A Contronym for Women: Bicentennial Examinations of the American Market Revolution in New England and Neighbouring States, 1790-1850

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The market revolution was a series of economic reforms most active between 1815 and 1846 whose many political, technological and structural implements that often predated the temporal historic consensus produced a holistic timeline ranging from 1790 to 1850. These technological and organisational variations, instituted toward the transition of the United States from a largely agrarian society to a market-capitalist economy, were particularly instrumental in moulding the lives of lower and middle-class White American women around the New England area, whose respective marital statuses, social substrata, and miscellaneous individual circumstances determined their socioeconomic experiences. To this end, the revolution's effects on the socioeconomics of this female cohort are characterised by an interdependent mixture of the positive and the negative. This essay seeks to examine the effects of the market revolution on the socioeconomic behaviours of lower and middle-class White American women around the New England area from 1790 to 1850. While the market revolution exposed working-class women to the liberties of the public sphere, it also challenged their socioeconomic productivity, rendered a new wave of middle-class domesticity, and generated industrial subcultures, ultimately finalising the United States' departure from the organic, and its arrival to the artificial.

1. The Decline of the Status Quo and the Woman's New Public Sphere

The socioeconomic situation of the working class that had dominated American colonial history was characterised by its strict adherence to the rhythms of the natural world. Spring called for moderate, preparational agricultural labour (e.g. tilling land, sowing seeds, rearing cattle, etc.), and summers were spent leisurely watching crops germinate and livestock grow, followed by the expeditious autumnal production and trade of goods. In short, biospheric conditions were "the dominant factor" that "set the pace of preindustrial economic life".[1] Under this system, goods — predominantly manufactured textiles — were exchanged without a set medium, and were produced in an artisanal household manner that enlisted respective tasks from men, women, and children.[2] Hence, the placement of women was determined jointly by the laws of this system and by the postulates of biology. That working-class men laboured in the fields and marketplaces — activities perceived as being too physically and mentally taxing for women, a patriarchal framework formed under which women were poised to exist within the private sphere as a subordinate dependent on men.[3] This American status quo, and the women inhabiting it, were primed for a sweeping metamorphosis by the introduction of the late 18th to mid-19th centuries' unprecedented boom in technological and structural innovations.

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[1] Jonathan Levy, "Organic Economy, Household Economy," in *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (New York: Random House, 2021), 39-40.
[2] Levy, "Organic Economy," 42-43.
[3] Kelly A. Ryan, "Summary, Women and Patriarchy in Early America, 1600–1800," Oxford University Press: American History, Oxford University Press, last modified January 25, 2019, accessed November 28, 2024, https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-584?d=%2F10.1093%2Facrefore%2F9780199329175.001.0001%2Facrefore-9780199329175-e-584&p=emailAEtoPqCp32f6w.

The industrial advancements of the market revolution generated female participation in the tasks of the public sphere. By the conclusion of the American Revolutionary War in 1783, the United States sought to distinguish itself from its British precedents in a manner that, exemplified by Hamilton's 1791 *Report on Manufactures* calling for "federal support of industry and manufacturing,"[4] was highly receptive to innovation. The consistent adoption of industrial solutions such as the mill system, cotton gin and power loom rendered a new system en masse, in which crude goods are processed by specialised facilities where machinery enlisting human labour yielded rapid output at miniscule cost. Intermediates and brokers interposed themselves between every procedure from field to factory, loading dock to client, and industry transformed into a race of unconformity against the natural cadence.[5] As a result of the sheer speed and totality with which this new order established itself, the traditional artisanal mode, now too slow and premium for a growing republic, waned in popularity.[6] It was particularly this progressive dissolution of the then-status quo that prompted perispacious owners to recruit New England women for factory work, mainly in the perception that they were dexterous and obedient enough to operate machinery without unionising over dissatisfaction of the monotony of factory life, a phenomena more logically likely with male workers given their extensive professionalism in production. Additionally, young women of various marital statuses were attracted to the liberating experience advertised by the industrialists who sought to create a more convivial culture than England's "dark satanic mills".[7] Responsively, mills employing "principally the daughters" appeared in ever-greater frequencies around New England,[8] for women to step into the public sphere, and in the words of Sarah H. Rice, a seamstress of Lowell's mills, "enjoy myself as well as I can while I live".[9]

2. Financial Autonomy

It should be noted that the market revolution was not a series of reforms restricted to the industrial age's stereotypical superficialities of chimneys and machines; rather, it was much characterised by the readiness with which other sectors embraced the forthcoming novelty of change. Colonial American systems of currency were plagued by a general lack of standardisation, under which the worth of pounds, shillings and pence would vary between states, and, already "extremely varied", local jurisdictions would impose their own "conventions, tender laws, and coin ratings".[10] Furthermore, per the subordination of the colonies to the British Crown, the worth of local species could not exceed the pound sterling.[11] The impracticality of these systems productively deferred pragmatic Americans to payment "through barter and

[4] Walter A. Friedman, "Commerce in the new nation, 1780-1820," in *American Business History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2020), 19.
[5] Friedman, "Commerce in the new nation," 19.
[6] Johnathan Levy, "Between Slavery and Freedom," in *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States*, by Jonathan Levy (New York: Random House, 2021), 165.
[7] Walter A. Friedman, "Early manufactures, 1820-1850," in *American Business History: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 28.
[8] Levy, "Between Slavery," 167.
[9] Letter by Sarah H. Rice, "Letter Written by Sarah 'Sally' H. Rice," 1838, accessed December 11, 2024, https://libguides.uml.edu/c.php?g=542883&p=3734736.
[10] Ron Michener, "Money in the American Colonies," ed. Robert Whaples, EH.Net, Economic History Association, last modified January 13, 2011, accessed December 4, 2024, https://eh.net/encyclopedia/money-in-the-american-colonies/.
[11] Michener, "Money in the American," EH.Net.

exchange" of the locally and seasonally relevant (e.g. hide or timber),[12] the fleeting nature of which, in addition to early American domesticity, made it challenging for women to claim ownership of them. Hence, their work would not return any independent capital. As for the stagnating colonial species, the market revolution's rapid diffusion of a standardised currency between the late 19th and early 20th centuries via centralised and sophisticated banking institutions, and whose steady growth in the upwind of the "manufactures" could not be syphoned for the Crown, became its solvent.[13] Consequently, its steady adoption meant that labouring American women in the onset of industrial advancements were content, like Rice, to have earned monetary salaries that were "something of my own".[14] The market revolution was, for working-class women, providing an embryonic sort of financial ownership, and hence, pecuniary autonomy.

3. Challenges to Socioeconomic Productivity and Creation of Industrial Subculture

Despite the inspiration that American industrialists drew from early Scottish manufactures to create "a conscientious program of improvement" in New England factories,[15] such magnanimity was generally overshadowed by what the ascetic transcendentalists of its time described as the "pecuniary foundations".[16] The principal objective of a manufacturing plant was to maximise productivity and output at minimal cost, generating profit for recruitment and expansion. Hence, factories and their policies were designed responsively. Its many particulars, including barricaded architecture that screened workers from the outside world for "at least twelve hours" of work,[17] exclaimed the intense uniformity and perpetuity that was "so essential to the process of manufacturing in the mills".[18] Seamstresses such as Susan Miller of Lowell retreated from the working day with a "dull pain in her head, and a sharp pain in her ankles,"[19] which, accompanied by biological phenomena such as menstruation that the commercial sciences of their time had yet to master, challenged the working woman's social productivity. Additionally, that the manufacturing institutions stagnated to deliver the convivial work culture that their recruiters so promised, provisional facilities such as boarding houses were characterised by an atmosphere of architectural austerity, social alienation, and poor hygiene.[20] This substandard quality, in addition to the boarding fee — a deduction of the already meagre daily salary of approximately one dollar — only furthered the obstacles to productivity while

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[12] Richard Lyman Bushman, "Markets and Composite Farms in Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (1998): 351.
[13] Friedman, "Commerce in the new nation," 17.
[14] Thomas Dublin, "The Lowell Work Force, 1836, and the Social Origins of Women Workers," in *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 37.
[15] Friedman, "Early manufactures," 32.
[16] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (speech, Harvard College, Cambridge, MA, August 31, 1837).
[17] Eileen Boris and Nelson Lichtenstein, "From the Artisan's Republic to the Factory System," in *Major Problems in the History of American Workers: Documents and Essays*, 2nd ed., by Eileen Boris and Nelson Lichtenstein (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 64.
[18] Susan Miller, "Susan Miller, Chapter III," in *Mind Amongst The Spindles: A Miscellany, Wholly Composed By The Factory Girls*, by Various Contributors, ed. Harriet Martineau (Boston: Dow and Jackson's Press, 1845), 90, PDF.
[19] Thomas Dublin, "The Social Relations of Production in the Early Mills," in *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 71.
[20] Thomas Dublin, "The Boardinghouse," in *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 80.

imposing financial constraints on any meagre ownership that women had procured beforehand.[21] Meanwhile, those who commuted between home and mill alternated between the public and private spheres, assuming both the rigour of the factory and the propriety of the household. Thus, the manufacturing framework severely challenged the social and economic productivity of the women under its employment.

Yet an increasingly pronounced social assembly of women was occurring within the boarding houses. The congenital mechanism by which individuals automatically collectivise over the particulars of their existence — of dress, diction and mannerisms — when encountering adversity is well-studied, and the working-class women of New England's industrial factories were of no exception to this phenomenon. Enduring the rigours prescribed by the American industrial system necessitated unity and solidarity. Boarding women sought to sympathise with their peers and build community — of "friends who accompanied them to shops", who "rested, talked [...] and read books and magazines" together — by differentiation from outsiders.[22] Hence, by encouraging one another to "adopt group patterns of speech and dress" and partake in the same activities,[23] boarding working-class women had erected a novel sphere, not of public or private, but of customs and values: an industrial subculture.

4. The Industrial Middle Class

Paradoxingly, the same industrial programmes through which working women socioeconomically distanced themselves from the past also catalysed a new wave of middle-class domesticity, whose machinations prudently exploited the market revolution's momentum instead of repudiating it. Prior to the market revolution, the preindustrial working class laboured in artisanal households whose predominantly physical tasks produced distinct delineations between a public sphere for men and private sphere for women and children. Meanwhile, their middle-class peers were occupied by the growth and operation of family businesses.[24] The greater operational complexity of mercantile activity necessitated the involvement of women such as Elizabeth Meredith who, literate, numerate and possessing "some degree of reputation [...] in the financing business,"[25] contributed their education-derived expertise to "decisions concerning her family's financial future".[26] Simply put, the mercantile nature of the preindustrial American middle-class produced a more ambiguous sphering. It was particularly the capital generated from the middle class's preindustrial legacy with which its women sought to distinguish themselves from their lower-class counterparts, the latter having transitioned into the ambiguity of dual-sphere work in the onset of the industrial era out of necessity. Hence, affirmed by religion, magazines and artwork (notably, of Erastus Salisbury Field), the new middle-class milieu cheered its women to be the divinely ordained, pious and

[21] Philip Sheldon Foner, "The First Trade Unions," in *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present* (New York, London: Collier Macmillan Free Press, 1982), 3.
[22] Dublin, "The Boardinghouse," 81.
[23] Dublin, "The Boardinghouse," 81.
[24] Susan Branson, "Women and the Family Economy in the Early Republic: The Case of Elizabeth Meredith," *Journal of the Early Republic*, o.s., 16, no. 1 (1996): 151, https://doi.org/10.2307/3124284.
[25] Branson, "Women and the Family," 151.
[26] Branson, "Women and the Family," 152.

malleable custodians of the home.[27, 28] Ownership was diverted to man. So came the relative leisure of domestic routines (as education and medicine were institutionalised), but also the mantle of bearing man's "sensual natural surge" of promiscuity, intemperance and cruelty.[29, 30] In both a literal and figurative sense, middle-class women had exchanged their situation for those of their working counterparts.

Ultimately, the brief era which has been the study of this essay lends itself to, according to contemporary academia, the universal father's remark as Eve leaves the Garden of Eden, that "this is an era of transition,"[31] and certainly, the United States had undergone an extraordinary metamorphosis. Where once breathed the agrarian organism of preindustrial America — under which working women occupied a subservient domestic sphere and their middle-class counterparts alternated between the public and private — now stood the industrial state. Working women alternated between the heterogeneity of the public and the private, of advancement and impediment, reward and hardship; of community and isolation, freedom and propriety. Meanwhile, the middle class retreated to a kind of domesticity that is distinct from its colonial precedent in its synthetic origin. Like the goods of the working womens' making, it is manufactured. It is a construct whose continuation is fed not by the biological thresholds of the natural rhythm, but by the perpetual growth of industry's insatiable pulse. To this end, just as Eve leaves the Garden of Eden, the female legacy in the market revolution marked a "chronicle of human progress:"[32] the finale of the organic world, and the overture of the industrial.

[27] Levy, "Between Slavery," 173.
[28] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly*, o.s., 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-159, https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179.
[29] Welter, "The Cult," 156.
[30] Foner, "The First," 2.
[31] Bernard A. Weisberger, "Chapter 1: Introduction," introduction to *The New Industrial Society* (New York: Wiley, 1969), 1.
[32] Weisberger, "Chapter 1: Introduction," introduction, 1.

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