

FLORENCE KELLEY AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DEGRADATION OF LIFE

An Introduction to a Selection from *Modern Industry*

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Florence Kelley illuminated how degraded environments stemmed from the social relations and operations of industrial capitalism. As a social reformer, she worked to document the various dangers that workers confronted. She presented how laborers were exposed to noxious gases, toxic substances, and poisonous chemicals and dyes. Dangerous materials, such as arsenic, were introduced into the production process without a concern for their health implications. Kelley's critique of industrial capitalism and its exploitation of workers, especially in the form of child labor, revealed how a productive process driven by the accumulation of capital threatened the health of all people and hindered social development. She fought to make the public aware of the dangerous materials and hazardous conditions that were involved in the production of items for market. Kelley worked to unite consumers and laborers in a campaign to improve industrial relations, recognizing that a radical transformation of social relations was necessary in order to stop the degradation of life.

Keywords: Florence Kelley; pollution; child labor; industrial capitalism; sweatshop; environmental degradation

When the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) began to keep a file on Florence Kelley (1859-1932), it was noted that she "has been a radical all . . . of her life" (Sklar, 1986, p. 14). No doubt this observation is because of, in part, Kelley's consistent struggle for social change in the conditions and relations of industrial production. Felix Frankfurter (1953), a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, explained that Kelley

had probably the largest single share in shaping the social history of the United States during the first thirty years of this [twentieth] century. . . . During that period hers was no doubt a powerful if not decisive role in securing legislation for the removal of the most glaring abuses of our hectic industrialization following the Civil War. (p. v)

She devoted her life to documenting and exposing the degradation of life and health, especially of children working in factories. Gottlieb (1993) indicated that Kelley was at the forefront of linking “the problems of degraded environments with workplace issues” (p. 62). In studying the social conditions of industrial cities, Kelley illuminated how people were immersed in unsanitary work environments, which extended from the shop floor into the neighborhoods. As a consequence, people were exposed to harmful conditions, which included exposure to toxins and poisons that were detrimental to their health (Gottlieb, 1993, pp. 62-63). Kelley worked to contribute to the creation of institutions to protect workers and families, establish standards for public health, educate children, and facilitate the means for the transformation of society to a system in the service of social needs. The importance of Kelley’s ecological thoughts are rooted in her analysis of industrial production, given its position in creating unsanitary environments where people spend the most productive hours of their days, its part in adding to the pollution of the local environment, and its role in the degradation of life.

Born into a progressive, abolitionist family, Kelley was immersed in a world filled with discussions of the existing inequalities and the formal efforts to transcend these conditions. Her father, William Darrah Kelley, a Congressman, worked on behalf of women’s rights. Family friends included Susan B. Anthony and Henry Carey, the most renowned economist, at the time, in the United States, who corresponded with Karl Marx and Justus von Liebig. Florence Kelley (1986) explained that her father taught her to read by using a book that told of children laboring long hours, under stressful conditions, in the English factories (pp. 26-27). The book contained woodblock pictures of children with bent backs and crooked legs, as they carried bricks. Her father contended that obtaining knowledge about the suffering of those less fortunate was a necessary condition to understand what things must be changed in the larger society. He told her of the horrors of the slave system and of the exploitation of indentured servants, as he promoted struggles for equality.

Florence Kelley attended Cornell University, where she studied Greek, Latin, and algebra. For her senior thesis, she studied the legal history of children, which led her to write “On Some Changes in the Legal Status of the Child since Blackstone.” This work, which included an analysis of the rights of children and women, was published in *The International Review* (Kelley, 1882b, 1986, p. 63; Sklar, 1995, p. 63). After not being admitted to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate studies, Kelley attended classes at the University of Zurich, beginning in 1883. At the time, Zurich served as a refuge for socialists, anarchists, and other radicals, who fled their home countries because of persecution. It also proved to be a place of awakening for Kelley. So far in her life she had read, seen, and gathered information regarding children who worked in the mills, Blacks who were lynched, and workers who were injured in the factories. She reflected that “the content of my mind was tinder awaiting a match” (Kelley, 1986, pp. 71-74). Socialist theory served as the spark that allowed her to grapple with the dynamics of a social system that created the conditions for exploitation and the degradation of life for the sake of profit. In particular it was the “scientific-materialistic criticism” that she found in socialist thought—especially in the work of Marx and Engels—that kept the fire burning as she organized her thoughts regarding the historical development of contemporary conditions of inequality. It is here in Zurich where Kelley became a socialist and an internationalist, realizing how capitalists attempt to pit workers against workers to obtain the cheapest labor for the accumulation of capital.

At this point in her life, Kelley established an ongoing friendship with Engels and undertook the translation of his book, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England in 1844*. This work by Engels (1950) served as a blueprint for her later work on sweatshops, given its historical analysis and documentation of class relationships under the development of industrial capitalism. Here Engels examined the exploitation of labor and cheapening of life as technological advancements undermine workers—transforming them into interchangeable parts—in a system based on the pursuit of profit. The reserve army of labor swelled as workers were laid off, as machines displaced skilled human labor. Engels portrayed how the urban poor lived as a result of class exploitation. Workers were exposed to toxic substances, fibrous dust, and carbon gases that impaired their health and shortened their lives. Their bodies were broken in the factories; however, the degradation of life and health did not stop there, as workers confronted dire conditions in their immediate surroundings, as a result of their class position. They were forced to live in houses with coal-stained walls and poor ventilation. Dilapidated buildings did not contain the means to properly dispose of human waste, so the alleys were filled with excrement. Poverty wages prevented families from obtaining the food that they needed for proper nutrition. The relations of production and the environment produced by the development of capitalist industry deeply affected the lives of workers as they experienced infectious diseases, skeletal deformities, and stunted growth. Kelley poured her energies into translating Engels's work, believing that the scientific-materialist criticism of this analysis would help people in the United States understand the developing conditions of life within the cities (Blumberg, 1966; Sklar, 1995). After completing the translation of *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Kelley also translated Marx's "Free Trade" speech, on which Engels provided additional assistance.

When Kelley finished this translation she immersed herself in work that paralleled that of Engels. Sklar (1995) reflected on Kelley's relationship with Engels, noting

from Engels she learned a truth later expressed in her measurement of the bodies of child laborers and her invasion of sweatshop homes: since the new order of industrial capitalism reconfigured personal as well as public life, any effort to challenge the hegemony of industrial capitalism had to do the same. (pp. 314-315)

Thus Kelley devoted her life to documenting the degradation of life and health, social inequalities, and the exploitation of workers. She linked all of these issues to an analysis of the realm of production and how the development of social relations in this sphere created new environments and impoverished conditions that negatively affected human lives.

In her studies of Marxism, especially Marx's *Capital*, Kelley came to comprehend "that poverty and misery were inherent not in the human condition but in the capitalist system" (Blumberg, 1966, p. 97). Kelley explained that capitalists seek "cheap hands and profit," rather than a "humane culture" (Kelley, 1891, p. 367; also see Marx, 1977, pp. 517-526, 610-635). Thus the work of a radical was to transform these conditions from the ground up, because "the evils of the exploitation of labor are inherent in the system of production by exploitation, and appear wherever that system develops" (Kelley, 1889, p. 26). Kelley dedicated her life to social reform, yet she remained critical of a philanthropic tradition that failed to recognize the inadequacies of "helping one child while the system sacrifices tens of thousands, saving one girl while thousands fall, building one

hospital while every condition of our social life grows more brutally destructive of human life and health" (Kelley, 1986, p. 95). She insisted, "For a radical cure of the social disease means the end of the system of exploiting the workers. . . . Lest this should sound like mere abuse, we have but to recall to mind the origin of poverty in our society" (p. 95).

The winter of 1891-1892, Kelley moved to Chicago to live and work at Hull House—a settlement house located in the working-class district of the city—along with Alice Hamilton, Julia Lathrop, Jane Addams, and Edith Abbott, as well as such visitors as Upton Sinclair and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Blumberg, 1966; Kelley, 1986, pp. 77-78; Sklar, 1995). Hull House served as a headquarters for women activists devoted to social reform, as they worked with the community to bring about transformation in the conditions of life, including the home, the neighborhood, and workplace. Through advancing "municipal housekeeping," they fought "to make the degraded urban environment livable" (Foster, 1994, p. 80). It was here that Kelley found a community of activists committed to social change. She immersed herself in the struggles of the community, and she taught economics to the residents of Hull House. Addams (1935b) reflected that Kelley "galvanized us all into more intelligent interest in the industrial conditions all around us. She was especially concerned for the abolition of child labor and the sweating system" (p. 116). In describing her particular approach, Edith Abbott, one of her friends, explained,

The method of social progress in which Florence Kelley believed almost devoutly was that of direct assault. She brought magnificent weapons to bear on the enemy. Sleepless, tireless, indefatigable, she was always on the alert. Life was never dull and the world was never indifferent where she lived and moved. (as quoted in Addams, 1935b, pp. 116-117)

Kelley's energies seemed ceaseless, as she worked in support of Eugene Debs's various campaigns, as well as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, along with her friend, W. E. B. Du Bois, for racial equality (Athey, 1971; Sklar, 1995).

Together the residents of Hull House undertook surveys of the immediate neighborhoods to document who was working in households, who constituted households, where people worked, what ethnic populations resided in the neighborhoods, and where these populations found employment. Much of Kelley's (1895) research focused on sweatshops, industrial production, and child labor. It is her detailed work that in part led to her appointment as the first chief factory inspector in Illinois between 1893 and 1896 and the production of a series of annual reports regarding the unsanitary conditions of production, the variety of dangers confronted by workers in hazardous industries, and the exploitation of children as laborers. Through this work, Kelley sought to accumulate statistics—given that this information was not usually recorded—regarding the working conditions of people, to use this information as a basis to push for industrial reforms and to advocate the passage of specific laws to protect children and workers, such as mandatory education and adequate funds for schools, an 8-hour work day, and protection from hazardous conditions in the workplace (Goldmark, 1953; Sklar, 1985; Waugh, 1982). Often Kelley would risk her life, such as during a smallpox epidemic, to document the dreaded conditions within tenement houses and to prevent infected materials—such as garments—from being distributed to the public (Addams, 1935a, pp. 310-311; Sklar, 1995).

In situating herself in this community and this work, Kelley's examination of the degradation of health and people's lives in relation to production served as the basis from which labor laws and social reform grew. A class analysis ran throughout her work, as she linked the existing conditions of life to the operation of a particular historical socioeconomic system. Kelley was primarily concerned with examining what historical factors created the working conditions confronted by workers, how productive relations contributed to the degradation of workers and communities, and why children were employed within factories and sweatshops rather than receiving an education. Although she believed that this work would yield information that could be used for short-term reforms in industrial production to protect the life and health of workers, she hoped that social reformers and laborers would be increasingly empowered in these struggles, so they could orchestrate major social change in the means of production.

Kelley developed her analysis through a series of articles, inspector reports, and books. Her books, *Some Ethical Gains Through Legislation* (1905) and *Modern Industry* (1914), serve as important works situating the degradation of life within the operations of capitalist production. (A selection from *Modern Industry* is reprinted in this issue.) "Modern industry" signified a particular form of manufacturing where machines were used to mass produce goods for the market while decreasing labor costs. Kelley pointed out that the development of "modern industry" had produced the means for "everything requisite for the enjoyment of good health. It produces unmeasured wealth in myriad forms—food, clothing, shelter, books, the means of travel, recreation and enjoyment" (Kelley, 1914, p. 41). Thus through the application of knowledge, machinery, and the labor that supports modern industry, we have the capability to fight disease, create clean factories, eliminate dangerous dust in workplaces, shorten the hours people work, improve hygiene, and enhance the conditions under which people live (pp. 41-44). However, the organization of the conditions of production for profit fails to produce such benefits. Instead,

It is the paradox of modern industry in relation to health that, while producing the wealth which enriches medical institutions and sustains the professions of scientific research, medicine and nursing, it gives rise to a considerable part of the disease which they strive to cure, and the deaths which they aim to deter. Avoidable disease and premature death are among its regular by-products, and it exhausts ever widening ranges of working people. It exerts a continuous injurious influence upon masses of those who consume its products, or work in its service. (p. 44)

Within *Modern Industry*, and a great many of her other works, Kelley undertook an analysis of what are the consequences of such a system for families, health, and education. All the while, she was also driven by a desire to transform such conditions, to reduce the hazards within industry and to provide people with free time for personal growth and development.

Kelley (1896) explained in "The Working Boy"—one of the many articles that she had published in the *American Journal of Sociology*—that "the introduction of new machinery...brings unmeasured harm to tens of thousands of skilled workingmen and their families" (p. 358). Following Marx and Engels, she explained that technological development within the capitalist system served as a means to cheapen labor by displacing skilled labor and depriving them of control of the tools of production (Engels, 1950; Kelley, 1896; Marx, 1977, pp. 517-526, 610-635). For example, "the introduction of the steam-cutting knife has enabled

the American Clothing Trust to reduce the skilled cutters to the level of precariousness of work and pay of the sweater's victims" (Kelley, 1896, pp. 359-361). This deskilling process increased the ranks of the unemployed, while decreasing wages as workers competed with each other for the remaining positions, given that they were interchangeable under the new operations of industry. Industry under such conditions causes poverty (Kelley, 1911, pp. 303-304). The deterioration of wages made it so adults could not provide for the subsistence of their families, thus the wages earned by children laboring were needed to supplement family income. The deskilling of jobs allowed for the incorporation of children into the production process of "parasite industries," given that they could be employed for simple tasks at machines. In time, children were used to replace adults in some factories. Capital justified paying children even lower wages than adults, arguing that youth were simply adding to the income of parents (Kelley, 1891, 1911). "Child labor comes of poverty and breeds low wages" (Kelley, 1889, p. 37). As a result, entire working-class families were sucked into the factories, where they faced numerous dangers to their health and longevity.

Kelley explained that in the process of this industrial development, children were deprived of the necessary education for contending with a changing world. Instead, they, like adults reduced to the role of tending to a machine, were caught in a conflict between the machine and mind. Rather than developing the facilities of the head and the hands, capitalist production forced workers in factories to only use their hands in tending to the monotonous manipulation of machines (Kelley, 1896, p. 361). Industry wasted their bodies and stunted their minds. She contended that for an informed public to emerge, everyone had the right to develop both of these realms, head and hands, to be active agents in the historical development of society, and to address the perils that confront communities. Enslaving children to the deadening world of factories hindered their personal development and growth, while shortening their lives.

In cheapening the hands of labor, capital, in such businesses as clothing, moved their operations from a factory to dark, damp, and poorly ventilated tenement houses or homes. In this, capital avoided the additional costs of maintenance of workshops, by displacing expenses such as heat, lights, and power onto the workers and/or the owners of tenement houses (Kelley, 1911, p. 307). Capitalist production extended its degradation of the world from the factory to the home, as poverty wages prevented families from being able to afford decent homes and the necessary food for good health. In addition, workers were relegated to labor in unsafe, unsanitary conditions, where disease was a constant threat to the health of families. The neighborhoods were dirty and infested with vermin. Landowners attempted to "kennel the greatest mass of human beings upon the least area with [the] smallest allowance of air, and light, and water" (Kelley, 1891, p. 371). It is in these neighborhoods where Kelley conducted research to expose the conditions under which people labored and to reveal the public health dangers that existed, as clothing could be contaminated during outbreaks of smallpox before it was distributed to the public for sale.

The cheapening of labor generated major profits for capital and allowed for the further concentration of capital. With venom, Kelley explained that the amassing of great wealth also demanded more police to protect the property of the wealthy, not to mention that it created poverty, homelessness, and starvation for the vast majority of the population (Kelley, 1891). She highlighted the fundamental relationship in the creation of wealth under these conditions by stating that the

crimes against the children of the working class are committed by the exploiting, *i.e.*, the employing class, with no extenuating circumstance. For while they coin gold out of the lifeblood of toiling children, a million adults, unemployed, seek in vain for work. (Kelley, 1889, p. 30)

Lest we forget the maquiladoras of today, Kelley (1890) warned that “wherever the capitalistic method of production prevails there is child slavery. . . . The capitalistic system and the wage slavery of children stand and fall together” (p. 95).

Kelley felt that the exploitation of children within industry embodied the inhumanity of capitalist production; and it is for her efforts to end child labor that she is generally remembered. However, it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that Kelley always recognized that the class struggle remained at the center of this system. The courts refused to recognize class as a basis for charges of exploitation, so Kelley used children and women as a surrogate to reveal the degradation of life and the cheapening of labor under industrial relations. She hoped that in the process she would tear away the veil that shrouded the inhumanity that operated at the foundation of capitalist production (Sklar, 1995, pp. 258-260). Health, Kelley recognized, was tied to class position, which was tied to issues such as type of work, wages, and the ability to purchase food, clothing, and shelter (Kelley, 1914, p. 54). In this, Kelley fought for the working class as a whole. She saw her position as a factory inspector as part of the class struggle:

The factory inspector of today, like the militiaman, is the child of the struggle of labor against capital. The factory inspector enforces the law for the worker against the capitalist, the militiaman shoots down the worker by command of the capitalist. (as quoted in Blumberg, 1966, p. 112)

So Kelley engaged in research with the specific desire to improve working conditions, protect and educate children, and empower workers, hoping that a new productive system could be born in the process.¹

Degraded environments extended from the workplaces to the houses of those who labored. The conditions at home were tied to the class relations within production. Thus Kelley’s analysis surveyed the conditions of the local communities as she moved between the public and private spheres, documenting the working and living conditions of the working class. She focused on the dangerous and hazardous industries of the day, examining the conditions that endangered workers’ lives and created additional concerns in regards to public health. Kelley’s work showed how the conditions of modern industrial production generated degraded environments where people were employed in dangerous work and were exposed to toxic and other hazardous materials.

In *Modern Industry*, Kelley (1914) explained that assessing the conditions of production demanded constant vigilance, given that:

The characteristic of modern industry is incessant change. As old processes are abandoned and new ones introduced, new dangers, new injurious influences constantly arise, and new powers of controlling them as well. Among the incidents of industry varying from branch to branch, from place to place, are heat, cold, glare, darkness, insufficient lighting, noise, speeding, monotony, heavy lifting, standing, bad air, dampness, contact with poisonous materials, dangerous machinery, and processes generating dust, gases and vapors. (pp. 55-56)

On the whole people were forced to work under conditions that threatened their health and lives. Kelley (1889) explained, "The danger to life takes the form of fire, boiler explosions, unguarded machinery, uncovered vats and tanks of boiling fluids, fatal diseases from contagion, foul air and poisonous work" (p. 7).

Workplaces were filled with immediate dangers. Women and children sewed garments in buildings that lacked fire escapes. The buildings were dilapidated, and the threat of fire was constant. Nonetheless, the workroom doors were often locked during the hours of operation. The rooms were poorly ventilated and filthy. Vermin added to the putrid state of the workplaces. Kelley (1889) referred to these conditions as a "legalized mode of torture and death" given that the owners knew the dangers that were present (pp. 7-10, 20-22). Boilers were kept in a poor state, so explosions were a constant threat, and many workers were killed as a result. Kelley (1889) commented that businessmen became very rich by employing children within the factories, where they tended to dangerous machines without any safeguards. As a result, the children ended up maimed, losing fingers in steel dies that would crash down on hands that attempted to position spoons in the machines (pp. 16-17). Open vats of chemicals and liquids served as watery graves for youth who fell into them. On the whole, Kelley charged, industry knowingly kills workers by failing to repair dangerous machinery and forcing people to toil in unsanitary conditions (Kelley, 1914, pp. 125-126).

The degradation of workers' lives in the workplace was amplified by exposure to toxic and hazardous materials. The particular dangers varied from industry to industry. In cotton mills, the fluff from the cotton filled the air in the workplace. Inhaling this material caused lung problems (Kelley, 1882a, pp. 523-524). Dust from industrial production was a serious concern to Kelley, given how readily these materials were incorporated into the bodies of workers. Tenement-house shops for the production of garments were "ruinous to the health of the employees," given the various fumes from "gasoline stoves and charcoal heaters" that mingled "with the mouldy smell of the walls and the stuffiness always found where a number of the very poor are crowded together" (Kelley, 1895, p. 35). Given that industrial production was creating "soot laden" cities, a few industries, such as chocolate and lace and silk shops, incorporated systems to purify the air that was brought into the workplace, such as pumping air "through flowing water and cotton batting" (Kelley, 1914, p. 58). The workspaces were much more comfortable, as pure air flowed through the shops. However, these conditions were not created to protect workers. A manager told Kelley that pure air was necessary to protect the delicate lace and silk from the "soot of the city." This ensured that profit trumps interest in the health of workers.

Beyond the inhalation of dust, Kelley (1895) addressed the many other dangers that were present in workplaces:

The dye from cheap cloth goods is sometimes poisonous to the skin; and the fluff from such goods inhaled by the operators is excessively irritating to the membranes, and gives rise to inflammations of the eye and various forms of catarrh. All these conditions, taken together with the exhaustion consequent upon driving foot-power machines at the highest possible rate of speed, make consumption, either of the lung or intestine, the characteristic malady of the sweater's victim. (p. 36)

In other industries, noxious gases emanated from the surroundings and materials used in production. Workers would go home sick after working their shifts (Kelley,

1889). Children working with carmine would develop extreme headaches. In the tobacco trade, workers experienced nicotine poisoning (Kelley & Stevens, 1895, p. 58). Developing industry introduced dangerous materials into the production process, such as arsenic and mercury, which created long-term health problems for the workers: "The child who handles arsenical paper in a box-factory long enough, becomes a hopeless invalid. The boy who gilds cheap frames with mercurial gilding, loses the use of his arm, and acquires incurable throat troubles" (Kelley & Stevens, 1895, p. 70; see also, Kelley, 1889, pp. 29-30).

In the dial-painting industry in the 1920s, women who painted glowing paint on the dials of clocks started to become ill, developing extreme forms of jaw disease, and die. The paint contained radium (Clark, 1997; Gottlieb, 1993; Riney-Kehrberg, 2000). Kelley helped mobilize the Consumers' League and scientists to investigate the industrial poisoning that was taking place to establish the link between the degradation of the health of the workers with the radium paint. The bones of the women who died continued to glow years afterwards, given the concentration of the element (Riney-Kehrberg, 2000, p. 521). Here Kelley was part of the movement to challenge industries' dismissal of responsibility for the poor health of the workers. Explicit connections were made between the materials used in production and the negative consequences on human health. Degraded environments included the realm of the body.

The degradation of life extended beyond the workplace, posing threats to public health, from the workers producing the commodities, to the residents of a community, and to the consumers of the products. Kelley's discussions of food intimately link these various segments of the social world. Bread was prepared in cellars where sewers regularly backed up into the kitchens. Bouillon was produced in areas adjacent to fertilizer plants, where its noxious toxins contaminated everything and made inspectors sick on site (Kelley, 1899, p. 297, 1901, p. 73, 1905, pp. 225-226). The production of food became a major concern, especially under the emerging chemical industry. Kelley expressed concern in regards to workers being exposed to chemicals and dyes in the production of food, and then consumers, unknowingly, ingesting "injurious chemicals in . . . supplies of milk, bread, meat, [and] home remedies" (1899, pp. 293-294). In *Some Ethical Gains Through Legislation*, she warned that

we are all in danger of eating aniline dyes in tomatoes, jams, jellies, candies, ices, fruit syrups, flavoring and coloring extracts; and salicylic acid in our canned peas and other vegetables. . . . We wear more or less arsenic in our print goods. (Kelley, 1905, p. 213)

Children consumed candies that contained dangerous dyes and poisonous coloring matters (Kelley, 1914, pp. 49-50). Given the integration of companies, the concern for contamination became more worrisome, especially in regards to chemicals such as arsenic and strychnia, which society "has not yet learned to deal [with] by any effective summary procedure" (Kelley, 1905, pp. 223-224).

Kelley pointed out that "the transformation of industry is to-day the life and death question" that confronts society (Kelley, 1914, p. 90). The negative consequences of such a system of production were so great "that unremitting effort is needed to abolish the system of which they are the consequences and the accompaniments" (Kelley, 1905, p. 254). Increasingly she proposed that consumers and laborers needed to unite "to control the conditions under which the things they

purchase are produced, and to keep the conditions of production humane” and not until we gain mastery of this situation, by wresting “the means of production from the service of the exploiting minority to the service of the now exploited majority, need we look for any radical change in the conditions of life” (Kelley, 1889, pp. 18, 25). In an effort to facilitate this union between laborers and consumers, Kelley worked tirelessly for the Consumers’ League.

Kelley’s commitment to this movement can be seen as an extension of her Marxism. Here Kelley (1899) highlighted how production and consumption were united and how we are all consumers of goods produced by labor. For Kelley, she wanted to strip away the veil that hid the conditions of production from consumers; she sought to reduce our alienation from each other by transforming the social relations of production. In this, she was working to overcome the fetishism of commodities, as explained by Marx, that plagued society by exposing the hazardous conditions under which commodities were produced, the dangerous materials that were incorporated into products, and the threat to public health that industry posed so long as it was organized for the purpose of the accumulation of capital (Kelley, 1899, 1905, 1914; Marx, 1977, pp. 163-177; for a useful, contemporary discussion of issues surrounding consumer movements that address the relations of production, see Hudson & Hudson, 2003).

Kelley worked to gather statistics and information regarding health and industry that had not been collected within the United States. She felt that this material would serve as a useful means for helping educate the public in regards to the extent of the degradation of life. The Consumers’ League worked to disseminate this information to enlighten and empower the public of their position to create change in the system (Kelley, 1914, pp. 67-85). Kelley asserted that our “personal adornment [came] at [the] cost of smoke-laden, filthy sky and air” (p. 90). Kelley and the Consumers’ League worked to promote full disclosure of the conditions of production and the ingredients within foods. They advocated the use of inspectors, in the service of the public, of factories to ensure that materials were not contaminated with infectious diseases, toxins, and poisonous chemicals. They fought to end sweatshops and child labor (Kelley, 1899).

The Consumers’ League wanted to create a groundswell of public pressure that would help usher in transformations in the operations of production. They advocated that workers receive fair wages, rather than the lowest wages possible; men and women should receive equal wages; workplaces should be sanitary and free from toxins and dangers; and child labor should be ended, so children could attend schools that were properly funded and that empowered them to create history, rather than to be slaves of machines in the reproduction of the class structure (Kelley, 1899, p. 300; 1914, pp. 97-100). Kelley (1914) lamented that we “waste money in war and preparations for war” rather than devoting this money to educating children (p. 98).

Kelley argued that we needed to prevent the degradation of life and the continuance of social inequalities. Hers was not a position of remediation or amelioration after the fact. She promoted the active transformation of social conditions, with one eye on practical changes and the other on social transformation on a societal scale. In addition to the positions promoted by the Consumers’ League, Kelley insisted that workers need to be able to direct their growth and development, rather than being reduced to simple tasks within industry (Kelley, 1914, pp. 103-106). Part of this involves, as Marx (1991) argued, an expansion in the realm of freedom and a reduction in the realm of necessity (pp. 957-959).

All workers must be freed from working 12- to 14-hour shifts in the factories;

the working day in industry must be shortened for men as well as for women and youth, to save human faculties from being utterly deadened in the modern process of production, and to afford leisure for the valuable active uses of the mind (Kelley, 1914, p. 104).

Kelley promoted cooperative, collective ownership of production, stating “we labor to promote the transition from the class of production by irresponsible monopolists, to the order of social production, conducted through the servants of the people, by the people, [and] for the people,” (Kelley, 1889, p. 39) because

industry conducted for profit and regulated only by the pressure of competition (the labor being performed by men, women and children who are merely “hands”) has produced, among its fruits, the maximum cynical disregard of the manhood, womanhood and childhood of the workers, and a loss of moral responsibility in the relation of the owners of industry to the consuming public. (Kelley, 1914, p. 119)

Through controlling the “means of production,” Kelley asserted we could decide what products are produced, how they are created, and what is used to construct these items.

Kelley’s work provides an important analysis that examines the connection between degraded environments and productive systems. Her work served as the basis for industrial reform, given that she initiated the collection of important statistics that detailed the conditions of production and the connections between health and hazardous work. In this she revealed the toxic dangers that were present within a system of production where profit supersedes the health of workers. Although social movements have helped lessen the brutalizing aspects of class relations, they have failed, thus far, to remove the conditions that Kelley explained root such degradations of life. Kelley insisted that we must struggle to transform the property relations to ensure a society that makes “wholesome products, made under [the] right conditions” (Kelley, 1899, p. 301). Thus the effort to diminish the dangers confronted in social production, to eliminate the use of toxins and hazardous materials, and to cease the degradation of life continues.

NOTES

1. Kelley (1895) noted that within industries that were organized, workers were able to reduce the incorporation of children into the factories, and the workplace tended to be more sanitary, when compared to sites of unorganized workforces (pp. 27-28). Thus the power of an organized workforce was seen as being one of the keys to transforming the conditions of production.

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