailey, *Immigrant and Native Workers*, Conservation for the Human Resources Studies in the New Economy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987).

55. Another upgrading strategy recently adopted by the owners of the largest Chinese contracting firms is worth mentioning. They have invested in design, marketing, and sales activities outside Chinatown, either by acquiring existing firms in the Garment District or by launching retail chains in the Greater New York area. For instance, the owners of Tech Sew Manufacturing have launched Lafayette128, named for the address of their

manufacturing facility in Chinatown, to design and market their own women's wear product lines.

56. Interviews, 1995.

57. Interview, 1995.

58. See www.labor.state.ny.US/pdf/p879.pdf for a summarized presentation of state regulatory activities.

59. F. Palpacuer, "The Development of Core-Periphery Forms of Organizations: Some Lessons from the New York Garment Industry," discussion paper, DP/95/1997 (Geneva: International Institute for Labor Studies, 1997); Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*.

60. M. J. Piore and C. F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

61. G. Van Liemt, "Codes of Conduct and International Subcontracting: A 'Private' Road towards Ensuring Minimum Labor Standards in Export Industries," International Workshop on "Global Production and Local Jobs: New Perspectives on Enterprise Networks, Employment and Local Development Policy" (Geneva: International Institute for Labor Studies, 1998).

62. Gear, 2003.

Chapter 3

The Geographical Movement of Chinese Garment Shops

A Late Twentieth-Century Tale of the New York Garment Industry

1. Much of the information in this chapter is drawn from Parts I and II of a report submitted by the author to the Sweatshop Project, cosponsored by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE) in September 1998, entitled "Sweatshops in Sunset Park: A Variation of the Late 20th Century Chinese Garment Shops in New York City." Some of it has also appeared in the author's book *Holding Up More than Half the Sky: A History of Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948–1992* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

2. See, for example, Donna Gabaccia, "Little Italy's Decline: Immigrant Renters and Investors in a Changing City," in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900–1940*, ed. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 235–51; Nancy L. Green, "Sweatshop Migrations: The Garment Industry between Home and Shop," Ward and Zunz, *The Landscape of Modernity*, 213–32; Altagracia Ortiz, "Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry of New York City, 1920–1980," in Altagracia Ortiz, ed., *Puerto Rican Women and Work: Bridges in Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 55–81.

3. Green, "Sweatshop Migrations," 216–25.

4. Gabaccia, "Little Italy's Decline."

5. Ortiz, "Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry," 70, 73. The decline is also mentioned in Abeles, Schwartz, Haechel, and Silverblatt, Inc., *The Chinatown Garment Industry Study* (hereinafter, *Study*) (New York: International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union Local 23–25 and the New York Skirt and Sportswear Association, 1983), 28.

6. It was the Sweatshop Project mentioned above. See note 1.

7. Since the second and third Chinatowns, in Queens and Brooklyn, were not established until the last two decades of the twentieth century, I am using “Chinatown” in this section to refer to the traditional one in Manhattan.

8. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1940.

9. They included the repeal of all the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1943, the amendment of the War Bride Act in 1946, and the passing of a series of Displaced Persons and Refugee Relief Acts in the late 1940s and 1950s. For a good discussion of changes in U.S. immigration laws between the 1940s and 1960s, see David Reimers, *Still the Golden Door: The Third World Comes to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 21–29; Roger Daniels and Harry H. L. Kitano, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), 16–18; and Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 121, 140–41.

10. Women formed 90 percent of the Chinese immigrants who entered the U.S. between 1947 and 1952. See U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (hereinafter INS), *Annual Report*, 1948–1953.

11. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1940 and 1960.

12. Abeles et al., *Study*, 2 and 107.

13. See note 5.

14. For the discussion and statistics in this paragraph, see Abeles et al., *Study*, 5, 48, 54 and 68.

15. It declined by only 3.5 percent in the years between 1974 and 1996. See Mark Levitan, “Opportunity at Work: The New York City Garment Industry” (New York: Community Service Society of New York, 1998), 24. For a brief mention of the outflow of the city’s garment industry in the 1920s, see Nancy Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham & London, 1997), 68, and “Sweatshop Migrations,” 215.

16. Abeles et al., *Study*, 5.

17. Abeles et al., *Study*, 81–82, and Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 28, 33.

18. Abeles et al., *Study*, 5.

19. For a further discussion, see Abeles et al., *Study*, 82, and Kwong, *The New Chinatown*, 29–36.

20. *U.S. Census of Population*, 1970–1990.

21. For the percentage of married women among Chinese women garment workers in 1980, see Min Zhou, *Chinatown: the Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Table 7–6.

22. For a detailed discussion of the complexity embedded in this aspect of their lives, see Bao, *More than Half the Sky*, 98–109.

23. Many sons and daughters of garment workers, some of whom are now playing important roles in the community, have singled out their mothers as the driving force in their lives. For example, Fay Chew, the former director of the New York Chinese American Historical Museum, and Doris Ling-Cohan, an attorney dedicated to serving the community, are both daughters of women garment workers. They both considered their mothers as their role models when they looked back on their early lives. For an interview with Cohan, see *Justice* 125, no. 3 (April 1993): 11.

24. Interview with a Mrs. Ying by the author, April 5, 1987.

25. This is the case to this day—particularly in Manhattan’s Chinatown, but also in most Chinese shops in Sunset Park.

26. For a discussion of the outflow of capital and its impact on the New York City garment industry, see Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprises in New York’s Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 68–88.

27. The 1974 statistic is from Mark Levitan, “Opportunity at Work: The New York City Garment Industry” (New York: Community Service Society of New York, 1998), 24. The 1980 statistic was provided by the Division of Research and Statistics of the New York State Department of Labor.

28. Abeles et al., *Study*, 30.

29. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, 72, and Levitan, “Opportunity at Work,” 18, 19.

30. Levitan, “Opportunity at Work,” 5, 24.

31. See Carl Proper, “New York: Defending the Union Contract,” in *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers*, ed. Andrew Ross (New York: Verso, 1997), 178.

32. The number of union-affiliated manufacturers fell from 297 in the 1960s to 189 in 1979 and 72 in 1987. See Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 70.

33. Abeles et al., *Study*, 199.

34. See Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky*, 221.

35. For the average rent in Manhattan’s Chinatown, see Abeles et al., *Study*, 50.

36. This can also be very economical for the employers. One owner of a shop told a reporter that he did not have to worry about being ticketed for parking violations anymore after moving to Brooklyn. It saved him quite a lot of money, because, according to him, a ticket could cost as much as \$50, which was equal to the profit he could make by having fifty garments sewed in his shop. See *Sing Tao Daily* (hereinafter *STD*), October 13, 1992.

37. Interview by the author on April 25, 1998.

38. Abeles et al., *Study*, 199.

39. I have chosen this decade because the numbers of Chinese immigrants who came to New York City from Hong Kong are not available between 1982 and 1985. To be more exact, the total number of Chinese immigrants who came to New York City between 1986 and 1995 was 124,695, but since the number of those from Hong Kong in 1987 is not available, this number can be taken only as an approximate one. See INS, *Statistical Yearbook*, Table 5.3 (1982–85); Table 15 (1986); Table 18 (1987–91) and Table 19 (1992–95).

40. A total of 108,021 out of the 131,679 Chinese immigrants who came to the city in this decade fell under these categories. See City of New York, Department of City Planning, *The Newest New Yorkers: A Statistical Portrait* (New York, 1992), Table 3, and *The Newest New Yorkers, 1990–94: An Analysis of Immigration to NYC in the Early 1990s* (New York, 1996), Appendix Table 3.

41. In the years from 1982 to 1994, of the 59,206 Chinese immigrants who had occupations prior to immigration, 36,547 had been working-class. See *The Newest New Yorkers*, Table 13, and *The Newest New Yorkers, 1990–94*, Appendix Table 13.

42. Rents, in particular, were, and still are, much lower in the Sunset Park area of Brooklyn than are those in Queens, not to mention those in Manhattan. For example, a worker in Brooklyn told me that in 1990 she paid \$250 for a studio in the basement with shared bathroom and kitchen when she and her family—her husband and son—lived in

Queens for the first month after they arrived in the city. But for an additional \$50, the family could have a one-bedroom apartment with their own bathroom and kitchen in Brooklyn, where they moved in the second month. The difference remains unchanged to this day. Interview with the Zhang family by the author on June 28, 1998.

43. The amount jumped to \$7,000 in 1996.

44. Interestingly, similar rationales were also used by the employers of the sweatshops where Puerto Rican workers worked. See Ortiz, “Puerto Rican Women in the Garment Industry,” 62.

45. Some union officers discovered that a number of Chinese employers had kept two sets of books, with one maintained strictly according to the wages and hours stipulated in the union contract.

46. The second Chinatown was in Queens. By the spring of 1998, Brooklyn’s Chinatown had been enlarged to encompass the area between Third and Ninth avenues and from Thirty-sixth to Sixty-fourth streets. See *STD*, March 8, 1998, Weekly Special Issue.

47. My interviews showed that even in the late 1990s, despite the fact that working conditions in these shops had deteriorated to an intolerable degree, many new Chinese immigrant workers continued to come and work in Brooklyn’s garment shops.

48. See *The Newest New Yorkers, 1990–94*, Tables 4–29 and 4–30.

49. Interview by the author, July 2, 1998.

50. Take those from Fuzhou, for example. My interviews showed that between the late 1980s and mid-1990s, the smugglers charged from \$20,000 to \$27,000 for smuggling a single person out of China and into the United States “by land” and about \$30,000 to \$35,000 by air. The costs by air, however, had risen to more than \$40,000 by 1998.

51. For example, in 1991, a shop owner in Brooklyn was reported to have been stripped naked by a group of Chinese gangsters in front of his female employees after the gangsters did not find enough money in his cash box. See *STD*, May 25, 1991.

52. Ko-lin Chin, *Chinatown Gangs: Extortion, Enterprise, and Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 50.

53. Daniel Soyer, “Sweatshops in the New York Garment Industry: The Jewish Era, ca. 1880–ca. 1920,” a report submitted to the same Sweatshop Project at the New York Lower East Side Tenement Museum as was this study (New York, 1997), 2. Recent government studies have defined a “sweatshop” as “a business which regularly violates both wage or child labor and safety or health law.” (See U.S. General Accounting Office, “Sweatshops in the U.S.: Opinions on Their Extent and Possible Enforcement Options,” August 1988.) However, as Mark Levitan has pointed out in Abeles et al., *Study*, the definition is so broad that it can cover anything “from firms which habitually fail to keep accurate payroll records to the infamous case of virtual slavery uncovered in El Monte, California.” See “Opportunity at Work,” 40–41.

54. The *Central Daily News*, August 17, 1988. The Chinese garment industry drew increasing attention from the media and the press in subsequent years. For recent newspaper coverage, see, for example, the *New York Times*, August 6 and September 13, 1995; October 17, 1997.

55. See, for example, *New York Times*, March 12, 1995.

56. For a detailed account of the workers’ struggle, see Bao, “Sweatshops in Sunset Park,” Part IV. The Workers’ Center was closed down by the union, however, in 2001.

57. *The China Press*, Weekend Edition, no. 000212 (January 17–23, 2003).

58. See note 3.

Chapter 4 Cockroach Capitalists

Jewish Contractors at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

1. 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), 7–8. For scholarly discussions of the role of contractors in recent decades, see Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Trades* (New York: New York University Press, 1986); Edna Bonacich, "Asian and Latino Immigrants in the Los Angeles Garment Industry: An Exploration of the Relationship between Capitalism and Racial Oppression," in Ivan Light and Parminder Bhachu, *Immigration and Entrepreneurship: Culture, Capital, and Ethnic Networks* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993), 51–73; Bernard Wong, "The Role of Ethnicity in Enclave Entrepreneurship: A Study of the Chinese Garment Factories in New York City," *Human Organization* 46 (Summer 1987): 120–30; Morrison G. Wong, "Chinese Sweatshops in the U.S.: A Look at the Garment Industry," *Research in the Sociology of Work: Peripheral Workers* 2 (1983): 357–79; Xiaolan Bao, "Sweatshops in Sunset Park: A Variation of the Late 20th Century Chinese Garment Shops of New York City," unpublished paper for Sweatshop Project, 1998.
2. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 157.
3. Levine, Louis, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924), 14, 16; Steve Fraser, "Combined and Uneven Development in the Men's Clothing Industry," *Business History Review* 57 (Winter 1983): 522–47; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 137–50.
4. Stansell, Christine, "The Origins of the Sweatshop: Women and Early Industrialization in New York City," in *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society*, ed. Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 78–103; Judith Greenfeld, "The Role of the Jews in the Development of the Clothing Industry," *YIVO Annual* 2–3 (1947–48): 181; Jesse Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York* (University of Missouri Studies, 1905), 13–46; Ava Baron and Susan E. Klepp, "If I Didn't Have My Sewing Machine . . . : Women and Sewing Machine Technology," in *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike: Women Needleworkers in America*, ed. Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 20–59.
5. Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 169–70, 302.
6. *Ibid.*, 174, 243, 402, 405–06; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 58.
7. Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, viii, 15.
8. Fraser, "Combined and Uneven Development," 535, 541–42; Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 387.
9. Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881–1905* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 18–19.
10. Bernard Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons in Amerika* (New York: United Hebrew Trades, 1929), 48; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 180–81; Daniel Bender, *Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 27.
11. Edmund James et al., *The Immigrant Jew in America* (New York: B. Buck, 1906), 112. For similar figures, see Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant*

Mobility in New York City, 1880–1915 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 61; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 80.

12. Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 14–15, 22–23; Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*, 52; Jesse Thomas Carpenter, *Competition and Collective Bargaining in the Needle Trades, 1910–67* (Ithaca, NY: New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, 1972), 6–7.

13. “Foreign-Born Labor in the Clothing Trade,” *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, vol. 15, 57th Cong., 1st sess., 1901, HR Doc. No. 184, 323, 325, 327.

14. *Ibid.*, 251.

15. Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*, 47–48, 52, 185.

16. Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 22.

17. *Report of the Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System*, 52nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1893, HR 2309, 199.

18. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 183–98.

19. Andrew Godley, *Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurship in New York and London, 1880–1914: Enterprise and Culture* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave, 2001).

20. Bender, *Sweated Work, Weak Bodies*, 47–54.

21. *Report of the Committee on Manufactures*.

22. Howe, *World of Our Fathers* 157–58; Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890; repr., Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 141–42.

23. Fraser, “Combined and Uneven Development,” 536–37; Carpenter, *Competition and Collective Bargaining*, 33; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 148.

24. *Report of the Committee on Manufactures*, 21, 224; Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 140.

25. Rose Cohen, *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (1918; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 129–31.

26. Bernard Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons in Amerika*, 50; Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*, 66–67; Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 19; *Report of the Committee on Manufactures*, xi–xii, 105–6, 109, 201–2, 221; Abraham Cahan, “A Sweatshop Romance,” in *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (1898; New York: Garrett Press, 1968), 167.

27. Bernard Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons in Amerika*, 62.

28. *Report of the Committee on Manufactures*, xi, xii.

29. Abraham Cahan, “Women of Valor,” in *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan*, ed. Moses Rischin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 409.

30. Ephraim Wagner, Autobiography #45, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 164–65.

31. Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons in Amerika*, 259; Isaac Benequit, *Durkhgelebt un durkhgetrakht* (New York: The Culture Federation, 1934), vol. 2, 85–86; *Report of the Committee on Manufactures*, 221; Sam Cahan, “A Sweatshop Romance,” 173, 179–80, 183–84; Liptzin, *Amol iz geven . . .* (New York: Amkho, 1951), 19.

32. Theodore Dreiser, *The Color of a Great City* (1923; repr., Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 93–94.

33. See A. Beittany, Autobiography #107, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 26–30.

34. “Foreign Born Labor in the Clothing Trade,” 325; Benequit, *Durkhgelebt un durkhgetrakht*, 49; J. Dyenson, Autobiography #147, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 47.

35. Fraser, “Combined and Uneven Development,” 528; Greenfeld, “The Role of the Jews,” 190–91.

36. William M. Leiserson, “The Pig Market,” in Stein, *Out of the Sweatshop*, 41–42; Liptzin, *Amol iz geven*, 5; M. Feigan, Autobiography #4, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 15; David Krasky, Autobiography #192, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 55.

37. “Foreign-Born Labor in the Clothing Trade,” 322–23.

38. M. Havelin, Autobiography #21, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 25–26.

39. Ish Akher, Autobiography #162, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 10.

40. Louis Borgenicht, *The Happiest Man* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1942), 213–18; Liptzin, *Amol iz geven*, 163.

41. Benequit, *Durkhgelebt un durkhgetrakht*, v. 2, 4.

42. Ibid., v. 2, 48–49.

43. Ibid., v. 2, 49–51.

44. Ibid., v. 2, 49–53.

45. Ibid., v. 2, 79–83, quote on 81.

46. Ibid., v. 2, 84.

47. Ibid., v. 2, 106–10.

48. Ish Akher, Autobiography #162, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, 13.

49. Elias Tcherikower, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher arbeter havegung in Amerike* (New York: YIVO, 1943), vol. 2, 250–51, 485–86. For other references to Socialist bosses, see Liptzin, *Amol iz geven*, 66; Benjamin Stolberg, *Tailor’s Progress: The Story of a Famous Union and the Men Who Made It* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1944).

50. A Seventy Year Old East New Yorker, Autobiography #24, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, 37–38.

51. Sholem Asch, *Onkl Mozes* (1918; repr., Buenos Aires: Ateneo Literario en el Instituto Científico Judío, 1973), 85–86; Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; repr., New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 378.

52. Bernard Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons in Amerika*, 50; M. Feigan, Autobiography #4, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, YIVO, 15; Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 140; “Foreign-Born Labor in the Clothing Trade,” 321–22.

53. Pearl Goodman and Elsa Ueland, “The Shirtwaist Trade,” *Journal of Political Economy* 18 (December 1910): 820; Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons*, 261; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 148–49.

54. Abraham Cahan, “Summer Complaint: The Annual Strike” and “Cockroach Pharaohs,” in Rischin, *Grandma Never Lived in America*, 382, 388; Carpenter, *Competition and Collective Bargaining*, 128.

55. J. Dyenson, Autobiography #147, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, 52–58.

56. *Report of the Committee on Manufactures*, 3, 8, 23.

57. Ibid., 3–23.

58. Quoted in Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 149.
59. Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons*, 66; Dreiser, *Color of a Great City*, 97–98.
60. Tcherikower, *Geshikhte*, v.2, 353–55, 368; Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons*, 280; Joanne Argersinger, *Making the Amalgamated: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Baltimore Clothing Industry, 1899–1937* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 22. For the story of a labor leader (in Chicago) who got his start as a contractor, see Abraham Bisno, *Abraham Bisno: Union Pioneer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 67.
61. Tcherikower, *Geshikhte*, vol. 2, 257–59, 266–67; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 51; Cahan, “Summer Complaint: The Annual Strike,” 38; Levine, *The Women’s Garment Makers*, 32–33, 79–80; Weinstein, *Di idishe yunyons*, 248.
62. Stolberg, *Tailor’s Progress*, 10, 23; Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 52–56; Carpenter, *Competition and Collective Bargaining*, 38–54; Budish and Soule, *The New Unionism in the Clothing Industry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1920), 12; J. M. Budish and George Soule, *The New Unionism in the Clothing Industry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1920), 12; Argersinger, *Making the Amalgamated*, 60–82.
63. Levine, *The Women’s Garment Workers*, 37, 194, 246–47, 258; Carpenter, *Competition and Collective Bargaining*, xix, 22–23, 104–38.
64. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 146; Carpenter, *Competition and Collective Bargaining*, 31.
65. M. Feigan, Autobiography #4, Collection of American Jewish Autobiographies, 20–21; Liptzin, *Amol iz geven*, 41 (see also 66); Carpenter, *Competition and Collective Bargaining*, 118.

Chapter 5 Tailors and Troublemakers

Jewish Militancy in the New York Garment Industry, 1889–1910

1. For a more extensive exploration of Jewish immigrant political culture, see my *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City 1881–1905* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).
2. For a discussion of the formation of ethnic identity, see Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George E. Pozzetta, and Rudolph J. Vecoli, “The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12 (Fall 1992): 3–41.
3. For an examination of the relationship between the unionization of the women’s garment industry and the industry’s structure, see Roger Waldinger, “Another Look at the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union: Women, Industry Structure and Collective Action,” in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women’s Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (London: Routledge, 1991), 86–109. See also Alice Kessler-Harris, “Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and Their Union,” in *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker*, ed. Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977).
4. Judith Greenfeld, “The Role of the Jews in the Development of the Clothing Industry in the United States,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, vols. 2–3 (1947/8), 203; Nancy Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 202.

5. American Jewish Historical Society Archives, Baron de Hirsch Fund Papers, Box 16, File: Census 1890.

6. U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, Bulletin no. 12, *Regularity of Employment in the Women's Ready-to-Wear Garment Industries*, 31; *Immigration Commission*, vol. 11, 388; *Industrial Commission*, vol. 15, 338.

7. Quoted in Elias Tcherikower, ed., *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, transl. and rev. by Aaron Antonovsky (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1961), 304.

8. *U.S. Industrial Commission on the Relations and Conditions of Capital and Labor*, 56th Congress, 2nd sess., 1901–2, vol. 11, 386; *Report of the Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System*, 52nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1893, Introduction, vi, vii.

9. *Yudishes Volkszeitung*, 20 February 1888, 2. Barsky was an advocate of an industrial union that would include all the workers in the industry.

10. *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 14 March 1890; J. Dubna, YIVO, RG 102, no. 71–71C, 14. According to Dubna's account, the strike occurred sometime between 1908 and 1910.

11. *New York World*, 1 April 1886.

12. *John Swinton's Paper*, 11 April 1886.

13. *New York Times*, 20 July 1901; 22 July 1901.

14. *New York Tribune*, 20 July 1901.

15. *John Swinton's Paper*, 23 August 1885. See also John Swinton, *Striking for Life, A Momentous Question: The Respective Attitudes of Labor and Capital* (Philadelphia and Chicago: A.R. Keller, 1895), 182–83.

16. *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 12 September 1890.

17. Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924), 151.

18. *New York Tribune*, 29 March 1893.

19. Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 420–22. For a biographical study and collection of Rosenfeld's poems, see Edgar J. Goldenthal, *Poet of the Ghetto Morris Rosenfeld* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1998).

20. Goldenthal, *Poet of the Ghetto*, 204. For a discussion of popular music, see Irene Heskes, ed., *Yiddish American Popular Songs, 1895–1950* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1992), xxiv, xix, 10, 11. According to Heskes (p. 25), numerous music publishers and many bookstores and outlet stores thrived on the Lower East Side, satisfying the growing demand for song sheets.

21. Heskes, *Yiddish American Popular Songs*, 69, music by Joseph M. Rumshinsky.

22. **P (Box 121: 22), Dorot Jewish Division, The New York Public Library.

23. *New York Sun*, 8 September 1894, 5 September 1894; *Yudishes Tageblatt*, 22 February 1892.

24. Moses Rischin, ed., *Grandma Never Lived in America: The New Journalism of Abraham Cahan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 379–80.

25. Hutchins, Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1965), 118.

26. Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 92, 93; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 69.

27. B. Rabinowitz, YIVO, RG 113, 2.

28. Bernard Weinstein, *Di idishe yunions in Amerika* (New York: United Hebrew Trades, 1929), 266, 269, 270.

29. Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition*, chap. 1.
30. *New York Times*, 22 July 1901; *New York Sun*, 6 September 1894, 5 November 1894.
31. Abraham Rosenberg, *Di kloukmakher un zeyere yunyons* (New York: Cloak Operators Union, Local 1, 1920), 7, 8.
32. Cary Goodman, *Choosing Sides: Playground and Street Life on the Lower East Side* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 13.
33. *New York Sun*, 19 August 1885.
34. *Ibid.*, 3 March 1891, 8 November 1894, 9 November 1894.
35. *New York World*, 9 November 1894; 12 November 1894.
36. *New York Times*, 18 August 1910, 26 August 1910, 28 August 1910.
37. *Ibid.*, 8 July 1910.
38. *New York Sun*, 20 March 1891. Ultimately, contractors and manufacturers tended to migrate to locations away from centers where community and union surveillance hindered production. Jack Hardy, *The Clothing Workers: A Study of the Conditions and Struggles in the Needle Trades* (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 156, 157.
39. *New York Times*, 3 July 1904; Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 52.
40. *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 8 September 1893, 15 September 1893; Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 8; Rosenberg, *Di kloukmakher un zeyere yunyons*, 83; *New York Sun*, 17 November 1894, 22 November 1894.
41. See Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 70 (September 1980): 91–105.
42. *New York Times*, 16 May 1902.
43. *Jewish Daily Forward*, 15 May 1902, quoted in Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest," 99.
44. *New York Sun*, 17 November 1894, 19 November 1894. In some instances, landlords showed leniency to tenants who owed back rent; some, however, evicted rebellious tenants. *New York Times*, 31 July 1895.
45. *Jewish Daily Forward*, 24 December 1907, 26 December 1907. Although some landlords gave in to the demands and lowered their rents, the strike continued to spread, affecting many tenements. *Ibid.*, 4 January 1908, 6 January 1908. For a discussion of the 1905–6 and 1907–8 strikes, see Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Landlord as Czar: Pre-World War I Tenant Activity," in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904–1984*, ed. Ronald Lawson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 111–23.
46. *New York Sun*, 17 October 1894, 9 November 1894; *New York Times*, 4 August 1896.
47. The best known and most notorious instance of interethnic clashes in the period occurred in 1902 during the funeral procession of Rabbi Jacob Joseph, when Jewish mourners came under attack by mostly Irish workers employed by Hoe and Company. As testimony collected during an investigation into the causes of the riot reveals, the police did not provide the necessary protection, often siding with the attackers. Leonard Dinnerstein, "The Funeral of Jacob Joseph," in *Anti-Semitism in American History*, ed. David Garber (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 275–301. For testimony of witnesses at the hearing conducted to investigate the causes of the riot, see Minutes of Hearing of Commissioners Appointed by the Mayor of the City of New York to Investigate the Riot on July 30, 1902. YIVO, RG 117.
48. *New York Sun*, 6 March 1891, 16 September 1894, 16 October 1894; *New York Times*, 4 August 1896.

49. *New York Times*, 12 October 1894, 13 October 1894, 14 October 1894. Quoted in Cary Goodman, *Choosing Sides*, 9.
50. *The Brooklyn Eagle*, 18 May 1902, 23 May 1902.
51. *New York Times*, 16 May 1902, 17 May 1902.
52. *Ibid.*, 24 May 1902, Editorial.
53. Quoted in Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 53.
54. *New York Sun*, 19 August 1885; *New York Times*, 3 August 1896.
55. *New York Times*, 4 August 1896, 6 August 1896, 4 August 1909; *New York Sun*, 24 July 1890.
56. *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 7 August 1898, 31 March 1893, 14 July 1893, 21 July 1893, 9 September 1892, 20 March 1891; *New York Sun*, 29 March 1886, 30 March 1886; *Jewish Daily Forward*, 18 May 1904, 26 May 1904.
57. Rosenberg, *Di kloukmakher un zeyere yunions*, 81.
58. *New York Times*, 3 July 1904.
59. *Ibid.*, 26 May 1897.
60. Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 131.
61. For a discussion of the strike, see Paul Brenner, "The Formative Years of the Hebrew Bakers' Unions, 1881–1914," *YIVO Annual* 18 (1983): 39–120. See also *New York Tribune*, 11 August 1905; *New York World*, 7 August 1905, 9 August 1905; *New York Times*, 8 August 1905, 10 August 1905.
62. *New York Sun*, 11 October 1894; *New York Times*, 6 August 1896; Rosenberg, *Di kloukmakher un zeyere yunions*, 167.
63. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest," 94.
64. Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880–1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 128–37.
65. *Ibid.*, 66–70.
66. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest," 97.
67. *Jewish Daily Forward*, 18 May 1904.
68. *Ibid.*, 7 December 1909.
69. The success in mobilizing members was not permanent. The reluctance of the male-dominated leadership of the ILGWU to invest resources in organizing women shirtwaist makers, the relative decline of the large shops in the 1920s, and, ultimately, the numerical decline of Jewish women workers in the union all undercut the organizational potential of the ILGWU. Roger Waldinger, "Another Look at the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union: Women, Industry Structure and Collective Action," in *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (London: Routledge, 1991), 95–104.
70. *Ibid.*, 96. These strikes, as well as the 1909 strike, did not succeed in organizing the shirtwaist trade under uniform rules. It was only after the cloakmakers strike of 1910 and the establishment of the Protocol of Peace that the ILGWU gained in importance.
71. The firm of Hart, Schaffner and Marx of Chicago, which employed six thousand people, was the pioneer in this process. Facing a general strike in men's clothing in 1910, the firm was the leading voice for the pragmatic approach and settled with the union. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 303–4; Steven Fraser, "Combined and Uneven Development in the Men's Clothing Industry," *Business History Review* 57 (Winter 1983): 545.
72. Waldinger, "Another Look at the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union," 98.

73. Rosenberg, *Di kloukmakher un zeyere yunyons*, 212, 213.
74. Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 120–22.
75. *Ibid.*, 251–52, 258. The “preferential union shop” was the invention of Louis D. Brandeis, the mediator of the 1910 cloakmakers’ strike and the architect of the Protocol. Brandeis rejected workers’ demand for a closed shop. *Ibid.*, 189–90.
76. Sixty percent of all workers in the clothing trades were organized, while only 15 percent of all wage earners were union members in the years 1917–1918. J. M. Budish and George Soule, *The New Unionism in the Clothing Industry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1920), 99–100.
77. Charles Leinenweber, “Socialists in the Streets: The New York City Socialist Party in Working Class Neighborhoods, 1908–18,” *Science and Society* 41 (Summer 1977): 152–71; Melvin Dubofsky, “Success and Failure of Socialists in New York City, 1900–1918,” *Labor History* (Fall 1968): 361–75.
78. Budish and Soule, *The New Unionism in the Clothing Industry*, 158, 159. The rate of unionization declined in the 1920s owing to changes in fashion, the reappearance of small production units, demographic changes in the workforce, and the reluctance of the ILGWU to commit itself to organizational efforts. Waldinger, “Another Look at the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union,” 101–4.

Chapter 6 Culture of Work

Italian Immigrant Women Homeworkers in the New York City Garment Industry, 1890–1914

1. By the time Italians were fully ensconced in the industry, tenement workshops were separate from living spaces. New York State Department of Labor, *Report on the Growth of Industry in New York* (Albany, NY: The Argus Company, 1904), 90.
2. Cynthia R. Daniels, “Between Home and Factory: Homeworkers and the State,” in *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home*, ed. Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 15; Joan Younger Dickerson, *The Role of Immigrant Women in the U.S. Labor Force, 1890–1910* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 155; New York State Department of Labor, *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* (Albany: The Argus Company, 1903), 65; U.S. House of Representatives, *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, 57th Cong., 1st sess., 1901, H.R. Doc. No. 184, 369; Miriam Cohen, *Workshop to Office: Two Generations of Italian Women in New York City, 1900–1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 47.
3. Cynthia R. Daniels, “Between Home and Factory,” 19.
4. A compelling example of this approach is Nancy Green’s comparative study of the garment industry in Paris and New York, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
5. My understanding of culture is influenced by the theoretical and anthropological work of recent years that treats culture as a social construction that is continually reproduced through linguistic and other practices rather than as a fixed and static entity.
6. The literature on Italian immigration is voluminous. For a concise summary of the history of Southern Italian immigration to the U.S., see Roger Daniels, *Coming to America:*

A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 188–201. The detailed studies that inform my understanding of Italian immigrant communities presented herein include Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977); Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880–1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Donald Tricarico, *The Italians of Greenwich Village: The Social Structure and Transformation of an Ethnic Community* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1984); Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982); Gary R. Mormino and George Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

7. Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, xv.

8. Regarding the nature of the cloakmaking trade, see New York State, *Seventh Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1894), 12; for the presence of Italians among cloakmakers, see Charles Anthony Zappia, “Unionism and the Italian American Worker: A History of the New York City ‘Italian Locals’ in the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, 1900–1934,” (diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994; Ann Arbor: UMI, 1997), 169; U.S. House of Representatives, *Report of the Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System*, 52nd Cong., 2nd Sess., 1893, HR 2309, 80–81; Louise Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry: A Study of Conditions in New York City* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1919), 59. For more on the presence of Italians in the sweatshops, see Jesse Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*, Social Science Series, vol. 1 (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1905), 271; 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; Louis Levine, *The Women’s Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924), 23.

9. The definition of the sweatshop used here is based on Daniel Soyer’s report “Sweatshops in the New York Garment Industry: The Jewish Era, ca. 1880–1920,” final report to the Sweatshop Project, Lower East Side Tenement Museum and UNITE, 1997, 3–4.

10. U.S. Senate, *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the United States*, vol. 2: *Men’s Ready-Made Clothing*, 61st Cong., 2nd sess., 1911, Doc. No. 645, 500.

11. State of New York, *Twelfth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, (Albany, 1898), 759.

12. While ethnically mixed small shops and factories, along with other intercultural contacts in the workplace, were not uncommon in this period, it is less clear whether this phenomenon carried over into the sweatshops per se. Nancy Green sees ethnically mixed garment shops as a tendency that was evident at the turn of the century but that became more pronounced as the 1900s progressed (*Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 288.) See also Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994), 52. On Italians in mixed-work environments, see Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 59.

13. In an interview, a former garment worker and member of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union recalled his job in a Jewish factory in 1916. Referring to his boss, he noted, “that man spoke very good Italian, but he was Jewish. . . . He spoke Italian well.

He was able to keep all his help—you know, the Italians.” The worker goes on to say that he himself learned some Yiddish. Frank Gatti, International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, 10/2/74 interview, Oral History 20, Collection 110, Box 17, The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, 26.

14. On the failure of Southern Italians to establish ethnic networks, see Steven Fraser, “‘Landslayt’ and ‘Paesani’: Ethnic Conflict and Cooperation in the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America,” in *“Struggle a Hard Battle”: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 282.

15. I am indebted to Daniel Soyer for this insight on the relationship between the two waves of Jewish immigrants in the garment industry and how that supported the rise of the Jewish contractor.

16. On the timing and numbers of Italian immigration, see Zappia, “Unionism and the Italian American Worker,” 134; for the effects of the 1892 legislation, see New York State Department of Labor, *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 44–45; for the conversion of tenements to factories, see State of New York, *Ninth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, 873; New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Commission* (Albany: The Argus Company, 1912), 30; on the move of the garment center to uptown, see Soyer, “Sweatshops,” 26–27.

17. Zappia, “Unionism and the Italian American Worker,” 152–54; on Italian young women’s fascination with factory life, see Amy A. Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” *Bollettino dell’Emigrazione* (1909), 14.

18. U.S. House of Representatives, *Report of the Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System*, 192.

19. Mabel Hurd Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1902), 260–62; Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 36; *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, 261–86; Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 64; Elizabeth C. Watson, “Homework in the Tenements,” *The Survey*, Feb. 4, 1911: 775.

20. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, 260–62; U.S. Senate, *Reports of the Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Cities* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 159; 163–65.

21. *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 60.

22. On cultural prohibitions against Jewish women working, see Roger Daniels, *Coming to America*, 16; Thomas Kessner and Betty Boyd Caroli, “New Immigrant Women at Work: Italians and Jews in New York City, 1880–1905,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 26; Daniel E. Bender, *Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 72; n. 73, 226. Regarding Italian underbidding of Jewish women, see Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 36; on Jewish daughters in the factories, see Susan Anita Glenn, “The Working Life of Immigrants: Women in the American Garment Industry, 1880–1920,” (diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1983).

23. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners in the United States*, 300.

24. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 184. In his study of Italian garment workers, *Immigrants and Unions, a Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870–1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), Edwin Fenton attributes the large numbers of Italian

women involved in homework to general illiteracy and lack of facility with the English language (467–69). For statistics on the percentage of women with little knowledge of English, see Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 9, and Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 264. On Italianized English learned on the job, see Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 44.

25. For the change in the attitudes of southern Italians toward education, see Rudolph J. Vecoli, “The Italian Immigrant Press and the Construction of Social Reality, 1850–1920,” in *Print Culture in a Diverse America*, ed. James P. Danky and Wayne A. Wiegand (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 17–18. On women being prevented from taking language classes, see Elisabetta Vezzosi, “The Dilemma of the Ethnic Community: The Italian Immigrant Woman between ‘Preservation’ and ‘Americanization’ in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Support and Struggle: Italians and Italian-Americans in a Comparative Perspective, Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association*, ed. Joseph L. Tropea, James E. Miller, and Cheryle Beatti-Repetti (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1986), 85. On Irish immigrant women domestics, see Hasia Diner, *Erin’s Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

26. New York State, *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York* (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1900), 52–53.

27. Regarding the mother-centered nature of Southern Italian families, see Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community*. On the uprising of the 20,000 in relation to Italian women, see Colomba M. Furio, “Immigrant Women and Industry: A Case Study; The Italian Immigrant Women and the Garment Industry, 1880–1950” (diss., New York University, 1979), 116; Zappia, “Unionism and the Italian American Worker,” 165–66. Jennifer Guglielmo argues that Italian women, who brought a history of informal militancy with them from Italy, did not participate in the 1909 uprising because they did not believe that the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) or the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) had their best interests in mind. See Jennifer Guglielmo, “Sweatshop Feminism: Italian Women’s Political Culture in New York City’s Needle Trades, 1890–1919,” in *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 190. The importance of cultural preference in determining—and limiting—the labor options of Italian women is supported by the fact that in 1900 they held the lowest rates of participation in the labor force, with only one out of nine women working outside of the home. See Dickerson, *The Role of Immigrant Women*, 162. Southern Italian cultural norms regarding female purity have been documented in the ethnographical literature. See, for example, Charlotte Gower Chapman, *Milocca: A Sicilian Village* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1971), and Ann Cornelisen, *Women of the Shadows* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

28. On the desirability of garment work of any kind over agricultural work for Sicilian women, see Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street*, 64. Indeed, Gabaccia argues more broadly that New York provided opportunities for Sicilian immigrants to achieve social ideals that were unattainable in Sicily, including the possibility of work for women that had been associated with the artisan class in Sicily. For the statistic on unmarried women home finishers, see State of New York, Factory Investigating Commission, *Second Report of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1913),

29. Vezzosi, “The Dilemma of the Ethnic Community,” 84. Although keeping boarders brought Italian women into contact with men outside of their immediate families, boarders were often other relatives or *paesani* who, in any case, would not have had much opportunity to spend time alone with the women of the household away from their male kin.

30. Daniels, *Coming to America*, 28; Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, “Patterns of Work and Family Organization: Buffalo Italians,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971): 309.

31. U.S. Senate, *Reports of the Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industries, Part 6: Clothing Manufacturing* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 385; Colomba M. Furio, “The Cultural Background of the Italian Immigrant Woman and Its Impact on Her Unionization in the New York City Garment Industry, 1880–1919,” in *Pane e Lavoro: The Italian American Working Class*, ed. George E. Pozzetta (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1980), 83, 88–89; Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, “Italian Women and Work: Experience and Perception,” in *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker*, ed. Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 111; Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 38.

32. *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, 326; 370–71.

33. Carolyn McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign to Organize Garment Workers: 1880–1917* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), 13; Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*, 271.

34. On Italian conservatism vis-à-vis work, see *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, 371; for difficulties in tracking homeworkers, see *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 47.

35. Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 273–74.

36. *Ibid.*, 274.

37. Cynthia R. Daniels, “No Place Like Home: A Pictorial Essay on Italian-American Homeworkers in New York, 1910–13,” in *Support and Struggle: Italians and Italian-Americans in a Comparative Perspective, Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association*, ed. Joseph L. Tropea, James E. Miller, and Cheryl Beatti-Repetti (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1986), 16; Elizabeth Sergeant, “Toilers of the Tenements,” *McClure's Magazine*, 35 (July 1910): 242. For additional descriptions of finishing and artificial flower making, see U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Conciliation, Arbitration, and Sanitation in the Dress and Waist Industry of New York City*, Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics No. 145 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1914), 163; Sergeant, “Toilers of the Tenements,” 239.

38. New York State, Department of Labor, *Second Annual Report of the Department of Labor of the State of New York*, vol. 1 (Albany: The Argus Company, 1903), 19.

39. On the preference by Jewish contractors for Italian workers, see Cynthia R. Daniels, “Between Home and Factory,” 16; Bernardy, “L'emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 35; Bender, *Sweated Work, Weak Bodies*, n. 73, 226. For the quote on Jewish contractors, see *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, 42.

40. Fraser, “‘Landslayt’ and ‘Paesani,’” 282; Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 44; Watson, “Homework in the Tenements,” 774–75; Sergeant, “Toilers of the Tenements,” 241.

41. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, 285; Miriam Cohen, *Workshop to Office: Two Generations of Italian Women in New York City, 1900–1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 99.

42. Sergeant, “Toilers of the Tenements,” 239; Boris, *Home to Work*, 186.

43. Odencrantz, *Italian Women in Industry*, 45; Watson, “Homework in the Tenements,” 775–76. See also Mary Van Kleeck, “Child Labor in New York City Tenements,” *Charities and the Commons*, vol. 19, no. 16 (January 18, 1908): 1405–20. Regarding the economic importance of children in Italian homeworking families, see Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 34–37.

44. *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Commission*, 89–90.

45. Watson, “Homework in the Tenements,” 776; Sergeant, “Toilers of the Tenements,” 248; Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 101. On the low expectations vis-à-vis Italian schoolchildren in general, see, for example, Selma C. Berrol, “School Days on the Old East Side: The Italian and Jewish Experience,” in *Education and the Immigrant*, ed. George E. Pozzetta (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991), 29 38–39; and Edward Alsworth Ross, *The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People* (New York: The Century Company, 1914): 114.

46. New York State, Factory Investigating Commission, *Second Report of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission* (Albany: The Argus Company, 1913), 105–6.

47. *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Commission*, 90; Cohen, *Workshop to Office*, 49–51.

48. Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 34–35.

49. Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 268.

50. The quote is from Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 79 (translation mine); see also Cohen, *Workshop to Office*, 102.

51. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, 262–63; 264; 280; 297; Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 80; Cynthia R. Daniels, “No Place Like Home,” 23; *Report of the Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System*, 196; *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, 478.

52. *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, 49.

53. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, 283; for more on the inadequacies of the diet of Italian homeworkers, see Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 288; Leon Stein, *Out of the Sweatshop* (New York: Quadrangle, 1977), 180; Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2001); Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). For an opposing view on the quality of the Italian immigrant diet, see Cohen, *Workshop to Office*, 103. On work-related illnesses, see *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, 296; Boris, *Home to Work*, 185–86.

54. *Report on Condition of Woman and Child Wage-Earners*, 297.

55. Stein, *Out of the Sweatshop*, 179–80.

56. *Second Annual Report of the Department of Labor of the State of New York*, I, 18.

57. Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 110–11; for similar estimates of piece rates, see *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 66; *Report of the Committee on Manufactures on the Sweating System*, 185–87.

58. Bernardy, "L'emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division," 89.

59. Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 120.

60. Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 120–22; Kathy L. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

61. Daniels, "No Place Like Home," 17.

62. Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 128; *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, 479.

63. Boris, "Sexual Divisions, Gender Constructions: The Historical Meaning of Homework in Western Europe and the United States," in *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible no More*, ed. Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prügl (New York, London: Routledge, 1996), 20.

64. *Twentieth Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 85; Daniels, "Between Home and Factory," 25; Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*, 171; Boris, *Home to Work*, 64; Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*, 167.

65. Van Kleeck, "Child Labor in New York City Tenements," 1405–6; Daniels, "Between Home and Factory," 20, 24.

66. Miriam Cohen and Michael Hanagan, "The Political Economy of Social Reform: The Case of Homework in New York and Paris, 1900–1940," *French Politics and Society* 6, no. 4 (October 1988): 34.

67. *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, 50. For more evidence of workers' resistance to sweatshop laws, see also *Testimony of Daniel O'Leary, Factory Inspector of the State of New York*, 28.

68. Watson, "Homework in the Tenements," 779–80.

69. *Ninth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, 54; State of New York, *Tenth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York* (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1896), 40; *Second Report of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission*, 118.

70. Willett, *The Employment of Women in the Clothing Trade*, 199; for a discussion of the difficulty of unionizing Southern Italian workers in general, see, for example, Fraser, "'Landslayt' and 'Paesani,'" 286.

71. McCreesh, *Women in the Campaign to Organize Garment Workers*, 104. The importance of ethnolinguistic factors in organizing Southern Italians in this period has been discussed by others. See Zappia, "Unionism and the Italian American Worker," 165–71; Furio, "The Cultural Background of the Italian Immigrant Woman," 102–3, 123.

72. Daniels, "Between Home and Factory" 23–24; "What the United States Government Says about Child Labor in Tenements," Records of the New York Consumers League, Box 9a, Folder #19, The Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives; for an example of the treatment of homework by the press from the perspective of the consumer, see Henry White, "Perils of the Home Factory," *Harper's Weekly*, Feb. 11, 1911.

73. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988); New York State, *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York* (New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1899), 789–90; "The Consumers' League," *Charities* 4, no. 19 (April 7, 1900), Records

of the New York Consumers League, Box #48; *Twelfth Annual Report of the Factory Inspectors of the State of New York*, 47, 51.

74. Bernardy, “L’emigrazione delle donne e dei fanciulli italiani nella North Atlantic Division,” 101–2; Sergeant, “Toilers of the Tenements,” 248.

75. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*, 131–3, 152–53; Yans-McLaughlin, “Italian Women and Work”; Boris, *Home to Work*, 178. Daniel Bender argues that male and female Jewish immigrant workers also participated in the discourse that construed sweated work in the garment industry as a threat to traditional gender divisions. See Bender, *Sweated Labor, Weak Bodies*.

76. Boris, *Home to Work*, 54.

77. The quotes are from Boris, “Sexual Divisions, Gender Constructions,” 27. On the role Italian homeworkers played in limiting their employment options, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage Working Women in the United States* (1982; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 127.

Chapter 7

On Dominicans in New York City’s Garment Industry

1. Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic: A National History* (New York: Hispaniola Books, 1995).

2. ENDESA (Encuesta Demográfica y de Salud) (Santo Domingo: Centro de Estudios Sociales y Demográficos, 1996), 2.

3. Miguel Ceara Hatton and Edwin C. Hernandez, *El gasto público social de la República Dominicana en la década de los ochentas* (Santo Domingo: Centro de Investigación Económica y Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia, 1993), 17.

4. Nelson Ramírez, “Un país a la medida: distorciones en la medición de la pobreza y el desempleo en la República Dominicana” (unpublished paper; Santo Domingo: Centro de Estudios Sociales y Demográficos, 1999), 8.

5. Miguel Del Cid and Rodolfo Tacsan Chen, *Fuerza Laboral, Ingresos y Poder Adquisitivo de los Salarios en Centroamérica, Panamá y República Dominicana: 1998*. (Costa Rica: Organización Internacional del Trabajo, LIL, S.A., 1999), 12.

6. Ramona Hernández, *The Mobility of Labor under Advanced Capitalism: Dominican Migration to the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

7. Ramona Hernández and Francisco Rivera-Batiz, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socio-Economic Migration* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 1997).

8. According to the Office of City Planning of New York City, between 1990 and 1996 the Dominican Republic was the mother’s birthplace corresponding to the highest percentage of births in the city.

9. Matthew Drennan, “The Decline and Rise of the New York Economy,” in *Dual City: Restructuring New York*, ed. John Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), 29.

10. Drennan, “Decline and Rise,” 32.

11. John Kasarda, “Structural Factors Affecting the Location and Timing of Urban Underclass Growth,” *Urban Geography* 11, no. 3 (1990): 237–53.

12. This chapter uses data from the Censuses of Population and Housing of 1980 and 1990 (5 percent PUMS) and from the 1997 Current Population Survey and compares

Dominicans, aggregate data from major ethnic groups (Hispanics, non-Hispanic whites, and non-Hispanic blacks), and the New York City average.

13. Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

14. *Ibid.*, 23.

15. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

16. *Ibid.*, 128.

17. *Ibid.*, 40.

18. Muzaffar Chishti, “Blaming the Victim,” *IRL Report* 20 (1983): 22–24; Roger Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York’s Garment Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 1986).

19. Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

20. Patricia R. Pessar, “The Linkage between the Household and Workplace of Dominican Immigrant Women in the United States,” *International Migration Review* 18, no. 4 (1984): 1188–1211.

21. Hernández, *The Mobility of Labor under Advanced Capitalism*.

22. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*; Alejandro Portes and Luis E. Guarnizo, *Capitalistas del trópico: la inmigración en los Estados Unidos y el desarrollo de la pequeña empresa en la República Dominicana* (Santo Domingo: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales/Proyecto República Dominicana, 1991).

23. Alejandro Portes and Robert Bach, *Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

24. Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle*, 184.

25. *Ibid.*, 116.

26. *Ibid.*, 180.

27. *Ibid.*, 180–81.

28. *Ibid.*, 181–82, 177.

29. Portes and Guarnizo, *Capitalistas del trópico*.

30. A similar argument was advanced by Luis E. Guarnizo in “One Country in Two: Dominican-Owned Firms in New York and in the Dominican Republic” (unpublished PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1992).

31. Portes and Guarnizo, *Capitalistas del trópico*.

32. Guarnizo, “One Country in Two.”

33. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner’s, 1958).

34. History and Migration Task Force, Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, *Labor Migration under Capitalism: The Puerto Rican Experience* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

35. William Kleinknecht, *The New Ethnic Mobs* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

36. Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández, *The Dominican Americans* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 79.

37. Andrés Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the New York Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 193.

38. Hugh O’Neill and Mitchell L. Moss, *Reinventing New York: Competing in the Next Century’s Global Economy* (New York: Urban Research Center, Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University, 1991), 10.

39. Ibid., 9.
40. Torres, *Between Melting Pot*, 48.
41. Torres-Saillant and Hernández, *The Dominican Americans*; Ramona Hernández and Francisco Rivera-Batiz, *Dominican New Yorkers: A Socioeconomic Profile* (New York: CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, 2003).
42. We are aware that the effects of the number of workers in the economy of a given home would vary depending on the household's dependency ratios, the total composition of the household, and the actual amount of cumulative income.
43. Pessar, "The Linkage between the Household and Workplace."

Chapter 8

Expanding Spheres

Men and Women in the Late-Twentieth-Century Garment Industry

1. See, for example, Sonya Rose, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
2. See June Nash and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly eds., *Women, Men and the International Division of Labor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983).
3. Helen Safa, "Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean," in *Women, Employment, and the Family in the International Division of Labor*, ed. J. Parpart and S. Stichter (London: Macmillan, 1990), 72–97.
4. This is discussed in Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone. *The Great U-Turn: Corporate Restructuring and the Polarizing of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
5. See Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), and Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
6. Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, "Broadening the Scope: Gender and International Economic Development," *Sociological Forum* 4, no. 4 (1989).
7. See Leslie Salzinger, "From High Heels to Swathed Bodies: Gendered Meanings under Production in Mexico's Export Processing Industry," *Feminist Studies* 23, n. 3 (1997), and 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).
8. Leslie Salzinger, "From High Heels to Swathed Bodies."
9. See Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital* and *The Global City*.
10. Fernandez-Kelly, "Broadening the Scope."
11. Edna Bonacich, Lucie Cheng, Norma Chinchilla, Nora Hamilton, and Paul Ong, "The Garment Industry in the Restructuring Economy," in *Global Production*, ed. L. Cheng, E. Bonacich, N. Chinchilla, N. Hamilton, and P. Ong (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
12. See Alejandro Portes and Robert L. Bach, *The Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Douglas Massey et al., *Return to Aztlan: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987–90); Robert Smith, "'Doubly Bounded' Solidarity: Race and Social Location in the Incorporation of Mexicans into New York City," (paper presented at Social Science Research Council, Conference of Fellows: Program of Research on the Urban Underclass, University of Michigan, June 1994); and Robert Smith, "Mexicans in New York: Membership and Incorporation in a New Immi-

grant Community,” in *Latinos in New York*, ed. S. Braver and B. Haslip Viera (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996).

13. Nancy Foner, “Sex Roles and Sensibilities: Jamaican Women in New York and London,” in *International Migration: The Female Experience*, ed. Rita and Caroline Brettell Simon (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1986).

14. Massey et al., *Return to Aztlan*.

15. Foner, “Sex Roles and Sensibilities.”

16. See Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia R. Pessar, *Between Two Islands: Dominican International Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

17. In this chapter, when I discuss skill, I am talking about the ability to piece together clothing, the ability to operate a sewing machine, and coordinating hand movements with foot movements. Most other literature, especially the literature on restructuring the economy, uses the word *skill* to mean formal education.

18. Xiaolan Bao, *Holding Up More than Half the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948–92* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), and Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*.

19. Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy: The Millinery and Dressmaking Trades, 1860–1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

20. Some women worked in the family-owned outside shops, which were usually located in apartments in tenement buildings on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. See Jesse Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York* (Columbia: The University of Missouri, 1905), and Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924).

21. Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*, and Louis Lorwin, *The Women's Garment Workers*.

22. Not only were women crowded out of cutting, but the increased immigration of German, Austrian, and Hungarian Jews led to the appearance of male sewing machine operators. See Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers*.

23. Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York*.

24. Wendy Gamber, *The Female Economy*.

25. Louise C. Odencrantz, “Italian Women in Industry,” in *Work: Its Rewards and Discontents*, ed. Leon Stein (New York: Arno Press, 1919; rpt. 1977).

26. Odencrantz, “Italian Women in Industry,” 61.

27. Susan Anita Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1990).

28. Green, *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work*.

29. Odencrantz, “Italian Women in Industry.”

30. The ILGWU and the Korean Contractors' Association estimated five hundred Chinese-owned and only two hundred Korean-owned shops. My sources indicate twice as many Korean-owned garment shops.

31. These are estimates from the Organizing Department of the Union of Needletrades Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE)—formerly two separate unions, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, that merged at the end of 1995. The estimate of forty thousand workers is based on an average of forty-five workers in each shop.

32. Margaret M. Chin, *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

33. Elizabeth McLean Petras, “The Shirt on Your Back: Immigrant Workers and the Reorganization of the Garment Industry,” *Social Justice* 19, no. 1 (1992).

34. Dae Young Kim, “Beyond Co-ethnic Solidarity: Mexican and Ecuadorian Employment in Korean-owned Business in New York City,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22, no. 3 (May 1999).

35. See Smith, “‘Doubly Bounded’ Solidarity,” and “Mexicans in New York.”

36. Chin, *Sewing Women*.

37. The men are referring to the garment shops as large factories, where work is more masculine than that expected in a garment shop.

38. I can only conjecture that the networks of the workers I interviewed were not connected to the networks that had access to housecleaning or babysitting jobs.

39. Groceries and restaurants hire fewer people than a garment shop. Each restaurant or grocery store can only hire up to ten people, whereas a garment shop can hire up to forty or more people.

40. Restaurants and groceries hire through personal recommendation. If a new immigrant knows fewer people, then it is all the more difficult to get a job.

41. Latino men’s average wage is by far the highest, averaging \$5.70 an hour, whereas Latino women earn, on average, \$5.16 an hour and Chinese women earn \$4.04 an hour.

Chapter 9

“Social Responsibility on a Global Level”

The National Consumers League, Fair Labor, and Worker Rights at Century’s End

1. For a summary which is also a product of the new activism, see Andrew Ross, ed., *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers* (New York: Verso, 1997); see also Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador, 1999), and Randy Shaw, *Reclaiming America: Nike, Clean Air, and the New National Activism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

2. No history of the post–World War II NCL exists, but see Landon R.Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers League, Women’s Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 244–51, and National Consumers League, “100 Years of Advocacy, 1899–1999” (Washington: NCL, 1999).

3. This essay, though it focuses on the NCL, draws upon my “Consumers of the World Unite! Campaigns against Sweating, Past and Present,” in *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective*, ed. Daniel E. Bender and Richard A. Greenwald (New York: Routledge, 2003), 203–24.

4. Linda F. Golodner, “Apparel Industry Code of Conduct: A Consumer Perspective on Social Responsibility” (paper presented at Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Religious Values in Business, October 6, 1997), 3, available at www.nclnet.org/notredam.htm.

5. Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 86; much of my account here elaborates on and extends this earlier analysis.

6. Kathryn Kish Sklar, Anja Schuler, and Susan Strasser, *Social Justice Feminists in the United States and Germany: A Dialogue in Documents, 1885–1933* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 5–7.

7. Maud Nathan, “Women Who Work and Women Who Spend,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 27 (1906): 646–47.

8. “Report of the President,” *Report of the Year Ending December, 1905* (Consumers League of the City of New York, March 1906), 10; on Nathan, see Maud Nathan, *Story of an Epoch-Making Movement* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1926), and Robert D. Cross, “Maud Nathan,” in *Notable American Women, 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 608–9.

9. Josephine Shaw Lowell, quoted in Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 19; Joan Waugh, *Unsentimental Reformer: The Life of Josephine Shaw Lowell* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 197–202.

10. Reverend James Otis Huntington, quoted in—and this account taken from—Kathryn Kish Sklar, “Two Political Cultures in the Progressive Era: The National Consumers League and the American Association for Labor Legislation,” in *U.S. History as Women’s History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 43.

11. Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation’s Work: The Rise of Women’s Political Culture, 1830–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 221.

12. *Ibid.* Sklar discusses her life until her move to New York.

13. Boris, *Home to Work*, 88–89.

14. Florence Kelley, *Some Ethical Gains through Legislation* (New York: Macmillan, 1905), 230.

15. Kathryn Kish Sklar, “The Consumers’ White Label Campaign of the National Consumers’ League, 1898–1918,” in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (Washington, DC: The German Historical Institute with Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17–35, esp. 23–4, 31; Boris, *Home to Work*, 82.

16. Sklar, “The Consumers’ White Label Campaign,” 31; Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–87.

17. Florence Kelley, “The Problem of Sweating in America,” *The Chautauquan* 60 (November 1910): 414–21.

18. Vivien Hart, *Bound by Our Constitution: Women, Workers, and the Minimum Wage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 63–86.

19. Boris, *Home to Work*, 91.

20. *Ibid.*, 92; Sklar, “The Consumers’ White Label Campaign,” 32–33.

21. Boris, *Home to Work*, chaps. 7–9; Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, chaps. 4–7.

22. Quoted in Linda F. Golodner, “Apparel Industry Code of Conduct,” 2.

23. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 153.

24. Meg Jacobs, “‘Democracy’s Third Estate’: New Deal Politics and the Construction of a ‘Consuming Public,’” *International Labor and Working Class History*, no. 55 (Spring 1999), 22–51; see also Elizabeth Cohen, “The New Deal State and the Making of Citizen Consumers,” in *Getting and Spending*, 111–25; Lawrence B. Glickman, “The Strike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth-Century American Political Culture,” *Journal of American History* 88 (June 2001): 99–128.

25. Quoted in Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 418, n. 35.
26. There is no history of the Shoppers, but see Helen Sorenson, *The Consumer Movement* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 127–28, and Kathleen Banks Nutter, "Jessie Lloyd O'Connor and Mary Metlay Kaufman: Professional Women Fighting for Social Justice," *Journal of Women's History* 14 (Summer 2002): 132–35, and Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism*, 104–8, 244–51.
27. Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*, 520, n. 45.
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Contributors

Daniel Soyer is associate professor of history at Fordham University in New York. In 1996–97 he was a fellow of the Sweatshop Project, a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Institute sponsored by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and UNITE! His book *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880–1939*, (Harvard University Press, 1997) was co-winner of the Saul Viener Prize of the American Jewish Historical Society.

Nancy L. Green is professor at the Centre de Recherches Historiques at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris. Her latest books include *Ready-to-wear and Ready-to-work: A Century of Industry and Immigrants in Paris and New York* (Duke University Press, 1997) and (as editor) *Jewish Workers in the Modern Diaspora* (University of California Press, 1998).

Florence Palpacuer is professor of business strategy at the University of Montpellier I, France. She previously worked as a researcher at the International Institute for Labour Studies in Geneva, where she studied changing forms of industrial organization in global industries. In 1992–95 she was a research fellow at Columbia University in New York, where she conducted an in-depth case study of the New York garment industry to complete her Ph.D. dissertation. She graduated in business administration from the University of Montpellier I in 1996.

Xiaolan Bao is professor of history at California State University at Long Beach. In 1997–98 she was a fellow of the Sweatshop Project, a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Institute sponsored by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and UNITE! Her book, *Holding Up More than Half*

the Sky: Chinese Women Garment Workers in New York City, 1948–92, was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2001 as part of its series on the Asian American Experience.

Hadassa Kosak is associate professor of history at Yeshiva University in New York. She is the author of *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, New York City, 1881–1905*, which appeared in 2000 in the series on American labor history published by the State University of New York Press.

Nancy C. Carnevale is assistant professor of history at Montclair State University in New Jersey. In 1997–98 she was a fellow of the Sweatshop Project, a Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Institute sponsored by the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and UNITE!

Ramona Hernández is associate professor of sociology at City College of New York and director of the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute. She is author of *The Mobility of Labor under Advanced Capitalism: Dominican Migration to the United States* (Columbia University Press, 2002), winner of the Choice Award for Outstanding Academic Title in 2002. She is coauthor (with Silvio Torres-Saillant) of *The Dominican Americans* (Greenwood Press, 1998).

Margaret M. Chin is assistant professor of sociology at Hunter College. She was awarded a Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Junior Faculty Award for 2004–05 to continue her study of Chinatown after September 11. Her chapter, “Moving On: Chinatown Garment Workers after 9/11,” is forthcoming in *Wounded City*, edited by Nancy Foner (Russell Sage Foundation Press); her book *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry* is forthcoming from Columbia University Press.

Eileen Boris is Hull Professor of Women’s Studies in the Women’s Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is author or editor of numerous books, including *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), which won the Philip Taft Prize in Labor History, and (with Elisabeth Prügl) *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (Routledge, 1996). She is currently writing a history of home health care work, with New York City as one focus.

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