

**From Slavery to the Cooperative
Commonwealth**

*Labor and Republican Liberty in the
Nineteenth Century*

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the modern economy. If, as William Forbath has suggested, "Gilded Age class conflict found cultural expression in a struggle to define and claim title to the republican legacy and the republican constitution,"⁸⁴ then we must approach the intellectual creativity of this period with the same willingness to identify and appreciate those moments of conceptual change that historians of political thought have brought to bear on earlier periods.

This brings us to the second important point regarding the development of modern republicanism. Recognizing that republicanism could lend support to the development of liberal ideas is not somehow a weakness or a problem for the republican revival. Instead, that recognition is a condition of possibility for understanding the kinds of questions about power, inequality, and dependence that modern capitalism raises for the interpretation and application of republican ideals to new conditions. There was an alternative possibility for thinking about free labor and wage-labor. But this possibility lay not with the petty-proprietor ideal of the individuated, property-owning citizen, so much as with the development of a labor republican defense of the cooperative organization of work. To appreciate the full force of labor republican ideas, we have first had to reconstruct the historical conditions as well as laissez-faire republican theory to which they reacted. To argue that wage-labor was servile, labor republicans had to find a way of arguing that legal self-ownership was inadequate to prevent workers from becoming subject to their employers. Equally important and novel was their proposal for universalizing republican liberty: cooperative ownership and control of productive property. We are now in a position not only to reconstruct these ideas, but to appreciate their originality and vitality.

⁸⁴ Forbath, "Ambiguities of Free Labor," 769; Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, 8.

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"The Sword of Want"

Free Labor against Wage Labor

a very numerous race of poor men;
of unfortunate human beings;
without resources of property; and, therefore, dependent,
even for their very existence, upon the pleasure,
the caprice, the tyranny, or the folly of others

Thomas Skidmore¹

On August 14, 1828, a group of workers crowded into the first floor of Commissioner's Hall, a sturdy, two story brick building in the Southwark district of Philadelphia, to listen to a speech called, "Principles of Aristocratic Legislation."² The speaker, William Heighton, was a radical cordwainer, founder of the Working Men's Party of Philadelphia, and editor of the party's journal, the *Mechanics' Free Press*, the first labor press ever published in the United States.³ In his speech, Heighton criticized the United States for living up to its revolutionary promise in political form but not economic practice:

we all acknowledge that the *foundation* of our independence was laid in the establishment, by our forefathers, of this inestimable right [of universal suffrage], and that in

¹ Thomas Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property! Being a Proposition to Make it Equal among the Adults of the Present Generation: And to Provide for its Equal Transmission to Each Individual of Each Succeeding Generation, on Arriving at the Age of Maturity* (New York: Alexander Ming, 1829), 249. Hereafter *The Rights of Man to Property!*

² William Heighton, *The Principles of Aristocratic Legislation Developed in an Address Delivered to the Working People of the District of Southwark, and Townships of Moyamensing and Passyunk* (Philadelphia: J. Coates Jr., 1828). Hereafter *The Principles of Aristocratic Legislation*.

³ For biographical information on Heighton, see Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 224–32; Philip Sheldon Foner, *William Heighton: Pioneer Labor Leader of Jacksonian Philadelphia* (New York: International Publishers, 1991); Louis H. Arky, "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76, no. 2 (April 1952), 142–76.

it we possess the *means* of ... attaining that happy state of real liberty and universal independence ... yet who will tell us, that the superstructure *itself* is yet, more than an IDEAL one? Who that is acquainted with the actual condition of society, that has visited the Plantation, the Quarry, the Workshop, the Forge and the Factory ... who, I say, that has seen these things will yet tell us, that the sacred sounds of LIBERTY and EQUALITY have any *actual* existence among us?⁴

Heighton was not alone in worrying that it was not just the slave "Plantation" but "the Workshop, the Forge and the Factory" that threatened universal independence. Heighton's Working Men's Party of Philadelphia, founded in 1827, was the first of many to crop up in the rapidly industrializing towns and cities of the late 1820s.⁵ These organizations shared a common vocabulary and were driven by a sense that the American Revolution was unfinished. As Seth Luther, an important New England labor advocate of the time, put it in an 1833 speech, "as we have adverted to Bunker Hill, we remark, in passing, that the unfinished monument is a most excellent emblem of our unfinished independence."⁶ Although free from external subjection to colonial overlords, internal forms of servitude remained even in the nominally "free" North.

One of the most radical of these early labor leaders, Thomas Skidmore, cofounder of the Workingmen's Party of New York, agreed. In his 1829 tract, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, Skidmore wrote that poor workers had become "dependent, even for their very existence, upon the pleasure, the caprice, the tyranny" of their employers. Like fellow labor leaders, Skidmore was using a familiar language of subjection and freedom, caprice and tyranny, to name a new and growing threat: the servitude of wage-laborers.

Although short-lived, these "workingmen's"⁷ organizations marked the beginning of a different kind of answer to the paradox of slavery and freedom. They thoroughly rejected the attempt to equate wage-labor with free labor on the grounds that propertyless workers remained economically dependent in various ways. Because of their efforts, the concept "wage-slavery" exploded onto the scene. Comparisons of "wages slavery" and "chattel slavery" became

⁴ William Heighton, *The Principles of Aristocratic Legislation*, 5-6.

⁵ On the history of these workingmen's parties, see Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*; Edward Pessen, "The Workingmen's Movement of the Jacksonian Era," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43, no. 3 (1956), 428-43; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 107-254; David Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830," *Labor History* IX (1968), 3-22; Arky, "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement."

⁶ Seth Luther, *An Address to the Working Men of New England, on the State of Education, and the Condition of the Producing Classes in Europe and America*, ed. George Evans (New York: The Office of the Working Man's Advocate, 1833), 26. Hereafter *An Address to the Working Men of New England*.

⁷ The terms "working men's" and "workingmen's" were used somewhat interchangeably, both at the time, and by subsequent historians.

a recurring feature of public debate.⁸ Over time, this critique of wage-slavery became the centerpiece of the labor republican tradition.

In fact, by the time the editors of the *Journal of United Labor*, the official journal of the Knights of Labor, published a short editorial decades later, on May 25, 1884, called "Wages Slavery and Chattel Slavery," that headline had become something of a convention in labor presses.⁹ It was just that title that had gotten under William Lloyd Garrison's skin during his running battles with "working men" in the pages of the *Liberator*.¹⁰ In their late nineteenth-century contribution to the genre, the Knights argued that the presence of "wages slavery" presented an old problem in a new form:

the whole process of civilization has been to emancipate human beings from the condition of slavery in which they have been held by their fellow men ... civilization has not yet reached its highest point of development, nor can it develop much further without first having abolished wages slavery, for that form of slavery stands to-day as one of the greatest barriers to the progress of civilization.¹¹

Unlike their predecessors, the Knights had the luxury of being able to position their project as the legitimate heir to mid-century abolitionism, not just the ideas of the Founding generation. The earlier Workyism suffered from being submerged under and challenged by the contest over chattel slavery. But the basic idea remained the same from the 1820s to 1880s. A republic could not tolerate wage-labor because it was a form of servitude, in which employees were subject to the "caprice" of their employers, just as colonists had been subject to the caprice of the Crown in Parliament, or slaves subject to the whim of their masters. The paradox of slavery was unresolved.

If the broad features of this argument remained constant throughout the nineteenth century, the late nineteenth-century Knights differed in important ways from the earlier Workies. A number of conceptual moves were required before the Knights could both give a full account of the wage-laborer's servitude and propose the "cooperative system" as a coherent account of free labor. If we are going to understand late nineteenth-century labor republicans as the culmination of their tradition, then we have to understand how that tradition developed. Therefore, this chapter reconstructs the radical agrarian origins of the republican critique of capitalism and the early-nineteenth-century Workies'

⁸ E.g., George Henry Evans, "Negro Slavery," *The Working Man's Advocate* III, no. 7 (October 1, 1831), 1; Heighton, *The Principles of Aristocratic Legislation*, 10. *The Working Man's Advocate*, hereafter WMA.

⁹ It appeared in a number of variations, e.g., William Heighton, "Slavery of Wages," YA 2, no. 46 (February 7, 1846), 1; West, "Wages Slavery and Chattel Slavery: To William Lloyd Garrison"; Evans, "Abolition at Home"; "Dialogue on Free and Slave Labor," WMA 1, no. 11 (June 8, 1844), 4.

¹⁰ See, e.g., William West, "Reformatory: Chattel and Wages Slavery," *The Liberator* 16, no. 38 (September 25, 1846), 152; Garrison, "Free and Slave Labor," 50.

¹¹ "Wages Slavery and Chattel Slavery," JUL V, no. 2 (1884), 702.

modification of that agrarianism. These radical agrarians and early artisans laid the groundwork for the labor republican program.

Agrarian Republicanism

The Agrarian Tradition

As far back as the English Diggers and Levellers of the seventeenth century, we can find groups of farmers and artisans seeking "to abolish all arbitrary Power" and to establish an equal republican commonwealth.¹² These attempts to provide a "constitutional foundation for a republic of small producers"¹³ coupled the argument for elected government and expanded suffrage with the material guarantee of a rough equality of control over property. In conditions of material equality, no citizen would be dependent on any other and no class could dominate. Perhaps the best known early modern expression of this idea is James Harrington's statement in *Oceana* that: "An equal commonwealth ... is a government established upon an equal Agrarian."¹⁴ An "equal Agrarian" was a law distributing property relatively equally among citizens by taking special aim at primogeniture – "a flinty custom."¹⁵ By eliminating primogeniture, large landed estates would be gradually broken up, ensuring a relatively equal distribution among all descendants, and freeing up land for those who did not have enough. Small-scale producers were free so long as they possessed enough property to remain independent from the state or the wealthy. They controlled their own labor and met their needs through the proceeds of that labor.

This radical agrarianism crossed the Atlantic, mainly through the argument that inheritance law should guarantee a relatively equal distribution of landed property. Thomas Jefferson, in his earlier, more radical phase, had famously declared that abolishing laws of primogeniture and entail in Virginia laid the foundation

¹² Several Hands, "An Agreement of the People for a Firm and Present Peace upon Grounds of Common Right and Freedom," in *The English Levellers*, ed. Andrew Sharp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 92–101. Arbitrating the complexities of the Diggers' and Levellers' views of property is well beyond the scope of this book. But see the excellent John Gurney, *Gerrard Winstanley: The Digger's Life and Legacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

¹³ Ronald Schultz, "The Small-Producer Tradition and the Moral Origins of Artisan Radicalism in Philadelphia 1720–1810," *Past & Present* no. 127 (May 1990), 92. For a more extended discussion see Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 3–35.

¹⁴ James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana and a System of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 34. For competing views of Harrington, republicanism, and property, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 423–61; Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*, 87–126; John F. H. New, "Harrington, a Realist?," *Past & Present* 24 (1963), 75–81; John F. H. New, "The Meaning of Harrington's Agrarian," *Past & Present* 25 (1963), 94–95; C. B. Macpherson, "Harrington as Realist: A Rejoinder," *Past & Present* 24 (April 1963), 82–85. On Harrington's influence on later agrarianism, see Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman*, 22–55; Adair, *The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*, 79.

¹⁵ New, "The Meaning of Harrington's Agrarian," 94.

by which every fibre would be eradicated of antient [sic] or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican. The repeal of the laws of entail would prevent the accumulation and perpetuation of wealth in select families ... the abolition of primogeniture, and equal partition of inheritances removed the feudal and unnatural distinctions which made one member of every family rich, and all the rest poor, substituting equal partition, the best of all Agrarian laws.¹⁶

Many of Jefferson's contemporaries agreed with this agrarian vision. A 1784 North Carolina law revising colonial inheritance law pronounced that "it will tend to promote that equality of property which is of the spirit and principle of a genuine republic, that the real estates of persons dying intestate should undergo a more general and equal distribution than has hitherto prevailed in this state." A similar Delaware statute from 1794 stated "it is the duty and policy of every republican government to preserve equality amongst its citizens, by maintaining the balance of property as far as it is consistent with the rights of individuals."¹⁷ Characteristically, Thomas Paine carried the thought further than his contemporaries. In his final pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice*, published in 1797, he argued that, "despotic government supports itself by abject civilization.... Such governments ... politically depend more upon breaking the spirit of the people by poverty, than they fear enraging it by desperation."¹⁸ Although in *Rights of Man* Paine had already argued that a true republic would abolish "the unjust and unnatural law of primogeniture,"¹⁹ *Agrarian Justice* took the more radical step of arguing for, among other things, capital grants to all citizens upon reaching maturity to help finance the purchase of land or tools.

If Paine's argument for active redistribution was a bridge too far for many of his contemporaries, who were content to attack feudal inheritance law, it resonated with the conventions of the many small farmers and petty producers of early America. The "homestead ethic,"²⁰ which linked land ownership to the elimination of dependence on wealthy landlords and creditors, not only spurred the participation of small farmers and artisans in the American Revolution, but also inspired the various "Regulations" and tax revolts of the late eighteenth

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson, "Autobiography," in *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1–101, 44.

¹⁷ Stanley N. Katz, "Republicanism and the Law of Inheritance in the American Revolutionary Era," *Michigan Law Review* 76, no. 1 (November 1977), 1–29, 14.

¹⁸ Thomas Paine, "Agrarian Justice," in *Thomas Paine: Common Sense and Other Writings*, ed. Joyce Appleby (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 323–45, 343.

¹⁹ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (New York: Citadel Press, 1991), 245. On Paine and the first generation of republican critics of economic exploitation, see Gregory Claeys, "The Origins of the Rights of Labor: Republicanism, Commerce, and the Construction of Modern Social Theory in Britain, 1796–1805," *The Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 2 (June 1994), 249–90.

²⁰ Robert Maxwell Brown, "Back Country Rebellions and the Homestead Ethic in America, 1749–1799," in *Tradition, Conflict, and Modernization: Perspectives on the American Revolution*, ed. Richard Maxwell Brown and Don Fehrenbacher (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 73–99.

century.²¹ These revolts marked the pivotal moment in which a small producer tradition became an active ideology.²² It served as the basis of political action by those small producers now seeking to put inherited meanings to use amidst increasing commercialization of agriculture, expansion of federal debt, and incipient industrialization. Their ideology developed into a republican critique of capitalism in general and wage-labor in particular.

The Early Republican Critique of Economic Dependence

The American Revolution politicized a class of farmers and artisans who interpreted its republican ideals to include the promise of political and economic independence. As historian Leon Fink observes, "the revolutionary mobilization itself added to the ranks of those who felt a direct stake not only in the infant nation's political freedoms but also in the protection, if not extension, of control over one's own property and one's own labor."²³ By the end of the war, these small producers saw themselves as authoritative interpreters of revolutionary republicanism and pushed these ideas beyond where their originators had intended. In 1783, for instance, one "Brother Mechanick" wrote a message in the *Independent Gazetteer* "to the MECHANICKS of PHILADELPHIA" in which he warned that both of the city's political parties "consider you as a useless set of beings, who ought to be fed with 'butter-milk and potatoes,' while the darling objects of their attention and pursuit, are 'the flesh pots and onions.'" Better, he said, to "establish a Society of Mechanics" for the advancement of their interests.²⁴ After Paine's *The Rights of Man* exploded onto the American scene in 1791, there was a marked increase in this kind of "plebeian" appropriation of republican ideas. As Seth Cotlar shows in his remarkable study of this

democratic moment, radical editors such as Robert Coram, Thomas Lloyd, and Benjamin Franklin Bache, along with anonymous readers of and contributors to the new popular press, began making novel arguments against the unequal distribution of property. They argued that the government should "make disappear the great inequalities of fortune" and that "in such a republic as this, men should by every fair means be legally prevented from becoming exorbitantly rich."²⁵ In the name of keeping the republic consistent with "agrarian principles," some proposed selling public lands cheaply to all settlers, with maximum allowable landholdings.²⁶

These thoughts persisted through the end of the century. In 1797, William Manning, a self-educated farmer and former revolutionary soldier from Massachusetts, wrote that "the few" use their superior wealth, especially control over money and credit, to keep "the many" in "a state of dependance on the few."²⁷ Manning's two essays, the first an attack on Hamilton's credit proposal and the second, the *Key of Liberty*, a longer, more general statement of republican theory addressed to "farmers, mechanicks, & labourers,"²⁸ made the same basic political point.²⁹ The few "are ever hankering & striving after Monerca and Aristocracy" because they live off the dependent labor of the "many." The many, on the other hand, constantly strive for economic independence, putting them in direct conflict with the few.

Like "Brother Mechanick" in Philadelphia, Manning not only worried that the new aristocracy of wealth used its control over credit and land to keep laborers in a "state of dependence," he also felt that the mechanics and petty producers should organize themselves into a "Society of Labourers"³⁰ to influence economic policy and change the distribution of wealth. Manning's fellow Massachusetts radical, David Brown, an itinerant laborer jailed in 1798 for "seditious" writings and public speeches against the John Adams' Federalist

²¹ Richard L. Bushman, "Massachusetts Farmers and the Revolution," in *Society, Freedom, and Conscience: The American Revolution in Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York*, ed. Richard M. Jellison (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1976), 77-124; Joseph A. Ernst, "Shays's Rebellion in Long Perspective: the Merchants and the 'Money Question,'" in *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion*, ed. Robert A. Gross (The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1993), 57-80; W. J. Rorabaugh, "'I Thought I Shall Liberate Myself From the Thralldom of Others': Apprentices, Masters, and the Revolution," in *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 185-217; Alan Taylor, "Agrarian Independence: Northern Land Rioters After the Revolution," in *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), 221-45.

²² Schultz, "The Small-Producer Tradition and the Moral Origins of Artisan Radicalism in Philadelphia 1720-1810."

²³ Fink, "From Autonomy to Abundance," 119. On revolutionary popular mobilization, see Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, 257-343; Larry Kramer, *The People Themselves: Popular Constitutionalism and Judicial Review* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73-144; Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America: the Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 13-48.

²⁴ A Brother Mechanick, "To the MECHANICKS of PHILADELPHIA," *THE INDEPENDENT GAZETTEER; or the CHRONICLE of FREEDOM*, October 11, 1783.

²⁵ Quoted in Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America*, 130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁷ William Manning, "The Key of Liberty," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1956), 219.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁹ For the credit proposal, see Manning's William Manning, "Some Proposals for Making Restitution to the Original Creditors of Government," *William & Mary Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1989), 320-31. The cited edition of Manning's *Key of Liberty* is 1798 but he wrote the first draft in 1797. On Manning, see Ruth Bogin, "Petitioning and the New Moral Economy of Post-Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (July 1988), 392-425; Michael Merrill and Sean Wilentz, "William Manning and the Invention of American Politics," in *The Key of Liberty: the Life and Writings of William Manning, "A Laborer," 1747-1814*, eds. Michael Merrill and Sean Wilentz (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-86. For a rejection of Manning as a critic of early capitalism, see Gordon Wood, "The Enemy Is Us: Democratic Capitalism in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 293-308. For my contrasting view, see Alex Gourevitch, "William Manning and the Political Theory of the Dependent Classes," *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 2 (2012), 331-60.

³⁰ Manning, "The Key of Liberty," 248.

administration, made clear the connection between economic inequality and republican liberty: "[F]ive hundred out of the union of five million receive all the benefit of public property and live upon the ruins of the rest of the community. Yet we ... sit still and see our fellow Citizens coming into a state of abject slavery."³¹ Here we see the republican language of servitude self-consciously mobilized against a new aristocracy of wealth. These turn of the century writings are the product of small producers and democratic editors seizing on the revolutionary republicanism of their "fathers."³² They took the early agrarian arguments directed at inheritance law and broadened them into a general critique of economic dependence.

If these were the basic features of the late eighteenth-century republican critique of capitalism, the theory was still significantly underdeveloped.³³ To be sure, there were a few inklings of how wage-laborers might pick up on these ideas. For instance, when a group of striking journeymen shoemakers were arrested and tried in 1805–1806, one of their defenders, William Duane, condemned the way a "breed of *white slaves* may be nursed up in poverty to take the place of the *blacks* upon their emancipation." In an address to the public, the shoemakers said, "the name of freedom is but a shadow ... if for doing what ... the laws of our country authorize, we are to have taskmasters to measure out our pittance of subsistence."³⁴ After their conviction, Duane said the shoemakers should tell their employers "you are entitled to independence as well as themselves."³⁵

Despite these intimations of the future, the early republican critique of inequality remained agrarian in nature. In fact, "agrarianism" was the allegation most frequently leveled at these republican radicals by their opponents.³⁶ Early republicanism mainly operated with a pre-modern conception of class – mainly based on "orders" and "professions" – rather than with the modern distinction between "propertied" and "propertyless."³⁷ "The few" were identified

³¹ David Brown, "Seditious Writings," in *The Faith of Our Fathers: An Anthology Expressing the Aspirations of the American Common Man 1790–1860*, ed. Irving Mark and Eugene L. Schwab (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 44; Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America*, 30–31; Geoffrey R. Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime From the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004), 64.

³² Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America*, 13–48.

³³ See Claeys and Cotlar's important work Claeys, "The Origins of the Rights of Labor: Republicanism, Commerce, and the Construction of Modern Social Theory in Britain, 1796–1805"; Gregory Claeys, "Introduction," in *The Politics of English Jacobinism: Writings of John Thelwall*, ed. Gregory Claeys (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), xiii–lviii; Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America*, 115–60.

³⁴ Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 160–61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁶ On the use of the term "agrarian" in this period, see A. E. Bestor Jr., "The Evolution of the Socialist Vocabulary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (1948), 259–302.

³⁷ Martin J. Burke, *The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 32.

as holders of credit and monopolizers of land. Small producers never singled out wage-labor for special criticism, as it was collapsed together with the dependence of the heavily indebted small farmer or the economically precarious artisan. Furthermore, the discussion of economic dependence was often overshadowed by the early-nineteenth-century battles over property requirements for suffrage. As one set of Virginia suffragists put it: "We have been taught by our fathers, that all power is vested in, and derived from, the people; not the freeholders: that the majority of the community, in whom abides the physical force, have also the political right of creating and remoulding at will their civil institutions."³⁸ Alongside the problem of chattel slavery, the republican aim of eliminating *political* dependence still weighed on public debate. As states eliminated these property requirements in the early nineteenth century, attention focused on economic questions, and especially on conditions in the rapidly industrializing towns and cities.

Wage-Labor and The Workingmen's Parties

Political and Social Background

By the 1820s, the United States was beginning to transform into a different country from its agrarian capitalist origins. When, in 1782, Jefferson penned his famous quip "let our workshops remain in Europe,"³⁹ there was one large-scale use of the spinning jenny, that famous technology of the early industrial revolution. Three decades later, there were eighty-seven.⁴⁰ By 1816, Jefferson himself was compelled to exclaim, "within the thirty years which have since elapsed, how are circumstances changed!"⁴¹ He even reversed his earlier proclamations, "experience has taught me that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort."⁴² Just a year prior, Francis Lowell had founded the first modern American factory in Waltham, Massachusetts and the organization of textile manufacturing under one roof quickly spread throughout New England.⁴³ By the 1820s, the transformation of male artisans, women, and children into wage-laborers was sufficiently pronounced that, "the urban working classes comprised recognizable and self-conscious elements of urban society."⁴⁴

³⁸ Irving Mark and Eugene L. Schwab, eds., "The Memorial of the Non-Freeholders of Richmond, Virginian [1829]," in *The Faith of Our Fathers: An Anthology Expressing the Aspirations of the American Common Man 1790–1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 22.

³⁹ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 158.

⁴⁰ Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City," 18.

⁴¹ Thomas Jefferson, "To Benjamin Austin, January 9, 1816," in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1370.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1371.

⁴³ Philip Sheldon Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Volume 1: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor* (New York: International Publishers, 1982), 54.

⁴⁴ Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City," 7.

Beyond the emergence of permanent wage-labor, two additional developments contributed to the rise of a republican critique of industrial capitalism. One, the Panic of 1819, was the first recession to affect the national economy as a whole. It raised questions about the desirability of this newly emerging social order, especially by illuminating inequalities that until then had been associated with despotic Europe. At one end, there was severe urban poverty and homelessness: "In Philadelphia three out of four workers were reported idle, and 1808 were jailed for unpaid debts."⁴⁵ At the other end, there was a dramatic increase in wealth: "According to the best estimates, the share of national wealth held by the richest 10 percent jumped, mainly after 1820, from the 49.6 percent of 1774 to reach 73 percent by 1860."⁴⁶ After the Panic subsided, another decade of dramatic industrial growth marked by periodic crises drove critics to make the comparison with Europe explicit, "American Citizens! Will you longer submit to worse tyranny than the enslaved brethren in the 'old world'?"⁴⁷

The second development was the decision to eliminate nearly all property requirements for suffrage. In these state constitutional conventions,⁴⁸ those opposed to eliminating property requirements had expressed the familiar Madisonian worry that workers would use their political liberty to expropriate owners. As General Rensselaer, a major figure in New York politics, put it during the suffrage debates at the 1821 New York state constitutional convention, "the property of the rich has always been, and always will be, an object of desire on the part of the poor, and whenever they possess the power they will gratify their desires by its distribution."⁴⁹ Figures such as Rensselaer also worried that, because workers were dependent on their employers, they would be an extension of that person's will, thereby undermining the political equality required for a free republic. A man "constantly and uniformly dependant [sic] for his subsistence on the owner of the establishment, soon loses [sic] all independence of mind, and yields himself to the views, the wishes, and desires of the individual from whom he receives his bread."⁵⁰ The suffragists rejected these concerns as alarmist and countered that a republic was based on the political independence of citizens, not property: "Our community is an association of persons-of human beings-not a partnership founded on property."⁵¹

⁴⁵ Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, Volume 1, 137.

⁴⁶ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 238.

⁴⁷ Luther, *An Address to the Working Men of New England*, 21.

⁴⁸ Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 26-52.

⁴⁹ See the objection to eliminating suffrage by General Rensselaer in Nathaniel H. Carter, William L. Stone, and Marcus T. C. Gould, *Reports of the Proceedings and Debates of the New York Constitutional Convention 1821* (Albany: E. and E. Hosford, 1821), 360-63.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵¹ See the remark by Mr. Buel, *ibid.*, 243.

What neither side expected was the emergence of a group of self-organized mechanics and wage-laborers that *accepted* the anti-suffrage argument that they were dependent, but sought to overcome it through public policy. Seizing on their newly won political liberty,⁵² and responding to a form of economic dependence that emerged from within a market society itself, poor artisans and wage-laborers organized themselves into the workingmen's parties of the late 1820s and early 1830s. The leading figures of these parties produced the first sustained republican engagement with the problem of wage-labor that went beyond either relegating wage-laborers to a class of political dependents or arguing for their enfranchisement *despite* their economic dependence.

Dependency and "the Force of Necessitous Circumstances"

The Workingmen's Parties, like all social movements, appealed to a number of different intellectual traditions, including natural rights and native Christian Socialism.⁵³ But the republican trope of slavery and dependence ran like a red thread through their arguments against the developing market in "free" labor. For instance, in his 1827 address to "working classes generally," William Heighton intoned that for "the working classes ... the system of profit is ... an iron chain of bondage. A system of unjust abstraction, oppression, and legal fraud, by which the most useful classes of society are drained of their wealth, and consigned over to eternal toil and never-ending slavery."⁵⁴ In a speech given to workingmen from across New England, another labor advocate, Seth Luther, denounced the "tens of thousands under the tyrannical government of the mills."⁵⁵ "Cotton mills are called 'Republican Institutions,'" Luther continued, yet they are defined by "one sided and arbitrary rule. The hands are compelled to work ... [and] are liable to be discharged at any moment."⁵⁶ Luther dubbed these workshops "Slave Mills"⁵⁷ that, as another New Englander put it, housed "the white slaves of the North."⁵⁸ Such statements were more than mere emotional appeals, opportunistically appropriating the condition of Black slavery for rhetorical effect. For these reformers, there was a real equivalence, not just analogy, between chattel slavery and wage-labor because both forms of labor denied workers full economic independence. Yet if these workingmen wanted to argue that the wage-laborer was dependent, and thus that the industrial system compromised their republican liberty, they knew that wage-labor

⁵² A few states, such as Pennsylvania, had eliminated property requirements earlier than the rest, but most did so only in the early nineteenth century. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 26-52.

⁵³ Subheading quotation from Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property*!, 288. On Christian Socialism, see for instance, Cornelius C. Blatchly, *Some Causes of Popular Poverty*, 1818.

⁵⁴ Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally*, 10.

⁵⁵ Luther, *An Address to the Working Men of New England*, 22.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵⁸ Fisk, *Capital against Labor*, 9.

was different from chattel slavery. They needed new tools of social analysis and criticism that could give an account of how a wage-laborer, though making a contract, was still subject to another's will.

The individuals who went on to develop the argument were an unusual group.⁵⁹ One of these intellectual lights was Philadelphia native, Langdon Byllesby, a printer and journeyman proofreader,⁶⁰ whose 1826 *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth* was the first full-length treatise written for and directed to workingmen.⁶¹ Other Philadelphians included the aforementioned William Heighton and his fellow party-member Stephen Simpson. Simpson was a banker-cum-labor reformer, eventual congressional candidate on the Philadelphia Working Men's ticket, and author of *A Working Man's Manual: A New Theory of Political Economy* (1831), the most systematic of the various treatises of the period.⁶² In New York, Thomas Skidmore's *The Rights of Man to Property!* (1829) was a similarly lengthy, if more radical, attempt to criticize the new aristocracy of wealth. Skidmore was the son of Connecticut farmers, an itinerant mechanic and inventor.⁶³ Along with George Henry Evans, Skidmore also cofounded the Workingmen's Party of New York and its magazine, the *Working Man's Advocate*. The *Working Man's Advocate* (New York) and *Mechanics' Free Press* (Philadelphia) were the most important labor presses of the time, transmitting the ideas of these early artisan republicans to their readership.

Mostly self-taught and drawing on wide-ranging sources of inspiration, this group settled on a consistent analysis of wage-labor. They started by identifying slavery with a specific kind of dependence: being economically vulnerable to compulsion to labor. As Byllesby put it, "the very essence of slavery is in being compelled to labour, while the proceeds of that labour is taken and enjoyed by another."⁶⁴ Although it might seem like a straightforward definition, this way of defining the "essence" of slavery had a specific conceptual purpose. It left

⁵⁹ See Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*. For historical background on the parties, see Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830"; Arky, "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement"; Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*; Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850*; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; David Anthony Harris, *Socialist Origins in the United States. American Forerunners of Marx, 1817-1832* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp., 1966).

⁶⁰ Not much is known about Byllesby's life. For accounts, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 164-7; Harris, *Socialist Origins in the United States*, 34-53.

⁶¹ For the intellectual prehistory of these works, see Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*; Harris, *Socialist Origins in the United States*, 1-33.

⁶² Edward Pessen, "The Ideology of Stephen Simpson, Upperclass Champion of the Early Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement," *Pennsylvania History* 22, no. 4 (October 1955), 328-40.

⁶³ Mark Lause's annotated edition of a biography written by one of Skidmore's contemporaries, Amos Gilbert, is still the best. Amos Gilbert, *The Life of Thomas Skidmore* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1984). Other good sources are Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 182-88; Edward Pessen, "Thomas Skidmore, Agrarian Reformer in the Early American Labor Movement," *New York History* 35, no. 3 (1954), 280-96.

⁶⁴ Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 33.

open the possibility that there were multiple ways in which a "slave" could be compelled to labor for another. The legal subjection of the chattel slave as the master's physical property was but one form that dependence could take. It was the original, but not the sole, defining form of dependence. Moreover, the artisans used their definition of slavery as a way of describing a concrete social relation that defines a wider political economy of production and exchange. Slavery, here, is not any old condition of unequal dependence, but one that has a particular social function and purpose for the employer and his society: the production and accumulation of wealth. This way of defining slavery was not a departure from republican thinking so much as a deepening of the analytics of compulsion, dependence, and law. This analysis would have staying power. Recall from the beginning of this chapter that, fifty years later, the Knights of Labor understood servitude in nearly the same terms: "[W]hen a man is placed in a position where he is compelled to give the benefit of his labor to another, he is in a condition of slavery."⁶⁵

Defining slavery as "being compelled to labour, while the proceeds of that labour is taken" opened the conceptual space to assert the moral priority of republican liberty over and against the prevailing defense of property rights. Thomas Skidmore argued that property owners

have no just right to use [property] in such a manner, as to extract from others, the result of their labors, for the purpose of exempting themselves from the necessity of laboring as much as others must labor.... The moment that any possessor of property, makes such use of it, I care not how, nor under the sanction of what law, or system of laws, as to live in idleness, partial or total, thus supporting himself, more or less, on the labors of others; that moment he contravenes and invades the rights of others; and has placed himself in the condition which would justify the party injured, in dispossessing the aggressor, of the instrument of his aggression.⁶⁶

Skidmore's extraordinary thesis was that *even if* all existing property rights had their origin in perfectly just acts of acquisition and exchange, they would be illegitimate if they produce a distribution of property that made some economically dependent on others. Of course Skidmore and others were quick to note that the history of property was *not* a sequence of perfectly just acts of acquisition and exchange. They extended a tradition, begun some decades earlier by radicals such as Robert Coram and Thomas Lloyd, of rejecting Blackstone's injunction not to look too carefully into the historical origins of actually existing property rights.⁶⁷ It turned out actual history was a series of violent, unjust expropriations, now reproduced and given sanction in law.⁶⁸ The purpose of

⁶⁵ Unsigned, "Wages Slavery and Chattel Slavery," 702.

⁶⁶ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 4-5.

⁶⁷ See Cotlar's fascinating reconstruction of this important moment, Cotlar, *Tom Paine's America*, 115-26.

⁶⁸ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 1-76; Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 14-41.

the workingmen's theory of slavery and their history of property rights was to identify the liberty of the citizen as prior to and defining of the legitimacy of property rights. The independence of each citizen was a constraint on the accumulation of property and property rights derived their legitimacy from the inalienability of each person's independence.

This critique of property rights was more than a general moral claim. It was a piece of social analysis aimed at refuting the argument that a wage-laborer was free. As we saw in the previous chapter, this argument was already a significant feature of antebellum political discourse, especially among abolitionists. These workingmen intellectuals observed that the institution of property could produce dependence even where chattel slavery did not exist. Specifically, the legal protection of the unequal ownership of property was the means by which wage-laborers were made dependent upon employers. Although wage-laborers were formally self-owning, unequal ownership of the "means of employment"⁶⁹ meant they had no reasonable alternative to selling their labor. Stephen Simpson, for instance, lamented the condition of the "mere operative, who lives from hand to mouth, and who must sell, because he must eat."⁷⁰ The basic compulsion here was not the lash of the master but the spur of economic necessity. As Skidmore put it in a message to New York workingmen,

thousands of our people of the present day in deep distress and poverty, dependent for their daily subsistence upon a few among us whom the unnatural operation of our own free and republican institutions, as we are pleased to call them, has thus arbitrarily and barbarously made enormously rich.⁷¹

In a slightly more philosophical vein, Heighton drew the same connection between economic need and compulsion:

Necessity compels us to work for such prices as are offered, and pay such prices as are demanded for every thing we need; we must either do this-resort to fraud or theft, or perish by hunger and nakedness.⁷²

Inequality in the ownership of property made "operatives" or the "working classes" dependent on employers for jobs and therefore livelihoods. This dependence had its source in a particular kind of compulsion: the compulsion

⁶⁹ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 240.

⁷⁰ Stephen Simpson, *The Working Man's Manual: A New Theory of Political Economy, on the Principle of Production the Source of Wealth* (Philadelphia: Thomas L. Bonsal, 1831), 70. Hereafter *The Working Man's Manual*.

⁷¹ Thomas Skidmore, "Working Men's Meeting: Report of the Committee of Fifty," ed. George Henry Evans, WMA (New York, October 31, 1829), 1.

⁷² William Heighton, *An Address Delivered before the Mechanics and Working Classes Generally, of the City and County of Philadelphia. At the Universalist Church, in Callowhill Street, on Wednesday Evening, November 21, 1827, by the "Unlettered Mechanic"* (Philadelphia: The Office of the Mechanics Gazette, 1828), 8-9. Hereafter *An Address Delivered before the Mechanics and Working Classes Generally*.

not of direct legal coercion to work for a master, like the chattel slave, but the compulsion of economic need or "necessitous circumstances."⁷³ As Skidmore summarized the view:

if you dispossess them of their equal right, you place them in circumstances of dependence, such that others, who, thereby, will have, of course, more than they are entitled to, will exercise over them the means of reducing them to slavery.⁷⁴

Economic need compelled them to labor for others and those employers received most of the benefits of that labor. The inability of workers to accumulate property kept workers dependent on employers. They were, thereby, slaves in the republican sense. They lived at the mercy of another: "He who can feed me, or starve me; give me employment, or bid me wander about in idleness; is my master; and it is the utmost folly for me to boast of being any thing but a slave."⁷⁵

The challenge of applying inherited republican ideas to new realities was most vivid in the attempt to formulate a political program. In 1829, Thomas Skidmore headed a Committee of Fifty, whose purpose was to write a report and draft the platform for the newly created New York Workingmen's Party. The final report, published in the first issue of the *Working Man's Advocate*, reproduced almost word for word Skidmore's critique of wage-labor in *The Rights of Man To Property!*:

For he, in all countries is a slave, who must work more for another than that other must work for him. It does not matter how this state of things is brought about; whether the sword of victory hew down the liberty of the captive, and thus compel him to labor for his conqueror, or whether the sword of want extort our consent, as it were, to a voluntary slavery, through a denial to us of the materials of nature.⁷⁶

"Sword of want," "compel him to labor," and "voluntary slavery," were turns of phrase whose purpose was both to establish the continuity with earlier, agrarian critiques of dependence and to mark the difference in social circumstances. The wage-laborer was neither chattel slave nor debtor-farmer;⁷⁷ he was dependent on more than a particular master or creditor. And to the degree he was dependent on a particular employer or creditor, this was attributed to a general economic dependence. He was dependent simply in virtue of his legally enforced propertylessness, a dependence of which employers regularly took advantage. In this political economy, the protection of property rights subverted rather than guaranteed the independence of citizens.

⁷³ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 288.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 388.

⁷⁶ Skidmore, "Working Men's Meeting: Report of the Committee of Fifty," 1.

⁷⁷ However, it must be noted that debtors' prisons and punitive debt collection were a major concern for poor workers. Two recurring demands were abolition of debtors' prison and a "mechanics lien law." "Imprisonment for Debt," WMA, March 6, 1830, 3.

The Labor Theory of Value

Two further features of this early republican critique of wage-labor mark its difference from earlier agrarianism. First we have to recall that their thinking about slavery revolved not only around the fact that the wage-labor was compelled to work for others but that "the proceeds of that labour is taken and enjoyed by another."⁷⁸ In the classic case of the chattel slave, this exploitative element was evident because the slave had no formal legal claim to receiving anything in return for his labor. But these artisan republicans were well aware that wage-laborers *did* get compensated. Furthermore, they knew that the argument defending wage-labor as free labor hinged on the belief that, as one 1836 employers' association put it, "labour, like every other commodity, will seek its own level, and its own true value, in an open and unfettered market."⁷⁹ There was, on this alternate view, no measure of the value of that labor-commodity independent of the one agreed to by the commodity's owner. Its value was in some sense arbitrarily defined by the subjective appraisals of the two contracting parties. As we saw previous chapter, laissez-faire republicans thought that to assert a quasi-objective basis for value, which one might use to criticize the labor contract, would contravene the will of the laborer, thus compromising his independence. Earning wages just *was* the mark of freedom, and as such, the market wage expressed the true value of that labor. Realized value was real value. This position presented workingmen with a theoretical challenge. If the labor market compensated workers for their labor, and they consented to that compensation, it was harder to argue they were nonetheless unfree. They, not masters, determined the value of their labor. These workingmen had to give some account of how the wage-laborer was not only economically dependent but in fact exploited – that they were, in fact, compelled to labor for others in a way that allowed those others to benefit from that compulsion.

Heighon, Skidmore, and company found the tools they needed in the new science of political economy, especially in the labor theory of value. Although a labor theory of *property* had been around for centuries, in canonical figures such as John Locke and as part of a moral common sense,⁸⁰ the labor theory of value was newer. The basic premise was that the value of all objects could be measured by the one thing they had in common, they were products of labor. Labor was measured by time, or by the number of man-hours it took to produce the object. Benjamin Franklin appears to have been the first to make it part of American conversations, especially, and not surprisingly, in the early manufacturing city of Philadelphia.⁸¹ But it was Smith and Ricardo

⁷⁸ Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 33.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Autumn 1984), 11. Also Garrison, "Free and Slave Labor."

⁸⁰ Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 25–26. Also Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism."

⁸¹ Franklin is credited as one of the first ever to have discussed the labor theory of value: "By Labour may the Value of Silver be measured as well as all other Things." Benjamin Franklin,

who were the first to fully develop the labor theory of value into a theory of political economy. Their ideas, as interpreted by the so-called British Ricardian Socialists, especially William Thompson and John Gray,⁸² blended effortlessly with early republican concerns to produce a "scientific" critique of the labor contract. The basic thought was that only labor creates value. If a fair contract was defined as a free exchange of equivalents, it was possible to evaluate independently whether there had been real equivalence, and thus truly free exchange. If a worker received a lower wage than the value he created, the employer unfairly acquired the "proceeds" or value of that worker's labor. As Heighon put it,

ALL WEALTH is the PRODUCT of HUMAN LABOUR: he therefore, who accumulates in a given time more than can be produced in an equal time, must accumulate that which has been produced by others, and for which he cannot have received an equivalent from him.⁸³

If, for instance, a worker spent twelve hours working, but received wages that could only buy goods that it takes four hours to produce, then the worker was giving up the products of an extra eight hours of labor for nothing. Byllesby summarized the view, "there can be no natural or moral justice in a system that takes from one man the products of two days' labour, and gives him in compensation of only day of another, when the ability ... of those men are equal ... yet ... this fact is the whole of the present mode of the arts of life."⁸⁴ Insofar as nearly every actual wage contract took this exploitative form, there was reason to believe the worker was not, in fact, free despite giving his consent to the contract's terms.

"A Modest Enquiry Into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency," in *The Works of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. 1 Autobiography, Letters and Misc. Writings 1725–1734*, ed. John Bigelow (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904). Franklin's essay was significant enough that Karl Marx said "one of the first economists ... to have seen through the nature of value, [was] the famous Franklin." Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990). On Franklin in Philadelphia, see Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 25.

⁸² On the Ricardian Socialists, see Esther Lowenthal, "The Ricardian Socialists," *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law* XLVI, no. 1 (1911), 5–105; Anton Menger, *The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour*, ed. H. S. Foxwell, trans. M. E. Tanner (London: Macmillan and Co., 1899); J. E. King, "Utopian or Scientific? A Reconsideration of the Ricardian Socialists," *History of Political Economy* 15, no. 3 (1983), 345–73. See especially H. S. Foxwell's extensive introduction to Menger, which served as the basis and inspiration for Lowenthal's more detailed account of the Ricardian Socialists. H. S. Foxwell, "Introduction," in *The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour*, ed. H. S. Foxwell (New York: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1899), v–cx. On Lowenthal's account, the Ricardian Socialists – so called because of the way they used Ricardo's labor theory of value to develop a set of scientific arguments parallel to the moral arguments for Socialism – consist primarily of William Thompson, John Gray, Thomas Hodgskin, and John Francis Bray. The label "Ricardian Socialist" remains disputed, especially because someone like Thomas Hodgskin was not a socialist. However, its use here introduces no major confusions into our narrative because only Thompson and Gray play a role.

⁸³ William Heighon, *The Principles of Aristocratic Legislation*, 3. Although many were a bit fuzzy about distinguishing between value and wealth, they all gravitated toward an interpretation that identified value with labor time.

⁸⁴ Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 42.

Whether early workingmen arrived at this thought independently, as Byllesby claimed,⁸⁵ or embraced it after reading Thompson and Gray, as Heighton claimed,⁸⁶ is of less moment than that they all immediately saw the ideological value of this new political economy. It gave them a response to opponents like the aforementioned employer's association that argued labor should "seek its own level, and its own true value, in an open and unfettered market." When Heighton quoted Thompson and Gray in his own speeches⁸⁷ or excerpted them in the *Mechanics' Free Press*, and when Byllesby and Skidmore referred to them in their writings,⁸⁸ it was because these early labor theorists' analysis of wage-labor revealed the underlying inequality and exploitation of otherwise formally free and equal economic relations. The following lines from Thompson's *Labour Rewarded*, excerpted in Heighton's *Mechanics Free Press*, are a case in point: "Free, voluntary, exchanges ... no where prevail." These "unjust exchanges," in which "the products of the labor of the industrious classes [are] taken out of their hands," are caused either "by direct operation of law, or by indirect operation of unwise social arrangements." These "unwise social arrangements" were defined by the lack of "equal command of means of production."⁸⁹ The last line completed the analysis, explaining how even without direct legal coercion, a formally free worker could be made dependent on employers, thereby turning the contract into an unfree, exploitative arrangement in which workers were forced to give up the lion's share of the value they produced.

The labor theory of value made economic dependence quantifiable. For instance, Langdon Byllesby quotes a calculation by the Benthamite reformer Patrick Colquhoun, who used the labor theory of value to calculate the first national income statistics of the British Empire, that in 1812 the laboring classes received "but one fifth" of the total annual product with "the rest being absorbed by the idle and unproductive classes."⁹⁰ Here was scientific proof that workers were getting far less value than they were producing and were doing

⁸⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁶ Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally*, 12.

⁸⁷ See, for instance, the block quotation of Gray's *Lectures on Human Happiness* in Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally*, 12-15.

⁸⁸ For instance, see the Thompson citations in Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 105-13.

⁸⁹ "Thompson's Labour Rewarded," *Mechanics' Free Press* 98 (November 21, 1829), 1.

⁹⁰ Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 57. These figures were taken from Patrick Colquhoun's *A Treatise on the Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire* (1814). To my knowledge, it is the first attempt in English of a complete gross national accounting, proudly advertising "copious statistical tables" on its title page. Patrick Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire* (London: Joseph Mawman, 1814). Other Ricardian Socialists were also quite taken with Colquhoun's statistics, using them to calculate exploitation rates according to the labor theory of value. Foxwell, "Introduction," lxvii.

so because, despite their legal freedom to make labor contracts, they were still compelled to labor for others. Their economic dependence on others left them vulnerable to exploitation. Of course, for these worker-activists, the dramatic increase in material wealth alongside urban poverty and homelessness was evidence enough that workers enjoyed very little of the fruits of their labors. They did not *need* strictly quantifiable, scientific proof to make their point, and often they simply observed the general fact of inequality to make their point about wage-labor and dependence.

But their use of political economy was no superfluity. The analytic power of the labor theory of value allowed figures such as Byllesby and Skidmore to develop a discourse appropriate to the new form of social domination they wished to criticize. Generalized market relations – defined centrally by the commodification of labor – meant that calculations were possible in a way not true of previous economies. The labor theory of value also made possible the articulation of a long-standing anxiety about dependent labor in a form specific to market relations. Note, for instance, that it allowed someone such as Skidmore to translate a general definition of slavery – being compelled to work for another who receives the benefits of that labor – into specifically modern terms. The wage-laborer is "in such necessitous condition, that he must work or die; and work, too, on such terms, that a very great share of the value of his labor must go to the employer, or to him, who, no matter how, affords the means of employment."⁹¹ After all, in the case of the chattel slave, it was immediately obvious that he had no choice but to work for a master and that the master took everything that the slave produced. But in the case of the labor contract, because the worker received wages in return, the exploitative element was not immediately visible. The material expression of his dependence had to take the form of a calculation of values, of the difference between what he was paid and what he produced. If in one sense the poverty of workers made their cause seem obvious, in another sense, the formal freedom of the labor market disrupted republican common sense, calling for further tools of social analysis. The labor theory of value grounded a form of social analysis that made visible relations of power and dependence that the voluntary labor contract concealed. Using the labor theory of value as an instrument of social analysis revealed the way in which the labor market was not defined by relations of equal independence but rather by relations of unequal dependence and thus domination. The employers' regular extraction of profits was a sign of their arbitrary power over employees.

Above all, the labor theory of value was important because it described the social function of economic dependence. Economic dependence was not just a generic evil; it was the core institution by which society reproduced itself. That is to say, it was not just that this republican society happened to permit, on its peripheries or in its interstices, an objectionable but marginal form of

⁹¹ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 240.

subjection. Instead, economic servitude was a central fact of this society. If employers relied on the economic dependence of a class of propertyless workers, then it was clear why owners of productive property "conceive it their interest to keep us in a state of humble dependence."⁹² Workers could only be paid less value than they produced if they remained dependent on some employer or another. This dependence was a product of unequal property ownership, which was reproduced by the fact that low wages, and the scarcity of productive property and credit, made it impossible for most to work their way out of wage-labor. This logic of reproduction meant their subjection was permanent, not temporary.⁹³ The natural conclusion, according to workingmen, was that the employers were hostile to the very idea of universalizing republican liberty. The labor theory of value gave scientific expression to the wage-laborer's exploitation, whereas the republican understanding of dependence explained the ability to exploit in the first place. Workingmen were propelled into this fusion of political economy with republican theory by the fact that the dependence they experienced was not personal and direct in the way classical slavery had been.

"The Equalization of Property"

Besides the labor theory of value, the second idea that these workingmen adapted to their purposes was the concept of cooperation. Here again the 1820s was a propitious decade for conceptual innovation. Robert Owen, founder of the cooperative movement, first known for his socialist experiment in New Lanark, traveled to the United States in 1824-25 to survey his new communitarian venture, New Harmony. Owen's *New View of Society* had been published in the United States as early as 1817 and by the time of his trip he was so well known that he was invited to give a two-part, six-hour speech on utopian socialism to a private dinner that included members of Congress, outgoing President James Monroe, and President-elect John Quincy Adams.⁹⁴ Owen commissioned an architectural model for his ideal community that stood on display at the White House for six weeks⁹⁵ and his ideas quickly became part of social discussion. Although he avoided meeting with any organized workers, preferring instead to rub elbows with middle class reformers and free thinkers when passing through Philadelphia,⁹⁶ figures such as Heighton and Byllesby

were acquainted with his ideas through the popular presses, from circulating copies of *New View of Society*, and through references to cooperation by figures including Thompson and Gray.⁹⁷

Cooperation was broadly understood as a form of associated production in which property was held in common, all able-bodied members of the community worked, in exchange for which they received a guarantee that they would be provided all necessities, after which owners of shares in the community would be paid dividends. But whereas for Owen cooperation was a solution to the social problems of poverty and crime, for workingmen it became the guarantee of personal freedom – the practical solution to the problem of universalizing republican liberty. The workingmen's interest in cooperation flowed directly from their analysis of dependence. If unequal control of productive property, especially land and factories, made wage-laborers dependent on owners, then it followed that the way to eliminate this dependence was by giving everyone some control over productive property. Liberty appeared to require a rough equality of property; and, indeed, Skidmore, Byllesby, Heighton, and Simpson all made some version of the argument that "the principles of equal distribution [be] everywhere adopted"⁹⁸ or to "equalize property."⁹⁹ Through this "equalization" of property, workers would "no longer suffer ourselves to be the slaves of the useless few."¹⁰⁰

The concrete form that this equal right should take varied with each thinker. They all shared an ambivalence toward Owenite socialism insofar as it seemed to mean the creation of cooperative communities *separate* from society. For instance, Byllesby argued against the Owenites, "we do not perceive how the means they propose, to wit, the erection of limited and independent villages ... are to include the immense and important interests, with valuable uses, embraced in the composition of large cities."¹⁰¹ These "limited and independent villages" could not possibly address the widespread dependence of all workers, especially in factories, and it left the existing distribution of property more or less untouched. Moreover, they thought Owen's appeal to the philanthropic impulses of the wealthy to fund these communities was unrealistic and failed to grasp the republican point that the aim was *independence*, and thus achieving these conditions through their own efforts, not another. "Allowing Mr. Owen's system to be good; where shall we find more men like Mr. Owen?" asked Skidmore, after which he said "Besides, there is something uncongenial

⁹² Heighton, *An Address Delivered before the Mechanics and Working Classes Generally*, 10.

⁹³ Luther, *An Address to the Working Men of New England*, 22-6.

⁹⁴ Robert Owen, *Two Discourses on a New System of Society as Delivered in the Hall of Representatives at Washington* (London: Whiting & Branston, 1825).

⁹⁵ Owen commissioned the plan from one Stedman Whitwell. Stedman Whitwell, "Description of an Architectural Model From a Design by Stedman Whitwell, Esq. for a Community upon a Principle of United Interests, as Advocated by Robert Owen, Esq.," in *Cooperative Communities: Plans and Descriptions*, ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

⁹⁶ Arky, "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement," 151; Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 212-14.

⁹⁷ The New Harmony Gazette circulated widely, as did Owen's writings. For references the Gazette and ideas about Owen's New Lanark, see, e.g., Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 120-36.

⁹⁸ Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally*, 35.

⁹⁹ Simpson, *The Working Man's Manual*, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 90.

with the best feelings of the heart ... when it is compelled to contemplate the happiness it enjoys ... as flowing from another. ... It subtracts half the value of such happiness, to feel that it is dependent on another for it."¹⁰² What stronger expression of the desire for independence than the demand to use one's own power to eliminate economic dependence?

Some, such as Simpson, broadly appealed to the idea of equalizing property, but stopped short of demanding full redistribution of land or machines, let alone the formation of workers cooperatives.¹⁰³ Others, however, identified cooperation as a necessary ingredient for managing the integrated work processes of a modern, factory economy in ways that eliminated dependent wage-labor. Byllesby called for "equalization of the advantages of industry and labour"¹⁰⁴ through inheritance taxes and for the redistribution of property to fund producer cooperatives – appending a plan for the formation of a cooperative to his *Observations*. Others, such as Heighton, imagined that "all the producers dwelling within the limits of each district or township" would "combine and co-operate," hire a few "agents" to manage distribution, and establish "exchanges" based on labor notes to facilitate commerce among the different worker cooperatives.¹⁰⁵ These proposals groped toward the image of a national community of free producers, comprising independent property-owners exchanging their individual or collective products on the basis of labor notes. Another Philadelphian fellow-traveler, Josiah Warren, founded one of the first labor note exchanges in 1828.¹⁰⁶ Heighton's *Mechanics' Free Press* also regularly contained excerpts from early British writings on cooperatives, as well as editorials from various local reformers proposing to set up labor exchanges and cooperatives for the purposes of "diminishing the number of dependent producers."¹⁰⁷

Skidmore's proposal was the most systematic and far-reaching. His *Rights of Man to Property!* shows us not so much the majority opinion but just how

¹⁰² Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 386.

¹⁰³ Simpson ran on the more "conservative" demand for free public education. On Simpson, see Pessen, "The Ideology of Stephen Simpson, Upperclass Champion of the Early Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement."

¹⁰⁴ Byllesby, *Observations on the Sources and Effects of Unequal Wealth*, 116.

¹⁰⁵ Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally*, 11. See also Arky "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement," 147–51.

¹⁰⁶ Josiah Warren, "Letter From Josiah Warren," in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society Volume v: The Labor Movement*, ed. John R. Commons et al. (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 133–37; John R. Commons et al., eds., "Constitution of the Philadelphia Labour for Labour Association," in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society Volume v: The Labor Movement* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 129–33. Warren was probably also the author of some of the pseudonymous articles in *Mechanics' Free Press* on labor exchanges, particularly those extolling the virtues of those recently established in the Philadelphia area.

¹⁰⁷ Cosmopolite, "(Labor Exchange)," ed. William Heighton, *Mechanics' Free Press* (Philadelphia, October 25, 1828).

far this logic of universalizing liberty and eliminating economic dependence could go. Echoing a plan that Thomas Paine first put forward in *Agrarian Justice*, but which Skidmore appears not to have known about,¹⁰⁸ Skidmore felt the logical step would be a "system that should have given each individual as he arrived at the age of maturity, as much of the property of the world, as any contemporary of his, was allowed to possess at a similar age."¹⁰⁹ Each person "has an equal right with any and every other man, to an equal share of the common property; or its undoubted equivalent."¹¹⁰ Skidmore did not simply try to acquire funds and land through estate taxes, but through expropriation and redistribution of existing property. His plan for an "equal division of property" involved holding a "State-convention" in which the state would conduct a property census, "claim all property within the State, both real and personal, of whatever kind it may be ... [and] order an equal division of all this property among the citizens."¹¹¹ Each person would acquire credits, and upon reaching the age maturity, would be free to bid for a share of public property – mainly land – of their own, or pool those claims to form associations of workers.¹¹² They would be free to work their property and keep the products for as long as they lived. But their property could not be inherited; instead, it would return to the common fund to be distributed again on the principle of equal rights. Not only would this respect equal rights, but this system would eliminate the incentive to "seek to acquire property for the purpose of making it an instrument (to be placed in the hands of children), of domination over the children of other parents."¹¹³ The analogy with that decade's state conventions, which eliminated property restrictions on the suffrage, was explicit and intentional. Here was the completion of the revolutionary republican project through one of its most characteristic acts of popular sovereignty – the constitutional convention. The equalization of property, through an act of higher law, secured universal independence.

Remarkably, this proposal for a state convention was a concession to necessity, not a sign of agrarian parochialism. Skidmore felt the logic of his argument was universal and thus global in scope. In principle, the ideal redistribution of land would be international, not state-level or national.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ Paine, "Agrarian Justice." The edition of Paine's writings available to and quoted by Skidmore, published in 1797, did not include *Agrarian Justice*, which had just been published that year. The edition Skidmore used was Thomas Paine, *The Works of Thomas Paine, Secretary for Foreign Affairs, to the Congress of the United States, in the Late War: In Two Volumes*, Vols. 1–2, ed. James Carey (Philadelphia: James Carey, 1797). Cited at Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 6. However, the historian Mark Lause told me that copies of *Agrarian Justice* circulated among Skidmore and his associates, which raises questions as to why Skidmore never mentions it.

¹⁰⁹ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 126.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹¹² See Skidmore's proposal *ibid.*, 137–44.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48–52.

Moreover, it would include every adult individual – man and woman, enslaved black and colonized Native American. In fact, Skidmore was careful to note that blacks, women, and Native Americans had suffered especially badly at the hands of the monopolizers of wealth.¹¹⁵ In an additional original step, Skidmore extended his argument for eliminating economic dependence to the domain of family relations. He thought the dependence of children on their parents for their education and inheritance corrupted family love, allowed parents to tyrannize children, and forced children into flattery – rather like attendants to monarchs. Skidmore therefore argued for free public education, state provided guarantee of means of subsistence, and a capital grant upon reaching maturity that was unlinked to the parents' economic fortunes. Their economic independence secured, children's relations with their parents would be characterized by true mutuality and love, rather than slavish obedience and flattery.¹¹⁶

As Skidmore noted, those original agrarians, the Roman Gracchi,¹¹⁷ may well have blushed at the radical nature of his proposal.¹¹⁸ As far-reaching as they were, Skidmore's ideas were not merely the loopy utopian musings of an isolated critic. The Report of the Committee of Fifty, the official platform of the New York Workingmen's Party, included a demand for "AN EQUAL AMOUNT OF PROPERTY ON ARRIVING AT THE AGE OF MATURITY, and previous thereto, EQUAL FOOD, CLOTHING, AND INSTRUCTION AT THE PUBLIC EXPENSE."¹¹⁹ For a brief time, then, the argument for dividing property equally among citizens in the name of republican liberty was the official platform of an actual political party.¹²⁰ Skidmore's views were long recognized as influential and of critical importance to the debates of the period, not just among workers but in Jacksonian America.¹²¹

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 158–60. He also wrote: "I would give the same rights of suffrage to the red man, the black man, and the white man." Ibid., 146. And later, "it is no more consistent with right, that the slaves should be subservient to [the white man], than it is for the poor white man, to be subservient to the rich one." Ibid., 270.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 262–66. For Skidmore's views of children, see Joshua R. Greenberg, "Powerful – Very Powerful Is the Parental Feeling: Fatherhood, Domestic Politics, and the New York City Working Men's Party," *Early American Studies: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 1 (2004), 192–227.

¹¹⁷ On the Gracchi in republican mythology, see Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*, 49–86.

¹¹⁸ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 29–30.

¹¹⁹ Skidmore, "Working Men's Meeting: Report of the Committee of Fifty," 1.

¹²⁰ On Skidmore's loss of control of the party to already organized and powerful Whigs allying with Wright and Owen, see Gilbert, *The Life of Thomas Skidmore*; Pessen, "Thomas Skidmore, Agrarian Reformer in the Early American Labor Movement"; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 182–88.

¹²¹ "Agrarianism," *The Atlantic Monthly* III, no. XVIII (April 1859), 393–403. See also discussion in Pessen, "Thomas Skidmore, Agrarian Reformer in the Early American Labor Movement."

Back to the Land: The Ambivalence of Early Republicanism

Skidmore and his fellow-travelers were attacked as dangerous "agrarians."¹²² A contributor to Philadelphia's *Mechanics' Free Press* proudly notes that the Roman tribunes were "working men's representatives" and that "among other names of reproach, they were called *Agrarians*; and in this city, also, the same word has been applied reproachfully to us."¹²³ But as we have seen, these labor advocates are more notable for the way in which they pushed the agrarian radicalism of the small producer tradition in new directions. In place of an exclusive concern with landlessness and indebtedness, these workers made wage-labor the central object of criticism. To deliver this critique in republican terms, they used the tools of modern political economy to expose the relations of dependence underlying the formal independence of "free" workers. Even more provocatively, they followed this critique of the wage-laborer's dependence with the radical demand to make control over property equal.

To be sure, they were ambiguous about what equal property meant. They found the cooperative idea attractive but many of their proposals were vague and somewhat individualistic – workers' cooperatives were but one, still relatively marginal, option. In the 1830s and 1840s, the few cooperatives established were a response to local conditions, showing little coordinated effort or even common ideological basis.¹²⁴ The workingmen were, moreover, uncertain in their thinking about the relationship between private property, collective property, and state-owned property. They uniformly avoided or explicitly rejected state-owned enterprises.¹²⁵ However, they went significantly beyond the small producer tradition in their willingness to use the state for redistributive purposes. More significant was their understanding that any attempt truly to universalize republican liberty would require not just redistribution of land, but the reorganization of industrial relationships. On this point, the idea of cooperation had a crucial, if still vaguely formulated, role to play: to recover control over one's labor required exercising that control continuously, during work itself. That control could only be achieved in a modern, industrial setting through shared, equal control, not individuated production. This was the reason why they were no longer content merely to eliminate primogeniture and entail. It was increasingly unlikely that those laws alone would guarantee property distributions that secured each citizen's independence. There was not enough land, and the nature of productive property had changed. Instead, these early republicans challenged inherited property itself and attempted to guarantee each person at least adequate ownership of productive resources so that nobody would be forced to sell his labor to another. Only this egalitarian

¹²² E.g., "The Agrarian Party," *Ithaca Journal*, May 5, 1830; Simon Clannon, "To the Public," *The Daily Advertiser*, March 2, 1830.

¹²³ "Agrarians," *Mechanics' Free Press* II, no. 99 (November 28, 1829), 3.

¹²⁴ Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 25–52; Horner, *Producers' Co-Operatives in the United States, 1865–1890*, 42–50.

¹²⁵ E.g., Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 156.

model control in the Bureau of

distribution of property, and thus control over labor, would eliminate the "slavery of wages." No wonder that, alongside "agrarians," their critics invented another term of abuse: "Workies."

By the mid-1830s, the workingmen's parties had dissolved. The radical moment in the republican critique of capitalism subsided but did not by any stretch disappear. Citywide labor councils, such as New York's General Trades Union, protested attempts by employers' associations to suppress union activity by saying such actions would "make dark the republican atmosphere of this boasted land of liberty, for a long and wicked reign of anarchy and despotism."¹²⁶ Some Workies found their way into the radical "Locofoco" faction of the Democratic Party. One of their most notorious spokesmen, Orestes Brownson, wrote in his extraordinary 1840 essay "The Laboring Classes" that "there is a class of our fellow citizens, who stare at us as if we were out of our wits ... when we represent the workingman as still a slave.... In their estimation he is already enfranchised, already a free man ... and no more dependent on the capitalist, than the capitalist is on him."¹²⁷ But, said Brownson, this dependence was not mutual. "Which is the more urgent necessity, that of growing rich, or that of guarding against hunger? You can live, though you do not employ the laborer; but, if he find not employment, he must die. He is then at your mercy."¹²⁸ The only reasonable thing, Brownson mockingly said to an imagined audience of employers, was to "set yourselves at work in earnest to remodel the institution of property, so that all shall be proprietors, and you be relieved from paying wages, and the proletariat from the necessity of receiving them."¹²⁹ The Worky critique of wage-labor continued to resonate.

Nevertheless, if the argument that the wage-laborer was dependent persisted, by the 1840s some of the latent individualistic and agrarian tendencies of the small producer tradition resurfaced. The National Reform Association (NRA), the largest mid-century reform movement in the country, preserved the republican critique of wage-labor, often self-consciously referring to the Workingmen's Parties as their predecessors.¹³⁰ There were both intellectual and biographical reasons for them to claim a Worky heritage. The NRA's originator, George Henry Evans, had edited the *The Working Man's Advocate* for the New York Workingmen's Party, and many ex-Workies ended up passing over to the NRA. However, the NRA made its emphasis not the reorganization of industrial production but rather the redistribution of land. Its basic aim was agrarian: to eliminate economic dependence by eradicating private land monopolies and

¹²⁶ Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism*, 32. See also the "Ten-Hour Circular" written by the Boston Trades' Union and discussion thereof in Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, 43.

¹²⁷ Orestes A. Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," *The Boston Quarterly Review* 3 (July 1840), 42.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³⁰ See for instance George Henry Evans, "Rise and Progress of Agrarianism," *YA*, September 20, 1845.

by making public lands available to all landless citizens for personal settlement and cultivation.¹³¹ The historian Mark Lause, in his superb history of the NRA, shows how the organization's focus on land transformed the republican critique of wage-labor into a national, rather than just urban, political movement. The association succeeded in influencing mainstream political parties, eventually contributing to passage of two bills in 1862, the Homestead Act and the Morrill Land Grant Act.¹³² The first dramatically expanded low-cost access to land and the second created the famous land-grant colleges to "promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes."¹³³

For our purposes, it is worth noting only a few points to set the stage for the late-century labor republicans. Like the workingmen, the land reformers thought the United States enjoyed a republican form of government but a despotic social condition that had unthinkingly adopted feudal English property arrangements:

The laws relative to property were adopted with no essential modification from such as prevail in Great Britain, and they have the effect of creating an aristocracy of wealth which must prove as fatal to liberty as the worst form of despotism.¹³⁴

This is almost exactly the same language as Skidmore used in the Report of the Committee of Fifty.¹³⁵ The creation of a landless class, dependent on the monopolists of land and factory property, produced a new kind of slavery. As John Pickering, prominent National Reformer and author of *The Working Man's Political Economy*, put it: "A capitalist finds a thing called a poor man without a home, deprived of his birthright in the soil, reduced to want and destitution."¹³⁶ This landless person "would be glad to labor, but is denied the privilege" unless the capitalist hires him. In the absence of employment, "he is turned into the street to starve, to beg, or to steal; he must do one or the other, there is no alternative; or die. (*These are the privileges of the Free Laborer.*)"¹³⁷

But a "man who is obliged, by his destitution, to sell himself for wages," was, on Pickering's view, treated as nothing more "than as convenient and

¹³¹ The NRA's constitution was published in the inaugural issue of the revived WMA. George Henry Evans, "National Reform Association Constitution," eds. George Henry Evans and John Windt, WMA, April 6, 1844. See also George Henry Evans and John Windt, "Our Principles," WMA, April 6, 1844.

¹³² Mark Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

¹³³ The language of the Morrill Act is available at the Library of Congress website, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Morrill.html>. Lause shows that the NRA became a home for the interpenetration of agrarian, labor republican, and socialist views. Lause, *Young America*, 35-59.

¹³⁴ Unsigned, "Address of Mr. Wait of Ill.," *YA*, October 25, 1845.

¹³⁵ Skidmore, "Working Men's Meeting: Report of the Committee of Fifty."

¹³⁶ John Pickering, *The Working Man's Political Economy* (Cincinnati, OH: Thomas Varney, 1847), 34.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

useful materials and instruments."¹³⁸ He was, in virtue of this dependence, a slave:

Now, this human machine is virtually and positively as much a slave to the capitalist, as any chattel slave is to his master; in either case, they are controlled by the will of their masters, in all their actions, with this difference: the hired slave can leave his master; but, if he does, he runs the risk of finding another, which is often very difficult to accomplish ... so that the servitude, as far as effects are involved, are alike compulsory in both cases. ... In neither case would the victims consent to part with the produce of their own labor, if they could help it.¹³⁹

So far, this is boilerplate republicanism, condemning wage-labor as a species of slavery in exactly the language of Pickering's Worky predecessors. In fact, it was this kind of language that informed the land reformer's running debates with the abolitionists, which we discussed in Chapter 2. Think, for instance, of the following lines uttered by Horace Greeley and reprinted with favorable commentary in the NRA's journal, *Young America*:

What is Slavery? You will probably answer "The legal subjection of one human being to the will and power of another." But this definition appears to me inaccurate ... it excludes the subjection founded in other necessities not less stringent than those imposed by statute.¹⁴⁰

A "subjection founded in other necessities" than law was precisely what lay at the heart of the republican critique of the formally free labor contract. Yet if the land reformers sounded Worky themes, a glance at the NRA's founding "Principles" reveals a narrower train of analysis: the "traffic in the soil ... we discover to be the *root* of the evil, the cause of that vast inequality of condition now existing among us."¹⁴¹ Although critical of "wage-slavery," they did not see the ownership of productive property *in general* as the problem, so much as the unequal ownership of land in particular. Their "leading measure" was "*the Equal Right of every man to the free use of a sufficient portion of the Earth to till for his subsistence.*"¹⁴² With adequate availability of land, each person would have a reasonable alternative of real economic independence available to him. For example, when George Henry Evans revived the *Working Man's Advocate* in 1844, now dedicating it to National Reform, he included in the first three issues a series of articles on the "Equal Right to Land." The first proclaimed:

If the whole people had free access to the land, the laborer would not be *dependant* [sic] on the employer. ... He would receive the full value of his labor, because he would have the ready alternative of laboring for himself.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 43-44.

¹⁴⁰ "What Is Slavery" from the Cincinnati Morning Herald: Letter from Horace Greeley to the Anti-Slavery Convention at Cincinnati," YA 2, no. 14 (June 28, 1845).

¹⁴¹ Evans and Windt, "Our Principles."

¹⁴² "Equal Right to Land I," WMA, March 16, 1844.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

This comparison between "hired laborer with the farm settler" was supposed to communicate the full range alternatives available for creating a "Republican Community."¹⁴⁴ Tellingly, some National Reformers went so far as to *condemn* the earlier Worky demand for equal control of industrial property or "value" instead of land. As a leading Reformer from New York put it,

the Working Men of this city (adopting the error of Thomas Skidmore) proposed an equal amount of property on coming of age in *lieu* of the right to land. This I opposed as soon as I reflected upon the proposition ... and contented that the Land itself should be restored to the people, and not merely an equivalent for it.¹⁴⁵

The author no doubt had in mind passages from Skidmore such as the following: "I am not to be understood as meaning anything by equality, other than that the *value* of the effects of our citizens, whether it be lands, or ships, or goods, or whatever else it may be, would be apportioned equally among us all."¹⁴⁶ For Skidmore and other Workies receiving value as opposed to land was what made possible pooling resources to form cooperatives and thus the running of the factory system on the basis of equal interdependence, rather than unequal dependence. It also was a tacit recognition that the land could not absorb all surplus labor – there was no purely agrarian path to universal republican liberty in an industrial society.

National Reformers formally rejected that view. They identified a concrete *form* of labor, agrarian self-sufficiency, with free labor in general.¹⁴⁷ As George Henry Evans put it, "it needs that the lands should be *free* ... [because] many of the employed laborers ... would gladly exchange their life of servitude for one of independence."¹⁴⁸ Here the republican critique of wage-labor was accompanied by a retreat from thinking about how industrial production itself could be made free. Redistribution of land might empty the factories, but not reorganize them. Up until the end of the Civil War, the dominant hope for universalizing republican liberty in a modern commercial republic was to return to the heroic independence of the small farmer and to identify the "Republican Community" with the republic of small producers. This view found its final and most famous exponent in Henry George, author of the immensely popular late nineteenth-century book, *Progress and Poverty*. But there is no need to trace out this line of thinking any further.¹⁴⁹ We follow a different path in the development of

¹⁴⁴ "Equal Right to Land III," WMA, April 6, 1844.

¹⁴⁵ "Explanation," *Subterranean, United with the Workingman's Advocate*, 1, no. 34 (1844).

¹⁴⁶ Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property*!, 248.

¹⁴⁷ Recall that, from Jefferson onward, agrarian "self-sufficiency" was not anti-market but rather about growing crops for the global market and combining these earnings with whatever one consumed oneself. Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order*, 253-76; Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 34-59, 127-51.

¹⁴⁸ "Equal Right to Land I."

¹⁴⁹ George was one of the Knights' favored political economists, and they considered him to have solved the "land question." However, as becomes clear next chapter, labor republicans thought the land question did not exhaust the labor question. On George's complex political

republican thinking about free labor. After the Civil War, that path leads back to the heart of the industrial world – “the Quarry, the Workshop, the Forge and the Factory” that William Heighton condemned in 1827 as sites of human bondage.¹⁵⁰ In the postbellum period, we find the redoubling of efforts to eliminate wage-labor, and thus to resolve the paradox of slavery and freedom, by transforming control over industrial property itself.

and intellectual connection to the Knights, see Robert E. Weir, “A Fragile Alliance,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 56, no. 4 (1997), 421–39.

¹⁵⁰ William Heighton, *The Principles of Aristocratic Legislation*, 5–6.

Labor Republicanism and the Cooperative Commonwealth

*There is an inevitable and irresistible conflict
between the wage-system of labor
and the republican system of government¹*

George McNeill

On January 9, 1865, an iron-molder named William H. Sylvis traveled to Chicago to address the national convention of the Iron-Molders' International Union (IMIU). Sylvis, then president of the IMIU, gave a two-hour address to what was later described as the “largest Convention of Workingmen of one craft ever held on this continent.”² The climactic end of the Civil War was still months away, and the House of Representatives had not yet ratified the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished slavery and “involuntary servitude.” Yet, according to Sylvis, history was already in the process of jumping over its own shadow. Even as a momentous “political revolution ... has left its trail of blood upon the sky.... The year ... has witnessed a social revolution such as the world has never known.”³ Sylvis described this “social revolution” as a “collision between classes,” which had its origins in the industrial relationships of the North, not the slave labor of the South. These new “relations are, for the most part, that of master and slave, and are totally at variance with the spirit of the institutions of a free people, and the relations that should exist between equals.”⁴ In Sylvis's mind, the Civil War was “merely” a political revolution because no government could legitimately call

¹ McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 459.

² Jonathan Grossman, *William Sylvis, Pioneer of American Labor* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1973), 78.

³ William H. Sylvis, “Address Delivered at Chicago, January 9, 1865,” in *The Life, Speeches, Labors and Essays of William H. Sylvis*, ed. James C. Sylvis (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872), 128.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.