

Priscilla Murolo,

The Common Ground of Womanhood: Class, Gender, and Working Girls' Clubs, 1884-1928 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1997)

In *The Common Ground of Womanhood* Priscilla Murolo offers a perceptive analysis of class and gender relations in the working girls' club movement. The movement was begun in the 1880s by upper-class women with an interest in moral uplift and soon boasted a large membership of young unmarried wage-earning women in cities throughout the American northeast and midwest. Though club members were exclusively white, they came from both immigrant and native-born families. They were Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic, and worked in a variety of factory, retail, craft, and service occupations. Most were the daughters of skilled tradesmen, and nearly all lived at home with their parents. Murolo's purpose is to examine what wage-earning club women "made of their sexual sameness with club sponsors, what came of class differences between the two, and what these things reveal about class-gender systems in the larger society." (5) The particular virtue of her book is that it discloses in rich detail the perceptions and social identities of wage-earning club women, allowing readers to see them as they saw themselves, in relation both to genteel women and to other women and men in America's diverse working class.

What we discover is that the nation's class-gender systems were so densely fitted with fine but shifting status gradations that wage-earning club women were quite selective about seeking "common ground" with anyone, whether on the basis of gender or class. Gender solidarity with genteel women was advantageous when it helped club members distance themselves from "rough" or non-white women at the bottom of the working class and allowed them to draw attention to the womanly virtues, dignity in labour, family connections, and ethnic heritage (Irish, English, German), that placed them among America's *best* and proudest workers. It had less appeal when club sponsors manifested indifference to the social distinctions that mattered to members, and lumped them together with their "inferiors." Conversely, in conditions of acute economic distress, gender solidarity with genteel sponsors became a real liability, threatening members' efforts to overcome difference with other working women and join with them in resisting exploitation, impoverishment, and the contempt of the middle and upper classes.

Murolo takes pains to describe the changeable intersection of class and gender values with the working girls' club movement over the full course of its forty-year history, though her sources are best for the movement's first two decades. Very early in the movement, and somewhat to the surprise of its upper

class sponsors, club members insisted on democratic “self-government”; they accepted the help and friendship of genteel women but refused to be treated as “objects of charity.” (18) The club members’ impatience with the arrogance of the rich was shared by most people in the working class; at the same time, these particular young women were acutely aware that they came not from the homes of the unskilled or illiterate, but from the homes of honourable craftsmen who valued education, mastery of one’s trade, and worker independence. Developing a council form of club governance, working girls initiated and directed an array of “self-improvement” programs. Well-attended classes on municipal affairs, the liberal arts, and vocational skills attested to their interest in becoming knowledgeable citizens and contributing members of society. Sponsors helped club members with the time consuming work involved in recruiting teachers and finding places to meet.

Club activities also took young working women out into neighbourhood streets and homes where they offered assistance to ailing and poor families and invited working-class children to holiday parties. According to Murolo, club members saw this work as a form of self-improvement and an extension of family obligations, rather than as an opportunity to advise or criticize those in need. This claim is not entirely convincing. No doubt, club members did try to avoid treating the needy in their communities in the condescending manner of middle-class charity workers. But one also suspects that young women bent on self-improvement could not help but hold themselves up as authentic models of working-class success and occasionally offended men and women enduring hard times.

Club women’s investment in self-improvement soon led them to demand the esteem of a distrustful genteel public. They used meetings, regional conventions, and club publications to defend themselves against critics who questioned the moral character and work ethic of all female wage earners. Government surveys and journalistic reports had convinced a gullible middle-class readership that most working girls were but a step away from moral depravity. Many club sponsors seemed inclined to subscribe to this view. But club members impatiently rejected the “notion that respectable femininity was incompatible with wage labor,” and declared that working women possessed the same natural moral endowments as their more privileged sisters. (25) They vowed to live by high moral and sexual standards and, indeed, were more scrupulous than their sponsors in keeping girls of dubious morals from joining the clubs. They also willingly accepted information from their sponsors about what constituted respectable dress and ladylike demeanour within the middle and upper classes. However, club members were not interested in perfecting a slavish imitation of

their sponsors; they knew that respect, safety, and comfort within their own homes and communities often required assertiveness or plain-spokenness quite at odds with ladylike decorum.

Club members also organized their own recreation, including games, dances, group sings, and parties, sometimes with men. The girls described sociability, especially in single-sex settings, as “a seedbed for sisterhood.” (51) Through informal leisure, working girls got to know one another and to appreciate both their differences and similarities; sponsors and members came to understand each other as individuals.

Over time, and after much frank talk and lighthearted play, working girls and sponsors achieved a sincere, though imperfect, solidarity. They realized that their views on female morality had much, if not everything, in common. They found, too, that they all valued female independence. Within the clubs working girls discussed their desire not to marry until they found men who would treat them as equals and help them with the heavy burdens of housework. Club sponsors shared with members the opinion that marriages were likely to be happier if the wife had some time to cultivate real interests of her own and did not live a secluded home life. Members and sponsors agreed that remaining single could be a desirable alternative to marriage.

But gender solidarity in the club movement did not last. When the economic depression of the 1890s caused a decline in work and living conditions, many club members turned their energies to labour reform, helping to establish sick benefit funds, job placement services, cooperative sewing rooms, inexpensive lunchrooms, and vocational classes in white-collar skills. Some young women also began to evince genuine interest in trade unionism, though many had previously found union men unsupportive and had concluded that union activism, especially strikes, often caused more harm than good. However, the clubs' involvement in labour reform was short-lived, in large part because upper-class club sponsors grew critical of the shift toward worker militancy. Wrestling leadership away from working-class members by creating a new level of bureaucracy within the movement, sponsors threw their support to manufacturers' initiatives in welfare capitalism and vocational education.

For two more decades the clubs retained a large membership, but only by shifting most of their energies and money to recreation. They operated without any semblance of the democracy that had previously existed. Young women with an interest in “self-improvement” shunned the clubs, and by the 1920s the clubs had lost nearly all of their appeal. Competition from commercial amusements and frustration with sponsors who cultivated a dispassionate professionalism pulled and pushed working girls away from club membership. So too,

white club members resented sponsors who seemed willing (at least for a time) to yield to pressures from upwardly-mobile African Americans to admit black women to the clubs. Finally, the clubs became increasingly irrelevant to their traditional constituents as young white working women experienced real improvements in their social status. The national obsession with working girls' respectability (or lack thereof) abated as American accepted women's necessary presence in the workforce. Simultaneously, white working women's stature rose as powerful members of their race succeeded in making "whiteness" and "blackness" the most important social division in the nation. The working girls' club movement no longer had meaning or purpose.

In some ways the compelling evidence and lucid explanations in Murolo's book are less than perfectly served by the conceptual framework she employs, though she is certainly in good company. In recent years Linda Gordon, Peggy Pascoe, Robyn Muncy, Mary Odem, Joanne Meyerowitz, Glenda Gilmore, Annelise Orleck, Susan Lynn, Estelle Freedman, and many other historians have explored relations between American women of different class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds within a revised social control framework. This framework explores the potential for unity or discord among women in terms of the interests, resources, privileges, and power that they bring to their encounters. Gender solidarity sometimes overcomes, but often falls to, the conflict and distrust produced by inequality. Privileged women frequently seek to control women who are below them in social status. In turn, the less-privileged often respond by trying to demand or negotiate for power of their own. The resistance of the less-privileged can be ineffectual; but even if it is merely annoying it renders social control incomplete.

What is problematic about this framework is that it sometimes encourages historians to construct a stage that admits too few players and too little action, to adopt an idiom that is too limited in its vocabulary and too unvaried in its inflection. Attention focuses narrowly on two sets of characters, identified as those who find control more compelling than cooperation and those who seek to defy compulsion and insult. The former are described as untrustworthy and narrow-minded, the latter as brave and honourable; the historian's tone shifts between censure and praise. Murolo is too honest and careful an historian to ignore wage-earning club women's status anxiety, their desire to place themselves above *working women of little education, few sexual inhibitions, or dark skin*. But she does not look directly or closely enough at the relations between club members and other women, nor does she find a sufficiently nuanced voice in which to interpret their values and social character. This is a fine book about wage-earning club members' interaction with their sponsors, but it does not tell us as much

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as we would like to know about how they comported themselves in the world beyond the clubhouse door.

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