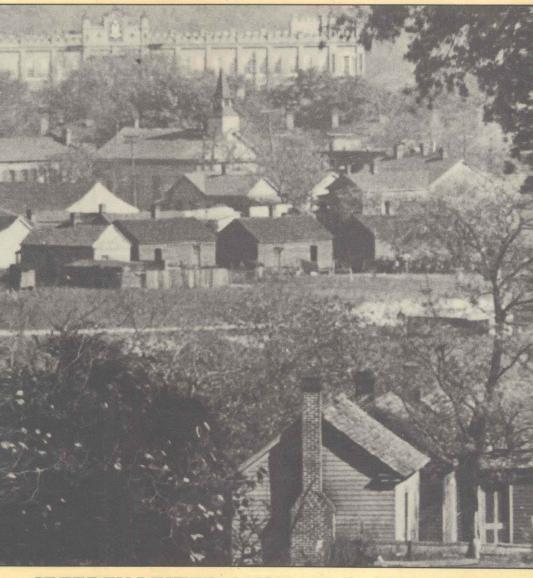# Hanging by a Thread

Social Change in Southern Textiles

JEFFREY LEITER, MICHAEL D. SCHULMAN, AND RHONDA ZINGRAFF, EDITORS

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Preface

In October 1990, as this book was being prepared for publication, President George Bush issued the fourteenth veto of his administration. The target was legislation passed by Congress which would have limited textile, apparel, and shoe imports. Insisting that the domestic textile industry was performing well, President Bush argued that import restrictions would jeopardize global economic progress. Advocates for the bill, whether elected officials or industry representatives, decried the veto with predictions of continued job losses. As editors, this news symbolized to a great extent our rationale for producing this volume. The clashing perspectives and conflicting interests that underlay this bill and its veto were familiar to those who have studied the historical and contemporary struggles of textile firms, their workers, and the communities that have been their homes. The news read like another chapter in a continuing saga of conflict and change. Some expect we are nearing the end of the story, while others believe the end is nowhere in sight. Most will agree, however, that these have been critical times for textiles.

We envisioned this book as a way to illuminate the historical roots and current dynamics of the southern textile industry. By the mid-1980s it was apparent that the industry had undergone a vast restructuring and that the human consequences were immense. The domestic economy of the United States had grown vulnerable to deindustrialization. The Midwest was termed the rustbelt, and the southern sunbelt was experiencing capital flight to more profitable locations across the border or overseas. Both our scholarly and civic interests led us to decide that the transformation of southern textiles was a story that needed to be told.

Our collaboration in the study of southern textiles began in 1980, when we surveyed employees of the J. P. Stevens plants in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. This was an especially provocative research site because of a lengthy battle between the company and the Amal-

gamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), which had been certified to represent the workers in an election seven years before but still had no contract settlement with Stevens. As we began to share the results of that research, we met other colleagues with similar interests in textile communities across the South. Some were sociologists; some were historians or political scientists. We valued these cross-disciplinary associations and concluded that a book designed to explain the circumstances in southern textiles ought to contain cross-disciplinary insights.

We sought contributions for *Hanging by a Thread* from those sociologists, historians, and political scientists whose expertise could inform readers of the crises faced by the industry at various times, by the communities where mills were located, and by the people whose lives were embedded in both. We sought historical and comparative analyses so that the picture of the textile experience in the South could be framed by a broad recognition of social, cultural, economic, and political forces. As editors, we have been fortunate to assemble these chapters from contributors who have our admiration and appreciation. We want to acknowledge their cooperation in all respects but also to applaud the energy and commitment they display in their studies of this topic. Their work has enlivened our own and, in some cases, has for many years enriched our own.

Our assessments of the developments in and the forecasts for the industry and communities have been vastly improved by our conversations with Clyde Bush of the ACTWU. We met him while planning our initial forays into Roanoke Rapids years ago and found a combination facilitator and interpreter in whom we have had confidence ever since. We are grateful also for our associations with Keir Jorgensen of the ACTWU in New York, who has always responded to our requests for information.

Our publication agreement with ILR Press has been a model experience. Fran Benson, Andrea Fleck Clardy, Trudie Calvert, and Erica Fox provided constructive advice and encouragement and splendid support services. We hope they recognize how much we value their contributions. The way they do their jobs has truly enhanced the way we did ours.

Our gratitude to Judy Teander is of giant proportion. She has distinguished herself as a manuscript manager extraordinaire. She knows how much we appreciate her labors, for which WordPerfect is both a process and a description, but we want everyone to know that her intelligent attention to detail is in evidence throughout this book.

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PART I

Introduction

1

Southern Textiles: Contested Puzzles and Continuing Paradoxes

Michael D. Schulman and Jeffrey Leiter

This book brings together the research of sociologists and histo-
rians on textiles and textile workers in the southern United
States. "Hanging by a thread" is a metaphor that describes the past
and the uncertain future of the southern textile industry, its work-
ers, families, and communities. Both the industry and the lives of its
workers are fragile: job security and profits have followed volatile
production cycles, and pressures to cut costs have intensified de-
mands on workers. Changes in the world economy, in corporate or-
ganization, and in the labor process are causing a restructuring of
the industry. Even if a transformed industry enters a new period of
prosperity, the process may leave many firms, people, and commu-
nities dangling from tenuous socioeconomic threads.

We believe the southern textile industry provides a case study of
the forces that cause change in social and industrial organization.
The issues and questions that appear repeatedly in both sociological
and historical analyses of this industry can be viewed in light of dif-
ferent sociological concepts. Yet the application of theoretical con-
cepts to historically specific situations or cases reveals contradictions
and new complexities.

One may ask, Why study the textile industry? It is not a high-tech
industry at the forefront of industrial restructuring; technologi-
cal change and modernization have come relatively recently to the

numerous mills scattered throughout the southeastern United States. It is not a growth industry in which the United States has a comparative advantage but a sick industry with shrinking employment.

People who study the textile industry—and the contributors to this book are only a few of the many who do—believe that it is the prototype for the analysis of industrialization, modernization, and the development of capitalism. It is also an exemplar for studies of the socioeconomic consequences of these transformations at the level of the individual worker, family, community, and society. Textiles are central to an understanding of Western development and to the analysis of many contemporary developing societies in which the textile industry serves as the base for a transition from agrarian to industrial economies.

In many countries, industrialization began in the textile industry. Expanding markets offered opportunities for entrepreneurs, and the mechanization of spinning and weaving and their relocation from the home to the factory made possible great increases in cloth production. Early industrial cities, such as the Manchesters on both sides of the Atlantic, frequently were centers of textile manufacturing.

The textile industry was often central to classic analyses of industrialization. Adam Smith (1976) compared spinning and weaving to illustrate the impact of capital investment on the relative returns to labor and capital. David S. Landes (1969) demonstrated the technological, organizational, and market forces behind industrialization in explaining the centralization of British textiles in Lancashire mills. Neil J. Smelser (1959) analyzed structural differentiation in textile production and textile families to illustrate the fundamental social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, and Tamara K. Hareven (1982) amplified Smelser's analysis by providing insights into the shifting balance of family and managerial forces on the textile workplace. Alfred D. Chandler (1977) pointed to the integrated production of textiles as the earliest use of large factories in the United States and the harbinger of a widespread managerial revolution. Robert Blauner (1964) used textiles as the paradigmatic example of machine-tending technology, which, along with assembly lines, was the source of greatest alienation for industrial workers.

Just as these analyses of industrialization used the textile industry to illustrate their arguments, so have interpretations of social transformation. The problems of precapitalist production that led to the reorganization of work around the wage-labor exchange, the dilemmas factory owners faced in the resistance of their workers, and the managerial and technological innovations owners undertook to ex-

tract greater profits were all widely and clearly experienced in textiles. Friedrich Engels (1962) stressed the poverty of the textile proletariat in mid-nineteenth-century Manchester. E. P. Thompson (1967) used early mill management practices and workers' responses to establish how the factory discipline of industrial capitalism fundamentally altered producers' lives. Stephen A. Marglin (1974) and Richard C. Edwards (1979) argued that the earliest factories were not created to harness machinery to water power but rather to increase control over spinners and initially involved no technological change from cottage yarn production. Dan Clawson (1980) used the example of textiles to show that technological changes are chosen and forgone in the process of class struggle. Liston Pope (1942) and Dale Newman (1980) investigated how paternalistic authority is used to control labor by considering textile communities.

One aspect of capitalist transformation has been the incorporation of peripheral areas and markets into the capitalist world economy. Textiles, as a consumer and producer of important trade commodities, has been central to this process. Textile production, because it required relatively little start-up capital and supplied necessities for proletarianized producers, served to facilitate accumulation in core areas of the capitalist world economy (Wallerstein 1980). Subsequently, the low value added in textile production with the resultant low profits, low wages, and low modernization rates has led to its transfer from the core into more peripheral areas, be they in the Third World (Chirot 1977) or in regions of the United States (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). U.S. textiles are now produced largely in the South, where the industry relocated starting after Reconstruction and accelerating after World War I.

Concentration of the industry in the South raises compelling questions and issues that may be labeled contested puzzles and continuing paradoxes. Contested puzzles are ongoing scholarly debates among researchers from different theoretical paradigms and intellectual traditions. Continuing paradoxes refer to the social reality behind the scholarly debates: phenomena whose complexity and historical specificity defy easy categorization and explanation. Sociological theory provides a fundamental set of concepts for isolating the essence or common factor that defines the poles of each contested puzzle. Theoretical concepts isolate certain aspects of social phenomena for intensive scrutiny, and their explanatory power is tested by applying them to the analysis of continuing paradoxes. This dialectical tension between puzzles and paradoxes is one reason sociologists and historians find the study of southern textiles central

for investigation. Although the six contested puzzles and continuing paradoxes identified here do not constitute the universe of southern textile scholarship, they do represent a core set of concerns that are addressed in this volume.

Social Class versus New Men of Power in the New South

The textile industry in the U.S. South is a product of post–Civil War industrialization. Textile plants and mill villages sprang up during the 1880s following the destruction of the agricultural-slave basis of the southern economy. A major problem facing mill owners was the composition of the labor force for the new mills. Blacks were considered unfit for industrial labor in the mills and were needed as agricultural workers in the cotton sharecropping/debt peonage system. Blacks worked the land to produce cotton, and whites worked in the mills to produce cloth (Williamson 1984). In addition, since oppression of blacks was legitimated by the concept of the natural superiority of whites, employment of blacks even in unskilled positions on an equal basis with whites risked questioning the ideological underpinnings of white dominance (Boyte 1972). Concurrent with textile industrialization, southern agriculture was experiencing a depression. A steady increase in sharecropping and tenancy and reliance on one-crop (cotton) agriculture combined to proletarianize white yeomen and tenants as the price of cotton fell (Mitchell 1921). Landless and impoverished white farmers and their families left agriculture to become textile workers in the newly created mill villages.

Traditional interpretations suggest that the textile boom was the work of a new group of industrialists who drew capital and support from community mill-building efforts (Woodward 1971). Other scholars argue that mill owners were members of the pre–Civil War dominant class: former owners of slaves and plantations, professionals, and merchants who either had retained land and capital or had accumulated capital through the sharecropping and tenancy systems of post–Civil War agriculture (Billings 1979; Wiener 1978). The heart of this puzzle involves the stratification system that developed in the post–Civil War South. Did the textile boom represent a clean break with plantation-based class and social structures, or did pre–Civil War systems of power and privilege reappear during southern industrialization?

If planters played a minor part in the textile boom, one might argue that the traditional agrarian plantation-based social structure

had been destroyed and replaced with capitalist industrial systems, resulting in both social mobility and new class positions for owners of capital, former slaves, and white farmers and workers (Wood 1986). Alternatively, if planters became merchants and textile mill owners, one might argue that plantation-based systems were recreated in the post–Civil War textile boom (Mandle 1978) and that relative positions in the stratification system remained the same though the roles of specific groups changed.

Although the contested puzzle over the structural inequalities of the New South involves historically specific phenomena, it is also a continuing paradox because of its importance for understanding the complexity of stratification in southern textiles. On one hand, textile industrialization fundamentally changed the pre–Civil War economic, social, and political structures. On the other hand, the post–Civil War replacements for these structures seem to have had much in common with their predecessors. Questions involving the interrelationship between agriculture and industry (e.g., was sharecropping a form of wage labor or a noncapitalist form of production?), stratification by race and gender (e.g., how did race and gender stratify workers?), dominant class control (e.g., were planters a ruling class or an elite?), and paternalism (e.g., does it persist?) need to be analyzed within the context of the social origins of the New South. This combination of continuity and discontinuity forms the heart of the paradox. Change obviously occurred, but was it a change in the form or the substance of social relations?

Paternalism versus Bureaucratic Authority over Labor

The interpenetration of workplace and community social structures to create unique systems of control over labor is a major theme that characterizes both sociological and historical analyses of southern textiles. Given the hierarchical, inegalitarian, and conflict-generating aspects of social relations between mill owners and workers, how was and is class conflict experienced? What systems of control over labor involving the mill and the community were specific to southern textiles? Are these systems still evident today, or have they been replaced by other control structures?

Dominant classes in all systems of stratification attempt to obtain stability by getting members of subordinate classes to accept and identify with the system. One of the most stable bases for the legitimation of systems of stratification is tradition. Traditional authority

applies both to the sanctity of old rules and to those holding positions of power who embody the rules (Newby 1977). Paternalism was the form of traditional authority in southern textile mill villages.

Paternalism involves both hierarchical differentiation between classes and the identification of the subordinate class with members of the dominant class (Newby 1975). It occurs when the dominant class has extended its control beyond the workplace into the community through a complex web of interrelationships. Paternalistic relations are most likely to emerge in isolated, one-industry, rural communities in which powerful members of the dominant class are personally identifiable and are involved in the everyday activities of workers' lives and there is an ideology that stresses the organic bonds between workers and employers (Norris 1978).

Early mills in the U.S. South were situated in geographically isolated towns, where the labor force was white, unskilled, and recruited from the farm population. Workers, many of them women and children, were often members of the same family or kin (Newman 1978). The mill was central to village life, providing housing and welfare activities and sponsoring community organizations. The dominant ideology within the mill village portrayed workers and owners as organically bound together in a "white family."

One aspect of the contested puzzle about paternalism involves the extent of control. Some argue that the extension of mill owners' control beyond the factory served to destroy any autonomous social space or institutions that workers might have developed on their own. The total determination of this social experience prevented workers from developing any autonomous culture or consciousness of themselves as a class (Cash 1941). While acknowledging the structural reality of paternalism, others argue that the paternalistic textile mill village was also subject to the informal expectations stemming from the workers' rural farm origins. Subsistence strategies common to rural farm life continued in the mill villages. Textile workers may not have been class conscious, but they did establish community- and occupation-based cultural forms, which at times appeared reconciled to paternalism but could serve as a basis for resistance when owners attempted to change the work process (Hall et al. 1986).

Another aspect of this contested puzzle involves the legacy of paternalistic structures. During the 1940s, local ownership of southern textile mills declined as a wave of consolidation hit the industry and most mill housing was sold (Herring 1949). Though the traditional mill village no longer exists, some argue that the ideology of paternalism persists through mechanisms of cultural transmission, social-