

**Frager, Ruth A. *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900–1939.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. Pp. Xi, 300. Black and White Photographs, Statistical Appendices**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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lucid introduction, and enhanced in certain ways by juxtaposition, all the essays speak clearly to the question of how the social and the political are linked.

Behind this simply-stated question lie more complex ones, both historical and theoretical: Exactly what are the social and the political? How can the two be distinguished? From whence does our sense come that they need to be separated? As the topics covered in *Colonial Leviathan* suggest, these questions are usefully explored through analyses of developments in bureaucracy and law. In case after case, different contributors show how the routinizing and codification of values into these state forms anointed particular interests and perspectives with the sacred oil of objectivity. For example, in the case of the school inspectors discussed by Bruce Curtis, the impersonal (i.e., bureaucratic) authority of leaders took its specific content from the personal (i.e., social) values of the first cadre of notables enlisted in the service of public education. As Mariana Valverde and her co-authors suggest for gender relations in other areas of state expansion, this transfer of values reproduced in the state/society hierarchy the hierarchies of civil society. Often the growth of the state amplified the inequalities of social power that lay at its origin. On these questions, this collection leaves one wanting to know more about the tensions associated with the emergence of hierarchies *within* the state system. For example, did the local/provincial hierarchy, at its origins, carry the same meanings as at its decline in the 1930s?

Two of the essays stand out for their fresh conceptualization of the relations of state and civil society. Jean-Marie Fecteau's mainly theoretical piece brings to historians' attention a set of ideas with major research potential, not only for the nineteenth century (Fecteau's focus) but also for the twentieth. His subject is the

place of "associational life"—an abstraction that includes everything from business corporations to literary clubs—in relation to the state. Sketching changes in this relationship, he argues that the hostility towards associations inherent in eighteenth century liberalism became enthusiasm among nineteenth century liberals as, through mid-century, associations were redefined as manifestations of the individual will—i.e., as "voluntary" associations rather than feudal estates—and endorsed in a controlling legal framework. While association came to be seen as an aid rather than a threat to governance (think of agricultural improvement clubs or women's benevolent societies), it also had the potential to act as a counterweight to or even a replacement for the state, a potential contemplated explicitly in corporatism and various socialisms. In making these connections, Fecteau places associational life squarely in the political, reaffirming but refining the Thompsonian insight about how life ways are linked to political agency.

Graeme Wynn's considerably more accessible essay, focused on the Maritimes, is no less sophisticated than Fecteau's in its conceptualization of the social and the political. Stating his conclusion in a metaphor, he achieves that never-to-be-undervalued goal: complexity of apprehension combined with simplicity of expression. Having a horror of paraphrased poetry, I refer you to the original for Wynn's conclusions. What *can* be noted about his perspective is his satisfying historical sensitivity to multiple social identities, and his appreciation of how such identities were both based in state forms, and were the state's necessary underpinnings. Historians with a deep repugnance for abstraction will find some of *Colonial Leviathan* unbearable, but Wynn's piece nicely ends the collection by speaking to the lover of stories as well as to the philosopher in all of us.

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This is a judicious book: informed, careful, and precise. Ruth Frager takes clear and sophisticated positions on the class and ethnicity, and class and gender debates. The book, however, is not dryly analytical. Frager also conveys the heroism, humanly flawed as it was, that flourished in Toronto's Jewish labour movement between 1900 and 1939. In *Sweatshop Strife*, the empyrean abstractions of class, gender, and ethnicity are rendered alive and active in the Spadina neighbourhood's union halls, garment factories, and family kitchens. Here is one scholar truly answering Robert Harney's call for an "interior" history of immigrant communities.<sup>1</sup>

The questions Frager poses about social and political solidarities are not mere presentist theorizing. These are questions often discussed by Toronto's Jewish garment workers among themselves, as they made the critical decisions of organizational strategy. They asked searching questions about the politics of identity, such as: do our loyalties to other Jews require that we moderate our class-based demands, or will our interests as Jews ultimately be served best by leftist political action? Can we as Jewish wage-earning women rely on other women as allies, or are we better served by class bonds, or by ethnic ones? As these questions suggest, to sustain politically effective solidarities was difficult when competing communities made conflicting

demands. Further discouraging political unity were the deep ideological divisions in the working-class Jewish left, divisions not noticeably determined by social categories.

Equally difficult—in a different way—is the historian's job of separating out for purposes of clear description these interpenetrating politics. Frager's approach was to focus the book's first half on the significance of Jewish life for class relations, and then to consider more centrally gender relations themes—for example the masculinity of the Jewish union culture and the ethnocentricity of Canadian feminism. A chapter on ideological splits—essential to the theme of fragmentation, but otherwise divorced from the book's theoretical underpinnings—completes the body of the book. Inevitably there is a certain amount of "see chapter *n*," but a chapter consisting of six mini-biographies of women activists contributes largely to integrating the various thematic layers.

The book's importance for urban historians lies in two of its subjects: the construction of Toronto's Jewish working-class culture and the role of the labour movement in shaping relations between Jews and non-Jews. In addressing the first of these themes, Frager corrects (or at least complements) Stephen Speisman's focus on upward social mobility as a defining force in the geography of Toronto Jews. For Jewish garment workers, especially men, the overlapping social institutions of immigrant life and of their unions defined a clearly working-class community, where fighting for social justice, more than "getting ahead," was affirmed. Cross-class ethnic bonds and feelings of obligation did exist, but they did not always moderate class conflict. Employers' ethnic loyalties were unreliable, and when workers' expectations of Jewish solidarity were disap-

pointed, resentment only imparted greater militance to their union strategies.

In her examination of the Jewish labour movement's role in shaping relations between Jews and non-Jews, Frager contrasts developments in Toronto with those in American cities. The distinctiveness of the Toronto case she sometimes ascribes to Canadian circumstances, attributing, for example, the general failure of feminist alliances to Canadian feminism's dominant and distinctively Christian thesis of feminine moral superiority. Paula Draper has suggested that women from the older, anglophone, Jewish community may have founded in the National Council of Jewish Women an organization inspired by views similar to those of Christian feminists. Frager's different focus on the perspective of the less-aculturated immigrant working-class women makes a persuasive explanation for the failure of inter-ethnic women's alliances.<sup>2</sup>

On other matters of inter-ethnic relations, Frager is sceptical of American historians' conclusions. She challenges, for example, Steven Fraser's contention that garment workers' unions helped close the cultural gaps between their Jewish and non-Jewish members. Certainly, on Frager's evidence, there is little to suggest that Toronto's Jewish labour movement succeeded in alleviating inter-ethnic tensions. The very strength of the Jewish unions—their deep interconnectedness with the life of their ethnic community—weakened their appeal for non-Jewish garment workers.

Central to what makes *Sweatshop Strife's* contentions about cultural ties convincing is the material on social life Frager has drawn from interviews, some she conducted herself, some done by others in the 1970s. In her construction and use of this evidence, two virtues are notable.

One is that she appears to have made a special effort to speak to women. Three of the twelve women interviewees were missed entirely by earlier researchers, and these three gave some especially valuable evidence. A second virtue is that Frager does not obscure the distinction between her informants' recollections and her interpretations. This approach speaks well of her respect for her informants and also of her willingness to take responsibility for expressing "the judgement of history."

This book's chief (though not particularly serious) defect lies in one of its strengths—its thoroughness. Frager's meticulous accounts of constraints on women's unionism, of the conditions of garment workers, or of infighting on the left mix much very familiar material with what is fresh and new. Readers will want to skim, in frequency and sections depending on their own subfield specialties. Of course, what is impressive and valuable is Frager's integration of subfields to enlarge our understanding of how identities compete and coalesce in community. This sort of integration, worthwhile for all historians, is something to which urbanists especially should aspire.

### **References**

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