

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911: Tragedy and Meaning in Sweatshop New York

Robert W. Whalen

Queens College, Charlotte, North Carolina

Saturday, October 6, 2001

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED]

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, fire broke out on the eighth story of the ten story Asch building in lower Manhattan. The eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the Asch building housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, a garment manufacturer which produced those fin de siècle women's blouses called "shirtwaists." Triangle employed some five hundred people, mostly Jewish and Italian immigrant women.

The fire broke out just as the workday ended. Though the cause was never determined, it seems that someone tossed a cigarette into a waste bin. The bin burst into flames. In a matter of seconds fire swept through the webs of cloth and thread which laced the factory's floors and draped chairs and tables. In seconds, the top three floors of the building were engulfed in flames. The fire killed some 155 people.¹

To an entire generation of urban reformers, activist clergy, progressives, feminists, and trade-unionists, the Triangle fire instantly became an emotion-charged symbol, a kind of menetekel, representing all the evils that they had combated for so long; it became the impetus of a moral crusade to prevent things like this from ever happening again. Many of the people who made modern America

- political leaders like Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, Al Smith, Fiorello LaGuardia, and Robert Wagner; social activists like Frances Perkins; and trade-unionists like Rose Schneiderman and Dave Dubinsky, were all directly or indirectly inspired by the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. A direct genealogical line can be drawn from the fire, to a host of New York City and New York State progressive reforms, to the New Deal of the 1930s. No wonder that almost every American history textbook lists the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire as one of the key events of Progressive era America. “In the end,” write Ric Burns and James Sanders, in their history of New York City, “the carnage of the Triangle shirtwaist factory fire would prove to have been one of the most transforming events in American political history.”² It seems obvious that the Triangle Fire would assume the meaning that it did. And yet, when one interrogates the obvious, one encounters the problematic.

“This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in this city,” trade unionist Rose Schneiderman bitterly remarked to mourners just after the fire,³ and in fact this was not the worst fire in New York City history, nor was it the only industrial accident of this kind. Why then did the Triangle Fire become such an incandescent icon for so many?⁴

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire achieved the power it did because it incarnated not one but a whole network of complex and contradictory meanings. These meanings both emerged from the fire and were imposed on the fire in the tumult that followed it. Excavating these meanings and tracking the process of their formation

can tell us both a great deal about the Progressive era and not a little bit about ourselves.

The most obvious reason for the Triangle fire's tremendous resonance is that it erupted before the very eyes of America's media. In 1911, newspapers were still the media in America, and many of the nation's most important papers were published within blocks of each other in New York City. Stories in these papers circulated throughout the country. The grim, grey plume of the Triangle fire could be seen all over Manhattan that terrible Saturday afternoon, and every paper in the city rushed reporters to the scene. Within hours, stories from the New York papers flashed around the nation.

This was, of course, the great age of the notorious "yellow press." The shocking fire, with its 155 victims, seemed made to order for newspapers obsessed with scandal and spectacle.

But there was much more to the newspaper reporting than yellow-press sensationalism.

One of the most astonishing things about the fire's reportage was its cinematic quality, astonishing because the cinema had only just begun to affect people's sensibilities. Indeed, it may well be that cinematic perception is as much a child of the sensationalist press as of the early nickelodeons.⁵

Newspaper reports presented readers with a visual, not really a prose, account of the disaster. All narrative prose, to be sure, must transform the simultaneous into the sequential, and the news reports translated the horrifying chaos of the fire into step-by-step accounts. But the reports did more. They were not only sequential, but also slow-motion. Reading about the fire, one moves slowly and gradually from event to event. Reading the newspaper stories, one's eye pans slowly from floor to floor, window to window, person to person. Most importantly, these accounts move from close-up to close-up, providing intimate portraits of those about to die.

"I still see the day it rained children," says a fictional garment worker in Chris Llewellyn's poetic evocation of the fire,⁶ and in fact eyewitnesses remembered that the most ghastly moment in the fire occurred when terrified workers, most of them young women, rushed to the building's windows, scrambled onto the ledges, and frantically trying to escape the flames, plunged to their deaths eight, and nine, and ten stories below. For a few horrible moments during the fire, it quite literally rained bodies as one worker after another tumbled from the ledges above and crashed to the pavement below.⁷

But when reporters recounted this ghastly moment, they slowed everything down and brought everything up very close. Here, in this paragraph, a young man and a young woman scramble to the ledge; they embrace; the woman falls to her death and then the man. There, in the next paragraph, several terrified young

women stand side-by-side on a ledge. They hold hands and plunge to their deaths. Another woman leaps but is caught in the telephone wires around the building and hangs there for a moment before falling. And then another woman appears; as she leaps from the ledge, her hair and clothing burst into flame.

This cinematic style of reporting is of course sensationalist. But it is more than that. This cinematic style changes the generic category of immigrant worker into a series of hastily but intimately sketched portraits of individual persons, portraits which then serve not simply as abstract classifications but as metaphors, as synecdoches, charged, like photographic portraits, with human energy. Without doubt, the fire achieved the emotional power it did because it was inherently horrible, but also because the way in which the horror was recounted humanized the disaster. The fire was able to evoke catharsis in part because of the cinematic sensibility of its chroniclers.

The Triangle fire was transformed from event into symbol also because so many progressive-era narratives nested in the fire, narratives, for example, about women, ethnicity, citizenship, property, and labor, each with its own logic and structure, each with its own dominant metaphors, each with its own emotional charge. The fire's tremendous resonance arose from its ability to speak to, and about, and from within, each of these narratives.

One of the many ironies entangled with the fire was the fact that Triangle's

impoverished women workers were manufacturing that generation's symbol of women's liberation, the shirtwaist. Charles Gibson's famous creation, the "Gibson Girl", popularized the shirtwaist, and young bourgeois women wore the shirtwaist as a sign of their independence, assertiveness, and modernity. The shirtwaists they wore were made by women who were poor, overworked, and economically trapped in New York's notorious sweatshops.

Women who wore the shirtwaists were not unaware of this painful irony. Earnest Progressive-era young women flocked to dozens of reform causes, including the cause of labor. Many of them, especially in New York, insisted that questions concerning women workers were feminist questions as well.

Central to all this in New York was a remarkable organization known as the Women's Trade Union League. Modeled after a British original, the WTUL had chapters in most major American cities. What made the WTUL unique was its attempt to unite gender issues to class issues; it struggled to link uptown bourgeois women to downtown proletarian women by building a bridge between feminism and labor.⁸

By 1911, the WTUL had been involved with issues concerning women workers for several years. Two years earlier, in New York, a strike-wave had rocked the garment industry. Tens of thousands of male and female garment workers had poured into the streets in protest of the industry's sweatshop conditions. Marching along with them was the WTUL.⁹

The Triangle fire, of course, horrified the WTUL activists. Many had picketed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company only months before, and some even knew women killed in the fire. The WTUL immediately demanded a city and state investigation of the fire; WTUL activists worked to provide care for the fire victims' survivors; the WTUL helped organize the monster protest march down Fifth Avenue which occurred in the wake of the fire; and it mobilized its wealthy uptown connections in support of urban reform.

The women the WTUL mobilized were especially Jewish immigrant women. The fire not only illuminated questions about women in general, but about Jewish women in particular. The fire's story became intimately linked to the story of Jewish women immigrants in America.

Young Jewish immigrant women enthusiastically went to work in the shops; of all immigrant women, Jewish women were perhaps the most autonomous and assertive. "In every stratum of Jewish society," Susan Glenn notes, "the work of women was considered both necessary and respectable."¹⁰ They expected not only that their work would be valued, but that it would be the vehicle not only for survival but for prosperity. "The vast majority of unmarried Jewish immigrant women living in American cities worked for wages by the time they were sixteen years old," Glenn continues.¹¹ Work provided these young women with wages, but

also with social relationships and even functioned as a kind of informal school. But all in all, these young Jewish women were sorely disappointed. Abraham Cahan, in his novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, notes that for immigrants, the arrival in America was like a “second birth;” and yet, trying to survive in sweatshop New York, Cahan writes, was like trying to survive in some “jungle.”¹² Conditions in the shops fundamentally contradicted these young women’s aspirations and identities and it is little wonder that they in particular became the sweat-shops’ greatest critics.

And as Jews, of course, they had little choice in their lives. They either had to endure their condition or change it; the one thing they could not do was flee it. Most turn-of-the-century immigrants came to America with the intention of returning home, and many did. Some 56% of Italian, 59% of Slovak, and 64% of Magyar immigrants in the early twentieth century left America after only a few years. But to what would Jews return—pogroms? disenfranchisement? impoverished *stetlach*? Little wonder that only some 2-3% of Jews left.¹³

There were other distinctly Jewish contours to the sweatshop world. The Yiddish Lower East Side was a cultural hothouse bursting with socialism, anarchism, Bundism, and every other radical vision known to eastern Europe. An intense family work-ethic linked everyone in the family to the workplace. A strong intellectual, and especially moral culture encouraged the humblest garment worker to be a social critic. The most militant workers in New York at the time of the fire were the Jewish garment workers; in the great garment strike of 1909, for instance,

while some 34% of garment workers were Italians, Italians made up only around 6% of the strikers; on the other hand, Jews made up perhaps 55% of the workforce, but nearly 70% of the strikers.¹⁴ Surnames are a shaky indicator of ethnicity, but using surnames, it would appear that roughly 10% of the Triangle victims were unidentifiable by ethnicity; around 24% were probably Italian, and about 66% were Jews.¹⁵ Jews, as Jews, had an intense interest in the sweatshop world and Jewish immigrants were neither “uprooted” nor “de-cultured;” to the contrary, their ethnic identity was central to the militant role they played in New York’s labor movement.

There was a strongly messianic, utopian cast to the Jewish critique of the sweatshop system. What fueled Jewish militancy was precisely the conflict between “the way things are” and the “way things ought to be.” Within this intensely eschatological framework, the fire was a kind of anti-utopia, it was the exact opposite, the violent negation of Jewish dreams of the way the world might be. It destroyed not only the Jewish worker’s present, but it denied his or her future. The fury workers expressed in the wake of the fire was the fury of an outraged eschatology.

The fire linked this Jewish story to the story of America. What did it mean, though, in 1911, to be an American?

This was no abstract question in sweatshop New York. By 1911, waves of immigrants had flooded New York City. There is a story that when one sweatshop

owner heard of the fire he remarked, “Let’em burn. They’re a lot of cattle anyway.”¹⁶ It seems inconceivable that anyone would really say this, but it is indisputable that for many garment industry managers, some of whom, by 1911, were themselves the children of immigrants, all these immigrants were little more than cheap labor needed to feed the vast garment industry.

The immigrants were not exactly welcomed. In 1905, Immigration Commissioner General Frank P. Sargent described the wave of immigration as “one of the gravest crises in [our] history.” Commissioner Sargent warned that “vast hordes of fear-driven, poverty-stricken Russians ... are pouring through every loophole of escape to this country.” If something weren’t done to limit this immigration tide, Sargent worried, it would “poison or at least pollute the very fountainhead of American life and progress.” This “enormous alien population,” he continued, was “breeding crime and disease at a rate all the more dangerous because it is more or less hidden and insidious.” “Within five years,” Sargent thought, this “alien population ... will constitute a downright peril.” The *New York Times* reporter who interviewed him commented on the “men, women, and children [who were] herded like cattle and hardly more intelligent ...” They were, the reporter wrote, “a motley assemblage of vice-ridden, stolid, bovine parodies of manhood.”¹⁷

Could such a “motley assemblage” really be human, let alone “American”? It seemed impossible, to some. An earlier *New York Times* article describing “East Side Vendors” insisted that the Lower East Side was the “eyesore of New York,”

and concluded that “it is impossible for a Christian to live there because he will be driven out, either by blows, or the dirt and the stench.”¹⁸

Yet, some New Yorkers found these foreign “Russians,” or “Jews,” utterly fascinating. A standard feature article in the New York press took readers on imaginative tours of the exotic, “oriental”, Lower East Side.¹⁹ “Going slumming” in the Lower East Side was a stimulating diversion for uptown, middle class young people. And some intellectuals, notably Hutchins Hapgood and Lincoln Steffens, found the Lower East Side positively fascinating.

What the fire did was first to humanize the denizens of the “ghetto.” The wave of articles reporting the fire and its aftermath forged a distinctly and unquestionably human identity for the garment workers. Consider, for instance, a report in the *New York Evening Post* from Monday, March 27, 1911. The report began by noting that “one could scarcely walk a distance of two blocks in certain ... neighborhoods without coming upon a hearse ...” The report, in the slumming tradition, took the reader into a Sicilian neighborhood (“they are emotional, these Sicilians,” the reporter warned). The reporter noted that “up narrow, twisting flights of stairs in many a tenement, one came upon the funeral in progress ...” One “urchin” says, pointing to a girl in a coffin: “It was my sister...they are going to bury her...she’s in there.” The reporter concluded: “Racial lines, usually sharp drawn on the East side, were shattered for once. Italian, Jew, German, Irish, all mingled freely in their grief.”²⁰

Complementing these journalistic cameos was the massive garment workers' march on April 5, 1911. This huge funeral parade demonstrated not only the humanity of the garment workers, but their militancy, and their determination not only to participate in, but to decisively shape, America's agenda.²¹

These labor militants and their friends were convinced, and this is a fourth great progressive era narrative, that democracy and property were badly out of joint. As Lincoln Steffens would quip: in America, "politics is business, and that's what's wrong with it."²²

By 1911, American progressives had developed a story which helped explain, they were sure, where America had come from, where it was, and where it could be. Progressives agreed that America had indeed been founded on the proposition that a free society requires a free market. But was the market, in 1911, really free? And if not, was its freedom more threatened by the state, or by the emerging corporate order itself? To most progressive era critics, the market was grievously endangered by the latter. Progressives charged that the market was riddled with secret deals between powerful corporate cliques who were concerned with amassing wealth even at a terrible cost to the commonwealth.

In New York City in 1911, the debate between wealth and commonwealth was intense. For example: the flood of immigrants had created a tremendous

demand for cheap housing in New York. Without two cents to rub together, most immigrants settled down within sight of the ships that brought them across the sea. New York real estate brokers scrambled to buy property on the Lower East Side and they quickly covered it with the famous tenements - apartment buildings in which they could pack tens of thousands of immigrants. (By the early twentieth century as many as a thousand people were crammed into each acre of the Lower East Side).²³

Landlords claimed that what they were doing benefited everyone. Immigrants got cheap housing and landlords made a tidy profit. But not everyone agreed. By 1911, the Lower East Side was a vast slum. It was much more than an eyesore. Its labyrinthine alleys were breeding grounds for a multitude of social and medical pathologies. True, no one forced the immigrants to live there, and no doubt some responsibility for their dismal living conditions rested on their own heads. But it was also true that the landlords had a monopoly on cheap housing in lower Manhattan, and because of the great demand for cheap housing, they had absolutely no incentive to make even minor improvements. Well-organized and wealthy, the landlords constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. The landlords proved impervious to community demands that they do something to improve tenement life, that they, for instance, put light-bulbs in the stygian corridors and working toilets in the community bathrooms. By the turn of the century, a coalition of immigrants, preachers, social workers, educators, doctors, trade-unionists, and law enforcement officials tried to pressure landlords into making reforms; the landlords

balked; and this battle became central to the city's political history.

But this was just one dimension of the battle between community and property.

The huge number of immigrants in New York City at the turn of the century drastically unbalanced the relationship between labor and capital, and it was this imbalance that bred the dreadful sweatshops. With tens of thousands of impoverished people frantic to work, capital held the whip hand. Employers could offer the most grueling, back-breaking, poorly-paid jobs, and still find scores of people eager to accept them. Working conditions might be terrible and pay even worse; bosses might be petty tyrants and safety conditions deplorable; but still workers would stand in line to sign-up.

Garment manufacturers pointed out, with justification, that they provided needed employment for poor and unskilled people who couldn't work elsewhere. They argued that there was opportunity in the garment industry and in fact many of the small shops were actually run by immigrant entrepreneurs.

But critics charged that the garment industry was also both thoroughly abusive and outrageously unfair. Sexual abuse was common. Petty corruption was endemic. Work rules were demeaning. The work pace was exhausting. There were, of course, no written contracts. And the industry was grossly exploitive. If one compared the profits the companies earned to the wages workers received, one quickly discovered that the garment industry was an enormous machine designed to

pump great amounts of wealth upward. Worst of all, the garment factories were dangerous.

Only days before the fire, the city fire marshal had urged all factory owners to install sprinkler systems, but an association of property owners published ads in the New York press denouncing the fire marshal for interfering with private property. The day before the fire the New York State Supreme Court struck down a law requiring manufacturers to contribute to a state-wide workers compensation fund; the court ruled that the law was an unjustified interference in private property..²⁴

At the center of this great debate was the question of labor, and this is a fifth, and final, progressive era drama embraced by the fire. The fire occurred in the midst of an unprecedented labor rebellion in the needle trades; by 1911, wave after wave of strikes had rolled through the sweatshops. For garment workers, these strikes quickly assumed epic proportions. At the heart of story of the strikes was this question: Was labor simply another commodity, to be bought as cheaply as possible on the labor market, and consumed in the industrial process, or was labor somehow different?

Andrew Carnegie knew the answer. Of course, Carnegie argued, labor was a commodity, and nothing more. It was especially Carnegie who ruptured the old link between profits and wages. In artisanal America, a carpenter, say, who had a good

year would be expected to increase his apprentices' pay. Profits and wages rose or fell together. But Andrew Carnegie insisted that for profits to rise, wages had to fall. Carnegie set the tone for most early 20th century entrepreneurs, who quickly accepted as conventional wisdom the belief that higher corporate profits demanded the suppression of workers' wages.²⁵

The tremendous imbalance between labor and capital in immigrant New York was Carnegie's dream come true. Millions of workers were willing to work for next to nothing, and if they became dissatisfied, there were millions more to take their place.

But - was labor really a commodity like any other? Or ought labor, in a democracy, be hedged about by certain inalienable rights?

The fiery destruction of the Triangle workers symbolized for labor's friends the logical outcome not only of the abusive conditions in the garment industry but also of the whole logic which argued that labor was a commodity. After the fire, the thousands of garment workers who marched down Fifth Avenue were demonstrating not only for another penny in the pay packet, but for a radical restructuring of democracy itself. The garment worker's struggle was at root a civil rights and human rights struggle. As Fannia Cohn, a garment worker recalled:

Many girls came here from a revolutionary background. They were struck by the atmosphere of freedom here. But then they were plunged into the sweatshop. The sweatshop was not only a physical condition but moral and anti-spiritual.

They found there was no Bill of Rights ...in the shop. They were thrown out if they mentioned the Bill of Rights in the shop.²⁶

It was a movement rooted in the claim that we are persons, not animals; citizens, not slaves.²⁷

In December 1911, the two owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company were tried for murder. They were acquitted.²⁸ But the fire's aftershocks hardly ended there. In fact, the fire's impact had only just begun.

New York's state legislature created a special committee, named the *Factory Investigating Commission*, to investigate working conditions in New York City and New York State. Chaired by two rising young politicians named Al Smith and Robert Wagner, and served, by investigators like Frances Perkins, and supported by other New York politicians like Franklin Roosevelt, activists like Eleanor Roosevelt, and labor lawyers like Fiorello LaGuardia (who worked for a time with the garment unions), the investigating commission conducted one of the most sweeping industrial surveys in American history. The commission would hold, in 1911 alone, 15 executive sessions and 22 public hearings; it would hear 222 witnesses, and generate 1,986 pages of testimony. The commission would work for a total of four years and produce a 13 volume report. Of the sixty bills the commission recommended, 56 were adopted by the New York State legislature.²⁹ Perhaps even more important than the legislation the committee recommended was

the conviction it aroused in people like Wagner, Perkins, the Roosevelts (especially Eleanor), LaGuardia, and Al Smith, and in millions of other, less famous people, that profound changes in the power relation between capital and labor, between economy and democracy, simply had to occur if other catastrophes were to be avoided. Meanwhile, in New York City especially, garment workers and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in particular, emerged as significant political forces, giving both New York City and New York State a decidedly progressive politics. As Burns and Sanders write:

From the ashes of the Triangle Company fire began to rise one of the most dramatic and far-reaching political transformations in American history—one that would set into motion a process of change that would eventually redefine forever the role government played in the lives of ordinary people.³⁰

What occurred was a sudden shift in the relationship between economy and democracy. For years, Progressives had argued that democracy and democratic institutions and practices, institutions and practices built around human rights, and civic equality could, and should, exercise oversight over the economy, driven, one might say, by priorities other than human rights and civic equality. The Triangle fire had turned the tide. New York City and New York State adopted a host of reforms designed to inject not only safety but even a measure of democracy into the economy, reforms that would profoundly change the way Americans thought of business, labor, and the republic itself.

But the fire was not just a political phenomenon. It was, for its generation, an intensely emotional and transforming experience.

For instance: Robert Wagner would be one of New York City's and New York State's greatest politicians. During the New Deal, Wagner would be instrumental in transforming and at least partially democratizing the relations between capital and labor. According to one of Wagner's biographers, J. Joseph Hutmacher:

The Triangle Commission experience was ... significant in the molding of Robert F. Wagner. He never forgot it, and three decades later he would win a bet by recalling the exact date and hour that the fire began. Service on the commission was the most important event in his public life up to that time.³¹

Or Al Smith. Frances Perkins, an eyewitness of the fire, and investigator for the commission, thought that Smith's service on the Factory Commission had changed Smith's "life, his outlook, the whole direction of his career."³²

The fire did not change Frances Perkins's life so much as confirm its trajectory. Already a "progressive" in 1911, the fire impelled Perkins in her work for social reform; she would become, of course, President Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of labor. Perkins would say of the fire's impact on her generation of reformers: "We banded ourselves together ... moved by a sense of stricken guilt ... to prevent this kind of disaster from ever happening again." Years later, speaking about the New Deal, Perkins remarked that the New Deal had begun "in that terrible

fire, on March 25, 1911.”³³

Or consider Dave Dubinsky: in 1911, Dave Dubinsky was a nineteen year old immigrant garment worker, too busy surviving to be very interested in politics. Then came the fire. Years later, Dubinsky wrote:

Like everyone else on the East Side, I was deeply touched by this shameful tragedy and by the wretched exploitation that had brought it about. I marched with tens of thousands of others in the funeral parade, a day in which the heavens wept, hours and hours of cold rain. I tore out of the *Jewish Daily Forward* and kept for years the dirge written by Morris Rosenfeld, the poet laureate of the slums.³⁴

The dirge that so moved Dubinsky is both an apocalyptic image of fire and death and a ferocious call for action and justice. Dubinsky, of course, would become a central figure in the American labor movement, and even more importantly a key figure especially in the struggle for justice and democracy in New Deal America. The fire did not “make” Dave Dubinsky, but it profoundly moved Dave Dubinsky in ways he had never not imaged.

Nearly a century later, now, the fire continues to be an icon of recurring relevance. Journalist Michael Elliott has argued that now that the Cold War has ended, America is not so much moving to a New World Order so much as it is returning to an unfinished agenda, the Progressive Era’s agenda. Immigration, urban decay, women’s rights, workers’ rights, all the only partially addressed causes of fin de siècle America have, Elliott insists, returned.³⁵ Nor, alas, have we escaped the

need to comprehend, not just intellectually, but emotionally, imaginatively, and spiritually, great tragedy. We have gone back to the future, and there the terrible flames of the Triangle fire have again become shockingly visible.

Notes

1. The classic account of the fire is Leon Stein, *The Triangle Shirt Fire* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1962). For a recent effort to place the fire in the context of progressive era reform, see: Frances Brewer Jensen, *The Triangle Fire and the Limits of Progressivism* (PhD. Dissertation, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 1996). For a poetic treatment of the fire, see: Chris Llewellyn, *Fragments of the Fire. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911* (New York: Penguin, 1987). There are several accounts of the fire written for children, including: Bonnie Bader, *East Side Story* (New York: Silver Moon Press, 1993), and Nancy Bogen, *Bobe Mayse: A Tale of Washington Square*. In 1998, Cornell University's Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, in collaboration with UNITE, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, created an Internet website devoted to the fire. The Cornell historians have also generated the most accurate list of fire victims, originally put at 146, but now more likely to be 155. The Cornell historians have also identified some 46 survivors of the fire. See: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>.

² Ric Burns and James Sanders, *New York* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999), 293. This is the text which accompanied the documentary film of the same name.

3. Cited in Nancy Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 96.

4. New York City's worst fire up to that time was the 1904 "General Slocum disaster" in which a fire on a tourist excursion ship, the "General Slocum," killed at least a thousand people. Industrial accidents, including fires, were common. Only weeks before the triangle fire, an almost identical fire, with, thankfully, fewer killed, occurred in Newark, New Jersey.

⁵ Joseph Pulitzer, of course, was one of the fathers of the "yellow press," and one of his innovations was to expand significantly the number of illustrations accompanying articles in his paper, the *New York World*. He was eager to find reporters whose prose could be translated into images. He liked reporter Nellie Bly's work precisely for this reason. As Bly's biographer notes, "for most of Pulitzer's objectives, Bly's talents were custom-made, including the way her stories lent themselves to illustration." See Brooke Kroeger, *Nellie Bly* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 104.

6. Llewellyn, *Fragments*, 7.

7. Fire officials later estimated that a human body, accelerated by gravity, falling from eight to ten stories struck the ground with an impact of around 11,000 pounds. Fire fighters had no safety nets to catch people jumping, but even if they had had such nets, they would have been useless. See Stein, 17.

8. For a thorough account of the New York City branch of the WTUL, see: Dye, *As Equals*.
9. For more on this famous “Uprising of the 20,000” and related events, see Joan M. Jensen, “The Great Uprisings: 1900-1920”, in Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson (ed.), *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 83-182.
- ¹⁰ Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl. Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation*, (Ithaca: Cornell), 12.
- ¹¹ Glenn, *Daughters*, 80.
- ¹² Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, in Allen Schoener (ed.), *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925* (New York: Hold, Rinehart, Winston, 1967), 15-17.
- ¹³ Glenn, *Daughters*, 47.
- ¹⁴ Glenn, *Daughters*, 191.
- ¹⁵ These very rough calculations are based on Cornell’s list of fire victims, available at the Cornell website indicated above.
16. H. F. Porter, a New York building inspector, told a *New York Times* reporter that a shop owner had made the remark to him. Quoted in Stein, 28. Stephen Jay Gould, who had an office in the old Asch building when he taught at New York University, argues that attitudes like this were widespread, that they were products of the then fashionable Social Darwinism, and that therefore, Social Darwinism quite literally had a lethal affect on human lives. See: Stephen Jay Gould, “Death by Social Darwinism,” *Natural History*, October 1997, 17ff.
- ¹⁷ “Are We Facing an Immigration Peril?” *New York Times*, January 29, 1905, in Schoener, *Portal*, 25-28.
- ¹⁸ “East Side Vendors,” *New York Times*. July 30, 1893, in Schoener, *Portal*, 57.
- ¹⁹ For instance, see: “The Ghetto Market,” *New York Times*, November 14, 1897, in Schoener, *Portal*, 55; “Thursday on Hester Street,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1898, 58; “The Delights of Haggling,” *New York Tribune*, July 28, 1901, in Schoener, *Portal*, 59-60.
- ²⁰ “East Side Funeral Day,” *New York Evening Post*, March 27, 1911, 2.
- ²¹ See: “10,000 March in the Rain,” *New York Evening Post*, April 5, 1911, 1;
- ²² Cited in Herbert Mitgang, *Once Upon a Time In New York* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 39.
- ²³ Glenn, *Daughters*, 54.
24. “Sprinkler Apparatus and New York Property Owners” (advertisement) *New York Times*, March 22, 1911, 4; “Waldo Fire Order Stirs Businessmen,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1911, 8; “Employers’ Liability,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1911, 10.

25. See especially, David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

²⁶ Glenn, *Daughters*, 186.

27. For more on the struggles of the garment workers, see: Joan M. Jensen and Sue Davidson (ed.), *A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike. Women Needleworkers in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), especially Joan M. Jensen, "The Great Uprisings: 1900-1920," 83ff.

²⁸ For a narrative of the trial, see Stein, *Fire*, Ch. 16, 177-203.

²⁹ J. Joseph Hutmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 5. The Commission quickly published a three volume report, and followed it up over the next several three years with supplemental reports. See: Factory Investigating Commission, *Preliminary Report in Three Volumes, Transmitted to the N.Y. Legislature on March 1, 1912* (Albany, N.Y.: Argus Company, 1912). There would later be second, third, and fourth and final reports to the legislature.

³⁰ Burns and Sanders, *New York*, 288.

³¹ Hutmacher, *Wagner*, 10.

³² Matthew and Hannah Josephson, *Al Smith, Hero of the Cities* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 135.

³³ Burns and Sanders, *New York*, 293.

³⁴ David Dubinsky and A. H. Raskin, *David Dubinsky, A Life in Labor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), 40.

35. Michael Elliott, *The Day Before Yesterday* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Elliott first explored this theme in a lead article for *The Economist* called "The Old Country," published in October 1991. For another take on the notion that "progressive era" issues are indeed returning, see: Peter Beinart, "The Pride of the Cities," *The New Republic*, June 30, 1997, 16-24.