

Forum

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Sweatshops and the Literary Scholar

TO THE EDITOR:

Bruce Robbins's "The Sweatshop Sublime" (117 [2002]: 84–97) is a nice illustration of why humanities professors are utterly ignored in the public sphere, especially when they propose to address political realities. The initial points of the piece are straightforward: (1) Sweatshops are sites of cruelty and exploitation. (2) United States consumption is founded on sweatshop labor. (3) Social justice demands that we halt the practice.

Who would disagree? Certainly not *PMLA*'s readers. Our ethical sensibilities are already ratcheted up to guilt-ridden levels. So, one assumes, to fulfill the third condition the appeal must reach people outside the humanities. That would require doing some hard economic analysis of the sweatshop phenomenon and of the trade and legal policies that enable it. A skillful writer might portray actual sweatshop workers and bosses in powerful scenes of long-term misery. But instead, what we get in the rest of Robbins's essay are a David Lodge novel, a *New Yorker* cartoon, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, Jameson, Kant, and Spivak, with loose commentary along the way. Robbins makes some strong points about protest turning into self-aggrandizement, and he has a realistic awareness of the limits of academic critique. But to elevate the sweatshop issue into a question of the sublime and to cite theorists whose sentences are illegible to everyone but other theorists is to render the piece ineffectual at best, indulgent at worst. Will people working to improve labor conditions in sweatshops learn anything useful from this? Will it provide well-intentioned economists with concrete ammunition as they analyze global capital? Will it raise the compunction of State Department officials as they engage in trade negotiations?

These are tall orders, but the righteous, not to say pious, tone of the piece raises the stakes to those levels. If *PMLA* wishes to publish contributions on real-world practices, we're very much in favor of it, but the Editorial Board must ask that the language and evidence in the articles change accordingly.

The idiom of cultural theory and literary criticism gets us no closer to the sweatshop problem than does a scene from a Gaskell or a Zola novel. This is not a metaphysical point, just a rhetorical and practical one. When it comes to sweatshops, Kant's ruminations on sublimity and Spivak's elliptical abstractions are beside the point. Readings of *Middlemarch* don't help workers in Honduras, theory can't substitute for economic data, and sanctimoniousness won't win over the indifferent consumer and the greedy profiteer. Give us the injustice in cold terms. Name names, follow the money, propose sound social and economic alternatives, but don't leave readers in this uneasy middle ground, easing our progressive consciences but speaking in theoretical tongues, sympathizing with the exploited but keeping our academic sensibilities immaculate. Or, let's stop pretending to be reformers and instead stick to our expertise as literary scholars. Until we get off the fence, we accomplish little, for despite Robbins's exaggerated claims for the power of "anti-sweatshop discourse," in truth, our fulminations are so much blather in the public sphere.

Mark Bauerlein
 Josué Harari
 Emory University

Reply:

Mark Bauerlein and Josué Harari find that my essay illustrates the reasons why humanities professors are "utterly ignored" in the public sphere. I'm not sure that the essay's faults, such as they are, are quite so representative. The piece was intended for an educated audience, in particular for literature professors and professors-in-training, and assumed this audience was already aware of the existence of sweatshops. (I think it could have assumed the same of a nonspecialist readership: the essay also appeared in an interdisciplinary collection, *The Public Intellectual* [Blackwell, 2002], where it does not seem to have scandalized nonspecialists.) My purpose was not, as Bauerlein and Harari seem to believe it should have been, to ratchet up readers' guilt levels further by means of "powerful scenes of long-term misery." The essay addressed itself instead to what generally well-informed and progressive readers would not already know and might thus

be interested in, as literary scholars and as citizens: Namely, what does all this have to do with literature, culture, the imagination? Can the work I get up to do each morning serve in any genuine way to rid the world of sweatshops? Is that a fair question to ask of my work as a literature professor, as distinct from my more directly political involvement?

The essay uses *Nice Work*, *Middlemarch*, *Nickel and Dimed*, and several other texts to fit our present concern with sweatshops into a larger problematic: a history of efforts by the individual imagination to conceive its place in a global economic order of apparently inconceivable magnitude and complex interdependence and to confront the attendant ethical responsibilities. The theorists I discuss, in particular Kant, Jameson, and Spivak, help lay out what I take to be a shared dilemma: on the one hand, a recognition that neither knowledge nor aesthetic pleasure will necessarily lead to action against injustice and, on the other, a recognition that to take action, even with the intention of helping sweatshop workers, is not to know in advance that the action is appropriate, one that will help rather than hurt. Thus, such action does not evade the stringent (academic) criterion of further and more strenuous knowledge.

It can be satisfying to "[n]ame names," as Bauerlein and Harari propose. When Charles Kernaghan of the National Labor Committee uncovered evidence that Kathie Lee Gifford's Wal-Mart clothing line was a sweatshop employer, it became clear that the power of the brand name was double-edged and could be reversed to enormous effect. I belong to what I hope is an ever-growing number who would be delighted to see a string of American names, corporate as well as political, added to President Milosevic's and General Pinochet's on the list of international indictments. But there are issues, perhaps including the most important ones, for which the identification of individual perpetrators is not the point. It's not always so simple.

The authors express their belief that "[r]eadings of *Middlemarch* don't help workers in Honduras." If memory serves, Mark Bauerlein occasionally writes for a nonprofessional readership. Since Bauerlein obviously cares deeply about the workers of Honduras and other victims of sweatshops, he has no doubt used his public access to speak up for them. He would do the readers of *PMLA* a valuable service by providing some references to his writing on the