

Self-Made Women: How American Mill Girls Contributed to the Dis- course of American Labor Exceptionalism

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Abstract: The enduring weakness of the American labor movement in comparison to its European counterparts continues to be one of the most intensely discussed and researched questions in the context of (European-) American Studies. Commonly, scholars answer this puzzle with the concept of American exceptionalism, arguing that a number of supposedly uniquely American cultural traditions led to a situation where the yearning for class-based actions simply was not as strong as in European countries. What is often neglected in this discussion are studies, which evaluate accounts of American workers in terms of whether they actually bought into this ideology of exceptionalism themselves. This study fills this research gap by demonstrating how Lucy Larcom and Harriet H. Robinson, two mill girls from the early industrial town of Lowell in Massachusetts, constructed a discourse of American exceptionalism in their autobiographies. It is especially notable that their exceptionalist discourse is one based on their experience as part of the first group of working women in the United States.

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American exceptionalism continues to be pervasive both as a scholarly concept in the field of American Studies and as an ideology that is to this day reflected in American everyday politics, culture and society. As such, it has been constructed as a national discourse and ideology that, in the past, has been argued to define and explain the distinct nature of the United States as a whole (Madsen, 1998: 1; Shafer, 1991: v). Based on the notion of transatlantic

difference and comparison, its main tenet is that “[a]s an exception to the rule of European normalization, American exceptionalism sustained an image of Europe as that which could not find reflection in the U.S. mirror” (Pease, 2010: 10). It is crucial that this otherness is also based on a belief in superiority. Put simply, believing in American exceptionalism means believing that the United States offers the better social and political model than Europe, which is why it is also a fundamentally transatlantic concept.

From a scholarly perspective, until the 1960s American exceptionalism was mostly taken as a given and interpreted as an empirical phenomenon. In other words, it was widely believed that the United States actually were different and exceptional. However, with the onset of the cultural turn in the 1960s and 70s and the inclusion of until then marginalized groups and areas of study, the validity of American exceptionalism as an empirical concept became critically questioned (Fluck and Pease, 2014: IX). Since then, many studies have elaborated how American exceptionalism was constructed as a national ideology and discourse on the basis of both secular and religious tenets (Pease, 2010: 7), constituting “a way of talking about American history and culture, [...] a form of interpretation with its own language and logic” (Madsen, 1998: 2). In other words, the question was no longer whether the United States were exceptional or not, but how this ideology came to be in the first place. However, it is important to mention that the empirical strand of studying American exceptionalism continues today, especially in the social sciences.

While the discourse of American exceptionalism originated as a religious concept in the form of John Winthrop’s famous *City Upon a Hill* sermon, it is nowadays also relevant in its secular form. As such, its main logic refers to the inherently democratic nature of the United States, which arguably leads to a more egalitarian society. This notion is also crucial for the exceptionalist argument in terms of the American labor movement: Since it was widely believed that in the U.S. classes never really existed and social mobility was pervasive, the desire for strong labor unions was allegedly never as pronounced as in Europe, where a heritage of feudalism and monarchy facilitated the evolution of a strong labor movement.

The argument of American exceptionalism in terms of labor and class was first conceptualized by famous German sociologist Werner Sombart in 1906. In his key work *Why is there no Socialism in the U.S.?*, he proposed the idea that the political and economic situation of the American worker was qualitatively simply better than the conditions of the European working class. Taken together with the absence of a class-consciousness and a much higher possibility of social mobility, it was no wonder that American workers preferred to believe in the power of the American dream instead of strong labor unions (Sombart, 1976: 18–20).

Sombart’s thesis was taken up and extended by a vast amount of scholars of American labor history, evaluating repeatedly the reasons why the American labor movement was so much weaker than its European counterpart.

In the context of the new labor history, which originated in the 1970s and is not only concerned with economic dimensions of labor, but also various cultural aspects, such as class, ethnicity, and community (Dubofsky, 1984: vii), two trends have become notable in this field of research. First, most of these studies are concerned with analyzing this American exceptionalism as an empirical concept, meaning that they are concerned with proofing through comparative approaches that certain aspects about the American labor movement actually were exceptional or not. Second, almost all scholars have striven to invalidate the concept of American exceptionalism in terms of labor by demonstrating that American workers often acted and thought in ways similar to those in Europe (Diggins, 1992: 326; Voss, 1993; Wilentz, 1984: 1–2).

By demonstrating how American mill girls Harriet H. Robinson and Lucy Larcom constructed a discourse of exceptionalism in their autobiographies, this study fills an important research gap through constituting a counterargument. Moreover, it questions the idea that this exceptionalist discourse was mostly constructed from above, so from dominant cultural elites like John Winthrop, by demonstrating that even a double marginalized group like the first industrial working women contributed to the construction of this discourse.

Lowell and its Mill Girls: An Industrial Utopia?

When taking a closer look at the early factory town of Lowell with its first generation of mill girls during the 1830s, it quickly becomes evident why it constitutes a very apt object of study in the context of American labor exceptionalism. Indeed, the founders of the mills, a group calling themselves the Boston Associates, consciously set out to develop a counter-model to the factory industry in England: Unlike the English factory system, which had already created a permanent precarious proletariat, Lowell was meant to become “an industrial Utopia” (Josephson, 1949: 6) and “a model of enlightened industrialism” (Dray, 2010: 11). The Boston Associates intended to build their model town on two pillars: On the one hand, they had brought with them from former trips to England and its textile industry a number of technological advances, which were implemented on U.S. soil for the first time in Lowell (Dublin, 1993: 17; Eisler, 1977: 13). More importantly, they were determined to initiate a number of social innovations as well: They intended to provide not only decent working conditions and wages, but also on-site accommodations in the form of boarding houses, and even recreational opportunities for their workers (Eisler, 1977: 22).

However, the most important factor for the creation of Lowell as an industrial model town was the specific group of employees that the Boston Associates targeted, namely young women and girls from the rural farms of New England. Utilizing the commonly held assumption that unoccupied girls and young women “were subject to temptation and vicious habits, as well as being

a financial drain on their parents and a burden to society” (Josephson, 1949: 23), they marketed the opportunity to come and work at the mills in Lowell as “a contribution to public morality” (Eisler, 1977: 19). Thus, the founders of Lowell substituted the until then existing image of the wretched and precarious factory worker with that of neat and industrious mill girls that were improving themselves while taking on a new and innovative role for women, namely that of working outside the home for the first time.

Yet, a quick overview of the evolution of Lowell as a factory town shows that the Boston Associates were only successful in creating a supposedly industrial model at the beginning. While during the 1830s, the first generation of mill girls seemed to both create and prove Lowell’s reputation as somewhat exceptional, during the 1840s the conditions at the factories already deteriorated significantly in the form of decreasing wages and increasing work hours (Dray, 2010: 42 ff.; Eisler, 1977: 36 ff.; Josephson, 1949: Ch. 10). At the same time, the work force at the mills became increasingly diverse due to the onset of mass immigration from Europe; and by the end of the Civil War, Lowell’s time as a supposed model town had ended once and for all when industrialization took full effect in the U.S. (Dray, 2010: 56; Dublin, 1993: 132 ff.; Eisler, 1977: 40). Even more notably, there were already two strikes during the 1830s and the first generation of mill girls. Overall, Lowell constitutes an ambiguous episode in American labor history: On the one side, it appears to be one of the very reasons why the idea of an American exceptionalism in terms of labor and class originated in the first place; on the other side, it all seemed to be rather short-lived and more of an idealized image than a reality.

However, the goal of my study was not to analyze whether anything about Lowell and its mill girls actually was exceptional or not, but to evaluate it in the context of American exceptionalism as a discourse. Since the founders of Lowell clearly aimed at constructing such a discourse, the interesting question was where the workers themselves, so mainly the idealized first generation of mill girls, are to be located in the making of Lowell as an industrial utopia. Did they contribute to the construction of this discourse as well? Or did they actually criticize their life and work at the mills? When looking at the two autobiographies by first generation mill girls Lucy Larcom and Harriet H. Robinson, it became obvious that the former was the case.

Autobiography as a Place of Negotiating Identity

A New England Girlhood by Lucy Larcom and *Loom and Spindle* by Harriet H. Robinson are the ideal sources for a discourse analysis of American labor exceptionalism for a number of reasons. First, until today, scholars have mostly disregarded them as subjects of cultural analysis; instead, they have commonly used them as historical resources in order to validate certain events or aspects about the mill girls. Moreover, autobiography as a genre is especially apt to serve as analytical basis for cultural concepts and ideologies due to

its constructivist dimension that is nowadays foregrounded by most scholars (Depkat, 2015: 56; Eakin, 1991: 15; Evans, 2005: 33; Smith and Watson, 2010: 39).

In other words, autobiography with its focus on negotiating collective and individual identities is the ideal source for analyzing how individuals discursively constructed the ideology of American exceptionalism as a means of negotiating both national and individual identity. Hence, this study is based on an interdisciplinary approach, combining two different methodologies. First, Larcom's and Robinson's autobiographies were evaluated against a few crucial categories of autobiographical analysis in order to determine their overall narrative intent and their biographical and historical context. This analysis was then complemented with a critical discourse analysis, which traced the construction of Larcom's and Robinson's discourse of exceptionalism. In doing so, the main source of reference was the transatlantic model of difference that Werner Sombart proposed in 1906.

Identity as category of analysis was crucial to this study because it provides a link between autobiography and discourse analysis: It is not only discursively constructed, but determines the social and cultural areas to which an author intends to contribute something by telling their life story. Hence, the identities that Larcom and Robinson draw on in their narratives are crucial insofar as they indicate for whom and based on which experiences the two women develop an exceptionalist discourse. While Larcom and Robinson both draw on a couple of different individual as well as collective identities, the most important one uniting the narratives of the two women is the collective identity of womanhood. Directly reflecting "the importance of group identity for women and minorities" that is nowadays central to the study of such autobiographies (Stanford Friedman, 1998: 72), it is their identity as former working women that mainly justifies their claim for exceptionalism.

Instead of foregrounding their own life stories as working girls who were able to move on to more demanding occupations during the course of their lifetime, both Larcom and Robinson focus on foregrounding the exceptionalism of the mill girls as a group. In doing so, it is the new and until then unknown situation of the mill girls as the first women who worked outside the home and who were thus able to support themselves which provides the foundation of their exceptionalism. According to this discourse, Lowell itself was exceptional as well because it was the very place that allowed women to adapt this independent and new role for the first time.

Mill Girl Autobiographies in the Context of Labor and Power

Even though Larcom's and Robinson's books differ in their overall literary style and narrative, there are many similarities between both women's lives that facilitate a joint analysis. Both women spent over a decade of their life and youth in Lowell due to the fact that their mothers ran boarding houses

there and had brought their children with them to Lowell. Hence, it is no wonder that it was precisely Larcom and Robinson who wrote autobiographies about their time in Lowell since they worked at the factories for a much longer time than the average mill girl, who usually only stayed for about one to six years (Dublin, 1993: 184).

While Larcom established herself as a quite well known poet after her time as a mill girl and Robinson married the newspaper editor William Stevens Robinson with whom she had four children (Bushman, 1981: 60–61), both women continued to struggle with their social and financial position as somewhat between different spheres for the rest of their lives (Bushman, 1981: xii–xiv; Marchalonis, 1989: 2). Considering the fact that American exceptionalism is usually regarded as an ideology that was created by cultural elites, Larcom and Robinson were not very likely contributors to this discourse. After all, even though they were able to move on to other occupations, they were former working girls. That the two women did construct a discourse of American exceptionalism in their autobiographies is thus all the more meaningful and interesting, since it questions the argument's one-sidedness as an ideology that was exclusively constructed to oppress the weak.

This conclusion is even more striking when considering the period during which both women wrote and published their autobiographies. Larcom's book was published in 1889, Robinson's almost a decade later in 1898. The publication of both autobiographies fell consequently right into the peak of the Industrial Revolution towards the final third of the 19th century and hence during a time when the American labor movement was growing significantly due to the increasingly bad standards of living for many workers and hazardous conditions at the work place.

This development is also reflected in the autobiographical genre, where many narratives of working class authors were published during the second half of the nineteenth-century as critiques of these harsh working and living conditions (Smith and Watson, 2010: 123). Hence, it could initially be assumed that Larcom and Robinson wrote their books as a contribution to this trend of working class literature and with the goal to criticize their time as early mill girls. Yet, when taking a closer look at both women's writings it quickly becomes evident that this was not the case.

Moreover, their respective occasions of writing and addressees indicate that they did not write their books as a contribution to typical working class literature. Larcom wrote her autobiography at the suggestion of her publishers and as part of a series that was conceptualized as inspiring stories of achievements aimed at young readers (Marchalonis, 1989: 246). Robinson, on the other hand, wrote her account in the context of her involvement in the women's suffrage movement, meant as a rather theoretical contribution to women's history (Bushman, 1981: 184), which is also emphasized through the foreword by former chief of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics Carroll D. Wright.

Transatlantic Difference and Awareness as the Basis for American Exceptionalism

The exceptionalism of the mill girls as a group becomes evident in a few different discursive categories in Larcom's and Robinson's autobiographies; two of which are essentially transatlantic and thus fundamental to the claim of exceptionalism. The first category – which is also crucial to Sombart's account of American exceptionalism – is the political situation of the mill girls. Both women describe it as exceptional, though based on different arguments. In doing so, Larcom develops the more explicitly transatlantic evaluation, drawing on the idea of essentially American political values, which factor into the exceptional position of the mill girls. A key passage in this discourse is when she reflects on how her childhood in New England was distinctly influenced by English traditions and heritage, serving as a mirror in which they could reflect on the new American traditions and heritage they built for themselves:

we did not think those English children had so good a time as we did; they had to be so prim and methodical. It seemed to us that the little folks across the water never were allowed to romp and run wild; some of us may have held a vague idea that this freedom of ours was the natural inheritance of republican children only. (Larcom, 2010: 53)

This passage already illustrates very distinctly, to what extent Larcom constructed her American political heritage as explicitly different from and better than European political traditions. Even more importantly, she also reflects on the newness and exceptionalism of her American heritage in relation to the mill girls and their occupation:

I do not believe that any Lowell mill-girl was ever absurd enough to wish to be known as a 'factory-lady', although most of them knew that 'factory-girl' did not represent a high type of womanhood in the Old World. But they themselves belonged to the New World, not to the Old; and they were making their own traditions, to hand down to their Republican descendants [...]. (Larcom, 2010: 102)

Again, Larcom emphasizes that Americans were making their own traditions, and by describing the traditions of the Old World as "absurd", she also implies that these new American traditions were the better ones. Moreover, this passage makes clear to what extent Larcom does not only construct herself as an exceptional former working girl, which was discovering new political traditions and roles for herself, but the mill girls as a group.

Robinson, on the other hand, does not evaluate the political situation of the mill girls as exceptional in transatlantic terms, but she fills the very gap that Larcom leaves open in her account, namely to describe the mill girls' occupation as exceptional in the context of women's work in the U.S. Describing how women were only "a ward, an appendage, a relict" and thus doomed to leading "joyless, and in many instances unsatisfactory, lives" before they

had the opportunity to work outside the home and provide for themselves, Robinson defines working at the Lowell factories as “a great opening to these lonely and dependent women” (Robinson, 2015: 68–69). According to her, the mill girls had not only “found a place in the universe”, but “learned to think and act for [themselves]” (Robinson, 2015: 69) through their occupation at the factory. Taken together, Larcom and Robinson construct a multifaceted discourse of American exceptionalism. Working as a mill girl was not only a historical novelty that significantly improved the political emancipation of these women, it was also the basis for creating new and distinctly American traditions in terms of labor and the social standing of factory workers.

Robinson’s elaboration of the mill girls’ exceptional political position plays an important role in economic terms as well. The new opportunity of a self-supported life did not only lead to political, but also to economic emancipation: “For the first time in this country woman’s labor had a money value”, thus making them “a recognized factor in the political economy of [their] time” (Robinson, 2015: 69). According to this argument, Lowell is defined as an exceptional place again because it allowed the mill girls to take on this new economic relevance. Regarding the evaluation of economic factors, Robinson also draws on an explicitly exceptional discourse parallel to that of Larcom. In a key passage in her book, she notes the following:

I cannot tell how it happened that some of us knew about the English factory children, who, it was said, were treated so badly, and were even whipped by their cruel overseers. But we did not know of it, and used to sing, [...]. In contrast with this sad picture, we thought of ourselves as well off, in our cosy corner of the mill, enjoying ourselves in our own way, with our good mothers and our warm suppers awaiting us when the going-out bell should ring. (Larcom, 2010: 33–35)

The direct comparison to English factory work makes very clear that Robinson’s understanding of her conditions as a mill girl as exceptional were largely based on a transatlantic awareness, where American factories were simply a much better place than those in England.

Another important aspect of Larcom’s and Robinson’s discourse in terms of the economic conditions at the mills is that they both frame them as subjective, which also corresponds significantly with the notion that autobiography is not to be read as objective history, but rather as subjective truth. Both Larcom and Robinson admit that from the outside, their life as factory girls would have been considered as “hardships” by “many” (Larcom, 2010: 84; Robinson, 2015: 31). Yet, they “[did] not recall any particular hardship connected with this life” (Robinson, 2015: 32) and “considered [themselves] pleasantly situated” (Larcom, 2010: 84). By framing their experiences at the mills in such a subjective way, both women clarify that they intend to consciously construct a counter image to that of the wretched factory worker.

They actively contribute to a discourse of American exceptionalism by emphasizing that even though the public often might not have been able to

differentiate between the experiences of English and American factory workers, their stories as mill girls demonstrate that they were indeed much better off than many would have thought. In doing so, Larcom's and Robinson's writing also corresponds with Sombart's notion that American workers did not despise the system – contrary to European factory workers – because they felt like they actually profited from it. This becomes most evident in Robinson's elaboration that “[t]he feeling that the agents and overseers were interested in their welfare caused the girls, in turn, to feel an interest in the work for which their employers were responsible” (Robinson, 2015: 71–73).

In other words, why would the mill girls hate a system, which enabled them to take on such a new and innovative role in society and allowed them to become more emancipated both politically and economically? Again, this elaboration makes clear in how far the exceptionalism that Larcom and Robinson constructed was one specific to the mill girls as working women, because it was only on the basis of their womanhood that they did experience their position at Lowell as exceptional.

Social Mobility and Self-Made Women

Another aspect that is central to the ideology of an American labor exceptionalism and reflected in Larcom's and Robinson's discourse is that of social mobility. Identified by Sombart as the “characteristic [...with] the very greatest importance” in his transatlantic comparison (Sombart, 1976: 115), it is one of the most fundamental myths of American culture, and condensed in the American dream of ascending from ‘rags to riches’. Again, its underlying logic is one of transatlantic difference: While in Europe, the heritage of a stratified class-system kept people from changing their social status during the course of their lifetime, Americans arguably did not know such social stratification and were widely able to ascend from ‘dishwasher to millionaire’. As such, the greater social mobility in the United States also undermined the formation of a strong working class consciousness. After all, why would there have been any need for workers to unite and fight together as a class for better conditions, when it was much easier to just work hard enough for yourself and make it to the top as an individual?

This kind of thinking is directly reflected in Larcom's and Robinson's autobiographies. Indeed, both women included very direct examples of such typical American dream tropes in their writing. Larcom does so by remarking that “[c]hanges of fortune come so abruptly that the millionaire's daughter of today may be glad to earn her living by sewing or sweeping tomorrow” (Larcom, 2010: 101). Interestingly, Larcom reverses the traditional logic of the American dream: Rather than stating that social advancement is always possible, she foregrounds the opposite, namely social descent.

Two important aspects should be noted about Larcom's discourse. First, Larcom constructs a specifically female discourse again by drawing on the

example of the “millionaire’s daughter” and by referring to specifically female work like “sewing” and “sweeping”. Second, by inverting the traditional logic of the American dream, Larcom appropriates this discourse of social mobility in favor of working women. Being at the top of the social hierarchy should never be understood as something permanent, it was just as likely to suddenly find oneself at the bottom of the social ladder instead of ascending it.

In fact, this discourse of social mobility is pervasive in Larcom’s autobiography, and she mainly constructs it by emphasizing the temporariness of the mill girls’ occupation: “[they] were happy in the knowledge that, at the longest, [their] employment was only to be temporary” (Larcom, 2010: 79), and “none of [them] had the least idea of continuing at that kind of work permanently” (Larcom, 2010: 113). Similar to Larcom, Robinson also has one passage in her book, which can be described as her personal version of the American dream:

And a glimpse of one handsome woman, the wife of an agent, reading by an astral lamp in the early evening, has always been remembered by one young girl, who looked forward to the time when she, too, might have a parlor of her own, lighted by an astral lamp! (Larcom, 2010: 14)

Robinson’s wording and grammar clarifies that it was not only an unrealistic daydream that she pursued, but also something that she deemed as likely to happen since she actually did “look forward” to it. In addition, other remarks in Robinson’s autobiography tie in with a discourse of social mobility as likely and natural, such as when she notes that the mill girls “became educated far beyond what their mothers or their grandmothers could have been” (Robinson, 2015: 91) and when she tells about the later occupations of other first generation mill girls, one of whom “became an artist of note, another a poet of more than local fame, a third an inventor, and several were among the pioneers in [...] Western States” (Robinson, 2015: 94). With this list, Robinson emphasizes the high number of factory girls who moved on to other, higher occupations, leaving behind their beginnings as working girls at the bottom of the social ladder.

There is one central discursive category where both Larcom and Robinson slightly deviate from foregrounding the exceptionalism of the mill girls as a group, namely when drawing on ideas of American individualism. This individualism is another key feature of American labor exceptionalism, and as such directly related to social mobility. In short, it is the individual mode of behavior that is enabled by the opportunity of social ascension, namely to constantly strive for more and to keep improving oneself. In Robinson’s writing, it is most important for her evaluation of the first strikes among the mill girls when she notes that

[t]he solution of the labor problem is not in strikes, but, as another has said, in ‘bringing the question down to its simplest form, a practical carrying out of the golden rule; by the employer elevating the

working-man in his own esteem by fair dealing, courteous treatment, and a constant appeal to his better side; and, on the other hand, in the working-man himself by the absence of malingering, by honest work, and a desire to further his employer's interests [...]. (Robinson, 2015: 206–207)

Here, it becomes very clear that Robinson does not believe in the power of class-based collective action. Instead, she identifies appropriate and exemplary individual behavior as the solution to conflicts at the workplace. Larcom's discourse is very similar – while she does not explicitly elaborate on the strikes, she argues that everyone should use their “individual powers” to “do some one thing which the world needed, or which would make it a pleasanter world” (Larcom, 2010: 80). Such argumentation clarifies that according to Larcom, it is not the system that needs to change, so in this case Lowell and its factories. Rather, everyone should try and improve society by literally being on their ‘best behavior’.

What is more, Robinson and Larcom actually develop a discourse of individualism that largely corresponds with Benjamin Franklin's ideology of the self-made man. According to them, the mill girls were “self-made [women] in the truest sense” (Robinson, 2015: 95), because they had used all their individual powers to try and improve their social and economic position. In doing so, they created “a larger, firmer ideal of womanhood” while still having “principle and purpose distinctly their own” (Larcom, 2010: 99). What makes this logic exceptionalist is that it was only possible in the United States: Only there, where working as a mill girl was an opportunity for social and economic advancement instead of a lifelong drudgery; women could make full use of their individual powers and realize this emancipation to its full extent.

Conclusion

Taken together, all of these factors demonstrate to what extent Larcom's and Robinson's autobiographies question the idea of a clear cut cultural and literary canon, where all American workers despised the system and were only kept from emulating European labor movements by the strong capital-side. While the circumstances and occasions of their writing already indicate that their books do not qualify as traditional working class literature, the discourse of American labor exceptionalism that they both construct makes this even clearer. Larcom and Robinson did not write their autobiographies in order to tell about the harsh life of being a mill girl, but to defend a specifically American ideal of labor that they firmly believed in. In fact, they even reflect all of the categories that Werner Sombart evaluated in his seminal work as possible reasons for the different development of the American labor movement in comparison to Europe.

Most notable about Larcom's and Robinson's writing is thereby that they constructed such a discourse of American labor exceptionalism even though

they were part of a double marginalized group, since it questions many of the main tenets of the new labor history. Finally, Larcom's and Robinson's discourse also illustrates the inherent ambiguity underlying American exceptionalism as a cultural concept: While it largely rests on notions of individualism and uniqueness, it is at the same time an ideology that provides national, and therefore collective, identity.

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