

Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective. *Edited by Daniel E. Bender and Richard A. Greenwald.* New York: Routledge, 2003. xii + 300 pp. Photographs, illustration, notes, index. Cloth, \$85; paper, \$24.95. ISBN: cloth 0-415-93560-1; paper 0-415-93561-X.

Reviewed by Jo Ann E. Argersinger

Historically, sweatshops have been primarily, but not exclusively, associated with the garment industry and have been the targets of regular investigations, periodic sensational exposés, and legislative and legal reform. Sweatshops have not only provoked public outrage and sympathy but have also illustrated the paradoxes of progress, as poor workers labor in grimy rooms to produce the latest fashions for a seemingly insatiable consumerism. In an effort to position sweatshops historically and globally, this edited collection of thirteen essays examines definitions of sweatshops, the industry's relentless pursuit of cheap labor, and workers' resistance to the system. The editors, Daniel E. Bender and Richard A. Greenwald, have another objective: to establish a new interdisciplinary field of "sweatshop studies" (p. 15).

As the editors indicate, sweatshops have been a durable feature of the American economy, even if their locations have migrated in the United States from urban to rural areas and from northern to southern regions, and, globally, from Taiwan to Mexico. Yet the moral indignation about sweatshop abuse has been less consistent and more episodic—its recent resurgence occurred in 1996, when newspapers exposed the conditions and wages of workers producing the clothing line endorsed by Kathie Lee Gifford, a television talk-show host. Almost all the essays refer to this "rediscovery" of sweatshops as a catalyst for organization, protest, and reform. And the editors, along with most of the contributors, call for marshaling the public sympathy it produced to wage a broader struggle for labor's rights in the global workforce. They pursue, moreover, a usable past for contemporary activists, as Eileen Boris suggests in her essay entitled "Consumers of the World Unite!" which ably links the historical role of consumers as reformers to the recent student-led movement against sweatshops. If

students can ally with workers, she writes, “the distinction between producer and consumer might fade as both lay claims to global citizenship” (p. 220).

The essays range from a discussion of the controversy stirred by an exhibit on sweatshops at the Smithsonian to an important analysis of “offshore production,” in which Edna Bonacich and Richard Appelbaum outline the differential impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement on global production, in particular, the garment industry in Los Angeles. Not all business leaders they interviewed favored offshore production, especially those producing expensive lines of clothes for smaller markets. Although firms mass-producing clothes have migrated to Mexico to reduce labor costs, other manufacturers, citing its reputation as a center of innovation in design, still prefer Los Angeles. Overall employment in the production of garments in Los Angeles has not declined, for “even as the industry loses one sector, another continues to grow and pick up the slack” (p. 164). But the authors also warn that the industry’s global search for cheap labor could ultimately serve to depress wages, even in Los Angeles, in order to keep its businesses competitive, and workers in all countries, they conclude, will be the losers.

Several essays study the connection between immigrant labor and the sweatshop. Daniel Bender carefully analyzes the language used by reformers, social scientists, and industrial investigators in the Progressive Era. He demonstrates how they linked the deplorable conditions of the sweatshops to the perceived biological inferiority of the immigrants, especially Jews. Economist John Commons, for example, argued that Jewish immigrants “prefer[red] the sweat-shop” (p. 23), while others labeled them greedy and enfeebled. Descriptions of the shops merged with depictions of the immigrants: the stench of the shop and the immigrant became indistinguishable. The close working conditions of men, women, and children were seen as reflecting an immoral and defective race of people. Male immigrant leaders themselves, Bender argues, ultimately endorsed the separation of home from work in an effort to become assimilated into American culture and to protect the family wage—if not the sweatshop worker. But Jennifer Guglielmo, in her essay, finds that Italian women in New York City during the Progressive Era created their own brand of feminism while attacking sweatshops, thereby becoming a central part of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union.

Less successful in combating their harsh working conditions are the Chinese immigrant women described in Xiaolan Bao's essay on sweatshops in New York at the end of the twentieth century. Ethnic divisions among Chinese, fears of job loss, and economic dependence on Chinese bosses in an unfamiliar environment all contribute to the workers' lack of power. Bao also faults the limited organizational efforts of the United Needle and Textile Workers Union (UNITE!) as characteristic of "parochialism" and "business unionism" (p. 137). Immanuel Ness focuses on New York's garment industry as well and analyzes the concessions UNITE! made to employers in order to protect its members' jobs. He explains that the union's actions, along with its ties to organized crime, have led community organizers to create an alternate labor organization, more responsive, they believe, to the needs of garment workers. But that organization, too, has proved unable to remedy the conditions of workers whose wages continue to be slashed by employers attempting to compete in a global economy.

Several authors, however, draw fresh optimism from the organizational efforts of UNITE! and the closely allied United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), a campus-based organization with an office in Washington, D.C. Essays by Andrew Ross and Liza Featherstone point to victories in shops in Mexico and the United States that resulted in unionization and improved wages and working conditions, but they also warn against complacency, adding that the gains won may again be contested.

The essays in this collection contain overlapping themes and much repetitious material. Uneven in quality, they are also occasionally marred by hasty editing and limited historical analysis. Some scholars will wish the authors had engaged more fully the arguments of their opponents and will wince at their activist agenda; others may find that explicit approach refreshing. Still, the collection is an important beginning in the study of a transnational workforce and the persistent problem of sweatshops. Whether a new interdisciplinary field will emerge is not yet certain.

Jo Ann E. Argersinger is professor of history at Southern Illinois University. She is the author of Toward a New Deal: People and Government in the Great Depression (1988) and Making the Amalgamated: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in Baltimore's Clothing Industry (1999) and a coauthor of The American Journey (third edition, 2004).

