Byington, *Households of a Mill Town* (1910)
Rosen, “Causes of Prostitution”
Boris, *Home to Work*

Study Questions

This is a rich set of readings that tells us a great deal about the working lives of poor American women in the early twentieth century. Byington’s account is a primary source, her contribution to the important Pittsburgh Survey of 1907, a landmark in the history of social investigation as a method of urban reform. Centering on the impact of life in Homestead on steel workers’ families, she helps to shift the welfare of families from the realm of private life to the public sphere. This text can be fruitfully compared with the account of family life in the stock yards district of Chicago. Boris tells us about the lives of women in the sweated “home work” trades, and Rosen turns her gaze on the illicit traffic in sex that converted women’s bodies to a marketable commodity.

**Byington**
1. What can you tell about Margaret Byington?
   - What was her special assignment for the Survey, and how did it relate to the American ideals described by Croly in *Promise of American Life*?
   - What did she try to find out? What sources and methods did she use?
   - Was her study well done?

2. What was the significance of studying Homestead, PA? Was this an important place to look at in 1907? Why?

3. What did Byington conclude about
   a. impact of wages levels and the organization of work on workers’ lives and community
   b. causes of, and blame for poverty (whose agency?)
   c. extent there were options open to workers
   d. impact of industry on the physical and social environment

4. How does Byington’s Mill Town (Homestead) compare with Barrett’s Packingtown (Chicago)?

**Rosen**
1. Why did very young (late teens-early 20s) women in the early 20th century US become prostitutes, according to Rosen’s account? What explanations from the time does she reject? Which does she find most defensible?
2. How does Rosen’s analysis of the reasons girls entered prostitution link up to what you have read about department store work? work in the needle trades? working class family wages in general? Can we simply say that poverty caused prostitution? Do we have to include other factors besides low wages in the reasons?

3. Was prostitution entirely an economic thing? Did higher wage women workers become prostitutes? Did women sell sex because of the double sexual standard? Why else? Can we link the sale of sex to the cultivation of desire that Leach described? with the disadvantages of class faced by working class women? Was the desire merely for “stuff?” Did it have something to do with definitions of success? Were some prostitutes female Horatio Alger?

4. Were there psychological reasons as well? Even ideological ones?

5. Why were progressives in the early 20th c. so obsessed with prostitution?

**Boris (now in UCSB’s Women’s Studies Program)**

1. Professor Boris’s account of reformers’ efforts to institute a family wage (defined here as one that gives the breadwinner income enough to support the family without the labor of wife and young children) is one concrete example of an attempt to fulfill H. C. Adams’s goal of setting a higher moral level of competition by placing a floor under wages. In part because the problem was so big (250,000 homeworkers in New York in 1910!), this case adds complexity, however, in that reformers did not all agree on how to reform the industry. What different methods did the National Consumers League and the Women’s Trade Union League try using to achieve this goal? To what extent did they recognize the economics that drove the sweatshop system?

2. How does Boris define the membership and goals of the National Consumers’ League? What does Boris mean when she says that the “chasm of class separated those who strove to relieve the burdens of working-class motherhood from the mothers of the tenements(reader 247).” Does she think that the largely professional middle class reformers attempted to impose its image of the ideal family on the working poor of their day? What was that image? How did it conflict with the image held by the tenement “home workers” of Italian descent who made up the largest group of workers in the sweated needle trades of New York? What does it mean to say that the home was “contested terrain?”

3. Boris’s narrative and notes show how important social investigation and documentary photography were in building awareness of the evils of the industrial homework system. What did these methods achieve?

4. What more was needed—on the legal front—to end the tenement system?