

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "AMERICA WAS PROMISES": THE IDEOLOGY OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, 1877-1905

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“America was Promises’: The Ideology of Equal Opportunity, 1877-1905” seeks to untangle one of the enduring ideas in American history—equal economic opportunity—by exploring the varied discourses about its meaning during the upheavals caused by the corporate consolidation of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In so doing, a new framework is proposed through which to comprehend the social and political disruptions wrought by the transition from an entrepreneurial to a corporate society.

This framework centers on a series of tensions that have permeated the idea of opportunity in the American context. As an expression of capitalism, the ideology of equal opportunity historically occupies conflicted terrain as it endeavors to promote upward mobility by permitting more people to participate in the economic sphere and emphasizing merit over inherited wealth, while it concurrently acts as a mechanism to maintain economic inequality. This tension allowed the rhetoric of opportunity to

animate social dissent among rural and urban workers—the origins of Progressive reform—even as it simultaneously served efforts by business elites to temper this dissent.

The dissertation examines the discourses about the ideology of equal opportunity of prominent figures and groups located along a spectrum of political belief. Some grounded opportunity in land ownership (Booker T. Washington); others defined it as control of one's own labor (Knights of Labor); while others connected opportunity to increased leisure and consumption (Samuel Gompers and business elites). As this occurred, the site of opportunity shifted away from entrepreneurship toward competition for advancement and investment within the corporation. Most social activists and reformers stressed the conditions necessary for equal opportunity to thrive. They thus reinforced assumptions about the benefits of economic competition and differentially rewarding individuals, even as they objected to the results of that system. And, certainly, some of these arguments led to progressive changes. But because the necessary outcome of equal opportunity was an inequality of economic result, to move beyond the boundaries of equal opportunity ideology demanded a rare willingness (Edward Bellamy) to question the system of economic competition itself.

“AMERICA WAS PROMISES”: THE IDEOLOGY OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY,  
1877-1905

By

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Though I arrived at the University of Maryland with a vague idea about a dissertation on the ideology of equal opportunity, it took a patient guide to contain the

breadth of my initial inclinations and redirect them to more manageable limits in a way that still allowed me to say what I wanted and without dampening my enthusiasm for the topic or for history. Gary Gerstle managed to do this while also encouraging me to think more deeply and with greater clarity about my work. While we may not always agree, I am certain that the end product benefited from his insistence that I continue to challenge myself just a bit more. My other committee members proved to be cogent readers and supportive presences throughout the many ups and downs of finishing a dissertation. Ira Berlin and Mary Corbin Sies offered provocative critiques and Saverio Giovacchini and Barbara Weinstein took an interest not only in the dissertation, which entailed reading multiple chapter drafts, but also in me, for which I am grateful.

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## INTRODUCTION

Equal economic opportunity has occupied a central place through much of American history and formed a core component of the nation's sense of its self: an equal chance, a level playing field, a fair race. Yet it is an idea that, on reflection, is more complex than a simple series of phrases, especially in those moments when it functioned less as a description of economic conditions and more as a political doctrine.<sup>1</sup> The ideology of equal opportunity stands as a set of beliefs, upon which people act, about how best to structure economic relations and, following this, social and political relations. Thus ideology is materially represented through conduct that has historical consequences. Life as a race becomes the defining metaphor of the national economic order, where society is a marketplace and the chance to compete the singular achievement of American social structure.<sup>2</sup> And success in this competitive marketplace garners political influence.

Celebrants of equal opportunity maintain that the nation's capacity to absorb ever-greater numbers of people into the orbit of upward social mobility has meant an absence of entrenched class conflict and its attendant social troubles. In this view, American history has been witness to a broadening of opportunity's inclusiveness as a means to

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<sup>1</sup> As Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin have noted, "Americanism . . . has been rooted less in shared culture than in shared political ideals." "Introduction," in *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, ed. Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Kramnick, "Equal Opportunity as 'The Race of Life,'" *Dissent* (Spring 1981): 178-87. Equal opportunity helps to extend the marketplace mentality to all spheres of life and, thus, implies that hierarchy is not the antithesis of democracy. Rather, through the establishment of fair means to determine a meritorious ranking it becomes the fulfillment of a democratic order. John H. Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond," in *Equality*, ed. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman (New York: Atherton Press, 1967), 228-49. See also Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) for an extended discussion about the process by which, what Frank terms, "market populism" became culturally predominant in the late-twentieth century, partially through the assertion of a connection between markets and democracy.

rectify past exclusions. Born of a desire to eradicate aristocratic privilege and to identify non-theological explanations for human behavior, equal opportunity is “a doctrine originally designed to serve the class interests of the talented ‘have-nots’ against the untalented ‘haves.’”<sup>3</sup> At its conception, it represented a socially progressive view that rewarded individual merit over inherited wealth and privilege. Perpetually scarce economic resources would now be allocated through free and fair market competition, rather than birthright.

A free market that encouraged competition and distributed material goods according to merit would increase the chances for upward mobility. An unregulated economic sphere comprised of small-scale buyers and sellers aimed to reward individual initiative and hard work and relied on the fantasy that everyone can potentially “win.” One was no longer destined to endlessly relive the working lives of one’s parents.

But equal opportunity also serves as a mechanism through which to judge and legitimate “natural” inequalities. Here equal opportunity reveals an internal tension between an inclusive principle that aims to reduce inequality by rewarding merit and a hierarchical one that aims to promote inequality through fair competition.<sup>4</sup> Further, the

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<sup>3</sup> Kramnick, “Equal Opportunity and ‘The Race of Life,’” 184.

<sup>4</sup> Political scientists, sociologists, and philosophers have all attempted to reconcile this inherent contradiction in the ideology of equal opportunity and have devised various schemes to retain hold of merit as the means to allocate scarce resources while also alleviating the inevitable unequal social outcomes of such a system. Thus the list of those goods and services that should not be distributed through competitive equal opportunity—education, healthcare—continues to grow, as does the list of criteria—age, race, religion, sex, ethnicity, sexual orientation—that should not factor into the competition itself. The result is a series of complex intellectual machinations that strive to retain individual rights while mitigating the economic outcomes of a system built on that very foundation. These efforts may, however, reveal something about the reform possibilities of equal opportunity. See, for example, Lesley A. Jacobs, *Pursuing Equal Opportunities: The Theory and Practice of Egalitarian Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Dennis E. Mithaug, *Equal Opportunity Theory* (London: SAGE Publishers, 1996); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971); and Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

ideology of equal opportunity formed in relation to one set of productive arrangements (small-scale, competitive capitalism) that was, by the late-nineteenth century, applied to quite different productive arrangements (concentrated capital), a circumstance that revealed a disjunction between economic conditions and economic values. During the Gilded Age, then, these tensions allowed this ideology to both instigate social unrest and to mitigate the very challenge posed by such conflict.

The history of ideas, as Daniel Rodgers noted, becomes most interesting when fact and ideology meet, and therein resides the greatest possibility for social change.<sup>5</sup> The Gilded Age was just such a moment. Entrenched ideas rooted in a celebration of free market competition confronted new economic conditions that tended toward consolidations of wealth, and which undermined economic competition and its presumed benefits. The economic traumas of the late-nineteenth century combined a transformation in the size, scope, and nature of production, as industrial enterprise took hold, with a shift to a permanent wage labor force. And these changes, along with their associated disparities in the distribution of wealth, prompted acute responses. Membership in labor unions increased, strikes and industrial violence spread, socialist and anarchist adherents organized, and legislative remedies were sought to curtail the pervasive reach of monopolies.

Amid these altered economic realities, the discourse about equal opportunity was ubiquitous, attesting to the power and appeal of this rhetoric. But what did the prevalence of this discourse mean? As relations between labor and capital shifted during industrialization, how did people struggle to resolve the discrepancy between the

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), xii.

promises of entrepreneurial opportunity and the realities of increased concentrations of wealth that narrowed the market where opportunity purportedly existed? How did the tensions within the ideology of equal opportunity, between its progressive tendency to reward merit and its retrogressive tendency to uphold economic inequality, shape the responses of those trying to reconcile the disparity between promise and reality? What conditions did various people insist be met for the realization of opportunity? If “America was promises,” the economic and social transformations of the late-nineteenth century prompted intense contestation over the meaning of these promises and the social conditions required for their achievement.

The reactions of many Gilded Age protestors centered on varied understandings about the very site of equal opportunity and the social and economic circumstances required for its fair expression. Reformers shared the assumptions embedded in the ideology of opportunity about the benefits of economic competition and differentially rewarding individuals, even as they objected to the results of that system. Efforts focused on expanding the base of what constituted just competition. Some rooted opportunity in land ownership, others in controlling their own labor, and still others in increased leisure and consumption. An examination of historical actors who proffered diverse ideas about how to reconcile the ideology of equal opportunity to the changed economic conditions of the Gilded Age illuminates the complexity of this ideology as it interacted with altered material realities. Though centered on individuals, this dissertation does not offer a traditional biography concerned with the entirety of a particular life. Instead, it aims to examine the resulting tensions of the interplay between the ideas, values, and beliefs of these people and the larger historical circumstances in which they lived. The individuals

and organizations included in this study used their platforms as nationally recognized leaders to present well developed arguments that not only employed the rhetoric of opportunity but also critiqued elements of the ideology of equal opportunity in a manner that reveals its complexities, intricacies, and pervasiveness, and, finally, how it was changing.

In a post-reconstruction South hostile to the advancement of blacks, a majority of whom struggled under the perpetual debts of the crop-lien system, Booker T. Washington identified opportunity with land ownership as the key to economic and political independence. Washington sought to use the prevalent values of individual economic mobility to affect race relations, and in the process demand for blacks the political power that came with economic independence. In this way he used the ideology of equal opportunity simultaneously to offer a trenchant critique of the relationship between political and economic power while also adhering to dominant capitalist values.

The Knights of Labor, led by Terence Powderly, associated opportunity with controlling one's labor. Powderly used producerist ideals to galvanize workers to claim the promises of economic opportunity. Meaningful opportunity for Powderly meant recognizing wage labor as a temporary condition on the road to self-proprietorship and economic independence. This disdain for wage labor prompted the Knights to promote economic cooperatives, but even as they did so they retained the idea, embedded in the ideology of equal opportunity, of rewarding individual merit: income depended on one's labor contribution. Someone who labored more would earn more. The Knights' cooperatives, then, would produce their own internal systems of economic stratification. Samuel Gompers, as president of the American Federation Labor, emerges as a

transitional figure who in the face of consolidating business interests, abandoned producerism and demanded for workers higher wages and shorter hours in pursuit of an understanding of equal opportunity centered on increased leisure and consumption. While Gompers effectively challenged the status quo in regard to the conditions required for opportunity to exist, he never challenged the inequalities inherent in the ideology of equal opportunity.

Gompers' use of equal opportunity ideology facilitated labor's accommodation to an increasingly corporate economy that ground citizenship not in productive property but in one's capacity to consume. Nonetheless, individuals like Gompers, though bound by attachment to economic competition, worked to achieve conditions that would make opportunity operative and railed against prevalent economic policies. In so doing they offered a social analysis that contained a disruptive potential. By demanding that an expanding minimum level of social conditions be met prior to the advent of "fair" competition they effectively used the rhetoric of equal opportunity to advance reform.

These demands and protests compelled a response from business elites. The National Civic Federation, with Gompers as Vice-Chair, accepted organized labor and capital as historical facts. The National Association of Manufacturers accepted organized capital but vociferously opposed organized labor. Both ultimately relinquished the idea of the independent businessman as the embodiment of equal opportunity, replacing him with the figure of the salaried employee able to rise within the corporation. This replacement required finding a place for the ideology of equal opportunity in a corporate structure that appeared seemingly antithetical to it. Economic competition and the chance for upward mobility persisted within a cooperatively managed business system,

creating yet a new set of tensions. Equal opportunity, in other words, was reconstituted in the age of the corporation in a manner that maintained its essential core while accommodating new economic circumstances.

The protagonists in this story struggled to bridge the distance between the promises of opportunity for upward social mobility and economic conditions that belied these promises, all within the constraints inherent to equal opportunity ideology itself. People adhered to economic ideas that failed to describe the reality in which they lived and labored, a circumstance that shaped their responses and actions. A more fundamental critique and reshaping of opportunity would come from those prepared to abandon economic competition altogether. Edward Bellamy, through his advocacy of equal wages and his proposed end to economic competition, escaped the contradictions that constrained the others under consideration. He divorced income from labor. This separation allowed Bellamy to develop a notion of opportunity that derived from an understanding of humans as not solely economically-driven but as endowed with a more expansive sense of capacities, needs, and desires.

The story told of America's second industrial revolution often begins with the formal close of Reconstruction and the brokered deal to install Rutherford B. Hayes as president in exchange for his agreement to withdraw federal troops from former Confederate states. The year 1877 also marked the official end to the recession that had plagued the country for the previous four years and the Great Railroad Strikes, the first-ever national strikes by workers and a portent of the intense labor struggles of the ensuing



decades. By 1877, the turmoil that so characterized the post-bellum period over how to reunite a nation torn by civil war had abated, and the complex negotiations between the North and the South were supplanted by issues arising from an explosive industrialism: economic depressions, unrest among farmers, and conflicts between labor and capital.<sup>6</sup>

The precise chronological boundaries of the Gilded Age, an appellation that owes its origins to a novel of the same name by Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain, have often been defined vaguely. While either the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865 or the official close of Reconstruction provides a relatively concrete beginning date, the “end” of the Gilded Age and the “beginning” of the Progressive Era have proved more elusive for historians. Part of this difficulty stems from the tendency to sharply divide the Gilded Age, a time of intense industrial change and social disruption, from that of Progressivism, which witnessed organized efforts to institute reform. As Rebecca Edwards has noted, however, this dichotomy diminishes the commonalities across the two eras and minimizes the impact on later years of ideas developed and refined between 1877 and 1905.<sup>7</sup>

Many historians who write about the Gilded Age do so to provide a backdrop for the discussion that most interests them: Progressivism.<sup>8</sup> In such accounts the Gilded Age appears merely as a prelude to the events and ideas associated with Progressivism.

Recent work by Nancy Cohen grounds in the late-nineteenth century Progressive Era

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); and Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967).

ideas about the need for an administrative state that upholds the corporate structure in the name of protecting individual liberty. Following that effort, this dissertation identifies the Gilded Age itself as a moment of tension, change, and significance.<sup>9</sup> By the early twentieth century many social reformers, activists, and business elites had reached fundamental agreements about how to accommodate the disruptions engendered by industrialization. Specifically, they had re-conceptualized the meaning of equal opportunity in a way that left intact the basic structures of economic power. The Progressive Era, then, witnessed the implementation of these agreements.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> While sympathetic to Cohen's arguments that the Progressive Era reconciliation of a corporate economy to the ideals of democracy was rooted in the Gilded Age, her equation of liberalism with equality is problematic. Liberalism is counter to equality. Cohen is also committed to challenging an older view that postulated a clear division between the "bad" liberals of the Gilded Age, who supported laissez-faire, and the "good" liberals of the Progressive Era, but she does so by denying the classical liberal orientation of laissez-faire supporters, which is less convincing. Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). On the shift from viewing liberty as the absence of government intervention to viewing the state as its protector and, thus, obligated to establish the conditions for equal opportunity to maintain social order see Michael Kammen, *Spheres of Liberty: Changing Perceptions of Liberty in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Early historiography on the Gilded Age concentrated on prominent individuals, whether social reformers or business leaders. Accounts of businessmen often depicted power-hungry people determined to advance the interests of property over those of society. (A recent trend in a quite opposite direction is the study of failure as a means to challenge the triumphant narratives of economic success often associated with individually-driven stories.) Alfred Chandler moved beyond this singular attention to individuals and focused on the internal organization of corporations. Chandler characterized upwardly mobile business workers as the "visible hands" that managed the corporation and played a role in the creation of the very middle-class they aspired to join. In reaction to this arose work that understood the emergence of the corporation as a political, cultural, and social institution. Alan Trachtenberg used the phrase "incorporation" to evoke the capacity for changes in the mode of production to affect social and cultural relationships throughout society. James Livingston, using a flexible definition of capitalism, has suggested that in the transition to a corporate economy, with its salaried managers and large bureaucratic entities dedicated to regulating markets, production was socialized in a manner that "peacefully co-exists" with capitalism. Arguing against the grain, Gabriel Kolko asserted that business competition actually increased at the turn of the twentieth century and, in contrast to Chandler, claimed that the inefficiency of corporations and their failure to control large economic swings drove them to embrace government regulation, a phenomenon he called "political capitalism." Thus the health of the nation became equated with that of the corporation. Other historians who share a sense of the cultural dominance of the corporation have drawn different conclusions. James Weinstein presented a capture thesis—that government regulation, hailed by reformers as a means to blunt capitalist excess, became the vehicle through which business elites successfully controlled the political economy without appearing to do so and, thereby, captured dissent itself. Martin Sklar maintained that the transition to a corporate economy was not inevitable, but contingent, and that corporate leaders did not operate without obstruction but, rather, were

The large-scale manufacturing that dominated the Gilded Age economy was made possible by a confluence of technological advancements, vast natural resources, advances in transportation, an expanding national market, and an influx of immigrant labor. Industrialization did not, however, usher in an era of quiet complacency, nor did it occur without significant disruption or resistance. New regional alignments pitted the interests of northeastern manufacturing against the agriculturally based Midwest and South. Older modes of small-scale entrepreneurial production continued to exist during this era of transition, which prompted stresses within the business community.<sup>11</sup> And while Reconstruction did assert the primacy of self-ownership and competition in the marketplace as the marker of freedom (rather than propertied independence) these issues were in no way settled by 1877.<sup>12</sup> Battles arose within the industrial sector itself between labor and capital, prompting some of the most violent labor struggles in American history.

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forced to accommodate dissenting groups. He did, however, agree that corporatism (as an economic and social system dedicated to administered markets and economic concentration) came to pervade social relations. By the turn of the century, Sklar asserted, no substantive organized effort existed that argued for a return to an older competitive economy, whatever the rhetoric. Matthew Jacobsen, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934); John G. Sproat, *"The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977); See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982); James Livingston, "War and the Intellectuals: Bourne, Dewey, and the Fate of Pragmatism," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2 (October 2003): 435; Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Re-Interpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press, 1963); James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); Martin Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism 1890-1916: The Market, the Law and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Schneirov, "Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873-1898," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5 (July 2006): 189-224. Schneirov argues that capital accumulation was one of the most important distinctions among economic systems during this era of transition.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation," *The Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994): 459-60.

For many years historians have waged their own battles over how best to understand the place of conflict within the national narrative. In reaction to the dominant strand of consensus historiography prominent in the 1950s that denied the significance of class conflict as a compelling force in American history, scholars with roots in 1960s activism have elucidated the extent to which conflict best defines American history. These historians abandoned the view that America has been essentially Lockean, strongly bound to notions of private property, and composed of citizens who have historically lacked a meaningful class consciousness. In its place they have identified an America populated with active historical agents acutely aware of their class position and its role in their social engagement. A story of conflict replaced that of consensus. In narrating American history from the bottom up, the new social history argued that the tale indeed looked different from below. By including the voices of those previously either absent from or peripheral to the national narrative, these historians broadened the scope of scholarship and worked to understand the important place of racial and ethnic minorities, women, and the working class.

These historiographic trends were especially influential within labor studies, which witnessed a shift from institutional history to the “new labor history.” Partially animated by the intellectual milieu of consensus historiography, the institutional approach, most closely associated with Selig Perlman, John Commons, and their students at the University of Wisconsin, focused primarily on labor leaders and the history of labor organizations. Such an orientation led to a concern with the success of trade unionism and efforts to secure higher wages and shorter working hours within the existing economic system, rather than with more radical tendencies that challenged the

foundations of capitalist ideology. The lack of attention to class conflict emerged, most famously, in Werner Sombart's question: Why is there no socialism in the United States? Under the guise of the new social history, labor historians in the 1970s and 1980s began to move beyond organizational histories to capture the voices, concerns, activities, and non-working lives of workers themselves.<sup>13</sup> Doing so helped to identify more radical strands within the labor movement, including socialism (an answer, at least partially, to Sombart's question), to highlight disagreements between labor leaders and rank-and-file members, to understand the place of racial and ethnic minorities and women in the story of labor, and to give union members (and workers outside unions), rather than leaders, a greater role in the unfolding narrative.<sup>14</sup> The social historical challenge to consensus historiography brought welcome complications about the political and economic tensions that comprise American history.

But despite these important correctives to historical scholarship, the work of consensus historians continues to offer an important reminder about the power of a widely accepted ideology in shaping the political and economic landscape. One must delineate between two kinds of consensus historians: those who minimized the relevance of ideology altogether in the American experience and those who identified a dominant ideology. Some consensus historians, notably Daniel Boorstin, characterized the

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<sup>13</sup> This shift within American labor history depended in great measure on the influence of E. P. Thompson, who reoriented the historian's focus from the history of union organization to the history of the working class itself and encouraged considerations of class and class consciousness as non-static entities that were continually made and remade in response to changing economic, political, and social realities. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: V. Gollancz, 1963).

<sup>14</sup> Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976); David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

American experience as a continual and pragmatic adaptation to changing circumstances.<sup>15</sup> In reaction to the conflict-oriented analyses associated with early Progressive history, and in recoil from fascism and communism, ideology itself became suspect. Out of this post-Progressive intellectual milieu reemerged a form of American exceptionalism in historical scholarship that associated the country's political and economic triumph with a non-ideological pragmatism. The United States, according to this view, successfully avoided the deep-seated ideological (class) conflicts that afflicted European nations. In this narrative, American history is best understood as the unfolding of a nation bound for greatness, led by practical people concerned mostly with achieving economic security. In the process, they created a free and prosperous society.<sup>16</sup>

However, not all scholars aligned with consensus told a tale of triumph.<sup>17</sup> In his influential *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Louis Hartz maintained that a lack of a feudal past in the United States allowed classical liberalism and capitalism to arise together unimpeded by older class conflicts. Hartz identified a national history profoundly informed by Lockean values of liberty, economic individualism, and property rights where power was dispersed through a system of checks and balances and the economically successful had proved themselves most rational and thus, most fit to rule. All classes embraced these fundamental ideas, according to Hartz, thus preventing class-based conflicts from taking root and creating a society wherein nearly all political debates

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).

<sup>16</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>17</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955); and Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1976).

occurred within a set of shared agreements. Richard Hofstadter, also considered a consensus historian, lamented the philosophy of economic individualism that bound Americans to the values of competitive capitalism from the founding through Franklin Roosevelt. This version of consensus history did not deny class; rather, it questioned the depth of class consciousness. Most social unrest, in Hofstadter's interpretation, came from the displacement of members of the middle and upper-middle classes by new social elites. Reform efforts, then, often emerged from members of the new middle-class or from those once expectant capitalists who now resisted the power of new social elites.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, Cal Jillson promulgated what might be termed a “modified consensus” approach to understand the broader patterns of United States history. Jillson identified the “American Dream”—defined as “an America that offers citizens and immigrants a better chance to thrive and prosper than any other nation on earth”—as the animating theme of the nation's history.<sup>19</sup> Jillson carefully noted that he did not intend for his identification of opportunity as the basis of a national narrative to veer into triumphal celebration or to deny the place of conflict. In fact, the struggles of those who fought to be included in this national promise fill the books pages. However, his chronicle of American history tells the story, ultimately, of a contested yet progressively expanding opportunity. More importantly, Jillson fails to consider fully the idea of opportunity itself—its inherent contradictions, the implications of building “progressive”

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), xii.

social movements on the same foundation as that of the status quo, or how its meaning was modified to temper possible critiques.<sup>20</sup>

By building on important new scholarship that emerged from social history, it may be possible to posit a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis that still depends on the notion of dominant ideological strands even as it more fully recognizes the impact of social tensions on modifying that ideology. To acknowledge that conflict within systemic parameters affects those very borders does not require abandoning the notion of historically broad, powerful, and “consensual” ideological forces. Exploration of the history of a political idea and its associated rhetoric provides insight into the influence of dominant ideologies and how their adherents successfully contained critics. It is an approach concerned with understanding the operation of power and the role of ideology in both maintaining and challenging that power through the interaction of elites and non-elites.

Recent efforts by some to encourage a return to the study of the ruling class, bringing with it the lessons and insights of social history, form part of a desire to better understand the mechanisms of ideological power. And it is through such work that the disparity between political and economic rhetoric and social conditions can be fruitfully considered. Steve Fraser’s and Gary Gerstle’s collection, *Ruling America*, reminds us that the ruling classes are not static stillborn entities, but have been forced to continually reconstitute themselves throughout American history to answer their critics. Fraser and Gerstle identify what they call “counterrevolutions” as historical moments when, in

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<sup>20</sup> This is also true of other consensus historians, including Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Knopf, 1952); and Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 211-64 (page citations are to the reprint edition).



contrast to entrenched European elites, members of the American ruling class “seem to cohere in the first place in order to stave off democratic advances.” Thus, ruling class consciousness formed in response to organized opposition.<sup>21</sup> However, while these important works effectively demonstrate that the status quo has not retained a monolithic character throughout American history and that moments of social disruption have affected both elites and reformers, they neglect to stress the role of ideology in mitigating conflict. Much of the contestation that forms the core of the essays in the Fraser and Gerstle volume suggests that the essential tenets of capitalism escaped deep scrutiny throughout most of American history and, as the editors note, the moments of intense political and ideological conflict have been relatively few in number. This conclusion, in the vein of certain consensus historians, suggests something about the dominance of capitalist ideals and their rootedness in classical liberal ideology.

Arguments against the dominance of a liberal tradition in America emerge from two distinct perspectives. The first, as noted earlier, challenges the notion that consensus accurately characterizes the founding and subsequent history of the nation. The second seeks to supplant the liberal consensus with a republican consensus.<sup>22</sup> Part of the

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<sup>21</sup> “Introduction,” *Ruling America: A History of Wealth and Power in a Democracy*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 25. See also Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Those who have argued in favor of a dominant liberalism include Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*; Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); John Patrick Diggins, “Comrades and Citizens: New Mythologies in American Historiography,” *The American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985): 614-38; Isaac Kramnick, “The ‘Great National Discussion’: The Discourse of Politics in 1787,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45 (January 1988): 3-32; and Issac Kramnick, “Republicanism Revisionism Revisited,” *The American Historical Review* 87 (June 1982): 629-64. Historians who have seen American history as a narrative of conflict include both Progressive and neo-Progressive historians, among them Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1913; reprint New York: The Free Press, 1986); Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922; reprint New York: Alfred A.

attraction of republicanism, with its emphasis on economic independence, civic virtue, and a public good, is its capacity to include those previously excluded from the historical record and to help historians locate an anti-capitalist class consciousness and a political place for women.<sup>23</sup> The tendency to apply the republican label to a range of historical actors and actions is aided by a preoccupation with the malleability of language in general, and of republican language in particular. The elasticity of republicanism has allowed it to replace liberalism as a consensual concept.

Republicanism has many meanings: rule by a virtuous elite whose economic independence allowed it to govern not in self-interest but for the common good; a fear of the corrupting influence of political power; a notion of motherhood that assigns to women a pivotal political role in imbuing future leaders with a sense of the public good that helped preserve the republic; a paternalistic rationale in defense of slavery; and a working class consciousness rooted in notions of manly independence that prompted resistance to capitalism. And as the meanings of republicanism multiplied, its chronological reach was extended. While Gordon Wood, an early proponent of the republican paradigm, argued that liberalism supplanted republicanism with the adoption

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Knopf, 1942); Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 115-36; Merrill Jensen, *The Articles of Confederation: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution, 1774-1781* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1940); Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); and Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Prominent among advocates of a republican consensus are Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

<sup>23</sup> See especially Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

of the Constitution, historians have since identified strands of republican thought throughout the antebellum years and Civil War, and into the latter part of the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Advocates of the republican synthesis claim that its flexibility expands its explanatory capacity beyond a static classical liberalism.

However, those working to replace the liberal consensus with the republican consensus often exaggerate their differences, particularly in regard to the core element of any political ideology, namely, who should rule. Both liberalism and republicanism distrust human nature and human motivations, though offer seemingly different responses to the political dilemma this poses about the need for rulers to insure a stable society. According to liberalism, exercising a self-interested nature reveals potential rulers from among the victors in economic competition, while republicanism maintains that effectively suppressing that nature indicates who should rule. But how are these virtuous republicans recognized? Republican virtue requires a heightened sense of the public good made possible by a measure of economic independence that frees one from the corrupting influences of the market and political power. Such a position of independent financial means, and a concomitant declaration of political power, can be achieved either through economic competition, which mirrors the core of liberalism, or through the self-evident claims to rule reminiscent of aristocratic assertions. Thus, neither of the criteria for identifying who should rule implicit in the republican rubric fundamentally differs from that offered either by classical liberalism or older aristocratic claims that liberalism challenged with its emphasis on competitive merit.

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<sup>24</sup> Wilentz, *Chants Democratic* and William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

The conceptual flexibility of republicanism has allowed historians to employ it as a framework to contain varied and, occasionally, contradictory ideas. But the very malleability of republicanism obscures the frequently tense relationship between ideology and material reality. While political rhetoric is imbued with all sorts of ideological meanings and assumptions, it constantly confronts material conditions.<sup>25</sup> The disjunction during the Gilded Age between political and economic rhetoric on the one hand and political and economic conditions on the other suggests a way to understand, at least partially, the politics, economics, and reforms of the era. Asserting a distinction between rhetoric and reality means that we cannot treat words as endlessly malleable. Rather, words have essential meanings based on historic commonalities.<sup>26</sup> Aside from the obvious difficulties of understanding one another if meanings are ever-changing and the tendency for words to lose meaning if they are perpetually modified, a methodological reason to insist on essential meanings compels our attention: to ask questions about the persistence of certain values and the relationship of these values to the historical operations of power.

Historians have long argued, and often quite convincingly, that to understand events in their proper context requires conceding the meanings of words to historical actors. So, for example, the history of “freedom” in the United States becomes a story about competing claims to the word and the meaning of freedom assumes an elasticity as various groups at various moments shaped its meaning to advance specific causes or

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<sup>25</sup> John P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics: Virtue, Self-Interest, and the Foundation of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> Some scholars argue that a distinction between reality and rhetoric cannot be sustained since both are essentially cultural forms. Such a position, however, limits the capacity of historians to identify sources of change and causality and, thus, devolves the profession into acts of description. See F. R. Ankersmit, “Historiography and Postmodernism,” *History and Theory* 28 (May 1989): 143.

reforms.<sup>27</sup> Such an approach offers valuable insights into the power of language and its relationship to social, economic, and political change. But it neglects to explain why certain language, beyond its apparent adaptability, retains such power and why so much has been at stake in claiming it. This phenomenon attaches to a number of key political words, in particular: “democracy,” “republicanism,” “liberty,” “freedom,” and “opportunity.” Such “magic” words evoke strong sentiments that encourage multiple groups, often with conflicting ideas and aims, to associate themselves with this language. However, to make the meaning of words perennially flexible denies the possibility of revealing the values imbued within particular rhetoric and the tendency of language to express not only ideological commitments but to help shape them as well. In short, making the meaning of words perpetually malleable interferes with grasping what was really being said.

To concede the meanings of words to historical context denies any possible distinction between rhetoric and reality—instead, reality is ceded to rhetoric. And, accordingly, the capacity for analysis about the basic relations of production and power is correspondingly diminished. If inquiry is an attempt to get to the bottom of the matter, clarity about the meaning of language helps to explain why certain things happened and others did not; in other words, to identify causality. To grasp the historical impact of particular language demands paying attention to the meanings that persist, despite the various uses to which a word has been put. Otherwise we abandon an important explanatory tool that offers insights into the complex ways in which language carries

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<sup>27</sup> Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998); and Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics Since Independence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

within it the ideological substance and boundaries that shape perception and pervade culture.

Those who situate the meanings of words in historical context do so in the name of avoiding the imposition of stasis. However, an approach that insists words retain persistent meanings is acutely concerned with historical contingency. Attempting to understand the parameters within which change operates, such a method considers the factors that prompt change as well as those that impede it, and thus takes seriously Marx's comment that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>28</sup> Such an approach seeks to account for how historical context forms the range of social, political, and economic options in any given present. It is, in fact, a position precisely driven by a desire to comprehend the processes of substantive social change in their often slow, circuitous, and laborious complexity, while also acknowledging the power of prevailing ideology to constrain and shape these processes.

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<sup>28</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; quoted in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 300.

## CHAPTER 1

### “This Haven of Equal Opportunity to All”

To celebrate the nation’s centennial in 1876, Harper & Brothers Publishers compiled a series of essays to assess the country’s progress over the past one hundred years and to point the way toward the next one hundred. Written by well known social commentators, whom the editors described as “specialists in their fields,” including Edward Atkinson, David A. Wells, Francis A. Walker, and William Graham Sumner, the *First Century of the Republic* engaged topics from “Mechanical Progress,” “Educational Progress,” and “Agricultural Progress,” to “The Development of Our Mineral Resources,” “Progress in Manufacture,” and “Progress in the Fine Arts.” Compiled a little more than ten years after the Civil War, the volume emphasized the seeming inevitability of the economic, technical, and cultural progress of a united America. While some contributors recognized occasional difficulties during the previous century, nearly all of the essays ended on a celebratory note.

In the chapter on commercial development, Atkinson acknowledged that changes in the nature of work had often resulted in economic hardship for unskilled workers, but he assured readers that individual economic opportunity continued to thrive: “It is a fact not to be gainsaid, that even at this moment the only conditions requisite to a comfortable subsistence for man or woman in this country are prudence, intelligence, health and integrity.” And, he concluded, “Thus does it appear that the century just ending, the first of a strictly commercial age, has been marked by greatly increased power over the productive forces of nature, and that the promises of the future material welfare of the

nation are grand indeed.”<sup>1</sup> David Wells ended his entry on “Progress in Manufacture” by noting the steady development of industry, despite attempts at what he deemed legislative interference. He likened such advances to the unstoppable flow of “one of our mighty rivers” where “its movement is beyond control.” “Successive years,” he continued, “like successive affluents, only add to and increase its volume.”<sup>2</sup> Combined, the essays effectively smoothed over the rough edges of the social disruptions wrought by a century’s worth of change. According to the publisher’s introductory note, “the reflections naturally deduced from these results, as to the characteristic features of our people, contradict those which are drawn from a superficial review of the social and political abuses of the day, and are re-assuring as to the hopeful future of the Republic.”<sup>3</sup> The future indeed looked bright.

“IT IS HERE,” the *Chicago Tribune* headline for 25 July 1877 simply announced. But what had landed on the shores of Lake Michigan was no simple matter. Spontaneous railroad strikes begun nearly a week earlier in Martinsburg, West Virginia, to protest wage cuts in the midst of a severe economic depression had advanced rapidly across the railroad industry and the country. The economic downturn, which had begun in 1873, had led to thousands of business closures, reduced pay, prolonged layoffs, soaring

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Atkinson, “Commercial Development,” in *The First Century of the Republic: A Review of American Progress* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1876), 209, 210.

<sup>2</sup> David A. Wells, “Progress in Manufacture,” in *First Century of the Republic*, 173. Wells conceded that “the general tendency of events during the last quarter of a century . . . has been to more unequally distribute the results of industrial effort,” but claimed that this resulted from individual failings and an “abandonment of that spirit of economy which so pre-eminently characterized our ancestors.” *Ibid.*, 172-3.

<sup>3</sup> “Introduction,” in *First Century of the Republic*, 9.



unemployment, vast increases in those who applied to private charities for relief, and a large population of tramps who wandered the country in search of food and jobs.

Economic instability and cycles of boom-and-bust characterized the nineteenth-century economy, of which the 1870s depression was only one manifestation. Four years after it had begun, continued wage cuts had reduced pay for some 35 percent, while the cost of food had dropped by only five percent.

In response to these difficult economic conditions and the persistent rate wars among railroads, the heads of the major northeast trunk lines gathered in March of 1877 to negotiate cooperative rate agreements. Assessing the meeting's outcome, John W. Garrett, President of the Baltimore & Ohio, enthused that "the great principle upon which we all joined to act was to earn more and to spend less."<sup>4</sup> In July, the B&O instituted a ten percent reduction on already low wages. Other railroads soon followed.

These proposed pay cuts prompted work stoppages across the nation from mid-July through early-August. Workers complained that the current rates of pay were barely livable and that the planned changes would be "equivalent to starvation."<sup>5</sup> Strikes halted most business activity in Baltimore, shut rail traffic in Pittsburgh, and wound their way toward St. Louis. Workers walked off their jobs in Buffalo and Albany, throughout Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, and further west in Omaha, Kansas City, and, eventually, San Francisco. As one Baltimore worker declared, we "might as well starve without work as starve and work."<sup>6</sup> More than half of the freight on the nation's 75,000

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<sup>4</sup> J. W. Garrett to J. S. Morgan, 9 March 1877, John W. Garrett MSS, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.; quoted in Robert Bruce, *1877: The Year of Violence* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1959), 40.

<sup>5</sup> "The Baltimore & Ohio R.R. Strike," *Baltimore Sun*, 18 July 1877, 1.

<sup>6</sup> "A War on the Railroads," *Baltimore Sun*, 20 July 1877, 1.

miles of track stopped running. The intervention of ten state militias and federal troops, called in to quell the strikes, often escalated the violence. By August 5<sup>th</sup>, President Rutherford B. Hayes noted in his diary: “The strikers have been put down *by force*.”<sup>7</sup> In all, the railroad strikes of 1877, which involved over 100,000 workers, resulted in 100 deaths, hundreds of injuries, over 1,000 arrests, and millions of dollars in property damage.

Many feared that class warfare had arrived in an America that considered itself immune from such divisiveness. Following the tumult of the Civil War and Reconstruction, where free labor had effectively triumphed over slave labor, a desired social calm was disrupted by seemingly new radical ideas and discontent. A series of editorials in *The Nation* strongly condemned the strikers, the press for sensationalist reporting, and those railroads that had capitulated to worker demands. The magazine’s editor, E. L. Godkin, asserted that public safety required that all strike leaders be fired by the railroads, as “it is better and easier to dismiss such ruffians than have finally to kill them.”<sup>8</sup> Work stoppages that occurred so spontaneously and spread so quickly suggested persistent, large-scale dissatisfaction among laborers. Edward Atkinson’s panacea of opportunity for a “comfortable subsistence” that depended on “prudence, intelligence, health, and integrity” shone less brightly when workers explained, “we are strikin’ for life. No one can live and support a family upon \$1.35 a day.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Notes on Cabinet Meeting of 31 July 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes MSS, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; quoted in Bruce, *1877*, 315.

<sup>8</sup> “The Week,” *The Nation*, 26 July 1877, 50.

<sup>9</sup> “Hunger’s Hazard,” *Chicago Times*, 20 July 1877, 1.

Despite the traumas of 1877, many during the Gilded Age harbored no doubt about what made the United States unique among nations: “In America there is a certainty of changing the [economic] condition, and a fair gambling chance of bettering it.”<sup>10</sup> As industrialization took hold, the domestic economy of the late-nineteenth century grew at one of the fastest rates in national history. From 1877 to 1890, industrial output increased over 150 percent and extraction of bituminous coal, which helped fuel industry, doubled in each decade after 1870. Railroads expanded everywhere during the second half of the nineteenth century. The manufacture of capital goods in steel and iron, along with coal production, exploded to satisfy the demands of this growing railroad construction and operation. In 1865, railroad track in the United States measured just over 35,000 miles. That number rose steadily, so that by 1900 the country boasted 195,000 miles of track.<sup>11</sup> Over 700,000 people worked for the railroads in 1888 as they linked the nation in a cross-country transportation network that expanded markets and joined rural and urban sections of the country. In 1860, the United States had 300 millionaires; by 1892, approximately 4,000.

The ideology of equal opportunity, with its promise of upward social mobility realized through entrepreneurial competition, echoed in the speeches of politicians, the congressional testimony given by business leaders, the writings of scholars and social commentators, and the social diagnoses offered by some in the working class. For white males, proponents of the ideology declared that initiative, hard work, and ambition made

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Dudley Warner, “Editor’s Study,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, May 1895, 967.

<sup>11</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 38.

it possible to improve one's economic standing, become one's own boss, make decisions in regard to production and the work environment, and enjoy success in the competitive economic arena. "Here men who have merit may rise," intoned Archbishop John Ireland. "The poor man, the workman of to-day, may become the capitalist and the employer of to-morrow."<sup>12</sup> With a level playing field—where no one benefited from an undue advantage over another—anyone could start life as a poor, young immigrant and grow-up to become Andrew Carnegie. Or, if not Carnegie, at least financially better-off.

Politicians extolled "America, a land of equal rights and equal opportunities," as a place "where property is within the reach of all who have the requisite industry and skill to acquire it." European immigrants, drawn to "this land of progress and of growth, this haven of equal opportunity to all," arrived in increasing numbers to fill the factories and swell the ranks of city dwellers.<sup>13</sup> A Massachusetts shoe-cutter claimed that, "in this country, as a general thing, every man has an equal chance to rise," while piano manufacturer William Steinway declared that "in this country a young man has a better chance to work up in the world than anywhere else that I have seen."<sup>14</sup> In an address at Vanderbilt University, corporate lawyer and future U.S. Senator from New York,

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<sup>12</sup> Remarks of Archbishop Ireland, *National Conference on Industrial Conciliation under the Auspices of the National Civic Federation, 1901, December 16-17 in New York* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1902), 18.

<sup>13</sup> "Address by Mr. Sulzer," *New York Times*, 5 July 1894, 8. Sulzer distinguished between those immigrants who brought "their labor, their skill, and their ingenuity," and thus aided in the nation's increased prosperity, and radical activists who aimed to "tear down the fabric of our institutions." William Sulzer was Speaker of the New York Assembly in 1893, served eight terms as a U.S. Congressional Representative (1895-1912), became Governor of New York in 1913, and gained notoriety for his subsequent impeachment from office after angering his initial Tammany Hall supporters.

<sup>14</sup> William L. Wilson quoted in "Either Democrats or Trusts," *New York Times*, 9 January 1895, 1; Testimony of William Steinway, Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *The Relations Between Labor and Capital: Hearing before the Committee on Education and Labor, 47<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 27 September 1883*, 1094. (Hereafter cited as *Relations Between Labor and Capital*.)

Chauncey Depew, described the University's namesake, Cornelius Vanderbilt, as "one of the products of American opportunity" who at the young age of twenty-one "had nothing but himself, and nothing before him but equal opportunity."<sup>15</sup> Vanderbilt went on to amass a fortune building railroads. In his memoir, P. T. Barnum shared what he deemed history's most important lesson: "Nine out of ten of the rich men of our country to-day, started out in life as poor boys, with determined will, industry, perseverance, economy and good habits."<sup>16</sup>

The ideology of equal opportunity, rooted in capitalist ideals, assumed that the "right" to participate in the economic marketplace and to claim the rewards associated with one's ability belonged to all. Merit would be appropriately acknowledged in a competitive order that, if let alone, would perpetually self-correct. Economic competition would diffuse concentrations of power and one could follow the entrepreneurial dream with a reasonable expectation of success.<sup>17</sup> If economic competition thrived, the pursuit of individual financial self-interest would ultimately benefit society through productive innovation, lower prices, and increased employment. And exhibition of the character traits associated with such achievement—hard work, perseverance, ambition—would

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<sup>15</sup> "Chauncey M. Depew Talks," *New York Times*, 19 June 1895, 2.

<sup>16</sup> P. T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs; Or, Forty Years' Recollections* (Buffalo: Warren, Johnson & Co., 1873), 482.

<sup>17</sup> This infatuation with diffusing power leads to a perpetual quest for balance, a pursuit that denies the possibility of social change beyond the boundaries of a relatively narrow pendulum. Consequently, it cannot accommodate philosophical outlooks that demand recognition of historical processes. For an elaboration of this argument, see Paul N. Goldstone, *The Collapse of Liberal Empire: Science and Revolution in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

lead to economic and social advance for individuals. The economic productivity that arose from free market competition would also create the necessary conditions for the fulfillment of social and political rights.<sup>18</sup> Achievement of social conditions that promoted equality of opportunity, not equality of result, offered the fairest chance for people to exhibit their inherent differences.

Importantly, here also resided an implicit claim that those who achieved economic success had demonstrated, as well, their superior capacity to exercise political power.<sup>19</sup> Historically, political participation has been closely linked to economic status and access to the market, and the economic independence it allows is imperative to effectively demand the rights associated with civil and political citizenship. In this regard, the promises embedded in the ideology of equal opportunity included non-monetary rewards, most importantly public influence. As put by Russell Conwell in his “Acres of Diamonds” speech: “If you only get the privilege of casting one vote, you don’t get anything that is worth while. . . . This country is not run by votes. . . . It is governed by influence. It is governed by the ambitious and the enterprises which control votes.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); and Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1960).

<sup>19</sup> Edward Atkinson explained that “the productive use of capital . . . calls for intelligence, skill, and mental capacity,” and that “the larger the capital the greater is the mental capacity required for its application to productive purposes.” Thus, those with the most money have demonstrated their superior intelligence. Edward Atkinson, “How can Wages be Increased,” *The Forum*, July 1888, 616.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Conwell, “Acres of Diamonds,” [www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rconwellacresofdiamonds.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rconwellacresofdiamonds.htm) (accessed 08/27/08). See also Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

Participation and success in the competitive economic arena finally determined one's political status.<sup>21</sup>

Assuming responsibility for one's economic standing appealed across classes—it supported the status quo while offering the working class upward mobility. The national government should not interfere with capital–labor relations, said a Massachusetts shoemaker, since “the wise and the prudent need no help” and “for the unwise and imprudent nothing effectual can be done.” In a self-correcting market, economic success depended on character. Alleviating financial difficulties required “forethought and economy,” not government or social intervention.<sup>22</sup> “In this great country,” announced President William McKinley, “all can have the opportunity for bettering themselves, provided they exercise intelligence and perseverance.” Railroad tycoon Jay Gould had earlier expressed similar sentiments, noting that “generally if men are temperate and industrious they are pretty sure of success.” In the United States, he continued, “every

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<sup>21</sup> Recently, Alice Kessler-Harris modified T. H. Marshall's earlier formulation of citizenship to more fully account for the place of women, as well as the very different historical circumstances which define the American experience. Marshall deemed the right to work as part of a contractual relationship for free labor and, thus, considered economic rights a subset of civil rights. But Kessler-Harris argues that to subsume “economic rights into the civil arena obscures their interactive influence on political and social citizenship.” Here economic citizenship emerges as a separate category. In a society where “work” leads to expanded social and political rights, those prevented from participation in the paid workforce or who engage in unpaid labor not traditionally considered work have diminished claims to various citizenship rights. Kessler-Harris concentrates on how the historic exclusion of women from paid work and their lack of economic independence explains women's continued disadvantaged social and economic position. But a more expansive reading of her argument relocates the site of economic independence beyond the opportunity to engage in wage labor, a move suggested by, though not developed, in Kessler-Harris' analysis. T. H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); and Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10-15.

<sup>22</sup> “Testimony of Workingmen,” in *Tenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor* (Boston: Rand, Aberg, and Co., 1879), 132. A country store clerk echoed this sentiment: “If a person enjoys good health, and is willing to work, he may earn an honest living. . . . A large portion of our poor people have poor ways.” *Ibid.*, 126. See also Testimony of Thomas H. Wickes, *Report on the Chicago Strike of June-July 1894 by the United States Strike Commission* (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1972), 594. Wickes was the Second Vice President of the Pullman Palace Car Company.

man has to stand here on his own individual merit.”<sup>23</sup> And Gould meant “every man.” Ambition, individualism, merit, and manhood would lead to economic success.<sup>24</sup> When asked whether coalminers had aspirations, one correspondent simply answered: “Is he a man?”<sup>25</sup>

The atomized individual was essential to the primacy of contract embedded in the ideology of equal opportunity. Contracts signified personal sovereignty as parties joined in mutually beneficial agreements. According to William Graham Sumner, who popularized Herbert Spencer’s reformulation of Charles Darwin in the United States, a participant in a contract “is freely subjecting himself to conditions which he considers satisfactory, for purposes which he considers worth obtaining.”<sup>26</sup> The protection of individual property rights and the “maintenance of the obligation of contracts” were essential to national progress.<sup>27</sup> A society based on such arrangements, therefore,

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<sup>23</sup> “President McKinley’s Address at Tuskegee,” 16 December 1898 in Booker T. Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work in The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Volume I, *The Autobiographical Writings*, eds. Louis R. Harlan, et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 132; and Testimony of Jay Gould, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 5 September 1883, 1088.

<sup>24</sup> Men were expected to provide for themselves and their household, despite a reality where women’s paid and unpaid labor often meant the difference between survival and destitution. In 1900, well over five million women were wage earners, nearly one million of whom were associated with the garment or textile industries. Another two million worked as domestic servants. While most wage earning women were young and unmarried, by 1900, 21% of the female population over age 16 worked for wages, many of them married. This was especially true for married African American women, whose husbands frequently could not find decently paid work. Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 235.

<sup>25</sup> Phoebe E. Gibbons, “The Miners of Scranton,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, November 1877, 922.

<sup>26</sup> William Graham Sumner, “Do We Want Industrial Peace?” *The Forum*, December 1889, 408-09. See also William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (Boston: Harper & Brothers, 1883). In response to Sumner’s article, Eugene Debs pointed out that “he assumes that the employer and employé occupy the same positions, the same vantage ground, and in the case of making a contract the employer may be as effectually reduced to ‘slavery’ as the employé—a proposition so foreign to fact, so utterly at war with history as to reduce his argument, if argument it may be called, to the merest flummery.” Eugene V. Debs, “Do We Want Industrial Peace,” *Locomotive Fireman’s Magazine*, March 1890, 194.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Nimmo, Jr., “The Insurrection of June and July 1894 Growing out of the Pullman Strike at Chicago, ILL,” *An Address delivered before the National Statistical Association at the Colombian University, Washington, D.C., 9 October 1894* (Washington, D.C.: Age Printing Company, 1894), 29;



promoted independence and the fullest expression of liberty. “Instead of striking when I am dissatisfied,” explained one worker, he would approach his agent and request more money. “He is not compelled to keep or pay me, and I am not obliged to remain in his employ any longer than I choose.” Indeed, “the remedy is in my own hands, as it is in the hands of every operative.”<sup>28</sup> Contracts symbolized choice: one chose to work, or not, for a particular boss and to accept, or not, the wages and conditions offered. And exercising this choice brought dignity and independence to the wage worker since negotiations over pay made manifest “industrial freedom” and “equal[ity] under the law.” Consequently, legal or social recourse designed to equalize the economic standing of people already presumed equal was anathema.<sup>29</sup> In fact, interference with contracting parties could taint the participant’s independence and undermine the very “civil and social freedom” that contracts upheld.<sup>30</sup>

The chance to compete in the economic marketplace meant a rejection of entrenched class status and its associated antagonisms. The ideology of equal opportunity promised not only upward mobility but downward mobility to the lazy.<sup>31</sup>

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located in Pullman Company Archives, Record Group 9, Series 3, History Files 1860-1968, Box 2, Folder 109, “Strike of 1894,” The Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois.

<sup>28</sup> “Fall River, Lowell, and Lawrence,” in *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor* (Boston: Rand, Aberg, and Co., 1882), 170.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Carnegie, “An Employer’s View of the Labor Question,” *The Forum*, April 1886, 115. As Scott Sandage pointed out, a contract was also a promise to succeed, and failing to fulfill its terms injured oneself and one’s associates. For Sandage, “failure was at once anathema and endemic to maturing capitalism.” Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 64.

<sup>30</sup> Sumner, “Do We Want Industrial Peace?” 408-09.

<sup>31</sup> “In this country, one generation follows another, and the poor of to-day are rich in the next generation, or the third. Their experience leads them on, and they become rich, and they leave vast riches to their young children. These children, having been reared in luxury, are inexperienced and get poor; and after long experience another generation comes on and gathers up riches again in turn.” Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 484. See also “Remarks of Oscar S. Straus,” *National Conference on Industrial Conciliation*, 5.

The idle rich were not guaranteed social standing and a failure to exhibit industrious traits meant they could ultimately (re)join the lower class. Rather than class divisions, this social impermanence fostered class harmony.<sup>32</sup> Sober, industrious, and ambitious laborers would aid in productive efficiency and economic growth, which would generate increased profits. These higher profits would accrue to workers in the form of higher wages which, in turn, would allow laborers to enter into business themselves. In this way, workers and owners recognized their shared economic interests.<sup>33</sup> And each person contained within his own grasp the key to his financial future.

Alongside the promises of the ideology of equal opportunity and economic growth, however, the social and economic disruptions wrought by industrialization intensified. While federal troops dispatched by President Hayes successfully contained the railroad strikes of 1877, they could not restore long-term industrial calm. Labor disputes continued to punctuate the Gilded Age, including the Southwest Railroad Strike (1886), Haymarket (1886), Homestead (1892), and Pullman (1894). In addition to these dramatic events, strikes and lockouts occurred frequently as workers sought union recognition, increased pay, safer working conditions, and shorter hours. Between 1880

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<sup>32</sup> According to cigar manufacturer Walter Barnett, “under a just system, there is not antagonism, and there should be no antagonism between capital and labor. Capital is the offspring of labor, and should be its helpmate.” Testimony of Walter E. Barnett, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 24 September 1883, 840.

<sup>33</sup> Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, xl-xli.

and 1905 an estimated seven million workers were involved in over 36,000 strikes.<sup>34</sup>

National labor organizations took root and socialist and anarchist ideas achieved currency among small but influential sectors of the working class. Increasingly it appeared that class conflict would replace sectional strife as the chief line of social antagonism.<sup>35</sup>

While a few amassed breathtaking fortunes and resided in lavishly appointed mansions, the majority of factory workers lived in crowded and unsanitary tenements and earned less than \$800 annually, which often failed to adequately cover necessities. By 1890, 73% of the nation's wealth was concentrated in the hands of the top ten percent of the population.<sup>36</sup> Rapid urban growth marked the decades following the Civil War, most dramatically in Chicago and New York, overwhelming limited city infrastructure and leading to, among other things, overcrowded housing, increased rates of disease, and high infant mortality.<sup>37</sup> At some point in a given year, between one quarter and one third of laborers in the industrial Northeast found themselves unemployed. "I do not mean to complain," a Massachusetts quarryman said, "but it does seem as if the burdens and the pleasures of this world were very unequally divided."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> David Montgomery, "Strikes in Nineteenth Century America," *Social Science History* 4 (February 1980): 86.

<sup>35</sup> Though a realignment of regional differences did mark the Gilded Age, it was predominantly driven by economic concerns. Southern and western interests united against northeastern financial interests in regard to economic and monetary policies. By the 1890s, these regional tensions helped to galvanize the Populist movement which directed much of its ire toward the seeming capriciousness of railroads and northeast "moneyed interests."

<sup>36</sup> Janette Thomas Greenwood, *The Gilded Age: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25.

<sup>37</sup> In 1850, Chicago's population numbered 30,000; by 1880 it had risen to 500,000, and by 1900 it had reached 1,700,000. The population of New York grew from 950,000 to 3,500,000 between 1870 and 1900.

<sup>38</sup> "Testimony of Workingmen," 120.

And, among the laboring class, workers received differential pay depending on their skill, sex, race, and region of residence. Skilled mechanics earned more than unskilled labor, whites more than blacks, men more than women, northerners more than southerners. In the South, where blacks comprised nearly forty percent of the population, a small minority had become landowners after emancipation. But almost three-quarters

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Wealth and Income in 1890<sup>39</sup>**

ESTATES (BY ANNUAL INCOME)	NUMBER OF FAMILIES	AGGREGATE WEALTH	AVERAGE WEALTH PER FAMILY
Wealthy classes (\$50,000 and over)	125,000	\$33,000,000,000	\$264,000
Well-to-do-classes (\$5,000-\$50,000)	1,375,000	23,000,000,000	16,000
Middle classes (\$500-\$5,000)	5,500,000	8,200,000,000	1,500
Poorer classes (under \$500)	<u>5,500,000</u> 12,500,000	<u>800,000,000</u> \$65,000,000,000	<u>150</u> \$5,200

of black farmers worked as tenants or sharecroppers, burdened under near-perpetual debt.<sup>40</sup> Alongside these growing disparities in personal wealth, capital became concentrated in fewer hands as the size of businesses grew.<sup>41</sup> Consolidated industries

<sup>39</sup> Charles B. Spahr, *An Essay on the Present Distribution of Wealth in the United States* (New York: T.Y. Crowell & Company, 1896); quoted in Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, xix.

<sup>40</sup> Loren Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 160, 183-84.

<sup>41</sup> For example, by 1880, Jay Gould and his partner Russell Sage controlled the bulk of railroads in the Midwest and Southwest, including the Union Pacific, the Kansas Pacific, the Denver Pacific, the Texas Pacific, the Rio Grande & Western, the St. Louis & Iron Mountain, the Wabash, and a series of regional lines. They also purchased the Western Union telegraph company and turned it into a virtual monopoly by running its lines along their railroad routes. The most dramatic merger occurred in 1901 when financier J. P. Morgan bought out Andrew Carnegie and created U.S. Steel, constituted from 200 separate iron and steel companies. It employed 170,000 workers and controlled over sixty percent of the nation's steelmaking capacity, along with 1,000 miles of railroad.

included, among others, textile, sugar, iron and steel, salt, tobacco, lumber, coal, and gunpowder. J. D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil controlled close to 90% of the domestic oil industry and by 1904 approximately three hundred corporations controlled more than two-fifths of the nation's manufacturing.<sup>42</sup> Increasingly it seemed that forces beyond the immediate control of individuals intimately affected people's economic lives.

The extensive political influence exercised by the "moneyed interests" also frustrated laborers, farmers, and small business operators. Seemingly rampant political corruption fed a growing perception that industrial concerns simply bought politicians.<sup>43</sup> But beyond the sensational details splashed across newspapers, the dangers concentrated power—whether economic or political—posed to liberty troubled reformers. In a nation that understood its own history as the fight for liberty against tyranny, a struggle to "wrest power from the hands of one or the few, and to lodge it in the hands of the many" enjoyed broad appeal. Centralized economic wealth, which translated into centralized political power, prompted an anxious response.<sup>44</sup> The individual, whether a "workman, small capitalist, or consumer," wrote William Barry, "has begun to feel that he cannot stand against the energy and relentless methods of the ring and the trust."<sup>45</sup> Equal opportunity could not exist amid such concentrated power.

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<sup>42</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 4.

<sup>43</sup> For example, the Big Four railroads in California effectively controlled the state government. From 1866 to 1872 the Union Pacific Railroad spent \$400,000 in bribes and between 1875 and 1885 the Central Pacific spent nearly \$500,000 annually on bribes. Jack Beatty, *Age of Betrayal: The Triumph of Money in America, 1865-1900* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 144.

<sup>44</sup> Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor Co. for the American Home Missionary Society, 1891; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 184-85 (page citations are to reprint edition).

<sup>45</sup> William Barry, "The Ring and the Trust," *The Forum*, March 1891, 95. See also Edward Bellamy, "The Programme of the Nationalists," *The Forum*, March 1894, 82, where he commented that "in place of a field

This newly industrialized world also altered productive relations. Manufacturing required a large number of wage workers, jobs often filled by immigrants who sought employment in textile and clothing factories, steel mills and coal mines, and on railroads.<sup>46</sup> The impersonality of industrial production differed from independent craft work. No longer were there autonomous workers who made an entire product; the manufacture of goods was broken down into their constituent parts and factory equipment and white-collared managers now set the pace of production.<sup>47</sup> For many, work became less skilled and more automated. Workdays could be ten or twelve hours, and work weeks at least six and, sometimes, seven days long. Modern manufacturing “confine[s] each operative to a very limited sphere of knowledge . . . [and] represses thought, kills aspiration, and confines the mind to a very low order of attainment.”<sup>48</sup> As well, working conditions were often unsafe. The Interstate Commerce Commission estimated that 20,000 railroad workers were injured and nearly 2,000 killed in 1889 alone.<sup>49</sup> Labor constituted an essential component of industrial productive activity and manufacturers

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of free competition with a fair opportunity for individual initiative in every direction, our economic system now presents the aspect of a centralized government, or group of governments, administered by great capitalists and combinations of capitalists, who monopolize alike the direction and the profits of the industries of the people.”

<sup>46</sup> In the forty years between 1880 and 1920, nearly 23 million immigrants arrived in a country whose total population numbered 76 million in 1900.

<sup>47</sup> The managerial requirements of corporate enterprise fostered an expanding middle-class with an increased sense of itself as situated between the financial elites and the working class. See Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003); and Olivier Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> “Fall River, Lowell, and Lawrence,” 170.

<sup>49</sup> Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 189.

expended significant energy to obtain, maintain, and control workers and to persuade them to accept the wage-labor system.

As many toiled long hours in unsafe conditions for low wages, others appeared disproportionately rewarded for their labors, while still others received financial compensation without having worked at all. Such idleness angered not only workers, who railed against the blatant unfairness, but also supporters of the status quo who detected a dual threat in this behavior: it both undermined the presumed connection between hard work and wealth embedded in the ideology of competitive opportunity and would provoke frustration, anger, and demands for social and economic reform from the “dangerous classes.” E. L. Godkin conceded that, in the face of a “growing idle class,” such discontent was not “unreasonable.” In fact, he found it increasingly difficult to defend the unequal results of equal opportunity (an “inequality of condition based on inequality of capacity”) when some drew their “quarterly dividends and spen[t] them in childishness” while laborers tilled, spun, wove, dug mines, and ploughed the earth.<sup>50</sup> Godkin ultimately condemned idlers as immoral.

Charles Lenz, editor of *Capital and Labor*, a self-described “organ of the manufacturers on the labor question,” testified before Congress in 1883 that, “we are having here a separation into classes; the one considers himself more and more as the master, and the other as the servant. The old relations between employés and employer, the old friendly relations, where one thought himself as good as the other, have ceased to exist.”<sup>51</sup> Instead, with the emergence of large-scale production, workers became

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<sup>50</sup> E. L. Godkin, “Idleness and Immorality,” *The Forum*, May 1892, 341.

<sup>51</sup> Testimony of Charles Lenz, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 15 August 1883, 241, 256.

interchangeable, personal relations between employer and employee disappeared, and the individualism on which the ideology of equal opportunity depended appeared to recede. Such conditions threatened the idyll of class harmony, which closely aligned the interests of worker and owner with the promise that one day the employee could become the boss.<sup>52</sup>

Growing wealth disparities challenged the promise of social mobility. In describing “the worst effect of the present thoughtless distribution of wealth,” a correspondent for *The Forum* stressed that “by placing one class in the power of another . . . it destroys all truly human relation between them, fills the one with pride, vanity, and cruelty, the other with servility, envy, and hatred, divides the nation against itself, and defeats the ends of humanity.”<sup>53</sup> These developments, the author contended, threatened the ideology of equal opportunity and the nation’s survival. Social reformer and clergyman Josiah Strong harkened back to a day when “the apprentice looked forward to the time when he should receive a journeyman’s wages, and the journeyman might reasonably hope some day to have a shop of his own,” where “there was little opportunity to develop class distinctions and jealousies.”<sup>54</sup> Socialist ideas and class warfare enjoyed wider appeal when the apprentice could no longer expect upward mobility, a possibility

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<sup>52</sup> Carole Shammas has pointed out that nostalgia for a preindustrial classlessness, both among historians and historical actors, is misplaced. Rather, “the tenacious hold of the top 1 percent on a quarter to a third of total wealth has given a certain continuity to the political economy of the nation.” According to Shammas, this sense of greater economic equality in earlier times “rests largely on an accounting that ignores the wealth of colonial officials, British residents, and the legal institutions of coverture, indentured servitude, and slavery.” She concludes, echoing Richard Hofstadter, that Progressive reformer’s concern with greater concentrations of wealth may have had less to do with any substantial changes in the distribution of wealth than with a sense of declining economic power among the upper-middle class. Carole Shammas, “A New Look at Long-Term Trends in Wealth Inequality in the United States,” *The American Historical Review* 98 (April 1993): 427.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Davidson, “Aristocracy and Humanity,” *The Forum*, September 1887, 158.

<sup>54</sup> Strong, *Our Country*, 141.



that troubled Strong. Equal opportunity ideology had helped to contain class tensions and its decline weakened social stability.<sup>55</sup>

Concern about the capacity of concentrated wealth to undermine opportunity resonated across classes. While laborers lamented their working conditions and saw little chance of becoming independent craft workers, small business owners and those who harbored entrepreneurial dreams also complained about consolidated capital. Maryland congressional representative Isidor Rayner described the Gilded Age as “a contest of honest business industry against these monopolies.” “A few years ago,” he recalled, “an individual with limited resources could by thrift and industry gradually advance his way to the front.” But, “to-day these colossal trusts, come marching along, and bankrupt and crush him to the earth.”<sup>56</sup> Such behavior, he pointed out, set people against the “moneyed interest.” For some this spelled alarm, as a united populace could not always be controlled. “The tyranny of the moneyed units,” one concerned correspondent wrote, “has raised a spirit of evil which it cannot allay. It has unchained the tiger and whetted his appetite for blood.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See Herbert Miller, “Socialism in the United States,” *American Federationist*, August 1895, 97. Supreme Court Justice Stephen J. Field, in his majority opinion in *Pollock v. Farmers’ Loan and Trust Co.*, warned that the income tax would foment class war: “The present assault upon capital is but the beginning. It will be but the stepping stone to others, larger and more sweeping, till our political contests will become a war of the poor against the rich; a war constantly growing in intensity and bitterness.” *Pollock v. Farmers’ Loan and Trust Co.*, 157 U.S. 429 (1895), 607; quoted in Beatty, *Age of Betrayal*, 110.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in “War Opened on Trusts,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 25 February 1892, 1. As expressed elsewhere: “The truth is that, through organization and concert, the greater capitalists are fast acquiring an advantage over the masses precisely similar to that which an army possesses as against an undisciplined mob; and monopoly, like an advancing conqueror, is annexing province after province in the industrial realm over which King Competition has hitherto been supposed to rule.” Edward T. Peters, “Should Fortunes be Limited?” *The Forum*, November 1887, 247.

<sup>57</sup> Howard Crosby, “The Dangerous Classes,” *The North American Review*, April 1883, 350-51. To alleviate potential trouble, Crosby advocated a limit on individual wealth, government supervision of corporations, and a guarantee of a year’s salary for workers.

The economic downturn of the 1890s exacerbated these tensions. During a six month period in 1893, 8,000 businesses and 360 banks failed; farm prices dropped while the debt farmers carried rose; wages were cut and an estimated 2,000,000 people were unemployed as the depression swept across the nation.<sup>58</sup> Some sought shelter in local police precincts and schoolhouses, others rode trains across the country in pursuit of work, and still others joined Jacob Coxey's march into Washington, D.C. to press for a federal jobs program centered on road building. In 1894, a strike erupted at the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago which disrupted national rail travel. Though federal officials declared the depression over in 1897 and 1898 amid a "return to prosperity" and the emergence of the United States as an imperial power following the Spanish-American War, wages failed to keep pace with inflation through the remainder of the 1890s. In 1900, United States Industrial Commission statistics classified between 60 and 88 percent of Americans as either poor or very poor.<sup>59</sup> The ideology of equal opportunity and, along with it, America's exceptionalism, seemed like chimera.

Even amid the undeniable economic consolidations throughout the Gilded Age and the associated disparities in wealth distribution, many claimed that economic competition and its presumed benefits, particularly opportunity, still thrived. Defenders of the status quo reminded wage workers that "the business men of to-day are the poor workingmen of a few years ago" whose success rested on their ability to have "pushed

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<sup>58</sup> Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, 116.

<sup>59</sup> Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1977), 373.

themselves to the front by their energy and industry.”<sup>60</sup> Many in business denied that economic concentration curtailed competition and extolled the capacity of business to self-regulate through the market. By associating their own prosperity with that of the nation and “industrial progress” businessmen opposed state action on behalf of workers in the name of laissez-faire.<sup>61</sup> E. L. Godkin defended opportunity’s continued existence and laid responsibility for poverty at the feet of individual character:

It is a great mistake too, to suppose that the ‘deadbeats’ have no opportunities offered them. There is probably no broken man or failure in the country who has not had, if his health was good, many opportunities offered him when beginning life. He has probably missed through stupidity, or drunkenness, or unsteadiness, or dishonesty, and he then comes for subsistence on the steady and prosperous.<sup>62</sup>

Corporate attorney Samuel Dodd acknowledged that while the late-nineteenth century “has been emphatically an era of combination in business,” competition “was never so strong.” “No day has ever equaled to-day,” he enthused, “in the business opportunities offered intelligent and industrious men.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “Business Success and Failure,” *The Nation*, 12 April 1888, 294. See also Testimony of Thomas Miller, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 5 September 1883, 25. Miller, General Manager of the Atlas Works in Pittsburgh, proclaimed that “nearly all the men who are now capitalists have been workingmen.”

<sup>61</sup> Sidney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1956), 30. Though, as Fine and others have pointed out, those in business who advocated laissez-faire were generally highly selective about the particular policies to which they applied that philosophy. Businesses often demanded protective tariffs, land grants for railroad construction, federal troops to oppose strikes, and enjoyed the benefit of favorable court rulings. Michael Les Benedict’s attempt to resolve this disparity depended on his distinction between the economic motivation for laissez-faire and its ideological support. Benedict argued that laissez-faire adherents often ruled against their own economic interests in favor of ideological consistency, as they imagined themselves to be protecting liberty. However, advocates of laissez-faire did not display an ideological consistency but violated regularly the spirit of “hands-off” in pursuit of their financial interests. Michael Les Benedict, “Laissez-Faire and Liberty: A Re-Evaluation of the Meaning and Origins of Laissez-Faire Constitutionalism,” *Law and History Review* 3 (Autumn 1985): 293-331.

<sup>62</sup> E. L. Godkin, “The Socialists ‘Opportunity,’” *The Nation*, 18 January 1894, 43.

<sup>63</sup> S. C. T. Dodd, *Trusts* (New York: n.p., 1900), 108-10.

Complaints about narrowed economic opportunity appeared to some as an attack on the value of competition, with its expectation of disparate rewards. And a decided reluctance to abandon the rhetoric of economic competition, even during an age of corporate consolidation, persisted among those who supported the status quo. “All progress has been made hitherto on the competitive principle,” Godkin proclaimed, “which means giving the prize to the best man.” “To divide the earth’s products equally,” he continued, “would be to ignore the claims of superior talent, industry, or frugality.”<sup>64</sup> The products of labor in a competitive setting, claimed Edward Atkinson, are distributed among workers “in the exact proportion to which their relative capacity and ability entitle them.”<sup>65</sup> To do otherwise would reward “stupidity, incompetency and laziness” and stifle “ambition, natural efficiency and the development of the individual.” This, in turn, would destroy the initiative and creativity which wrought innovation in art, science, literature, and law.<sup>66</sup>

Equality of opportunity did not mean equality of result. In this way, the ideology of equal opportunity naturalized inequality, since equal results denied the inherent differences among people.<sup>67</sup> Those who failed to advance economically simply illustrated the results of a competitive system rooted in presumed natural differences.

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<sup>64</sup> E. L. Godkin, “The Duty of the Education Men in a Democracy,” *The Forum*, March 1894, 42, 43.

<sup>65</sup> Edward Atkinson, “Progress from Poverty,” *The Forum*, September 1888, 31-2.

<sup>66</sup> David M. Parry, “The Trend of Trades Unionism Toward Socialism,” *American Industries*, 15 February 1903, 2. See also E. L. Godkin, “The Lessons of the Strikes,” *The Nation*, 6 May 1886, 376.

<sup>67</sup> It is possible, however, to acknowledge differences among people without predicating the distribution of economic and social rewards on these differences.

Indeed, “every effort to realize equality,” William Graham Sumner noted, “necessitates a sacrifice of liberty.”<sup>68</sup>

Most who challenged existing conditions, including many in the labor movement, populists, and social reformers, concentrated on changing the circumstances in which opportunity operated and, thus, accepted the inevitability of unequal results. Reforms were directed toward creating a level playing field on which competition could most fairly thrive. Despite this, they were often accused of trying to level economic rewards and thwarting ambition and hard work. In response, Ohio Attorney General F. S. Monnett explained his support for progressive tax laws by declaring, “I am not here to demand the equality of fortune nor the division of wealth, but to insist upon the God given right of equal opportunity.”<sup>69</sup> Exploiting available opportunity depended on personal attributes. Accordingly, while society should create conditions for fair competition, success or failure rested with the individual.<sup>70</sup> Thus most of those who objected to current concentrations of wealth did so in the name of establishing conditions that would make economic competition fair, not in the name of questioning the inequities inherent to the ideology of equal opportunity itself.

Equal opportunity provided a compelling response to critics of the economic and social impact of industrialism. In a society that guaranteed all an equal chance to acquire a greater command on wealth, the failure to “succeed” necessarily resided with individual

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<sup>68</sup> Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> “Mr. Monnett on Trusts,” *New York Times*, 28 January 1900, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Here, self-actualization is reserved exclusively for those able to successfully navigate the waters that lead to economic success. Society, then, becomes the sum of its component parts wherein each person acts to protect his or her financial self-interest as an expression of human nature. In such a society one stands completely alone. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947).

character and, by inference, could not be used to indict broader economic arrangements.<sup>71</sup> Those mired in poverty, the argument went, exhibited none of the highly prized traits—hard work, thrift, ambition—that allowed them to seize opportunities. Thus, “the indigent, poor classes are those who lack intelligent skill, industry, economy, and self-control.”<sup>72</sup> Even in the midst of the 1890s depression, it was said that “no other land has offered the individual man such opportunities of bettering his condition.”<sup>73</sup>

Social Darwinism bluntly expressed the claim of disparate rewards for disparate efforts rooted in the ideology of equal opportunity. Here, economic competition identified the most successful. “If we do not like the survival of the fittest,” Sumner stated succinctly, “we have only one possible alternative, and that is the survival of the unfittest.”<sup>74</sup> For Sumner, preserving the liberty embedded in competitive opportunity necessitated unequal outcomes: “If, then, there is liberty, the results cannot be equal.”<sup>75</sup>

Economic equality would violate the liberty of those, who through exertion had acquired

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<sup>71</sup> “He only is left behind who does not qualify himself to grasp the ever wider opportunity for comfort and for welfare which is open to him in the exact measure of his own capacity and aptitude.” Edward Atkinson, “How can Wages be Increased?” *The Forum*, July 1888, 502.

<sup>72</sup> W. T. Harris, “Edward Bellamy’s Vision,” *The Forum*, October 1889, 201. As summarized by another: “Opportunities are daily presenting themselves, to which they [the poor] pay no more attention to the souging of the wind, and as they neglect opportunities, opportunities neglect them.” Howard Crosby, “The Forgotten Cause of Poverty,” *The Forum*, August 1887, 575.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Dudley Warner, “Editor’s Study,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, August 1894, 476.

<sup>74</sup> Sumner made this point repeatedly: “Liberty, inequality, survival of the fittest; not-liberty, equality, survival of the unfittest. The former carries society forward and favors all its best members; the latter carries society downwards and favors all its worst members.” William Graham Sumner, “The Influence of Commercial Crises on Opinions about Economic Doctrines,” in *Sumner Today: Selected Essays of William Graham Sumner with Comments by American Leaders*, ed. Maurice R. Davie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 42; and William Graham Sumner, “The Challenge of the Facts,” in *Sumner Today*, 73.

<sup>75</sup> Sumner elaborated the distinction between liberty and equality and, in the process, expressed the core of equal opportunity: “Liberty of development and equality of result are therefore diametrically opposed to each other. If a group of men start on equal conditions, and compete in common enterprise, the results which they attain must differ according to inherited powers, early advantages of training, personal courage, energy, enterprise, perseverance, good sense, etc., etc.” William Graham Sumner, “What Makes the Rich Richer and the Poor Poorer,” in *Sumner Today*, 55.

more.<sup>76</sup> Most concretely manifested in Gilded Age legal reasoning, Social Darwinist thought provided justification for a series of court rulings that upheld a broad vision of property and contract rights, helped pave the way for corporate consolidation, limited the state's capacity to regulate business activities, and declared corporations persons entitled to due process.<sup>77</sup> The brief, but significant 1886 Supreme Court ruling in *Santa Clara v. Southern Pacific Railroad* found that: "The court does not wish to hear argument on the question whether the provision in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids a state to deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws, applies to these corporations. We are all of the opinion that it does."<sup>78</sup> Courts regularly issued injunctions against labor actions, making strikes and boycotts illegal, and held union leaders personally liable for business losses during labor disputes.<sup>79</sup>

Dedicated to individual rights, proponents of the ideology of equal opportunity struggled to resolve its promise of upward mobility with the need to accept economic

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<sup>76</sup> "The trick for the contract theorist," Sheldon Wolin wrote, "was to get equality to serve the ends of inequality. To accomplish this, memory was enlisted and told that it had to forget the social categories that were the marks, in some cases ineradicable marks, of inequality. By divesting the person of his or her multiple identities and replacing them with the single identity of 'the individual,' then declaring that each individual would enter society on the same terms as every other individual, the way was prepared for the modern liberal solution to the problem of justice." Sheldon S. Wolin, "Injustice and Collective Memory," in *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 39.

<sup>77</sup> For example, in 1895 the court ruled in *U.S. v. E. C. Knight Company* that the manufacturing activities of the sugar trust did not constitute commerce and it was, therefore, exempt from the provisions of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Morton J. Horowitz, *The Transformation of American Law: The Crisis of Legal Orthodoxy, 1870-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 67.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 67. Between 1890 and 1910, of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment cases brought before the U.S. Supreme Court, 19 dealt with blacks and 288 with corporations. Zinn, *A People's History*, 25.

<sup>79</sup> William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). Frustrated by the dominance of Social Darwinist reasoning among his fellow jurists, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. declared in his dissent in the 1905 *Lochner v. New York* case, which centered on limiting the hours of work, that "the Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics*." *Lochner v. New York*, 198 U.S. 45 (1905), 75.

inequities. Beyond the tension prompted by a curtailment, in the eyes of many, of the conditions that promoted fair opportunity, tension persisted within the idea of opportunity as it promised emancipation through social mobility while committing itself to an economic hierarchy of rich, middling, and poor. Equal opportunity has historically occupied conflicted terrain as it endeavored to reduce inequalities by allowing more people to participate in the economic sphere and rewarding merit over inherited wealth, while simultaneously acting as a mechanism by which to legitimate various degrees of inequality. *Getting on in the World; Or, Hints on Success in Life*, a bestselling business manual reprinted from the 1870s through the 1890s, extolled the virtues of those who, from humble origins, became “great” and “successful.” Readers were encouraged to aspire to join this group. However, they were also admonished to recognize their limits and to strive for “success” wherever they found themselves, for not all can be “great.”<sup>80</sup>

The friction in the directives of *Getting on in the World* mirrored that within the ideology of equal opportunity itself: the possibility of upsetting the social hierarchy through economic mobility while insisting that those who remained poor had no one to blame but themselves. The challenge was to encourage contentment among the lower class without curtailing their motive to work hard. The chance for economic mobility tempered dissatisfaction among laborers by offering advancement through the exhibition of ambition and industry. In a forthright exchange before a congressional committee, Jay Gould conceded as much:

*Gould:* Your best men do not care how many hours they work, or anything of that kind; they are looking to get higher up; either to own a business of their own and control it, or to get higher up in the ranks.

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<sup>80</sup> William Matthews, *Getting on in the World; Or, Hints on Success in Life* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Company, 1873), 17, 350.



*Question:* But from the necessity of the case only a very small number can expect that.

*Answer:* Well, there are a great many who have places in view all the time. Of course there are only so many places to be filled, but there are a great many that are looking after those places. There may be only one place to be filled, but there may be five hundred nice, industrious fellows who are all working for it.

*Question:* That keeps them quiet?

*Answer:* Yes, sir.<sup>81</sup>

If part of the social function of the ideology of equal opportunity involved “keep[ing] them quiet,” then perceptions of limited opportunity could prompt serious discontent. Moreover, a further contradiction inheres in the idea of equal opportunity. The desire to expand opportunity has historically involved a claim to greater participation in existing economic arrangements while simultaneously minimizing a class-based challenge to capitalist ideology. By successfully absorbing claims for greater inclusiveness, equal opportunity relieved social tensions. However, the diminution of opportunity for social advancement prompted additional social stress. And as multiple groups insisted on a reconsideration of the conditions necessary for an operative opportunity, they struggled to reconcile an ideology rooted in entrepreneurial competition with an increasingly corporate economy. Amid these demands for economic reforms that variously identified the locus of opportunity with land ownership, controlling one’s labor, or increased consumption and leisure, these activists were compelled to confront the inherent tensions within the ideology of equal opportunity.

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<sup>81</sup> Testimony of Jay Gould, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 5 September 1883, 1084.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Opportunity as Land Ownership: Booker T. Washington and the Quest for Economic Independence and Political Power**

As tensions intensified in the Northeast and Midwest between the expectations of upward mobility embedded in the promise of opportunity and concentrations of wealth amid the transition to an industrial economy that seemed to circumscribe that chance, similar tensions arose in the South, though with a distinctive regional cast. Laborers and farmers in this predominantly agricultural economy also struggled to realize equal opportunity. And the efforts of southern blacks to achieve upward mobility were complicated further by a long history of slavery and violent race relations. Despite the attempts by proponents of “New South” economic development to introduce manufacturing industries into the South with the lure of cheap labor, two out of every three southerners still depended on the land for their livelihood and cash crops, especially cotton, dominated agricultural production. Single-crop overproduction that depleted the soil, declining cotton prices, and a system that indebted farmers to merchants through a claim on future crops insured continued poverty for many. As the economic and political status of southern blacks declined following Reconstruction, grounding opportunity in land ownership in pursuit of economic independence represented, for some, an attempt to employ economic means to circumnavigate overt racism.

In a speech delivered before the Boston Unitarian Club in 1888, Tuskegee Institute principal Booker T. Washington voiced concern about the economic plight of

many southern blacks as they struggled under burdensome sharecropping, crop-lien, and tenant farming contracts. “The colored people on these plantations,” he declared, “are held in a kind of slavery that is in one sense as bad as the slavery of antebellum days.” He condemned the mortgage system as “the curse of the Negro,” a cycle of never-ending debt that “binds him, robs him of independence, allures him and winds him deeper and deeper in its meshes each year till he is lost and bewildered.”<sup>1</sup> Washington’s disquiet grew from alarming statistics that showed that in some Black Belt counties nearly four-fifths of the people lived on rented land in small, single room cabins, toiled under agreements with annual interest rates as high as forty percent, and mortgaged a significant portion of their crop to secure food.<sup>2</sup> Under such conditions, Washington asserted that the meaningful inclusion of southern blacks into the national narrative of equal opportunity resided in land ownership, which would promote economic independence and lead to social and political advancement.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than directly confront southern racism, Washington thought he could affect race relations through the nation’s dominant economic values of individual upward mobility. Though he secretly funded legal challenges to disfranchisement laws and

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<sup>1</sup> Booker T. Washington, “A Speech before the Boston Unitarian Club,” 1888, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Volume II, 1860-89, ed. Louis R. Harlan, et., al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 503. (Hereafter cited as *Washington Papers*.)

<sup>2</sup> Booker T. Washington, “An Article in the *A.M.E. Church Review*,” April 1899, in *Washington Papers*, Volume V, 97. In a laudatory profile of Washington and Tuskegee, Thomas J. Calloway, president of Alcorn A&M College in Mississippi, situated industrial education in the context of the estimated three-fourths of the black population engaged in agriculture and the “necessity of inducing them to become [land] owners as a prime condition for independent moral life.” Thomas J. Calloway, “Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute,” *The New England Magazine*, October 1897, 141.

<sup>3</sup> As Manning Marable has commented, leaders in black communities have persistently sought to sort out the relationship between political and socioeconomic rights and whether the solution to racial tension rested primarily within black communities or through persuading whites that the resolution also served their interests. Manning Marable, *Black Leadership* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), xii-xiii.

segregated transit, rarely did he voice unequivocal resistance to racism publicly. Instead he focused on economic issues. If blacks achieved sufficient economic success within the existing system they could harness that success to demand political power. Integral to this strategy were efforts to make equal opportunity meaningful for blacks in a manner that would garner economic independence. While this approach likely underestimated the depths of opposition to black economic advancement, it depended on a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between economic and political power. And for Washington, land ownership appeared the most immediate route to economic and, thus, political power for southern blacks.

The pursuit of economic independence on the land at a time of intensifying industrialization and urbanization reflected diminished economic opportunity and social mobility, along with discomfort about the dependence of wage labor associated with industrial organization. Washington sought to incorporate former slaves and their descendants into a system of free labor historically oriented around economic independence realized through property ownership or skilled craft, precisely as the system shifted toward permanent wage labor. Against this tide, Washington rooted opportunity in land ownership. This tradition went back at least to Jefferson, feared economic dependence and associated liberty and political independence with an agricultural self-sufficiency, which demonstrated one's capacity to engage in civic matters. Disdain for non-producers extended to household dependents, among them women, slaves, apprentices, and journeymen. Those who did not labor but engaged in financial or land speculation were also suspect, since their livelihood depended on other's labor. Political liberty was intimately tied to a labor-induced independence.

Numerous Gilded Age social commentators and activists attributed diminished economic opportunity to the consolidation of land in fewer and fewer hands. Thus Henry George proposed his popular single tax to end speculation in unproductive property. In his 1893 address to the American Historical Association on the “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner described a constricted frontier where the rapidity and scope of industrial development had contracted the chance to earn a living through the cultivation of one’s own land. The continent, full from Atlantic to Pacific, could no longer accommodate continued westward migration as the condition of always-present opportunity. For Turner, the hopefulness of opportunity previously embedded in the soil had vanished. But George believed that state intervention could restore widespread property ownership. Booker T. Washington shared this vision of America even as he eschewed organized political action and retained hold of land ownership as the expression of opportunity’s promise for southern blacks.

Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, established in 1881, and centered on training teachers for a growing number of southern black schools, reflected Washington’s vision of education in particular and his understanding of the place of blacks in post-Reconstruction America generally. A product of an education that emphasized technical training alongside scholarly study, Washington’s experience shaped a philosophy that he expected would bestow status on manual labor—the work, he frequently pointed out, which engaged most blacks. To that end, Tuskegee offered coursework in agriculture, blacksmithing, carpentry, masonry, dressmaking, and cooking, along with literature,

mathematics, and religion. All students engaged in classroom studies as well as manual labor, where industrial training focused on skilled crafts and agriculture.<sup>4</sup>

Though Washington expanded the site of opportunity over the course of his career beyond land ownership and skilled labor to eventually include business entrepreneurship, he remained consistent about the need to pursue economic independence and escape the dependence of wage labor. And in a predominantly agricultural South where land constituted the general means of production, property ownership offered the most direct route to such independence. For people once considered property, to own property not only held symbolic meaning. It was also economically emboldening.<sup>5</sup> And from this economic foundation Washington expected the extension to blacks of the social and political rights associated with economic success. Here, Washington confronted the relationship between economic and political power. In a society that admired wealth and uses it to award differential access to power, political influence was intimately tied to economic success. For Washington achieving political power required achieving economic security.

Washington sought to broaden the actualities of what constituted equal opportunity, and in this way he challenged existing conditions. But he also accepted the focus on individual achievement and the expectation of unequal results embedded in the

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<sup>4</sup> In his critique of Washington, James Anderson emphasized the contrast between Tuskegee's industrial programs and the classical education promoted for whites and made available to blacks during Reconstruction. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 33-78.

<sup>5</sup> Though, as Barbara Fields has noted, while land ownership "enhanced black people's sense of freedom, independence, and accomplishment," owning land did not exempt some from struggling for subsistence. Barbara J. Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); quoted in Loren Schwening, *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 172.

ideology of equal opportunity and, thus, remained bound by its contradictions.<sup>6</sup>

Washington embraced the idea of differential material rewards as an expression of merit, a fundamental element of opportunity ideology, and used it to motivate blacks in their pursuit of social and economic advancement. In this manner he upheld the status quo and limited the impact of his own critique about the operation of economic and political power.

Washington harkened back to Jeffersonian notions of land ownership and sustained a faith in skilled craft, and eventually entrepreneurship, as the means to economic independence in the midst of an advancing industrial age. Simultaneously, his support for laissez-faire economics precisely fitted his times and made him an attractive leader to many whites, minimizing fears among them about his economic programs.<sup>7</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, among others, criticized Washington for failing to appreciate the impact of New South industrialism on the agricultural idyll and the need to reconsider the place of economically and politically marginal blacks in the South. For Du Bois, political

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<sup>6</sup> Booker T. Washington, "Sowing and Reaping," "A Sunday Evening Talk," 19 April 1891, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 142-43. This aspect of equal opportunity was clearly articulated by John C. Calhoun, an Arkansas planter and grandson of the South Carolinian statesman, when he testified before Congress in 1885 that, "industrious laborers ought soon to become landowners." Adding a racial twist, Calhoun continued, "but, owing to indolence, the negroes, except where they are very judiciously managed and encouraged, fail to take advantage of the opportunities offered them to raise the necessaries of life." John C. Calhoun quoted in Ari Hoogenboom and Olivia Hoogenboom, eds. *The Gilded Age* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 52.

<sup>7</sup> C. Vann Woodward declared that "the businessmen's gospel of free enterprise, competition, and laissez-faire never had a more loyal exponent than the master of Tuskegee. Washington went back to a bygone day for his economic philosophy." C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951); quoted in Robert J. Norrell, "Booker T. Washington: Understanding the Wizard of Tuskegee," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 42 (Winter 2003-2004), 96. But if Washington was nostalgic then so too were vast numbers of businessmen, politicians, lawyers, and judges.

action was primary. But Washington ultimately developed a conflicted relationship with the ideology of equal opportunity that allowed him to accept its inherent inequality and to simultaneously demand for blacks a larger stake in owning productive property.

Washington never considered his emphasis on economic advancement separate from a claim to improved social status and expanded political power.

Often characterized as so practically minded that he lacked any animating ideology, Washington's attempt to grapple with capitalism as both a problem and a solution for blacks has not commanded scholarly attention.<sup>8</sup> Capitalism as a problem demanded removing barriers to participation by blacks in the marketplace, and capitalism as a solution depended on Washington's faith in the market as the lever for greater social status and political power. This view arose, in part, from his ideas about labor.

Washington explicitly connected the skills taught at Tuskegee with black economic advancement through independent craft, entrepreneurship, and, especially land ownership. In a society where financial achievement constituted a fundamental value, effective political power and influence would emerge from such a foundation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This assessment has also been challenged recently by Michael West, who identified an ideology of race relations in Washington's thought that sought to reconcile racism and democracy. It also, according to West, helped to justify and sustain Jim Crow policies as well as to shape the later civil rights movement that struggled to dismantle that system. Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2006.

<sup>9</sup> As James Anderson emphasized, most Tuskegee graduates became teachers, rather than land-owning farmers, independent craftsmen, or small business owners. Washington hoped to establish and promote an educational model that would spread across the South. While Anderson characterized this program of combined manual labor and teacher training as part of a broader effort to imbue the value of "hard toil" into prospective teachers who would then pass it along to their own students, Washington remained certain that improved economic status would lead to expanded social and political rights and believed that the training at Tuskegee offered the skills to make this possible. Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 33-4.



Washington's economic focus is often reduced to support for the exploitative policies of capitalism and colonialism.<sup>10</sup> Eric Foner, for example, identified Washington with a "conservative ideology" that "eschewed political action in favor of economic self-help."<sup>11</sup> And Louis Harlan, Washington's most thorough biographer, declared him a "conservative by just about any measure."<sup>12</sup> Washington's "conservative" appellation stems from his central concern with economic self-sufficiency for blacks, his apparent failure to acknowledge the obstacle of racism in applying a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality to a recently freed population, and his concessions to an increasingly segregated South. He is generally contrasted with more "radical" activists, especially Du

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<sup>10</sup> Sven Beckert, "From Tuskegee to Togo: The Problem of Freedom in the Empire of Cotton," *Journal of American History* 92 (September 2005): 508. Beckert argued that Washington's "ideas about the future of black people in the United States and elsewhere in effect made him receptive to the schemes of European colonial powers." Noteworthy, however, is that economic independence among the natives of Togo provided them with the foundation from which to resist colonial economic power. The Ewe "enjoyed access to land, the tools of subsistence, and power and therefore did not perceive a reallocation of their labor to commodity production as emancipatory" (p. 524). Why access to such economic means should not apply in the same way to southern blacks, as advocated by Washington, is not explained. See also Brian Kelly, "Sentinels for New South Industry: Booker T. Washington, Industrial Accommodation and Black Workers in the Jim Crow South," *Labor History* 44 (August 2003): 337-57. Kelly brings a welcome dose of class to his analysis of Washington and argued that his economic programs exacerbated class distinctions within the black community, ultimately injuring the black working class by satisfying "elite requirements for a tractable workforce," to aid in the growth of New South industries (p. 339). While Washington's embrace of capitalist values necessarily encompassed its inherent class divisions, his understanding of the relationship between economic and political power in such a context led him to potentially more disruptive conclusions than those suggested by Kelly.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers), 546. Harsher critiques of Washington come from, for example, Oliver C. Cox, who described Washington's efforts as that of "controlling the masses" while he "abandoned their common cause" and "demanded less for the Negro people than that which the ruling class had already conceded." Oliver C. Cox, "The Leadership of Booker T. Washington," *Social Forces* 30 (October 1951): 95. For a recent and more sympathetic view, Robert Norrell claims that historians have too often "confused the style with the substance of Booker T. Washington" and too easily fall prey to the notion that "change is the result exclusively, or even predominantly, of protest." Norrell, "Booker T. Washington: Understanding the Wizard of Tuskegee," 107.

<sup>12</sup> Louis R. Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation," in *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 11.

Bois, who encouraged protest among African Americans against late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Jim Crow and disfranchisement laws.

This assessment of Washington's reluctance to denounce publicly social segregation and disfranchisement led critics to reduce his programs to "accommodationist self-help."<sup>13</sup> In such accounts, Washington willingly conceded segregationist demands in exchange for financial aid for Tuskegee and used the school's training programs to satisfy the labor needs of southern white elites. But in a hostile South and a pervasively racist nation, Washington maintained that improved conditions for southern blacks demanded economic strength. He argued that "as an entering wedge there is an absence of prejudice against the colored man in the South in the matter of business that counts for a great deal."<sup>14</sup> Though Washington overstated the "absence of prejudice" in regard to blacks in business, he did argue that exploiting such an opening, however slight, could advance their economic, and eventually, their social and political position in an increasingly violent South.

The racism of many Tuskegee supporters also has obscured how Washington's philosophy aimed to extend political power to blacks through economic independence. Tuskegee trustee William H. Baldwin, Jr., president of the Long Island Railroad,

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<sup>13</sup> Scholarly work has revealed Washington's covert financial support for a number of court cases initiated to challenge Jim Crow facilities on railroad cars, voting discrimination, and the exclusion of blacks from juries. Washington never publicly acknowledged his role in these cases or used it to answer critics. Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 297-98 and Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 247-49.

<sup>14</sup> Booker T. Washington, "A Speech before the New York Congressional Club," 16 January 1893, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 286. While Washington favored that "the Negro give up no right guaranteed to him by the Constitution of the United States," he remain convinced that the best way "to secure the opportunity to exercise" those rights "is to make himself the most useful and independent citizen in his community." Booker T. Washington, "Speech at Alumni Dinner, Harvard University," 24 June 1896, in *Washington Papers*, Volume I, 104-5.

concluded that higher education was anathema for blacks and that “their opportunity was to be taught the dignity of manual labor and how to perform it.” According to Baldwin, Tuskegee should educate blacks “for their natural environment.”<sup>15</sup> But, as many have noted, Washington’s success depended on his ability to use language adroitly such that whites heard one thing and blacks another (though eventually this circumscribed his capacity to publicly criticize segregation).<sup>16</sup> Washington accepted Baldwin’s money and used it to promote his own version of black advancement, which aimed for greater economic independence than Baldwin’s remarks encompassed.<sup>17</sup>

Washington’s dramatic biography captured the attention and respect of many. Born into slavery, he walked hundreds of miles after emancipation to pursue an education, became a teacher, founded an educational institution, assumed national prominence as the declared spokesperson for his race, and dined with a President. Washington effectively used his story to advance Tuskegee by proclaiming himself an exemplar of his own educational philosophy. He published two autobiographical works in short succession. *The Story of My Life and Work* (1900), ghostwritten by journalist

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<sup>15</sup> W. H. Baldwin, Jr., “The Present Problem of Negro Education,” *Journal of Social Science* 37 (December 1899): 54, 55. Baldwin continued: “In the negro is the opportunity of the South. Time has proved that he is best fitted to perform the heavy labor in the Southern states. . . . He will willingly fill the more menial positions and do the heavy work, at less wages, than the American white man or any foreign race which has yet to come to our shores.”

<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline M. Moore, *Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2003), 63; and August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), 101, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Harlan, “Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation,” 2.

Edgar Webber, covered his public career and mainly consisted of speeches and previously published essays. Washington expressed displeasure with the volume and scholars have subsequently identified numerous factual errors in the book. The second, *Up from Slavery*, published the following year, bore Washington's imprint and became a national bestseller. The book begins with Washington's slave childhood, includes the early years of emancipation, and continues through his emergence as a national figure. *Up from Slavery* describes the formative influence of his attendance at Hampton Institute in southeastern Virginia, where he first learned to "love labour, not alone for its financial value, but for labour's own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants brings."<sup>18</sup>

Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, led by Samuel C. Armstrong provided Washington a model of industrial education. The school mandated manual labor alongside academic studies and produced African American teachers who were expected to carry forward to their students the ideals about work and discipline instilled through their own training.<sup>19</sup> The animating philosophy held that the skills, ability, and temperament for economic self-sufficiency would yield the greatest promise for black

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<sup>18</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 1901, in *Washington Papers*, Volume I, 252.

<sup>19</sup> While James Anderson correctly drew attention to Hampton, and later Tuskegee, as schools that trained teachers in an ideology that celebrated the work ethic, this assessment does not comprise the extent of what Washington imagined as the ultimate reward of economic independence. Washington's administration of Tuskegee allowed him to explain to whites that the school trained blacks to fulfill southern labor needs while he explained to blacks that the school offered the promise of an industrial education that would lead to greater economic independence, all of which allowed him to establish an influential black-run institution that exceeded the Hampton model of manual training. Anderson's deeper disagreement with Washington is over the relationship between economic and social rights. Anderson declared that Hampton's "social and educational ideology was inherently opposed to the political and economic advancement of black Southerners and therefore oppressive" because it failed to "encourage blacks to pursue basic political and social justice." But for Washington, improved economic conditions for blacks, achieved through economic independence, would allow greater social and political freedoms. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 53.

advancement.<sup>20</sup> Armstrong attributed the “great trouble” with newly freed slaves not to institutional factors, but to a “deficiency of character.” Work provided the only means for improvement, for in the end, “he has got to work to succeed.” Advancing an argument that Washington would later echo, Armstrong maintained that while slavery had taught blacks to labor, it had not taught them to respect labor, a transition fundamental to their future success, and by implication, the resolution of the “race problem.” Armstrong’s efforts to alleviate blacks’ difficult circumstances depended on including them in the rubric of equal opportunity—“a chance to work his way up”—though Armstrong almost certainly underestimated the historical and social forces that impeded blacks in the competitive economic arena.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after Washington graduated from Hampton, Armstrong recruited him to return as a teacher and to administer the school’s educational program for Native Americans. Later, when approached by trustees who had gathered to form Tuskegee, Armstrong recommended Washington as principal, declaring him his best student.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Washington later described Hampton programs as an “opportunity for class-room education and for practical training in industrial life, opportunity to learn thrift, economy, and push. Amid Christian influences I was surrounded by an atmosphere of business, and a spirit of self-help that seemed to awaken every faculty in me and cause me for the first time to realize what it means to be a man instead of a piece of property.” Quoted by Max B. Thrasher, *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, 26 February 1899; quoted in Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel C. Armstrong, “Industrial Training,” *First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question, June 4, 5, 6 1890* (Boston: Geo. H. Ellis, 1890), 13, 15.

<sup>22</sup> The late 1880s witnessed an expansion in the number of schools dedicated to black industrial training, in part fueled by the philanthropy of the John F. Slater Fund, established in 1881. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 66.

During the early years of his career, Washington repeatedly expressed concern about the difficulties faced by southern black agricultural laborers. In post-Reconstruction America, nearly ninety percent of the black population resided in the South and of these, eighty percent lived in rural areas. The hope for extended land ownership among blacks after emancipation had quickly faded and control of productive agricultural property remained disproportionately in the hands of whites. When federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877, blacks owned less than three million acres of land and by 1890, 82 percent of black farmers worked as tenants.<sup>23</sup> As the economic circumstances of southern blacks declined, so too did their social status. Redeemed states passed disfranchisement laws, lynching accelerated, and the South embraced Jim Crow.

Despite deteriorating southern race relations, Washington warned that northern migration offered no panacea.<sup>24</sup> He distrusted the pervasive racism of white northerners, who excluded blacks from craft unions and erected multiple obstacles in the path of their economic success. Washington did not envision a biracial unity based on class interests, but maintained that success within the existing economic structure would elevate blacks economically and socially. Such realization of opportunity depended on the dignity of labor, property ownership, self-sufficiency, and independent proprietorship. As Ralph Bunche noted, that Washington “should advocate the dignity of labor but not the importance of its organized unity in an industrial society, did not appear inconsistent to

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<sup>23</sup> Manning Marable, “Booker T. Washington and Black Accommodation,” in *Black Leadership*, 25. See also Schweninger, *Black Property Owners in the South*, 148, 160. Schweninger detailed black property acquisition throughout the South, and emphasized the regional differences between the lower and upper South, where in the latter blacks enjoyed greater land and business ownership. *Ibid.*, 161, 176, 179.

<sup>24</sup> “[M]uch in the way of idleness, crime and poverty in connection with the life of my people in the North grows out of the fact that so many of the industries and avenues of business, so many of the opportunities for earning a living are closed against them.” Washington, “A Great Triumph for Negro Progress,” 19.

him.”<sup>25</sup> For Washington, the North offered only the economic dependence of wage and factory work.

Instead, he urged blacks to stay in the South where they could enjoy the “opportunity to buy the foundation for a high civilization.” White landowners, Washington said, even those holding the “old family homestead . . . where generations of slaveholders have been born and reared,” would sell land to blacks.<sup>26</sup> While such statements appeared to minimize the impact of racism, at the intersection of race and class Washington chose to emphasize economics. Economic independence, realized ideally through land ownership and control of productive property, could best be achieved in the South.<sup>27</sup> He also disparaged the overcrowding and compressed living conditions of cities in favor of romantic celebrations about nature and rural life.

Washington’s exhortations to stay in the South also sprang from regional loyalty. Economic independence assumed not only an individual, but a sectional cast as he imagined a South emancipated from its dependence on the North and Midwest, to which the economically independent black was integral. “The time is coming when the South will cease to depend on the North for her manufactured wares,” Washington predicted,

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<sup>25</sup> Ralph J. Bunche, “The Programs of Organizations Devoted to the Improvement of the Status of the American Negro,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 8 (July 1939): 540.

<sup>26</sup> Booker T. Washington, “A Speech before the Philosophical Lyceum of Lincoln University,” 26 April 1888, in *Washington Papers*, Volume II, 441. Not all agreed with Washington’s assessment about the possibilities for black land ownership in the South. Whitelaw Reid, a reporter for the *New York Herald* concluded that, “the feeling against ownership of the soil by the Negro is so strong that the man who should sell small tracts to them would be in actual physical danger.” Whitelaw Reid; quoted in Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch, “The Ex-Slave in the Post-Bellum South: A Study of the Economic Impact of Racism in a Market Environment,” *Journal of Economic History* 33 (March 1973): 135.

<sup>27</sup> Because of its rootedness in small land ownership and its celebration of labor, Washington biographer Louis Harlan labeled this economic program “peasant conservatism.” Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader*, viii.

“and when she will cease to keep her smoke houses and corn cribs in the West.”<sup>28</sup>

Though agriculturally-focused, Washington’s faith in southern economic opportunity paralleled advocates of the New South who promoted southern industrial development in an effort to increase the region’s national relevance.

In February 1892, Washington began a series of annual conferences at Tuskegee for the “common, hardworking farmer” to explore black working and living conditions and to identify how Tuskegee students could be educated to help “the masses of colored people to lift themselves up.”<sup>29</sup> Washington acknowledged the economic orientation of the conference and conceded that “it has not been our intention in these discussions to take up all that was vital to the Negro race.” Other organizations were better suited to engage the issues of suffrage, lynching, Jim Crow laws, and social relations between the races.<sup>30</sup> The conference sought to improve the economic circumstances of southern blacks with an expectation that economic strength would advance their economic and social position.

Washington blamed economic conditions for the increasingly large number of blacks headed north. “As to the cause [of northern migration],” he wrote, “I feel quite sure it is to be fo[u]nd in the fact that the colored people are tired of working hard all the year and getting nothing for it. It is simply impossible under the present mortgage system

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<sup>28</sup> Washington, “A Speech before the Philosophical Lyceum of Lincoln University,” 450.

<sup>29</sup> In the announcement, Washington noted that the conference was not for “politicians” or “leading colored people,” but for the “masses.” “A Circular Announcing the Tuskegee Negro Conference,” January 1892, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 209. David Sehat suggests that the conference also served Washington’s fundraising agenda, with appeals to “our generous friends” for financial support. David Sehat, “The Civilizing Mission of Booker T. Washington,” *The Journal of Southern History* LXXIII (May 2007): 339-40.

<sup>30</sup> Washington, “An Article in the *A.M.E. Church Review*,” 98.



for them to get ahead.”<sup>31</sup> The solution, he concluded, required blacks to remain in the South, become landowners, and claim their economic independence. “We regard the South as our home,” Washington declared, “and we urge all to avail themselves of the opportunity now afforded to buy land and other property at exceptionally low rates and share, with those around us, in the development of the country and in the increasing value of our property.”<sup>32</sup> Though again Washington minimized publicly the impact of racism in such calls to action, he remained convinced that blacks could exploit an opening in the ideology of equal opportunity to advance their status. Economic independence for a predominantly agricultural southern black population depended on land ownership, and thereby control of the means of production, as the expression of opportunity. And political and social power depended on this.

Through education, the introduction of new technologies, and advanced farming methods Washington hoped to change the circumstances of sharecroppers. He encouraged farmers to resist the allure of cash crops, which perpetuated a cycle of economic dependence.<sup>33</sup> Instead, Tuskegee aimed to teach farmers to “raise corn and potatoes and beans, to produce pork, and in fact raise first what will feed them rather than depend upon an outside market.” “It has too long been,” Washington continued, “the rule

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<sup>31</sup> Booker T. Washington to George Washington Cable, 1 February 1889, in *Washington Papers*, Volume II, 512.

<sup>32</sup> Booker T. Washington, “An Account of the Tuskegee Negro Conference,” 21 February 1893, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 299.

<sup>33</sup> Conference participants were encouraged to buy land and cultivate more food crops. According to one attendee, “buying land makes better citizens”; said another, “to own property is to own character; when a man who owns land gives his word he knows he can’t run away.” “An Account of the Tuskegee Negro Conference,” 525.

in the South to raise only cotton and buy all food products.”<sup>34</sup> H. L. Wayland, a Philadelphia-based Baptist minister, declared that the southern black, as with men “of whatever color,” should strive to “acquire property, own his little house and his lot and his mule and his tools and his unmortgaged crop for this year and the next.” Such a program, he insisted, would insure that blacks “shall be truly independent and self-supporting.”<sup>35</sup> Thus could blacks emancipate themselves from debt and enjoy economic independence as the foundation for meaningful political power.<sup>36</sup> “The masses of our people are dependent upon the white people of the South, in a large degree, for employment, education and protection of life and property,” noted Washington.<sup>37</sup> Economic independence, not suffrage, would go the farthest toward remedying this circumstance.

Washington’s understanding of the relationship between economic and political power also informed his ideas about race relations. Economic success among blacks

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<sup>34</sup> “An Interview in the Chicago *Inter Ocean*, 26 January 1895, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 504.

<sup>35</sup> H. L. Wayland, “The Higher Education of the Colored People of the South,” *Journal of Social Science* 34 (November 1896): 70, 75. Wayland also noted that the black man “should learn that he is to look to the state, not for fifty acres and a mule, but for the protection of life and property and for equality of rights for himself and his children. The rest he must achieve himself.” *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Washington was consistent in his understanding of the historical relationship between economics and politics. He considered slavery an essentially economic institution that ended in the North when it was no longer financially remunerative and continued in the South where agricultural slave labor proved more productive and profitable. Booker T. Washington, *The Future of the American Negro*, 1899, in *Washington Papers*, Volume V, 306. Louis Harlan called this book, which consisted of a compilation of earlier writings and speeches, the most complete formulation of Washington’s views on race.

<sup>37</sup> Booker T. Washington, “The President’s Annual Address,” *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League, New York City, August 16, 17 & 18, 1905* (Nashville: n.p., 1905), 65-7. Though certainly no socialist, Washington’s focus on economic independence paralleled Eugene Debs’ assessment that questions of “social equality” masked the economic dependency of blacks. “The Negro, given economic freedom, will not ask the white man any social favors; and the burning question of ‘social equality’ will disappear like mist before the sunrise.” Eugene V. Debs, “The Negro in the Class Struggle,” *International Socialist Review*, November 1903 in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, with an introduction by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Hermitage Press, 1948), 65.

would provide not only a foundation for political power but also promote racial integration. Black economic independence, according to Washington, would ultimately establish economic *interdependence* between whites and blacks, usher in “peace and union,” and provide the basis for integration where “the interests of the two races would be identical.”<sup>38</sup> Rather than the perpetual economic dependence of blacks on whites, Washington aimed to create a mutual need where whites also depended on the economic contribution of blacks. This “interlocking of . . . business interests” between the races would help bury the “hatchet of race discord . . . so deeply and securely, that it shall never be disinterred.”<sup>39</sup>

Opposition to Washington among blacks mounted as his influence grew and as social conditions for southern blacks deteriorated. Rather than directly confront these realities, critics charged, Washington simply focused on economic self-help. Further, his exclusive focus on economic matters narrowly construed the meaning of emancipation and failed to acknowledge the “large majestic and abiding things” which comprised humanity.<sup>40</sup> Washington, his detractors said, failed to recognize the persistent limits on economic opportunity for blacks or to acknowledge that economic improvement for some did not necessarily alleviate racist attitudes or expand social and civil rights. In fact, “most whites objected fundamentally to the rise in status represented by a black skilled

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<sup>38</sup> Booker T. Washington, “A Speech at Old South Meeting House,” 15 December 1891, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 200.

<sup>39</sup> Booker T. Washington, “A Report of the Triennial Meeting of the Hampton Institute Alumni Association,” 23 May 1884, in *Washington Papers*, Volume II, 252.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Crummell, “Civilization, the Primal Need of the Race” in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 174.

worker, business proprietor, or landowner.”<sup>41</sup> John Hope, future president of Atlanta University and Morehouse College, complained that “if money, education, and honesty will not bring me as much privilege, as much equality as they bring to any American citizen, then they are to me a curse, and not a blessing.”<sup>42</sup> Washington’s refusal to credit the importance of political agitation upset many leading members of the African American community, including Monroe Trotter, who noted that Washington’s attitude ignored the success of political organizing in accelerating the demise of slavery.<sup>43</sup>

But Washington insisted that economic success, defined firstly as independence through land ownership, and secondarily through craft and business entrepreneurship, would allow blacks to claim their full complement of political and social rights. Effective political influence would expand alongside growing economic strength. Where race and class intersected in a violent South, Washington argued that economic advancement offered blacks a route that would accrue to them the necessary power to address the issue of race. He also argued that economic independence would most immediately relieve the plight of southern blacks who continued to reside in often desperate financial circumstances.

Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansmen* and a well-known racist raised the alarm about the implications for race relations in Washington’s push for black economic

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<sup>41</sup> Robert J. Norrell, “Understanding the Wizard: Another Look at the Age of Booker T. Washington,” in *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up From Slavery 100 Years Later*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 77.

<sup>42</sup> John Hope quoted in Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Viking Press, 2001), 64.

<sup>43</sup> Monroe Trotter, “Editorial,” Boston *Guardian*, 4 April 1903, in *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Francis L. Broderick and August Meier (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 28.

independence. In contrast to those who accused Washington of creating a servile class of black workers, Dixon understood him to be “training them *all* to be masters of men, to be independent, to own and operate their own industries, plant their own fields, buy and sell their own goods, and in every shape and form destroy the last vestige of dependence on the white man for anything.”<sup>44</sup> Though Dixon’s concern arose from anxieties about the diminished place of southern whites implicit in Washington’s programs, he accurately assessed the latter’s broader goals.

Washington made his famous statement, “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress,” at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta.<sup>45</sup> At the time, Washington had operated Tuskegee for nearly fifteen years in a white-dominated South increasingly hostile toward blacks. Washington consistently struggled to navigate this terrain and to find within it a place for black success. In his own assessment of the speech, which revealed his understanding of the relationship between economic and political power, Washington said that he had “tried to emphasize that political agitation

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Dixon, *Saturday Evening Post*, August 1905; quoted in Norrell, “Booker T. Washington: Understanding the Wizard of Tuskegee,” 104.

<sup>45</sup> Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Compromise Speech,” 18 September 1895, in *Washington Papers*, Volume I, 75, emphasis added. As Louis Harlan noted, the speech emphasized racial mutuality as much as it accepted social segregation: “The emphasis throughout the speech was on mutuality, that identity of interest on which he and Henry Grady [champion of the New South] had agreed a decade earlier. Millions of black hands would either aid the white man in pulling the load upward or would weigh against him and pull the load downward.” Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader*, 218.

alone would not save the Negro, that back of politics he must have industry, thrift, intelligence and *property*.”<sup>46</sup>

Washington told his white Atlanta audience many things they wanted to hear. He excoriated blacks who expected to start atop the ladder of economic and social success and projected an apparent disdain for black engagement with “high brow” cultural activities. To many southern whites, Washington symbolized the end of contentious Reconstruction-era policies and represented values that could curtail the threat of a growing biracial Populist movement that aimed to nationalize transportation and communication networks and called for cooperation among farmers. Northern whites sought in Washington support for the expansion of northern capital in the South and relief from persistent racial troubles.<sup>47</sup> The *New York Tribune* editorialized that, “today when men think of American freedom they can do no better than to think of Booker T. Washington’s oration at Atlanta.”<sup>48</sup> The *Washington Post* declared Washington’s speech “the most interesting and significant utterance” of the exposition.<sup>49</sup> In this context, Washington appears a tool of southern and northern economic white elites who encouraged blacks to “cast down your bucket where you are,” work hard, persevere, accept present social conditions, and expect an appropriate reward for good behavior.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Booker T. Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work*, 1900, in *Washington Papers*, Volume I, 68.

<sup>47</sup> Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader*, 204, 227-28.

<sup>48</sup> “What New York Says,” *Atlanta Journal*, 19 September 1895, 1.

<sup>49</sup> “The Speech of the Occasion,” *Washington Post*, 22 September 1895, 6. Washington received numerous letters of congratulations from both whites and blacks following the speech, including from W. E. B. Du Bois, who characterized it as “a word fitly spoken.” W. E. B. Du Bois to Booker T. Washington, 24 September 1895, in *Washington Papers*, Volume IV, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Washington, “Atlanta Compromise Speech,” 74.

The pursuit of “high culture,” Washington intoned, ignored that “the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands” and, thus, undermined the respect such labor deserved. Washington trusted the promise of opportunity: merit would be rewarded and respected.<sup>51</sup> Thus he could declare that “no race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized.”<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to the laudatory praise from many that greeted Washington’s speech, immediate criticism arose from within the black community about the lecture and its possible implications. These disputes portended future struggles over leadership within the black community, exemplified by the 1906 founding of the Niagara Movement, followed by the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1910. *The Washington Bee*, a leading black newspaper, described the speech as “nothing more than an apology for the white negro haters of the South.” Beyond challenging Washington’s concessions on social equality, the *Bee* castigated his economic program, noted the need for black professionals, and asked: “Why should we confine ourselves alone to industrial education?”<sup>53</sup> Others worried that Washington’s

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<sup>51</sup> Washington declared that “there is something in human nature which always makes an individual recognize and reward merit, no matter under what color of skin merit is found.” Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 297.

<sup>52</sup> Washington, “Atlanta Compromise Speech,” 76. He often invoked the experience of Irish and Jewish immigrants to buttress his case who, like members of his race, initially faced discrimination but after achieving a measure of economic success were, according to Washington, fully accepted into society. “Those who have possessed the property and intelligence have exercised the greatest control of government, regardless of colour, race, or geographical location.” Washington Gladden took exception to Washington’s assessment, commenting that, “Mr. Washington emphasizes the argument that if the Negro will but succeed in a material way all doors will be open to him. But that is not quite certain. The history of the Jews is evidence that industry and thrift do not disarm race prejudice.” Washington, *The Future of the American Negro*, in *Washington Papers*, Volume V, 383. See also Booker T. Washington, “A Speech Delivered before the Women’s New England Club,” 27 January 1890, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 28. Washington Gladden quoted in Sehat, “The Civilizing Mission of Booker T. Washington,” 356.

<sup>53</sup> “Apologizing for Wrongs,” *The Washington Bee*, 26 October 1895, 4. Others also took exception to Washington’s seeming concessions on issues of social equality. Five months after Washington’s success in Atlanta, John Hope, president of Atlanta University, shared his thoughts about social segregation in a not so

implicit dismissal of higher education would encourage the “pernicious idea that Industrial Education of a low grade and the improvement of the economic conditions of the Negroes, is the chief end to be aimed at, and that the higher education of the Negroes, college training that gives breadth and culture is not to be expected or desired.”<sup>54</sup> Such critics challenged Washington’s emphasis on industrial training and declared that “when the freedman regards himself as qualified to earn a support by mental work he is unwilling to accept manual labor.”<sup>55</sup> Economic improvement would not provide a foundation for these higher activities, as Washington claimed. Rather, improved economic conditions “will come as the result of higher training.”<sup>56</sup>

Such sentiments became a constant refrain in the growing disapproval of Washington’s program.<sup>57</sup> But Washington steadfastly asserted that higher education did

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veiled critique of Washington: “I regard it as cowardly and dishonest for any of our colored men to tell white people and colored people that we are not struggling for equality. . . . Now catch your breath, for . . . I am going to say we demand social equality. . . . If equality, political, economic and social is the boon of other men in this great country of ours, then equality, political, economic and social is what we demand.” John Hope quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1951), 759.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Jefferson Morgan to Booker T. Washington, 14 February 1896, in *Washington Papers*, Volume IV, 117-18. In 1898, Morgan authored *The Negro in America and the Ideal American Republic* which, among other things, called for racial and sexual equality and the same schooling practices for all, regardless of race or gender.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Muldrop Logan quoted in Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., “The African-American Experience,” in *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1996), 145.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Jefferson Morgan to Booker T. Washington, 14 February 1896, in *Washington Papers*, Volume IV, 117-18.

<sup>57</sup> Lyman Abbott, at Mohonk, used the idea of equal opportunity to support higher education for blacks: “If the Negro is thus to live with us on terms of industrial and political equality, [though he earlier clarified, not social equality] with all avenues open before him, then all educational avenues are to be open before him. I do not disesteem the importance of primary education or the importance of industrial education. . . . Nevertheless, I think that there is some danger lest we think the Negro is to be set off in a class by himself, and educated for a particular function, sphere, or place.” For Abbott, these conditions were a necessary precursor to the realization of equal opportunity. Only then could “every man find his own place by the measure of his striving and ability.” Ultimately, “with a free field and an open race-course, let every man



little to aid southern black agricultural workers who toiled under the crop-lien and sharecropping systems, and who had little hope of joining what Du Bois called the “Talented Tenth.”<sup>58</sup> Washington concluded that these critics were either elite intellectuals, hailed from the North, or both. In any case, they “know almost nothing about the Negro” and, more damning, they were “ignorant in regard to the actual needs of the masses of the coloured people in the South to-day.”<sup>59</sup> Washington maintained that Tuskegee’s programs formed the foundation on which to build the “higher” elements of life. Industrial education, which would lead to economic independence, served “not as an end, but as a means.”<sup>60</sup> A sustained certainty that success within the economic rubric of equal opportunity would advance blacks socially and politically compelled Washington to demand an equal place for blacks within the competitive arena, itself a challenge to the status quo. This certainty emerged from his continued faith in the economic

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find his own place by his own courage, energy, and enterprise.” Remarks of Lyman Abbott, *First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> Du Bois later chafed against the constraints of what he called the “Tuskegee Machine,” an indication of Washington’s control over philanthropy, black owned newspapers, fraternal organizations, and political appointments. These disagreements became increasingly personal. But in many ways the philosophical differences between Du Bois and Washington that became so public began as disputes centered on class distinctions, as Washington focused on trying to alleviate the acute economic reality for most southern blacks under the duress of enormous debt while Du Bois extolled the virtues of the Talented Tenth. It was these “exceptional men” who would save the race. For Du Bois, the pressing problem involved “developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.” W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” September 1903; quoted in Broderick and Meier, *Negro Protest Thought*, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Booker T. Washington, “Extracts from *My Larger Education*,” 1911, in *Washington Papers*, Volume I, 434. Du Bois biographer David Levering Lewis argued that in large measure, Du Bois and Washington spoke past each other as they tried to address race relations in different regions, though he concluded that Du Bois spoke more toward the future and Washington to the past. David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 502.

<sup>60</sup> Booker T. Washington, “Industrial Training for the Negro,” *The Independent*, 27 January 1898, in *Washington Papers*, Volume IV, 373.

independence he associated with entrepreneurial opportunity, despite increasing economic consolidation.

The assertion that economic independence would lead to an expanded enjoyment of social rights emerged from Washington's view about the operation of political and economic power. For many, voting constituted the most overt expression of political power. In support of the Fifteenth Amendment Wendell Phillips claimed that "a man with a ballot in his hand is the master of the situation. He defines all his other rights. What is not already given to him, he takes. . . . The Ballot is opportunity, education, fair play, right to office, and elbow room."<sup>61</sup> Du Bois declared that without the vote one could not protect one's rights or defend one's economic interests.<sup>62</sup> "With the right to vote goes everything," he explained, and "everywhere the laborer, with ballot in hand, is voting open the gates of Opportunity and Peace."<sup>63</sup> Disfranchisement, according to Du Bois, contributed to the difficult economic conditions of southern blacks: "When you

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<sup>61</sup> Wendell Phillips, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 20 March 1869; quoted in J. R. Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 202.

<sup>62</sup> Kelly Miller echoed this view in 1903, as did The National Negro Committee on Mr. Washington in 1910. Kelly Miller, "Washington's Policy," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 18 September 1903, 8; and "The National Negro Committee on Mr. Washington, 1910" in *Booker T. Washington and His Critics: Black Leadership in Crisis*, ed. Hugh Hawkins (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company, 1974), 93, 121-22.

<sup>63</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Niagara Movement: Address to the Country," 1906, in Du Bois, "The Souls of Black Folk," 184-85, 186. According to historian Dylan Penningroth, "Winning the right to vote for black men was arguably the most important struggle of the decades after the Civil War." At the same time, however, he also acknowledges the importance of white control over land and movable property, those claims on which slavery was based, and concedes that "if ex-masters could hold onto them, they would effectively keep blacks under their thumb." Penningroth presents a compelling argument about the social importance of property ownership, but a failure to distinguish between personal and productive property limits a more thorough analysis of political and economic power relations. Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 111, 142.

have the leading classes of a country with the ideal of slavery in their minds and the laboring classes ignorant and without political power, there is but one system that can ensue and that is serfdom.”<sup>64</sup>

Washington rejected these arguments. Instead, he asserted that “until there is industrial independence it is hardly possible to have a pure ballot.”<sup>65</sup> In a society where control of productive property translated into political power and influence, economic strength would earn blacks expanded political and social rights. According to Washington, when a black man owns the mortgage on a white man’s house “that he can foreclose at will,” that “white man won’t drive that Negro away from the polls when he sees him going up to vote.”<sup>66</sup> Without economic independence, ideally rooted in land ownership, the exercise of political rights diminished. While Washington relied on the philanthropic largesse of white supporters to sustain Tuskegee, a constraint on his own economic independence that he clearly recognized, his programs revolved around economic advancement for and within the black community.

Here, Washington implicitly questioned the efficacy of voting as an articulation of political power. Amid intensified Jim Crow laws and the deepening impoverishment of blacks, Washington concluded that the acquisition of productive agricultural land and the skills to secure a living were more likely to offer substantive relief than casting ballots.

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<sup>64</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Economic Revolution in the South,” in Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro in the South: His Economic Progress in Relation to his Moral and Religious Development* (Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs, 1907; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1973), 91 (page citations are to the reprint edition). For Du Bois, “Without the right to vote there is no real freedom and no chance for free development.” W. E. B. Du Bois, “Lecture in Baltimore,” 1906, in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 76.

<sup>65</sup> Booker T. Washington, “A Speech at the Institute of Arts and Sciences,” 30 September 1896, in *Washington Papers*, Volume IV, 217.

<sup>66</sup> Washington, “A Speech before the New York Congressional Club,” 287.

Still stinging from the betrayals he associated with Reconstruction-era politics and disapproving of Gilded Age political corruption, Washington doubted that the vote could substantially relieve black's economic subservience.<sup>67</sup> In a society animated by an ideology that assigned political power to the economically successful, Washington believed that economic success for blacks would lead to political power. William Lloyd Garrison called "monetary independence, the power of self-support and the possession of property honestly earned," the "first essential."<sup>68</sup> And even Du Bois, early in his career, argued that if the "doors of economic opportunity" were opened to southern blacks, integrated political cooperation would follow.<sup>69</sup> Though Du Bois ultimately reached different conclusions than Washington, particularly regarding the impact of Jim Crow on economic development, he did acknowledge that "to be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> August Meier, in *Negro Thought in America*, identified protest "against inequality of opportunity" as integral to the anti-Bookerite and "radical" position. Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 78.

<sup>68</sup> "Address of William Lloyd Garrison," *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League, Boston, MA, August 23 & 24, 1900* (Nashville: n.p., 1901), 88. William Lloyd Garrison echoed Washington's ideas about the importance of economic independence, exhorting African Americans "to be your own employers as speedily as possible." "If you are farmers," he continued, "do not rest until you control the land from which you gain your living. If you are mechanics, or traders, seek first to gain a home without a mortgage," for, he concluded his lesson, "independence and debt cannot long keep company." William Lloyd Garrison quoted in Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work*, 183.

<sup>69</sup> However, as Du Bois wrote decades later in his autobiography this possibility receded when after 1895 "the whole South disfranchised its Negro voters" and passed draconian Jim Crow laws which institutionalized "the Negro citizen as a subordinate caste." W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), 55. Du Bois later returned to economic issues, though with a more sophisticated class analysis than that developed by Washington as the cause of deteriorating social conditions for blacks. For Du Bois, these realities undermined any possible economic opportunity and prevented blacks from protecting their property rights.

<sup>70</sup> Du Bois, "On Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 14. Among the Niagara Movement's Declaration of Principles included a complaint "against the denial of equal opportunities to us in economic life." "Declaration of Principles," in *African American Political Thought, 1890-1930: Washington, Du Bois, Garvey, and Randolph*, ed. Cary D. Wintz (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 103.

Part of Washington's disdain for politics stemmed from his memories of Reconstruction. Even with expanded political rights for blacks in the form of voting and office holding following the Civil War, he recalled little improvement in the economic condition of most former slaves. For Washington, the exploitation of black voters by political machines characterized a post-emancipation politics that failed to alleviate the plight of newly freed slaves who faced the immediate task of earning a living. The politics of Reconstruction, in Washington's eyes, marked a time when blacks were used by northern whites to punish southern whites.<sup>71</sup> Beyond this, he believed that "general political agitation drew the attention of our people away from the more fundamental matters of perfecting themselves in the industries at their doors and in securing *property*."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Michael West noted that Reconstruction also taught Washington to disdain political conflict and that good race relations were equivalent to racial harmony. West elaborated Washington's idea of "race relations" as a key theory in his thought that sought to harmonize relations between whites and blacks without undermining essential national values and in a way amenable to whites, predicated on the "absence of bitterness" that depended on "a willingness to forgive the past's sins against the Negro people." West charged that Washington's position made it possible, then, to successfully reconcile the expansion of Jim Crow with democracy and that by the turn of the century, the "measure of African-American well-being and progress is the state of race relations." While West's argument is compelling, it fails to fully elaborate the relationship between economic and political power. West's focus on politics, apparently defined as voting, as separate from economics denies the influence of capitalist ideology on political processes. In contrast, Washington's focus on economics acknowledged the intimate relation between economic and political power. West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington*, 53-55, 76, 140.

<sup>72</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 258, emphasis added. Washington's understanding of emancipation and its responsibilities proved formative in his experience and thinking. In this second autobiography, Washington described emancipation as less a celebration and more a cause of anxiety: "The wild rejoicing on the part of the emancipated people lasted for a brief period, for I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins there was a change in their feelings. The great responsibility of being free, of having charge of themselves, of having to think and plan for themselves and their children, seemed to take possession of them. . . . In a few hours the great questions with which the Anglo-Saxon race had been grappling for centuries had been thrown upon these people to be solved. These were the questions of a home, a living, the rearing of children, education, citizenship, and the establishment and support of churches. Was it any wonder that within a few hours the wild rejoicing ceased and a feeling of deep gloom seemed to pervade the slave quarters?" *Ibid.*, 225.

Washington accepted limits on suffrage, in the form of literacy tests and property qualifications, if fairly and equally applied to whites and blacks. For Washington, political rights were not only a consequence of economic success. They represented its reward, and the acquisition of property indicated a capacity to participate fully in political affairs. This generated criticism from various activists who noted the disproportionate impact of such requirements on blacks since, as a group, they were less educated and less financially well-off. Vociferous among these was Monroe Trotter who regularly used the pages of his Boston *Guardian* to excoriate Washington. Trotter called Washington a failed leader because he looked with “equanimity on the disfranchisement of his race in a country where other races have universal suffrage.”<sup>73</sup> In contrast, Trotter enthused over Du Bois as the anti-Bookerite, who “has never in public utterance or in written article, betrayed his race in its contest for equal opportunity and equal rights.”<sup>74</sup> Even Washington’s ally Timothy Thomas Fortune, editor of the *New York Age*, complained, “It is not necessary to give away the *whole* political case in order to propagate the industrial idea.”<sup>75</sup> But according to Washington, equal opportunity resided in the land as the source

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<sup>73</sup> Monroe Trotter, “Editorial,” Boston *Guardian*, 20 December 1902, in Broderick and Meier, *Negro Protest Thought*, 27. Trotter and his supporters were so outraged by Washington’s public concessions on suffrage that they disrupted a meeting in Boston as Washington spoke. The resulting melee led to Trotter’s arrest for which he and an ally spent 30 days in jail. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee*, 44-8.

<sup>74</sup> Monroe Trotter quoted in Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 198.

<sup>75</sup> Timothy Thomas Fortune quoted in Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 63. Fortune was born in 1856 as a slave. Mostly self-educated, he gained respect as a journalist and eventually owned the *New York Age*. While closely associated with Washington for many years, they split over Washington’s failure to publicly protest President Theodore Roosevelt’s dishonorable discharge of black infantrymen in the 1906 Brownsville Affair or to condemn a speech by Roosevelt essentially blaming blacks for lynching. Fortune also differed with Washington over the importance of political activism and helped to found the National Afro-American League in 1889, an organization dedicated to advancing black civil and political rights. In response to William H. Baldwin, Jr.’s comments that it was proper for blacks to perform menial labor at cheaper rates than other workers, Fortune declared that while he supported Tuskegee, “the principle is wrong that a man should first learn to work and then develop his head. My idea is you have got to educate the head before the hand.” Further, “you cannot eliminate the social question, and you cannot eliminate the

of productive property, not the vote. And a society with widely dispersed land ownership would diminish the impact of property requirements on voting. Implicitly, Washington did not aim to repudiate politics but, rather, to politicize economics.

For Washington, “the hardest problem that the colored man has to solve, from year to year, is, how to make a living.”<sup>76</sup> And, this reality demanded industrial education to provide the training and skills to promote economic independence. Washington imbued a practicality into education that “should serve to guide us in living, in other words, to fit us for the work *around* us and demanded by the time in which we live.”<sup>77</sup> Here, he used prevailing rhetoric about merit to challenge the status quo by insisting that blacks be allowed to participate fully in the national economic race. And, if members of the black community accepted the parameters of equal opportunity and succeeded on those terms, they expected to receive their promised reward. For Washington, racism would be alleviated via economics. In the early 1890s, Timothy Fortune declared that, “in the present stage of our development it [technical training] is of more importance than collegiate and professional training.” Fortune went on to reassure Washington, with a

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negro from politics. I cannot eliminate myself from politics. It is impossible for me to do it, and still preserve my self-respect and my identity as a citizen.” T. Timothy Fortune, “Discussion,” *Journal of Social Science* 37 (December 1899): 66.

<sup>76</sup> Booker T. Washington, “A Speech before the Alabama State Teacher’s Association,” 7 April 1882, in *Washington Papers*, Volume II, 193.

<sup>77</sup> Booker T. Washington, “A Speech before the Alabama State Teacher’s Association, 11 April 1888, in *Washington Papers*, Volume II, 432.

certain lack of prescience, that the work of Tuskegee “will be more generally and generously appreciated ten years hence than now.”<sup>78</sup>

Black Americans, Washington declared, must achieve success according to the nation’s prevalent values for “this country demands that every race measure itself by the American standard. By it a race must rise or fall, succeed or fail.”<sup>79</sup> And Washington understood this in financial terms. A lack of economic independence, whether as a tenant farmer or wage laborer, was akin to being an “industrial slave.” Instead, Washington urged, “what you want is to own your own house, your clothes, your tools and be able to provide your own food, and then you will be independent and will get all the rights, political and otherwise, that you are entitled to.”<sup>80</sup> The intention was not to create a class of subservient black wage-workers, but an economically independent black community. Washington’s struggle was to achieve this independence precisely as industrial wage-labor, and its associated economic dependence, was becoming the norm.

All of this, for Washington, was intimately bound to the idea of equal opportunity. He approvingly quoted Frederick Douglass’s assurance that he supported “no fancied or artificial elevation” for blacks “but only ask[ed] [for] fair play.”<sup>81</sup> Inequality among

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<sup>78</sup> Timothy Thomas Fortune to Booker T. Washington, 18 November 1891, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 182.

<sup>79</sup> Washington, “An Address at the Harvard University Alumni Dinner,” 184. Harvard awarded Washington an honorary degree on that day.

<sup>80</sup> “An Account of a Speech in Washington, D.C.,” 7 April 1894, in *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 399.

<sup>81</sup> Frederick Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 8 March 1853, in Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work*, 56. According to Douglass, once “society has secured this [fair play] to its members, and the humblest citizen of the republic is put into the undisturbed possession of the natural fruits of his own exertions, there is really very little left for society and government to do.” Quoted in Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 152. As criticism of Washington mounted among some members of the growing black intelligentsia, admiration for Douglass soared. Kelly Miller, professor of mathematics at Howard University and a prolific commentator on race relations composed a long, lyrical paragraph that compared



races, Washington noted, reflected differences “growing out of unequal opportunities in the past.”<sup>82</sup> “What the negro does ask,” he explained, “is equality of opportunity, that the door which rewards and encourages virtue, intelligence, thrift, economy, usefulness, the possession of property, be kept wide open to the humblest black man from one shore of this continent to the other.” Expanding opportunity to include blacks should appeal to others since, Washington warned, if you “close this door against a negro now . . . within a few years the temptation will be to close it against a class of white men.”<sup>83</sup>

By basing his argument on equal opportunity Washington demanded a place for blacks within the dominant ideology by insisting that any definition of “fair competition” must also include blacks. Washington garnered support when allies understood him to advocate “fair play,” a condition “that should touch a responsive chord wherever right and justice and law are honored and respected.”<sup>84</sup> Washington sought to expand the base of opportunity to allow blacks to enjoy its promise of upward mobility. But, he insisted, for blacks and whites to compete fairly in the economic arena, blacks needed to be assured that they could claim the spoils of their victories.

Lyman Abbott, editor of the *Christian Union* (after 1893, the *Outlook*) and later exponent of the Social Gospel, shared Washington’s urgency about the need to include blacks in equal opportunity for the idea to survive in any meaningful sense. In his

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the two leaders and proclaimed, among other things, that while both were often exploited by whites and products of their times, “Douglass was like a lion, bold and fearless; Washington is lamblike, meek and submissive.” Kelly Miller, *Race Adjustment: Essays on the Negro in America* (New York: Neale, 1900), 19-20.

<sup>82</sup> Washington, *The Future of the American Negro*, 315.

<sup>83</sup> Booker T. Washington, “An Address at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church,” 22 May 1900, in *Washington Papers*, Volume V, 539.

<sup>84</sup> “The Negro’s ‘Open Door,’” *Chicago Evening Post*; quoted in *Report of the Fifth Annual Convention, National Negro Business League* (Pensacola, FL: M. M. Lewey, 1904), appendix, 20.

remarks at the 1890 Mohonk Conference to consider the “Negro Problem” Abbott explained the political and social stakes: “Negroes are to remain here, and they are to have all avocations and all doors that are open to other men open to them.”<sup>85</sup> Fulfillment of the nation’s promise of equal opportunity demanded its perpetual expansion. Continued economic, cultural, and intellectual achievements among blacks would force whites to “distinguish between Negroes and Negroes” and necessarily “open the door of opportunity to all Negroes who aspire.”<sup>86</sup> The differential outcomes of merit among blacks would be rewarded just as they were among whites.

While Washington remained rooted in agriculture and land ownership as the core of southern black economic independence, by the turn of the century, and in response to changing economic conditions, he more overtly incorporated nonagricultural business success into his vision, especially amid the growing migration of blacks to southern cities. But Washington’s concession to an industrial economy focused on promoting entrepreneurial independence, not the economic dependence of wage labor. Along with Emmett J. Scott, his close aide and personal secretary, and with financial support from Andrew Carnegie, Washington established the National Negro Business League in 1900

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<sup>85</sup> Abbott continued: “We cannot afford to have society in this country split up into separate factions and castes, because a republican and democratic organization cannot survive such a disorganizing process.” “Remarks of Lyman Abbott,” *First Mohonk Conference on the Negro Question*, 83. The two Mohonk Conferences (1890 and 1891) were originally suggested by former president Rutherford B. Hayes who, after speaking at Albert K. Smiley’s annual conference on Indian affairs, suggested the model be expanded to include blacks. The initial conference of about 100 participants included no African Americans and avoided any discussion of “political” issues and race relations. The 1891 conference approved a platform that supported industrial education for blacks. *Washington Papers*, Volume III, 41.

<sup>86</sup> Washington, *The Story of My Life and Work*, 183.

and served as its president until his death in 1915. The League met annually to celebrate black entrepreneurial achievements and established local chapters throughout the country to facilitate such exchanges. The organization sprang from Du Bois' 1899 Atlanta Conference on "The Negro in Business," from which he had hoped to create local, state, and national associations of black business leaders.<sup>87</sup> The NNBL had established 300 local branches by 1905 and an estimated 600 by 1915.<sup>88</sup> Ralph Bunche called the organization's "influence on economic betterment . . . inconsequential," but its effect in "shaping the psychology and thinking of Negroes . . . vastly important."<sup>89</sup> The League also expanded Washington's political influence among the black business class and provided another forum in which to advance his ideas about economic independence.

Washington attributed the League's genesis to a need to bring together those in business for mutual aid and to "show the world what progress we have made in business lines since our freedom."<sup>90</sup> Annual NNBL meetings extolled the promises of equal opportunity where those who worked hard would reap what they sowed and "get what

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<sup>87</sup> Du Bois later directed the business bureau within the Afro-American Council (founded by T. Thomas Fortune to fight for black civil rights), with a mandate to implement a program focused on black business. Washington's close relationship with Fortune meant that, while not in regular attendance at meetings, he exerted influence over the Council. Eventually, Du Bois' labors were stymied when Fortune ended the appropriation to cover postage costs initially earmarked for his organizing efforts. Washington then approached Du Bois for the list of contacts he had assembled and used them to found the National Negro Business League. At the 1900 annual meeting of the Afro-American Council, Washington's secretary Emmett J. Scott was elected to replace Du Bois as director of its bureau on business, further solidifying Washington's control of work connected to the black business community. Lewis, *Biography of a Race*, 220-21.

<sup>88</sup> Wilson Record, "Negro Intellectuals and Negro Movements in Historical Perspective," *American Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1956): 14.

<sup>89</sup> Bunche, "The Programs of Organizations Devoted to the Improvement of the Status of the American Negro," 541.

<sup>90</sup> *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League, August 23 & 24, 1900*, 7, 8.

they deserve.”<sup>91</sup> Boston Mayor Thomas N. Hart welcomed guests at the first gathering by reassuring them that, unlike in other cities, blacks in Boston had “the same chance as any white man” where all “stand on equality,” and where each person bears responsibility for his or her own success.<sup>92</sup>

Conference participants embraced the chance for economic and social advancement proffered by a society that simply needed to allow opportunity to flourish. Under such conditions, blacks would demonstrate their capabilities and enjoy the commensurate benefits.>NNLB members imagined that the organization’s work “appeal[ed] to our more favored and fortunate fellow-citizens for helpful sympathy and for ‘the open door of opportunity,’” without which success would remain elusive.<sup>93</sup> Attendees mostly centered their testimonials on small business, such as barbering, mortuary, and dressmaking. The pressures from consolidated capital that occupied other businessmen, labor organizations, and social commentators were strikingly absent from these assemblies. The>NNBL encouraged blacks to enter lines of business less affected by corporate concentration as a way to avoid the drudgery and dependence of industrial wage-labor. This also allowed its membership to celebrate the values of laissez-faire amid a growing centralization of wealth. Thus Washington responded to the altered economic conditions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by expanding his vision of the path to economic independence to include business entrepreneurship alongside land ownership, asserting that while opportunities for economic independence

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<sup>91</sup> Mrs. A. A. Casheace, “Dressmaking,” *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>92</sup> “Remarks of Hon. Thomas N. Hart,” *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>93</sup> “Report of Committee on Resolution,” *Report of the Fifth Annual Convention, National Negro Business League*, Appendix, 12.

may have been curtailed in the North with the expansion of wage labor, they continued to exist in the South.

Blacks, even in the Deep South, were encouraged to take full advantage of opportunities as they arose. Participants claimed that “the opportunities for men of our race to succeed in business in the Mississippi Delta are many and of the very best kind.” The problem was that blacks failed to avail themselves of these opportunities. “The great loss to the Negro,” another speaker admonished, “has been that he has satisfied himself so long to be an employee that he has made little attempt to be his own employer.”<sup>94</sup> Despite deep-seated racism that curtailed these opportunities, the allure of economic independence remained, and the National Negro Business League represented a broadening of Washington’s view about the means for its achievement. He now explicitly included business entrepreneurship along with traditional agricultural pursuits and skilled labor.<sup>95</sup>

Washington’s support for capitalist ideology, expressed as equal opportunity, drove him to help create conditions of fair economic competition for blacks, where

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<sup>94</sup> Eugene P. Booze, *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League, August 23 & 24, 1900*, 187; and James N. Vandervall, *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>95</sup> As the criticism mounted against Washington, especially from those within the black community, he strove to publicly clarify his views. In his annual address to the sixth annual meeting of the National Negro Business League, he reiterated the original purpose of the organization and its focus on economic advancement through business success. But, he pointedly reminded listeners, to do so did not imply that they intended to “overlook the fact that there are other and vital subjects bearing upon the rights of our race.” In fact, he continued, “there is perhaps no body of individuals who crave more earnestly the opportunity than we do to enter into the full enjoyment of all that is guaranteed to us by the Constitution of our country.” That said, however, Washington demurred, noting that one organization cannot, practically speaking, effectively advance all of these interests and that the League would continue to emphasize the economic progress of the race as the necessary first step to achieving civic and political progress. In a further conciliatory gesture, after noting that blacks expected to be accorded their full constitutional rights, he admonished participants not to “spend all our time and strength in enlarging upon a demand for these things.” Such statements led to sharp criticism of Washington, his views, and programs. Remarks of Booker T. Washington, *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Convention of the National Negro Business League*, 65-7.

individuals would be assessed by their merit. “It is an equality of industrial opportunity that the negro should seek,” he wrote to the *New York World*, rather than “spend[ing] time over questions of social equality.”<sup>96</sup> Washington’s approval of entrepreneurial ideals rooted success for blacks in individual economic achievement and independence, a perspective that supported the status quo while also revealing the operation of power in an ideologically capitalist system. Louis F. Baldwin, a real estate broker from Cambridge, Massachusetts remarked at a NNBL gathering:

Recognizing, as I do, and as well all must do, the great importance with which is regarded the dollar by the American people, I can not but feel that any showing we make along the lines of industry and commerce will give us a position in this country which we rightfully deserve, but which we have been denied.<sup>97</sup>

Independence for blacks required success within existing economic realities. As Harold Cruse later noted, “in capitalist society, an individual or group that does not own anything is powerless.”<sup>98</sup>

At the same time, an economic Black Nationalism developed on the edges of the National Negro Business League. Members were called on to “pull each other up by spending some of our money with ourselves.” Progress would be impeded if blacks

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<sup>96</sup> Booker T. Washington, “To the Editor of the *New York World*,” 19 September 1895, in *Washington Papers*, Volume IV, 16.

<sup>97</sup> “Remarks of Louis F. Baldwin,” *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League, August 23 & 24, 1900*, 9-10.

<sup>98</sup> Harold Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1968), 201. Cruse continued: “In capitalist society, a group that has not experienced the many sides of capitalistic development, that has not learned the techniques of business ownership, or the intricacies of profit and loss, or the responsibilities of managing even small or medium enterprises, has not been prepared in the social disciplines required to transcend the functional limitations of the capitalistic order. Thus, to paraphrase Lenin, it is not that the Negro suffers so much from capitalism in America, but from a *lack of capitalistic development*.” *Ibid.*, 206-07.

remained “entirely dependent upon the white man for everything.”<sup>99</sup> While the League claimed to promote improved relations between whites and blacks, much of its work centered on encouraging black support for black-owned businesses. By 1904, League members reluctantly acknowledged that persistent segregation limited the potential market for their businesses and undermined their success. In response, the League asked participants to pledge support for businesses owned by blacks.<sup>100</sup>

In accord with its capitalist roots, Washington’s plan would intensify class divisions within the black community.<sup>101</sup> Social advancement for some meant declining status for the black working class, just as equal opportunity exacerbated “merit-based” class distinctions among whites.<sup>102</sup> And this prompted further criticism from Du Bois,

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<sup>99</sup> “Remarks of J. C. Leftwich, *Proceedings of the National Negro Business League, August 23 & 24, 1900*, 115. As Harold Cruse commented, “Black Power is nothing but the economic and political philosophy of Booker T. Washington given a 1960s militant shot in the arm and brought up to date.” Cruse criticized those on the political left who maintained that “capitalist development of a Negro bourgeois class is neither desirable, necessary, nor historically relevant.” Such a position, he pointed out, denies the progressive possibilities of black capitalism and black economic advancement. Cruse concluded that, outside of its calls for violence, the Black Power movement was not revolutionary but rather reformist in its economic, political, and social agenda. Further, such misunderstandings have led those on the left to minimize the continual effectiveness of whites to thwart black efforts to achieve middle class status. Cruse, *Rebellion or Revolution*, 234.

<sup>100</sup> John Sibley Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black Americans: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 152.

<sup>101</sup> As Glenda Gilmore has noted, social mobility and equal opportunity for the black middle class represented the triumph of merit over the intractability of race. Here ability, not hereditary, determined one’s social status. While this opportunity represented progressive advancement for middle class blacks, it also upheld the status quo by reinforcing class distinctions. Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). See also Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>102</sup> Many scholars have criticized Washington’s program for its failure to advance the economic position of the black working class. But such a consequence is the logical outcome of a position built on the inequities of equal opportunity, which itself acts as a mechanism to solidify class distinctions. Many members of the new black bourgeoisie, using the NNLB as their platform, approved of Washington’s emphasis on self-help, which corresponded to their experience, and they “easily appropriated the symbols of American individualism and Social Darwinism to explain and rationalize their social role.” Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 156-57. For such criticism of Washington see, for example, Marable, “Booker T. Washington and Black Accommodation,” 35-8.

who complained that a focus on the “acquisition of private capital and bank accounts” ignored the reality that “the mass of negroes can no more expect to become all capitalists, than the mass of white men can.” Finally, Du Bois concluded, “Mr. B. Washington’s is a remedy for the *few*, while what is necessary is relief for the *many*.”<sup>103</sup> Washington’s reluctance to embrace a traditional class-based analysis of black’s economic status led him to develop programs that would ultimately exacerbate class divisions within the black community, and he remained constrained by the contradictions of that very system. Washington failed further to consider the need for collaborative responses among laborers to counter the power of concentrated capital and land ownership, or that an expanding industrial economy made obsolete the skills he venerated through his insistence that entrepreneurial opportunity continued to exist in the South. But he also sought to identify progressive possibilities for blacks within the economic structure and to insist that they pursue an independence rooted in controlling the means of production. In the course of doing so, he spoke to the connections of political and economic power. Further, Washington’s emphasis on economic independence and its inseparability from political power recalled a radical American tradition that also resonated with workers trying to adjust to the realities of factory wage work.

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<sup>103</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois to Max Rubinow, 10 November 1904, in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, Volume I, *Selections, 1877-1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 82. Rubinow was an economist and socialist.



## CHAPTER 3

### Equal Opportunity in Labor: Producerism and the Knights of Labor

The Railroad Strikes of 1877. The Southwest Strike. Haymarket. The Great Upheaval. Homestead. Pullman. These iconic events symbolize the intense post-Civil War disputes between capital and labor as the nation rapidly industrialized. The social and economic disruptions wrought by consolidating capital and the expanding scale of business enterprises, with their concomitant growth in wage and factory work, generated vigorous reaction. Disagreements about the nature of work itself (wages, hours, pace of production, division of labor), about who should work (women, children, immigrants, African Americans), about who should claim the wealth produced by labor (workers, financiers, capitalists), and about the meaning of equal opportunity and the conditions necessary for its realization defined Gilded Age struggles between labor and capital. And as business consolidated, so to labor organized. The country witnessed its first-ever national strike. Newly formed national labor associations—the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor—demanded the attention of industrial leaders.<sup>1</sup>

The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that nearly 10,000 strike actions occurred during the 1880s and in 1886 alone, the year historians call the “great upheaval,” approximately 700,000 workers struck or were locked-out.<sup>2</sup> In a series of

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<sup>1</sup> “For a number of years,” Samuel Gompers commented in his autobiography, “I had foreseen the necessity for paralleling in the labor movement the centralization that was taking place within industrial organization.” Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography*, ed. Nick Salvatore (Ithica: ILR Press, 1984), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Arnesen, “American Workers and the Labor Movement in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1996), 44.

reports compiled by the Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics that documented the daily life of industrial workers, one discovers a shoemaker with a wife and three young children who earned \$700 per year with \$797 in expenses; a street-car conductor who worked fifteen hours a day year round and brought home \$706 annually for a family of seven, just barely covering minimum expenses; yet another street-car conductor who earned slightly more than his peer, \$728 per year, though carried expenses of \$756. At the same time, by 1890 just .01 percent of the nation's families controlled over 50% of the country's aggregate wealth.<sup>3</sup> "Under the present order of things," wrote a correspondent to the *Journal of United Labor*, "the rich git richer while the poor git poorer."<sup>4</sup> In a report assembled by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, one reads that "the manufacturers are hungry for results and money: it is the almighty dollar to-day, to-morrow, and all the time." Consequently, "should an outsider say to the manufacturers that they ought to have more pity and a more humane feeling for their help, the reply will be, that they do not run the mills for pity or for charity, but to make money."<sup>5</sup>

While workers struggled to make ends meet, the press asked steel magnate Andrew Carnegie as he traveled through Europe in 1892 if a growing socialist movement threatened the United States. Carnegie declared such radical sentiments inapplicable in a nation founded on republican principles and enthused that in America, "every man has the same chance; he has every privilege that every other man has." Further, such

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<sup>3</sup> *Third Biennial Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics of Illinois* (Springfield: H. W. Rokker, State Printer and Binder, 1884), 382-85; and Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), xix.

<sup>4</sup> Merlinda Sisins, "The Blight of Monopoly," *The Journal of United Labor*, 20 September 1888, 2702.

<sup>5</sup> "Fall River, Lowell, and Lawrence," in *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor* (Boston: Rand, Albery Co., 1882), 157.

opportunity acted as the “sure preventative to socialistic ideas.” Labor activists in London offered their own assessment of economic conditions across the pond: “Where does the equality of opportunity exist in a country that contains such men as Vanderbilt, Gould, Mackay, Carnegie and others on one side, and an army of starving proletarians on the other?” When reprinted in the *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, the editors agreed that “the good opportunities are already taken up by those unscrupulous men and their relatives.”<sup>6</sup> The nation’s promise of equal opportunity was suffocating beneath the fortunes of robber barons and the demands of an industrial system increasingly dependent on impoverished wage labor. Monopoly capital threatened the expectation of upward social mobility, such that “the top so anxiously looked to a few short years ago has passed into the hands of a trust, and no poor man need look in that direction again until conditions change.”<sup>7</sup>

As Booker T. Washington strove to make equal opportunity and economic independence relevant for southern blacks, northern industrialization compelled a response from a growing population of wage laborers. The Knights of Labor, under the leadership of Terence Powderly, emerged as the first large-scale national union and embodied many of the prevailing ideas within the labor movement, as well as its internal and organizational conflicts. In contrast to trade unions that focused on skilled laborers,

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<sup>6</sup> Reprinted from *London Commonweal* in “Carnegie on Socialism,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 7 April 1892, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Terence V. Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor, 1859 to 1889* (Columbus: Excelsior Publishing House, 1890), 326. See also “Wanted: A New Government,” *The Journal of United Labor*, 3 September 1887, 2482.

collective bargaining, and immediate gains in regard to hours and wages, the Knights welcomed skilled and non-skilled workers as part of a broad vision of reform to improve working and living conditions for all workers through a social transformation that would undermine wage labor and allow them to claim the full value of what they produced.

The powerful ideas of free labor and producerism among the working class originated in a pre-industrial antebellum society that envisioned an economy built on small scale, independent skilled artisans, farmers, and entrepreneurs. Producerism, borrowing from the labor theory of value, rooted opportunity in one's labor and a claim to the wealth it created. A presumed balance existed between employer and employee that accorded labor appropriate respect, not merely as one among many elements of a balkanized productive process. Here equal opportunity was equivalent to producerism, which celebrated the dignity of labor as the means for upward mobility. The character traits that encouraged economic independence—judiciousness, hard work, ambition, self-reliance—prepared one to fulfill civic duties and responsibilities. Idlers and dependents were suspect. Thus, economic independence, dignity, and manhood were intimately connected to social status and political liberty. Producerist assumptions about gender relations extolled the adult white male as head of household, and thus reinforced patriarchal social and family relations. Dependents, including wives, lacked the wherewithal to be full citizens.

As economic concentration threatened the national narrative of equal opportunity during the Gilded Age, many labor activists focused on how to ensure the relevance of producerist ideas in an industrial and wage-labor system. They also began to grapple with a tension inherent in the ideology of opportunity itself, between its progressive

capacity to celebrate individual achievement over inherited birthright and its tendency to uphold the inequities of the status quo through this same celebration of individual achievement. Labor advocates sought to connect producerism to the progressive possibilities within the ideology of equal opportunity by embracing economic independence and its associated promises of upward social mobility and civic autonomy. Most boldly, some rejected the wage labor system and the economic dependence it required in favor of worker cooperatives. Experiments with and support for worker cooperatives, especially in the Knights of Labor, illuminate the ideological frictions both between and within equal opportunity and producerism respectively.

Many in the labor movement lamented that during the “age of the robber baron” hard work and the virtue associated with the creation of wealth with one’s hands no longer commanded respect. Instead, financial accumulation, not labor itself, marked the measure of a man. Labor activists understood themselves battling to preserve not only their individual material survival, but national values as well. Money-getting for the sake of money-getting violated their sense of the American ideals of perseverance and opportunity. Dignity resided in labor and the wealth it created, not in financial speculation. Producerists saw labor as the principal creator of value. Consequently, wrote the editor of *The Journal of United Labor*, “labor asks for a just share of all that labor produces.”<sup>8</sup> The small minority who controlled vast sums of money could not have

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<sup>8</sup> “Progress,” *The Journal of United Labor*, 25 December 1886, 2236. “If labor is the creator of all wealth, then those who do not work must live on the labor of some one else. If many live without labor then those who do labor cannot receive a just share of the products of their labor. It matters not how it comes, whether from an internal revenue, a tariff, a land tax or the interest on a bonded debt, what goes to those who do not labor comes from those who do. Every man or woman who lives without work is supported by the labors of others.” Samuel Gompers, “A News Account of an Address in Denver, February 10, 1888, *Rocky Mountain News*, 10 February 1888” in ed. Stuart Kaufman, et. al., *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, *The Early Years of the American Federation of Labor, 1887-90* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 84. See also the Declaration of Principles of the Central Labor Union: “We further hold that labor

earned such fortunes through their own efforts. Instead, their wealth represented the accumulated labor of others. “To make millionaires of forty men,” Terence Powderly intoned, “the voice of manly independence was stifled in thousands of other men.”<sup>9</sup>

In this new and bewildering economic world, “the lords of trade have their hundreds and thousands of humble subordinates, over whom they rule, often with a rod of iron.” Workers frequently found themselves unemployed at a moment’s notice and without explanation. Borrowing antebellum language, Eugene Debs testified in his capacity as leader of the American Railway Union that “if a man is obliged to depend upon another man as to whether he shall work or not he is slave.”<sup>10</sup> Such economic uncertainty and dependence bred fear which, in turn, undermined manhood, where men “dare not assert even a decision of their conscience.”<sup>11</sup> The conflict between capital and labor was also “a war in which the manhood of the American laborer is fighting for recognition.”<sup>12</sup>

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produces all wealth, and therefore, the laborer is in justice entitled to a full share of the wealth he labors to produce.” Platform of the Central Labor Union, “Platforms of Labor Societies,” in *Labor: Its Rights and Wrongs* (Washington, D.C.: The Labor Publishing Company, 1886; reprint, Westport: Hyperion Press, 1975), 163 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>9</sup> Powderly continued: “To make forty millionaires and gather together four hundred millions of dollars, the sweat and blood of thousands were poured freely forth in steel mill and blast furnace.” Terence V. Powderly, *The Path I Trod: The Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly*, ed. Harry J. Carman, Henry David, and Paul N. Guthrie (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 421. See also Terence V. Powderly, “Powderly on Plutocracy,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 30 July 1891, 1 where he stated: “Not one of the princely fortunes of America was honestly gained. It could not be, for it is not possible under heaven to honestly earn a million dollars within the lifetime of man.”

<sup>10</sup> “Testimony of Eugene V. Debs,” *Report on the Chicago Strike of June-July 1894 by the United States Strike Commission* (Clifton: Augustus M. Kelley, 1972), 170.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Crosby, “The Haste to be Rich,” *The Forum*, June 1888, 441.

<sup>12</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “General Master Workman Powderly Responded to the Address of Welcome,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Tenth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1886, 8, Terence V. Powderly Papers, reel 67, Department of Labor, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as Powderly Papers.) Robert Layton, the Knights Grand Secretary, echoed this view when he described factory work to a Senate Committee: “When the men entered in the morning they were numbered by checks. A man lost

A growing wage labor force compelled a reconsideration of the meaning of economic opportunity that reflected efforts to adjust the ideas of economic independence and producerism to new industrial conditions. Producerist adherents aimed to retain those facets of equal opportunity that celebrated the dignity of labor and rewarded hard work, without capitulating to the dehumanizing aspects of wage labor. Grounding opportunity in one's labor contained three essential and often distinct elements: controlling one's working conditions, claiming the value of one's labor, and, for some, owning the means of production.

Continued economic concentration and its associated expansion of wage labor, many feared, would weaken expectations of social mobility and diminish the chance through diligent work to achieve economic independence, and its concomitant rewards of political and civic independence. But, if producerist ideas challenged the economic status quo and its sharp economic inequality, they did not upset the traditional boundaries of equal opportunity ideology. The correlation of opportunity with the ownership of one's labor continued to depend on the idea of rewarding the victors in economic competition. Producerists demanded realization of the social and economic conditions for an opportunity that allocated rewards according to merit. Even as they argued for worker cooperatives and an abandonment of wage labor, producerists embraced that aspect of opportunity discourse that supported differential recompense for different effort. The hardest working deserved the greatest compensation, as their labor expressed greater moral worth and character. Producerism afforded all the equal chance to labor, to

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his identity as a man and took a number like a prisoner in a penitentiary." Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *The Relations Between Labor and Capital: Hearing before the Committee on Education and Labor*, 47<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 6 February 1883, 9. (Hereafter cited as *Relations Between Labor and Capital*.)

demonstrate their capacity for hard work, and to claim appropriate material and civic rewards. Inequitable outcomes were expected, however. In fact, such results helped to identify virtuous individuals. Nevertheless, the success of cooperatives required forms of mutual aid, through patronage, investment, and management, that conflicted with the competitive individualism called for by the ideology of equal opportunity.

Producerism's conflicted relationship with the status quo arose, in part, from a reluctance to see a necessary conflict between labor and capital. While those who did not create material wealth, such as lawyers, bankers, and merchants, received the wrath of producerist supporters, owners of small enterprises were often considered fellow producers. Capital did not by definition represent the theft of past labor, but could be the result of previously virtuous labor.<sup>13</sup> As such, no inherent class conflict existed between capital and labor. This logic shaped the producerist Knights of Labor. Powderly, an exemplar of producerism in his role as Grand Master Workman of the Knights, repeatedly denied the existence of class conflict in the United States. Rather, the meaningful distinction was between "workers [and] idlers."<sup>14</sup>

Producerist values resonated among trade unionists, socialists, cooperativists, and industrial unionists, though often they led these groups in divergent directions. Powderly and the Knights of Labor aimed to build an inclusive union that organized across industries and included skilled and non-skilled workers in the producerist vision. All workers, the Knights asserted, shared a fundamental claim to the fruits of their labor. In

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Oestreicher, "Terence Powderly, The Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," in *Labor Leaders in America*, ed. Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 35. See also J. R. Pole, *The Pursuit of Equality in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 206.

<sup>14</sup> Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 424.



contrast, producerism prompted Samuel Gompers, as a young labor activist and eventually as leader of the American Federation of Labor, to embrace the exclusivity of trade unions as a “natural” form of organization and one that would allow skilled labor to assert its independent economic power.<sup>15</sup> Gompers’ producerism, alongside his trenchant understanding of the economic power of a consolidating corporate economy, eventually led him and the AFL to focus on obtaining for workers shorter hours and higher wages in a quest for greater leisure and consumptive capacity within the wage system. In Powderly’s view, however, trade unions divided workers, promoted gains for some laborers at the expense of others, and violated the solidarity called for by producerist values.

The advent of an economy organized around factory and wage labor, where workers were subservient to owners and managers, upended the independence so crucial to producerism. Under such circumstances, the realization of a producerist republic and the meaningfulness of equal opportunity became increasingly difficult and their relevance more suspect. The rhetoric of “wage-slavery” had gained prominence during the mid-nineteenth century and persisted through the post-Civil War years. “The anti-slavery idea,” claimed Ira Steward, a leading theoretician of the labor movement, “was that every

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<sup>15</sup> “We knew that the trade union was the fundamental agency through which we could achieve economic power, which would in turn give us social and political power. . . . Trade unions endeavored to organize for collective responsibility persons with common trade problems. They sought economic betterment in order to place in the hands of wage-earners the means to wider opportunities.” Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 66, 76. The AFL and the Knights split formally in 1886 when AFL delegates meeting in Columbus concluded that the failure of the eight-hour movement rested largely with the Knights’ leadership and their hostility toward the goal. Delegates also accused the Knights of “scabbing” against trade union actions in an effort to retain their position as the dominant national union. They ultimately determined, unlike earlier trade unions organizations, not to admit Knights of Labor assemblies into the new American Federation of Labor. Stuart B. Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 163.

man had the right to come and go at will.” “The labor movement,” he continued, “asks how much this abstract right is actually worth without the power to exercise it.”<sup>16</sup>

Producerist advocates struggled to retain worker independence in an industrial economy oriented around a growing immigrant workforce employed in unskilled factory jobs. They claimed that opportunity and economic independence, and thus political and civic autonomy, could be realized even under these new industrial realities. Wage labor, then, existed only temporarily on the road to self-proprietorship and economic independence for those with the skill and ambition.<sup>17</sup> Though producerism did not necessarily lead to class antagonism between workers and owners, it did generate a “deeply troubled response to the conflictual way those interests were shaping up in the emerging industrial regime.”<sup>18</sup> But, while producerism challenged the dependence of wage labor, it accepted the premise of unequal material rewards for different effort as an accurate reflection of individual character—a key component of the ideology of equal opportunity used frequently to defend the very wage labor system that producerists hoped to undermine.

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<sup>16</sup> Ira Steward quoted in Richard Oestreicher, “Terence Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism,” 42.

<sup>17</sup> “‘Free labor’ was built on a concept of independence in which skill at craft work was equated with a manliness that would preserve self-respect while workers earned wages that promised ultimately to release them from wage labor.” Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>18</sup> Robert B. Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 84.

Laborers saw in business activities the effectiveness of cooperative organization. As Powderly noted, industrial leaders enjoyed an ambivalent relationship to economic competition. They “recognize competition up to a point where they are powerful enough,” he observed, “or securely enough entrenched [*sic*], to control production; then they change from competitors into monopolists.”<sup>19</sup> And, if business could combine to promote its interests, labor could unite to advance a producerist society. Under these circumstances, many labor activists shared the sentiments expressed at the 1873 Industrial Congress: “If we desire to enjoy the blessings of the government bequeathed to us by the founders of the republic . . . a check should be placed upon the power and unjust accumulation of wealth, and a system adopted which will secure to the laborer the fruits of his toil.”<sup>20</sup> Unions aimed to act as a countervailing power to industry and “to free the earth and its treasures, and allow man to have free access to his natural rights.” This required that the worker organize to demand the promises of economic opportunity and overturn existing conditions “which made him a serf in a land of liberty and sunshine.”<sup>21</sup>

Begun in Philadelphia in 1869 as a secret society to protect its members against reprisals, and initially led by Uriah S. Stephens, the Knights of Labor did not enjoy significant growth until after the 1877 railroad strikes. Terence Powderly assumed leadership as Grand Master Workman of the Knights and its approximate 10,000 members in 1879 and led the union until 1893, years that included its tumultuous heyday

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<sup>19</sup> Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 264.

<sup>20</sup> Resolution of 1873 Industrial Congress quoted in Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 110.

<sup>21</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “Trade Unionists, Hear the Truth!” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 16 June 1892, 4-5.

and a spectacular rise and fall. During his early tenure, Powderly fought a protracted, and ultimately successful, battle within the Knights to lift the veil of secrecy that had shrouded its activities, eliminate various induction rituals, and remove the phrase “holy and noble order” from the group’s official name (so as to end Church sanctions against Catholics who joined unions). As a result, he helped usher in an era of significant growth in membership.<sup>22</sup> By 1885, nearly 110,000 people called themselves Knights, a number that would increase nearly seven fold over the next year, and finally lead to a temporary moratorium on the issuance of new charters.<sup>23</sup>

The Knights’ popularity grew after successful railroad strikes in 1884 and 1885 and was aided by their inclination to organize industrially, rather than by craft, which opened their ranks to skilled and unskilled workers. The expansion of the union and its decentralized structure meant that Powderly often exercised only nominal control over its members, who frequently voted to strike despite the leadership’s formal disapproval of such activities. Administratively, the Knights became victims of their own success: the very inclusiveness which attracted many to the Order made its management especially difficult.<sup>24</sup> By 1890 the Knights membership had dropped to approximately 100,000.

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<sup>22</sup> New members were initiated in a ritual presided over by the District Master Workman, who spoke the following words when receiving new members: “While nature and industry may create in plenty, false distribution withholds and causes artificial scarcity and famine. Greed adulterates and idleness gambles in the products of toil and grows rich off the necessities of the producers. . . . While machinery should be the only slave of man, to do his work and lighten his toil, capital can and does monopolize machinery, thereby depriving labor of its God-ordained increase, dictating its remuneration, riveting more firmly the chains of oppression, and rendering it almost impossible for the toiler to participate equally in the occupation of the soil and the elements of natural wealth.” Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 64.

<sup>23</sup> By early 1886, the Knights boasted a membership of over 700,000 and over 12,000 locals formed between its 1869 founding and its official demise in 1917. Robert E. Weir, *Knights Unhorsed: Internal Conflict in a Gilded Age Social Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 14.

<sup>24</sup> Identifying the causes of the Knights’ dramatic rise and fall has captured the attention of many historians and prompted debate about the degree to which the organization reflected Powderly’s views and influence. Richard Oestreicher seeks to minimize perceptions that the Knights mirrored Powderly. He posits that it

While much scholarship on the Knights of Labor concerns how best to explain the organization's dramatic ascendancy and collapse, the focus here centers on their unprecedented success in bringing together workers of varied backgrounds and exploring the relationship between their ideological stance and ideas about equal opportunity.<sup>25</sup> The Knights attempted to fit older, individualized notions about labor's worth into an increasingly corporate economy. In this regard they were both wedded to the traditional ideas of what historians have called "artisanal republicanism," and determined to try and influence new economic conditions. The Knights were not merely nostalgic for a bygone era.<sup>26</sup> They adhered to the labor theory of value and glorified labor, which prompted a critique of avaricious financial accumulation during the Gilded Age.

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was assemblies amenable to craft union efforts allied with those angered by what they perceived as Powderly's obstructionism, rather than direct disputes between Powderly and the AFL, that divided the Knights and hastened the organization's decline. "In this role within the factional struggle inside the Knights much more than through the rivalry of their new union federation, the AFL, the craft unionists helped to seal the Order's doom." But this position indeed suggests something about Powderly's importance. Oestreicher, "Terence Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," 54.

<sup>25</sup> Much discussion about the Knights' organizational history centers on ideological and practical disputes with the ascendant AFL, the difficulties managing such a large and diverse organization, internal leadership struggles, concerted efforts by business interests, in an environment of labor repression, to undermine the organization, and Powderly's divisive leadership style. Craig Phelan offers a more sympathetic appraisal of Powderly's leadership than most, but concedes that his emphasis on local control created an organization difficult to administer and nearly impossible to corral for a unified response against the counteroffensive perpetrated by business interests against the Knights. Powderly's effort to introduce more centralized control was defeated at the 1886 meeting and, "As a result," concludes Phelan, "by 1888 well-organized, highly disciplined, and soundly financed employer associations, often with the assistance of the state, had crushed a decentralized, undisciplined, impoverished, and fractured movement still struggling to define its goals and strategies through democratic means." Robert Weir, while less kindly disposed toward Powderly than Phelan, concludes that the forces of capital arrayed against the Knights, not internal strife or structural complications, undermined the organization's viability. This argument implies that the AFL survived, at least in part, because it was more acceptable to the interests of capital than the Knights and, thus, did not engender such a concerted effort to see it destroyed. Craig Phelan, *Grand Master Workman: Terence Powderly and the Knights of Labor* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), 129, 172, 274-5; and Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Oestreicher, "Terence Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," 40. Wilson Carey McWilliams and Brian Phelan also maintain that the Knights, unlike champions of strict craft unions, understood that the era of craft independence had passed and that new economic conditions demanded broader industrial organization. Effective labor organizations needed to move beyond strikes for higher wages and shorter hours and, instead, organize the growing numbers of unskilled workers around common

However, the Knights also maintained that wealth constituted the proper reward for labor. Thus, the Order and its supporters simultaneously celebrated and critiqued equal opportunity. Their efforts, rooted in producerist concerns, concentrated on establishing the economic and social conditions for a thriving equal opportunity best expressed through independent labor. The realization of this opportunity entailed ending the wage labor system in favor of worker cooperatives and according to labor a rightful claim to the wealth it produced. At the same time, however, the Knights accepted the potentially unequal rewards embedded in opportunity discourse. Merit remained the compelling determinant of claims to wealth. As the place of independent labor receded in the face of industrialization and a deskilled work force, the Knights' complaints did not focus on the inherent inequalities embedded in equal opportunity but on the proper avenue for its realization.<sup>27</sup> The ideological consistency of the Knights remained

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grievances. Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 395; and Phelan, *Grand Master Workman*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Leon Fink asserted that the Knights capacity to reach both to the values of laborers as well as to those of the middle-class (property) represented neither weakness nor ideological inconsistency, but strength and broad appeal. With a focus on rank-and-file workers operating at the local level, Fink challenged earlier interpretations of the Knights as a non-political and backward-directed union that failed to accommodate successfully to a changing economic world. Instead, he identified a class-conscious labor movement determined to challenge traditional elites and dedicated to establishing a “worker’s democracy” by offering laborers a participatory and decision-making role in community affairs. Fink divided the Knights’ political activity into three phases: “The first was a national lobbying effort directed from the top and aimed at specific state and federal legislative action. This effort gathered strength from 1884 to 1886 and was crowned by the passage of a national contract labor law, state anti-convict labor legislation, and funding of the U.S. Bureau of Labor. The second—and most significant—phase was a grassroots entry into local politics by hundreds of district and local assemblies roughly between 1885 and 1888. Finally, the Knights moved into active association with a national third-party movement led by the farmers from 1890 to 1894.” He concluded, however, that while the Knights tried to integrate politics and trade-unionism, they entered politics without a coherent program and their initial refusal to align themselves with a political party resulted in internal divisions that weakened the organization and placed it in the awkward position of advocating for worker political rights without offering a venue in which to exercise these rights. Leon Fink, “The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor,” *The Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 188; and Leon Fink, *Workingman’s Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 19-24. See also Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 299.

producerism and its contradictory relationship to the economic status quo—challenging contemporaneous economic circumstances, accumulated fortunes, large-scale business enterprises, and wage labor, while adhering to assumptions about the need to distribute material rewards, and their associated civic and social benefits, according to merit.

Born in 1849 in Carbondale, Pennsylvania to Irish immigrant parents, Terence V. Powderly was one of twelve siblings. He received a rudimentary education and began working for the Delaware and Hudson Canal company at the age of thirteen and later apprenticed as a machinist. In 1871, Powderly joined the International Union of Machinists and Blacksmiths and eventually become president of his local. The 1873 Depression hit industrial workers especially hard and left Powderly both unemployed and blacklisted because of his union activities. By 1876 he had joined the Scranton, Pennsylvania local of the Knights of Labor and steadily rose through the union's ranks, becoming Grand Master Workman in 1879 at the age of thirty, a position he held for 14 years.

In addition to his labor activities, Powderly represented the Greenback-Labor Party as Scranton's mayor from 1878 to 1884, practiced law, and worked for the Republican Party. Following his tenure with the Knights, he was appointed by President McKinley Commissioner General of Immigration and in 1906 became Special Immigration Inspector.<sup>28</sup> He then worked as Chief of the Immigration Division of

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<sup>28</sup> When Powderly described his father's decision to leave Ireland and emigrate to the United States, he noted with a sense of irony that "he was fortunate in coming as early as 1827, for at a later period I might, as Commissioner-General of Immigration, be obliged to deport him as likely to become a public charge." Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 5.

Information until 1921 and concluded his long public career as Labor Department Commissioner of Conciliation. Powderly died in Washington, D.C., on June 24, 1924.

The Knights of Labor strove for the unity among all producers as defined in its founding documents. In addition to organizing across industries, rather than by skill as trade unions did, the Knights welcomed women into their ranks and, after 1883, blacks also could join, though in segregated locals.<sup>29</sup> By 1887, the Knights boasted more than 90,000 African American members.<sup>30</sup> The Knights were not all inclusive, however. The Order excluded those engaged in certain occupations and activities it deemed antithetical to its producerist and reformist vision: lawyers, bankers, liquor dealers, and gamblers.<sup>31</sup> The Knights also opposed unchecked immigration, especially of Chinese workers, who, they argued, reduced the wages of all laborers. To that end, they employed overtly racist stereotypes to support the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

The Knights' platform called for an eight-hour work day, the abolition of child labor, nationalized industries, a graduated income tax, and equal pay for equal work for

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<sup>29</sup> The Knights had a contested and occasionally ambivalent relationship with trade unions. In 1879, the General Assembly passed a resolution declaring that trade unions violated the inclusive mission of the Knights. However, by 1882 they voted to support trade assemblies, which led to direct competition with trade unions, and by 1886 they demanded that cigar makers choose between affiliation with the Knights or with the Cigar Makers International Union, which prompted the formation of a national trade federation in the form of the AFL. Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33-4.

<sup>30</sup> Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 8. The Knights' leadership understood that allowing "foolish prejudice" to divide workers meant that blacks could be "used as a tool to aid the employer in grinding down wages." To that end, they declared that the Knights "should be false to every principle of our Order should we exclude from membership any man who gains his living by honest toil, on account of his color or creed." "Assemblies of Colored Men," *The Journal of United Labor*, 15 August 1880, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Powderly was a lawyer in Scranton which, on the face of it, would have made him ineligible for membership in the Order. However, members at the 1880 Session of the General Assembly passed a resolution clarifying the restriction. In this case, law students were deemed ineligible for membership, "but if a member becomes a lawyer after becoming a member," which applied to Powderly, "it does not interfere with his membership." *Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1880, 263, reel 67, Powderly Papers.



women. The Order embraced an active role for the state in countering the consolidated power of corporations and mediating a return to what they recalled as widespread opportunity for economic and social advancement.<sup>32</sup> They claimed that the government had “fostered private enterprises, created and granted exemptions, and in many ways encouraged the developing of corporate wealth.” Now these entities had grown stronger than their creator. To offset this development, “in the future the duty of the government must be to build up and guard the interests of the people.”<sup>33</sup> Concentrations of economic power diminished opportunity for most, and the state needed to rectify matters. The Knights did not advocate state control of all the means of production but did support the nationalization of those industries vital to the economy: transportation, in the form of railroads, and communications, in the form of telephones and telegraphs.<sup>34</sup> This would guarantee that “no individual will have it in his power to defraud [others] of their inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>35</sup>

Most ambitiously, the Knights desired to abandon the wage-labor system in favor of cooperatives that would remove workers from a competitive labor market and, accordingly, restore to them a measure of autonomy and economic independence. The Knights’ rootedness in producerist ideals, where the essential conflict rests not between owners and workers but between producers and non-producers, and Powderly’s

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<sup>32</sup> Fink, *Workingman’s Democracy*, 35; McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*, 395; and Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 271.

<sup>33</sup> Terence V. Powderly, Address given at Hamilton, Ontario, 1885; quoted in Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 346.

<sup>34</sup> Many Knights concluded that the failure of cooperative ventures resulted, in large measure, from the excessive costs of transporting goods, a problem that nationalized railroads could alleviate. Terence V. Powderly, “On Earth Peace, Good Will Toward Men,” *Cosmopolitan*, December 1891, 158-59.

<sup>35</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “Address of the General Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Eleventh Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1887, 1533, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

commitment to the educational role of the organization, led to a disdain of strike actions in favor of boycotts and arbitration.<sup>36</sup> However, despite Powderly's reluctance to strike, he often failed to control locals that regularly engaged in walkouts. Successful strikes in 1884 and 1885 against the Union Pacific and Jay Gould's southwestern railroad system, with which Powderly unexpectedly found himself directly involved, dramatically increased membership.

Powderly consistently tried to gain control over a progressively more unwieldy organization and repeatedly submitted proposals to the General Assembly intended to grant the Executive Board more decision-making authority, especially in regard to strikes and boycotts.<sup>37</sup> By 1887, Powderly's annual address to the General Assembly combined frustration with pleading: "This Order is not a mere striking machine;" he reminded his listeners. "It deals in ideas, not in force or threats of force."<sup>38</sup> Powderly feared that seemingly perpetual strike activity would subsume the organization's producerist and educational ideals. Workers who joined the Knights on the eve of a strike and then abandoned the Order following its conclusion particularly angered Powderly. Such

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<sup>36</sup> Powderly also questioned the efficacy of strikes: "A strike brings in its train a series of evils which no man can see the end of. If the men gain their point or lose it, it is all the same. If they gain, the Company or Corporation lays low, watches its chance and pounces upon the men when they least expect it, either discharges the ring-leaders of the strike or cuts down the wages. In either case the men go on strike again; if they do not, they acknowledge themselves beaten, and they are at the mercy of capital." Terence V. Powderly, "Grand Master Workman Talks of Strikes and Gatling Guns, and Tells Some Plain Truths in a Very Plain Manner," *The Journal of United Labor*, 15 August 1880, 37.

<sup>37</sup> "Too much indiscriminate boycotting has been indulged in throughout the Order, and as a consequence that weapon has lost a great deal of its effectiveness. . . . The power to decide upon the wisdom of embarking in a boycotting crusade should be placed in the hands of the Executive Board." Terence V. Powderly, "Address of the General Master Workman," *Record of the Proceedings of the Ninth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1885, 19, reel 67, Powderly Papers. Despite objections from some locals, the 1885 General Session upheld the rule that any strike called by a local assembly must be sanctioned by the Executive Board. See also "Resolutions Adopted at the Special Session," *The Journal of United Labor*, 10 June 1886, 2090.

<sup>38</sup> Terence V. Powderly, "Report of the General Master Workman," *Proceedings of the Twelfth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, November 1888, 9, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

persons ignored the Knights' educational mission and failed to appreciate its desire to re-order society according to producerist values. And, more practically, they generated bad publicity for the union and depleted its already thin coffers.<sup>39</sup>

As early as 1882, and prior to the Knights dramatic growth, Powderly worried that exaggerated claims about their strength encouraged strikes that the organization could not support adequately.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, when locals did strike the Executive Board often endorsed the action and assessed its membership to establish a strike fund. Powderly never liked the practice and declared as a "foolish and imbecile waste of money" the 1886 General Assembly's decision to obligate the Knights to provide financial aid to striking locals.<sup>41</sup> In Powderly's view, the policy undermined the organization's dedication to educating people away from the perniciousness of the wage system in favor of short term concessions. And financially he thought it could bankrupt the Order.

Despite persistent strike activity, Powderly positioned the Knights as an antidote to the narrowness of trade union concerns with hours and wages and their tendency to advance the interests of some workers over those of others. According to Powderly, strikes for gains in pay ultimately did little to improve the living standards of workers since increased wages led to higher prices that affected all workers, especially those who

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<sup>39</sup> Terence V. Powderly, "Address of the General Master Workman," *Record of the Proceedings of the Ninth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1885, 20, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>40</sup> Powderly, "Address of the Grand Master Workman," *Record of the Proceedings of the Sixth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1882, 278-79, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>41</sup> Terence V. Powderly to Charles H. Litchman, 15 July 1888, reel 52, Powderly Papers.

may not have received a pay raise.<sup>42</sup> In his first address to the General Assembly in 1880 as Grand Master Workman, Powderly characterized the propensity of trade unions to strike as “one of the evils” which beset such organizations.<sup>43</sup> Echoing his predecessor Uriah Stephens, Powderly called for a single unified labor union founded on the commonality of interests among all producers that also sought to minimize ethnic and religious differences.<sup>44</sup> The Knights motto, “an injury to one is the concern of all,” expressed a presumed harmony of interests among producers and highlighted the inherent divisiveness of trade unions.

Craft-based unions organized workers around a given skill, thus excluding unskilled workers, along with those barred from apprenticing to a trade (especially blacks). This emphasis on a hierarchy of skill, according to the Knights, meant that advances achieved through strikes for one group came at the expense of others and reflected a lack of unity among all producers. But trade unionists considered strikes the natural outgrowth of industrial conditions and as attempts to offer workers “greater advantage of conditions and opportunities” through the recognition that their labor

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<sup>42</sup> Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 216. “It has not yet dawned on his mind, that no matter how much his wage was increased, the price of living went up accordingly, so that at the end of the year the purchasing power of his savings was no greater than before.” Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 43.

<sup>43</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “Address of the Grand Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1880, 169, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “Letter of Grand Master Workman Powderly to Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers,” 31 May 1886, reprinted in “Report of Committee of Conference of Knights of Labor and Trade-Unions,” 8 December 1886, 6-7, reel 67, Powderly Papers; Uriah Stephens, “Annual Report of the Grand Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Second Regular Session of the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor*, September 1878, 51, reel 67, Powderly Papers; and Uriah Stephens, “Grand Master Workman’s Address,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Third Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1879, 102, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

constituted their property and greatest strength.<sup>45</sup> While trade unionists viewed strike activity as “a revolt against the class rule of the capitalists,” Powderly maintained that temporary gains in regard to wages and hours failed to alter fundamentally arrangements between producers and non-producers.<sup>46</sup> The need to address relations between producers and non-producers seemed especially relevant as non-producing financiers and business leaders organized themselves into large trusts and combinations. Strikes conceded the perpetuation of the wage system.

Substantive relief for workers demanded systemic reform, changes that Powderly asserted required a population educated about the plight of laborers and the underlying causes of their difficulties. Powderly supported the abolition of the wage system since, “so long as a pernicious system leaves one man at the mercy of another, so long will labor and capital be at war.”<sup>47</sup> A unified labor movement, organized industrially, could more effectively counter concentrated capital than trade unions. According to Powderly, the strength of such a union could reconfigure the relationship between labor and capital and help realize labor’s opportunity for economic independence.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Samuel Gompers, “An Article by Samuel Gompers in the *Carpenter*, November 15, 1890,” in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, 381.

<sup>46</sup> P. J. McGuire, “1883 Hearings on Relations between Labor and Capital,” February 1883 in *Ibid.*, Volume I, 287.

<sup>47</sup> But Powderly opposed strikes, because “no strike can deliver a blow sufficiently hard to break the hold with which unproductive capital today grasps labor by the throat.” Powderly, “Address of the Grand Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1880, 170, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Powderly never retreated from this vision of a united, single labor union. In 1892 he penned an editorial entitled “Universal Organization” in which he criticized the divisiveness among trades unions and expressed certainty that “every thinking man should know just why efforts to win reforms or concessions do not succeed in these days of gigantic trusts and combines.” Terence V. Powderly, “Universal Organization,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 15 September 1892, 1.

In the name of economic independence and opportunity vested in one's labor, the Knights supported cooperatives over wage labor. Though often vaguely defined, Knight cooperatives involved more than working together. Bound as they were to producerism, cooperatives were expected to replace the degradation and dependence of wage labor with worker autonomy and economic independence through cooperative production and distribution and to assign to workers the "fruits of their labor" while elevating the status of the small producer. The wage system introduced an arrangement wherein "it is to the interest of one kind of men to purchase labor at the lowest possible figure," while "it is in the interest of another kind of men to sell labor to the highest possible bidder." Such conditions destroyed the potential harmony between capital and labor. And so long as this state of affairs continued, "just so long will there exist an antagonism between the two which all the speakers and writers on labor cannot remove."<sup>49</sup> Wage labor promoted a degree of competition between workers that undermined the "life of trade" among small producers, and ultimately "meant death to manhood and independence" as people scrambled for jobs that lacked long-term security and placed their economic status in the hands of others.<sup>50</sup>

Equally troubling, wage labor violated the precepts of producerism by curtailing workers' autonomy and preventing them from claiming the full product of their labor. Instead, it allowed "a half dozen men to sit at their tables in any of our large centers of

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<sup>49</sup> Terence V. Powderly, "Address of the Grand Master Workman," *Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1880, 170, reel 67, Powderly Papers. See also "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor*, November 1883, 597.

<sup>50</sup> Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 26-7, 459.

trade, and, without thought of the welfare of the country, apart from their own interests, issue the mandates which direct the movements of the whole industrial population of the United States.”<sup>51</sup> The exploitation inherent in wage labor allowed non-producers to both accumulate wealth they did not create and direct the work lives of those who did produce it, an affront to economic (and manly) independence.

In lieu of the wage system, the Knights aimed to establish economic cooperatives that would address the material deprivation of wage labor along with its associated diminishment of manhood and independence, and bring forth harmony between labor and capital. Cooperatives would act as a “means of remunerating fairly those who take part in the production of wealth . . . thus emancipating the workingmen from the condition of wage workers.”<sup>52</sup> Despite historian’s frequent characterizations of the Knights’ cooperative ventures as impractical nostalgia, they were attempts, albeit mostly unsuccessful, to bridge the growing chasm between producerist values, rooted in individual land ownership and independent craft, and an expanding and collective industrial economy. Unlike antebellum cooperative experiments that sought to realize in practice a theoretical blueprint or that depended on ideas of religious communitarianism, cooperatives administered by the Knights were more experimental and flexible. It was

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<sup>51</sup> “This is the system which makes every railroad superintendent, every factory or mine superintendent, an autocrat at whose nod or beck the poor, unrequited slave who labors must bow the head and bend the knee in humble suppliance.” Powderly, “Address of the Grand Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1880, 170, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Testimony of Robert Layton, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 6 February 1883, 37. Early labor historians characterized the Knights of Labor as backward looking and unable to accommodate to changing economic realities, unlike trade unions that focused on higher pay and shorter hours. But more recently historians have argued that many union members shared both sentiments and have undermined this supposed political division. For a recent example see Steven Leiken, *The Practical Utopians: American Workers and the Cooperative Movement in the Gilded Age* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

expected that cooperatives would exempt workers from the degradations and dependence of wage labor and, instead, make them independent entrepreneurs.

For the Knights, cooperation involved dividing the accrued profit from both labor and capital among all participants, though the details of this distribution—whether in proportion to capital investment or labor contribution—prompted much discussion. Ideally, however, this would “eventually make every man his own master—every man his own employer” and culminate in the realization of opportunity and economic independence. According to Powderly, “the aim of the Knights of Labor—properly understood—is to make each man his own employer. Co-operation is the basic stone of the organization.”<sup>53</sup> Under cooperative production “industry will become a part of him who produces” and workers will find contentment through the dignity of labor, and economic independence through receipt of the wealth they create.<sup>54</sup> Cooperatives would also lead to shorter working hours, a long sought goal for organized labor: when laborers owned and controlled their places of employment they could “command that the hours of labor be reduced.”<sup>55</sup>

Cooperatives constituted a primary focus for the Knights during the first half of the 1880s. The Knights first committed to formal financial support for cooperative endeavors in 1880 when the General Assembly approved a compulsory per capita

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<sup>53</sup> Powderly, “Address of the Grand Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Fourth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1880, 171, reel 67, Powderly Papers; and Terence V. Powderly, “Organization of Labor,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 4 May 1893, 3. The Bishop of Durham explained that co-operation “aims at making the working man his own capitalist, and thus giving him the command of his own labor.” Bishop of Durham quoted in “Cooperation,” *The Journal of United Labor*, November/December 1881, 178.

<sup>54</sup> Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 460.

<sup>55</sup> Powderly, “Grand Master Workman Talks of Strikes and Gatling Guns,” 38.



assessment on local assemblies. However, complaints from members prompted a reversal, so by 1882 the fee was voluntary. Given the organization's limited financial resources, funding decisions exacerbated internal conflicts between those who supported cooperatives as a means to circumvent wage labor and trade unionists in the ranks who wanted to establish a strike fund and to direct the Order toward collective bargaining. Annual gatherings of the Assembly included reports on cooperative enterprises and proposed amendments to their governing policies. Early reports stressed education over experimentation and advocated abandoning non-self sustaining cooperatives. As particular cooperative efforts failed, some supported more centralized control to reduce the isolation of cooperatives. By 1884, however, the Cooperative Board advocated forming smaller cooperatives that could accommodate the specific needs and proclivities of each local, though they would be administered by the Order. Such an approach would "be part and parcel of competition" and work within the existing economic structure. But the unified strength of cooperatives, building on the Knights growing membership, would provide them the capacity to "make the market" and, thus, the establishment of such endeavors would also counter the competitive system. In practice, however, centralized control over scattered cooperatives distanced management decisions from the shop and factory.

The Board claimed that cooperatives would allow members to circumvent the existing market, produce the goods they desired, and "advance rapidly to that condition in which we become self-employed and independent of masters."<sup>56</sup> Building on the Rochdale example in England that paid a patronage dividend to members who purchased

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<sup>56</sup> "Report of the Co-operative Board," *Record of the Proceedings of the Eighth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1884, 603, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

cooperatively manufactured goods, successful cooperatives depended on producing goods for a self-established market—in essence, becoming consumers of their own products. According to Henry Sharpe, who led the Cooperative Board during its first years, laborers “have been taught to look upon themselves as producers.” Instead, he urged, “far better were it to teach them that they are consumers, and that the interest of the consumer is to get all he needs, and to get it at the lowest cost.”<sup>57</sup> Workers viewed as both laborers and consumers, Sharpe maintained, should shape cooperative efforts.

In 1886, the General Assembly reversed course again and established a compulsory fund drawn from the general operating budget to support cooperatives, though the money never materialized. And the following year the Assembly agreed, yet again, to make the fund voluntary. The national Knights managed only one cooperative enterprise, a mine in Indiana, which continually lost money. With uncertain financial support from the General Assembly, cooperative enterprises were operated increasingly at the local level and included banks, grocery stores, newspapers, retail shops, and factories. Hundreds of cooperatives were formed at the local level in at least 35 states.<sup>58</sup> But the long-term success of cooperative efforts was stymied by a combination of factors: participants who pursued profit over the larger goal of challenging wage labor, a lack of capital, intense competition from other businesses that feared their possible success, and, most problematic, the difficulties of operating small ventures in an age of industrial consolidation. A stress on cooperatives continued to inform the thinking of the Order’s

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<sup>57</sup> Henry Sharpe quoted in Leiken, *The Practical Utopians*, 62. Sharpe later proposed an ambitious plan to establish a Cooperative Guild to assume responsibility for the Order’s cooperative activities and entities. The Guild would have had an executive board and assemblies, in essence, a parallel organization to the Knights. Resistance to Sharpe’s plan, with its centralized bureaucracy and emphasis on consumption rather than ownership of the productive cooperative, alongside his alienating personality, led to his eventual expulsion from the Order. *Ibid.*, 62-6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

national leaders through the 1880s. By the close of that decade, however, as cooperatives struggled, the Order faltered, and the AFL ascended as the preeminent national labor organization, cooperative ventures were no longer considered viable alternatives to the wage labor system. The Cooperative Board was formally dissolved in 1890.

Cooperation offered the chance to sustain the promises of a producerist economic opportunity grounded in the sanctity of labor and the wealth it created. Trade-union concern with shorter hours and higher wages appealed to some Knights members, Powderly conceded, because it offered immediate and tangible gains.<sup>59</sup> But such efforts diverted attention and resources from educational programs that extolled the benefits of cooperation and self-employment, and the greater distribution of the material and social value of labor to its producers.<sup>60</sup> To limit labor's goals to improved working conditions within the system of wage labor meant that laborers "united with other men not to exchange dependence for independence," as Powderly desired, but merely to "demand better conditions from a master." While higher pay and shorter hours mattered, this narrow focus failed to advance the aim of workers to become masters themselves.<sup>61</sup> "If," Powderly informed readers of the *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, "we are to regard the wage-earner as a creature who must always look to a master without daring to entertain the hope of one day becoming his own master" then the AFL should become the

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<sup>59</sup> "I believe that with the most advanced thinkers as to ultimate ends, including the abolition of the wage system. But I hold it as a self-evident proposition that no successful attempt can be made to reach those ends without first improving present conditions." Samuel Gompers, "An Interview in the *Leader*," 25 July 1887 in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, 46.

<sup>60</sup> Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 270.

<sup>61</sup> Terence V. Powderly, "Organization of Labor," *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 4 May 1893, 3.

dominant national union.<sup>62</sup> However, the circumscribed ambitions of trade unionism would forever bind workers to wage labor, as the promise of becoming one's own boss and acquiring economic and civic independence receded.<sup>63</sup>

While cooperation appears initially to contradict the desire for individual economic independence, the Knights acknowledged no such conflict. Indeed, economic cooperation would lead to economic independence. This new status, in turn, would allow workers to enjoy fully the fruits of their labor. Cooperatives provided an avenue to entrepreneurship and would insulate vulnerable workers from the uncertainties of wage labor. As Robert Layton, Grand Secretary of the Knights of Labor, explained to an 1883 Congressional committee investigating relations between labor and capital: “[W]hen a man enters upon business for himself he ceases to be a wage-worker subject to the dictation of the bosses, and he cannot be thrown out of employment.”<sup>64</sup> Cooperation aimed to redress the tendency of industrial competition to “concentrate all the means of production in the hands of, comparatively, a few” and, consequently, “lessen the opportunities” available to most workers.<sup>65</sup> According to its advocates, cooperation

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<sup>62</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “Trade Unionists, Hear the Truth!” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 16 June 1892, 2.

<sup>63</sup> The promise of economic opportunity and social mobility continued to animate Powderly and the Knights. “The theory of our government,” Powderly explained, “presupposes that the child of the poorest parents may one day become President of the United States, and the true Knight of Labor seeks to remove the artificial barriers which ignorance and greed have erected in the pathway of the workman.” Powderly, “Organization of Labor,” 3.

<sup>64</sup> Testimony of Robert Layton, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 6 February 1883, 37. See also “Report of the Co-operative Board” presented at the 1884 General Assembly: “The worker who, for whatever cause, does not own the material he works upon, cannot fix the price of his labor upon it, and has not the opportunity to do better for himself, is virtually a slave.” “Report of the Co-operative Board,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Eighth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1884, 601, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>65</sup> “Report of the Co-operative Board,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Eighth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1884, 601, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

would restore the opportunities for the “whole human family” diminished by the consolidation of economic power.”<sup>66</sup> Opportunity, and its promised reward of individual economic independence, would not be abandoned under cooperation but given meaning. For Layton and the Knights, “the man is happiest who goes to himself for all that he desires, who is independent of outside circumstances.”<sup>67</sup> So while production would be organized cooperatively and depend on mutual aid in a manner that undermined wage labor, the competition between laborers called for by producerism would persist within that structure. Cooperation would not end competition. Rather, the two philosophies would coexist.

Though Powderly imputed to cooperatives the task of reviving economic independence and opportunity, building on producerist roots he explained that they would not result in an absolutely equitable division of goods. Clinging to the foundational idea of entrepreneurial opportunity—differential rewards for differential effort—he condemned “dividing up the earnings of industrious men among the many.” Rather, the cooperation envisioned by the Knights would “guarantee to all men that which is rightfully theirs and no more. It will demand and exact from each according to his ability.”<sup>68</sup> Merit determined claims to wealth, even in cooperatively organized industry. For Powderly, “if the opportunities under the law are the same, and men do not keep pace

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<sup>66</sup> “The increase of opportunities must be for the whole human family; that is to say, it must be a change in existing industrial arrangements, which, although beginning with a few, must be capable of elaboration and expansion, so as to include all who desire to be included.” Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Testimony of Robert Layton, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 6 February 1883, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Powderly, *The Path I Trod*, 274.

with each other in acquiring incomes, it is because men are differently constituted,” differences that resided in the men themselves and not in the nature of opportunity.<sup>69</sup>

Prior to becoming head of the Knights’ Cooperative Board, Henry Sharpe organized the York Society of Integral Co-operators. Its prospectus declared that “individual incentive must not be abolished” under cooperatives. “Although to each one must be guaranteed equal opportunity,” the document continued, “yet upon him must be cast the entire responsibility of rightly using that opportunity.” Consequently, the group’s motto read: “Equal opportunity, but reward proportioned to deed,” where “every individual is to receive according to the quantity and quality of his labor.”<sup>70</sup> The Knights’ Executive Board agreed that the individual incentive to labor associated with the wage-system and in pursuit of material gain must be retained for cooperative programs to succeed.<sup>71</sup>

Those engaged in the British cooperative movement, to whom the Knights often looked for an example, echoed this view. The Lord Bishop of Durham, in an 1881 address before the Cooperative Congress at Newcastle-on-Tyne, reminded his listeners that “equality is not equity.” While “equity distributes its rewards according to worth; equality distributes to all alike.”<sup>72</sup> And cooperatives aimed to achieve equity. Under

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<sup>69</sup> Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 366-67.

<sup>70</sup> Prospectus of the York Society of Integral Co-operators reprinted in “Report of the Executive Board,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Eighth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1884, 648, 650, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> The Bishop also noted that cooperation did not eliminate competition, but instead replaced the oppressive competition between great capitalist and worker with “an honorable, peaceful, law-loving inoppressive [*sic*] competition.” The Lord Bishop of Durham, “Cooperation,” *The Journal of United Labor*, November/December 1881, 179, 178.

such circumstances, the conditions of opportunity could be equalized, but not income. Here, opportunity resided in the chance to demonstrate a superior capacity to labor and to claim appropriate economic and social rewards for that expression of moral character.<sup>73</sup> Cooperatives centered then on equal opportunity and not material equality.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the potential inequities inherent in an economic system organized around individual competitive opportunity remained fundamentally unchallenged by the cooperatives so celebrated by Powderly and the Knights.

The rhetoric the Knights employed against the wage-labor system sounded an indictment against the “moral and physical bankruptcy” of competition in favor of a “purer civilization” based on cooperation “where man will no longer stand against his brother-man.”<sup>75</sup> This discourse expressed dissatisfaction with the manifestation of economic competition within a wage- and factory system and aroused consternation among those who deemed the Knights a threat.<sup>76</sup> But the Knights repeated calls for cooperation left uncontested the presumption that economic scarcity motivated hard work and accepted the assertion that varied capacities to produce should result in differential

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<sup>73</sup> In a quest to rehabilitate Powderly and the Knights from charges that their advocacy of cooperation ultimately devolved into “a desire to recapture lost entrepreneurial status,” some historians have argued that it constituted “a genuine expression of working-class aspirations.” Such distinctions, however, fail to adequately demonstrate that working-class aspirations differed from a desire for entrepreneurial status and its expression in equal opportunity. Phelan, *Grand Master Workman*, 62.

<sup>74</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 324-5.

<sup>75</sup> “Report of L.A. 1562, Regarding Propositions of Practical Cooperation,” *Records of the Proceedings of the Sixth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1882, 320, reel 67, Powderly Papers. The report recommended that all current efforts to establish cooperative enterprises be abandoned in favor of a program of education and political reform that would end the competitive system and establish a cooperative system “for and by all those who are able and willing to work.” *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>76</sup> According to some critics, the Knights were attempting to “introduce into modern society a new right—that is, the right to be employed by people who do not want you and who cannot afford to pay you what you ask.” E. L. Godkin, “The ‘Fundamental Principle’ of the Knights of Labor,” *The Nation*, 1 April 1886, 272.

material and social rewards. The scale and nature of competition among laborers under industrialism generated objection, but it did not lead to a rejection of economic competition itself.<sup>77</sup> Instead, calls for cooperative economic endeavors simultaneously challenged the prevalent system of wage labor and also acquiesced to its basic assumptions about what motivates individuals to work and the need to assess the value of that work in differential material terms to feed that motivation. Rooting opportunity in controlling one's labor and calls for the mutual aid associated with cooperation did not emancipate the Knights from the contradictions within the ideology of equal opportunity. Indeed, these tensions manifested themselves in their efforts to apply producerist ideals to cooperative ventures.

The general strike called for May 1, 1886 in Chicago to demand an eight-hour work day proved crucial in the history of American labor. The Knights preamble called for an eight-hour day and members of the Order participated in the demonstration.<sup>78</sup> Powderly, however, objected to associating formally the Knights with planned events in Chicago and used the occasion to revisit his persistent critique of the shorter-hours movement: while important, it failed to alleviate labor's subservient position in relation to organized capital or to address the impact of mechanization, the importation of cheap

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<sup>77</sup> While Powderly lamented the impossibility of a wage worker successfully competing against new machinery, often operated by "boys or girls who worked for inadequate wages," he also asserted that "competition between man and man is healthy." Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Powderly and the Knights also supported passage and enforcement of an eight-hour workday law for government employees as a necessary first step toward extending that benefit to other workers. Terence V. Powderly, "National Eight-Hour Law," *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 25 February 1892, 1.



immigrant labor, and needless competition among workers.<sup>79</sup> Instead, he urged eight-hour advocates to “go beyond a reduction of the number of hours a man must work and labor for the establishment of a just and a humane system of land ownership, control of machinery, railroads, and telegraphs.”<sup>80</sup> The realization of this broader agenda, not shorter work hours, Powderly asserted, would promote meaningful opportunity that commanded respect for labor and resulted in economic independence.

Events in Chicago quickly became violent as clashes between police and striking workers erupted. Eventually, during a rally at Haymarket Square organized by local anarchists in support of the striking workers, a bomb exploded among a group of police officers, resulting in eight deaths.<sup>81</sup> In the aftermath, Chicago police rounded up

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<sup>79</sup> In a secret circular issued on 13 March 1886, to District Workmen to be shared with members, Powderly reminded local leaders that “the executive officers of the Knights of Labor have never fixed upon the first of May for a strike of any kind, and they will not do so until the proper time arrives and the word goes forth from the General Assembly.” Powderly admonished members that “no assembly of the Knights of Labor must strike for the eight hour system on May first under the impression that they are obeying orders from headquarters, for such an order was not, and will not, be given. Neither employer or employe [*sic*] are educated to the needs and necessities for the short hour plan.” Reprinted in Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 496. See also Powderly, “Address of the General Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Ninth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1885, 15, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Terence V. Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 514-15. Beyond the philosophical, however, practical concerns appear to have motivated Powderly, as he struggled with a growing AFL for supremacy as the leading national labor union. This certainly seems the case after 1886 as the Knights’ membership rapidly declined. Powderly repeatedly accused the American Federation of Labor of being less concerned with the plight of workers than with injuring the Knights: “Workingmen of America, you may look in vain for a period in the history of the world when more of gain, more of education, more of unity, more of fraternity and more of a feeling of co-operation results from organization than during the time that the Knights of Labor were drawing you together and binding your interests in one compact whole. You were warned under pain of banishment from trade circles not to affiliate with the Knights. You were told that the Knights of Labor could never do anything for you, and now the time has come when it is my place to ask you what the federation has done for you?” Terence V. Powderly, “The Ideal Organization,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 13 August 1891, 1.

<sup>81</sup> For a recent account of the events at Haymarket see James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006).

hundreds of labor and political activists, many of whom were immigrants.<sup>82</sup> A growing perception associated the foreign born with class warfare in a nation that prided itself on class harmony. Haymarket, as a result, prompted a significant backlash against labor and against immigration. Anti-labor legislation passed in states across the country and court injunctions were issued regularly that limited organized labor's capacity to strike and boycott.<sup>83</sup>

In this atmosphere of widespread repression against labor activists, the Knights of Labor found themselves under intensive attack.<sup>84</sup> And while the aftermath of Haymarket adversely affected all labor organizations, as the largest national union the Knights were especially vulnerable. Their membership dropped nearly as quickly as it had risen following the successful 1885 strike against Gould. By 1890, the Knights, which at one time called over 700,000 workers "brothers," claimed only 100,000 members.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Eventually eight anarchists, despite little evidence, were indicted for conspiracy, though none was ever charged with throwing the bomb. At the conclusion of the trial, seven of the eight were sentenced to death and one given a long prison sentence. On 10 November 1887, the day before the scheduled executions, Louis Lingg hanged himself in his jail cell. Shortly afterward, Illinois Governor Richard Oglesby commuted two of the sentences to life imprisonment while the following day, as scheduled, August Spies, Adolph Fischer, Albert Parsons, and George Engel were hanged. In 1893, Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld pardoned the three survivors, Michael Schwab, Oscar Neebe, and Samuel Fielden. Though widely applauded in some circles, many speculate that the decision cost Altgeld his re-election bid. Animosity toward anarchists reached such a fever pitch in the years after Haymarket that a correspondent for the *Forum* wrote that with "outlawry and exile failing, and confinement being demonstrably impracticable, there is nothing left but to kill him." Henry Holt, "Punishment of Anarchists and Others," *The Forum*, August 1894, 657.

<sup>83</sup> For a detailed look at the role of the court in the "labor wars" see William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>84</sup> At the 1886 meeting of the General Assembly, the Legislative Committee reported that Gould's public declarations that he had weakened the Knights hampered its lobbying work and diminished its influence among legislators. "Report of the Legislative Committee," *Record of the Proceedings of the Tenth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1886, 139, reel 67, Powderly Papers. When Gould died in 1892, the headline in the *Journal of the Knights of Labor* practically exulted: "Rapacious Jay Gould Dead: The Notorious Wrecker has Obeyed the Universal Summons," *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 8 December 1892, 2.

<sup>85</sup> The aftermath of Haymarket and the growth of the American Federation of Labor compelled the Order to establish a committee charged with negotiating better relations between the trades and the Knights.

Powderly strove to distance the Order from the actions of early May 1886, but his efforts did little to temper the public outcry against the perceived violence of organized labor and its association with radical, and potentially dangerous, ideas.<sup>86</sup>

Powderly's attempts to dissociate the Knights from the events in Chicago and their repercussions compelled him to differentiate between socialism and anarchism on the one hand, and producerism on the other. He objected strenuously to the violence advocated by anarchists, which he suspected was designed to foment discord within the Knights and destroy the Order. Further, anarchist attempts to "overturn all law and order" thoughtlessly failed to distinguish among laws by declaring them all false. Such a crude form of politics provided justification for the "establishment of a strong

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Powderly continued to criticize the organizationally divisive tendency of trade unions and their failure to more thoroughly critique the wage system, but the Knights precipitous drop in membership, alongside the strengthened AFL, left him few options. This new committee, in its report to Powderly, explained that the trade unions offered a treaty that would have effectively ended the Knights' organizing efforts in any trade for which a trade union already existed. This would have folded any local Knights Assembly for which a trade union also existed into a mixed assembly and demanded a pledge to honor all trade union strikes. The committee member's unwillingness to sign the treaty ended discussion. Further efforts at joint action between the Order and the trade union movement also faltered. Certainly other factors played a role in the Knights demise: Powderly's personal limits as a leader, factionalism within the organization (for a detailed account of Powderly's relationship with the Home Club and DA 49, which for years undermined his authority within the organization, see Robert E. Weir, "Powderly and the Home Club: The Knights of Labor Joust Among Themselves," *Labor History* 34 (Winter 1993): 84-113), and Gould's successful retaliation in the strike of 1886. However, ultimately the climate of repression against the potential threat of labor unions created obstacles impossible for the producerism of the Knights to overcome. "Report of Committee of Conference of Knights of Labor and Trade-Unions," 8 December 1886, 3, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>86</sup> Powderly's efforts also failed to mollify many within the Knights who expected the Order to issue statements of public support for those arrested. Not only did Powderly fail to call for clemency for those jailed, he declared to the delegates at the 1887 General Assembly that "the man who threw the bomb in Chicago should be hanged and his accomplices should receive the punishment allotted to such offences by the law of the State of Illinois." He then asked delegates to consider a resolution that would bar avowed anarchists from membership in the Knights. While Powderly's resolution did not pass, debates among the Knights persisted about issuing statements in support of clemency, a new trial, commuting of sentences, and expressions of sympathy, all of which Powderly successfully blocked. In his remarks Powderly also reiterated his directive that no local assembly shall offer financial support for those "implicated in the commission of a crime against the peace and welfare of society." Terence V. Powderly, "Address of the General Master Workman," *Record of the Proceedings of the Eleventh Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1887, 1499-500, 1513, 1503, 1702, 1723, reel 67, Powderly Papers. See also Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 544-45.

government” likely to be administered in the interests of business. Thus, Powderly concluded, “monopoly and anarchy are twin evils.”<sup>87</sup>

Beyond this, conflating socialism and anarchy weakened support for the Order among sympathizers who might favor a socialist-like position on certain issues but who resisted association with the violence of anarchism or the redistributive tendencies of the “ultra socialist of the present day.” While Powderly adhered to the Knights’ calls for the nationalization of various industries, his producerism led him to declare that, “the confiscation of property or the distribution of wealth, or, in fact, the bestowing of wealth or means on those who have not worked and earned it, is not socialism; it is robbery, it is rapine, and no sane man can advocate such a doctrine.”<sup>88</sup> Opportunity remained vested in labor and individual effort, and the distribution of material and social rewards should reflect that effort.

By the early 1890s, strike defeats, continued repression against labor unions following Haymarket, internal organizational difficulties, and a growing trade-union movement eclipsed the influence of the Knights of Labor. In response, the Order focused on the concerns of its remaining rural members and formed a close alliance with an emergent Populist Party that addressed declining prices for agricultural products alongside an increase in freight and storage rates, a relationship that helped to solidify the

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<sup>87</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “Official Circular No. 5,” 14 May 1887, reprinted in Powderly, “Address of the General Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Eleventh Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1887, 1526, reel 67, Powderly Papers. See also *The Journal of United Labor*, 14 May 1887, 2385.

<sup>88</sup> Terence V. Powderly, “Address of the General Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Eleventh Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1887, 1536, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

Knights' ties with southern farmers.<sup>89</sup> Association with the Populists served not only practical purposes, but illustrated a determination to continue efforts to undermine the wage-labor system. Along with many others, including Henry George, Booker T. Washington, and the Populists, Powderly argued that land provided a foundation for the exercise of opportunity and producerist values: the chance to achieve economic independence through a claim to the fruits of one's labor, which, for farmers, required access to agricultural property. Powderly criticized the unwillingness of trade unionists to add land reform to their platform and join forces with the increasingly influential Populists. For Powderly, "the same agency rules the destiny of the workers of factory, farm and mine. That which strikes a blow at one must shock the other."<sup>90</sup> His disdain for the non-productiveness of financial manipulators extended to land speculators.

Powderly's emphasis on land reform came as Gompers focused the AFL on reduced hours and higher wages, and further intensified divisions between the two labor organizations. Gompers considered it a mistake to classify farmers as laborers since they often employed workers, and to do so would muddy recognition of the inherent conflict between labor and capital. In Powderly's view, however, competition among workers in factories resulted, at least in part, from an "iniquitous land system" that pushed people off

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<sup>89</sup> Matthew Hild has recently demonstrated that the alliance between the Knights and the People's Party, particularly in the South, was more influential than previously thought. Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor & Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth Century South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007).

<sup>90</sup> Terence V. Powderly, "Powderly's Call to Arms," *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 17 December 1891, 1.

farms and into urban factories to replace workers who struck for increased wages and shorter hours.<sup>91</sup>

The Knights and the Populists shared a producerist ideology that emphasized the dignity of labor, claims to the fruits of that labor, and a disdain for non-producers. Populists divided the economic world into those who “sweat and toil and farm the land,” and the “money power,” which too often controlled the economic system while contributing little to its sustenance. These financiers “farmed the farmers.”<sup>92</sup> Echoing the producerist claims of workers, Populists argued that, unlike bankers, merchants, and lawyers, who merely transferred wealth, farmers labored to produce wealth and had a rightful claim to its total value.

The Populists and the Knights also shared portions of their reform platforms. Each proposed to nationalize the transportation and communications industries, called for currency reform to expand the availability of credit, promoted cooperation as means to combat the economic power of oligopolies, and demanded land reform (though the Populists never adopted the Knights program to abolish wage labor).<sup>93</sup> Powderly

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<sup>91</sup> Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 360-1. In Powderly’s view, with “the rapid concentration of the land in the grasp of the few, and the rapid increase in population, the time is not far distant when men will arise in the morning, and, after eating their morning meal, they will turn away from the table not knowing where the next one is to come from.” Terence V. Powderly, “Address of the Grand Master Workman,” *Record of the Proceedings of the Sixth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1882, 283, reel 67, Powderly Papers.

<sup>92</sup> William Jennings Bryan quoted in Robert W. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 36.

<sup>93</sup> In 1887 the Knights attempted to create a coalition of like-minded reform organizations. They supported the founding of the National Union Labor party, with a platform that centered on land, transportation, and currency reform, much of which reappeared in the Populist 1892 Omaha Declaration. The Omaha convention in 1892 boasted eighty-two Knights and that same year the Knights official journal printed a Declaration of Industrial Independence that closely echoed the platform advanced by the Populists. It called for the coinage of silver, public ownership of the railroads, telegraph, and telephone, and the implementation of a graduated income tax. “Declaration of Industrial Independence and Platform,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor*, 31 March 1892, 1.

supported laws to prevent non-citizens from owning property in the United States, as well as proposals to limit the amount of land one could own to what one could cultivate. All land purchased for speculative purposes would be returned to the public domain. This would reintroduce into the marketplace fair competition in lieu of existing conditions, which pitted small farmers against large farmers, and allow the introduction of Henry George's single tax, which Powderly described as "the nearest to the remedy for the evils of the present system," since it would reward those whose labor enriched the land.<sup>94</sup>

Land reform dovetailed with Powderly's quest to abolish the wage system and to promote economic independence realized through the opportunity for productive labor to claim its bountiful results. As the Knights faltered organizationally, they clung to a broad vision of reform designed to improve working conditions for all laborers and to promote economic opportunity through cooperative production that would entail a reimagining of the relations between employer and employee. Producerist ideals led Powderly and the Knights to identify opportunity with one's labor and to seek to advance individual economic independence while questioning the wage-labor system. Though opportunity for Powderly required abolishing wage labor, he accepted some of the essential presumptions behind the inequities of that system. By the 1890s the labor movement was beginning to discover that an understanding of opportunity which emerged from within the wage labor system might lead to more immediate concessions.

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<sup>94</sup> Powderly, "Address of the General Master Workman," *Record of the Proceedings of the Ninth Regular Session of the General Assembly*, September 1885, 13; and Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 374.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Opportunity Remade: Samuel Gompers and Labor's Pursuit of Leisure and Consumption**

In his autobiography Samuel Gompers fondly related that his political and economic education began when as a teenager he worked alongside fellow cigar makers in New York's Lower East Side and listened to co-workers read aloud from newspapers, magazines, and books. A co-founder and president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 until 1924 (he lost the Presidency for one year in 1894), Gompers had emigrated from London to the United States in 1863 as an adolescent and followed his father into the cigar trade. Ferdinand Laurrell, a Swedish-born socialist active in the International Workingmen's Association introduced Gompers to *The Communist Manifesto* and played a formative role in shaping Gompers' political views. Laurrell argued that trade organizations offered laborers the best chance to improve their circumstances. Eventually, Gompers learned German to immerse himself further in Marx's writings, along with those of Frederick Engels and Ferdinand Lassalle.<sup>1</sup> Melding aspects of Marx and Laurrell, Gompers became convinced that labor's advance depended on its economic strength, which necessitated not political party action but a class-based trade movement.

In the 1870s, Gompers became an active member of the Cigar Makers' International Union and a close ally of Adolph Strasser, the union's President. Gompers' and Strasser's efforts to restructure the Cigar Makers' Union into a financially secure, centralized trade union that would guide the work of locals served as a model for the later

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography*, with an introduction by Nick Salvatore (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1984), 26-28.



development of the American Federation of Labor. The AFL eventually surpassed the Knights of Labor as the pre-eminent national labor union and enjoyed sustained growth through its first two decades, including in its ranks, by 1904, approximately 1.7 million members.<sup>2</sup>

A crafts-based union that initially borrowed producerist ideas about the sanctity of labor, the AFL organized skilled workers and promoted an entrepreneurial vision of opportunity based on controlling one's labor and the expectation of becoming a master craftsman. Like producerist advocates affiliated with the Knights of Labor, the AFL adopted rhetoric that celebrated individual craft and its associated economic and civic independence as distinct from the wage labor system. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, Gompers had helped lead trade unionists toward a revised view of opportunity that focused on greater leisure and consumption realized through shorter hours and higher wages. This transition evolved from the logic of the trade-unionist understanding of labor's place in society and as a response to the altered economic and working conditions of Gilded Age industrialization.

The centering of manufacturing in large factories, the permanence of wage labor, and the introduction of technological advances to increase production effectively deskilled labor which, in turn, diminished worker autonomy along with the promise of a craft-based entrepreneurial future. Trade union exclusivity in regard to membership and concern with worker and entrepreneurial independence could not easily accommodate corporate consolidation or changes in the labor force caused by the large waves of

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<sup>2</sup> AFL membership declined between 1904 and 1914 in the face of a vigorous anti-union campaign, though resurged during and after World War I. By 1920 membership had reached four million but fell again during the 1920s as anti-union efforts were renewed.

immigrants landing on American shores. Thus, for Gompers, greater leisure and consumption came to define opportunity, a shift that redirected the gaze of trade unionism from questions of production toward those of distribution. Gompers acted as a transitional figure as the nation abandoned producerist ideas and embraced consumption as part of the accommodation to a corporate economy. While this led to improved working and living conditions in the short-term, it left intact the fundamental division of labor that defined industrial productive relations. The redefinition of opportunity as greater leisure and consumption also did not challenge the inequalities of equal opportunity. But Gompers did insist on a reassessment of the conditions necessary to ensure fair economic competition. This included the right to work and a minimum wage, both of which promised to expand leisure and consumption, and simultaneously broaden the foundation of what constituted meaningful equal opportunity. Gompers sought to increase labor's power within the existing economic system but accepted that system's hierarchies, a tension which mirrored contradictions within equal opportunity—between its progressive capacity to incorporate more people into its rubric and to reward merit over inherited wealth on the one hand and its inclination to uphold economic inequities on the other.

As leader of the largest national trade federation, Gompers became, for many, synonymous with the voice of labor and an influential figure not only within the labor movement, but also among businessmen, politicians, and the general public. Although the Federation's internal structure allowed local autonomy, over the course of his presidency Gompers strengthened his personal power base, protected the interests of influential affiliates, and effectively steered the Federation toward his vision of business

unionism.<sup>3</sup> Gompers also reached a growing audience through editorship of the AFL journal *American Federationist*, which increased circulation from 10,000 in the late 1890s to 50,000 by 1902.

When Gompers began work in the United States he was struck by how little seemed different from what he had left in London. However, he gradually came to “feel the freedom of opportunity and the bigness of the ideal on which American conditions and institutions were founded.”<sup>4</sup> A sense of the latent possibilities for upward mobility embedded in opportunity, mixed with an abiding frustration about its diminution, helped drive Gompers into trade unionism. Late-nineteenth century economic conditions shaped Gompers’ protests. He asserted that a reality where “many men toil on year after year with no apparent prospect of bettering their condition” violated core principles of the American dream.<sup>5</sup> His years of advocacy on behalf of labor against the arrayed interests of capital and the state were motivated by his desire to reinvigorate the American promise of equal opportunity. He concluded his autobiography, written after nearly fifty years in the labor movement, by reiterating that “in the United States, our institutions are founded upon the basic principles of equality.” Labor’s challenge was “to make plain that it did

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<sup>3</sup> “The AFL could not specify unions’ disciplinary activities, audit their membership or finance records, establish economic standards for collective bargaining, or assess and distribute a strike fund.” Thus, local labor federations often engaged in militant politics and strike actions. Gompers and the AFL effectively reigned in such actions, however, by withdrawing trade union support, so that “the United States, unlike many European countries, possessed no institutional basis after 1900 for a labor movement independent of the national unions.” Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 12.

<sup>5</sup> “The Labor Question,” *Rocky Mountain News*, 10 February 1888, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, *The Early Years of the American Federation of Labor, 1887-90*, ed. Stuart Kaufman, et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 83. (Hereafter cited as *The Samuel Gompers Papers*.)

not request special privilege but equality of opportunity”—a chance to compete for upward mobility on a fair playing field.<sup>6</sup>

As the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor struggled with each other for prominence in the late-1880s and early-1890s, the divergences within producerist thought became increasingly apparent. The Knights wanted to organize all workers through mixed assemblies of variously skilled laborers as part of a broad vision of social reform, of which improved working conditions comprised only one element, and for whom the abolition of the wage-labor system remained central. The AFL, by contrast, grounded its organizing principles in the nature of work itself, through craft unions that aimed to promote worker autonomy for skilled workers, the benefits of which would eventually reach the unskilled. Unlike the Knights, and often in opposition to its own membership, the Federation’s leadership never advocated nationalizing industry. Socialists filled the ranks of the Federation and, during its early years, Gompers struggled to limit their influence and to assert his craft-based view.<sup>7</sup> But, ultimately, amid

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<sup>6</sup> Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 183.

<sup>7</sup> As alliances between labor organizations, especially the Knights of Labor, and the Populists solidified during the early 1890s, the AFL leadership faced increased pressure from its rank-and-file to support nationalized telephones, telegraphs, and railroads and to engage in more partisan politics. The 1892 AFL convention endorsed such a program. At the 1893 convention Thomas J. Morgan, a Chicago-based socialist, had prepared an eleven-point plan for debate that included demands for the eight-hour day, improved sanitary conditions, municipal ownership of street cars and electric plants, and nationalized communications industries. The tenth plank, which called for “the collective ownership of all means of production and distribution,” proved the most controversial and, with Gompers strenuously objecting, became the subject of vociferous debate. Convention delegates agreed to send Morgan’s program to affiliated unions for consideration, many of which were quite sympathetic. By the 1894 convention, however, Gompers’ continued opposition to the program winnowed support and it was eventually defeated. Despite Gompers’ victory regarding Morgan’s political program, he lost the Presidency that year to John McBride, leader of the United Mine Workers, who expressed more sympathy for political action. *A Verbatim Report of the Discussion on the Political Programme, at the Denver Convention of the American*

consolidated capital and the dominance of factory work, the AFL leadership abandoned entrepreneurial craft independence rooted in producerism and accepted the certainty of wage work. They then sought to build into the wage system greater autonomy, both at work and at a home, through shorter hours and higher wages.

Economic insecurity animated many in the labor movement. Some recalled an idealized era of limitless upward social mobility in a society presumably free of entrenched classes where “each laborer had the prospect of becoming the employer of the future.” But by the 1880s and 1890s economic mobility, both the perception of and in reality, had diminished, such that “to-day you have two distinct classes, one rich and powerful, the other weak and dependent.”<sup>8</sup> Persistent anxiety about employment and the capacity to care for one’s family left people vulnerable and uncertain. A correspondent for the *American Federationist* colorfully expressed this anxiety: “Are we not all living on the crater of a volcano? Are we not all under fragile tents, on the border of the desert from which tornadoes may come at any moment to envelop everything and everybody in havoc, and death, and destruction?”<sup>9</sup> Yet while trade unions strove to improve conditions for labor, they accepted competitive opportunity and its expectation of unequal results. “What the trade unions seek to bring about,” one spokesperson wrote, “is not an equal

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*Federation of Labor, December 14, 15, 1894* (New York: 1895), in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 630-32. See also Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 60-4.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon D. Stratton, “Thesis of Labor,” *American Federationist*, December 1894, 219.

<sup>9</sup> Jose Goss, “Freedom,” *American Federationist*, October 1894, 166. “It is the uncertainty, the very reasonable fear of the future which destroys the solid comfort at one’s home, and acts as a mainspring to perpetual discontentment.” C. Sorensen to Mark Hanna, 23 December 1902, reel 4, Series I, General Correspondence 1900-1940, Box 3, Folder 1, National Civic Federation Records, Manuscripts & Archives, New York Public Library, New York.

distribution of wealth, but an equal distribution of the opportunities for producing wealth.”<sup>10</sup>

Unlike broadly inclusive labor organizations, epitomized by the Knights of Labor and, later, the American Railway Union founded in 1893, trade unions concentrated on immediate improvements in the working and living conditions of its members as a precursor to broader social advances.<sup>11</sup> Success on these pressing issues would position labor, in its own and others’ eyes, to pursue further ends “by opening new vistas, creat[ing] new desires and develop[ing] legitimate aspirations,” all of which would prompt dissatisfaction with injustice, inspire people to act, and allow a strengthened labor movement to expand its social agenda.<sup>12</sup> In the present, however, the American Federation of Labor focused its efforts on skilled workers—mostly native-born white

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<sup>10</sup> P. J. Maas, “The Situation To-day,” *American Federationist*, May 1895, 42.

<sup>11</sup> In a direct dig at the social reform orientation of the Knights of Labor and the opposition of its leadership to strikes, the Report of the Secretary on Strikes at the 1884 meeting of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions noted that rather than “ignore present social conditions” in favor of “some will-o’-the-wisp millennium,” organized labor should focus on immediate gains in regard to shorter hours and higher wages. As the impetus to form the American Federation of Labor solidified in 1886, its primary influences came from the Cigar Makers, the Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers, and the Carpenters and Joiners. As the organization grew, the “business unionism” of the cigar makers and the carpenters continued to dominate. “Morning Session Report of the Secretary on Strikes,” “Report of the Fourth Annual Session of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada,” 7-10 October 1884, in *Proceedings of the American Federation of Labor* (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationary Co., 1906), 10; (hereafter cited as *Proceedings*); and Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Gompers quoted in Stuart B. Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848-1896* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 166. “The more the improved conditions prevailed,” Gompers explained, “the greater discontent prevails with any wrongs that may exist. It is only through the enlightenment begotten from material prosperity that makes it at all possible for mental advancement.” *Ibid.*, 174. In the late 1880s, Gompers supported abolishing the wage system, a position he associated with the “most advanced thinkers.” In the meantime, however, that goal could not be achieved “without first improving present conditions.” Samuel Gompers, “The Platform,” *Leader*, 25 July 1887, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Vol. II, 46.

men employed, for instance, as carpenters, plumbers, typographers, and machinists. These workers received higher wages and enjoyed more autonomy and authority on the shop floor than less skilled laborers.<sup>13</sup> The inclusion in the Federation of the United Mine Workers and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, unions that organized industrially, stood as major exceptions to this general orientation of the AFL, as semiskilled labor became increasingly important to productive processes. But skilled workers continued to dominate most AFL unions. The AFL aimed to protect what historians have called “labor’s aristocracy” against the degradations of newly arriving immigrants from eastern and southern Europe in the 1880s and 1890s.

For Gompers, craft unions manifested the human desire for sociability and, consequently, represented a natural form of labor organization. The cohesiveness that arose among those who shared a skill rested on a conscious recognition of craft worker’s unity and an awareness of their importance to productive processes that gave them more economic leverage than the unskilled.<sup>14</sup> Through their combined efforts craft workers would develop an awareness of their broader class interests and “strike a blow for the emancipation of the disinherited wage-working class and thus abolish all classes based upon wealth or possessions.”<sup>15</sup> Gompers scoffed at charges that the AFL aided only

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<sup>13</sup> Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 11. Greene suggests that by the late-nineteenth century skilled workers emerged as a social group distinct from other workers, a circumstance that constituted a “dramatic and social remaking of the working class.” According to Greene, “on a daily basis, their wage labor differentiated them from other workers because they possessed a skill that brought both higher wages and power to affect their immediate environment. After 1890, this fundamental difference became overlaid with ethnic, gender, and racial distinctions.” *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> “Our movement is of the wage-earning class, recognizing that class interests, that class advancement, that class progress is best made by working class trade union action.” “President Gompers’ Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 12-20 December 1898, *Proceedings*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Gompers to Eva McDonald Valesh, 9 February 1892, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Vol. III, 143. Valesh worked at the Bureau of Labor Statistics in Minneapolis.

skilled workers, insisting that it sought to “protect and advance the interests of every wage earner,” and that classification according to skill and trade, federated into a comprehensive union, would best realize this end.<sup>16</sup> Organizing workers into craft unions that could successfully agitate to raise wages and improve working conditions was necessary for any successful labor movement that hoped to include unskilled workers.<sup>17</sup> Trade unions, building on their acute awareness of class solidarity, would lift the entire working class so that all laborers could enjoy the gains achieved by craft workers.

Gompers struggled to reconcile his consciousness of class conflict with his early sympathy for producerist values. He agreed that “there is scarcely a division of thought upon the question that the workers, being the producers of all the wealth of the world, should at least enjoy more of the results of their toil.”<sup>18</sup> But while this sentiment led the Knights to divide the world into producers and non-producers and eschew any necessary antagonism between labor and capital (since capital could also result from virtuous labor), Gompers embraced a paradigm of class conflict. The producerist Knights denied a harmony of interests between those who possessed wealth but did not produce it and

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<sup>16</sup> Samuel Gompers to Thomas Berry, 12 March 1899, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 80. Berry was Secretary-Treasurer, Tin Plate Workers’ National Protective Association.

<sup>17</sup> This followed from Gompers’ rejection of arguments that destitution led to increased activism among laborers. Instead, he believed that “the best organizations of labor are in those countries where the highest wages and the shortest number of hours and best conditions prevail and vice versa.” Samuel Gompers to Charles Baustian, 24 May 1894, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 510. Baustian served as secretary-treasurer of the Carriage and Wagon Workers’ International Union of North America, 1893-1907.

<sup>18</sup> “On every hand,” Gompers continued, “we see fortunes amassing, elegant mansions and immense business houses rearing, we see the intricate machinery in its rotary motions, the genius of man, all applied to the production of the wealth of the world; and yet in face of this thousands of our poor, helpless brothers and sisters, strong, able-bodied, willing to work, unable to find it!” Samuel Gompers, “President’s Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 11-15 December 1888, *Proceedings*, 8-9.



those who produced wealth but did not possess it. But they pursued a harmony among producers that included owners of capital, so long as they produced their own wealth. For trade unionists, by contrast, class conflict defined relations between capital and labor. The emancipation of workers from permanent dependence rested on their combined strength as a class. It would not do to allow employers in the same union as workers, a practice that the Knights (according to the AFL) encouraged. Instead, “the workers should organize as wage earners, for success is alone possible when they thus recognize their trade and class interest as being separate and distinct from their employers.”<sup>19</sup>

The trade-union philosophy, labeled voluntarism by scholars, followed from ideas about economic independence and manliness, both of which, along with individualism, became wrapped-up in notions of dignity best realized through the promotion of opportunity.<sup>20</sup> Originally conceived by Gompers to reflect his commitment to retaining the autonomy of individual unions while reaping the benefits of federation, voluntarism came to encompass the trade-union perspective more broadly. In this view, workers would depend on their unions, not the state or political parties, for improved working conditions and, thus, limit infringements on their independence. Organized into skilled-

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<sup>19</sup> Samuel Gompers, “A Wage Earner’s Movement, Only,” *American Federationist*, June 1897, 75. As dramatically put by William Holmes: “The harmony of interests between capitalists and laborers . . . is of the same nature of ‘harmony of interests’ which exists between the serpent and the bird, the flea and the dog, the hawk and the chicken, the highwayman and the traveler. The capitalist charms his victims by his promises and blandishments, he fastens his merciless teeth and claws into their quivering bodies; he sucks from them the life and spurns their bloodless carcasses; he robs them of their substance and leaves their famished bodies to rot by the roadside.” Wm. Holmes, “The Harmony of Interests,” *American Federationist*, March 1896, 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Rogin, “Voluntarism: The Political Functions of an Antipolitical Doctrine,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 15 (July 1962): 521-35. For Rogin, this focus on economics also led to a disdain for political activism, a thesis challenged by Julie Greene in *Pure and Simple Politics* and Karen Orren, who argues that anti-labor court rulings compelled greater political activism on the part of workers, not a retreat. Karen Orren, *Belated Feudalism: Labor, the Law, and Liberal Development in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

craft unions to protect their economic interests in an environment where the “opportunity of advancement [is] continually lessened,” voluntarism assumed that independent unions could effectively control the labor supply and, thus, create the necessary conditions for economic opportunity.<sup>21</sup> The federated strength required to realize this goal meant excluding those deemed likely to undermine labor’s power, particularly women, people of color, and the unskilled, groups that comprised a growing segment of workers.<sup>22</sup> Controlling the labor supply meant opposing the influx of more workers to America and thus, consistent with other unions, the AFL opposed unchecked immigration.”<sup>23</sup>

Voluntarism also entailed a distrust of the state in regard to relations between labor and capital, as it was deemed to defend the interests of capital through legislative policy, military strength, court rulings, and business-friendly economic policies.<sup>24</sup> Since the “state has always been the representative of the wealth possessors,” improved conditions for workers and the realization of opportunity depended on their capacity to

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<sup>21</sup> George E. McNeill, “The Hours of Labor,” in *The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-Day*, ed. George E. McNeill (Boston: A. M. Bridgeman & Company, 1887; reprint New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1971), 471 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>22</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67. In his autobiography, Gompers claimed that, while he never supported social equality among races, he did believe that “equality of opportunity in the economic field should be accorded to colored workmen” and that they should be encouraged to organize to promote their interests. Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 109.

<sup>23</sup> While industry effectively absorbed an earlier influx of workers, AFL leaders maintained that by the late-nineteenth century, “there is not an industry which is not overcrowded with working people who vainly plead for an opportunity to work.” Such sentiments were tinged with racism, as newly arrived immigrants from eastern and southern Europe were deemed less fit to “harmonize” and “blend” with those who already populated the United States. Samuel Gompers, “President Gompers’ Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 14-19 December 1891, *Proceedings*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> See for example, Samuel Gompers to William McKinley, 16 November 1897, Samuel Gompers Correspondence to 1898, reel 13, v. 12, 906, Samuel Gompers Papers, University of Maryland, College Park. (Hereafter cited as Gompers Papers.) In his complaint to the President about the continued issuance of court injunctions against organized labor, Gompers warned McKinley about a potential usurpation of authority by the courts, such that “we may soon witness that instead of three co-ordinated branches of the Government we shall have the Judicial to which all else will be subordinated.” *Ibid.*, 907.

assert independent power.<sup>25</sup> As private, voluntary organizations that sought only the non-interference of the state in relations between labor and capital, voluntarism, according to Gompers, exempted unions from state regulation and intrusion. Organized labor attempted to affect change in a political and economic context where “capital is entrenched in the habits, customs and prejudices of society as well as in statute law.”<sup>26</sup> How to best make inroads under these circumstances preoccupied all labor leaders.

The liberty to enter into employment contracts also anchored voluntarism. Gompers and other AFL leaders maintained that compulsory arbitration—where the disputing parties abided by the decision of a third party—violated the liberty presumed to exist in this idea of contract. (Non-compulsory mediation did not present such problems.) Proper contract negotiations required an equality of power between the two parties, a condition that labor unions sought to achieve by offering an organized response that equaled the strength of organized capital. If one party enjoyed greater power than the other, freedom of contract became impossible.<sup>27</sup> Gompers also feared that compulsory arbitration laws would allow the government to demand that workers work,

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<sup>25</sup> “President Gompers’ Report,” in “Report of the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 11-20 December 1899, *Proceedings*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> George E. McNeill, “Committee on President’s Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 12-17 December 1892, *Proceedings*, 29-30. Carroll Wright, U.S. Commissioner of Labor from 1885 to 1905 and chair of the committee investigating the events surrounding the 1894 Pullman Strike, noted the incongruity of business demands that the state act against labor but not regulate business activities: “It does appear . . . to be inconsistent to demand even partial governmental control on one side and to insist upon *laissez faire* upon the other.” Carroll D. Wright, “The Chicago Strike,” *Publications of the American Economic Association* 9 (December 1894): 519.

<sup>27</sup> McNeill, “The Hours of Labor,” in *The Labor Movement*, 479-80. This differed from the Social Darwinist celebration of contract which assumed that individuals, as such, entered into contracts as equals regardless of social conditions.

whether they desired to or not.<sup>28</sup> And to compel people to labor was akin to slavery. For Gompers, the right to voluntarily leave work—to strike—needed to be protected on economic grounds and to preserve a laborer’s manhood and independence.<sup>29</sup>

The AFL distinguished itself in part through its advocacy of strikes. Unlike Terence Powderly of the Knights, who insisted that strikes resulted from a failure to educate society about labor issues, Gompers maintained that they signified worker unity and demonstrated labor’s strength as an economic class, as well as the manhood and independence of individual trade unionists. The right to quit work, for whatever reason, Gompers asserted, “is the concrete expression of individual liberty.” Extending the rhetoric and ideas of abolitionism, labor activists argued that forced labor was anathema to a nation that had known slavery; strikes protected liberty. To abandon the right to strike promoted a “demoralized, degraded, and debased manhood,” and returned workers to a condition of serfdom.<sup>30</sup>

By embracing the discourse on the liberty afforded by contracts, Gompers deployed the language of the market to defend labor’s right to strike. A strike, in his rendering, served as a “trial of industrial strength” in an “application of the law of ‘supply and demand.’” Using rhetoric that supported capital accumulation, he asked how, in a “society based on free contract and free competition” one could “object to such a method

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<sup>28</sup> Samuel Gompers to George Iden, 15 July 1892, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 192. Iden worked as a clerk for the B&O Railroad, acted as Secretary of the Federal Labor Union of Newark, Ohio, and served as an Ohio state senator from 1892-95. See also *Address of Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, before the Arbitration Conference, Held at Chicago, Ill., December 17, 1900, under the Auspices of the National Civic Federation* (Washington, D.C., 1901), in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 299.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Gompers, “Arbitration or Involuntary Servitude,” *American Federationist*, June 1898, 71.

<sup>30</sup> *Address of Samuel Gompers, before the Arbitration Conference, December 17, 1900*, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 300.

of determining the comparative strength and endurance of capital and labor?”<sup>31</sup> Strikes were merely the settling of grievances between two independent parties, each of which should be allowed to exercise its relative power without outside interference. Labor’s complaints concerned, in part, the roles of the state and the courts as the most egregious examples of extraneous intervention into the private realm of contracts. Gompers asked only for fair competition, certain that trade unions would prevail if allowed to organize and to exercise their united force.

Opportunity, manhood, independence, and citizenship all emerged from economic competition. While demands to alter the conditions required for meaningful opportunity challenged the status quo by expanding the necessary pre-conditions for the “race of life,” they did not contest the fundamental parameters of competitive economics. Gompers readily admitted that “inequalities exist” and that “trade unions make no claim that they shall not continue to exist.” But to concede this condition did not mean that “equal opportunities should not prevail,” or that people should be born into a permanent economic caste “with all opportunities to rise from that condition, either restricted or already sequestered.”<sup>32</sup> A quest to attain a fair playing field that allowed a reasonable chance for upward mobility shaped trade-union goals, goals that reflected the inherent tensions within equal opportunity between a progressive impulse to incorporate more people into the promise of social mobility and to reward merit over inherited status, and its simultaneous impulse to reinforce inequality.

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Gompers, “Strikes, Sympathetic and Otherwise,” *American Federationist*, August 1902, 431.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Gompers, “A Minimum-Living Wage,” *American Federationist*, April 1898, 29.

Gompers' thinking about labor-capital relations changed in response to the concentrated economic production that characterized the Gilded Age and the consequent altered interplay between employer and employee. Owners and workers no longer shared the workbench or the intimacy of apprenticeship, with its expectation of becoming an independent master craftsman. The technological and organizational demands of factories separated capital and labor such that "men lose in a great measure their individuality and become parts of the great machine."<sup>33</sup> To reduce production costs businesses sought to deskill work and minimize the influence of labor unions. Where tasks were continually sub-divided and laborers in danger of becoming mere appendages to ever-more productive machinery, Gompers claimed that association with a union could restore that lost individuality, along with an enhanced sense of economic and social importance.<sup>34</sup> Factory work compelled Gompers to re-imagine opportunity away from entrepreneurial craft and toward the chance for greater leisure and consumption. Labor organizations, in this view, needed to focus on maintaining a measure of autonomy on the shop floor for skilled workers and to promote independence outside of work through shorter hours and increased consumption, the benefits of which would eventually accrue to all workers.

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<sup>33</sup> Testimony of Samuel Gompers, Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *The Relations Between Labor and Capital: Hearing before the Committee on Education and Labor*, 47 Cong., 2d sess., 16 August 1883, 290. (Hereafter cited as *Relations Between Labor and Capital*.) As noted by Henry George, "The effect of the introduction of machinery in any trade is to dispense with skill and to make the laborer more helpless." Testimony of Henry George, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 22 August 1883, 469.

<sup>34</sup> "Peace with Liberty and Justice," *National Civic Federation Review*, 15 May 1905, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume VI, 419.

Despite rhetoric throughout the late-nineteenth century that “free competition was the necessary basis to industrial progress,” Gompers conceded that “consolidation remained the trend.”<sup>35</sup> And labor risked failure if it did not recognize and accommodate to this development. The regulatory mechanism of supply and demand no longer applied to the production of goods; instead, trusts controlled output to advance their own interests. Workers needed to adopt these lessons and come together to eliminate hurtful competition between each other.<sup>36</sup> In this context, Gompers argued that labor need not fear business combinations, so long as they were met by organized labor. He opposed the 1890 Sherman Anti-Trust Act, designed to prevent the further consolidation of industry, because he did not agree that regulation could eliminate the tendency toward business concentration. He distrusted state action in such matters, and, quite presciently, feared that the vagueness of phrases such as “restraint of trade” in the Sherman Act would be used to “deprive labor of the benefit of organized effort.”<sup>37</sup> Though he did support some

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<sup>35</sup> Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 132.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Gompers, “Immutability of Supply and Demand,” *American Federationist*, September 1896, 143. “In the early days of our modern capitalist system, when the individual employer was the rule under which industry was conducted, the individual workmen deemed themselves sufficiently capable to cope for their rights; when industry developed and employers formed companies, the workmen formed unions; when industry concentrated into great combinations; the workingmen formed their national and international unions; as employments became trustified, the toilers organized federations of al[!] unions—local, national, and international—such as the American Federation of Labor.” Samuel Gompers, “Speeches and Writings,” AFL Records: The Samuel Gompers Era, reel 10, 9, Gompers Papers. See also George E. McNeill, “The Trade Unions and the Monopolists,” *American Federationist*, December 1896, 209.

<sup>37</sup> In fact, Gompers declared, “the greater efficiency that follows unification of control and management benefits society through increased production” and it was unlikely that any government action could prevent the “natural combination of industry.” And, as the Sherman Act was repeatedly invoked to challenge labor’s right to organize and strike, Gompers and others sought to have unions specifically exempted from anti-trust legislation and protected from judicial injunctions. The Clayton Anti-Trust Act of 1914, which Gompers famously declared labor’s Magna Carta, recognized the right for unions to organize, though it did not protect unions from anti-trust actions. Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 181; and “President Gompers’ Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 11-20 December 1899, *Proceedings*, 15. For a discussion of the political compromises involved in passing the Clayton Act see Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 246-48.

regulation of trusts, Gompers' concerns centered more on fairness of employment.<sup>38</sup>

“Whether an individual, or a collection of individuals, an aggregation of individuals, in the form of a corporation or a trust” mattered little, Gompers told members of the U.S. Industrial Commission, “so long as we obtain the fair conditions.”<sup>39</sup> Labor’s failure to organize and confront consolidated capital, however, meant “there is economic danger and political subjugation in store for all.”<sup>40</sup>

Defenders of organized labor who did criticize concentrated capital needed to explain their support for the regulation of trusts and the non-regulation of unions. Combinations of capital operated for self-aggrandizement and expected and received “special privileges,” the argument went, that allowed them to control the market and upset the “natural” workings of supply and demand. “Trade unions,” though, “ask no special privileges or immunities from the State.” They did not receive “any gift or bounty” from the state and did “not claim any greater liberty collectively than they do severally, as individuals.” “Parasitical” business trusts thrived by exploiting the “great mass of the wage-earners” and, in pursuit of self-interest, “vitiate[d] the people’s rights” and offered little social benefit.<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, a trade union operated as a “legitimate combination which indirectly benefits the entire community,” through improved working

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<sup>38</sup> Industry’s engagement in illegal activities to thwart competition and to subvert and corrupt the political process indeed bothered Gompers and he sought regulatory remedies. “President Gompers’ Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 11-20 December 1899, *Proceedings*, 15.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Industrial Commission, Reports, vol. 7, *Report of the Industrial Commission on the Relations and Conditions of Capital and Labor Employed in Manufacturers and General Business* (Washington, D.C., 1901), in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 144.

<sup>40</sup> “President Gompers’ Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 11-20 December, *Proceedings*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Gompers, “A Trust Magnate on Organization,” *American Federationist*, April 1899, 34.



conditions and higher wages.<sup>42</sup> With this distinction, trade unionists claimed that organized capital threatened the ideal of opportunity while organized labor protected it through its advocacy of individual liberty. Gompers agreed that the government should not interfere with union organizations, which came together voluntarily and independently of the state to advance their economic interests. But, despite growing public sentiment to regulate trusts, Gompers increasingly conceded the permanence of concentrated capital.

As Gompers acknowledged the actuality of consolidated industry, he minimized his attachment to the producerist focus on who controlled productive property in favor of a “pure and simple” unionism oriented toward the distribution of wealth.<sup>43</sup> While he extolled the dignity of labor embedded in producerism and celebrated the independence in craft autonomy, Gompers saw workers as both consumers and producers. He supported programs that would improve worker’s status on both of these fronts, particularly the eight-hour work day and increased wages. For Gompers, “the reduction of the hours of labor reaches the very root of society.” Shorter hours, he testified before

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<sup>42</sup> Victor Yarros, “Trusts, Combination and Labor Organizations,” *American Federationist*, August 1897, 109-10. Gompers shared this enthusiasm about the larger social benefits of trade union activity: “The trade union’s aim is the uplifting of the great body of wage-workers, the enlightenment of the masses, humanizing the conditions of life more every day and working for the good of the whole human race.” Gompers, “A Trust Magnate on Organization,” 34.

<sup>43</sup> As summarized by Nick Salvatore, “A belief in individualism, the absence of governmental interference, and the strength of a free market economy became for Gompers the criteria of both the good trade unionist and the patriotic American citizen.” Nick Salvatore, “Introduction,” in Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, xxv.

Congress, “gives the workingman better conditions and better opportunities, and makes of him what has been too long neglected—a consumer instead of a mere producer.”<sup>44</sup>

Higher pay and shorter hours would alter the distribution of wealth, while the fundamental relations of production remained intact. This shift meant abandoning the producerist dependence on the labor theory of value and replacing it with a concern for increased material abundance that did little to upset the increasing division of labor associated with industrialism.<sup>45</sup> Work was no longer thought to express liberty; rather, escape from work defined liberty. “Opportunity, in the twentieth century,” social commentator George Gunton wrote, “calls for an entirely different policy” from that of previous centuries. “Then, opportunity was to be compelled to work; now opportunity

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<sup>44</sup> Testimony of Samuel Gompers, *Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 16 August 1883, 294. Lawrence Glickman maintains that workers were intimately involved in creating a “consumerist identity and a consumerist political economy” and that they did so much earlier than scholars previously thought. In the years following the Civil War, Glickman argues, “workers began to define themselves as consumers, to ponder the power of consumer organizing, and to posit working-class consumption as a necessary prerequisite for industrial democracy.” Lawrence Glickman, “Workers of the World, Consume: Ira Steward and the Origins of Labor Consumerism,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 52 (Fall 1997): 72. See also Remarks of John Mitchell, *National Conference on Industrial Conciliation under the Auspices of the National Civic Federation, 1901, December 16-17 in New York* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1902), 83-4.

<sup>45</sup> Recent scholarship has sought to identify a distinct working-class culture and consciousness in the habits of consumption. For example, Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Knopf, 2003); Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); and Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). Roy Rosenzweig, in his community study of workers in Worcester, Massachusetts, argued that while laborers enjoyed little political power and exercised little control over their work environments, they effectively protected their leisure from outside influence and, consequently, established and maintained a working class culture beyond the purview of capital. See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What we Will: Workers & Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Recently historians have identified the basis for a class conscious politics through this focus on consumption. But, while the shift toward a concern with distribution rather than production does indicate a significant ideological reorientation, it also constitutes part of a redefinition of opportunity that more readily accommodated the permanence of wage labor within a corporate economy. It also supposes that supply and demand accurately describes market relations, as workers expressed their autonomy through demand, a potentially specious assumption.

requires leisure.”<sup>46</sup> While this focus on consumption allowed for an expanded concern with non-economic social goods realized through consumer power, Gompers’ inability to escape the tensions between opportunity’s progressive and non-progressive tendencies meant he accepted economic competition as the organizing principle of society while he sought to broaden the base from which it operated. This limited the more disruptive potential of the material abundance he desired for workers, where people continued to work for financial remuneration rather than as an act of self-expression.<sup>47</sup>

This adjustment in Gompers thinking occurred as overproduction was increasingly identified as the root of the 1890s economic downturn. In response, labor advocates noted the incongruity of such claims alongside an increasingly destitute population, as thousands found themselves unemployed and homeless. Many noted that technological advances and increased productive efficiency had ended concerns about the capacity of industry to fulfill the nation’s material needs—“it is no longer a problem.” But the allocation of these resources remained an issue and labor, according to Gompers, looked to “the men of affairs, and the men who think, and the men who act for the solution of this problem of distribution.”<sup>48</sup> Underconsumption, not overproduction, presented itself as the more obvious culprit.

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<sup>46</sup> Remarks of George Gunton, “The Eight Hour Day,” *Industrial Conference under the Auspices of the National Civic Federation, New York, December 8, 9, 10, 1902* (New York: The Winthrop Press, 1903), 168.

<sup>47</sup> Rosanne Currarino, “The Politics of ‘More’: The Labor Question and the Idea of Economic Liberty in Industrial America,” *Journal of American History* 93 (June 2006): 17-36.

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Congress, House Committee on Labor, *Hours of Labor for Workmen, Mechanics, etc., Employed upon Public Works of the United States: Report of Hearings . . . Relative to H.R. 6882, 56<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1900*, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers, Volume V*, 229. In the midst of the depression, Gompers rejected explanations that cited overproduction as in any way causal. “What does overproduction mean?” he asked. “Because we have too much meat the working people can have none to eat; because there is an overproduction of wheat and corn the working people can have no bread; because there is an

Diagnosing the cause of the 1890s depression, Gompers identified economic stagnation with a “lack of opportunity of the workers to consume more largely of the product of their labor.” Less consumption meant less demand and higher unemployment; conversely, more consumption meant more demand and lower unemployment.<sup>49</sup> Shorter hours and higher wages promised to solve the problems caused by technological innovation and economic concentration, which multiplied productive capacity but also increased unemployment and shrank the pool of workers able to consume this new productivity. (In this regard, Gompers argued that meeting labor’s demands would benefit business by enabling more workers to consume.<sup>50</sup>) A focus on consumption addressed the difficulty of a productive capability that surpassed people’s ability to consume; thus there existed a need to create a market of consumers, through higher wages and shorter hours, to sustain the economy.<sup>51</sup> International conditions, Gompers claimed, illustrated that those nations with shorter working hours enjoyed technological innovation, high productivity, and widespread prosperity.<sup>52</sup>

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overproduction of houses the working people must go shelterless. Away with san explanation.” “Organized Labor,” *Mobile Daily Register*, 18 May 1895, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume IV, 25.

<sup>49</sup> “President Gompers’ Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 14-21 December 1896, *Proceedings*, 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> “Ducey and Gompers,” *New York World*,” 28 August 1893, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 387. Opponents of a standardized eight-hour work day complained that such laws restricted worker’s freedom by imposing limits on their ambitions. Supporters countered this charge by building on their claim that shorter hours led to higher wages, and that “the only road to freedom is that which leads away from poverty.” The capacity to protect one’s freedom, its proponents maintained, rested on improved economic status. George Gunton, “Feasibility of an Eight Hour Work Day,” *American Federationist*, July 1894, 91.

<sup>51</sup> See for example, Gunton, “Feasibility of an Eight Hour Work Day,” 92.

<sup>52</sup> “President Gompers’ Address,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, 2 May 1890 in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, 310. See also U.S. Congress, *Hours of Labor for Workmen, Mechanics, etc.*, 1900, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 204; and McNeill, “The Hours of Labor,” in *The Labor Movement*, 472.

Speaking on behalf of workers, Gompers informed a congressional committee that “we have been told so frequently and with such seeming persistency, that the more you work the more you will own,” but the reality indicated otherwise. In fact, it appeared that “the longer hours you work the less . . . the workers own.” The endless working day, with little time to rest or think stifled the ambition and drive for upward mobility so celebrated in equal opportunity. Reduced working hours would help make opportunity meaningful and allow that ambition to flower.<sup>53</sup>

Like the Knights of Labor, Gompers built his argument in part on the ideas of Ira Steward and his advocacy of the eight-hour work day. Steward contested the dominant wage-fund theory, which asserted that a finite pool of wage money existed, determined by the amount of accumulated capital relative to the number of employees. Accordingly, overall higher wages necessitated either an increase in capital or a reduction in the number of workers. Or, if wages rose for some, pay needed to decline for others since the funds available from which to pay people remained finite.<sup>54</sup> And while the total size of the fund could change over time, the relative amount available to pay wages would not increase.

Steward disputed the economic assumptions of the wage-fund theory as well as its implicit denial that workers could exert power over their own economic and social standing. He combined calls for shorter hours with appeals for increased pay and maintained that the leisure gained through reduced hours would prompt demands for

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<sup>53</sup> U.S. Congress, *Hours of Labor for Workmen, Mechanics, etc.*, 1900, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 225.

<sup>54</sup> While this resembles Terence Powderly’s opposition to a labor movement focused solely on wage increases, since pay rises for some injured others, his concerns did not derive from adherence to the wage fund theory but from a certainty that the price of goods would increase relative to the raise, a circumstance that would affect all workers, including those who did not receive increased pay.

higher wages to further the enjoyment of that leisure, which would then promote a better standard of living for workers and a greater and more varied demand for the products of industry. Additionally, enlarged consumer demand would impel manufacturers toward more efficient production and labor-saving technology. Thus working hours could be reduced without sacrificing productive capacity and wages could be increased from the greater profits that resulted from economies of scale.<sup>55</sup> Steward's ideas influenced many in the labor movement and provided theoretical grounding for eight-hour day proponents. While Steward supported legislative remedies, Gompers insisted that trade-union activity alone would bring about shorter hours, higher wages, and the associated benefits outlined by Steward.

Though Steward did not challenge the fundamentals of capitalist ideology, he did imagine that higher wages and shorter hours would provide workers political power and make them more complete citizens. Reduced hours would prompt further demands for higher wages, a process that would continue until workers had achieved the cooperative commonwealth.<sup>56</sup> Working class power rested on the crucial importance of consumption in an industrial economy. Greater leisure could expand worker's opportunities beyond material survival and toward the "larger opportunities to cultivate his better nature." This would create a better laborer, better man, and better citizen.<sup>57</sup> The increased wages and shorter hours demanded by trade unions were "essential in order that the wage-earner

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Schneirov, "Thoughts on Periodizing the Gilded Age: Capital Accumulation, Society, and Politics, 1873-1898," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 5 (July 2006): 13.

<sup>56</sup> Glickman, "Workers of the World, Consume," 75; and Sidney Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1956), 317.

<sup>57</sup> U.S. Congress, *Hours of Labor for Workmen, Mechanics, etc.*, 1900, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 229.

may have some opportunity to develop his moral and intellectual attributes.” Indeed, the realization of such conditions would allow a worker to “become a worthy participant of a high civilization.”<sup>58</sup> The assertion of working class power would allow laborers to become full participants in society and to enjoy its associated benefits. The desire for more was vital since, “those who have the least want the least,” and “those who have more want more.”<sup>59</sup> George McNeill, a well-known labor editor and activist claimed that “contentment in one’s position is unknown” except, he added, “among the most degraded and depraved.”<sup>60</sup>

In the United States, an insistence that workers receive higher wages and enjoy shorter hours expressed the nation’s exceptional status as a country where wage earners expected more as part of the opportunities associated with citizenship.<sup>61</sup> Shorter working hours would mean that the “the world’s workers shall be more than beasts of burden,” that “men, women, and little children shall not be bent and broken under the loads imposed by task-masters more merciless than those of Pharaoh of old.” Instead, the world would achieve a “civilization when equality of opportunity shall be the natural and

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<sup>58</sup> Frank Valesh, “The Ethics of Trade Unions,” *American Federationist*, January 1896, 198. Gompers called time “the most valuable thing on earth.” Leisure allowed people to become educated, more social, and, most importantly, to “better and more independent citizens.” Henry George shared this view about the latent possibilities of leisure to emancipate people from material concerns: “The highest qualities of humanity can only develop when the material wants are satisfied; the most precious flower in existence can only bloom in leisure; and yet, to the great majority of men in our highest civilization, real leisure is a thing unknown.” “For Eight Hours: Mr. Gompers’ Address,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 23 March 1891, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 54; and Henry George, “Opinions of Eminent Men,” in *Labor: Its Rights and Wrongs* (Washington, D.C.: The Labor Publishing Company; reprint Westport: Hyperion Press, 1975), 74 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>59</sup> Geo. E. McNeill, “The Eight Hour Primer: The Fact, Theory, and the Argument,” *Eight Hour Series* No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Labor, 1899), 10.

<sup>60</sup> McNeill, “The Hours of Labor,” in *The Labor Movement*, 476.

<sup>61</sup> McNeill, “The Eight Hour Primer” 10; and McNeill, “The Hours of Labor,” in *The Labor Movement*, 476.

inalienable heritage of all the sons of men.”<sup>62</sup> Importantly, equal opportunity realized through the eight-hour day would not emancipate labor from economic competition. Instead, it would alter the conditions under which that competition occurred.

Through demands for shorter hours and increased leisure Gompers also articulated a connection between economic and political power. In an abundantly productive corporate order, and in lieu of entrepreneurial independence, opportunity for workers (and their economic and, hence, political power) rested on their capacity to consume. Reduced hours, and the associated higher wages, would afford workers the time and the means to express this power as their acts of consumption became increasingly essential to the economy. Class-based economic organization, for Gompers, represented labor’s greatest asset.

Insistence on shorter hours had been integral to the history of labor agitation and Gilded Age activists continued this tradition with calls for an eight-hour day. The permanence of wage labor prompted trade unions to focus on improving working and living conditions within that system. Achievement of the eight-hour day meant that laborers would then press for better working conditions, “better clothes, better food, more books, more newspapers, more education, more of the commodities that labor provides, more of the world’s wealth,” demands that would culminate in a more equitable distribution of wealth.<sup>63</sup> Eight-hour leagues formed throughout the country to organize

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<sup>62</sup> “Report on the Committee of Eight Hours,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 14-19 December 1891, *Proceedings*, 46. Members of the Committee included Frank K. Foster, Henry Kretlow, Henry Lloyd, and Edward Malone.

<sup>63</sup> Testimony of Adolph Strasser, *The Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 21 August 1883, 459-60.



strikes, rallies, and parades in support of the eight-hour workday.<sup>64</sup> Building on Steward, this agenda linked calls for shorter hours and higher wages. Through consumption, and the increased productivity it prompted, workers would acquire the power to secure for themselves the very jobs for which they sought higher wages. Steward's ideas offered the means to improve immediate conditions and to empower laborers by grounding the realization of these improvements in their own actions.

Redefining higher pay as part of the demand for wages that allowed more consumption indicated acceptance of the permanence of a wage labor economy and a desire to find within it a voice for labor. This focus on consumption also severed wage labor from its older association with a kind of slavery, and reinterpreted it, through its capacity to promote material abundance, as the symbol of freedom.<sup>65</sup> For Gompers, a reconstituted doctrine of economic opportunity centered less on entrepreneurial activity and more on consumption allowed workers to claim a greater share of an expanding economy. The increased leisure associated with a shorter workday would trigger new material wants and social aspirations, leading to higher wages and a more equitable (though not equal) division of wealth.<sup>66</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, influential economist and social philosopher Simon Patten argued that the productive abundance of organized industry effectively defined labor as the effort to free oneself for greater leisure, most often expressed through

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<sup>64</sup> Eventually, Woodrow Wilson signed the first federal law to guarantee an eight-hour workday in 1916. The Adamson Act covered approximately 400,000 railway workers. And the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, as part of the New Deal, extended the benefit of an eight-hour day to workers throughout the nation.

<sup>65</sup> Glickman, *A Living Wage*, xv, 2-4.

<sup>66</sup> Gompers imagined that laborer's demands for "more of the product of their labor" would, finally, eliminate the profit on labor altogether. "Samuel Gompers," *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 28 April 1896, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume IV, 162.

consumption. Unlike producerism, work no longer offered self-sufficiency or dignity, or acted as a creative expression of self. Instead, it provided the means to allow consumption, the purpose of which, for Patten, lay less with material goods than with the social and personal rewards associated with their acquisition. “The worth of life,” he said, “is not to be measured by the utility of goods consumed, but by this fund plus the pleasure of activity and aesthetic enjoyment of goods.”<sup>67</sup> Patten offered a less overtly political reward than what Gompers hoped to achieve through consumption, but both shared an interest in questions of distribution rather than production in an industrial economy.

Advocates of this refashioned opportunity of consumption-as-leisure distinguished between earned leisure, realized from one’s own efforts, and inherited leisure, which depended on the luck of birth. To embrace leisure and consumption required positively associating labor with the absence of work—that which previously constituted the target of labor’s ire. The transition from producerism, grounded in the inherent value of labor, toward leisure meant that *not* working began to assume ever-greater positive connotations. However, elements of producerist morality persisted. The leisure and consumption bought with earned wealth prompted little critique, but the abuse of leisure by those who inherited wealth was condemned, for “it is these unearned

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<sup>67</sup> Simon N. Patten, *The Theory of Prosperity* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), 43. Patten’s celebration of the consumer led him to assert that consumer demand lowered prices, not competition among producers, a conclusion antithetical to the motive force behind classical capitalist economics which expects technological innovation to emerge from competition among an array of producers that, in turn, would lower prices. Instead, Patten argued that consumer choice drives competition, a claim that accommodated concentrated productive economic power, while trying to maintain the relevance of competition within a monopolized reality. *Ibid.*, 60-1, 63, 73.

fortunes that breed caste, and threaten social degeneracy” and undermined the promise of opportunity and social mobility.<sup>68</sup>

Demands for the eight-hour day joined calls for a minimum wage, “a living wage, a life-line, a line beyond which society must recognize it is unsafe, aye, even dangerous to ask a man or woman to work below.” For Gompers, the minimum wage represented an economic and a social wage that secured the base for labor advancement. Workers would receive sufficient income to sustain themselves and their families “in a manner to maintain his self-respect, to educate his children, supply his household with literature, [and] with opportunities to spend a portion of his life with his family.”<sup>69</sup> In this way, the minimum wage would directly benefit its recipients and, indirectly, the entire community.

This economic floor did not, however, impede rewarding merit or include an expectation of equal wages. Varied economic effort, ingenuity, and ambition deserved correspondingly varied rewards. Gompers strove to remedy what he deemed society’s failure to realize meaningful opportunity by demanding that certain conditions be met so that fair competition could commence. But even as he fought to improve labor’s position, he accepted the expectation of unequal results. Charged by critics that he advocated “no more wages paid to the highest skilled and deftest worker than we insist upon for the sluggard and the shirker of his duty,” Gompers declared that this “is as far from the truth as anything can be.”<sup>70</sup> While dedicated to broadening the foundation from

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<sup>68</sup> “It is not the accumulators of wealth, but the heirs of wealth, that furnish the drones of society and the enemies of labor.” Lester Ward Frank, “The Use and Abuses of Wealth,” *The Forum*, February 1887, 557.

<sup>69</sup> Gompers, “A Minimum-Living Wage,” 26.

<sup>70</sup> Samuel Gompers, “On the Attitude of Organized Labor Toward Organized Charity: An Extempore Address Delivered by Samuel Gompers, 20 March 1899, before the Monday Evening Club, Boston, Mass, and the Representatives of the Organized Charities of New England,” AFL Records, The Samuel Gompers Era, Speeches and Writings, Reel 10, 65, Gompers Papers.

which the “race of life” began, equal opportunity, not equal wages, defined the extent of Gompers’ demands.

Calls for reduced work hours to ensure greater leisure for self-improvement remained grounded in an economic understanding of opportunity and a view of humans as economically-driven agents. When the National Eight-Hour Association demanded “an honest opportunity for every human being to possess the reasonable comforts of life,” they parted from those who rooted opportunity in controlling one’s labor in pursuit of entrepreneurial dreams, but remained bound to opportunity’s essentially economic nature.<sup>71</sup> Trade unionists complained that socialists sought to violate the merit embedded in equal opportunity by “forc[ing] everyman who works to surrender his products to the co-operative enjoyment of the commonwealth, so that even those who did not work would share the benefits of the co-operation of consumption.”<sup>72</sup> In rendering socialists economic levelers, trade unionists revealed their own acceptance of the economic inequality of a merit-based system, a core component of equal opportunity.

However, debate over the social and economic foundation required for opportunity to thrive did offer Gompers and trade unionists space to protest the status quo. While never challenging economic competition itself, Gompers questioned the prerequisites to ensure fair competition and in this manner aimed to improve labor’s position. And, he adopted the rhetoric of opportunity and merit to advance his case. To

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<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *The Nationalizing of American Life, 1877-1900*, ed. Ray Ginger (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 72.

<sup>72</sup> Sam L. Leffingwell, “Socialism—Trade Unionism,” *American Federationist*, January 1899, 215.

exhibit ability and enjoy an appropriate reward required assurances of available work.

“We do not claim,” Gompers said in the name of organized labor, that “the world owes us a living.” But, he continued, “if we are willing to work, then society does an injustice in denying the opportunity to work.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in the midst of the 1890s depression Gompers declined an offer by Oliver Sumner Teall, a real estate investor and Republican Party activist, to aid a committee charged with providing relief for New York’s homeless and hungry. Charity would simply humiliate and demean workers and, most damning, “destroy their independence.” What laborers wanted was to work “in order that they may be self-sustaining.”<sup>74</sup> For Gompers, the right to work was intimately tied to the opportunity to live—to provide laborer’s the chance to secure “the means of life.”<sup>75</sup>

The right to employment, according to Gompers, represented the minimum foundation on which to base equal opportunity, or the starting line from which to determine success or failure. “What is life and liberty,” he asked, “what is the pursuit of happiness to him who has not the opportunity to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow?” The meaningfulness of the promises enumerated in the Declaration of

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<sup>73</sup> Gompers, “On the Attitude of Organized Labor Toward Organized Charity,” 74. See also Gompers, “A Minimum-Living Wage,” 27. Echoing this view, Sam L. Leffingwell argued that society assumes no obligation to support those who are able to care for themselves—to do so would allow society to “absorb the individual. . . . Society has entered no contract to support anybody who is able to support himself.” Sam L. Leffingwell, “Unionism; Socialism; Communism,” *American Federationist*, November 1899, 215.

<sup>74</sup> Samuel Gompers to Oliver Teall, 5 December 1893, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 418. See also Samuel Gompers to John Thomas, 23 February 1898, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume IV, 446-47.

<sup>75</sup> The Executive Council of the AFL to the Officers and Delegates of the International Trade Union Congress, London, 27 October 1888, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, 153. Delegates at the 1893 America Federation of Labor conference adopted a resolution that criticized the practice of arresting those unable, in the midst of dire economic conditions, to find work. The resolution went on to claim “that the right to work is the right to life,” and that to limit the right to work denies the right to life. Further, if private employment was unavailable, city, state, or national government must provide employment. Delegate Morgan, Resolution No. 55, in “Report of the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 11-19 December 1893, *Proceedings*, 37.

Independence required economic conditions that allowed opportunity to flourish. By expanding claims about what constituted an appropriate starting position amid a presumed failure to fulfill the expectations of a fair chance for upward mobility, Gompers stretched, but did not break, the bounds of competitive opportunity.<sup>76</sup> While expectations of available work and a guaranteed minimum wage challenged the Social Darwinist status quo, such demands did not fundamentally alter the assumptions embedded in equal opportunity—that economic pressure motivated some to work harder and “smarter” and that, consequently, that effort should be differentially rewarded.

A politics rooted in material advancement emerged from Gompers’ support for craft-based unions, his frustration with failed attempts to legislate improved working conditions, and a distrust of the state.<sup>77</sup> Gompers resisted efforts to establish a labor party and steered the AFL away from association with either established political party, which exacted a loyalty of which he remained suspicious. He did endorse the candidacy of individual politicians deemed friends of labor and the AFL could certainly be classed

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<sup>76</sup> Chicago Civic Federation, *Congress on Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Arranged under the Auspices of the Industrial Committee of the Civic Federation, Held at Chicago, November 13 and 14, 1894* (Chicago: n.p., n.d.), in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 600.

<sup>77</sup> As an active member of the Cigar Makers’ International Union, Gompers worked strenuously to end the practice of rolling cigars in tenement houses. (This tactic was taken rather than attempting to organize its mostly immigrant and female work force.) He conducted extensive investigations and worked diligently to see the passage of legislation in the New York legislature outlawing the practice. In 1884, when the law was declared unconstitutional because it violated property rights, he concluded that legislation could not effectively improve working conditions for laborers. This experience proved formative in compelling Gompers to rethink the relationship between politics and economics. See also Samuel Gompers to George Eby, 24 September 1890, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, 364; and Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 58-62.

“political in a sense of prosecuting economic reforms for the betterment of its class.”<sup>78</sup>

But for Gompers, a labor party could only follow, not precede, the economic organization of workers.

While it is too simple to assert that Gompers shunned all political activity in favor of bread-and-butter unionism, or that his reluctance to support the formation of a labor party captures the entirety of the tension between trade unionists and socialists, he did stake out a position that seemingly made politics a secondary concern. “Political equality,” Gompers argued, “without some degree of industrial independence would be more of a fantasy than a practical reality.”<sup>79</sup> Gompers’ early insistence on AFL non-partisanship arose from his sense of the relationship between political and economic power. By refusing to embroil the organization in frequently corrupt party politics, he understood the Federation to “tacitly declare that political liberty with[out] economic independence is illusory and deceptive, and that only in so far as we gain economic independence can our political liberty become tangible and important.” Gompers acknowledged that this “may sound like political heresy,” but he declared it “economic truth.” Shorter hours and higher pay—improved economic circumstances and increased leisure—meant more “in the meaning of life and progress of the workers of our country than the voting for any candidate of any political party.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Leffingwell, “Socialism—Trade Unionism,” 214.

<sup>79</sup> Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 127. “[T]he whole history of labor and its struggles firmly demonstrates that political liberty cannot co-exist with economic dependence. Those whose economic existence depends upon the will of others cannot exercise or enjoy political equality.” Samuel Gompers, “Unite and Achieve True Freedom,” *American Federationist*, July 1897, 94.

<sup>80</sup> Samuel Gompers, “Organized Labor in the Campaign,” *North American Review*, July 1892, 91-6, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 203 (brackets from editors of *The Samuel Gompers Papers*). Gompers consistently maintained this position, declaring in 1905 that “liberty can be neither exercised nor enjoyed by those who are in poverty. Material improvement is essential to the exercise and enjoyment of

Unexpectedly, this view echoed Booker T. Washington's claim that economic independence and land ownership for southern blacks formed the necessary foundation for meaningful political rights. If wage-laborers could be described as "slaves in employment," Gompers wondered how they could reasonably expect to "achieve control at the polls."<sup>81</sup> Rather, corrupt party politics meant it likely that labor's attachment to a particular party or candidate would, ultimately, benefit office-seekers, not organized labor. But more fundamentally, "economic organization and control over economic power were the fulcrum which made possible influence and power in all other fields."<sup>82</sup> If new economic conditions required abandoning elements of producerist thought, and the entrepreneurial promise of possessing a skilled craft, the idea that labor's strength rested on economic power remained. The capacity to consume acted as one expression of economic power, as well as the ability of organized labor to achieve higher wages and shorter hours in the interests of expanded consumption. The reduced hours and increased pay that allowed greater consumption would yield, Gompers believed, commensurate advances in social status and, thereby, political power.

American socialists had long diverged from trade unionists in their certainty that economic organization was insufficient to counter the power of capital. Following a European model, they insisted on the relevance of a Socialist party. "As a class," socialists asserted, "workers must take control of the legislative process, for in the

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liberty." *National Civic Federation Review*, 15 May 1905, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume VI, 419; and Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 147.

<sup>81</sup> "President Gompers' Report," in "Report of the Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor," 10-18 December 1894, *Proceedings*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> Samuel Gompers to Henry Lloyd, 11 July 1893, Samuel Gompers Correspondence to 1888, reel 7, vol. 9, 275, Gompers Papers; and Samuel Gompers quoted in Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers*, 121.



legislative bodies each and every political freedom of the working class is destroyed by the now-ruling class.” As leader of the Socialist Party of America, Eugene Debs advocated industrial unions, encouraged workers to recognize the “Socialist ballot as the weapon of their class,” and rejected “pure and simple” unionism “whose members strike against and boycott the effects of the capitalist system while voting industriously to perpetuate the system.”<sup>83</sup>

The Federation’s ascendance intensified disagreements with socialists. Gompers’ insistence that the AFL organize along craft lines and concentrate on economic issues at the expense of building a viable third party led socialists to charge that trade unions could not effectively accommodate the growing numbers of unskilled laborers. Effective organization, they argued, needed to combine economic and political power. To wage such a battle “solely on the economic front” would not succeed in any lasting way.<sup>84</sup> The strength of socialist sentiment within the AFL during the economically depressed mid-1890s forced Gompers to cede leadership in 1894 to John McBride who advocated the Federation’s more overt involvement in politics as a means to further “ameliorate the

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<sup>83</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “The Western Labor Movement,” *The International Socialist Review*, November 1902, 264. Debs organized the American Railway Union to promote industrial organization across trades and catapulted to national prominence when the ARU joined the 1894 Pullman Strike. Gompers withheld AFL support for the strike, though he did offer financial help to defray the legal expenses of ARU leaders. In the years following Pullman, Debs emerged a socialist and determined that corporate control of the government prompted the defeat at Pullman, despite widespread popular support. Thus, advances for labor, and the eventual abolition of the wage system, required an assertion of national political power to “make the workers themselves the masters of the earth.” Eugene V. Debs, “Unionism and Socialism,” *Appeal to Reason*, 1904, in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, Introduction by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Hermitage Press, Inc., 1948), 111. See also Eugene V. Debs to Samuel Milton Jones, 8 December 1899, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, Volume I, 1874-1912, ed. Robert Constantine (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 142.

<sup>84</sup> “Translation of a News Account of the Founding Meeting of Local 1 of the Cigarmakers’ Progressive Union of America,” *New York Volkszeitung*, 24 July 1882, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume I, 273; and “Organized Labor,” *Workmen’s Advocate*, 27 September 1890, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume II, 368-69.

wage workers' condition in life.”<sup>85</sup> McBride's single year tenure was marred by illness and charges of corruption and Gompers reclaimed the presidency in 1895, a position he held until his death in 1924. But throughout the 1890s the AFL leadership worked to clarify the organization's position regarding the socialist activity in its midst. In the years following Gompers' successful effort during the 1894 convention to defeat a plank that called for nationalizing industries, similar proposals were introduced which also met with failure.<sup>86</sup> Gompers maintained that such measures violated the principles of trade unionism. Economic opportunity would be realized through the certainty of employment, shorter hours, higher wages, and increased consumption within the given economic structure.

Many trade unionists invoked equal opportunity to oppose socialist claims. Political support of candidates committed to aiding labor met with approval, but socialist politics that sought to “reform governments by leveling down and leveling up the social inequalities” were an affront to equal opportunity.<sup>87</sup> By associating socialism with economic leveling, trade unionists echoed charges from the business community that

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<sup>85</sup> “President McBride's Report,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 9-17 December 1895, *Proceedings*, 16. McBride's election, which depended on strong support from western affiliates, also reflected regional tensions within the organization.

<sup>86</sup> For example, at the 1897 AFL convention a resolution introduced by Delegate Kreft from the United Labor League in Philadelphia to support the “entire abolition of the wage system” and the “collective ownership of all the means of production and distribution” was quickly defeated. A similar measure was introduced, and failed to win approval, at the 1898 convention. Also, at the 1900 convention a resolution to support nationalizing industries in the face of continuing economic consolidation was defeated in favor of one that called for “trade workingmen [to] study the developments of the trusts and monopolies.” “Report of the Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 13-21 December 1897, *Proceedings*, 101; “Report of the Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 12-20 December 1889, *Proceedings*, 105; and “Report of the Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 6-15 December 1900 in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 281-82.

<sup>87</sup> W. S. Carter, “Trade Unionism and Socialism,” *American Federationist*, September 1897, 132. Carter edited the *Locomotive Fireman's Magazine*, an organ edited by Eugene V. Debs before he formed the American Railway Union.

socialism violated equal opportunity and stifled ambition—that “desire in human nature to rise above common level.” Socialism, then, denied the essence of humanity.<sup>88</sup> Debs and other socialists responded by condemning economic competition, proclaiming it “utterly cannibalistic,” where the “strong devour the weak,” and proposing, instead, a system of economic cooperation hastened through political action.<sup>89</sup>

Gompers, however, maintained that he offered a more potent challenge to the capitalist order than socialist party politics. Socialist efforts to build an alternative political party, in his view, misconstrued the relationship between economic and political power. Trade unionists constituted far more of a class movement than did the socialists, who were “nothing more than a party movement.” He argued that as socialism’s strength as a party increased, “in the same ratio does it lose its working class character,” since all parties ultimately focused on institutional advancement.<sup>90</sup> In a system based on capitalist ideals, economic power realized through the organizational strength of trade unions that had educated workers to their class interests, which they then expressed through consumption, would lead to effective political power. For Gompers, the AFL’s efforts to build and exercise labor’s economic strength made it *the* class-oriented organization.

In a series of articles published in successive issues of *American Federationist* during the summer and early fall of 1898, G. A. Hoehn, a socialist and longtime editor of *St. Louis Labor*, argued that contrary to charges levied by socialists, the AFL “has not

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<sup>88</sup> Delegate Pomery, *Report of the Political Programme, at the Denver Convention, December 14 and 15, 1894*, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume III, 653.

<sup>89</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “Present Conditions and Future Duties,” *Railway Times*, 1 January 1897, 1. See also Frances Willard, “Competition Doomed,” *The Social Democrat*, 20 January 1898, 3 and Eugene V. Debs to Samuel Milton Jones, 8 December 1899 in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, Volume I, 142.

<sup>90</sup> Samuel Gompers to Ernst Kurzenknabe, 5 December 1896, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume IV, 264.

placed itself in opposition to the teachings of Marx and that it has been fighting on the lines of the historic class struggle.”<sup>91</sup> The labor movement, as a product of and reaction to the economic conditions of an industrial system “that has completely and mercilessly revolutionized the economic basis of the social family” and altered all economic, social, and political relations, risked failure if it “disregard[ed] the economic laws of social development.”<sup>92</sup> The AFL, a class-based trade union centrally concerned with economic relations, more directly addressed these conditions than did the politically-oriented socialists. Hoehn applauded Gompers’ argument that class organization among workers offered the best antidote to concentrated capital, with its recognition that “the workmen’s class interests are diametrically opposed to the class interests of the ‘profit earners.’”<sup>93</sup> For Hoehn, Gompers and the AFL stood for class conflict.

The AFL followed Gompers’ lead throughout the 1890s in regard to political activity. It maintained a non-partisan position in electoral politics and concentrated on drafting legislation and lobbying representatives for pro-labor laws. However, by the early years of the twentieth century the Federation’s strategy could not adequately counter the effectiveness of employer associations in their opposition to such legislation. The AFL was compelled to enter politics more directly.<sup>94</sup> The situation became

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<sup>91</sup> G. A. Hoehn, “True Socialism I: Marxism and Pseudo-Marxism,” *American Federationist*, August 1898, 108-09.

<sup>92</sup> G. A. Hoehn, “True Socialism III: Marxism and Pseudo-Marxism,” *American Federationist*, October 1898, 154.

<sup>93</sup> G. A. Hoehn, “True Socialism III: Marxism and Pseudo-Marxism,” *American Federationist*, November 1898, 175.

<sup>94</sup> Philip G. Wright, “The Contest in Congress between Organized Labor and Organized Business,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 29 (February 1915): 244. Julia Green identified three specific developments that forced the AFL to act with greater political intent: effective open shop efforts and increased judicial hostility toward labor, which increased the need for pro-labor legislation to counter these developments; labor’s lack of success in finding sympathetic ears among members of Congress; and, the

particularly acute after the National Association of Manufacturers embarked on a series of anti-union programs in 1903, led by its determined president David Parry who likened labor organizations to Huns and Vandals.<sup>95</sup> As part of this trend toward greater partisan political action, Gompers eventually accorded, especially after 1910, a more positive role for the state in helping to realize the expanded foundation necessary for equal opportunity.

The National Civic Federation formed in 1900, bringing together some of the largest industrialists, national labor leaders, and well-known social commentators. It described its mission as the improvement of relations among labor, capital, and the public outside the sphere of state intervention. Attracted by their compatibility with voluntarism, Gompers saw NCF goals as consistent with his stance against state intervention in labor issues and his opposition to compulsory arbitration. Additionally, access to industrial leaders, whose acceptance of NCF principles indicated a concession to labor's right to organize (as opposed to the National Association of Manufacturers), prompted Gompers' greater involvement. A willingness to negotiate with organized labor made the NCF palatable, even attractive, to Gompers. He had found a partner in

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successful lobbying of NAM and other employee organizations. Greene also points out that this expanded political activity occurred within the pretense of non-partisanship which resulted in tension between national and local offices. While the national office controlled the finances, the locals retained a better sense of conditions on the ground. By 1908, the AFL endorsed Democratic Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan and worked to create the illusion of political consensus within the organization. Julia Greene, "The Strike at the Ballot Box": The American Federation of Labor's Entrance into Election Politics, 1906-1909," *Labor History* 32 (Spring 1991): 168.

<sup>95</sup> David Parry, "President's Annual Report," *Proceedings of the Eighth Convention of the National Association of Manufacturers of the United States of America, Held at New Orleans, April 14, 15, and 16, 1903* (New York: Issued by the Secretary's Office, 1903), 17-18.

the refashioning of opportunity away from individual entrepreneurship and toward greater leisure and consumption within a corporate structure. Gompers served as NCF Vice-Chair, as a member of the Executive Committee, as Vice-Chair of the Industrial Committee (chaired by Senator Mark Hanna and which sought to settle labor disputes), and as acting President between Hanna's death in February 1904 and August Belmont's election in December of that year.

The NCF sponsored several conferences, featuring leading businessmen, labor representatives, social scientists, and journalists, to proffer self-regulating solutions to problems between labor and capital. According to Gompers, such gatherings helped to diminish the "suspicion bred of isolation" that heretofore permeated industrial relations. Instead, and in a move away from his earlier commitment to class conflict, personal connections between leaders of capital and leaders of labor could lessen this antagonism.<sup>96</sup> And, negotiated contracts acknowledged labor's right to bargain collectively and could provide job security, shorter hours, and increased pay, all of which promoted increased leisure and consumption.

More significantly, Gompers' involvement with the NCF reflected his recognition of a new economic order of centralized corporations and labor unions. Group, not individual, action defined economic relations. And this condition necessitated that industry recognize the presence and influence of organized labor. For decades labor had struggled for legitimacy among those who controlled capital and continued to combat the well financed open-shop campaign by the National Association of Manufacturers. The NCF, however, acknowledged labor's right to organize and "concluded that antagonism

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<sup>96</sup> Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 118.

to organized labor is vain and unprofitable.”<sup>97</sup> In an ideological, political, and legal context often hostile to this right, Gompers considered the NCF’s position on this single point extraordinarily important. He never imagined that the NCF could permanently solve the labor problem, but did believe that it could diffuse tensions between labor and capital and help “offset the bitter antagonism which is being manifested on the part of the Manufacturer’s Association,” an organization he described as “avowedly hostile to the trade unions and bent upon crushing them.”<sup>98</sup> Employing less confrontational rhetoric than earlier in his career, Gompers concluded that cooperation between capital and labor could set working conditions. Operating outside the bounds of the state, “industry would thus become self-regulated.”<sup>99</sup>

The founding of the NCF coincided with the growing acceptance of the corporate economic system on the part of trade unions and a determination to improve conditions for workers within that system.<sup>100</sup> While Gompers considered his association with the NCF consistent with a desire to find solutions to labor-capital tensions outside the jurisdiction of the state, it also indicated a shift from the overtly class struggle discourse

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<sup>97</sup> Samuel Gompers, “Militant Trade Unionism Essential to Industrial Peace,” *American Federationist*, February 1902, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 487.

<sup>98</sup> Samuel Gompers to George Perkins, 16 January 1903, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume VI, 104-05.

<sup>99</sup> Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 132-33. The NCF, according to Gompers, “helped to establish the practice of accepting labor unions as an integral social element and logically of including their representatives in groups to discuss policies.” *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>100</sup> Julie Greene also identifies the turn of the twentieth century as the moment when the business unionism of the AFL became dominant, though she associates it more closely with the structure of the union rather than with broader ideological and economic trends. “Conservative craft unionism was not born but built, step by step, as potential paths to inclusive strategies gradually disappeared over the course of the late nineteenth century. The decline of industrial unionism, the waning of the Knights of Labor, the dominance over local labor organizations exercised by the AFL—together these events narrowed the outlook of skilled workers already facing great pressures from mass immigration, economic upheaval, and employer assertiveness.” Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics*, 47.

that had infused his earlier writings and speeches. As an officer of the National Civic Federation, he called for greater cooperation between capital and labor. Gompers' understanding of opportunity as leisure and consumption helped to focus organized labor on questions of wealth distribution, and thus he and industry leaders could agree to accept the fundamental ordering of production. Competitive wage labor would persist. This further adjustment in Gompers' thinking recognized the changing economic order, but in a manner that he imagined still accrued to labor its status as a separate class. Capital and labor would meet where each acknowledged the strength of the other. With this acknowledgement, it became possible to reach agreements that did not depend on overt expressions of class conflict.

Retreat from the spirit of his previous rhetoric led some to cast aspersions on Gompers' association with "great capitalist and plutocratic politicians," and his claim that the interests of labor and capital could be harmonized.<sup>101</sup> How is it possible, asked a writer in *Miner's Magazine*, for labor to conciliate with capital when workers and capitalists each organize to protect their respective, and opposed, interests? "One must be right and the other wrong," the writer concluded, "and between right and wrong there is no compromise."<sup>102</sup>

In promoting the Federation's work among laborers, Gompers needed to reframe perceptions of trusts as obstacles to social mobility and the culprits in narrowing

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<sup>101</sup> "Socialists' Resolutions Fail in Big Convention," *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 19 November 1905, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume VI, 492.

<sup>102</sup> "Gompers and Hanna," *Miner's Magazine*, January 1902, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, Volume V, 463-64. By 1911 the criticism of Gompers and the NCF had become so heated, and so personal, that Gompers felt compelled to devote a significant portion of the March issue of the *American Federationist* to defending the NCF and his role in it. See Samuel Gompers, "Organized Labor, and the National Civic Federation," *American Federationist*, March 1911, 181-91.



economic opportunity. Labor activists often extolled economic competition, the desire for “a fair race in life,” and the imperative to “place equal opportunities” before all who desired a chance. And in celebrating these values they resisted the tendency of the “iron hands of monopoly and trust [to] squeeze the life-blood out of the opportunity.”<sup>103</sup> In refashioning opportunity as the pursuit of greater leisure and consumption, made possible through higher wages and shorter hours, Gompers had to decouple the association of consolidated capital with declining economic opportunity and he had to abandon his rhetoric of class struggle.

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<sup>103</sup> William Aimison, “Introductory Remarks,” in “Report of the Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor,” 13-21 December 1897, *Proceedings*, 12. Aimison previously served as President of the International Typographical Union.

## CHAPTER 5

### Opportunity Remade: Business Gets Organized

In the midst of the contentious 1894 Pullman Strike, precipitated by a decision during yet another economic downturn to cut wages with no corresponding reduction in rents for company housing, the Chicago Civic Federation offered to mediate between the Pullman Palace Car Company and union officials. Led by Ralph Easley, who had encouraged the nonpartisan association of various community interests to, among other things, negotiate relations between labor and capital, the Civic Federation consisted of leading Chicago citizens, including Jane Addams, Lyman Gage, and Bertha Palmer.<sup>1</sup> Federationists maintained that such agreements would minimize the economic and social disruptions caused by strikes and promote a harmonious accord among labor, capital, and the general public that lessened class conflict.

The confrontation at Pullman, which affected rail travel across the country and commanded national attention when the newly formed American Railway Union voted to support the striking workers, appeared as a moment to put into practice the principles of negotiated settlements. Establishing an Industrial Committee composed of representatives of employees, employers, and the public, the Federation intended to offer a hearing to all sides and resolve the strike, in part, by encouraging a rent reduction equivalent to the wage reductions. However, George Pullman's emphatic "no" in answer

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<sup>1</sup> Easley had pursued a journalism career in Kansas and, then, Chicago where he met many of the city's reformers, social activists, and business and labor leaders. A committed Republican, in 1893 he founded the Chicago Civic Federation and eventually helped to establish the National Civic Federation in 1900, for which he initially served as secretary and then as chair of its Executive Council from 1904 until his death in 1939. For an early analysis of the Chicago Civic Federation see Albion W. Small, "The Civic Federation of Chicago: A Study in Social Dynamics," *The American Journal of Sociology* 1 (July 1895): 79-103.

to the Federation's offer to act as peacemaker effectively ended their intervention. The strike continued for more than two months, President Cleveland dispatched federal troops, thirty-four people were killed, ARU leader Eugene Debs was imprisoned for six months, and, in the aftermath, Congress conducted hearings on the strike's causes and outcome.<sup>2</sup>

While the Chicago Federation's efforts to end the Pullman Strike failed, the principle of joining representatives of labor, capital, and the public to settle economic disputes endured and shaped the Federation as it outgrew its Chicago roots and became a New York-based national organization.<sup>3</sup> In an era marked by industrial strife and growth in the scale of corporations, the Civic Federation proffered solutions that recognized the changed needs of business. And addressing these needs required grappling with the conflict provoked by the interaction of the ideology of equal opportunity and Gilded Age economic consolidation. Industrial leaders strove to mitigate complaints among social and labor activists about the unmet promises of opportunity in an age of mergers while also confronting those in business whose adherence to the ideals of economic competition led them seemingly to oppose both organized labor and organized capital. Consequently, Federation leaders and members used the rhetoric of competition to support consolidated capital in their quest to shift the meaning of opportunity from entrepreneurialism to advancement within industry, through internal promotion or expanded stock ownership, or higher wages and shorter hours.

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<sup>2</sup> *Report of the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894 by the United States Strike Commission* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895; reprint, Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> The Chicago Civic Federation organized four conferences during the 1890s on industrial arbitration (1894), primary elections (1898), foreign policy (1898), and trusts (1899).

Prior to the Civil War, relatively small-scale business characterized an economy that many associated with entrepreneurial opportunity and social fluidity. “What most astonished me in the United States,” Alexis de Tocqueville noted of his 1830s visit, “is not so much the marvelous grandeur of some undertakings, as the innumerable multitudes of small ones.”<sup>4</sup> Here, with little capital, one could aspire to establish a business and pursue economic independence. But the expansion of industrial enterprises following the war altered the nature of business. Technological developments joined the economic policies enacted by the Republicans during the Civil War. Centralized banking, protective tariffs, the federal government’s involvement in internal improvements, and massive railroad construction all created favorable conditions for industrial growth. Large-scale businesses differed in kind from earlier entities. The consolidation of economic and social power, increased capital costs, diversified ownership rather than individual entrepreneurship, expanded geographic interests, management of larger work forces, and a broader range of productive and distributive activities necessitated ever-greater planning.

Small-scale capitalism required price competition to encourage technological innovation that would, in turn, spur increased productivity and provide the basis for a market operated by supply and demand. Low barriers to entry meant that ingenuity and hard work would translate into upward mobility. But Gilded Age industrial leaders quickly discovered that the scope of economic production engendered by new technology and business methods could not accommodate the uncertainties of competition. Nor

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<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Toqueville, quoted in Glenn Porter, *The Rise of Big Business, 1860-1920* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1992), 9.

could businesses tolerate easily disputes with labor and potential disruptions in production wrought by strikes and boycotts. The imperatives of big business required predictability to allow industry to operate “independent[ly] of the general market.”<sup>5</sup>

In this environment, business leaders experimented with various methods to contain price competition and to insert a measure of stability in the economic system, from informal volunteer associations that set prices, to pools, and cartels. These non-binding agreements, however, often failed and common law tradition made cartels illegal. In response, Standard Oil pioneered the trust whereby trustees “received and held the common stock of different corporations in exchange for trust certificates, thereby effecting legal control by the trust over the properties of the participating firms.”<sup>6</sup> This allowed the trust greater control over prices and productive capacity. The holding company, which accrued a majority of stock in other companies, allowed for similar control. As the entrepreneur gave way to corporate firms, the market was abandoned as a site of price competition. Yet the rhetoric of competition, and its association with opportunity, persisted. Industrial business interests aimed to accommodate prevalent ideas about opportunity to economic consolidation by reorienting it away from entrepreneurialism and toward upward mobility within the corporation as these entities came to control a growing proportion of national productive activity and to employ an increasing percentage of nonagricultural workers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Carnegie, quoted in Porter, *The Rise of Big Business*, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, *The Rise of Big Business*, 60-1.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the DuPont Corporation employed 1,500 workers in 1902 and 31,000 by 1920. The Ford Motor Company began with a few hundred workers in 1903. By 1924 it employed 42,000 at its plant in Highland Park and over 68,000 workers in River Rouge.

In this context, businesses began to establish formal associations dedicated to advancing their interests in a comprehensive manner. By the early twentieth century the National Civic Federation and the National Association of Manufacturers had emerged as influential national business organizations. Historians have mostly portrayed them as illustrative of divergent responses to the centralization of economic power during the “age of trusts.”<sup>8</sup> The National Civic Federation counted among its membership large northeastern industrial, railroad, and banking men such as Marcus Hanna, August Belmont, Andrew Carnegie, and several partners from J. P. Morgan. The National Association of Manufacturers included smaller industrial and merchant interests from the Midwest who expressed a more ambivalent attitude toward trusts and other forms of corporate consolidation. Even the Association’s telling of its own history perpetuates this view, as it depicted itself gallantly standing before the behemoths of corporate enterprise, much as David confronted Goliath. A confidential report that narrated the NAM’s first fifty years noted that at the organization’s inception “the nation had then to choose between monopoly or competition as the instrument of this growth which would be less open to abuse.” The Association, the report concluded, “chose competition, as a matter of public policy for the nation.”<sup>9</sup>

But this dichotomy, while helpful, obscures the more complex relationship between the two organizations and their shared dependence on the rhetoric of economic

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<sup>8</sup> Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 204-13; and James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 14-15, 17.

<sup>9</sup> “Survey of 50 years of NAM,” 10 January 1946, 2, Box 43, Unmarked Folder, National Association of Manufacturers Records, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware. (Hereafter cited as NAM Records.)

competition and opportunity.<sup>10</sup> In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the conflict between the NCF and the NAM involved the place of organized labor, not organized capital. James A. Emery, Secretary of the Citizens' Industrial Association, an open-shop group supported financially by the NAM, conceded that "we are more concerned with the bad union than with the bad trust."<sup>11</sup>

Scholars generally divide the emergence of big business into two periods: the establishment of such enterprises prior to 1895 followed by the "age of mergers," an approximate ten-year period that began during the 1890s depression and resulted in even greater concentration. While consolidated industries did not eliminate small businesses entirely, they did control key productive sectors, including, textiles, sugar, iron and steel, oil, salt, tobacco, lumber, coal, and gunpowder. Between 1895 and 1905, roughly 300

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<sup>10</sup> Not long after the National Civic Federation formed, President Search of the NAM commented that as organized labor met organized capital "it is exceedingly gratifying to note that instead of more determined antagonism there is a larger disposition to consider the points at issue with calm deliberation and intelligent judgment." Theodore Search, "President Search's Annual Report," *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Convention of the National Association of Manufacturers of the United States of America, Held at Detroit, Mich., June 4, 5 and 6, 1901* (New York: Issued by the Secretary's Office, 1901), 24. (Hereafter cited as *Proceedings*.)

<sup>11</sup> James A. Emery, "What we Stand For: A Statement of the Principles we Advocate," *Square Deal*, August 1905, 6. In his expansive comments, Emery clarified the origins, tendencies, and distinctions between organized labor and organized capital:

The trust of capital springs from the law as Adam from the dust of Eden; it is tangible, reachable, punishable. . . . Its wealth, property and personality give it an unwieldy bulk that cannot evade the civil and criminal pursuit of state and federal authority. . . . But the organization of labor assumes no legal form. It is unincorporate, intangible, irresponsible. As an organization it answers neither to individuals nor the state. It gathers like a storm and separates like its rain drops. It strikes like an army and scatters like a mob. . . . Only the public to whom it appeals for support and sympathy, whom it injures, discomforts and exasperates can summon, try and punish it.

An unsigned 1909 editorial from the *Square Deal* echoed this view: "With one or two exceptions the great Trusts have decreased the cost of living to the American people, and these Trusts are the objects of constant attack by all sorts of people from the President down to the socialists." Alternatively, "the one great Trust which has for its purpose, openly avowed, the increase of the price of its product and has thus added to the cost of living to all, the Labor Trust, is truckled to and petted by our demagogical politicians of all grades." Emery *Ibid.*, 6; and unsigned, untitled editorial, *Square Deal*, September 1909, 190.

businesses were absorbed annually by mergers.<sup>12</sup> Further, as big business leaders sought greater control over production with an eye toward stabilizing a boom-and-bust economic cycle, they effectively squeezed out smaller and still competing entrepreneurs.<sup>13</sup>

Conflict among business interests intensified as these organizational changes aided some and injured others. These disagreements became particularly acute in regard to relations with organized labor. In the entrepreneurial business model, profit maximization is the essential motive and concessions to labor reduce the rate of profit. Alternatively, the size of the “mature corporation” means that it can forgo short-term profit maximization for the sake of growth and stability, and concessions to labor unions can be compensated for through increased productive efficiency. The planning needs of the “mature corporation” also mean that it cannot tolerate price competition. Indeed, it strives to establish the market prior to production, hence inverting the traditional relationship between supply and demand.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Federationists expressed a greater

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<sup>12</sup> Mergers were especially prevalent within capital intensive industries that engaged in mass production and had expanded rapidly prior to the depression. Naomi Lamoreaux, *The Great Merger Movement in American Business, 1895-1904* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11-12, 14-45.

<sup>13</sup> James Livingston, “The Social Analysis of Economic History and Theory: Conjectures on Late Nineteenth-Century American Development,” *The American Historical Review* 92 (February 1987): 87. Livingston concluded that consolidation represented attempts to curtail overproduction, which ultimately allowed the corporate economic structure to solve the social problem of the “labor question.” However, it is possible that technology, not multiple small-scale entrepreneurs as Livingston asserted, made “overproduction” a problem whose ultimate solution lay in generating what John Kenneth Galbraith called “want creation.” Overproduction makes sense only within the constraints of capitalist ideology and emerged to reconcile the divergence between that tradition of presumed material scarcity and the productive capacity of new technologies. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

<sup>14</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith termed this the “revised sequence.” John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978). This revised sequence, however, did not prevent supporters of consolidated industry from relying on the rhetoric of supply and demand to protect trusts from government regulation: “This principle [of supply and demand] is universal, and is a vastly greater safeguard against exorbitant rates than any legislative enactment.” Henry Wood, “The Bugbear of Trusts,” *The Forum*, July 1888, 586-88.



willingness than the NAM membership to concede a place for organized labor (ideally, under conservative leadership) and to negotiate labor agreements.

This transition to a corporate economy also prompted reconsiderations of equal opportunity for factory workers and a growing white-collar workforce. As laborers accommodated corporate conditions through a revised understanding of opportunity as increased leisure and consumption achieved through higher wages and shorter hours, some business organizations embraced the chance to rise within, or invest in, the corporation itself as part of a redefined opportunity. Coupled together, these re-conceptualized notions of opportunity allowed continued discourses about individual economic competition amid growing cooperation. While opportunity purportedly continued to thrive, it depended less on the economic independence associated with the autonomy of entrepreneurship and more on advancement within the corporation and leisure and consumption outside of work.

The Chicago Civic Federation continued its efforts to resolve industrial conflicts with a series of conferences that brought together social commentators and business and labor leaders to generate proposals that might lead to a permanent settlement of labor-capital disputes outside the purview of the state predicated on an assumed harmony of interests. The first such conference aimed to address what Federation leaders asserted were misconceptions about the nature of economic organization. The September 1899 “Chicago Conference on Trusts,” according to Federation President Franklin Head, was

“not a trust or an anti-trust conference” but instead, “a conference in search of truth and light.”<sup>15</sup>

Conference participants included politicians, lawyers, judges, business leaders, labor activists, agricultural leaders, scholars, and social reformers who represented a range of opinion about trusts, economic competition, and equal opportunity—though a range with limits. Lyman Gage urged Easley not to invite socialist-leaning Freeman Otis Willey, author of the recently published *Whither are we Drifting?* and *The Laborer and the Capitalist* since, “it would be, I think, a dangerous experiment to present him to a Chicago audience.”<sup>16</sup> Despite Willey’s absence, however, the meeting entertained a diversity of views about the benefits and dangers of economic concentration and generated impassioned calls in favor of entrepreneurial competition. Such varied perspectives distinguish the Chicago conference from a later 1907 gathering best characterized by discussions about how to effectively manage trusts, not about their appropriateness. A planning report for the 1907 assembly declared that “any wholesale proposition to ‘smash the trusts,’ is, of course, not only indefensible but absurd.”<sup>17</sup> But in 1899, conference delegates engaged in heated debate about the impact of concentrated economic power on the promise of upward social mobility.

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<sup>15</sup> Franklin Head, “Introductory Address,” in *Chicago Conference on Trusts: Speeches, Debates, Resolutions, List of the Delegates, Committees, etc.* (Chicago: The Civic Federation of Chicago, 1900), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Lyman Gage to Ralph M. Easley, 1 April 1899, reel 142, Series II, General Correspondence 1894-1901, Box 155, Folder 4, National Civic Federation Records, Manuscripts & Archives, New York Public Library, New York. (Hereafter cited as NCF Records.) While AFL President Samuel Gompers did attend, P. F. Doyle, President of the Chicago Federation of Labor considered the conference a betrayal of labor interests and told organizers “to my mind your agitation is for partisan purposes only. In other words to desire some way in which the Republican Party can denounce trusts and at the same time retain their friendship.” P. F. Doyle to Ralph M. Easley, 3 June 1889, reel 143, Series II, Affiliated Organizations, Box 156, Folder 3, NCF Records.

<sup>17</sup> No author, no title, reel 225, Series IV, Departmental Files 1901-1935, Box 242, Folder 3, NCF Records.

A sense of diminished economic opportunity shaped discussions at the gathering. “It is equality of opportunity which has attracted to this country the millions of people of other nations who have helped make American citizenship and American institutions the greatest and best in the world,” proclaimed Michigan Governor Hazen S. Pingree. Americans have “felt the stimulus and ambition which goes with equality of opportunity. These have contributed to make him a good citizen.” Narrowed opportunity meant a loss of independence and aspiration and, for Pingree, posed a threat, for “without good citizenship our national life is in danger.”<sup>18</sup> As the proceedings unfolded, Henry C. Adams, in his capacity as statistician for the Interstate Commerce Commission, asked participants to consider whether “trusts tend to close the door of opportunity.”<sup>19</sup>

Conference delegates offered a range of responses to Adams’ query. Some answered in the affirmative and advocated greater entrepreneurial competition; others spied no danger in consolidated industry, only the logical outcome of competition with winners and losers, and extolled the presumed benefits of monopoly—stability and increased productive efficiency that lowered prices for consumer goods. Some struggled to acknowledge the apparent inevitability of oligopolies but to minimize their more rapacious anti-competitive behavior by delineating between “good” and “bad” trusts, thus conceding the pitfalls of “injurious” competition while maintaining a belief in its virtues. And still others argued that the threat of potential competition from new business constrained the behavior of oligopolies that might otherwise act with impunity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Hazen S. Pingree, “The Effect of Trusts on Our National Life and Citizenship,” in *Chicago Conference on Trusts*, 265, 266.

<sup>19</sup> Henry C. Adams, “A Statement of the Trust Problem,” in *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> In his own tentative answer, Adams concluded that while he believed the question worthy of debate he did not agree that “the trust organization of society destroys reasonable equality, closes the door of

Framing their critique of monopoly within the parameters of the ideology of equal opportunity, anti-trust activists decried the ability of consolidated industry to “control and cut off our opportunity to labor” and to deny workers the chance to “secure the means of existence.” Prior to the advent of the trust, people entered an “occupation with the hope of advancement, if not fortune.”<sup>21</sup> Through their capacity to crush competition, however, trusts circumscribed the prospect of becoming the boss and pursuing individual economic betterment. In the name of labor, small business, and consumers M. L. Lockwood, President of the American Anti-Trust League, deployed producerist rhetoric and invoked religious imagery in his plea against combinations: “How can this great corporate conspiracy against equal rights and equal opportunities be checked and driven back?” National values were under attack—the principles for which “the lowly Nazarene suffered upon the cross.” The republic’s “mission of giving to man an equal show in the battle of life” demanded economic competition and equal opportunity.<sup>22</sup>

Federation leaders and members confronted a difficulty: the presence of organized capital and labor in the context of powerful discourses about equal opportunity and competition. The tensions within the ideology of equal opportunity meant that as the Federation struggled to contain the potentially disruptive critiques on the part of labor activists and reformers prompted by narrowed opportunity, it could not abandon entirely the rhetoric and presumed benefits of competition, even in the midst of economic

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industrial opportunity, or tends to disarrange that fine balance essential to the successful workings of an automatic society” operating under the self-correcting mechanism of supply and demand in the market. He called for “public supervision” in those instances where competition was absent or where one competitor held an unfair advantage over another. Henry C. Adams, “A Statement of the Trust Problem,” in *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> John W. Hayes, “The Social Enemy,” in *Ibid.*, 332, 334, 339.

<sup>22</sup> M. L. Lockwood, “Property Rights and Human Rights,” in *Ibid.*, 380, 383, 378.

consolidation. The Federation's conferences and activities illuminate the constraints imposed by the ideology of equal opportunity and illustrate various attempts to reconcile large-scale industrial production to these ideals. In the course of doing so, discourses about opportunity shifted from small-scale entrepreneurship to mobility within the corporation and a linking of interests through an alleged expansion of stock ownership to a broad public. By this reasoning, "a corporation is only another name for the means which we have discovered of allowing a poor man to invest his income in a great enterprise."<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to traditional ideas about opportunity rooted in economic independence and centered on owning a business, land, or one's labor, effort would now be rewarded with internal advancement or the payment of dividends in pursuit of greater leisure and increased consumption. Such a reorientation of opportunity depended, in part, on arguments that emphasized the continued existence of competition both for workers inside corporate entities and between corporations themselves.<sup>24</sup> This shift

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<sup>23</sup> Testimony of Jay Gould, Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *The Relations Between Labor and Capital: Hearing Before the Committee on Education and Labor*, 47 Cong., 2d sess., 5 September 1883, 1089.

<sup>24</sup> Rhetorical highlights of the conference included a multi-day debate between W. Bourke Cockran, a New York lawyer and member of Congress who enjoyed a contentious relationship with his chosen Democratic Party, and William Jennings Bryan. Cockran acknowledged that trusts could deny people the "opportunity to acquire property" and he sought to regulate trusts, publicize their activities, and distinguish between those arrived at through fair play and those achieved through the advancement of favors: "While free competition leads to the domination of the best, restricted competition develops the domination of the baser." The irony of trusts, Cockran noted, meant that while all competition rewards excellence, that very excellence resulted in concentration which spelled the end of competition. Bryan attacked this distinction between "good" and "bad" trusts, declaring them all problematic. People's selfish nature necessitated economic policies that tempered the tendency to "trespass upon the rights of others in their efforts to secure advantages for themselves." A consequence of human nature, only government regulation could contain monopoly, otherwise "any man by his own brain or his own muscle will be able to secure a fortune so great as to be a menace to the welfare of his fellow man." Bryan sought to break-up monopolies, restore economic competition, and expand opportunity. Yet, given the human propensity toward self-aggrandizement, he also feared the consequences of that competition. In response, Cockran declared his own position the more logical since he accepted the economic victor and claimed himself "at a loss to understand the mental processes which lead men to laud competition and yet to condemn the fruit which

corresponded to the desire of trade-unions for higher wages and shorter hours as they ground opportunity in consumption and leisure.<sup>25</sup>

While many argued that the vastness of economic production limited opportunities for those without sufficient capital, Paul Morton, Vice-President of the Atchison, Topeka & Sante Fe Railroad, claimed that the reorientation of opportunity away from entrepreneurial independence and toward mobility within the corporation meant that the larger the combination “the more requirement there is for brains and the higher the compensation that is offered for it.”<sup>26</sup> Ohio Senator Marcus Hanna also extolled the capacity for organized capital to increase economic opportunities by rewarding effort and skill, illustrated in his eyes by the number of industry leaders who “came from the loom and forge and furnace.” Consolidated industry offered workers “better opportunities” that depended on recognizing merit within the corporation. “Among the number—a large number—of boys in my office, every one of them is the

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competition must always bear.” Bryan responded that he failed to understand how one could celebrate competition but accept as inevitable a result that by its very nature undermined its continuation. W. Bourke Cockran, “Effect Produced by Combinations, Whether of Capital or Labor, Upon the General Prosperity of the Community,” in *Chicago Conference on Trusts*, 468, 475, 478, 484-85; William Jennings Bryan, “The Man Before the Dollar: Society not Enthralled to an Institution Solely Because the Institution Exists: The Remedy of Congressional License,” in *Ibid.*, 501, 510; and W. Bourke Cockran, “Reply to Mr. Bryan and Answers to Various Questions,” in *Ibid.*, 588.

<sup>25</sup> John Bates Clark, “The Necessity of Suppressing Monopolies While Retaining Trusts,” in *Ibid.*, 407. Rather than stifle competition, as he himself once thought, Francis Thurber, President of the United States Export Association, argued that concentration actually promoted competition and elevated it to a “higher plane.” As other interests gravitated toward the profits in a particular industry, “another combination is formed, and competition ensues on a scale and operates with an intensity far beyond anything that is possible on a smaller scale” as the initial monopoly succumbs to the new one. F. B. Thurber, “The Right to Combine,” in *Ibid.*, 130. Edward P. Ripley, President of the Atchison, Topeka & Sante Fe Railway System, shared this view and reassured conference participants that “it is fair to say that competition has been restricted but slightly, if at all, by the consolidations that have taken place.” Edward P. Ripley, “How Consolidation has Worked out in the Case of One of the Great Common Carriers,” in *Ibid.*, 553. See also Andrew Carnegie, “The Bugaboo of Trusts,” *North American Review*, February 1889, 141-50; and John Bates Clark, “Trusts,” *Political Science Quarterly* 15 (June 1900): 190.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Morton, “Railroad Cooperation More Economic Than Unrestricted Combination,” in *Chicago Conference on Trusts*, 252.

son of a poor man that has earned his place,” Hanna declared to an enthusiastic audience.<sup>27</sup>

Standard Oil lawyer S. C. T. Dodd, who is often credited with inventing the trust as a means to circumvent laws designed to limit cartels, assured an anxious public that “the man who still fears the combination will destroy competition . . . would have feared a conflagration during Noah’s flood.”<sup>28</sup> Defenders of trusts claimed that opportunities continued to abound in the United States and that this, in fact, distinguished the nation from Europe, where antagonistic class conflict dominated.<sup>29</sup> The persistent appeal of opportunity for those who endorsed trusts lay in its capacity to resolve harmoniously the tensions between labor and capital that so preoccupied the Gilded Age, and through their insistence that so long as opportunity continued to thrive one’s economic status remained an individual responsibility.

Few specific policy recommendations emerged from the 1899 conference on “Trusts and Combinations,” though it did generate a call to expand the Chicago Civic Federation into a national organization.<sup>30</sup> Ralph Easley worked assiduously to build a

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<sup>27</sup> Marcus A. Hanna, *Labor and Capital: An Address Delivered at Chautauqua, New York, August ninth, nineteen hundred and two* (Springfield, OH: Chautauqua Press, 1902?), 32; and Marcus A. Hanna, *Every Man who Works with His Hands is a Human Being with a Soul*, “Address before the Urbana Chautauqua, Aug. 6, 1902, Reported by the Cincinnati Enquirer, Aug. 7, 1902” (Chicago: Public Policy Publishing Company, 1902?), 7, 15.

<sup>28</sup> S. C. T. Dodd, *Trusts* (n.p., 1900), 108-10, 114-16 in *The Transformation of American Society, 1870-1890*, ed. John A. Garraty (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 80. Dodd also proclaimed the inevitability of trusts: “To stop co-operation of individuals and aggregation of capital would be to arrest the wheels of progress—to stay the march of civilization—to decree immobility of intellect and degradation of humanity.” S. C. T. Dodd, “Aggregated Capital: Its History and Influence,” in *The Trust: Its Book: Being a Presentation of the Several Aspects of the Latest Form of Industrial Education*, ed. James H. Bridge (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1902), 47.

<sup>29</sup> Hanna, *Labor and Capital*, 5, 27-8, 32.

<sup>30</sup> While the Committee on Resolutions for the 1899 conference “made an earnest effort to find some common ground upon which all could stand,” it “failed to do so.” “Introduction,” in *Proceedings of the National Conference on Trusts and Combinations Under the Auspices of the National Civic Federation*

New York-based National Civic Federation founded on the Chicago model. Invitations to join the Advisory Council issued by Easley and Franklin Head, Chairman of the Committee on Organizations, emphasized the Federation's non-confrontational and nonpartisan tenor and made clear that "only representative, conservative, practical men of affairs, Republican and Democrat" would be asked. Further, "no federal or state officer-holders, professional politicians, cranks, hobbyists or revolutionists have been knowingly included."<sup>31</sup> The NCF's prospectus declared as its purpose:

To organize the best brains of the nation in an educational movement seeking the solution of some of the great problems related to social and industrial progress; to provide for study and discussion of questions of national import; to aid thus in the crystallization of the most enlightened public opinions; and, when desirable, to promote legislation in accordance therewith.<sup>32</sup>

By June 1900, the organization boasted a 500-member advisory board and a membership that included not only business leaders, but university professors, well-known lawyers, newspaper publishers, and high profile figures, including Chicago banker and future Secretary of Treasury Franklin MacVeagh, Charles Francis Adams, Grover Cleveland, William H. Taft, Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia University, Harvard University president Charles W. Eliot, and Benjamin Ide Wheeler, president of the University of California. Over thirty labor leaders also joined the NCF and AFL President Samuel Gompers and John Mitchell, head of the United Mine Workers, held leadership positions

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(New York: National Civic Federation, 1908), 9. In 1903, the National Civic Federation established local affiliates in Buffalo, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Milwaukee, Kansas City, Omaha, Denver, St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Minneapolis and St. Paul. Branches were formed later in Boston and New York.

<sup>31</sup> Franklin H. Head and Ralph M. Easley to prospective committee members, 6 April 1900, reel 142, Series II, General Correspondence 1894-1901, Box 155, Folder 5, NCF Records.

<sup>32</sup> "National Civic Federation Prospectus," p.1, reel 375, Series IX, Subject Files, History and Activities, Box 419, Folder 15, NCF Records.



in the organization. By 1903, the NCF counted as members representatives of nearly one third of the 367 largest corporations and sixteen of the largest railroads.<sup>33</sup>

Curtailing labor-capital disputes in pursuit of industrial peace, according to Federation leaders, required recognizing the right of both to organize, a view to which some NCF members also needed to be educated.<sup>34</sup> While acknowledging organized labor, the Federation did not endorse a growth in union membership and hoped, through their association, to ensure the installation of conservative labor leaders. In its early years, the NCF focused on resolving industrial conflicts and supported legislation to exempt organized labor from the anti-trust provisions of the Sherman Act, though eventually its mission broadened to include trade agreements, industrial welfare, women's issues, workers' compensation, and later, anti-communism. Easley led the Federation from 1900 until 1939 when his widow, Gertrude Beeks Easley, assumed control. She presided until 1949 when it folded.

Federation members praised the chances for economic and social advancement in the United States and proclaimed that, "there is no other country where there are opportunities for the laboring man, where he is industrious, as much as here in America."<sup>35</sup> However, industry leaders and the Federation occupied a conflicted position

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<sup>33</sup> Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Vociferous among those concerned about the influence of organized labor in the NCF was Charles W. Eliot, who maintained that labor boycotts and closed shops violated individual liberty. He engaged in continued correspondence with Easley and various NCF Presidents to express his displeasure with the Federation's apparent capitulation to labor demands and by 1903 informed Easley that he felt "an increasing difficulty in having any association whatever with Mr. Gompers because of the systematic boycotting organization which the American Federation of Labor maintains," behavior he thought "ought to be illegal." Charles W. Eliot to Ralph M. Easley, 29 August 1903, reel 6, Series I, General Correspondence 1900-1949, Box 5, Folder 2, NCF Records.

<sup>35</sup> "American Opportunities Incomparably the Best," *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, June 1903, 3; and "For Industrial Peace," *Ibid.*, 9.

regarding economic opportunity and competition. They struggled to retain those elements of the ideology of equal opportunity that made one's economic status an individual responsibility without conceding to the demands of labor and social activists that diminished opportunity required substantive economic reform by, minimally, breaking-up trusts or, most alarmingly, by nationalizing industry.

Further, NCF members viewed competition as destructive, the cause of price wars that narrowed profit margins, or eliminated them altogether, and created unpredictable business conditions that made planning difficult.<sup>36</sup> Henry Phipps, Director of U.S. Steel, explained that the decline of competition meant “how much nicer it is to be in business to-day than it was when I was a young man.” Previously, business was “war” and one “didn't know what was going to happen in July or January.” Arbitration, though, allowed predictability, industrial peace, and “civilization” rather than “barbarism.”<sup>37</sup> But the need for planning among large enterprises put them at odds with entrepreneurial-oriented businesses rooted in the ideal of price competition and who bristled against the association of organized labor and organized capital in the NCF. Like many, Phipps wanted to eliminate the uncertainties of economic competition yet remained bound to its rhetoric. NCF members struggled to reconcile their desire to curtail competition with

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<sup>36</sup> According to Naomi Lamoreaux small firms produced differentiated products to avoid the pitfalls of competition, while large firms formed oligopolistic associations. Naomi R. Lamoreaux, “The Competitive Behavior of Small Versus Large Firms: The American Steel Industry in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century,” *Business and Economic History*, Second Series, IX (1980), 33-5.

<sup>37</sup> “An Historic Gathering to Promote Industrial Peace,” *National Civic Federation Monthly Review*, 1 January 1905, 7. Charles Francis Adams also noted that the “extreme instability of railroad competition” made it difficult for businesses, including railroads, to plan. “What it needs is certainty—a stable economy in transportation,—something that can be reckoned on in all business calculations,—a fixed quantity in the problem.” Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *Railroads: Their Origins and Problems*; quoted in Garraty, *The Transformation of American Society*, 71.

their adherence to an ideology that celebrated competition as the force of capitalist innovation.

After 1900, the Federation no longer debated the merits of concentrated capital. The *National Civic Federation Monthly Review* lead article for September 1903, “Combinations of Capital and Labor,” cautioned readers not to suppress trusts but to “preserve their benefits and prevent their excesses.” “Excessive” competition hurt labor and capital with depressed trade, uncertain credit, bankruptcy, long hours, low wages, sweatshops, and dangerous working conditions. Enlightened businessmen “all agree,” the article concluded, “in the one policy of combining as many as possible of those who are competitors in an agreement not to compete with their fellows beyond a certain point and to deal effectively with those who will not enter into the agreement.”<sup>38</sup>

Marcus Hanna served as the Federation’s first president (1900-1904), and in an atmosphere of intense conflict between labor and capital emphasized the NCF’s positive association with trade-union representatives while directing the organization’s resources toward conciliation of industrial disputes.<sup>39</sup> Hanna declared that these efforts at

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<sup>38</sup> “Combinations of Capital and Labor,” *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, September 1903, 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Gompers temporarily assumed the presidency after Hanna’s death. August Belmont, president of the New York Interborough Rapid Transit, was President from 1904 to 1907, followed by Seth Low, former President of Columbia University (1907-16). Under the leadership of the latter two, and amid intense anti-labor sentiment among many in business and a growing socialist movement, the organization moved away from direct conciliation of industrial disputes and toward legislative efforts to regulate trusts and to recognize the legitimacy of trade unions. While NCF president, Belmont prevailed in a 1905 transit strike and successfully broke the union. The NCF repeatedly helped introduce federal legislation to exempt organized labor from the restraint of trade provisions in the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Though not initially successfully, the general outlines of the legislation were later incorporated into the 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act. Additional legislation sought by the Federation during Low’s tenure included calls to strengthen the 1898 Erdman Act, which protected workers from discrimination based on union

negotiation could “establish a relation of mutual trust between the laborer and the employer” and “lay the foundation stone of a structure that will endure for all time.”<sup>40</sup> Operating outside the parameters of the state, labor and capital could resolve disagreements in a manner that recognized mutual interests and proved beneficial to each, as well as to the nation. To accomplish this, the Federation brought together “the larger employers, the representatives of labor and leaders of public thought, in the hope of hastening the day when such mutuality of interest may be established.”<sup>41</sup> The Federation never denied the existence of class, but did promote class fluidity as an idea embodied in opportunity that could blunt class conflict and, consequently, identified no structural problems with the country’s economic organization. Hanna declared more than once that he would more willingly resign his Senate seat than abandon his work with the Federation.<sup>42</sup>

While part of the Civic Federation’s growing influence stemmed from Hanna’s enthusiastic support and Easley’s tireless efforts, its expanding public profile also gained from the willingness of major industrial leaders alongside officers of national trade unions, particularly Gompers and Mitchell, to work with the Federation. At a time of frequent and often violent labor disputes, the possibility of negotiated settlements enjoyed

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membership, legislation to prevent strikes by public employees, and laws to create a set of uniform industrial standards across states. Christopher J. Cyphers, *The National Civic Federation and the Making of a New Liberalism, 1900-1915* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 33.

<sup>40</sup> “For Industrial Peace,” *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, June 1903, 7.

<sup>41</sup> “National Civic Federation Prospectus,” p. 4, *Ibid.* See also “The Industrial Department, National Civic Federation,” *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, April 1903, 1. In a speech delivered at Chautauqua, Hanna reminded his audience that, “you cannot separate the interests of capital and labor. If it is good for one to be organized for any purpose, it is good for the other for the same reason.” Hanna, *Labor and Capital*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Marguerite Green, “The National Civic Federation and the American Labor Movement” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1956), 56.

wide appeal.<sup>43</sup> Machinist C. Sorenson encouraged the establishment of local civic federations in cities across the nation since the only solution to the “complete lack of understanding between the people in the white collar, and those in the overalls” is to “bring some representatives of both classes together upon a friendly basis, and remedy everything by arbitration.”<sup>44</sup> As trade unions increasingly concerned themselves with income distribution rather than on the control of productive wealth, they also welcomed the potential rewards of negotiated settlements.<sup>45</sup> According to Federation supporters, if organized labor and capital could temper the excesses of one another, “the product derived will be happiness, prosperity and peace.”<sup>46</sup> Such sentiments prompted criticism from other labor activists who charged that the NCF aimed to temper and control organized labor. Though not always successful, the Industrial Department, charged with promoting industrial peace and led by Hanna and other high profile businessmen, along

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 36; and “Not Peacemaker, Peacekeepers,” *New York Times*, 21 February 1902, 8.

<sup>44</sup> C. Sorensen to Mark Hanna, 23 December 1902, reel 4, Series I, General Correspondence 1900-1949, Box 3, Folder 1, NCF Records. Sorenson went on to describe how insecurity over employment led to worries about his child’s future: “When I take my little son in my arms and look into his innocent face, I am ever seized by uneasiness because of this question coming to my mind. How will this little fellow fare in life? Shall his life be darkened by hate, and his time wasted in struggle? Shall his loving disposition be modified, and will he be the same kind of a heartless individual as so many others?” Sorensen concluded that the job security supplied by negotiated agreements could alleviate these anxieties.

<sup>45</sup> Henry White, n.d., reel 380, Series IX, Subject Files, Misc., Box 426, Folder 8, NCF Records. White served as general secretary of the United Garment Workers of America from 1895 to 1904.

<sup>46</sup> R. Jolie to Ralph Easley, 25 September 1903, reel 334, Series VI, Conferences and Committee Files, Box 365, Folder 2, NCF Records. Jolie represented the Employers Association of Kansas City. See also Herman Justi, “The Organization of the Employer Class as a Prerequisite of Conciliation and Arbitration,” in *National Conference on Industrial Conciliation Under the Auspices of the National Civic Federation, December 16-17, 1901* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1902), 204-05. In his remarks, Justi, Commissioner of the Illinois Coal Operators’ Association, said that strikes will continue “unless labor and capital are both thoroughly organized,” since this would insure that “the strength of the respective organizations being so nearly equal that neither side can presume upon the weakness or unpreparedness of the other.”

with labor leaders, formed the center of the Federation's most significant activities during its first years.<sup>47</sup>

Though it embraced association, the Federation never wholly abandoned the idea of individual initiative or competition. Retaining key aspects of the ideology of equal opportunity, its members regularly distinguished between those who possessed the requisite character traits to exploit their opportunities and those who lacked such tendencies.<sup>48</sup> In 1905, the Federation's newly organized Department of Industrial Economics met to discuss "How far does associated effort in industry involve the curtailment of individual liberty?"<sup>49</sup> Assuming the position he occupied increasingly within the Federation, Harvard University president Charles Eliot inveighed against the tendency of consolidated capital or labor to "destroy free competition" and, hence, individualism. For Eliot, the stakes involved a violation of core American values that undermined continued prosperity.<sup>50</sup>

As Columbia University economist Edwin Seligman later made plain, "by equality we do not mean absolute equality." Rather, equality of opportunity represented

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<sup>47</sup> The Executive Committee of the Industrial Department included Samuel Gompers, John Mitchell, Grover Cleveland, Charles M. Schwab, and Bishop Henry C. Potter. "The Work of the National Civic Federation," n.d., p. 2, reel 375, Series IX, Subject Files, History and Activities, Box 419, Folder 15, NCF Records.

<sup>48</sup> The NCF sent an investigator to assess the attitude of workers during a 1901 steel strike in Illinois who reported that workers could generally be classed into two groups: those who were "thrifty, ambitious and self-respecting," and those best characterized as "idle" and who "never make much progress in the direction of prosperity, no matter what his opportunities may be." "Report of Investigation among the Mine-Workers of Spring Valley Illinois," pp. 1, 2, reel 381, Series IX, Subject Files, Steel Strike 1901, Box 427, Folder 11, NCF Records.

<sup>49</sup> Speakers included August Belmont, Chair of the NCF; lawyer Louis D. Brandies; Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University; Frank K. Foster, national secretary of the AFL; Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL; Francis L. Robbins, President of the Pittsburg Coal Company; and Edwin R. A. Seligman, Professor of Economics at Columbia University.

<sup>50</sup> Charles W. Eliot, "Industrial Peace with Liberty," First Meeting of the New Department of Industrial Economics of the National Civic Federation in *The Railway Conductor*, v. XXII (Cedar Rapids: The Order of Railway Conductors, 1905), 474.

the best that could be achieved, “in the sense that no man is shut out by legislation or social prejudice from free access to any vocation or employment for which he deems himself fitted.”<sup>51</sup> While “there is no way known, before men or under Heaven, to legislate men into the possession of anything,” it is possible “to open the door—to hold out the opportunity” and to “rely on the instincts of the American to do the rest.”<sup>52</sup> NCF members claimed to be guided by the principle that “a man cannot be made to work against his will,” and “neither can an employer be made to employ against his will.”<sup>53</sup> Even an age of association needed to preserve individual liberty.

Although known for its staunch anti-union activities and, during the early twentieth century, for disagreements with the National Civic Federation, the National Association of Manufacturers did not form out of any special concern with employer-employee relations. Founded in 1895, it initially imagined itself as a non-political organization to promote foreign trade, reform the merchant marine, construct a Nicaragua Canal under U.S. control, develop a consular service, establish a Department of Commerce, and more broadly, to advocate “carefully considered legislation, to encourage

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<sup>51</sup> Edwin Seligman, “The Trust Problem,” *Proceedings of the National Conference on Trusts and Combinations*, 162. Seligman attempted to distinguish between individual liberty and social liberty, such that a sacrifice in individual liberty would be acceptable if association led to greater community benefits. However, his analysis lacked any discussion about who determines what constitutes “community benefit.”

<sup>52</sup> Peter S. Grosscup, “Anti-Trust Laws,” *Ibid.*, 223, 224, 226, 227, 230.

<sup>53</sup> “NCF History,” 1915?, p. 42, reel 375, Series IX, Subject Files, History and Activities, Box 419, Folder 16, NCF Records.

manufacturing industries of all classes throughout the country.”<sup>54</sup> Leaders included James Van Cleave, owner of the Buck’s Stove and Range Company (who secured an injunction in 1906 against the AFL for supporting a boycott against the company, which led to charges of contempt against Gompers, Mitchell, and Frank Morrison), Charles Post, a cereal manufacturer, and bicycle producer George Pope.

The NAM originally centered its efforts on increasing production and expanding markets for manufactured goods. Between 1895 and 1905 exports from the United States increased by nearly two hundred percent.<sup>55</sup> The Association also supported the Interstate Commerce Commission regulation of railroad rates to rectify unfair advantages afforded to large businesses through rebates and preferred shipping rates, though it never advocated breaking-up or nationalizing the railroads. “All that our manufacturing interests have asked is fair play and equal rights,” Ohio Governor and future President William McKinley explained to attendees of the Association’s first national convention in 1895.<sup>56</sup> “Fair play” meant that “equitable treatment should be accorded to all shippers,

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<sup>54</sup> Invitation, *1895 Proceedings*. See also “The National Convention of Manufacturers of the United States,” *The Ohio Valley Industrial Review*, 1 February 1895, 1; and Albert K. Steigerwalt, *The National Association of Manufacturers 1895-1914: A Study in Business Leadership* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Bureau of Business Research and Graduate School of Business Administration, 1964), 1-32. The call came in 1895 from Thomas Eagan of Cincinnati in the pages of *Dixie*, a southern trade paper. Much of the NAMs early efforts concentrated on state promotion of foreign trade in a manner beneficial to American business interests: “Our markets are our own, to be used by us in a sensible, business way, as a lever with which to pry open the markets of other countries with which we want to trade.” “Hon. J. B. Foraker’s Speech,” *The National Industrial Review*, March 1895, 56. Joseph Benson Foraker served as governor of Ohio from 1885-1889 and as a Republican U.S. Senator from Ohio, 1897-1909.

<sup>55</sup> Steigerwalt, *The National Association of Manufacturers*, 95.

<sup>56</sup> *1895 Proceedings*, 10.



the small, as well as the great.”<sup>57</sup> In an age of consolidation, the NAM claimed to protect individualism and its expression in equal opportunity.

Explicit policies toward labor unions did not appear among the Association’s founding purposes. In 1901, NAM President Theodore Search reminded members that “the consideration of questions involving the relations between manufacturers and their employés [*sic*] has never been regarded as one of the proper functions of the National Association of Manufacturers.” The unique requirements of each industry made it difficult to formulate specific policies. However, while questions of wages and hours did not properly fall under the NAM’s purview, Search conceded that “social questions”—those centered on the “conditions and surroundings of the employed”—did warrant the organization’s attention.<sup>58</sup>

While the NAM eventually gained its national reputation combating what it deemed the intolerable consequences of organized labor for infringing on individual rights, leaders and members did not hesitate to coordinate the interests of capital. The Association described itself as “an organization of business men for business purposes.” Joining these interests was “simply for the purpose of extending and widening the avenues of trade and commerce, and for removing the obstacles in the way of fair competition in our own markets, and for improving the conditions governing our trade

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<sup>57</sup> David M. Parry, “President Parry’s Annual Address,” *1903 Proceedings*, 79. By 1905, as the anti-union stance of the Association came to the fore, Parry modified his attitude toward government regulation of railroad rates and expressed concern about granting the ICC authority to review railroad rates as potentially too socialistic. To allow the government to establish standard rates was tantamount to overthrowing economic competition and the “substitution of the socialistic system in its place.” According to Parry, despite the complaints of those who claimed extortion on the part of railroads, “the simple incontrovertible fact is that railroad rates in this country are far cheaper than anywhere else in the world.” Parry conceded that certain shippers received favorable rates, though noted that all shippers wanted “impartial” treatment, not a government ordered reduction in rates. David M. Parry, “President Parry’s Annual Address,” *1905 Proceedings*, 55-6.

<sup>58</sup> *1901 Proceedings*, 23-4.

with other countries.”<sup>59</sup> So long as the NAM claimed to promote business competition and expanded economic opportunity, it exempted itself from the very charges it levied against labor about the dangers organization posed to individual liberty.

Assumptions about the proper role of the government in the economic sphere infused the NAM’s early programs and informed its later attitude toward relations among business, the state, and labor. That the business of the state is business was embedded in the perspective of Association leaders and members. Accordingly, national prosperity depended on business success and the state needed to insure this prosperity with trade and economic policies beneficial to manufacturing interests. “The American who introduces a new industry for his own profit is in a high sense, a public benefactor,” explained Association President Thomas Dolan at the first meeting of the Executive Committee. “Much of the gain accrues not to him, but to the general body of people.”<sup>60</sup> Thus did the NAM assert the positive correlation among business, patriotism, and economic growth. And, because the efforts of NAM members were defined as patriotic, government policies should aid that work. Succinctly put by future Association President David Parry in 1902: “We believe that the prosperity of our country is as closely intertwined with the manufacturing interests as it is with any other interest.”<sup>61</sup> And, as the NAM’s anti-union stance intensified, a mid-1903 editorial in *American Industries*, the Association’s official

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<sup>59</sup> “Purposes of the National Association of Manufacturers,” 15 June 1896, Circular No. 1, NAM Labor Policy, Box B-43, NAM Records.

<sup>60</sup> “Proceedings of First Meeting,” *The National Industrial Review*, 1 April 1895, 66. The NAM argued that a consular service and improved international diplomacy should advance the economic interests of domestic manufacturers seeking additional markets for their goods: “The consular branch of the Department of State is a purely commercial service and therefore it ought to be treated upon a business basis.” “Purposes of the National Association of Manufacturers,” 15 June 1896.

<sup>61</sup> *1902 Proceedings*, 9. The compatibility of business and national interests under the banner of patriotism found a forceful advocate in David Parry who declared that, “on deeper consideration, it becomes clear that business and patriotism go hand in hand.” “Address of President Parry,” *1906 Proceedings*, 14-15.

journal, declared that, “the work of the National Association is a patriotic one. It is not merely individual interests that are at stake, but the welfare of the entire nation.”<sup>62</sup>

The National Association of Manufacturers rested its support for business-friendly governmental policies on a certainty that individual liberty required the protection of private productive property; that the natural law of supply and demand should determine economic conditions; and that economic competition—fair play and equal opportunity—maintained this liberty.<sup>63</sup> In the eyes of the Association, “no fair-minded man asks more than an even chance with his competitors and none can do with less.”<sup>64</sup> Following a common refrain, NAM members declared that opportunity expressed through competition prevented the United States from forming rigid, class-based distinctions and, instead, offered economic and social fluidity.<sup>65</sup> For the NAM, protecting the sanctity of private property was integral to individualism, the exercise of economic liberty and competition, and human progress. At the same time, the

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<sup>62</sup> “Patriotism,” *American Industries*, 1 May 1903, 8. And again, an editorial in the pages of *American Industries* claimed that increased tension between labor and capital had compelled manufacturers to organize in “desperation” to “protect not only their own but the property interests and the prosperity of the whole country.” “For Peace, by Fighting,” *American Industries*, 15 October 1903, 8.

<sup>63</sup> The Association’s adherence to supply and demand and its dependence on the rhetoric of liberty and freedom of contract to combat organized labor meant that it struggled to explain its support of protective tariffs which, by definition, interfered with natural economic law. David Parry declared organized labor’s threat to natural law intolerable, since “its aim is the advancement of the interests of only a part of the people,” but that tariff policies designed to protect business interests represented an acceptable violation of natural law since “its aim is the advancement of the interests of the whole people.” The NAM asserted that foreign trade could expand within the confines of high tariffs through reciprocity agreements that encouraged trade in goods that did not compete with domestically produced manufactures. David M. Parry, “David M. Parry to Organized Labor,” 24 October 1903, p. 24, accession 1521, reel 3, NAM Records.

<sup>64</sup> Theodore C. Search, *Annual Report of the President of the National Association of Manufacturers*, Presented at the Second Annual Convention, Philadelphia, 26-28 January 1897, Published 1 February 1897 and distributed by Bureau of Publicity, National Association of Manufacturers, 18-19.

<sup>65</sup> Richard Walker Gable, “Political Analysis of an Employers’ Association: National Association of Manufacturers” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1950), 42.

Association's initial desire to expand foreign markets for domestic goods constituted part of an effort to temper the vagaries of "boom-and-bust" economic cycles and to introduce a measure of stability into an otherwise volatile market.

As with the Civic Federation, the NAM struggled to resolve the tensions in the ideology of equal opportunity in the midst of growing capital accumulation and resisted the tendency of that ideology to prompt demands from labor activists and reformers for increased union membership, higher pay, shorter hours, and business regulation, as well as socialist calls for public ownership of major industries. Unlike the Federation, however, the NAM also opposed any recognition of labor's right to organize, though it advocated state legislation and government policy favorable to manufacturing interests. The Association's medium-sized businesses remained dedicated to the rhetoric of economic competition and were less able to absorb the costs of negotiated labor agreements than the large business concerns associated with the Civic Federation, who could either minimize them through increased production or pass them along to consumers as price competition declined in a given industry.<sup>66</sup>

It is convenient to mark the 1902 election of David Parry as President of the National Association of Manufacturers as signifying a reorientation in the organization's purpose and the beginning of a successful campaign to remake the NAM into an anti-union entity. Parry, who owned the nation's largest wagon manufacturing concern, founded the Overland automobile factory, and built the Indianapolis Southern Railroad,

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<sup>66</sup> Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, 315; and Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State*, 4.

served as President from 1903 to 1906. His first presidential address differed from those of his predecessor who, reflecting the Association's original mission, spoke mainly on issues related to trade. In contrast, Parry's 1903 speech announced that attacks against organized labor and its supporters would become the NAM's *raison d'être*. However, while his singular focus effectively redirected Association resources, Parry's anti-union stance did not represent an ideological shift. From its inception, the NAM's journal printed anti-labor articles and many of its members affiliated with anti-union employers' associations.<sup>67</sup> Further, Parry's arguments against organized labor extolled individual liberty and property rights, assumed that the gains of capital would accrue eventually to labor by broadening opportunity, and equated business interests with national interests, all of which had originally animated the Association's understanding of itself as representative of core American values. This stance, and a membership less able to afford the loss of profit associated with concessions to workers, led the NAM to resist the National Civic Federation's promotion of trade agreements with organized labor.

Parry claimed, and the official histories of the Association reiterate, that events surrounding the 1902 anthracite coal strike compelled the organization to sharpen its anti-labor stance.<sup>68</sup> After railroad management refused to negotiate, miners in Pennsylvania struck to demand recognition of the United Mine Workers, a pay increase, and an eight-

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<sup>67</sup> For example, *American Industries* approvingly printed an article by Reverend Newell Dwight Hillis of Brooklyn's Plymouth Church, "Labor's Hatred of Labor," which characterized boycotts as violations of equal opportunity and condemned their pernicious impact on the economic standing of non-union workers. In a further example, an unsigned editorial belittled the "sentimental twaddle" about improving relations between labor and capital that placed an unreasonable burden on businesses through expectations that they should exhibit "brotherhood" toward "organizations that hold the deadly power to ruin them without warning." Such organizations, in the eyes of the editorial writer, were simply "instruments of terror." Newell Dwight Hillis, "Labor's Hatred of Labor," *American Industries*, 15 November 1902, 1, 3; and *American Industries*, 15 September 1902, 6, 8.

<sup>68</sup> Vada Horsh, "NAM Past and Present," Address to NAM New Regional Personnel, 4 September 1951, Series I, Box B-43, Folder 100-Q, p. 4, NAM Records.

hour workday. Five months into the strike, President Roosevelt invited UMW President John Mitchell and George Baer of the Reading Railroad to the White House and insisted that they arbitrate an agreement or risk having federal troops seize the company's property. Roosevelt used the weight of the federal government to force a settlement and, in Parry's eyes, threatened the sanctity of private property. For Parry, these events illustrated that,

A strike is a blow at the social order, trampling into the dust individual and property rights and substituting the terrorism of the mob for legal and orderly government. Properly defined, it should be termed insurrection, and the heroes of strikes, no matter how sincere their professed desire to better mankind, are leaders of revolution.<sup>69</sup>

But, while pivotal, the strike alone did not precipitate the Association's altered focus. Political and economic conditions as well as organizational pressures fused with Parry's fiery personality to make anti-union activity a mainstay of the NAM. Strikes and labor agitation continued into the early twentieth century; radical political movements and the Socialist Party of America attracted growing numbers of followers; a proposed eight-hour law for federal workers continued to gain traction; and an expanding AFL, with well over one million members, had formed an alliance with influential civic and business leaders through the National Civic Federation that could potentially injure smaller enterprises. Each of these developments represented a potential threat to the individual liberty that the NAM purported to uphold. Under Parry's leadership the NAM enjoyed widespread publicity for its anti-union agitation, increased its membership, roused support to defeat pro-labor legislation, and spearheaded a national open-shop campaign that damaged labor's organizing efforts. This dedication to anti-union policies

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<sup>69</sup> David M. Parry, "President's Annual Report," *1903 Proceedings*, 35.

helped galvanize the NAM and presented a platform easily embraced by a broad spectrum of manufacturing interests.<sup>70</sup>

Parry threw down the gauntlet at the Association's April 1903 meeting when he outlined the threats to liberty, opportunity, and American values embodied in union labor:

Organized labor knows but one law, and that is the law of physical force—the law of the Huns and Vandals, the law of actual force or by the threat of force. It does not place its reliance in reason and justice, but in strikes, boycotts and coercion. It is, in all essential features, a mob-power, knowing no master except its own will, and continually condemning or defying the constituted authorities. The stronger it grows the greater a menace it becomes to the continuance of free government, in which all the people have a voice. It is, in fact, a despotism springing into being in the midst of a liberty-loving people. . . . It has not, in times past, hesitated to resort to violence and the destruction of property to compel the acceptance of its demands. Its history is stained with blood and ruin.<sup>71</sup>

He characterized the AFL as a dangerous organization “which in late years has had such an insidious growth that we find it dominating to a dangerous degree the whole social, political and governmental systems of the Nation.” Parry acknowledged that while “the fight against organized labor is, in a measure, a departure from our former conservative policy respecting labor,” current conditions compelled this response. The Association

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<sup>70</sup> Following Parry's assumption of the presidency, over 1,000 new members joined the NAM and after the April 1903 adoption of the anti-union Declaration of Principles, membership rose from approximately 1,900 to 2,700 in a seven month period. Richard W. Gable, “Birth of an Employers' Association,” *The Business History Review* 33 (Winter 1959): 545.

<sup>71</sup> Parry, “President's Annual Report,” *1903 Proceedings*, 17-18. James W. Van Cleave succeeded Parry as the NAM President in 1907, followed by John B. Kirby, Jr. who led the organization from 1909-13. While Van Cleave toned down the rhetoric, anti-unionism remained organization policy. And Kirby again employed purple prose to describe organized labor as a “beast with seven heads and ten horns, that was stalking up and down the earth, demanding that no man should work, buy, or sell, save he that had the name or the mark of the beast upon his right hand or in his forehead.” Both Van Cleave and Kirby had cut their teeth in anti-union employer associations, Van Cleave as head of the Citizens' Alliance of St. Louis and Kirby as organizer of the Employers' Association of Dayton, which successfully made Dayton a city of open shops. With the 1914 election of George Pope as president, who declared himself committed to “chang[ing] the spirit of the organization,” the NAM tempered somewhat its anti-union rhetoric. Kirby quoted in Green, “The National Civic Federation and the American Labor Movement,” 124; Gable, “Birth of an Employers' Association,” 541; and Steigerwalt, *The National Association of Manufacturers 1895-1914*, 169-70.

now aimed to expose the “true nature of this un-American institution” and turn public sympathy away from labor’s agenda.<sup>72</sup>

The speech’s strident tone and vitriolic language generated broad publicity and intense responses, especially from organized labor and the leadership of the National Civic Federation, which bristled at the charge that arbitration could not permanently calm tensions between labor and capital. Hanna accused Parry of uttering “senseless criticisms [that] are chiefly remarkable for their one-sided view of things about which Mr. Parry evidently knows very little” and that aimed to “produce endless discord.” For Hanna and the NCF, negotiated settlements between labor and capital, not an intensification of their differences, pointed the way toward a better future.<sup>73</sup> Parry’s speech clarified the divergent responses within the business community to the tensions within the ideology of opportunity and between the promises of equal opportunity and Gilded Age economic conditions. The NAM sought to resist the exploitation of these tensions by those who advanced policies that it deemed interfered with the operation of private industry. It also aimed to protect a membership less able to accommodate concessions to organized labor than those represented by the Civic Federation who valued long-term stability and predictability to satisfy the planning needs of industrial operations.

Organized labor, in the NAM’s view, violated the principles of equal opportunity and liberty. “If there is one thing in the world which the American people love and will fight for,” an *American Industries* editorial proclaimed, “it is fair play and a fair show.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Parry, “President’s Annual Report,” *1903 Proceedings*, 16, 17.

<sup>73</sup> “Hanna on Labor Unions,” *New York Times*, 22 April 1903, 1. See also “Hanna is Cheered,” *The Washington Post*, 22 April 1903, 1.

<sup>74</sup> “Coercion in Industry and Politics,” *American Industries*, 15 September 1904, 8.



The Association described an “average” workman as someone who “likes his country” and understands that “here is freedom of opportunity.”<sup>75</sup> But union efforts to organize collectively for reduced work hours and higher pay, the NAM charged, encouraged passivity among workers and eliminated incentives for hard work by abolishing the mechanisms that appropriately rewarded superior ability. Instead of compensating individual ingenuity, unions leveled effort to its lowest common denominator and placed a premium on “indolence and incompetence.”<sup>76</sup> The NAM queried supporters of labor if, by curtailing individual liberty, they intended to “prevent the poor from rising” in the social order?<sup>77</sup> Parry’s confidence in the results of competitive opportunity led him to conclude that unions appealed only to manual laborers (failures in the race of life) or those who had been duped. This prevented labor from successfully organizing in any “field of labor in which mental capacity is a greater or lesser requisite on the part of the worker.” Instead, union members were compelled, in an ultimate violation of equal opportunity, to “seize by physical force that which their merit cannot obtain for them.”<sup>78</sup>

The NAM’s frustration with the National Civic Federation centered on the latter’s tolerance of unions and, in particular, its founding principle of negotiated settlements to

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<sup>75</sup> “How the Workman Reasons,” *American Industries*, 15 July 1903, 8.

<sup>76</sup> Parry, “President’s Annual Report,” *1903 Proceedings*, 20. See also Parry, “David M. Parry to Organized Labor,” 8. Parry positioned himself in the gulf between equal opportunity and equality of result: “The fact that one man succeeds in making himself a better living than others is a spur to other men to try all the harder. This is what causes progress and the evolution of the race.” “Attempts,” he continued, “to equalize the rewards of toil are fatal to the interests of the entire nation, and the indolent and inapt in whose behalf they presumably are made would certainly suffer with all the rest.” Parry, “David M. Parry to Organized Labor,” 16.

<sup>77</sup> Untitled editorial, *American Industries*, 1 October 1902, 6. See also “Thirty-Three Reasons Why,” *American Industries*, 1 December 1902, 8.

<sup>78</sup> Parry, “President’s Annual Report,” *1903 Proceedings*, 20.

industrial disputes that implicitly acknowledged labor's right to organize.<sup>79</sup> For the NAM such a stance proved untenable. To accept organized labor in matters of conciliation devalued the status of the individual and demonstrated "an attitude of compromise with regard to fundamental convictions." Further, the NAM maintained that the negotiated agreements favored by the Civic Federation represented an attempt to increase wages so that smaller enterprises could not effectively compete. Complaints about the pernicious impact of concentrated capital almost always came coupled with indictments against organized labor. According to the NAM, the Civic Federation's association with labor unions and its willingness to engage in arbitration violated natural law, introduced artificiality into economic relations, and perpetrated an "injustice" to both labor and capital.<sup>80</sup>

Following Parry's 1903 speech, Association leaders embarked on a national organizing campaign to buttress anti-union sentiment and policies. They established local Citizens' Alliances, under the auspices of the Citizens' Industrial Alliance, to promote the open shop, oppose boycotts and sympathetic strikes, and fight any legislative or policy advances by labor.<sup>81</sup> While the CIA was nominally separate from the NAM, Parry served as its president, Marshall Cushing acted as secretary for both organizations, and it enjoyed financial support from Association members. Though relatively short-lived—the CIA was in decline by 1908 and replaced by the National Council of Industrial

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<sup>79</sup> "Great Movement; Great Questions," *American Industries*, 1 April 1905, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Parry, "President's Annual Report," *1903 Proceedings*, 60.

<sup>81</sup> Members of Citizens' Alliances were compelled to pledge: "I hereby make application for membership in the Citizens' Alliance and I affirm that I am not a member of any labor organization which resorts to boycotting, or any form of coercion or unlawful force, and fully agree to discountenance of all strikes and schemes of persecution." *American Industries*, August 1903, 4.

Defense, which in 1919 became the National Industrial Council—it acted as an effective anti-union arm of the Association.

The Citizens' Industrial Alliance focused particularly on opposing closed union shops. Such shops, according to the CIA, denied individuals the chance to exhibit their merit and thus violated an essential tenet of opportunity by promoting circumstances akin to slavery. An "intelligent, steady, sober, industrious workman" would resist all attempts to "bend to a yoke of slavery." Instead, he would desire to "stand upon his own ground" which "would make of him a free man again."<sup>82</sup> Predicated on equal opportunity, open shop advocates claimed that they embraced "the right to work, to grow, to expand and to build up," ideals intimately connected to the American dream. "Here the masses are the freemen, the people; they are equal; they have the same rights, the same laws, the same opportunity." Sounding a resonant chord, equal opportunity promised to make "the workman of to-day the capitalist of to-morrow."<sup>83</sup>

By 1904 the Association had adopted a somewhat more nuanced explanation for the appeal of labor unions. The ideas about opportunity that the NAM imagined itself protecting could also engender social unrest. An *American Industries* editorial informed readers that a sense of diminished opportunity acted as an effective recruitment tool for organized labor. A dim view about the "door of opportunity" made workers susceptible to the teachings of "false leaders." To counter workers' drift toward unions, Association members needed to celebrate opportunity. To that end, and to counter the influence of large industrialists, at annual conventions members consistently voted to support railroad

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<sup>82</sup> W. C. Shepherd, "Open Shops, Freedom, Opportunity, Progress, Fellowship," *American Industries*, 15 November 1904, 1. Shepherd was president of the Employers' Association of Wilkesbarre, Pennsylvania.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

regulation, declaring such action necessary to “eliminate from the minds of the people at large the prevalent idea that privilege, or the power of money . . . is having too great a swing among people supposed to be entitled to freedom of opportunity.”<sup>84</sup> Members were reminded that “opportunity is the dearest heritage of the humblest American citizen and that because of this fact he will fight for it if necessary.”<sup>85</sup> In such a context, efforts perceived to stifle opportunity would meet resistance.

Economic progress and stability required that people believe that “there is the same chance for him according to his just desserts” in the early twentieth century “that his father, or even his grandfather, enjoyed when, for individual success, it was more a case of individual capital and personal effort.”<sup>86</sup> The goal was, “the preservation of the competitive spirit and the re-establishment of conditions wherein, no matter what the work or who the man may be, that an even chance may be possible to take advantage of.”<sup>87</sup> The NAM maintained that it occupied a middle-ground between the threats posed to individual liberty and opportunity both by organized labor and organized capital.

National Civic Federation leaders considered themselves more sophisticated than the NAM in their relationship to organized labor and more realistic about the demands of

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<sup>84</sup> “Epoch-Making Events at Atlanta,” *American Industries*, 1 June 1905, 8

<sup>85</sup> “Parts that Individuals Must Play,” *American Industries*, 15 October 1904, 8.

<sup>86</sup> “Great Movement; Great Questions,” 8. Mark Hanna of the NCF shared this concern about the need to promote a perception that opportunity continued to exist as an answer to the socialist threat and he promoted education about the promise of improving one’s condition in life as the means to achieve this goal. Hanna, *Labor and Capital*, 27-8.

<sup>87</sup> “Great Movement; Great Questions,” 8.

an industrial economy. Regardless of a given employer's preference, associated labor, "if crushed today, will rise tomorrow." The age of consolidation had arrived, and organized labor was "as natural an evolution as is organized capital." Small-scale independent entrepreneurship no longer described economic conditions and a new attitude toward labor was required. "The man today who talks about 'smas[h]ing labor unions' is as much of an old fogy as the man who used to talk about 'smashing' organizations of capital and trying to force society back to the individual."<sup>88</sup>

Yet the rhetoric of entrepreneurialism persisted in the NCF itself. Federation Secretary Ralph Easley acknowledged the difficulty of promoting the benefits of organized effort in a national environment where the idea of individual equal opportunity continued to resonate: "Even in a land of opportunities," he noted, "it is hard to overcome this temperamental inertia and arouse the worker to the actual practicability of improving his condition through organized effort."<sup>89</sup> To advance successfully the harmony of interests between organized labor and organized capital that the NCF advocated—"the capitalist is a laborer with his capital, and the laborer is a capitalist with his labor"—it needed to convince workers to decouple opportunity from economic independence realized through the ownership of one's individual labor and locate it, instead, within group organization.<sup>90</sup>

This transition involved more than rhetoric. Easley envisioned shifting opportunity from its traditional connection with entrepreneurial individualism toward

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<sup>88</sup> "The Work of the National Civic Federation," n.d., p. 2-3, reel 375, Series IX, Subject Files, History and Activities, Box 419, Folder 15, NCF Records.

<sup>89</sup> "The Assault by Socialism," *National Civic Federation Monthly Review*, 15 November 1904, 7.

<sup>90</sup> No title, reel 225, Series IV, Departmental Files 1901-1935, Box 242, Folder 3, NCF Records.

acceptance of new industrial arrangements that required permanent wage workers whose unions negotiated labor agreements. The NCF, according to Easley, needed to hasten this adjustment and find some way to address the persistence of older ideas about the meaning of opportunity. In fact, the tenacity of this entrepreneurial discourse compelled Federation members to frame their arguments in favor of combination with ideas related to competition. NCF members declared that competition persisted among oligopolies, that the ever-present threat of possible competitors mitigated potential abuses on the part of businesses, and that competition among employees meant that merit and hard work continued to be rewarded, though now within the corporation.

As president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers also noted that industrial production and the permanence of wage labor made less relevant a producerist understanding of opportunity rooted in owning one's labor. Under these new conditions, Gompers aimed to accrue for labor as many gains as possible. To that end, trade-union goals of higher wages and shorter hours in pursuit of greater leisure and consumption corresponded to the transition Easley advocated. Labor leaders also needed to reassure their constituents that affiliations with both a union and the Civic Federation did not spell the abandonment of independence. Connection with the NCF meant recognition of labor's right to organize which, in Gompers' view, strengthened the economic position of individual laborers through achievement of increased pay and reduced working hours. And while he defended the autonomy of labor's position, Gompers more and more shared with NCF members a desire to minimize conflict between capital and labor.

Gompers and United Mine Workers President John Mitchell served as officers of the National Civic Federation, despite criticism from within the labor movement that included taunts for dining at sumptuous banquet feasts with industrialists and accusations that they smoked non-union cigars. Opponents argued that the Federation, with its insistence on a harmony of labor and capital interests, represented merely a more subtle mechanism by which to temper organized labor than the direct assaults instigated by the NAM. Easley's pronouncements that "every labor member on our Committee is broadening his views and has become more conservative from being in the Civic Federation," confirmed the suspicions of detractors.<sup>91</sup> While acknowledging the planning benefits and stability of negotiated trade agreements, NCF members never endorsed union growth and looked to labor leaders to mediate between workers and owners, not to represent labor in a conflict.<sup>92</sup> The 1900 Chicago conference on Conciliation and Arbitration had concluded that, in time, organized capital would effectively teach labor "how to utilize its beneficial and eliminate its objectionable features."<sup>93</sup> And President of the Massachusetts Wholesale Lumber Association, Charles Batchelder, reassured fellow businessmen that, "as startling as it may seem," business leaders retained the power to control who could become a labor leader: "If you war with them, you will have the violent demagogue. If you make business agreements, you will

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<sup>91</sup> Ralph M. Easley to Charles W. Eliot, 8 September 1903, reel 6, Series I, General Correspondence 1900-1949, Box 5, Folder 2, NCF Records. "The Civic Federation," Easley continued, "was the first movement in this country, so far as I know, designed to give the labor men the benefit of the superior brains and education of employers and public men, in working out their problems."

<sup>92</sup> Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State*, 38.

<sup>93</sup> "National Civic Federation Prospectus," p. 3, reel 375, Series IX, Subject Files, History and Activities, Box 419, Folder 15, NCF Records.

have the business man.”<sup>94</sup> In the eyes of critics, the NCF sought ultimately to undermine labor’s independence and blunt its more radical elements.<sup>95</sup>

For AFL leaders, however, the Civic Federation’s willingness to acknowledge organized labor, entertain trade agreements and collective bargaining, resolve industrial disputes outside the purview of the government, and help exempt labor from anti-trust prosecution persuaded them to participate in NCF affairs.<sup>96</sup> Much of this reflected Gompers’ and Mitchell’s sense of how relations between labor and capital should proceed in this new economic environment. For Mitchell, “the time has passed when wages and conditions of employment can be fixed satisfactorily at the door of the factory or at the mouth of the mine.” Instead, these issues should be resolved in conferences attended by representatives of capital and labor, who recognized that employers should also “receive that portion of the profits to which their investments entitle them.”<sup>97</sup> Trade-unionists strove for more pay and reduced hours within existing economic arrangements. Producerist values of economic independence rooted in controlling one’s labor retreated in the wake of industrial organization and permanent wage labor. Opportunity shifted

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<sup>94</sup> Charles C. Batchelder, “What Attitude Toward Labor Unions is Wisest, in the Light of Enlightened Self-Interest,” n.d., pp. 4, 7, 8, 12, 13, reel 374, Series IX, Subject Files, Labor Unions, Box 417, Folder 19, NCF Records. Francis L. Robbins, president of the Pittsburgh Coal Company, also shared this sentiment and noted that, “the interests of labor and capital are reciprocal,” that combinations of capital and labor best served these interests, and, as such, he preferred dealing with labor leaders than with rank-and-file members since leadership, by its very nature, “tends to conservatism.” “An Historical Gathering to Promote Industrial Peace,” 9.

<sup>95</sup> Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1903; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 325-26 (page citations are to the reprint edition.); and “Socialists Disturb Cooper Union Meeting,” *New York Times*, 9 May 1901, 1.

<sup>96</sup> Edward A. Moffett, editor of *The Bricklayer and Mason*, called David Parry of the NAM an “apostle of hate,” and explained that where the NCF would “conciliate, he [Parry] would crush; where they would have reconciliation, he would have rebellion.” Edward A. Moffett, “Mr. Parry and Labor Unions,” *New York Times*, 16 August 1903, 8.

<sup>97</sup> “For Industrial Peace,” *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, June 1908, 8.



from entrepreneurship to higher wages, shorter hours, increased consumption and leisure, and upward mobility achieved through advancement within the corporation. Relocating opportunity within the corporation, through a “wise system of promotions” would “produce a steady evaporation of class feeling.”<sup>98</sup>

The relationship between the Federation and trade unions prompted criticism from conservative business leaders who disparaged what they described as the NCF’s capitulation to labor’s demands and from more radical activists who saw capital constraining labor. The Citizens’ Industrial Alliance characterized the Federation as “the greatest menace to industrial peace now in existence,” while socialist Eugene Debs accused trade-union leaders of entering into a “joint conspiracy against the union man” and succumbing to the “blighting control of the Civic Federation.” The Federation highlighted these attacks from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Ralph Easley boasted that “the Federation faces simultaneously the hatred of Socialism and the opposition of the recently formed employers’ associations.”<sup>99</sup> Easley lumped together critics on the left and right, noting that “this extreme class of employers and employers’ associations is quite similar to that extreme wing of the labor movement—the Socialists.” And he declared the NCF best able to resolve labor-capital disputes, since “if these two extreme wings of irreconcilables have their way the outcome will be either arbitrary

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<sup>98</sup> John R. Commons, “Is Class Conflict in America Growing and Is It Inevitable?” *The American Journal of Sociology* 13 (May 1908): 761. As Martin Sklar noted, “for many Americans, the corporation became the new frontier of opportunity that the western lands had once symbolized.” Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*, 26.

<sup>99</sup> Ralph Easley, “The Federation and Its Work,” *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, June 1904, 7.

control by labor or arbitrary control by capital.”<sup>100</sup> Both the NAM and socialists represented class politics that accentuated conflicting interests, while the NCF sought to promote industrial harmony.

As Debs condemned Federation activities, along with Gompers’ association with large industrialists, other socialists argued that the trust could advance the broader public welfare and reduce class antagonism. Organized capital, they maintained, foreshadowed socialism.<sup>101</sup> But Federation members saw little connection between consolidated capital and socialist aims. In fact, they asserted, the NCF’s work would lessen socialism’s appeal by renewing faith in opportunity: “It is the duty of the employer and the more powerful elements of society to reduce the number of those who own nothing, who have no stake in the country.” If socialism succeeded in this “country of opportunity for all,” it would be because people doubted that hard work would lead to upward mobility.<sup>102</sup> The Federation understood itself to be preventing a reversion to destructive economic competition as well as averting a future where organized capital and labor evolved into the cooperative commonwealth by retaining the core of equal opportunity—differentially

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<sup>100</sup> “The Contending Forces,” *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, April 1903, 12.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas J. Morgan, a British-born Chicago-based labor activist involved in the Socialist Labor Party, told 1899 conference participants that he “welcome[d] the appearance of the trust as one of the natural and inevitable products of our industrial and commercial system” that would eventually help to alleviate the unnecessary “warfare in which man is at war with man, and man with woman, and both with the child in every place of industry and commerce in the world.” Laurence Grönlund also spoke at the 1899 conference and urged participants to see in the trust not a “monster,” but “a phenomenon at which to look fearlessly, and to utilize for the public welfare.” In Grönlund’s cooperative commonwealth the productive benefits of organized capital would be enjoyed by all, though without capitalists. Thomas J. Morgan, “The Trust from a Socialist Point of View,” in *Chicago Conference on Trusts*, 319, 322; and Laurence Grönlund, “The Trust as a Phenomenon to be Handled Fearlessly and Utilized for the Public Weal,” in *Ibid.*, 570.

<sup>102</sup> Remarks of John Ireland, “An Historic Gathering to Promote Industrial Peace,” 5. Ireland went on to note that while, “all cannot possibly be in the front, all may aim at being in the front, and none can say that hard-drawn classifications held them back.” Archbishop Ireland was a well known religious and civic leader.

rewarding merit—while altering the site of that opportunity away from individual entrepreneurship and toward the corporation.

Both the National Civic Federation and the National Association of Manufacturers planned major conferences in Chicago for October 1903, separate from their respective annual meetings. While the Civic Federation conference centered on how to improve relations between employers and employees, the NAM used its conference to launch the Citizens' Industrial Alliance and to criticize NCF work with unions.<sup>103</sup> Each organization then sustained their disagreements in their respective journals. Civic Federation leaders initially declared that the "Parry-Kirby-Job" effort to "organize an anti-movement" had "fallen flat."<sup>104</sup> But with the formation of Industrial Alliances across the country dedicated to fighting the closed shop, Easley expressed alarm about the Association's growing strength: "Parry's association is organizing all over the country and has gained more strength than I had any idea it would," he warned labor leader John Mitchell. Easley emphasized that the Federation's conference needed to offer constructive alternatives that included "an 'appeal to reason'" that might "help to antidote the radicalism on both sides."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Green, "The National Civic Federation and the American Labor Movement," 98-104. In criticizing the NCF conference, one correspondent wrote that "they no more make for the adjustment of differences between employers and wage-earners than a conference between allopaths, homeopaths, osteopaths, and Christian Scientists would advance medical science." J. C. B., "Socialists were Balked," *New York Times*, 20 October 1903, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Oscar S. Straus to Mark Hanna, 7 October 1903, reel 334, Series VI, Conferences and Committee Files, Box 365, Folder 1, NCF Records.

<sup>105</sup> Ralph Easley to John Mitchell, 9 December 1903, reel 7, Series I, General Correspondence 1900-1949, Box 6, Folder 4, NCF Records. Easley also wrote Gompers about Parry's plan to boycott union made goods and urged a "heart to heart" to discuss how best to respond to Parry and his associates. Ralph M. Easley to Samuel Gompers, 5 December 1903, reel 6, Series I, General Correspondence 1900-1949, Box 5, Folder 4, NCF Records.

Federation activities, according to Easley, brought together labor and capital based on their presumed shared interests.<sup>106</sup> In contrast, he accused Parry and his followers of fomenting class division and concluded that the “entire spirit and purpose” of the NAM and its Citizens’ Industrial Alliances was “to inflame a class warfare,” a sentiment he deemed “un-American.”<sup>107</sup> In response, the pages of *American Industries* and the *Square Deal*, the CIA’s official journal, bristled with condemnations of the Federation’s association with labor unions and predicted that its influence would decline “just as soon as the public finds that it is merely the facile instrument in the hands of the closed shop combine.”<sup>108</sup> Amid these heated exchanges, Easley concluded that the NAM assaults improved the Federation’s support among workers and, thereby, increased its influence within labor organizations.<sup>109</sup>

Representing business interests that sought predictability in the economic sphere, the Civic Federation maintained that negotiated agreements with labor would promote stability and allow the planning required for large-scale industrial enterprise. This put the Federation at odds with the National Association of Manufacturers, whose members

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<sup>106</sup> Shelton Stromquist, *Re-Inventing ‘The People’: The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

<sup>107</sup> “The Three Conspicuous Foes of Organized Labor,” *Monthly Review of the National Civic Federation*, November 1904, 5.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Green, “The National Civic Federation and the American Labor Movement,” 114.

<sup>109</sup> In correspondence with Marcus Hanna, Easley commented that, “The effect of their [NAM] silly attack has been to our advantage. In the first place it lined up a number of the Labor people who had for some reason or other held aloof, and the ultra-virulent tone of their utterances has sharply defined the differences in policy between our movement and the Parry class of organization.” In a letter to Oscar S. Straus, Easley reassured him that while, “The Parry’s, Kirby’s et al. have declared war on the National Civic Federation and the American Federation of Labor jointly,” it actually “strengthens us a great deal with the Labor side and hurts us very little with employers; but it also puts us in a position where we can have more influence with the labor people.” Ralph Easley to Marcus Hanna, 11 October 1903, reel 334, Series VI, Conferences and Committee Files, Box 365, Folder 1, NCF Records; and Ralph Easley to Oscar S. Straus, 7 October 1903, reel 334, Series VI, Conferences and Committee Files, Box 365, Folder 2, NCF Records.

retained a commitment to the ideal of entrepreneurial competition. This transition in business practices, from an entrepreneurial to a corporate economic system with a permanent wage labor force and concentrated capital, wrought a reformulated understanding of economic opportunity. Further removed from an understanding of opportunity that depended on owning land or controlling one's labor, industrial organization retained the idea of attaching social standing to individual effort, but rooted that opportunity in industry itself.

The National Civic Federation organized another conference on trusts in 1907, though its tone differed from that of the 1899 gathering. While a "wide diversity of opinion in regard to the welcome attributes of trusts and combinations" characterized the earlier conference, the absence of a "wholesale denunciation of trusts" marked the 1907 assembly.<sup>110</sup> The later conference identified methods to regulate trusts but did not debate the merits of their existence. The Federation leadership remained sensitive to charges that monopoly capital threatened economic opportunity and its associated virtues and struggled to retain parts of the competitive model while tempering its disruptions. Widespread complaints from businessmen and workers that trusts narrowed opportunity could not be ignored since "these conditions are tending toward a repression of initiative and enterprise in business circles."<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> "Trusts and Combination," *National Civic Federation Review*, February 1908, 18.

<sup>111</sup> Ralph Easley to Seth Low, 25 March 1908, reel 226, Series IV, Departmental Files 1901-1905, Box 242, Folder 5, NCF Records.

Much discussion centered on how to amend the Sherman Act to protect labor organizations from its provisions and to account for “the distinction between combinations which are reasonable and may well be permitted and those which are unreasonable and must at all hazards be forbidden.”<sup>112</sup> Federation leaders expected that proposed amendments to the Sherman Act would help identify exploitive trusts and “ameliorate many of the conditions felt to be oppressive.”<sup>113</sup> Delineations between good and bad trusts allowed the Federation to protect the productive efficiency of concentrated capital against “ruinous competition” by not destroying all trusts, while adhering to the benefits of competition in mitigating the potential arbitrariness of concentrated power.<sup>114</sup> Increasingly, “the fundamental fact which lies at the root of the matter is this: that unrestricted competition as an economic principle is too destructive to be permitted to exist; it has been pushed away from every industrial calling.”<sup>115</sup> Economic conditions needed to be reconciled with the rhetorical demands of equal opportunity. The NCF hoped to allay the tendency of diminished opportunity to prompt expanded demands for state intervention beyond some minor regulation of trusts, which might include calls to

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<sup>112</sup> Nicholas Murray Butler, “The Problem Before the Conference,” in *Proceedings of the National Conference on Trusts and Combinations*, 38. The debate over how to apply Sherman centered on whether its intent was to embody common law and distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable trusts or to supersede common law in favor of greater competition by declaring that all trusts violate free trade. Between 1890 and 1897 the courts chose the former course, while from 1897 to 1911 the latter course. Martin Sklar, a leading historian on the rise of the corporation and its social, political, and legal consequences, argues that the intent of Sherman was always to uphold the common law tradition. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*, 98-100.

<sup>113</sup> Ralph Easley to Seth Low, 25 March 1908, reel 226, Series IV, Departmental Files 1901-1905, Box 242, Folder 5, NCF Records.

<sup>114</sup> Ralph Easley, “Report of the Chairman Executive Council,” *National Civic Federation Monthly Review*, January 1905, 12, 13.

<sup>115</sup> Aldace F. Walker, “Unregulated Competition Self-Destructive,” *The Forum*, December 1891, 511.

nationalize industry, by asserting that even amid consolidated industry the core of opportunity persisted.

The resolutions from the 1907 conference aimed to simultaneously protect the benefits of combined capital while heeding the imperatives of equal opportunity and competition. Specific proposals included support to authorize the Interstate Commerce Commission to approve agreements among railroads governing freight and passenger rates and enforcement of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, “thus effectually refuting the impression that great wealth and large corporations were too powerful for the impartial execution of law.” Additionally, mirroring the Federation’s own activities, participants urged Congress to form a nonpartisan commission that included representatives of capital, labor, and the general public to study industrial conditions and develop recommendations to regulate business relations. Such a commission would “secure in all industrial and commercial relations justice and equality of opportunity for all” and “preserve individual initiative, competition, and the free exercise of a free contract in all business and industrial relations.”<sup>116</sup>

The proceedings of the 1907 gathering illustrated a shift in the Federation’s orientation. Conceptualized as a body that could, through representation of the interests of labor, business, and the public improve relations between labor and capital outside the purview of government, the recommendations from this conference signaled a willingness to turn to the state to lessen industrial tension, though, ideally, in a manner where business influences would prevail. In a Progressive Era context that embraced a

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<sup>116</sup> “Trusts and Combinations,” *National Civic Federation Monthly Review*, February 1908, 19. Additional recommendations from the conference included expanding the Department of Commerce requirements in regard to public disclosure of corporate finances, as well as conceding the authority of the Supreme Court to determine the outcome of conflicts between state and federal authorities over railroad rates.

larger regulatory role for the federal government, conference participants began to incorporate state action into their mission of industrial stability.

And by 1907, for Federation members, the discourse on opportunity was firmly lodged in the corporation. As J. W. Jenks noted, “The fear that all industry will be so dominated by the Trusts that the ambitious individual with small capital will have no opportunity of directing business, and that therefore personal initiative in the business community will be greatly weakened, seems likewise to have passed.” Increasingly, he continued, “it has been recognized that even in the great corporations there is plenty of opportunity, as heads of departments, to develop original views, which will be well paid for.” Entrepreneurial opportunity had been exchanged for the chance to rise within the corporation. New York banker Isaac N. Seligman, brother of Columbia University economist Edwin Seligman, voiced a concern shared by many—that with the disappearance of the independent producer “the stimulus to progress and to creative ingenuity is weakened.” But, he concluded, “ability and industry are more clearly recognized and fairly dealt with in large corporations than in smaller concerns; . . . [and] opportunity for promotion to those who are really worthy is on the whole better.”<sup>117</sup>

In addition to advancement within the corporate hierarchy, opportunity was increasingly associated with the chance to become part owner through the acquisition of stock. In this way, the entrepreneurial dream endured. In response to the labor upheavals of 1886, Andrew Carnegie declared that “ample opportunity already exists for working men to become part owners in almost any department of industrialism.” Retaining a key

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<sup>117</sup> Jeremiah W. Jenks, “The Trust Situation,” in *Proceedings of the National Conference on Trusts and Combinations*, 154; and Isaac N. Seligman, “The Trust Problem,” in *Ibid.*, 162. See also Testimony of Norvin Green, Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *The Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 3 September 1883, 937-38. Green was President of Western Union Telegraph Company.



aspect of entrepreneurial opportunity, he also promised that as stockholders workers' would share in both the "dividends and the management."<sup>118</sup> And, despite disagreements about the place of organized labor, NAM President David Parry echoed arguments made by the National Civic Federation when he noted that, while "it is true that we find greater industries under the guiding hand of one man," he merely directs the capital owned "by the thousands" who either bought stock or deposited money in banks that purchased stocks.<sup>119</sup>

By the time of the 1907 conference, Peter Grosscup, known for his judicial rulings against Debs and the ARU during the 1894 Pullman strike, commented that "the supreme problem now before the country is not how to destroy the corporation, nor how to hamper it, but how to so reform and rebuild the corporation, that it may become a trustworthy medium through which the universal American instinct to have some individual part in the property of his country may find a way to work itself out." The

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<sup>118</sup> Andrew Carnegie, "Results of the Labor Struggle," *The Forum*, August 1886, 546. Ship builder John Roach also embraced this solution as a means to temper labor unrest: "I think the plan I have suggested of taking ten men or any number of selected men from among the workers, and giving them an interest in the business, would be found to work very much to the advantage of every manufacturing establishment where it could be done." Testimony of John Roach, Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *The Relations Between Labor and Capital*, 5 September 1883, 1015.

<sup>119</sup> Parry, President's Annual Report," *1903 Proceedings*, 23. Parry went on to note that while "monopoly may be justly regarded as a danger signal of trust development," it should be remembered that "industrial combinations are along the lines of progress." And in his 1905 address to the national convention Parry described concentrated capital as "a gauge of progress and not as a development to be looked upon with fear." "Bit corporations," he continued, "are merely a sign of a great and highly civilized country." And, amid increased anti-trust sentiment, future Association president John Kirby, Jr. declared that "the Standard Oil Company has been and is now being prosecuted, and persecuted, too, and the wonder is, how it withstands the many savage and bitter attacks which are constantly hammering away at its existence." *Ibid.*, 67; Parry, Annual Presidential Address," *1905 Proceedings*, 58, 59; and "'The Evils of Labor Unionism,' Extracts from an Address by Mr. J. Kirby, Jr., of Dayton, O., Before the Employers' Association of Cleveland, O., December 14, 1905," *Square Deal*, February 1906, 5.

solution involved stockholding to diffuse the ownership of industry throughout the ranks of the people.<sup>120</sup>

Even as they embraced a corporate economy, Federation members refused to abandon the ideals of equal opportunity and competition. Renewed confidence in opportunity required educating the public to trust the trust and view it, not as a threat, but as compatible with “America’s instinct for fair play and for every man having a fair part in the affairs of life.”<sup>121</sup> To retain the productive benefits of organized capital while resolving the conflict between the rhetoric of competition and a corporate economy required the need to regulate consolidation in the public interest without disrupting that consolidation.<sup>122</sup> This, in turn, demanded a reformulation of opportunity away from its entrepreneurial roots and toward the chance to rise within the corporation, a redefinition that more comfortably accommodated these new economic conditions. Faced with an acute disparity during the Gilded Age between the promise of equal opportunity and economic conditions, the business community struggled to preserve the ideal of competition while also embracing the benefits of consolidated economic organization. The resolution redirected opportunity away from individual entrepreneurship and into the corporation in a manner that left intact the basic structures of consolidated economic production while continuing to differentially reward merit.

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<sup>120</sup> Peter S. Grosscup, “Anti-Trust Laws,” in *Proceedings of the National Conference on Trusts and Combinations*, 223-27, 230, 372.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Thurman W. Arnold, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 207.

## CHAPTER 6

### Edward Bellamy and the Re-Imagining of Equal Opportunity

In 1887, Julian West, a wealthy Boston businessman and the protagonist of Edward Bellamy's 1888 bestselling novel *Looking Backward*, falls into a hypnotic slumber in a sound- and fireproof chamber in the lower level of his home to alleviate his chronic insomnia. After putting West to sleep his doctor leaves town and Sawyer, his houseman and the only other person who knows where West sleeps, perishes in a fire that destroys the house and, it is presumed, West as well. One hundred thirteen years later the occupants of the rebuilt home discover West in the deep basement and he awakens in the year 2000, slightly groggy but otherwise intact. Dr. Leete, whose family now resides in the home, becomes West's guide to a wholly transformed Boston, a beautified city where "every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees" and where the Charles River wound like a "blue ribbon" toward the sunset.<sup>1</sup>

A series of rapid and non-violent economic transformations have nationalized industry and eliminated poverty, the state administers work, and citizens, regardless of occupation, receive equal wages in the form of credit that they spend at community storehouses. Modeled on the military, Bellamy's future society is highly regimented and invests broad authority in an expanded state. Retired workers promoted to regional and national functionary posts for life-terms make administrative decisions. Politics as a site of social interaction designed to resolve disputes disappears. In this imagined nation absolute economic equality transforms class conflict into class harmony, production and

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1888* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888; reprint, ed. Alex MacDonald, Toronto: Broadview Literary Press, 2003), 65-66 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

consumption meet in perfect synchronicity, and citizens enjoy a life free from the struggle for financial survival. Bellamy called these new arrangements Nationalism since industry is nationalized and citizens work toward the common good.

At the age of 18 each person explores various occupations to determine his or her vocation and by age 21 enters the industrial army to embark on their working lives. Women are relegated to a separate sector of the industrial army, though they do receive equal pay.<sup>2</sup> Blacks, aside from Sawyer, are noticeably absent from Bellamy's novel. He does applaud the demise of slavery and characterizes racial segregation as bigotry, but also maintains that blacks would benefit from the civilizing influence of whites. Technological advances reduce the number of hours dedicated to work and allow retirement by age forty-five. The value of work is no longer measured monetarily, but by its contribution to the social good; in essence, income is separated from labor. And, the continual reduction of work hours for those tasks deemed unpleasant make such jobs, with their greater leisure time, more attractive to some.<sup>3</sup> Bellamy does not banish all property ownership in his new society, despite charges to this effect. Rather, he distinguishes between productive property, which is nationalized, and personal property, which remains in individual hands.

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<sup>2</sup> In later elaborations of Nationalism Bellamy abandoned these separate divisions and opened all lines of work to both women and men.

<sup>3</sup> Bellamy explained this reorientation toward work as follows: "It is the business of the administration to seek constantly to equalize the attractions of the trades, so far as the conditions in them are concerned, so that all trades shall be equally attractive to persons having natural tastes for them. This is done by making the hours of labor in different trades to differ according to their arduousness. The principle is that no man's work ought to be, on the whole, harder for him than any other man's for him, the workers themselves to be the judges." Edward Bellamy quoted in Nicholas P. Gilman, "'Nationalism' in the United States," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 4 (October 1889): 56-7.

The thread of a love story that begins with Edith, the woman to whom West was engaged in 1887, meanders through the novel and concludes with West falling in love with Edith's great-granddaughter, also called Edith and, coincidentally, Dr. Leete's daughter. Despite the pretense of the romance, however, the book centers on this new economic and social order, and by way of contrast, critiques Gilded Age economic arrangements.

Building on a tradition with antebellum antecedents, Bellamy joined a chorus of voices in the late-nineteenth century disturbed by the social conditions wrought by industrial production and an adherence to the presumed benefits of economic competition. Much of this critique, led by clergy associated with the Social Gospel, centered on the moral questions surrounding celebrations of self-interest attached to laissez-faire economic policy and the accumulation of fortunes. Concerned with how to live a moral life in an immoral society, Social Gospelers described the "existing competitive system" as "thoroughly selfish, and therefore thoroughly unchristian." And the rampant individualism that accompanied contemporary economic arrangements was considered "characteristic of simple barbarism, not of republican civilization."<sup>4</sup> Instead, these critics advocated economic policies predicated on the ethics of cooperation and harmony, the recognition of workers as humans, not commodities, and the payment of a

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<sup>4</sup> Josiah Strong to Richard Ely, 8 August 1889, Richard T. Ely Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, quoted in Sydney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956), 173; and Henry Ward Beecher, quoted in *Ibid.*, 174. Michael McGeer distinguished between working class mutualism and the associationalism of Social Gospelers. While both decried economic competition, mutualism relied on a class identity while Social Gospel association emerged from a sense of difference among the middle class, who crossed class lines in pursuit of social harmony. Michael McGeer, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 66-7.

just wage. Bellamy shared with many of these reformers a morally-based disquiet about the Gilded Age economy and hoped to inscribe the values of the Golden Rule into economic relations. However, unlike most other social critics, he supported not only abolition of the existing wage labor system, but equal wages. This effectively divorced the size of one's income from the quality of one's labor and undermined the connection between competition and the ideology of equal opportunity.

Bellamy's novel and subsequent writings challenged the predominant understanding of equal economic opportunity, its expression through differential financial rewards, and its promise of social mobility. He joined those who sought to reconcile the tensions within opportunity between its progressive call to include more participants in the chance for upward mobility, where merit challenged inherited wealth, and its simultaneous capacity to uphold the status quo through competitive economics. Activists variously identified the source of opportunity in land ownership, controlling one's labor, or in greater leisure and consumption. They sought to expand the foundation of opportunity, but retained its inevitable economic inequalities. Bellamy's solution, though, bypassed this quandary by demanding equality of result and abandoning an ideology dependent on individual economic competition. Instead, he embraced notions of cooperation that relied on economic interdependence and that made economic equality possible. This equality, in turn, liberated individuals from the competitive struggle for material survival, and allowed them to explore more fully the scope of their nature. In the course of doing so, Bellamy also reassessed the relationship between political and

economic power. He imagined a society that no longer rewarded social status, and thereby civic influence, according to financial achievement.<sup>5</sup>

For Bellamy, economic interdependence in pursuit of cooperation, not profit, made it possible to eclipse economics as the organizing principle of society. While the ends Bellamy desired rested on an economic foundation, economic equality would allow a degree of leisure previously unavailable to most and provide an escape for all from an endless concern with scarcity. This leisure is distinct from that advocated by Samuel Gompers and labor activists who argued that reduced hours and higher wages would allow workers to become consumers and demonstrate their economic power, thereby, raising their social status. Consumption for Bellamy was secondary, while leisure for non-material self-development and self-improvement assumed primary importance. Meaningful leisure required abandoning the need to produce for pay and the capacity to consume as a marker of social status, a result best achieved through equal wages.

Contemporary critics and later scholars have characterized Bellamy's call for equality of income as an expression of his middle-class desire to create a society of consumers.<sup>6</sup> William Dean Howells, for example, declared that Bellamy offered merely

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<sup>5</sup> Sylvia Bowman, one of Bellamy's biographers, suggested that his scheme represented an attempt to "restore to the citizens the equality of opportunity which had once existed in the United States but which had been lost when wealth became the 'open sesame' to education, social position, and professional and commercial opportunities." While this captures some of Bellamy's concern, it does not fully consider the ways in which his conceptions of economic interdependence undermined the fundamental premises of the opportunity to which Bowman referred. Sylvia E. Bowman, *The Year 2000: A Critical Biography of Edward Bellamy* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958), 183.

<sup>6</sup> James Gilbert, *Designing the Industrial State: The Intellectual Pursuit of Collectivism in America, 1880-1940* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 23-5; Jeffrey R. Lustig, *Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 200; Vernon L. Parrington, Jr., *American Dreams: A Study of American Utopias* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1947), 69-70; and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture & Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 49-50.

middle-class comforts to those who lacked the means to consume.<sup>7</sup> Another reviewer dismissed Bellamy as “essentially a middle-class man . . . on the whole very well satisfied with the life of middle-class people.” “Indeed,” the reviewer continued, “we may sum up his Utopia in a very few words as simply *the extension of present middle-class comfort and well-being to the whole nation.*”<sup>8</sup> Social commentator William Morris concluded that *Looking Backward* advocated the creation of a society where “the only ideal of life which . . . a man can see is that of the industrious *professional* middle-class man of to-day purified from their [*sic*] crime of complicity with the monopolist class.”<sup>9</sup> Bellamy, so the critics charged, extended a middle-class idyll to others and protected its members from acknowledging their collusion with the economic status quo.

Bellamy did identify under-consumption as the cause of persistent Gilded Age economic downward turns. In *Equality*, the sequel to *Looking Backward* in which he further elaborated Nationalism, Bellamy postulated that the pursuit of profits created “a gap between the producing and consuming power of the community, the result of which was that people were not able to consume as much as they could produce.”<sup>10</sup> So, while society possessed the technological and productive capacity to satisfy all consumptive needs, the quest for profit precluded its realization. The solution, according to Bellamy,

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<sup>7</sup> Howells expressed mock sympathy for “those select spirits who were shocked that nothing better than the futile luxury of their own selfish lives could be imagined for the lives which overwork and underpay had forbidden all pleasures.” William Dean Howells, “Introduction,” in *Blindman’s World and Other Stories* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898; reprint, New York: Garrett Press, Inc., 1968), n.p.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard D. Abbott, “Studies in the Literature of English Socialism: William Morris’ *News from Nowhere*,” *Twentieth Century*, 18 June 1898, 8-9. Italics in original.

<sup>9</sup> William Morris, “‘Looking Backward,’” *The Commonweal*, 22 June 1889, 194.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Equality* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897), 158. See also Rick Tilman, “The Utopian Vision of Edward Bellamy and Thorstein Veblen,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 14 (December 1985): 884.



was to nationalize industry, circumvent the profit system, and produce sufficient goods to satisfy people's needs.

But this does not encompass the totality of Bellamy's argument. Though rooted in his own middle-class background, Bellamy's proposed economic reorganization served as a means to an end. Eventually Howells reconsidered his initial judgment and concluded that "the joys I thought trivial and sordid did rightly, as they did most strenuously, appeal to the lives hitherto starved of them."<sup>11</sup> The satisfaction of material needs would liberate people from worry about fulfilling consumptive desires and permit them to more fully explore their individuality. Yet, as one of Bellamy's biographers cogently noted, he did not naïvely think that "the achievement of economic equality would bring an end to human tragedy, or that men would live happily ever after." Indeed, "Bellamy saw that most men in their poverty and their struggle for survival had been pressed to fight for sheer existence, and that only as that fight relaxed would they be able and inclined to face the deeper problems of life."<sup>12</sup> Though Bellamy never delineated the specifics, emancipation from economic concerns would allow the exploration of human consciousness.

Bellamy's notebooks and early writings, where he first explored some of the themes that appeared in *Looking Backward*, depict a young man struggling to identify the significance of an individual life in a vast world and what, finally, gives life meaning. He concluded that economic concerns obstructed one's ability to engage these questions fully. But unlike many other critiques of the moral dangers of competition Bellamy did not seek a retreat from contemporary industrial society. Instead, as described in the

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<sup>11</sup> Howells, "Introduction," in *Blindman's World*, n.p.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur E. Morgan, *The Philosophy of Edward Bellamy* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1945), 77.

novel, the technological and productive capacities of the industrial age could alter social arrangements sufficiently to liberate people from the struggles that had defined past generations.

The child of Baptist minister Rufus King Bellamy and Maria Putnam, who traced her ancestors back to the earliest English colonial settlers, Bellamy arrived on earth in 1850 to a deeply religious family and lived most of his life in the small mill town of Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts. Bellamy's youthful fascination with all things military included an attempt in 1867 to enter West Point. Suffering the effects of persistent childhood illness, however, he failed the physical examination. Following this disappointment, he entered Union College in Schenectady, New York, studied abroad in Germany, and returned to the United States to complete his legal studies. Bellamy passed the bar exam in 1871 and set about opening a law practice. However, after a single case that involved evicting a widow for nonpayment of rent, he abandoned the law and relocated to New York to pursue journalism. Following a difficult, lonely, and isolated six months in Brooklyn, Bellamy returned to Massachusetts and began work as an editorial writer and book reviewer for the *Springfield Union*. His writings for the newspaper concerned a range of literary and political topics.

A mild-mannered, middle-class man, Bellamy strayed only occasionally from Chicopee Falls after his return from New York. In 1882, he married Emma Sanderson, the young woman his parents had adopted as a ward and with whom he had grown-up. Bellamy and Sanderson had a son, Paul, in 1884 and a daughter, Marion, in 1886, the

same year he began writing *Looking Backward*. He strove for a quiet, contemplative existence, dabbled in literary futurism, and only reluctantly engaged in organized political activism following the phenomenal national and international success of *Looking Backward*.

Bellamy's first published novels did not directly engage social questions, but by early 1880 he and his brother Charles founded a weekly paper, the *Penny News* (later the *Springfield Daily News*), which they wrote and edited together until December of that year when Bellamy returned to freelance writing. After the success of *Looking Backward* in 1888 catapulted Bellamy into national fame and politics, he devoted himself to explicating the Nationalist program through speeches, writings, and, finally, editorship of *The New Nation*, which he financed at a loss for a number of years. Bellamy abruptly ceased publication of his journal in 1894 and, despite declining health because of tuberculosis, devoted himself fulltime to writing *Equality*, which appeared in 1897. The book extended and elaborated the ideas in *Looking Backward* and constituted Bellamy's most thorough answer to his detractors. That same year, following his doctor's advice, Bellamy relocated to Denver hoping that the fresh mountain air would relieve his illness. Bellamy died at home in Chicopee Falls on May 22, 1898, at the age of forty-eight.

Bellamy derived his sense of economic possibilities from the coordination among large business concerns and, consequently, shared more with some business leaders than with reformers whom, in other ways, he was more politically compatible. His frustration with reform movements manifested itself in the pages of *Equality*, where he bemoaned

the tendency to replace capitalists with workers who, in turn, did to others what the capitalists did to them. This cycle would persist until economic inequality ended.<sup>13</sup> For Bellamy, “it was the system which permitted human beings to come into relations of superiority and inferiority to one another which was the cause of the whole evil,” and that required adjustment. Nationalism, he asserted, simply proposed to extend the cooperation among business organizations to the public good. But while Bellamy and other advocates of the cooperative commonwealth considered this a logical evolution, to others it undermined cherished beliefs about the economic organization of society.

Through his insistence on equal wages and equality of result, Bellamy relocated opportunity outside the confines of economics—where most reform efforts centered—and embraced aspects of human development that did not depend on an understanding of people as economically-driven. In so doing, he challenged fundamental presumptions of capitalist ideology, including the notion of “economic man” and its expression in equal economic opportunity. Bellamy’s analysis pushed the debate about opportunity beyond an expansion of the foundation on which it operated (whether in land ownership, one’s labor, or increased leisure and consumption) and sought, not to reconcile its inherent contradictions, but to supersede these tensions by eliminating economic competition and by transcending the ideology of equal economic opportunity. Ultimately, Bellamy’s condemnation of economic conditions was not so much about economics itself as it was part of an attempt to emancipate those aspects of human nature stifled in the constant struggle for material survival.

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<sup>13</sup> Bellamy, *Equality*, 132-34.

The depiction of the society Bellamy described in *Looking Backward* as utopian provides the predominant framework for his work. This categorization places him in a socialist utopian tradition that included both idealists and those who attempted to realize in practice these visions of a re-made world.<sup>14</sup> However, this label can too easily diminish Bellamy's writings to the mere fanciful. Bellamy's imagined future depended on current economic realities, and he proposed using these developments to alter social arrangements. He did not call for a retreat from contemporary society to an idealized era of small-scale economic competition. By freeing his analysis from the limits of the category "utopian" we can rehabilitate the radicalism of his critique of contemporaneous social and economic conditions.

While Bellamy sympathized with many socialist concerns, Nationalism included elemental components that separated him from active socialist organizations. Like the Fabians, Bellamy anticipated a non-violent and evolutionary transition to a socialistic ownership of the means of production, one that minimized class struggle as the defining social relationship. And like Laurence Grönlund, the Danish writer credited with introducing many of Marx's ideas to American audiences through his 1884 *Co-operative Commonwealth*, Bellamy depicted a moral, peaceful, and cooperative future built on an expectation of linear progress. But while Grönlund celebrated the success of *Looking Backward*, he emphatically distinguished socialism from Nationalism's rootedness in equal wages and its dependence on the military model, both of which he called

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<sup>14</sup> While some people did establish separate communities based on Nationalist principles, Bellamy, though flattered and reluctant to criticize, did not advocate such efforts but focused, instead, on broader reforms.

“decidedly unsocialistic notions.”<sup>15</sup> Eugene Debs also, though initially enamored of Bellamy’s book, increasingly worried that the expansion of the state called for in the novel would dwarf the individual, eliminate labor unions, and lead to absolutism.<sup>16</sup> Bellamy himself remained distant from organized socialism and asserted that Nationalism represented a more fundamental critique of the assumptions embedded in contemporary economic arrangements.

To the extent that socialists rested their claim for labor to enjoy a greater share of productive wealth on a distribution system based on one’s efforts, Bellamy maintained they failed to dislodge the power of equal economic opportunity. Clarifying Bellamy’s critique of socialism depends on a distinction between what Marx called the two phases of socialism, or between socialism and communism. With his insistence on equal wages, Bellamy positioned himself between the socialist phase that distributed income based on one’s labor contribution and the communist phase that distributed income according to varied need. Building on producerist values, Debs described socialism’s goals as the “equal right to work with every other man” where “each will receive the fruit of his labor.”<sup>17</sup> When socialists organized their complaints around producerism and the labor theory of value—and argued that laborers did not receive a reward commensurate with

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<sup>15</sup> Laurence Grönlund, *The Co-operative Commonwealth: An Exposition of Socialism* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1890), viii. Despite his disagreements with Bellamy, Grönlund’s enthusiasm about the potential impact of *Looking Backward* prompted him to suspend sales of his own book during the initial year of the novel’s publication so as not to detract from Bellamy’s audience. Arthur E. Morgan, *Edward Bellamy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 389.

<sup>16</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “Government Control of Railroads and Employés,” *Locomotive Fireman’s Magazine*, May 1894, 468.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “Prison Labor,” Address before the Nineteenth Century Club at Delmonico’s, 21 March 1899 in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, Introduction by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Hermitage Press, Inc., 1948), 32.

their economic contribution—they implicitly accepted the inequalities of equal opportunity. Hence, Bellamy argued that equal wages—absolute economic equality—transcended socialism, the inequities of producerism, and the contradictions within the ideology of equal economic opportunity.

*Looking Backward* sold over 200,000 copies in the United States, a nation of approximately 63 million, during its first year of publication. When Bellamy died, over one million books had been sold and it had been translated into German, French, Russian, Italian, Swedish, Spanish, Danish, and Portuguese, among others. Reform organizations including the Farmer's Alliance and Union Party, bought copies in bulk and distributed them to their members. Major newspapers, literary magazines, and labor journals reviewed the novel. Henry Demarest Lloyd wrote that *Looking Backward* "sells more copies than any other [book] of our day abroad and at home [and is] debated by all down to the boot-blacks as they sit on the curbstones."<sup>18</sup> Bellamy's analysis resonated with a diverse group that included Populists, feminists, socialists, and philosophers. The book's popularity prompted the creation of Nationalist Clubs throughout the United States—165 alone between 1890 and 1891. Mostly concentrated in the Northeast, the clubs initially dedicated themselves to discussing the book and only later began to work for political reforms designed to create the necessary conditions for the triumph of Nationalism.<sup>19</sup> At

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<sup>18</sup> Henry Demarest Lloyd, *Wealth Against Commonwealth* (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1894), 327-28; quoted in Rob Vaughan, "The Workers' Paradise: Edward Bellamy and the 'Labor Question,' 1888-1898" (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawai'i, 2007), 93-94.

<sup>19</sup> The founders of the New York Nationalist Club included Abner Doubleday, Florence Kelley, and Daniel de Leon. Vaughan, "The Workers' Paradise," 104.

its height, Nationalists claimed approximately 6,000 organized members and nearly 500,000 fellow-travelers. A monthly journal, *The Nationalist*, which ran from May 1889 through April 1891, promulgated Bellamy's ideas.

All of this activity led a reluctant Bellamy from his study in Chicopee Falls to Boston, public speaking, the publication of his own magazine, and, eventually, a short-lived political alliance with the Populist Party, part of whose 1892 platform drew from Nationalism. Bellamy contributed articles to *The Nationalist* and had agreed to assume the editorship when, citing ill-health, he unexpectedly withdrew. After *The Nationalist* ceased publication Bellamy founded *The New Nation*, a weekly journal he described as for the "discussion of the industrial and social situation from the moral and economic point of view indicated by my book and subsequent work." Though its focus continued to appeal to Nationalists, Bellamy also used the journal to engage more directly in politics, where he hoped to reach a broader audience of "all good men and women who have hearts to feel the evils of the day and courage to hope for better things."<sup>20</sup>

A May 1891 editorial in the *New Nation* encouraged readers to affiliate with the People's Party to insure that the 1892 platform reflected Nationalist principles, as it offered the "largest opportunity yet presented in the history of our movement to commend it [Nationalism] to the masses of the country."<sup>21</sup> In an address at Faneuil Hall, Bellamy declared that "the platform of the People's Party of this state," which included progressive taxation, a federally regulated money supply, and nationalized railroads, "is a complete statement of the position which any party must take up that fundamentally

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Bellamy to W.W. Higginson, 21 December 1890, Unmarked Folder of Correspondence, Edward Bellamy Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as Bellamy Collection, LOC.)

<sup>21</sup> *New Nation*, 16 May 1891, 278.



opposes the usurpations of the money power.” More than any other aspect of Populism, calls to nationalize industry, according to Bellamy, distinguished it as “the proper means of meeting the aggressions of private monopolies.”<sup>22</sup>

Scholars have differentiated this latter period’s political activism from Nationalism’s earlier history, which until 1891 had concentrated on education.<sup>23</sup>

Following this reorientation toward politics most Nationalist Clubs, which had centered on theoretical discussion, dissolved as quickly as they had formed.<sup>24</sup> Despite Bellamy’s continued financial support, the *New Nation* ceased publication in 1894 for lack of funds. (This also allowed Bellamy to begin work on *Equality*.) Without an official organ, Nationalism rapidly declined as a social movement and, with the fusion of Populism into the Democratic Party during the 1896 election, it disappeared. However, Bellamy did not mourn Populism’s decline, explaining that though it had “fallen in bad hands” the recent campaign had “done much to break up the political soil, cause discontent and prepare the people for the radical doctrines.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “Faneuil Hall Address,” Binder 3B(3), Edward Bellamy Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge. (Hereafter cited as Bellamy Papers, Houghton.)

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, *Edward Bellamy*, 247-53. A September 1890 editorial in *The Nationalist* called on various reform organizations—The Farmers’ Alliance, Nationalists, Knights of Labor, trade unions, and others—to “unite on the demand that the railroads and telegraphs should be nationalized.” But by January of the following year another editorial warned of the dangers posed by “entangling alliances” and urged caution before Nationalism associated itself with other reform movements, especially single-issue efforts, to prevent “dissipat[ing] their energies in taking up minor issues.” Thus, just a few months after encouraging alignment with the Populists, the official organ of Nationalism retreated from active political involvement. “A Common Platform,” *The Nationalist*, September 1890, 96; and “Entangling Alliances,” *The Nationalist*, January 1891, 413-14.

<sup>24</sup> Bowman, *The Year 2000*, 123-4; and John Hope Franklin, “Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement,” *The New England Quarterly*, December 1938, 739-772.

<sup>25</sup> Edward Bellamy to Henry D. Lloyd, 5 December 1896, Bellamy Papers, Houghton. While Bellamy may have entered politics reluctantly, by August 1890, in response to a request from the *Atlantic Monthly* editor for a fiction submission, Bellamy replied that “since my eyes have been opened to the evils and perils of our social state, and I have begun to cherish a clear hope of better things, I simply can’t ‘get my consent’ to write or think about anything else.” Bellamy went on to lament, that “as a literary man I fear I am a ‘goner’

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While many Gilded Age social commentators, critics, and activists, including Booker T. Washington, Terence Powderly, and Samuel Gompers, challenged traditional understandings of political and economic relations through varied attempts to expand the foundations of equal opportunity, Bellamy pushed further. He contended that political rights demanded a foundation of economic equality, not merely equal opportunity. Under Bellamy's editorship, *The New Nation* featured a front piece that highlighted the "tyrannous" exercise of power by the wealthy who pursued private gain over community interests. Bellamy condemned such behavior "as offensive to respecting men as any form of political tyranny that was ever endured." The paragraph concluded:

As political equality is the remedy for political tyranny, so is economic equality the only way of putting an end to the economic tyranny exercised by the few over the many through superiority of wealth. The industrial system of a nation, like its political system, should be a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Until economic equality shall give a basis to political equality, the latter is but a sham.<sup>26</sup>

According to Bellamy, political and economic equality "are one and stand or fall together," for "the permanent preservation of political equality requires indeed the

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and past praying for. There is a sense in which I am very sorry for this, for I had much work to do and should greatly have enjoyed doing it. There is one life I should like to lead and one which I must lead." Edward Bellamy to Horace Scudder, 25 August 1890, Bellamy Papers, Houghton. Upton Sinclair declared Bellamy, along with Harriet Beecher Stowe, failed artists "because their impulse to teach and to preach had run away with their inspiration." Stowe quoted in Vaughan, "The Workers' Paradise," 107.

<sup>26</sup> *The New Nation*, April 1893, 1. Wealth, Bellamy said elsewhere, leads to concentrated power and "in the presence of great disparities of wealth, social equality is at an end, industrial independence is destroyed, while mere constitutional stipulations as to the equal rights of citizens politically or before the law, become ridiculous." Nationalism, though, "proposed to harmonize the industrial and commercial system with the political, by bringing the former under popular government, as the latter has already been brought, to be administered as the political government is, by the equal voice of all for the equal benefit of all." Edward Bellamy, "Principles and Purposes of Nationalism," Address at Tremont Temple, Boston, 19 December 1889 (Philadelphia: Bureau of Nationalist Literature, 1889), 1; and "The Programme of the Nationalists," *The Forum*, March 1894, 81.

establishment of economic equality, without which the former will soon be undermined and lost.”<sup>27</sup> Bellamy shared with other activists an understanding that economic power brought political power. But for Bellamy, the willingness of these reformers to accept those aspects of the ideology of equal opportunity that perpetuated economic hierarchies limited the potential democratization of political power. Meaningful political rights required not equal opportunity, but equal economic result. Further elaborated in *Equality*, Bellamy identified the “worth and dignity of the individual” as the core of democracy, which demanded that “material conditions must be made subservient” to civic engagement.<sup>28</sup> Economic equality would “render democratic government in practice the admirable system which hitherto it has been only in theory.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, democratic politics depended on economic equality, which would allow the fullest expression of each individual.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Edward Bellamy, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward,’” *The Ladies Home Journal*, April 1894, reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, (Westport, Conn.: Hyperion Press, Inc., 1937), 225; and Edward Bellamy, “Socialism and Nationalism,” *New Nation*, 27 January 1894, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Bellamy, *Equality*, 26.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism* (Freeport, N.Y: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 162. As Julian West says to Dr. Leete: “It seems that your foundation principle of economic equality which I supposed was mainly suggested and intended in the interest of the material well-being of the people, is quite as much a principle of political policy for safeguarding the stability and wise ordering of government.” Bellamy, *Equality*, 28. This position challenged a dominant view that “democracy . . . strives to establish equality of opportunities, not equality of recompense.” “The New Socialism,” *The Nation*, 13 June 1889, 478.

<sup>30</sup> Attention to the relationship between political and economic equality had also occupied Bellamy’s attention as a young man when he penned an editorial entitled “Industrial Feudalism in Modern Times.” Here he offered readers a history lesson: “As the political world was once dominated by a few great nobles, so now is the industrial and commercial world altogether controlled and governed by the princes of merchandise, manufactures, and commerce.” But while democracy replaced feudalism in the political sphere, “in the affairs of industry . . . feudalism still survives in its pristine vigor.” In contrast to the impetus for historical change in Europe, where altered social and industrial conditions prompted new political arrangements, Nationalism was a distinctly American movement where the existing principle of equality in the “establishment of a political republic” would be extended to “include the industrial organization of society.” Edward Bellamy, *Springfield Daily Union*, 3 November 1873, 4; and Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 157.

While Bellamy did not fully elaborate a political scheme in *Looking Backward*, for which he has been rightly criticized, this did not result from a lack of interest in or concern with politics, as evidenced by his early editorial writings on a range of political and social topics.<sup>31</sup> However the limited political arrangements in the novel, where the military provided a model for the industrial army, left decisions to senior functionaries who served for life and restricted government activity to bureaucratic tasks. This benign administrative state raised immediate and subsequent objections. Such centralization of power in the state, according to critics, stifled individualism, too closely resembled the military, concentrated political authority, and devalued politics. Detractors further accused Bellamy of failing to recognize that loyalty extends not to abstractions like Nationalism, but to the local and particular toward which people feel greater attachment, an attachment expressed through political engagement.<sup>32</sup>

Bellamy readily acknowledged that the national service at the heart of Nationalism derived from European military systems. Following this example, Bellamy's scheme assumed that "the duty to serve depends on the ability to serve, but the

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<sup>31</sup> For example, in 1867 Bellamy authored two short essays about political representation. In one he called for the abolition of the Electoral College because of its potential failure to represent majority interests. In the other he expressed concern about the nature of representative government itself and the relationship between minority and majority interests. Edward Bellamy, "Thoughts on Political Economy" and "The Representation of Minorities," 1867, Binder 2, Notebook 6, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

<sup>32</sup> Francis A. Walker, "Mr. Bellamy and the New Nationalist Party," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1890, 262; and Morris, "Looking Backward," *The Commonwealth*, 194-95. Lewis Mumford charged that Bellamy "showed almost no apprehensive insight into the repeated miscarriages of human purposes that has resulted from the early practice of reducing men to the status of machines." In a series of sharp attacks, Arthur Lipow criticized the centralized state in *Looking Backward* and concluded that it shared features with the "anti-democratic" bureaucratic states of the twentieth century. According to Lipow, Bellamy's vision was grounded in an attempt to suppress politics and shared "ideological roots in [the] conservative political reaction against liberal democratic values and institutions." Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), 219; and Arthur Lipow, *Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 14.

right to protection depends solely and merely on citizenship.”<sup>33</sup> The appeal of the military model rested on duty, in regard both to one’s contributions and claims to benefits. Bellamy maintained that he merely extended into the economic sphere the military concept of service, such that Nationalism “holds every able-bodied citizen bound to work for the nation, whether with mind or muscle; and, on the other hand, holds the nation bound to guarantee livelihood to every citizen, whether able to work or not.”<sup>34</sup> Nationalism would redirect the cohesion and solidarity of the military into civilian life by encouraging the expression of that part of human nature which desires to contribute to the public good. Despite Bellamy’s initial defense of his choice of the military model, he reconceptualized the industrial army in *Equality* to more closely resemble a civil service.

As political theorist Harold Rhodes has noted, Bellamy associated politics with the conflict induced by class distinctions, where those with economic resources gained access to political resources and imposed their will on others. Nationalism would eliminate class distinctions and, thus, the social conflicts previously resolved through politics. Consequently, Rhodes concluded, politics became irrelevant for Bellamy.<sup>35</sup> Bellamy’s desire for a moral and harmonious society has been further associated with an animus toward the contentiousness of politics. However, this assessment neglects Bellamy’s concern with the relationship between political and economic power and his

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<sup>33</sup> Edward Bellamy, “What Nationalism Means,” *The Contemporary Review*, July 1890, reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, 92-3.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Bellamy, “‘Looking Backward’ Again,” *North American Review*, March 1890, reprinted in *Ibid.*, 184-5.

<sup>35</sup> Harold V. Rhodes, *Utopia in American Political Thought* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1967), 40-1.

certainty that economic equality, not competitive equal opportunity, formed the necessary foundation for a more equitable politics.

In response to critics, Bellamy elaborated a more detailed political system in *Equality*. Here he established mechanisms for electoral recall, since “it is an axiom of democratic government that power should never be delegated irrevocably for an hour,” thus making it possible to circumvent the lifetime appointment of government functionaries. Further, he allowed that any legislative decision beyond those of “routine character” should be returned to the general populace for approval. Decision-making was not delegated to representatives, but actively involved all citizens, which allowed him to declare that under Nationalism “the people not only nominally but actually govern.”<sup>36</sup>

Bellamy’s imagined community, where conflict disappears, is strangely ahistorical. The traditional engines of social transformation—conflict, tension, dialectics—have been removed in favor of a harmonious stasis realized through a linear and progressive social evolution. Bellamy’s failure to theorize historical change led him to underestimate the tenacity of those who benefited from the status quo, as well as the persistence of habits of thought that, while increasingly removed from economic conditions, continued to shape thinking—what Thorstein Veblen termed “cultural lag.” The difficulty of challenging capitalist ideological conventions puzzled Bellamy and he remained perplexed about why criticism of certain ideas, especially those rendering private productive property sacred—“this idol of the world”—was equivalent to

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<sup>36</sup> Bellamy, *Equality*, 274-75.

“sacrilege.”<sup>37</sup> The consequence, in Bellamy’s mind, meant an inability to maneuver beyond contemporary social chaos.

Bellamy began work on *Looking Backward* in 1886 as skilled craft gave way to factory wage work and small-scale entrepreneurship ceded to corporate consolidation, a turbulent transition that manifested itself in numerous strikes and violent conflicts between labor and capital. Part of *Looking Backward*’s appeal lay in the non-revolutionary means of social transformation assumed to have occurred, along with the diminution of class conflict as a catalyst for change. While the Gilded Age was replete with calls for social and economic reform—from Single Taxers, Populist demands for nationalized railroads, and advocates of the eight-hour day to radical labor agitators, socialists, and anarchists—Bellamy’s Nationalism “made a conscious effort to reconcile peacefully an unreasonable capitalist to an embittered laboring class.”<sup>38</sup> Nationalism existed as a middle ground between a reversion to agrarian values and a socialism that demanded working-class power.<sup>39</sup>

*Looking Backward* captured a prevailing mood of disaffection. Bellamy himself commented that had the book been published five years earlier it would not have generated such a response. One reviewer attributed the popularity of *Looking Backward* to its coincidence “with a very deep and wide-spread discontent with existing social

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<sup>37</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Second Lyceum Talk,” p. 2, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

<sup>38</sup> Franklin, “Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement,” 740.

<sup>39</sup> Howard P. Segal, “Bellamy and Technology: Reconciling Centralization and Decentralization” in *Looking Backward, 1888-1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy*, ed. Daphne Patai (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 95.

conditions,” and yet another to its hopefulness, “for who would not find his own burden light, in the belief that his children should be delivered from it?”<sup>40</sup> Bellamy credited his success to Nationalism’s ability to preserve the productive capacity of concentrated capital while abolishing corporate power.<sup>41</sup> By couching Gilded Age dissatisfaction in fiction Bellamy’s social critique may also have seemed less politically threatening.<sup>42</sup> But he asserted the immanence of substantive social and economic change. Thus, in an “atmosphere rife with revolution,” where “society in its present form will not long exist,” people could choose either a path of anarchy, chaos, slavery, or “an era of a more perfect liberty and happiness than the world has ever known, the rich fruition of the garnered hope of the ages.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Gilman, “‘Nationalism’ in the United States,” 58; and Katherine Pearson Woods, “Edward Bellamy: Author and Economics,” *The Bookman*, March 1898-August 1898, 401. See also, Parrington, Jr., *American Dreams*, 97.

<sup>41</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Some Misconceptions of Nationalism,” *The Christian Union*, 13 November 1890, reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Bellamy demurred that when writing *Looking Backward* he never entertained engagement with social reform and had “no thought of contriving a house which practical men might live in, but merely of hanging in mid-air, far out of reach of the sordid and material world of the present, a cloud-palace for an ideal humanity.” But his earlier editorial writings for the *Springfield Daily Union*, where often he expressed sympathy with those who struggled under industrialism, belie his claim to a lack of interest in politics. In a later essay that explained his motives for writing *Looking Backward*, he remembered that while in Europe as a young man “my eyes were first fully opened to the extent and consequences of man’s inhumanity to man.” The ideas in *Looking Backward* represented sustained thinking on Bellamy’s part about the compelling social and economic issues of his day and the nature of reform. His insistence that he lacked a reform impulse is further contradicted by the postscript of *Looking Backward* which noted that while the novel took the form of a “fanciful romance” it was intended as a “forecast, in accordance with the principles of evolution, of the next stage in the industrial and social development of humanity.” He continued that, “no part of it is believed by the author to be better supported by the indications of probability than the implied prediction that the dawn of the new era is already near at hand, and that the full day will swiftly follow.” Edward Bellamy, “How I Came to Write ‘Looking Backward,’” *The Nationalist*, May 1889, 1; Edward Bellamy, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward,’” *The Ladies Home Journal*, April 1894, reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, 217; and Bellamy quoted in Morgan, *Edward Bellamy*, 31.

<sup>43</sup> “Second Lyceum Talk,” p. 7, Bellamy Collection, LOC.



Bellamy's imaginative leap into the future allowed him to train an anthropological lens on his own society and to accentuate the peculiarities of the choices that created contemporary social and economic arrangements. This scrutiny takes hold as West's guide describes the re-born Boston by contrasting it with the city West knew—by looking backward. Bellamy's decision to put West to sleep only to have him awaken in an altered society was not an uncommon literary device during the late-nineteenth century. Fictional time travel allowed Bellamy to exploit West's renewed status as a stranger to describe both the new social order and the old. West sleeps not only to forget but also so he can cast a more inquisitive gaze on his own society. Thus, West forgets so he can remember. From his new vantage point on the periphery of 1887 Boston, a social and economic order that previously appeared "natural" becomes strange and illogical, the consequence of immoral choices subject to human will—a journey Bellamy invited the reader to embark on with Julian West.

The foreshortening of economic opportunity wrought by the emergence of corporate capital intensified Bellamy's dissatisfaction with the Gilded Age. As a young man he wrote an editorial for the *Springfield Daily Union*, "America the Only Land of Freedom," that celebrated the country's centennial and eulogized a nation "alone on earth" where a citizen has the "freedom to move in society, to rise and fall upon his own merits."<sup>44</sup> By 1887, though, Bellamy had altered his assessment of economic opportunity in the United States.

As industrialization accelerated so too did the concentration of economic power, alongside a concomitant rise in the number of wage workers amid narrowed

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<sup>44</sup> Edward Bellamy, "America the Only Land of Freedom," *Springfield Daily Union*, 8 July 1876, 4. Importantly, this opportunity applied mainly to white males.

entrepreneurial opportunity. The amount of capital required to engage in business had so increased that “there is at present no opportunity for individual initiative in business,” nor is there “opportunity for talent to raise a man to the position of employer,” which constituted capitalism’s promise. Consequently, “the middle class, the business class, is being turned into a proletarian class.”<sup>45</sup> These conditions threatened not only the standing of the middle class but undermined the premise of an economic system rooted in the chance for upward mobility. Bellamy’s critics, however, dismissed his assessment of declining opportunity and proclaimed that “in this country the doors of opportunity are all practically wide open to all those who are prepared to enter.” Economic hardship resulted not from a lack of opportunity but from the personal failure of those not “fully equipped to embrace the opportunity” or to “fully discharge all its duties.”<sup>46</sup> Bellamy disagreed. In explaining the economic system from which Julian West awoke, Dr. Leete pointed out that railroads and other business interests had formed syndicates, trusts, and pools that “fixed prices and crushed all competition except when combinations as vast as themselves arose.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Plutocracy or Nationalism—Which?” Address at Tremont Temple, Boston, 31 May 1889 (Boston: Nationalist Club of Boston, 1889), 5-6; and Edward Bellamy, “The Root of the Present Discontent,” *New Nation*, 18 July 1891, 390. Bellamy further explicated this point in *Equality*, noting: “Formerly known all over the world as the land of opportunities, America had in the time of a generation become equally celebrated as the land of monopolies. . . . [T]he monopolization of all the valuable economic opportunities in the country by the great capitalists made it correspondingly impossible for those not of the capitalist class to attain wealth. The hope of becoming rich some day, which before the [Civil] war every energetic American had cherished, was now practically beyond the horizon of the man born to poverty. Between rich and poor the door was henceforth shut. The way up, hitherto, the social safety valve, had been closed, and the bar weighted with money bags.” Bellamy, *Equality*, 311, 315.

<sup>46</sup> George A. Sanders, *Reality: Or Law and Order vs. Anarchy and Socialism: A Reply to Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward and Equality* (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1898), 37.

<sup>47</sup> Bellamy quoted in Gilman, “‘Nationalism’ in the United States,” 54-5.

While many Gilded Age reformers advocated a return to the presumed benefits of small-scale economic competition by breaking-up trusts—a desire that may certainly be called utopian—Bellamy did not. Rather than promote resumption of destructive and inefficient economic competition, Bellamy acknowledged the increased productive capabilities of centrally organized industry and sought to direct these benefits away from the immoral plane of private profit and toward the morality of the common good.<sup>48</sup> Eventually, production and labor crises would prompt demands for nationalized industry, work that would be completed under the rubric of Nationalism.<sup>49</sup> Dr. Leete described how, through a process of peaceful social transformation, the nation’s industry ceased to be “conducted by a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons” in favor of a “single syndicate . . . conducted in the common interest for the common profit.”<sup>50</sup> Like some socialists that saw in concentrated industry the future cooperative commonwealth, Bellamy’s Nationalism merely extended the consolidations of private industry. (Though Bellamy’s cooperative commonwealth did not depend, as it did for many socialists, on an organized working class to act as a countervailing force to concentrated capital.) Despite Henry George’s comment that “‘Looking Backward’ is a castle in the air, with clouds for its foundations,” Bellamy was, if not more of a realist

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<sup>48</sup> “The competitive system can never be restored, neither is it worthy of restoration, having been at best an immoral, wasteful, brutal scramble for existence. New issues demand new answers. It is in vain to pit the moribund system of competition against the young giant of private monopoly; it must rather be opposed by the greater giant of public monopoly.” Bellamy, *Equality*, 333. As one of Bellamy’s defenders noted, his critics too easily forgot that the end of economic competition was wrought by business itself through the act of consolidation. Mason A. Green, “Unconscious ‘Nationalism’ in Our American System of Government,” *New Englander and Yale Review*, February 1890, 105.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Bellamy, “How We Shall Get There,” *Twentieth Century*, 11 May 1889, 166.

<sup>50</sup> Bellamy quoted in Gilman, “‘Nationalism’ in the United States,” 55.

than those who harkened for the restoration of small-scale competitive capitalism, certainly no more utopian.<sup>51</sup>

Bellamy responded to economic conditions as he found them, not as he imagined them, and he hoped to extend the benefits of consolidation to more people. In so doing, he did not call for a return to pre-industrial values but, instead, desired to establish new ones. Monopoly, per se, did not threaten the social fabric as many reformers claimed; rather it was the use to which monopoly was put. A reorientation away from profit would allow a reassessment of the meaning of opportunity. Small-scale entrepreneurship depended on notions of acquisitive individualism, equal opportunity in pursuit of economic independence, and competition that appropriately rewarded merit. For Bellamy, the consolidation of capital presented an opportunity to transcend entrepreneurialism and the values it encouraged and on which it depended.

Beyond recognizing the certain persistence of concentrated industry, Bellamy's attempt to alleviate Gilded Age economic antagonisms rested on a critique of the ineffectualness of competition. Economic consolidation and "centralized despotism" could not be "successfully resisted from behind the decayed and dilapidated breastworks of free competition." Bellamy argued that a return to the "day of small things is not possible," for it "would involve a turning backward of the entire system of modern material progress." Competitive economics led to duplication of productive endeavors to

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<sup>51</sup> Henry George, *The Standard*, 31 August 1889, 1. As a young editorial writer, Bellamy himself noted that turning to the state to rectify the massive scale of economic and social problems was the purview of dreamers and that to imagine such a scheme was tantamount to "fly[ing] from a haystack to the moon." Edward Bellamy, "Communism Boiled Down," *Springfield Daily Union*, 3 August 1877, 2.

gain an advantage over an adversary which, in turn, led to an economic system “under which nothing can be done properly without doing it twice.”<sup>52</sup>

Bellamy’s objections to economic competition extended beyond its productive inefficiencies. He doubted that financial inducements and self-interest fully explain human behavior. Returning to a military analogy, Bellamy maintained that presumed selfish intentions could not explain why people put themselves in harm’s way to defend their nation. Humans, he concluded, must be driven by other motivations. As opposed to his critics, who worried that the absence of economic competition would eliminate the incentive to work hard and who “discern[ed] in competition the force to which it is mainly due that mankind have risen from stage to stage in intellectual, moral, and physical power,” Bellamy argued that economic competition exploited the worst, not the best, of human nature.<sup>53</sup> Moral objections to the competitive struggle for material survival also animated many in the Social Gospel movement and led Eugene Debs to declare that “our competitive system is utterly cannibalistic,” where people are set against one another in acts of self-defense.<sup>54</sup>

By placing economic competition in a social context Bellamy asserted that “if the conditions of the struggle are immoral and brutal, the most immoral and brutal types will survive.”<sup>55</sup> In describing the Gilded Age, he wrote in *Looking Backward*: “It was the

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<sup>52</sup> Edward Bellamy, “The Outcome of the Battle of Standards,” *Boston Globe*, 16 July 1893, reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, 212; and Bellamy, “Plutocracy or Nationalism—Which?,” 7, 4. For a further critique of economic competition, see also Frances Willard, “Competition Doomed,” *The Social Democrat*, 20 January 1894, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Walker, “Mr. Bellamy and the New Nationalist Party,” 262.

<sup>54</sup> Eugene V. Debs, “Present Conditions and Future Duties,” *Railway Times*, 1 January 1897, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 181.

sincere belief of even the best of men at that epoch that the only stable elements in human nature, on which a social system could be safely founded, were its worst propensities. They . . . believed that greed and self-seeking were all that held mankind together.” In this way, and in a swipe at Social Darwinists, economic competition led to the “survival of the unfittest” and rewarded “what is worst in the character of all.” Current economic conditions meant that “we have to make our living out of one another, preying upon our fellows and being preyed on by them.” Nationalism, in contrast, would promote people’s “hunger for comradeship and mutual trust.”<sup>56</sup> Rather than assume a static human nature where the “evolution of humanity had resulted in leading [people] into a *cul de sac*” of self-interest, Bellamy emphasized the fluidity of human nature as it interacted with environmental conditions.<sup>57</sup> Thus, different social circumstances would enhance different aspects of human consciousness.

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<sup>56</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*; quoted in Joseph Schiffman, “Edward Bellamy’s Altruistic Man,” *American Quarterly* 6 (Autumn 1954): 204; Bellamy, “Plutocracy or Nationalism—Which?”, 2; and Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 100-01.

<sup>57</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*; quoted in Schiffman, “Edward Bellamy’s Altruistic Man,” 204. The front piece of each edition of *The Nationalist* reproduced a “Declaration of Principles”:

The principle of the Brotherhood of Humanity is one of the eternal truths that govern the world’s progress on lines which distinguish human nature from brute nature.

The principle of competition is simply the application of the brutal law of the survival of the strongest and most cunning.

Therefore, so long as competition continues to be the ruling factor in our industrial system, the highest development of the individual cannot be reached, the loftiest aims of humanity cannot be realized.

No truth can avail unless practically applied. Therefore those who seek the humanity of man must endeavor to suppress the system founded on the brute principle of competition and put in its place another based on the nobler principle of association.

But in striving to apply this nobler and wider principle to the complex conditions of modern life, we advocate no sudden or ill considered changes; we make no war upon individuals; we do not censure those who have accumulated immense fortunes, simply by carrying to a logical end the false principle on which business is now based.

The combination, trusts and syndicates of which the people at present complain demonstrates the practicability of our basic principle of association. We merely seek to push this principle a little further and have all industries operated in the interest of all by the nation—the people organized—the organic unity of the whole people.

The present industrial system proves itself wrong by the immense wrongs it produces; it proves itself absurd by the immense waste of energy and material which is admitted to be its concomitant. Against

In response, critics accused him of “ignoring human nature” such that, “Mr. Bellamy’s men and women have rid themselves of poverty, and with poverty have lost all their claws and stings.”<sup>58</sup> For Bellamy, economic scarcity caused people to behave in a self-interested fashion, which could be remedied through equal wages; for his critics, economic competition simply provided an outlet for the most self-interested of human instincts. Further, to end economic scarcity and competition would eliminate the incentive to work hard since, historically, “the main spur to exertion has been want.”<sup>59</sup> As writer and editor W. A. Croffut explained, “if the worker were thus securely fixed he might prefer not to work at all. . . . The prospect of possible poverty and suffering is the mildest stimulus adequate to keep men at work.”<sup>60</sup> William Lloyd Garrison objected to excessive legal interference with the “natural right of exchange under free competition.” And, he asked: “Is it not better to attempt the equality of opportunity which is practical, leaving resulting conditions to the law of nature which is manifestly beyond our control?”<sup>61</sup> By eliminating the threat of potential deprivation, the argument continued, Bellamy ignored what motivated human action and ingenuity and, perhaps more damning, minimized those aspects of human nature that found a productive outlet in economic competition.

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this system we raise our protest: for the abolition of the slavery it has wrought and would perpetuate, we pledge our best efforts.

<sup>58</sup> “Recent American Fiction,” *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1888, 845-46.

<sup>59</sup> Walker, “Mr. Bellamy and the New Nationalist Party,” 255.

<sup>60</sup> W. A. Croffut and Louis F. Post, “What Rights Have Laborers?” *The Forum*, April 1886, 294-306.

<sup>61</sup> William Lloyd Garrison, “The Mask of Tyranny,” *The Arena*, April 1890, 555, 557.

However, rather than compete for economic resources, Bellamy reoriented the field of competition toward the pursuit of community accolades and advancement in the industrial army. Here merit persisted in the desire for public acclaim and promotion in rank where “the certain rewards of honor, authority and public approbation as incentives to diligence” replaced the “wholly uncertain cash prizes now offered.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, while Bellamy retained competition as a motivating force, he altered its context and used it to “encourage and give precedence to the nobler qualities of men instead of the meaner.”<sup>63</sup> So long as society admired those who accumulated money, and thus granted them political influence, people would pursue money. Bellamy aimed to shift social approval from financial achievement toward those aspects of human development that would allow the fullest expression of individuality.

Bellamy’s explicit rejection of a return to small-scale entrepreneurship undermines efforts to associate him with wistfulness for a bygone pre-industrial ideal. Numerous scholars maintain that Bellamy’s distaste for the social consequences of industrialism, along with his rejection of working-class activism as the catalyst for economic change, emerged from nostalgia for competitive capitalism.<sup>64</sup> This critique

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<sup>62</sup> Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 179.

<sup>63</sup> Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 182. As Bellamy biographer Arthur Morgan explained, “the fact that love of power has many other forms than love of riches is both the hope and despair of such programs as that of Bellamy. What men crave is not primarily great wealth, but honor and respect, and whatever promises those rewards will induce their greatest efforts.” Morgan, *Edward Bellamy*, 400.

<sup>64</sup> Scholars who claim Bellamy acted out of nostalgia for a pre-industrial past include George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 109-11; Milton Cantor, “The Backward Look of Bellamy’s Socialism,” in *Looking Backward, 1888-1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy*, ed. Patai, 21-36; and R. Jackson Wilson, “Experience and Utopia: The Making



centers on the dearth of industrial workers in Bellamy's stories. But it fails to fully acknowledge the political implications of his economic philosophy. Bellamy did lament the passing of small-scale economic organization where employer knew employee and consumer knew both, which he associated with his childhood. But while he mourned, he also recognized that the acceleration, size, and complexity of new productive arrangements made it impossible to return to the imagined idyll of his youth. And he upbraided those who continued to invoke the rhetoric of competition to defend an increasingly cooperative industrial system.

The scale of these new industrial operations altered the organization and nature of work. Large, impersonal factories prompted labor to resist its loss of autonomy on the shop floor as the demands of machines set the pace of production. Bellamy's own conflicts about the meaning of work mirrored this workplace tension. Drawing from his New England Calvinist upbringing, Bellamy asserted the obligation to work and maintained that Nationalism "proposes to impose no new burden, but to systematize and equalize the ancient burden and thereby greatly lighten it for all alike."<sup>65</sup> Inequities in the distribution of labor, such that many worked hard while others hardly worked, particularly exercised Bellamy. Nationalism would end such practices. As a young man, he did not consider work intrinsically worthy, but as the means to an end—living life.<sup>66</sup>

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of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*," *American Studies* 2 (1977): 45-60. For the claim that Bellamy simply advanced a common critique of individualism, see Wilson, "Experience and Utopia," 53-6. Strangely, those who criticize Bellamy for his inattention to a working-class movement share with capitalists an abiding interest in the economic motives of human behavior. Rather than see economic change as a means to an end, as Bellamy did, his "radical" critics see it as an end in itself.

<sup>65</sup> Bellamy, "What Nationalism Means," *The Contemporary Review*, July 1890, reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, 93.

<sup>66</sup> "We are not here to work, but to live, to live the fullest, freest, most developed life we can," Bellamy wrote and went on to muse that, "to have accomplished this or that work be it material, artistic, is well

Under Nationalism, work would no longer be the most significant marker of identity. Instead, life outside of work would assume greater importance.<sup>67</sup> Critics chastised Bellamy for neglecting the place of meaningful work in his Boston of 2000 in favor of external rewards and accolades.

In one of his later notebooks Bellamy queried himself about his motives for writing and concluded that it is “chiefly . . . to know myself.” And, he continued, “Consciously, or subconsciously, this is the motive that impels men to do work of any sort, to express themselves in speech or written words, or stone or colors or empire building.”<sup>68</sup> Upon greater reflection, Bellamy concluded that while the tasks required for social maintenance would eventually be filled by one person or another, “the one work that never will be done if each man fails to do it for himself, the one work that can not wait, is the development of his own soul and its enjoyment.”<sup>69</sup> There is the necessary work for material survival and there is the work of human development. Contemplation and self-expression, for Bellamy, were the more important of the two forms of labor.

Bellamy’s varied sense about whether work constituted primarily a means to satisfy material needs or a creative expression of self stems from his attempt to reconcile the satisfaction of physical needs with his desire to emancipate people from an economic understanding of human nature. Through a presumption of perpetual scarcity and the use of equal opportunity as a distributive mechanism, economic competition bred consistent

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enough, only let it not be forgotten that we do not live to work, but work to live.” Edward Bellamy, Binder No. 1, Notebook 1, February 1874, 31, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

<sup>67</sup> Daphne Patai, “Introduction: The Double Vision of Edward Bellamy,” in *Looking Backward, 1988-1898: Essays on Edward Bellamy*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Bellamy, Binder No. 1, Notebook 2, p. 5, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

<sup>69</sup> Edward Bellamy, Binder No. 1, Notebook C, p. 3, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

uncertainty and prevented the manifestation of “natural mental tendencies” in favor of an endless struggle for survival. Bellamy never denied the importance of access to material goods. He simply declared it an insufficient end. Abolishing competition for material resources would encourage an “unrestrained . . . endeavor to attain the highest and best that is within the compass of this natural capacity.”<sup>70</sup> This quest to re-imagine people’s relationship to their consumptive needs and to secure them in a way that transcended the role of goods and income as the measure of social value pushed Bellamy to embrace economic equality through equal wages.

Critics persistently faulted Bellamy’s proposal for equal wages and its failure to remunerate for individual labor contributions as a violation of a core component of the ideology of equal opportunity. In the preface to one of a number of sequels to *Looking Backward* authored by others, Richard Michaelis wrote that Bellamy would “in the name of equal rights, deprive all the clever and industrious workers of a large or the largest part of the products of their labor for the benefit of their awkward, stupid or lazy comrades!”<sup>71</sup> The recognition of merit required differential material rewards. And Francis Walker charged that “to say that one who produces twice as much as another

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<sup>70</sup> Bellamy, “Is Nationalism a Sin Against Liberty?” *The Nationalist*, August 1890, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Michaelis, *Looking Further Forward: An Answer to Looking Backward by Edward Bellamy* (New York: Rand, McNally & Company, Publishers, 1890), iv-v. Michaelis’s extension of Bellamy’s story makes Julian West a professor of 19<sup>th</sup>-century history who eventually meets the faculty member whom he replaced after his dismissal for teaching the “wrong” material. Through a series of questions and answers, similar to that between Dr. Leete and West in *Looking Backward*, this professor graphically illustrates for West Nationalism’s errors, with its centralized state, loss of individual merit and initiative, and propensity for favoritism and corruption. The story concludes with a violent scene where Dr. Leete is attacked and killed by an axe-wielding mob. See also J. W. Roberts, *Looking Within, The Misleading Tendencies of ‘Looking Backward’ Made Manifest* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1893).

shall yet have no more is palpable robbery. It is to make that man for half his time a slave, working for others without reward.”<sup>72</sup>

In response to claims that equal wages undermined the idea that individuals should be compensated relative to their productive contribution, Bellamy declared all labor social, thus making such assessments arbitrary: “All that a man produces today more than his cave-dwelling ancestor, he produces by virtue of the accumulated achievements, inventions, and improvements of the intervening generations, together with the social and industrial machinery which is their legacy.”<sup>73</sup> Since all labor builds on past labor the specific contribution of each person cannot be measured, nor can that effort be used to determine appropriate financial compensation. This aspect of Nationalism, Bellamy maintained, simply extended the tendency within industrial production to offer the same wages to workers engaged in similar occupations, though, unlike trade union agreements, Bellamy’s equal wages existed outside the purview of the profit system.<sup>74</sup> He also asserted that labor is “worth nothing in itself.” Instead, its significance lies in the process of creation and the “satisfaction which its use or contemplation may afford to others.”<sup>75</sup> Labor is thus social in multiple ways. Bellamy’s stance differentiated him from many labor activists and socialists who identified

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<sup>72</sup> Walker, “Mr. Bellamy and the New Nationalist Party,” 259.

<sup>73</sup> Bellamy quoted in Joseph Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization, 1865-1918* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 151. This is a somewhat different notion of labor as social from that asserted by Eugene Debs, who noted that industrial conditions meant that the production of wealth was no longer an individual act, but social, along with the tools of that production. All that remained was to socialize ownership. Eugene V. Debs, “Revolutionary Unionism,” Speech at Chicago, 25 November 1905, in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, Introduction by Schlesinger, Jr., 213.

<sup>74</sup> Bellamy, “What Nationalism Means,” *The Contemporary Review*, July 1890, reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Edward Bellamy, Binder No. 1, Notebook 1, February 1874, p. 31, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

opportunity with their own labor, a position rooted in economic independence, and organized around claims for the realization of the labor theory of value. But Bellamy staked his philosophy on economic interdependence, whereby cooperative and accumulated labor constitutes the source of social value.

While often called a socialist, Bellamy consistently distinguished between Nationalism and the varieties of socialist thought that populated the late-nineteenth century landscape. He deliberately chose the name Nationalism because, “socialism has become a term too broad and inclusive to serve any longer as a specific definition.”<sup>76</sup> In his introduction to the American edition of the *Fabian Essays*, Bellamy defined socialism as substituting “private management in diverse personal interests” with “public management of industry and commerce in the common interest.” Nationalists shared this goal but also asserted that “that the distribution of the cooperative product among the members of the community must be not merely equitable, whatever that term may mean, but must be always and absolutely equal,” through equal wages.<sup>77</sup> The equity advocated by those aligned with Marx’s first phase of socialism attached wages to one’s labor contribution, which would reproduce the inequalities embedded in equal economic opportunity.

According to Bellamy socialized industry, while imperative, did not guarantee economic equality, nor would it necessarily lead to Nationalism.<sup>78</sup> He advocated material equality as the precursor to abandoning economics as the organizing principle of

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<sup>76</sup> Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 24-5.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Bellamy, “Introduction to ‘The Fabian Essays,’” American Edition (1894), reprinted in *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again!*, 231-2, 237.

<sup>78</sup> Bellamy, “The Programme of the Nationalists,” *The Forum*, 85.

society. The productive capacity of industrialism eliminated the centuries-old problem of scarcity and the need for equal economic opportunity as a means to distribute resources, a shift best realized through guaranteed equal wages. As he remarked in a letter to William Dean Howells, “In the radicalness of the opinions I have expressed I may seem to out-socialize the socialists.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike many socialists, Bellamy’s argument that labor is social, and the consequent impossibility of identifying and, thus rewarding specific contributions, freed him from the constraints of the labor theory of value. Instead, one’s contribution to the community was best realized through the expression of self that economic equality would make possible, a position that more closely resembled Marx’s second stage of socialism, or communism. While Bellamy claimed not to have read Marx prior to writing *Looking Backward*, Marx’s ideas echo in the thinking that led him to Nationalism.

But according to Bellamy, neither the communist slogan, “From each according to his abilities; to each according to his needs” nor the socialist motto, “To each according to his deeds,” fully captured Nationalism’s essence, which he described as, “From each equally; to each equally.” While Bellamy conceded that the communist position “must always be the ethical standard for the individual,” he declared it too difficult to organize such a society and concluded that service to the nation and the distribution of goods must depend on fixed standards. Though Bellamy claimed that Nationalism superseded both the socialist and communist position, he more accurately occupied a middle ground. He did share the communist commitment to abandoning material possessions as markers of status and power. But he identified equal wages as the

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<sup>79</sup> Edward Bellamy to William Dean Howells, 17 June 1888, Unmarked Folder of Correspondence, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

means to do so, while Marx identified the satisfaction of varied needs which might necessitate varied income. Despite Bellamy's assurance that he recognized disparate individual needs and that equal wages simply represented the most practical method of liberating people from economics, his view appears to assume a symmetry of material desires and hints at an equivalence between equality and sameness that is absent from Marx's analysis.<sup>80</sup> Bellamy's affinity for the military as a model for social organization led him to adhere to a greater degree of regimentation than exponents of communism. Further, he rejected a class-based understanding of capital-labor relations. He did, however, acknowledge the existence of economic classes and extolled the benefits of Nationalism's classlessness.

Bellamy proclaimed that Nationalism constituted a "citizens' movement" that represented "neither men nor women, North nor South, black nor white, poor nor rich, educated nor ignorant, employers nor employed, but all equally," since all suffered under present economic and social arrangements. In this way, everyone had a stake in "breaking the meshes which entangle us" and struggling "upward to a higher, nobler, happier plane of existence." Nationalism would abolish class.<sup>81</sup> He did not aim to create a harmony that masked class differences but one, based on economic equality that eliminated them. For Bellamy, the economic equality of equal wages made Nationalism more radical and egalitarian than most socialist platforms.

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<sup>80</sup> For a provocative discussion of the relationship among symmetry, equality, difference, and complementarity see Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1990), 103-07.

<sup>81</sup> Bellamy, "Looking Forward," *The Nationalist*, December 1889, 3; and Bellamy, "Four Distinctive Principles of Nationalism," *New Nation*, 9 January 1892, 18.

To insist, as Bellamy did, that everyone receive the same income, regardless of occupation or level of productivity or need, fundamentally undermined capitalist precepts and, consequently, their expression in competitive economic opportunity. Rather than concede that economic scarcity comprised the foundation of social organization, Bellamy imagined a nation where technological innovation joined with efficient production to meet material wants, and thus liberated people from perpetual anxieties about deprivation. Nationalism would eliminate the fear of privation that accompanied the industrial economy and the wage-system, thereby freeing people to develop aspects of their personalities stifled under such conditions. In *Looking Backward* Dr. Leete commented that, "It is not our labor, but the higher and larger activities which the performance of our task will leave us free to enter upon, that are considered the main business of existence."<sup>82</sup> Thus emancipated, people could attend to the non-material, and for Bellamy more spiritual, facets of their nature and explore elements of their consciousness previously muted by an endless quest to satisfy material needs.

Bellamy's desire to establish a social organization that superseded the contradictions of the ideology of opportunity and built on a sense of humans as more than economically driven creatures sprang from his attempts to reconcile the material and spiritual and to understand his own purpose in the world. This struggle emerges in the surviving personal notebooks from his young adulthood. In addition to story fragments and plot ideas, the journals contain a series of writings on the place of the individual

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<sup>82</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 159.



within the infinite, the nature of consciousness, and the relationship between the spiritual and the material. Bellamy's certainty that humans exist as more than economic animals and that society is greater than its constituent parts prompted him to question Gilded Age economic and social arrangements that, he concluded, ignored what is finally most human. In fact, perpetual economic competition contrived to develop and reward the least human of traits. The various strands of these thoughts, which provided the philosophical foundation for Nationalism, coalesced in his essay "The Religion of Solidarity."

Written in 1874, when Bellamy was 24 years old, the article concerned the significance of an individual life within society. An 1887 note reveals that Bellamy, who struggled with ill-health, requested that the essay be read aloud to him when he was dying since, though written when a young man, it "represents the germ of what has been ever since my philosophy of life."<sup>83</sup> Bellamy began by describing the struggle within human nature—the "dual life"—between the material existence of the individual and the infinite world of the soul:

On the one hand, in the personal life, an atom, a grain of sand on a boundless shore, a bubble on a foam-flecked ocean, a life bearing a proportion to the mass of past, present and future life, so infinitesimal as to defy the imagination. . . . On the other hand is a certain other life, as it were, a spark of infinity, asserting solidarity with all things and all existence, containing the limitations of space and time and all other of the restricting conditions of personality.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, "as an individual he finds it a task exceeding his powers even to secure satisfactory material conditions for his physical life." However, "as a universal he grasps at a life infinitely larger than the one he so poorly cares for." For Bellamy, this dual life of the

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<sup>83</sup> Series IV, 45M-552H, Bellamy Papers, Houghton.

<sup>84</sup> Edward Bellamy, "The Religion of Solidarity," 6, Bellamy Papers, Houghton.

“personal and impersonal,” the “individual and universal,” helped “explain the riddle of human nature and human destiny.”<sup>85</sup> While not the first to comment on these seemingly contradictory aspects of human experience, Bellamy, unlike those who concluded that the elements of the dual life “show very little relation to each other,” strove toward reconciliation.<sup>86</sup>

For Bellamy, the individual and the universal elements of life determine relations with others and the self. To engage with existence only at the level of the universal would be dislocating and bewildering. Instead, “the instinct of personality” leads humans, “weary of exploring the universe and striving to grasp the relations of it . . . to take refuge in the bundle of mental and physical experiences which he calls himself” in an effort to grasp something solid “in the midst of an illimitable sea.”<sup>87</sup> A necessary sense of self grounds people and prevents them from drowning in the immense oceans of the earth.

However, while retreat into individual personality tempers the inherent vastness of the universal, it presents its own traumas. To consider individuals as entirely autonomous prompts a “sense of utter and unnecessary isolation” and “inexpressible loneliness.”<sup>88</sup> Life’s meaningfulness depends on its connection to something larger than itself. Otherwise, “the pettiness of our individual lives comes in sharp contrast with these stupendous and labyrinthine reaches of the soul, forming a bizarre and glaring opposition

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” in *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1940), 100.

<sup>87</sup> Bellamy, “The Religion of Solidarity,” 13-14, Bellamy Papers, Houghton.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 14.

seemingly inscrutable and oppressing us with a painful sense of mystery and self-ignorance.”<sup>89</sup> Awareness of our dual nature makes us human and our success in unifying these seemingly contradictory impulses offers relief from the anxieties wrought by searching for purpose in individual existence. Bellamy’s solution was solidarity.

Solidarity manifested itself in the propensity to connect with forces greater than the individual, either by absorbing others into ourselves or by being absorbed by others.<sup>90</sup> For Bellamy, the solidarity that arises from our dual nature contains an essential moral component, since “in the religion of solidarity is found the only rational philosophy of the moral instincts.”<sup>91</sup> Bellamy situated his philosophy in moral terms and often claimed that Nationalist economics represented an attempt to realize in practice the dictates of the Golden Rule. Like many in the late-nineteenth century, Bellamy’s moralism aimed to conciliate not only humanity’s dual nature through social solidarity, but to bridge the apparent chasm between rationalism and religion.

Self-sacrifice forms the base of this morality and when delineating Nationalism’s core characteristics, Bellamy cited unselfishness as the first and most important.<sup>92</sup> Ultimately he sought an ethical transformation of economic arrangements.<sup>93</sup> Bellamy made explicit that “not only is the Nationalist idea that the Nation should become an economic organism, but a moral organism as well.” Capitalism and most forms of

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<sup>89</sup> Bellamy, “The Dual Life,” 6-7, Bellamy Papers, Houghton.

<sup>90</sup> Bellamy, “The Religion of Solidarity,” 20, Bellamy Papers, Houghton.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>92</sup> Bellamy, “Looking Forward,” *The Nationalist*, December 1889, 1. While Bellamy’s moral foundations appear reminiscent of the seventeenth century “moral economy” associated with New England colonial settlement, Bellamy differed with his rejection of economic hierarchy, call for equal wages, and ultimate concern for individual expression.

<sup>93</sup> Tilman, “The Utopian Vision of Edward Bellamy and Thorstein Veblen,” 885.

socialism were all too materialist for Bellamy. While this moralism required an economic foundation Nationalism's "most important aspect is that of a moral movement for uplifting, enlarging and ennobling the individual life."<sup>94</sup> Bellamy observed that in a society centered on self-interest such principled values make little sense, but in the dual life, where the individual is transitory and solidarity supreme, unselfishness becomes appropriate to advance the greater good and, therefore, rational.<sup>95</sup> Further, Bellamy asserted that shared circumstances evoked "moral emotions," and that the "equalizing of human conditions will mean the broadening of human sympathy." Economic equality would promote an ethically grounded sense of solidarity.<sup>96</sup>

The essay on solidarity seemingly diminishes the place of individuals in society. But this conclusion misconstrues Bellamy's argument. While he struggled to comprehend the relationship between a single life and the universal, and to imbue that life with meaning through association with something greater than itself, he also strove to create a society that allowed for the fullest development of each individual. Nationalism, Bellamy claimed, is "necessarily, by its essential principle, committed to encouraging the utmost possible development of the individuality of every person in the nation, as the only means of getting the most and best service out of him."<sup>97</sup> This was essential for the productive efficiency on which nationalism relied. But more philosophically, Bellamy

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<sup>94</sup> Edward Bellamy to T. W. Higginson, 28 December 1890, Unmarked Folder of Correspondence, Bellamy Collection, LOC.

<sup>95</sup> Bellamy, "Religion of Solidarity," 24, Bellamy Papers, Houghton.

<sup>96</sup> Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 105. This moral world was subject to ridicule. A book reviewer in the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* commented, "It is to be a utopia where everyone shall be perfectly good, and frightfully bored." *The Daily Picayune*, 27 August 1897, p. 24, col. 6.

<sup>97</sup> Bellamy, *Talks on Nationalism*, 39.

sought to establish social and economic conditions that allowed the most complete expression of individual capabilities. For Bellamy, the realization of each person to his or her full potential, which required economic equality, would strengthen the solidarity among people. Such a society would reduce isolation and connect people more intensely to the world around them. Here the individual and society do not occupy separate spheres but depend on one another, and the full articulation of each personality will lead to greater social solidarity.

This quest for individual expression rested on equality, but not equality defined as sameness. Difference for Bellamy did not necessitate inequality. For many, varied mental and physical ability undermined any argument for economic equality. Differences should be appropriately, and differentially, compensated.<sup>98</sup> However, Bellamy proposed the equal distribution of wages not because people are the same, but precisely because they are different.<sup>99</sup> Release from economic concerns served as a necessary prerequisite for people to fully realize their distinctiveness. As Bellamy noted, if we considered individualism “the completest possible personal independence, Nationalists are the only intelligent devotees of true individualism.”<sup>100</sup> In the process of re-imagining people’s

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<sup>98</sup> “If we are not alike, if we differ in mental power and physical ability, if the results of the labor of men are different, then there is no reason why the wealth of the nation should be equally divided.” Michaelis, *Looking Further Forward*, 31-2.

<sup>99</sup> As Dr. Leete queried West, “How could your contemporaries look about them without seeing that it is always inequality which prompts the suppression of individuality by putting a premium on servile imitation of superiors?” “It is always among equals that one finds independence,” Dr. Leete answered. Bellamy, *Equality*, 391-2.

<sup>100</sup> Bellamy, “More Talk About ‘Individualism’ and Common Sense,” *New Nation*, 1 April 1893, 167. In a reported exchange between Bellamy and Henry George when asked why he did not call himself a Nationalist, George answered “because I am an individualist,” to which Bellamy replied, “I am a Nationalist *because* I am an individualist.” George feared that state ownership of the means of production, especially land, would limit individualism, while Bellamy maintained that it would help to create the material conditions necessary for individuality to flower. Quoted in Vaughan, “The Workers’ Paradise,” 122.

relationship to economics, Bellamy emancipated opportunity from its attachment to capitalist ideals, and thus bypassed the struggle with its contradictions that so constrained other reformers.

Defenders of economic competition complained that equal income would stifle creativity, spontaneity, and individual artistic expression in favor of regimentation. As one detractor wrote, “when a man’s comfort in no way depends on his intellectual exertion, the mediocrities will find still fewer spurs to prick the skin of their self-content.”<sup>101</sup> Bellamy countered by suggesting that release from a life consumed by financial insecurity would encourage the fullest expression of human imagination. So long as economic uncertainty remained the organizing principle of society, the fulfillment of the individual creativity that these critics lauded remained impossible.

This view of what motivates people to act and a desire to foster the complete expression of human consciousness marks Bellamy’s ideas as a challenge to the presumptions embedded in equal economic opportunity. He undermined the premises of equal opportunity by asserting that altered social conditions organized around economic equality would lead to the manifestation of those human attributes stifled in an environment that rewards financial victors. Human nature does not change, “only the conditions of life . . . and with them the motives of human action.”<sup>102</sup> Bellamy declared insufficient reform efforts dedicated to guaranteeing equal opportunity, which confined the state to refereeing economic struggle. To stake out such a position suggested that “we objected to men eating those they conquered in battle, not because we objected to men

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<sup>101</sup> “Recent Fiction,” *The Overland Monthly*, August 1888, 214.

<sup>102</sup> Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 79.

eating men on principle, but merely because the individual on the scrimmage line did not start fair.” In such a world, he continued, society’s obligation ends when we “give them each a club and match them according to weight, so that all will be fair play, and then let the eating go on.”<sup>103</sup>

For Bellamy, equal opportunity for economic success depended on a narrow understanding of human capabilities and exploited the least attractive of human traits. His appraisal of equal opportunity was, in some ways, most overtly elaborated in *Equality*, where Dr. Leete noted that the sustained belief in the “possibility of the wage-earner rising” is one of the “most truly diabolic feature[s] of the whole system.” Bellamy offered two core critiques of equal opportunity: the emergence of concentrated economic power limited upward mobility and, second, if the conditions for such advances improved, what would be the result? He concluded that the chance for economic improvement served to “reconcile the wage-earner or the poor man in general to his subjection.” To achieve conditions of economic opportunity successfully divided people by saying: “Be a good slave, and you, too, shall have slaves of your own.”<sup>104</sup>

In Bellamy’s view, however, “no true man should wish to rise save to raise others with him.”<sup>105</sup> True liberty, and emancipation from the strictures of competitive economic opportunity, evolved from a moral foundation, depended on economic interdependence, and demanded economic equality. For, Bellamy asked his reader: “What form of happiness, so far as it depends at all on material facts, is not bound up with economic

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<sup>103</sup> Edward Bellamy, Notebook 7; quoted in Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General-Welfare State*, 298.

<sup>104</sup> Bellamy, *Equality*, 84.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

conditions; and how shall an equal opportunity for the pursuit of happiness be guaranteed to all save by a guarantee of economic equality?”<sup>106</sup> So in lieu of a society that rewarded people for taking advantage of others, Bellamy sought to establish a material foundation for “the equal right of all to the pursuit of happiness”<sup>107</sup>—the fullest realization of the self, best achieved through social solidarity.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 17.



## CONCLUSION

The future Edward Bellamy imagined depended on abandoning economic competition as the organizing principle of society. An insistence on equal wages eliminated the need for a competitive mechanism to distribute scarce resources. Productive abundance, realized through advanced technology, would make it possible to separate labor from wages and to end economic struggle. Where an equality of income prevailed, people could focus on those aspects of their nature heretofore stifled by an endless concern with material survival. This material equality allowed him to move beyond the limits imposed by the ideology of equal economic opportunity

While Bellamy's hoped-for future superseded the ideology of equal opportunity, most late-nineteenth century social reform efforts operated within its parameters and were, consequently, constrained by its inherent contradictions. Acting concurrently as a force for progressive change and for upholding the status quo, the ideology of equal opportunity replaced inherited wealth with merit and aimed to include more people while simultaneously advocating unequal outcomes, thus accepting the principle of inequality. Animated by the increased consolidation of economic power that characterized the Gilded Age and that belied the promises and expectations of upward mobility, reformers proffered various proposals about the social conditions necessary to reinvigorate such mobility. Some identified opportunity with land ownership; some with the ownership of one's labor; and others with increased leisure and consumption. But even as these activists assailed concentrations of wealth, they were bound by the limits of the ideology of equal opportunity. While they complained about economic inequities, Booker T.

Washington, Terence Powderly, and Samuel Gompers agreed that only differential economic rewards would impel individuals to work. They thus remained committed to unequal outcomes, a commitment that impeded their capacity to upset fundamental economic arrangements. Nevertheless, they did aim to alter economic conditions by expanding those allowed to enter the arena of competition and raising questions about vast wealth disparities. Further, sometimes their actions disrupted the status quo, prompting business elites to launch their own reform efforts to regain the upper hand.

By the early twentieth century the site of opportunity was moving away from entrepreneurship and toward the corporation. This shift occurred partly in response to complaints about narrowed economic opportunity, partly in response to the changes in production that increased economic concentrations and fostered these complaints, and partly in response to the ideology of equal opportunity itself. Internal corporate advancement emerged as the new landscape on which to realize opportunity and upward mobility. This transition in the location of opportunity decoupled it from an earlier association with self-employment and economic independence.

However, the core certainty persisted that economic competition best determined the distribution of resources, goods, and services. Accordingly, a prevalent ideology about the benefits of individual economic competition was applied to corporate realities that were more and more cooperative. So, while the Gilded Age witnessed a reconstitution in the site of opportunity, a further set of tensions intensified: a corporate structure that depended on coordinated economic activity and an ideology of equal opportunity that continued to insist on the vital role of individual economic competition.

Building on late-nineteenth century protest movements and over the course of the twentieth century, views expanded about the necessary conditions for equal opportunity to exist. The list of factors deemed inappropriate for influencing the outcome of economic competition grew to include, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, and, most recently, sexual orientation. Much of this reform centered on incorporating more social groups in the potential upward mobility previously reserved for white males. However, the conflict between diminishing inequalities while emphasizing unequal outcomes endures, regardless of who is included in or excluded from the competition. There will be winners and losers.

As equal opportunity became more inclusive a parallel effort also emerged to allocate certain goods and resources on a non-competitive basis. Education, health care, a minimum income or wage, were among the goods to be so distributed, as they were considered necessary to establish the foundation for fair competition. Ideally, equal access to these resources would ensure an equitable race, which required separating their distribution from “merit.” This process removed altogether certain goods from the competitive rubric and thus challenged the inequalities inherent in the ideology of equal opportunity. Throughout the twentieth century attention turned increasingly to the state as that body dedicated to sustaining conditions that would promote “fair” competition, as well as provide those services freed from the expected inequities of equal opportunity.

To fully realize the progressive potential within the ideology of equal opportunity requires, finally, escaping its insistence on unequal outcomes. While this can be achieved most directly by a system of equal wages, such as that proposed by Edward Bellamy, we have chosen the more circuitous route of expanding the list of those social resources

distributed outside the competitive arena. A slower path toward economic equality stands as testament to the historical challenge of developing economic ideologies that correspond to productive realities. This tension is clearly revealed in the inherent contradictions within the ideology of equal opportunity and its tenacious hold on our political imagination.

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