

Bread and Butter Activism



Joshua R. Greenberg, *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Market Revolution in New York, 1800-1840*. New York: Columbia University Press/Gutenberg, 2007.

For too long, studies of working class activism have focused almost exclusively on working men's public lives—on their political and social activities and their developing class consciousness. In recent years there has been a growing interest among historians in examining the private lives of men. Yet while

these studies have revealed a great deal about middle- and upper-class men as husbands, fathers, and breadwinners, the domestic experiences of working men remain invisible. Thus far, our entire understanding of working-class households—our entrée into this private world—has been through the eyes of women.

In *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Market Revolution in New York, 1800-1840*, Joshua R. Greenberg bridges this gap in the literature, providing scholars of the early American republic with an entirely new perspective on both the private and public lives of working men. As Greenberg persuasively asserts, political activism and demands for higher pay, better working conditions, and protection of craft integrity were “closely intertwined” with men’s “lived domestic experiences” (intro.: para. 3 [note that this review references the e-book by chapter and paragraph number]). Men and women, particularly of the working class, did not reside in separate spheres. The practical day-to-day needs of a growing family—from putting food on the table, paying the rent, and providing a proper education for children to laying away some money to provide for the unknowns of sickness, injury, and death—remained at the forefront of men’s concerns as they ventured out of the household and into the workplace. Thus, any attempt to comprehend the motivations of workers in forming unions, organizing political parties, or otherwise engaging in collective activities *must* begin in the household.

Reflecting this interdependence of the private and public, Greenberg devotes the first section of this study of organized labor in New York City to an analysis of the household and neighborhood composition of the men who actively participated in the labor unions and workers’ political parties. Greenberg compares a “sample” of these organized working men against the average demographic characteristics of journeymen. He concludes that activists were more likely than the average working man to be older, married men who headed large households. Thus, in direct contrast to the stereotypical young, single, male worker with no household responsibilities and a loose moral compass, those most likely to resort to collective action were men with the greatest domestic responsibilities. Greenberg then couples this statistical overview with case studies of a house carpenter and a printer, both of whom (he alleges) serve as “typical examples of organized working men” (chap. 2: para 39).

This first section comprises the weakest portion of the book. In repeatedly employing the term “sample”—and then in statistically comparing this demographic data with that of average journeymen—Greenberg misleadingly implies that he has compiled representative statistics on a randomly selected sample of organizing men. In reality, Greenberg’s “sample” instead consists of those activists about whom he *could* locate demographic information. Since people with stable household lives are more likely to leave their imprint in historical records, it is perhaps not surprising that Greenberg found them to be older, married men with domestic responsibilities. Nor does Greenberg indicate what percentage of all organizing men his “sample” represents. While much of the problem in compiling this type of demographic information lies in the

limitations of the historical record itself, Greenberg needs to be much more forthcoming regarding his method and much more circumspect with respect to his results. Likewise, I am skeptical with regard to his "typical" working men. Printer Theophilus Eaton, for example, was a failed entrepreneur who tried to make his fortune first as the publisher of a political newspaper and later as the author of a book of poems and of a gazetteer that reflected "a mercantile bent" (chap. 2: para 16). None of these characteristics seems truly representative of the "average" journeyman.

However, the aforementioned weaknesses of this first section do not undermine Greenberg's overall argument. Even without being able to demonstrate definitively that organizers were more likely to be family men, his next two sections convincingly show that working men viewed their market relations and couched their arguments for collective organization in domestic terms. While past studies of early nineteenth-century workers' movements have focused on the political content of pro-labor newspapers and pamphlets, Greenberg reconsiders these publications more holistically. Discussions of a living wage, paper money reform, and barriers to entry into crafts appeared alongside marriage notices, debates over how best to provide an education for workers' children, and poems about domestic life. As reflected in these publications, there was no line separating the public rhetoric of workers from their private interests.

Furthermore, these domestic interests infused the political language itself. In demanding better compensation and security in the workplace, workers emphasized their fundamental duty as husbands and fathers to provide for the material as well as the "moral, spiritual, and emotional" well-being of their families (chap. 5: para 50). On the one hand, this equation of workplace complaints with domestic hardships was politically expedient. Women and children were more sympathetic victims than male laborers. Yet this language regarding the household responsibilities of male breadwinners was not limited to external tracts intended to sway public opinion. Even when these organizations internally discussed the merits of providing health insurance, death benefits, or strike pay, their debates revolved around the ability of workers to adequately fulfill their domestic duties.

Advocating the Man presents historians of the early republic with a fresh perspective on the daily trials, tribulations, and motivations of laboring men. Greenberg's unique angle nicely complements the existing literature on working-class households and labor activism, yet it will simultaneously force scholars of the period to rethink their entire approach to investigating working men. Rather than viewing laborers as solely the product of their work relations and public experiences, future studies will now be obliged to consider the role of domestic concerns in shaping these men's public activities.

Further Reading:

The standard labor history of the early republic is still Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984). Notable works on the lived experiences of working men include Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill, 1987), Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York, 1992), and Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1986). The literature on working women includes Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Chicago, 1988) and Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York, 1979). Some works that do examine the interaction of working men and women include Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, 2002), Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley, 1995), and Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill, 1991). Finally, the much more developed literature on masculinity, which almost exclusively focuses on middle- and upper-class men, includes E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993), David C. Pugh, *Sons of Liberty: The Masculine Mind in Nineteenth-Century America* (Westport, Conn., 1983), Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America* (New York, 2001), and Stephen Frank, *Life With Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century American North* (Baltimore, 1998).

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