CHAPTER 9

The Market Revolution, 1800–1840

54. Complaint of a Lowell Factory Worker (1845)

Source:* *Factory Tracts Number One.* Factory Life As It Is *(Lowell, 1845).

The early industrial revolution centered on factories producing cotton textiles with water-powered spinning and weaving machinery. In the 1820s, a group of merchants created a new factory town near Boston, incorporated as the city of Lowell in 1836. Here, they built a group of modern textile factories that brought together all phases of production from the spinning of thread to the weaving and finishing of cloth. By 1850, Lowell's fifty-two mills employed more than 10,000 workers.

At Lowell, young unmarried women from Yankee farm families dominated the workforce that tended the spinning machines. Competition among the mills led to a deterioration in working conditions and, beginning in the 1830s, protests among the workers. They engaged in strikes or "turn outs," and petitioned the legislature to limit their hours of labor. Founded in 1845, the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association published a series of Factory Tracts to expose conditions in the mills. Frequently, as in this account by an unnamed worker, they drew an analogy between their conditions and those of southern slaves.

PHILANTHROPISTS OF THE nineteenth century!—shall not the operatives of our country be permitted to speak for themselves? Shall they be compelled to listen in silence to [those] who speak for gain, and are the mere echo of the will of the corporations? Shall the worthy laborer be awed into silence by wealth and power, and for fear of being deprived of the means of procuring his daily bread? Shall tyranny and cruel oppression be allowed to rivet the chains of physical and mental slavery on the millions of our country who are the real producers of all its improvements and wealth, and they fear to speak out in noble self-defense? Shall they fear to appeal to the sympathies of the people, or the justice of this far-famed republican nation? God forbid!

Much has been written and spoken in woman's behalf, especially in America; and yet a large class of females are, and have been, destined to a state of servitude as degrading as unceasing toil can make it. I refer to the female operatives of New England—the free states of our union—the states where no colored slave can breathe the balmy air, and exist as such;—but yet there are those, a host of them, too, who are in fact nothing more nor less than slaves in every sense of the word! Slaves to a system of labor which requires them to toil from five until seven o'clock, with one hour only to attend to the wants of nature, allowed—slaves to the will and requirements of the "powers that be," however they may infringe on the rights or conflict with the feelings of the operative—slaves to ignorance—and how can it be otherwise? What time has the operative to bestow on moral, religious or intellectual culture? How can our country look for aught but ignorance and vice, under the existing state of things? When the whole system is exhausted by unremitting labor during twelve and thirteen hours per day, can any reasonable being expect that the mind will retain its vigor and energy? Impossible! Common sense will teach every one the utter impossibility of improving the mind under these circumstances, however great the desire may be for knowledge.

Again, we hear much said on the subject of benevolence among the wealthy and so called, Christian part of community. Have we

not cause to question the sincerity of those who, while they talk benevolence in the parlor, compel their help to labor for a mean, paltry pittance in the kitchen? And while they manifest great concern for the souls of the heathen in distant lands, care nothing for the bodies and intellects of those within their own precincts? Shall we esteem men honest in their pretensions to piety and benevolence, who compel their help to labor on the Sabbath day or lose their situation?...

In the strength of our united influence we will soon show these driveling cotton lords, this mushroom aristocracy of New England, who so arrogantly aspire to lord it over God's heritage, that our rights cannot be trampled upon with impunity; that we WILL not longer submit to that arbitrary power which has for the last ten years been so abundantly exercised over us.

Questions

1. Why does the female factory worker compare her conditions with those of slaves?

2. Why does she doubt the sincerity of the Christian beliefs of the factory owners?

55. Joseph Smith, The Wentworth Letter (1842)

Source: **Times and Seasons *(March–May 1842).***

Among the most successful of the religions that sprang up in pre–Civil War America was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons. The Mormons were founded in the 1820s by Joseph Smith, a farmer in upstate New York who as a youth began to experience religious visions. He claimed to have been led by an angel to a set of golden plates covered with strange writing. Smith translated and published them as *The Book of*