emerged in almost all of New York's early industrial trades. It arose in its purest forms in the consumer finishing trades, and most notoriously in the production of clothing.

It took only ten years, from 1825 to 1835, for New York's clothing revolution to conquer the local market; by 1850, it had created and captured the lion's share of a national trade in ready-made clothes for men. The original instigators were the city's cloth wholesalers, auctioneers, and jobbers, whose command of the English import market and broadening avenues to New England invited further adaptation and expansion of the contracting schemes of the early slopshop entrepreneurs. Their success, and that of the master tailors turned manufacturers whom they supplied with cloth and credit, was neither an act of Providence nor an inevitable working-out of the growth of commerce. Of all of New York's middlemen and manufacturers, the clothiers were the most astute at perfecting aggressive merchandizing methods; more important, it was the clothiers who first mastered the art of extending liberal credit to local retailers and country dealers, to expand their own contacts and squeeze their competitors in other cities (and smaller New York dealers) out of the market. By 1835, they had turned the New York trade in ready-mades into one of the nation's largest local industries, with some firms employing between three and five hundred hands each. A large portion of their output was for the "cheap" trade—in precut apparel for southern customers (as well as the "Negro cottons" for southern slaves), dungarees and hickory shirts for western farmers and miners, and shoddy clothing for the urban poor. Beginning in the early 1830s, the clothiers also entered the respectable market, introducing superior lines, fiercely promoted by the jobbers and retailers, for clerks, shopkeepers, and wealthy patrons who lacked the time or money to patronize a custom tailor. There was some initial resistance to this noncustom work among the most cosmopolitan customers—but by the late 1840s the clothiers had changed people's minds. In 1849, a breathless report in Hunt's noted with admiration that the clothing of one ready-made firm was "adapted to all markets and for all classes of men, from the humblest laborer to the fashionable gentleman." With this democratization of product and the continued growth of the southern market, the New York clothing trade became an antebellum manufacturing giant. By 1850, the largest New York firms hired as many as five thousand tailors and seamstresses to turn out goods "with a degree of precision that would astonish the negligent observer."

The rise of the ready-mades metamorphosed New York tailoring at every level of production. Some of the old-fashioned master craftsmen did survive, largely in the fancy trade: New York business directories from the 1850s still boasted of Broadway's rows of custom fitters and gentlemen tailors. After about 1830, however, even the finest custom masters began to feel the competitive pinch. Some large custom firms like Brooks Brothers' entered the ready-made market for themselves and divided their shops into separate departments for custom work and the cheaper lines; as early as 1835, master tailors' advertisements stressed the availability of ready-mades as much as the skills of the proprietor and his journeymen. Some small custom masters

who lacked the funds to finance a ready-made operation set aside defective work and tried to sell it off as “precut.” Others went to work for the manufacturers, either as foremen or as semi-independent retailers, vending a specific firm’s ready-mades and doing a bit of custom tailoring on their own. A few of these men went on to become large employers themselves; they, and the clothing merchants, oversaw not enlarged craft firms but entirely new kinds of enterprises.

The focal point of the clothing outwork system was the New York version of the central shop—often an attractive structure when seen from the street, its shapely lines and graceful columns beckoning customers to inspect the stock. Once inside, a patron would see only the ample stores and the retinue of clerks; behind the scenes, the elite of the clothing work force, the in-shop cutters, prepared the predesigned patterns. The head cutters, the overseers of that elite, numbered about fifty in all the city. With an average annual income of between $1,000 and $1,500 each, they were probably the best-paid craft workers in New York. Certainly they were the most privileged. Apart from their power to discipline workers, the head cutters (sometimes called “piece masters”) were in charge of giving out all work to the journeymen, outworkers, and contractors. On the basis of their appraisal—or whims—a cutter or stitcher could earn a decent living or an excellent one. Impartiality in these matters was not among the head cutter’s virtues. “Generally,” the Tribune reported, “he has his favorites, perhaps a brother, or cousin, or a particular friend, who gets the ‘cream of the shop’ and is thus frequently able to make $30 or $40 per week.” With their incomes, with their close control over the daily operations and the lives of their subordinates, and with the confidence of their manufacturer-employers, head cutters could reasonably expect one day to open their own businesses.

The cutters enjoyed relatively high wages (roughly $10 to $12 per week) and regular employment, but none of the foremen’s powers. Rapid, regular work schedules prevailed in the cutting rooms. At the Devlin and Brothers’ firm, cutters were divided into bureaus for coats, pants, vests, and trimmings, while the entire production process, one reporter observed, “was reduced to a system,” in which every piece of work had its own number and a ticket with the workman’s name. Emphasis fell on speed and accuracy in cutting predetermined designs; “Southern-trade cutting,” a term synonymous with rapid rather than artful work, was the most common task in New York’s major clothing firms at least as early as the mid-1830s. Any slip, momentary slowdown, or simple disagreement with the foreman could deprive a cutter of the best work in the shop; if he could not adjust to the pace, he was fired.

From the cutting rooms (again, out of sight of the customers), the head cutter or piece master distributed the cut cloth to the outworkers and contractors, and it was here that the worst depredations of sweating began. A variety of outwork schemes existed. While most contractors were small masters unable to maintain their own shops, or journeymen looking for the surest road to independence, some cutters and in-shop journeymen also managed to subcontract a portion of their work on the sly. Major firms dealt directly with outworkers. In all cases, the system invited brutal competition and a successive lowering of outwork piece rates. At every level of the contracting network, profits came from the difference between the rates the contractors and manufacturers received and the money they paid out for overhead and labor. Two factors turned these arrangements into a matrix of unremitting exploitation: first, the successive bidding by the contractors for manufacturers’ orders (as well as the competition between manufacturers) depressed the contractors’ income; second, the reliance of the entire trade on credit buying by retailers and country dealers prompted postponement of payment to all workers until finished work was done—and, hence, chronic shortages of cash. The result: employers steadily reduced the rates they paid their hands and often avoided paying them at all for as long as possible. To middle-class reformers, the great villain of the system was the contractor himself, the “sweater,” the “reposeless sharper and shaver,” who in league with the cruel landlord fed greedily on the labor of poor women and degraded journeymen. But the contractors and manufacturers had little choice in the matter, as they tried to underbid their competitors and survive on a wafer-thin margin of credit. “If they were all the purest of philanthropists,” the Tribune admitted in 1845, “they could not raise the wages of their seamstresses to anything like a living price.” Hounded by their creditors, hunted by the specter of late payment and bankruptcy, the contractors and garret masters lived an existence in which concern for one’s workers was a liability and in which callousness (and, in some recorded cases, outright cruelty) became a way of life. Some were not above underhanded tricks to earn the extra dollar (the most widespread complaints concerned contractors who withheld wages on the pretense that an outworker’s handiwork was not of the proper quality); all maintained their independence from the only source available to them, the underpaid labor of the outworkers and garret hands.

The sufferings of the outwork and garret-shop hands—the vast majority of clothing-trade workers—taxed the imaginations of even the most sentimental American Victorians; if the reformers’ accounts sometimes reduced a complex situation to a moral fable, they in no way falsified the clothing workers’ conditions. All pretensions to craft vanished in the outwork system; with the availability of so much cheap wage labor, formal apprenticeship and a regular price book had disappeared by 1845. At any given moment in the 1830s and 1840s, the underbidding in the contracting network could depress outwork and garret-shop piece rates so low that stitchers had to work up to sixteen hours a day to maintain the meanest of living standards; in 1850, some of the largest southern-trade clothing firms in the Second Ward paid their male workers, on the average, well below subsistence wages. Housing was difficult to come by and could amount to no more than a cellar dwelling or a two-room flat, shared with two or more families; single men crammed into outwork boardinghouses. During slack seasons or at a bad turn in trade, the clothing workers struggled harder to make ends meet, with a combination of odd jobs, charity relief, and the starchiest kinds of cheap food. Poor journeymen tailors had little recourse but to sweat themselves and their families or, if they were single, to strike informal arrangements with girls and widows to work beside them, while they handled the negotiations with the head cutters or contractors: as a German immigrant later recalled, one
New York adage from the 1850s ran, "A tailor is worth nothing without a wife and very often a child." The seamstresses and tailors' wives — consigned the most wearisome work (shirt sewing worst of all) and subjected to the bullying and occasional sexual abuse of the contractors — bore the most blatant exploitation; the men, working either as petty contractors or the paterfamilias of the family shops, enjoyed, by comparison, a measure of independence — but only that, as unionists noted in the 1850s. By themselves, such conditions were difficult; they were aggravated by the tendency for outwork and garret-shop wages to diminish further as workers tried to increase their earnings by intensifying their labor and by taking on larger lots of work, thus causing short-term gluts in the labor market and still lower piece rates — what Mayhew elaborated as the principle that "overwork makes for underpayment." Even more, the rise of the ready-mades accentuated the seasonal fluctuations in labor demand. In April and October, when manufacturers prepared for the spring and fall sales seasons, regular work was relatively plentiful; for the rest of the year, as much as two-thirds of the clothiers' work force had to string together temporary work in an already overstocked labor market.

Life for most New York shoeworkers was no better. Like clothing production, the boot-and-shoe trade changed dramatically with the expansion of the city's trade contacts and the wholesalers' pursuit of markets. By 1829, four major footwear jobbers had opened in Manhattan; by 1850, the number had increased tenfold. The most enterprising major concerns kept pace with the clothing dealers and extended their inland markets southward to Alabama and as far west as Texas. Unlike the clothiers, however, New York firms never took the national lead in the production of respectable ready-mades: most either relied on established firms in shoemaking capitals like Lynn or Haverhill or hired their own workers in outlying towns, where, the Tribune reported in 1845, "the workmen can live for almost half the sum it costs our city mechanics." What remained in New York, apart from a busy custom trade, was repair work, ladies' shoemaking, bootmaking and production of the cheapest lines of shoes, either for government military contractors or for wholesale exporters in the southern trade. The shoemakers were left either to what the English writer Joseph Sparkes Hall called "the cheapening system" or to an endless competition for custom orders.

The transforming effects of credit, competition, and mercantile sponsor-ship were dramatized in one of the trade's success stories, the rise of John Burke. Burke, an Irishman, had learned the shoemakers' craft in Dublin, where he also dabbled in radical, anti-British politics. Disgusted with famine conditions and with Ireland's inability to break British rule, he determined to try his fortune in "the Great Republic," and in 1847 he arrived in New York. Having landed jobs in the leather-cutting rooms of some of the best custom shops, Burke quickly learned that the New York trade was very different from the Irish: to earn his competence, he would have to curry favor and credit from his employers' customers. The erstwhile radical craftsman became an entrepreneur. Within two years of his arrival, he proudly reported that "all the customers were my friends"; by 1852, thanks to a timely loan from Moses Beach, the editor and chronicler of the city's mercantile fortunes, Burke opened his own shop. Over the next ten years, Burke expanded his business (eventually buying out one of his former employers, an event he noted with blustering pride) and with Beach's backing eventually began to "gain first place in the shoe trade." He readily admitted that without the help of his "good friends," his life would have remained "a fight against mishaps, disappointments, and adversity." For the thousands of journeymen who lacked Burke's combination of skills, contacts, and charm, such a life of adversity was unavoidable: those who would gain their independence had little choice but to become contractors, to be stigmatized as "the greatest tyrants in the entire trade," in a competitive shoemakers' world where, as Hall remarked, "money bulk and not money worth becomes the only standard of business."

The division of labor in boot- and shoemaking followed the same general pattern as in the clothing trade. Work in the custom shops and in the shops of the ladies' shoemakers and the bootmakers was divided into the very few skilled cutting chores (handled by men like Burke) and the simpler, more repetitive tasks of the crimper, fitter, and bottomers. Most journeymen could expect to earn at best six dollars per week from the easier work; to supplement their incomes, they completed an array of ornamental "extras," the most time-consuming and exacting chores in the better branches of the trade. In the shops, apprenticeship, in decline even before 1825, was reported "pretty much done away with" by 1845. Outside of the shops, the demands of garret work and outwork led the Tribune to reckon in 1845 that no class of mechanics averaged so great an amount of work for so little money as the journeymen shoemakers. Chronic unemployment and underemployment were even more severe in shoemaking than in tailoring, leaving the jour- neymen to labor at a breakneck pace whenever work came their way. Family-shop arrangements . . . became ever more common:

We have been in some fifty cellars in different parts of the city [the Tribune reported], each inhabited by a Shoe-maker and his family. The floor is made of rough plank laid loosely down, and the ceiling is not quite so high as a tall man. The walls are dark and damp and a wide desolate fireplace yawns at the center to the right of the entrance. There is no outlet back, and of course no yard privileges of any kind. The miserable room is lighted only by a shallow sash, partly projecting above the surface of the ground, and by the little light that struggles down from the steep and rotting stairs. In this apartment often live the man and his work bench, his wife, and five or six children of all ages; and perhaps a pauperized grandfather and grandmother and often both . . . Here they work, here they cook, they eat, they sleep, they pray . . .

Outwork binders, almost all of them women, were placed in backstairs chambers, where they worked from before sunrise until after sundown for piece rates that brought in as little as fifty cents a day. Small masters, in a losing battle against the wholesalers and the Lynn trade, made the cheapest grade of shoes and survived, the Tribune claimed in 1845, on "the chance job of gentlemen's or children's mending brought in by the rich people above the neighborhood who are not celebrated for paying a poor cobbler high prices."
Sweating assumed different forms and took slightly longer to develop in the furniture trades. The shift began in about 1830, when the larger master furniture makers, hoping to reduce their wage bills and circumvent the existing price books, solicited British and European artisans to emigrate to New York. Within five years, hundreds of cabinetmakers had settled in Manhattan, many of them Germans from declining craft towns, creating the oversupply of hands the masters wanted; one English cabinetmaker, upon his arrival in Manhattan in 1834, was advised to leave the overcrowded city as soon as he could, since steady furniture work was hard to find. In their search for cheap labor, however, the masters also undercut their own position, as some of the Germans began entering the business for themselves and managed to undersell the established firms by hiring other Germans at low wages. Small German shops soon dotted the shores of the Hudson and East rivers, producing inexpensive goods for the wholesalers and paying piece rates well below those expected by native-born journeymen. In response, the established masters ... turned out cheaper lines (so-called butcher furniture) and cut some of their journeymen's wages accordingly, which only led the furniture jobbers to order more goods from the small garret shops. By the early 1840s, garret contracting operations had inundated the trades; agents prowled the city's wharves looking for immigrants to steer to the cheap shops. Furniture making, though immune to the usual forms of outwork, became a sweating contract trade.

The majority of furniture workers divided into a small elite corps of custom workmen and the contract suppliers to the wholesalers and retailers. First-rate hands continued to turn and fashion elegant designs ... and earned as much as fifteen dollars for a sixty-hour week, but by the mid-1840s such work was scarce, open to fewer than one in twenty furniture employees. Apprenticeship continued, although by one investigator's estimate in 1853, not one in fifty cabinetmakers was an apprentice; those who remained were taken on for periods of two to four years, a span the Herald claimed "those who have had an experience in the trade say is almost impossible to obtain a complete practical knowledge of it. The "second-class' or "botch' workers labored at restricted, repetitive tasks, either in the larger manufactories along the Hudson or in the colonies of cabinetmaking garret shops on the Lower East Side, places where, as the cabinetmaker Ernest Hagen remembered, the work was strictly divided and masters "generally made a specialty of one piece only." Their plight, as reported in the Herald, was quite similar to that of the tailors, as intense competition between contractors and small masters led to a system of underbidding "in which the contending parties seem to lose all sense of honor or justice." By 1850 the furniture journeymen complained that most furniture workers could not expect to earn as much as "the common standard prices paid to hod carriers and sewer-diggers, little better than starving prices."

Tailoring, shoemaking, and furniture making were the most dramatic examples of consumer finishing trades beset by similar problems. In others——hat and bonnet making, umbrella making, and many more—one form or another of piecework, outwork, and sweating arose between 1825 and 1850; in still others, such as cigarmaking, the full force of the bastardization of craft would be felt within a generation. In all of them, we confront, in the most extreme way, the divided legacy of early-nineteenth-century capitalist growth. There can be little question that the transformation of New York consumer finishing improved material life for millions of Americans, in the form of cheaper clothes, cheaper shoes, and cheaper furniture, in greater quantities (and of higher quality) than ever before. For those at the very bottom of the outwork network——especially, after 1845, the famine-ravaged Irish——even work in the sweatshops and outwork cellars and the driven life of a petty contractor were preferable to rural disaster and, for some, starvation; for the fortunate few like John Burke, it was still possible to expect to earn, by one means or another, an independent estate. But none of this alters what was the harsh truth in the sweat trades——that the cost of productivity, of salvation from agrarian calamity, and of opportunity for some was the collapse of the crafts and their replacement with a network of competition, underbidding, and undisguised exploitation—all in a city where the mercantile elite and the more successful manufacturers accumulated some of the greatest fortunes in America. These changes were invisible to most customers and chroniclers, hidden from view in the back-room cutters' bureaus and in the out-workers' cellars. To upper- and middle-class New York, the onset of metropolitan industrialization appeared mainly as a dazzling cauldron of new commodities, "suited to every market." To the craft workers, it was the intensity of labor, the underpayment, and the subordination to the rule of another that was most apparent. Above all else, it was the very transparency of exploitation, the self-evident inequalities of power and material expectations at every level of production, that made the sweated consumer finishing trades the most degraded crafts in New York.

It would also make these trades the most troubled of all during the city's labor upheavals after 1825.

Working-Class Youth: The Gals and Boys of the Bowery
CHRISTINE STANSELL

Between the founding of the republic and the Civil War, a new conception of womanhood took shape in America, prominently in Northeastern towns and cities. Within the propertied classes, women constituted themselves the moral guardians of their families and their nation, offsetting some of the inherent liabilities of their sex. Laboring women were less fortunate: The domestic ideals from which their prosperous sisters profited did little to lighten the oppressions of sex and class they suffered. They were also more troublesome, since their actions——indeed, their very existence as impoverished female workers——violated some of the dearest held genteel precepts of "woman's nature" and "woman's place."

Glancing at the history books, it is difficult at first to discern those