

# Samuel Slater and the origins of the American textile industry, 1790-1860

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The last few years have seen the rise of a Samuel Slater industry. At least three books on Slater's textile mills have been or are about to be published, and several dissertations are waiting in the wings. It is appropriate that Slater, the mills he founded, and the people who worked at those mills be given this attention, for Slater's contributions were central to America's early industrial development. Barbara Tucker's *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry*, which focuses on Slater's mills in Webster, Massachusetts, is a significant contribution to this growing body of work.

Tucker brings an important new perspective to the history of early American industry. She argues that the important issues in early American industry were those of family and religion, generation and gender, and she does an excellent job of incorporating the current historical understanding of these issues into industrial history. Though much of the recent work on early American industrial history has looked through the prism of class, Tucker suggests that the Marxian perspective not only misses more important categories of early nineteenth-century industrial society, but also overemphasizes change at the expense of continuity, and conflict at the expense of cooperation. She suggests that before 1829, when Samuel Slater's sons started to play a significant role in the family businesses, Slater's textile-mill villages were "without appreciable strife." To those who lived and worked in them, Slater's factory towns "appeared to be peaceful, ordered, traditional communities" (p. 15).

The mill villages were peaceful because Slater based them on the traditional values of small-town New England. The managerial structure of his mills reflected the family structures of the workers. Fathers retained their authority; many did not work in the mills, but worked at Slater's agricultural enterprises. Their children's pay went directly to the family, reinforcing traditional ties and forms of discipline. The "family system of labor" allowed industry to fit easily into American society. Tucker argues that "as long as the family and the church remained inviolate and retained their positions within the community and factory, harmonious labor-management relations continued" (pp. 184-85).

This conclusion is exactly the opposite of that drawn from the same evidence by Jonathan Prude in *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810-1860* (1983). Prude argues that currents of tension raged beneath the apparent calm of Webster. The difference in viewpoint is exemplified by Tucker's and Prude's conflicting interpretations of a single line in Slater's correspondence. In 1827 Slater wrote that handloom weavers had "determined not to weave unless at the old prices." Prude takes this line as indication that there was a strike in Webster, and draws from this premise a long chain of antecedents and consequences. The strike, he claims, was an "expression of overt militancy," a consequence of the "pressures playing across life and work in Slater's woolen village." The "confrontation arose from the long-building momentum of resistance" brewing in the mill villages, and must be seen in terms of "lengthy prior histories of fencing between workers and their employers." The consequences of this "strike," Prude argues, were the dismissal of the handloom weavers and their replacement by young women tending power looms. Tucker, not reading this sentence as indication of a strike, draws none of

these conclusions. In fact, she points out, Slater was well behind other manufacturers in installing power looms. To my mind, Tucker's description of the early southern New England mill villages is more convincing. It is narrower, though, almost self-contained; Prude does a better job of describing the wider context of early nineteenth-century industrialization.

After 1829, the mill villages began to change. Horatio Slater, Samuel's son, did not believe in maintaining tradition; he wanted to make money. Tucker sees this as indicative of a wider trend: "commitments to traditional concepts of patriarchy gave way to competitive capitalism" (p. 189). With the new generation came new structures of management. Entrepreneurial functions were separated from operating functions, and ownership was separated from management. Cost accounting and new technology and marketing ploys were introduced.

The relationship of management and labor also changed. The family system of labor disappeared. Managers took over the hiring and discipline of workers. Taking advantage of their increased control of the factory floor, they assigned more machines to each worker and ran the machinery more rapidly. The native-born families who had been the bulk of the work force simply left, to be replaced by immigrant Irish and French Canadian workers. Tucker's analysis of Webster's population shifts is an impressive exercise in historical demography.

Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry is convincing evidence of the value of combining family and industrial history. Its strength lies in its intensive study of a single entrepreneur and his enterprises. That is also its weakness. This is a narrow case study, and the degree to which Slater's enterprises reflected Samuel Slater's idiosyncrasies, as opposed to larger cultural trends, is unclear. Tucker occasionally draws conclusions that are larger than her evidence warrants. Taken as a whole, though, her book is a useful new interpretation of the forces that shape American industry.

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