Notes on Modernization and Its Complications: Economy and Society

By the end of the 18th century, the American economy began undergoing a process that historians call modernization. This process involves a number of changes, including: the rapid expansion of markets, commercial specialization, improved transportation networks, the growth of credit transactions, the proliferation of towns and cities, and the rise of manufacturing and the factory system. Obviously, all these factors are interrelated. Furthermore, such changes always have profound effects on people’s lifestyles as well as on the pace of life itself.

While the frontier moved steadily westward, the South was primarily agrarian—tied to cash crops such as cotton, sugar and tobacco. New England’s economy, however, quickly became modernized. Although agriculture was never completely abandoned in New England, by the early 1800s it was increasingly difficult to obtain land, and many small New England farms suffered from soil exhaustion. Young men could go west---in fact, so many of them left New England that soon there was a “surplus” of young women in the area. In addition, the transformation of New England agriculture and the demise of much of the “putting-out” system of the first local textile manufacturing left many single female workers underemployed or unemployed. What were these farmers’ daughters supposed to do? What were their options?

In periods of rapid change, people often try to cling to absolute beliefs and even create stereotypes that implicitly punish those who do not conform. Such a stereotype began to emerge after the American Revolution. According to this stereotype, every “true” woman was a “lady” who behaved in certain ways because of her female nature. Historian Barbara Welter has called this phenomenon the “cult of true womanhood.” True women possessed four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These characteristics, it was thought, were not so much learned as they were biologically natural---simply an inherent part of being born female.

Simultaneously then, two important trends were occurring in the early 1800s: the northern economy was modernizing, and sexual stereotypes that assigned very different roles to men and women were developing. Whereas a man should be out in the world of education, work, and politics, a woman’s place was in the home, a sphere where she could be sheltered. But what happened if economic need for an increased supply of labor and changes in individual economic circumstances clashed with the new ideas about women’s place in society? As historians have pointed out, there was a direct conflict for poorer or unmarried women between their need to earn money and the ideology that home and family should be central to all women’s lives. This situation sharpened class divisions and created alternative ways of living especially on the part of young, white, native-born, Protestant women, that were deeply disturbing to many Americans.

The Lowell system was an attempt to prevent the spread of the evils associated with the factory system and to make work in the textile mills “respectable” for young New England women. Working conditions in Lowell were considerably better than in most
other New England mill towns. However, several major “turnouts” (strikes) occurred in the mid-1830s and by the mid-1840s Lowell began to experience serious labor problems. To remain competitive yet at the same time to maximize profits, companies introduced the “speedup” (a much faster work pace) and the “stretch-out” (one worker was put in charge of more machinery—sometimes as many as four looms). The mills also cut wages. When women protested against these circumstances, they further challenged the ideas embodied in the cult of true womanhood, especially that of submissiveness.

Even before the strikes, the Lowell system was breaking down as more and more mills were built. Both housing and neighborhoods became badly overcrowded. By 1850, mill owners were looking for still other ways besides the speedup and stretch-out to reduce the cost of labor. They found their answer in the waves of Irish immigrating to America to escape the economic hardships so widespread in their own country.

By 1860, what Reverend Mills had characterized as “the moral and intellectual advantages” of the Lowell system had come to an end. Indeed, many Americans could see little or no difference between our own factory towns and those of Europe.