

**From Slavery to the Cooperative
Commonwealth**

*Labor and Republican Liberty in the
Nineteenth Century*

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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.

itself republican while permitting chattel slavery. But the concomitant social revolution meant that this external opposition between republican government and chattel slavery had now become an internal conflict between political form and social content. "What would it profit us as a nation," Sylvis asked, were

all the forms of our republican institutions to remain on the statute-books ... with the wealth of the nation concentrated in the hands of the few, and the toiling many reduced to squalid poverty and utter dependence on the lords of the land... Again, allow me to ask, what would it profit us if the forms of our institutions were preserved and all else lost.⁵

With this defense of the "toiling many" against "utter dependence" the republican critique of wage-labor reared its head once more.

Sylvis's speech, delivered from the belly of the Yankee Leviathan, was a sign of things to come. The near certainty of Northern victory had opened up the ideological space at the national level into which radical labor leaders like Sylvis rushed. In Sylvis's case, he rushed a bit too quickly. Although he succeeded in building the first international craft union (of iron-molders), the initial efforts at postwar national organizations of labor ended in failure. In 1866, Sylvis spear-headed the formation of the National Labor Union and the National Labor Party, both of which, along with their successor organization, the Industrial Congress, quickly collapsed without attracting many members.⁶ Their major significance lay in the intellectual recovery of an earlier language of critique and, perhaps more importantly, in the attempt to present "cooperation" as a solution to the problem of guaranteeing all workers their economic independence.⁷

In 1869, as the first organizational efforts disintegrated, a small group of garment workers, led by a tailor and labor reformer named Uriah Stephens,⁸ formed a secret organization called the Knights of Labor. Drawing on language from the National Labor Union, the Knights' Constitution said they wanted to organize "every department of productive industry and [to make] industrial, moral and social worth – not wealth – the true standard of individual and national greatness."⁹ The Knights were the first post-Civil War labor organization open to nearly all workers, including unskilled, black and women workers, but excepting Chinese.¹⁰ They remained secret for about a

⁵ Ibid., 129.

⁶ Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States*, 1–22; Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 170–96.

⁷ On the revival of cooperative ideology and actual cooperatives by these groups, see Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 5–24; Horner, "Producers' Co-Operatives in the United States, 1865–1890," 46–52.

⁸ To my knowledge there is no full biography of Stephens. For a brief sketch by one of the Knights, see "Our Past Grand Master Workman," *JUL* II, no. 4 (August 15, 1881), 1–2. See also Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States*, 26–28.

⁹ Powderly, ed., "Knights of Labor Platform – Preamble and Declaration of Principles," 30.

¹⁰ On their greater openness, especially to women and blacks, than their immediate predecessors, see Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 33–35, 45–46. On the history of the Knights of Labor, see the sources mentioned in footnote 25 of the Introduction.

decade out of the reasonable fear that they would be blacklisted, infiltrated by Pinkerton agents, and otherwise persecuted.¹¹ By 1880, their growth to nearly 30,000 members convinced them to flex their muscles publicly. Some successful strikes and labor actions in the early 1880s earned them enormous national popularity. Their official membership peaked in 1886 at a bit more than 700,000, with probably more than a million when unofficial members are included.¹² These numbers would not be matched by a national organization of labor for decades. Internal chaos and external repression in the late 1880s led to rapid decline.¹³ By the mid-1890s, they were spent as a national political force, having been displaced by Samuel Gompers' American Federation of Labor.¹⁴ But for more than a decade, the Knights of Labor was the most powerful national organization of labor of the century and was a major player in the defining events of the day.¹⁵ Most importantly for us, the Knights as an organization, and especially its better-known leaders, were self-consciously republican, seeing themselves as keepers of the flame in the post-Civil War environment.¹⁶

Although the group I am here calling labor republicans were mostly concentrated around the Knights of Labor, they did not all belong to a single organization or agree on every issue of the day. They were instead united by their use of republican ideas to criticize wage-labor and to present cooperation as an alternative. The main figures all came out of a nineteenth-century tradition of independent, working class agitation.¹⁷ William H. Sylvis (1828–1869), the son of a wagon-maker, became an iron-molder and founded the Iron-Molders'

¹¹ On their secret rituals, see Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 19–66. Blacklists against Knights were very common as was the use of Pinkertons. McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 138; "Making War on This Paper," *JSP* II, no. 69 (February 1, 1885); Levine, *Labor's True Woman*, 56–59, 66–68, 73–81. Violence, legal and illegal, against the Knights and labor generally was a major part of the literature of the time and of labor historiography. Terence V. Powderly, *Labor: Its Rights and Wrongs* (Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1886); Karl Liebknecht, *Militarism* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1917) 140–141; Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America*; Taft and Ross, "American Labor Violence: Its Causes, Character, and Outcome"; Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement*; Tomlins, *The State and the Unions*, 3–98; Pope, "Labor's Constitution of Freedom."

¹² Oestreicher, "A Note on Knights of Labor Membership Statistics," 102–08. See also Weir's calculation: Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 16.

¹³ On the internal sources of their decline, see the excellent Robert E. Weir, *Knights Unhorsed* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ However, see Oestreicher's comments that even through the 1890s their membership competed with that of the AF of L. Oestreicher, "A Note on Knights of Labor Membership Statistics."

¹⁵ On Labor Day, see Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 308–13.

¹⁶ Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*; David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860–1920," 201–15; Richard Oestreicher, "Terence v. Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," in *Labor Leaders in America*, ed. Warren Van Tine and Melvyn Dubofsky (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 30–61.

¹⁷ On the difference between these figures and the Radical Republicans, see Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862–1872*, 260.

International Union before turning his attention to national labor organizing.¹⁸ Ira Steward (1837–1883), the son of abolitionists, was a machinist and self-educated labor reformer. He was most famous as a tireless eight-hours campaigner, founder of Boston's Eight Hour League, and a major influence in the creation of the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁹ Steward's friend and protégé, George McNeill (1836–1907), was a labor editor, a leading member of the Knights, active in Boston labor politics and author of one of that era's most influential accounts of the labor movement.²⁰ After the Knights' decline he joined the American Federation of Labor. The other central figure is Terence Powderly. The son of Irish immigrants, he was a machinist who served as General Master Workman (leader) of the Knights of Labor during its heyday, from 1879 to 1893, and who also served as mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania from 1878 to 1884. After being pushed out of the Knights in the 1890s, he later served as an official in the Bureau of Immigration and in the Labor Department.²¹

These were the major players, but labor republicanism was more than the "cranky notions"²² of a few leading lights. As we shall see, the core thinking appeared in the pages of the *Journal of United Labor* and developed in relation to the experiences and activities of the Knights. These experiences included the rapid rise of permanent, industrial wage-labor, judicial and political hostility to organized labor, strikes and boycotts, fluctuating living standards, and the reorganization of work. In some sense, the Knights were forced by circumstance to

¹⁸ For biographical information, see James C. Sylvis, "Biography of William H. Sylvis," in *The Life, Speeches, Labors and Essays of William H. Sylvis*, ed. James C. Sylvis (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872); David Montgomery, "William H. Sylvis and the Search for Working-Class Citizenship," in *Labor Leaders in America*, ed. Warren Van Tine Melvyn Dubofsky (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3–29; Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862–1872*, 223–229; Grossman, *William Sylvis, Pioneer of American Labor*. On the NLU and its connection to the Knights, see Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States*, 22–55.

¹⁹ There is no full biography of Steward, who remains an enigma among a class of enigmatic nineteenth-century labor agitators. See David R. Roediger, "Ira Steward and the Anti-Slavery Origins of American Eight-Hour Theory," *Labor History* 27, no. 3 (1986), 410–26; Dorothy W. Douglas, "Ira Steward on Consumption and Unemployment," *The Journal of Political Economy* 40, no. 4 (1932), 532–43; Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862–1872*, 249–60; Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, 90–96; Ken Fones-Wolf, *The Boston Eight-Hour Men and the Emergence of American Trade Union Principles*, 1863–1891.

²⁰ McNeill, *The Labor Movement*.

²¹ Terence V. Powderly, *The Path I Trod: The Autobiography of Terence v. Powderly* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940); Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor 1859–1889*; Oestreicher, "Terence v. Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism"; Weir, *Knights Unhorsed*, 9–22, 161–78.

²² "Cranky Notions" is the name of a column that Joseph Labadie wrote in the *Labor Leaf*, the local Detroit paper of the Knights. Labadie was the paper's editor, a Knight and one-time member of the Socialist Labor Party. See Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875–1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 79–96.

articulate their own understanding of the republican tradition. Court cases not only served to overturn pro-labor laws and limit union activity, in explicit and implicit ways they also gave constitutional sanction to sometimes quite violent repression of labor activities.²³ The "struggle to define and claim title to the republican legacy and the republican constitution" was an unavoidable fact of post-Civil War political life.²⁴ Any attempt to organize workers compelled labor republicans to give their own account of the ideology of free labor that informed public discourse and constitutional interpretation.²⁵ The heterogeneous origins and diverse cultures of the workers they organized further compelled the Knights to articulate what was universal about the republican language in which they made their appeals.

The end of the Civil War gave labor republicans one advantage over their predecessors. Postwar reformers could not easily be accused of putting the concerns of wage-laborers ahead of black slaves. In fact, labor republicans could now present themselves as the true torchbearers of the revolutionary republicanism that the Civil War and its ideology of free labor had revived. For instance, when George McNeill wrote, "there is an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage-system of labor and the republican system of government,"²⁶ his use of the phrase "inevitable and irresistible conflict" rhetorically linked his cause to the Civil War's antislavery mission. William H. Seward, Secretary of State during the Civil War, had coined the phrase "irrepressible conflict" when arguing that chattel slavery was incompatible with republican government.²⁷ Like Sylvis before him, McNeill borrowed that language to argue that the freedom of a republican community had not yet been achieved.

What makes reconstructing these views difficult is that they were not articulated as a systematic whole, laid down in the philosophical form of a formal treatise. Labor republican arguments appear in books and pamphlets, novels and speeches, essays and editorials. They emerge as an interlocking sequence of partial responses to the overall challenge of defining freedom and slavery in a modern context. Often, by addressing themselves to one end of the intellectual

²³ See footnote 11, this chapter.

²⁴ Forbath, "The Ambiguities of Free Labor: Labor and the Law in the Gilded Age," 769. Also Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, 8.

²⁵ See especially James Gray Pope and William Forbath's excellent, if slightly differing, work on the subject. Pope, "Labor's Constitution of Freedom." Pope, "The Thirteenth Amendment Versus the Commerce Clause: Labor and the Shaping of American Constitutional Law, 1921–1957." Forbath, "Caste, Class, and Equal Citizenship." Forbath, "The Ambiguities of Free Labor: Labor and the Law in the Gilded Age"; Gillman, *The Constitution Besieged*, 61–100; Tomlins, *The State and the Unions*, 3–9, 32–59.

²⁶ McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 459.

²⁷ Although McNeill is invoking Seward, he has the language slightly off. Seward's famous phrase was that there was an "irrepressible conflict" between the slave and non-slave states. See Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: the Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, 69–72.

puzzle, they unintentionally redefined or significantly altered another related concept. It is therefore helpful to sketch the general outlines of this labor republican view before going more deeply into each of its conceptual elements.

"Away the False Idea of Liberty": Labor Republicanism as a Whole

In the heady ideological environment of post-Civil War America, labor republicans returned to first principles. Against laissez-faire republicanism, labor republicans argued both that the prevailing conception of freedom was false and that servitude persisted. For instance, in a series of twelve lectures published in the *Journal of United Labor* under the title "Chapters on Labor," one Knight argued that

liberty signifies the moral and material possibility for each citizen, the individual, to perform his duty in all security and without being under the authority of anybody. It signifies for the people the collectivity, the certainty that their industrial relations shall serve to equitably balance the services and products of men between themselves ... away the false idea of liberty being defended by the governing classes!²⁸

Any reader of the *Journal* would have instantly recognized the "false idea of liberty" of the "governing classes" as the one standing behind the political treatises and anti-labor court decisions we discussed in Chapter 2. The author of "Chapters on Labor" nodded in that direction when saying,

Are the governing classes really serious when they tell us that it is out of respect and love for liberty that they do nothing to emancipate labor from its condition of misery? ... How can they love or believe in liberty? it [sic] is the total negation of their presumptuous authority.²⁹

The governing classes' "presumptuous authority" was housed in the rights of property and contract, and the claims about legal independence that stood behind them. The "false idea" resided in the fact that these legal institutions failed to prevent the laborer from, in that telling republican phrase, coming "under the authority of anybody."

This return to first principles, however, was no mere repetition. Just saying that wage-labor was servile, and that cooperative production was free, did not make it so. It required argument. The labor republican project therefore necessarily involved a clarification and elaboration of the meaning of both republican liberty and domination. After all, the new social conditions of industrial capitalism, just as much as the new ideological context of a post-emancipation society, forced them to say something about what free labor could mean in the mechanized and collective conditions of modern production. They had no choice but to find a way to remain true to their intellectual

tradition while expounding on the ambiguities of its basic concepts. Otherwise the labor republican critique of the new forms of slavery would collapse back into intransigent agrarianism. This, no doubt, is why they found Algernon Sidney's words, which we touched on in the introduction, so appealing. Recall that in June, 1882, the *Journal* published these lines from Sidney's *Discourses on Government*:

SLAVERY – The weight of chains, number of stripes, hardness of labor, and other effects of a master's cruelty, may make one servitude more miserable than another; but he is a slave who serves the gentlest man in the world, as well as he who serves the worst; and he does serve him if he *must* obey his commands and depend upon his will.³⁰

This passage was important because it distinguished the condition of subjection from its original defining instance – chattel slavery. Whether one man's subjection to another was legal or economic, and however that domination was exercised, was a separate question from whether it counted as servitude in the first place. It opened up the conceptual space to criticize wage-labor so long as it could be shown that analogous forms of subjection existed. That the Knights do not cite Sidney as the author of these words only reinforces the sense that they cared about basic meanings, not the moral authority behind the concept. Restating the meaning of slavery in these terms was the other side of attacking the "false idea of liberty." It was not just that the hegemonic view of freedom was wrong, but that nominally free labor concealed the new forms of subjection that wage-labor introduced.

In general, then, we can say that the labor republicans did not just return to first principles, they also added content to the central concepts of slavery and of freedom. As the next four sections show in greater detail, they gave the concept of slavery more precise meaning by developing an account of the overlapping forms of structural and personal domination to which a modern wage-laborer was subject. Their domination was structural insofar as each worker was, owing to his lack of property ownership, dependent on some employer or another for a job. Their domination was personal insofar as the labor contract gave the employer a substantial amount of arbitrary power over the employee. The wage-laborer was forced to sell his labor, which meant he was forced to make a contract that left him subject to the will of his employer. All in all, the labor republican critique amounted not just to an indictment of the corrupting effects of inequality, but to an argument that a society based on labor contracts had simply replaced old forms of servitude with new ones.

The final three sections of the chapter show how, alongside this analysis of wage-slavery, labor republicans gave new content both to the *meaning* and *value* of republican liberty. Their proposal "to abolish as rapidly as possible, the wage system, substituting co-operation therefore"³¹ is the most important of

²⁸ Unsigned, "Chapters on Labor: Chapter V (Continued)," *JUL*, September 25, 1885, 1082.

²⁹ "Chapters on Labor: Chapter V (Continued)," 1082.

³⁰ "Slavery." It comes from Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, [II:21] p. 181.

³¹ Jelley, *The Voice of Labor*, 203.

their modifications to the small producer tradition. The "Republic of Labor"³² could now be described as a cooperative commonwealth, comprising interlocking producer and consumer cooperatives, rather than a body of separate free producers. Labor republicans further understood this economic independence to be a condition not just of free production but also of increased leisure, a condition of freedom in *and* from work. From this account of the meaning of independence they then moved to a new account of its value. Republican liberty, they argued, was important because it was a necessary condition for the development and enjoyment of an individual's abilities. What mattered was not the glory of the republic, the virtues of political participation, nor the priority of any particular domain of life, but the opportunity for self-cultivation.

Political Liberty and the Corruptions of Wealth

In 1890, General Master Workman Terence Powderly addressed a Knights of Labor picnic with the following question:

how it comes that the indictment drawn up against the English king applies with such startling force to the agencies we now find usurping the "divine right of kings" and making slaves of men who proudly, but thoughtlessly, boast of their freedom – that freedom which they claim came down to us from revolutionary sires as a heritage.... Are we the free people that we imagine we are?³³

Speeches like Powderly's were a regular feature at Knights of Labor picnics, which were the central recreational institution through which the Knights developed their own political culture.³⁴ On this occasion, Powderly had an old republican concern in mind: corruption. The modern wage-labor system undermined republican liberty by generating extreme economic inequalities that translated into political inequalities. The wealthy wielded disproportionate influence over politics and especially the administration of justice, such that "courts are administrators of estates, and not of justice."³⁵ Powderly's fellow agitator, George McNeill, often sounded a similar theme: "[I]t is imperative, if we desire to enjoy the full blessings of life, that a check be placed upon unjust accumulation, and the power for evil of aggregated wealth."³⁶

What made this more than a moralistic critique of luxury was the concern that inequality subverted the formal independence of citizens. If employers controlled the apparatus of the state then the legal autonomy of the free laborer

³² A slogan prominently displayed at various Knight-sponsored picnics and parades. See Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 305–13.

³³ Quoted in Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony and the Case of the Knights of Labor" 115.

³⁴ Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 282–88.

³⁵ McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 456. "Exclusion of lawyers-the technicians of American politics-from membership in the Knights of Labor in part reflected a desired distance from the contaminated machinery of the state." Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, 24.

³⁶ McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 197.

was a sham: "[W]e are wholly in the hands of our employers ... subjects of the railroad kings and cotton lords."³⁷ Much like the British commonwealthsmen of the seventeenth century, or the American revolutionaries of the eighteenth, editorialists in the *Journal* regularly worried about the loss of political independence to the wealthy and well-connected:

Corporations of capitalists ... are slowly but surely crushing out the manhood and liberties of the poor laborer, guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the land, by creating immense fortunes which enable them to buy up legislatures, sway judges and communities as they please.³⁸

Whether or not a proper labor contract guaranteed a worker's independence was immaterial if the law would not be enforced fairly in the first place.

Following a convention dating back to the American Revolution, labor republicans often drew negative comparisons with European despotism.³⁹ John Swinton, a famous labor journalist and Knight supporter, warned darkly of creeping "Bonapartism in America."⁴⁰ The Knights' local paper in Detroit attacked the "industrial oligarchy" for wanting to "establish a strong military government to keep [workers] in subjection and in slavery"⁴¹ and it lauded thousands of Philadelphia workers marching "against the conduct of the police force of Philadelphia towards strikers."⁴² In Chicago, the Knights' local paper noted that the city council had given police permission to revoke their "right of free assemblage," giving them "discretionary powers as to whether they will allow the people to exercise their constitution rights or not." They continued, "add to this the statement of Mayor Harrison, that he has authorized his police to do things in Chicago 'which if done in London would overturn the throne of Victoria,' and it really does not seem as if American liberty amounted to very much."⁴³ Inability to control legislatures, arbitrary treatment by courts, and violent conduct by police and private forces seemed to confirm that there was not one law protecting equal citizenship but two systems of law for two different classes. The law prevented boycotts but permitted blacklists, inhibited labor organizations but promoted business corporations, enjoined strikes but respected lockouts.⁴⁴

³⁷ Ibid., 456.

³⁸ William McKee, "Co-Operative Shoe Factory," *JUL*, September 25, 1884, 797.

³⁹ On the role of these comparisons as they first appear in debates about wage-slavery, see Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery*.

⁴⁰ Swinton, "Bonapartism in America."

⁴¹ "Our Bitter Foes! True Sentiments of Our Industrial Oligarchy," *Labor Leaf* 1, no. 48 (October 7, 1885), 3.

⁴² "A Union Protest: Against Police Ruffianism in Philadelphia," *Labor Leaf* 1, no. 48 (October 7, 1885).

⁴³ "(Right of Free Assemblage)," *Knights of Labor* 1, no. 27 (October 9, 1886), 8. See also "Fate Marked the Cards before the Game Began," *Knights of Labor* 1, no. 32 (November 13, 1886). *Knights of Labor* hereafter *KoL*.

⁴⁴ "Law and the Boycott," *JUL* VII, no. 20 (January 29, 1887), 2268; "Boycotting May Be Illegal"; L. W. Richter, "Discharge of a Mechanic," *JUL* VII, no. 2 (May 25, 1886), 2077; "Rumblings All Over," *JSP* 2, no. 93 (July 19, 1885).

Yet, if political and administrative corruption were deeply important to labor republicans, it was not the issue that set them apart from other critics of the new industrial system. Although many were willing to argue that extreme wealth corrupted political liberty, fewer were willing to drive the analysis into the heart of the labor contract and the industrial workplace. Labor republicans distinguished themselves by arguing that *even if* the law were created and enforced fairly, it would still operate in a way that left workers dependent on employers. Here labor republicans made three overlapping arguments about the structural and personal dimensions of modern wage-slavery. They argued there was domination *prior to* the making of the contract, *in the making of* the contract itself, and then *in the workplace* itself. The purpose of criticizing these three "moments" of domination was to rebut the basic *laissez-faire* republican proposition that the capacity to labor was a commodity like any other, and that a worker could be protected from the arbitrary will of an employer by guaranteeing the worker's property right in his own labor and freedom to make a labor contract. Let us take each of these three moments in turn.

The First Moment of Wage-Slavery: Structural Domination and "Seeming Free"

One of the most consistent arguments labor republicans made was that just because a contract was voluntary did not mean it was made freely. The workers "*assent but they do not consent, they submit but do not agree*,"⁴⁵ said George McNeill. Or, as one "Meddlesome" put it, "*freedom of contract is not free, but only seeming free*."⁴⁶ The labor contract was a "seeming freedom" because the worker, though legally free to sell or not sell his labor, was nonetheless compelled to sell his labor. As one Knight put it, "the producers are slaves.... Even the children and women of the American laborer are driven, from necessity ... to toil from dawn till night, that others may luxuriate in overabundance."⁴⁷ In one sense, this was the identical argument of the earlier Workies and National Reformers, who condemned the "necessitous circumstances" that made wage-laborers into slaves.⁴⁸ But the later labor republicans refined the argument through an analysis of the labor commodity. As owners of their labor, wage-laborers were compelled to sell their labor-commodity, because they could not withhold it from the market: "[I]f, in the place where the laborer lives, the demand for his commodity falls or ceases altogether, he cannot, like the employer, stop offering his goods and wait for a better time."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Quoted in Oestreicher, "Terence V. Powderly, the Knights of Labor, and Artisanal Republicanism," 42.

⁴⁶ Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism*, 94.

⁴⁷ Jelley, *The Voice of Labor*, 279.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 3.

⁴⁹ "Review of Cherouny," *JSP* 2, no. 87 (June 7, 1885).

A case of "to sell or not sell" =
well free
structural
condition

The worker had to eat. He thus had to sell his labor at whatever price the current market offered.

At one level, this was not an argument against labor contracts themselves, but rather about the special character of the capacity to labor as a commodity. Since it was inextricable from the physical person of the worker, workers had to have some economic means to withhold that commodity from the market, otherwise their property rights in their labor were a sham: "[T]he anti-slavery idea was, that every man had the right to come and go at will. The labor movement asks how much this abstract right is actually worth, without the power to exercise it."⁵⁰ The labor republican argument for unions, which can bargain collectively and can use membership dues to pay their members to withhold their labor until a better deal is struck, derived from this view of the labor market. As George McNeill put it in congressional testimony,

The fact is, there is no such thing as liberty of contract between a wage worker and an employer.... A starving man cannot contract with a man of wealth; a man that is compelled to sell his labor or starve can not make a contract. A man that is not removed from starvation by at least two or three months is not in a condition to make a contract.... [T]he union is to the wage laborer what the republican form of government is to the citizen of the union.⁵¹

For true freedom of contract to exist, workers had to be able to control their commodity, with its special characteristics, the way other property-owners controlled theirs. They needed some degree of *material* independence, allowing them to withhold their commodity from the market for a time, so they could meet as equals in the bargaining relationship.

But labor republicans were not just interested in making labor contracts "truly free" because, at least in the mass labor market, they thought that was not possible.⁵² Although a union might temporarily alleviate the pressure on workers, it could not eliminate the basic compulsion he faced. Support from a union might allow him to temporarily withhold his labor, but he could not permanently do so. He still had no reasonable alternative to selling his labor. Here the labor republican analysis of power and dependence pushed past the dominant metaphor of property-ownership itself. As an article from the *Journal of United Labor* put it:

A considerable percentage of those who are wage laborers to-day owe to the change in methods of production the fact that they are such, and their condition should be

⁵⁰ Steward, "Poverty," 412.

⁵¹ *Report of the Industrial Commission on the Relations and Conditions of Capital and Labor Employed in Manufactures and General Business, Including Testimony So Far as Taken November 1, 1900, and Digest of Testimony Vol. 7* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1901), 115. Hereafter *Report of the Industrial Commission Vol. 7*.

⁵² McNeill himself makes this clear in his testimony: "Before I get through, perhaps, you will understand that I do not believe in the wage system: but as long as it continues we will simply modify and improve it until we get out of it." *Report of the Industrial Commission Vol. 7*, 118.

compared not with that of the wage laborers of fifty years ago, but with that of the independent, self-employing artisan of that time.⁵³

Whether a wage-laborer today had more bargaining power or earned more than the wage-laborer from the past was not the relevant question because it failed to capture a crucial transformation in power relationships. An independent producer, working his own tools or land, could meet his own needs without selling his labor at all. He only sold his labor occasionally, to augment his income, or purchase some luxury, but he met his basic needs by consuming or selling the products of his labor. Since he could support himself and his family without selling his labor-power, he was not forced to sell his labor-power. Importantly, the point was not that the independent producer was free from economic need itself, but that he had a way of satisfying those basic needs without entering the labor market. The existence of this alternative meant that, when making a labor contract, he did so as one economically independent actor making an agreement with another. But if that really became the case, then labor contracts would become irregular features of the economy, not the core institution organizing productive activity. In Ira Steward's pithy summation: "If laborers were sufficiently free to make contracts ... they would be too free to need contracts."⁵⁴

The current distribution of property, however, left most wage-laborers with no such alternative to selling their labor. They *needed* to make contracts because they were "dependent on wages received from a separate capitalist class"⁵⁵ for their survival. As the author of "Industrial Ideas," a series of lectures serialized in the *Journal*, put it, since this wage-dependence came not from nature but human law, it counted as a form of subjection:

The land, the tools and materials of labor are still the exclusive property of the privileged few, and the worker cannot produce without giving himself a boss or master. It must not be supposed that the proclamation of emancipation liberated mankind from slavery. The most odious, because the most subtle form of slavery – wages slavery – remains to be abolished.⁵⁶

Again, the problem was not that a person had to work, but that he "cannot produce without giving himself a boss or master." The laws protecting the current distribution of property arbitrarily removed the one reasonable alternative to working for another person. That, in itself, was a form of domination, exercised by the entire class of property owners and the state agents protecting them. It did not matter that the laws no longer specified which master controlled which slave because the prevailing distribution of property guaranteed that workers would have to work under some "boss or master." The

⁵³ "Some Economic and Social Effects of Machinery," *JUL* VI, no. 20 (February 25, 1886), 2011.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, 96.

⁵⁵ "Some Economic and Social Effects of Machinery."

⁵⁶ "Industrial Ideas Chapter II," *JUL* VII, no. 4 (June 25, 1886), 2097–99, 2098.

I cannot work without giving myself

especially bitter feature of this form of subjection was that the individual's consent was mobilized against him, he "*gave himself*" a master rather than had the master directly imposed on him.

Labor republicans could criticize this form of structural domination without denying that wage-labor was relatively freer than chattel slavery. Henry Sharpe, a leading theorist of cooperation for the Knights, drew attention to this point:

In slavery the slave was totally dependent on a force outside himself; he was driven to work, and had no interest in the affairs of life other than to keep the lash off his back. In the wage-system there are, it is true, some prizes, nay, many prizes, and many objects of interest, and many avenues for independent action, yet the condition of the man is largely still one of dependence; they are forced to work.⁵⁷

There may be "many prizes" and it might even be possible for some wage-workers to become business owners, but most could not, and they could not *all* become property-owners in this economy.⁵⁸ The majority of propertyless workers would always be dependent on wages. They were free to "give themselves a master," but they could not choose not to have one. *

Although labor republicans did not call this "structural domination," I use that phrase to distinguish this argument from other elements of their social analysis. Structural is the appropriate word because it was a form of domination arising from the background structure of property ownership and because the compulsion they felt did not force them to work for a specific individual. It is not that the "structure" was somehow an "agent," nor that there were no dominating agents. There were, in this case, many dominating agents – all those who defended property distributions that left the majority propertyless.⁵⁹ Through human design and institution, workers were left with no reasonable alternative but to sell their labor.

However, even if we can distinguish conceptually between this form of structural domination and other, more personal forms, in practice labor republicans thought the moments ran together. The full extent of wage-slavery could only be appreciated by understanding how structural domination connected up with a particular employer's power over his employee's when it came to specifying the terms of the contract and, after that, controlling the workplace itself.

The Second Moment of Wage-Slavery: The Terms of Labor

Although the structural element of wage-slavery might seem abstract and impersonal, it quickly became concrete and personal when employers exploited a

⁵⁷ Henry E. Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *JUL*, November 1883, 597.

⁵⁸ See also "Industrial Ideas Chapter IV," *JUL* VII, no. 7 (August 10, 1886), 2133–35, 2134.

⁵⁹ I have analyzed this conceptual issue in greater detail in Gourevitch, "Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work," 591–617.

THE condition under which the laborer is made and not equitable

worker's structural disadvantages. The following passage describes an employer taking advantage of that dependence:

The absence of actual equality between the two parties to the labor contract make the terms of the sale unavoidably one of compulsion. Nor can the laborer, like other commodities, seek a distant market or hold himself aloof until better terms are offered ... Moreover, labor, besides accepting compulsory rates, must also labor under such conditions as the employer may impose. These may, of themselves, be destructive to health, and thus lessen the value of the commodity itself.⁶⁰

Insofar as the employer was able to arbitrarily extract as much value from the worker as he could manage, without consideration for the worker, this amounted to a kind of servitude:

when 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, whether the slave is held in chattel bondage or in wages bondage, he is equally a slave.⁶¹

This was, in one sense, just a revival of the earlier Worky argument that the function of economic dependence was to get some to work for others, in exchange for only an arbitrary fraction of the amount of value they themselves produce. This argument was meant to demonstrate that economic dependence was central to the way society reproduced itself; it was not just the occasional objectionable instance but a systemic form that made the profits of the idle possible.

However, labor republicans further developed this argument by using the dominant language of property-ownership. Enjoying property rights in their capacity to labor gave workers nominal, not full control, over their labor. They were compelled to agree to the terms of its sale and to lose control over the fruits of their labor:

We obtain in exchange for the most severe labor a salary which hardly prevents us from dying of hunger; in fear that at each moment dull times may drive us into forced idleness ... we forego, in exchange for a stipulated salary – pittance – all claims or right to the fruits of our labor.⁶²

Labor republicans even believed that employers were well aware of the function of poverty and unemployment in augmenting the employer's power over the contract. One Knight criticized

the employers, who would not have been sorry to see the poverty of their hands augmented temporarily so that their dependence in the future might have been made more certain, at the same time their boldness in striking was being rebuked. There are such

manufacturers, wise, farseeing business men-who [thereby] ... gain undisputed control over their workers.⁶³

The more extreme the economic need and the greater the competition among workers, the greater the latter's dependence on an employer. The more intense the dependence, the more the employer could impose his will on the terms to which a worker consented. "No amount of sophistry will ever make him regard such a life as aught else than slavery," wrote one local Master Workman; "[s]ociety makes labor terrible to him, and circumstances place other means of winning bread beyond his reach."⁶⁴ Low wages, long hours, though better than unemployment, were hardly the terms of a contract to which properly independent economic actors would agree. In fact, as we have seen, a major argument not just for unionization and collective action, but for labor regulations – such as banning payment in script, abolishing convict and child labor, and instituting maximum hours laws – was that they reduced the kinds of terms that employers were able to impose at their own discretion.⁶⁵ Although these regulations could not abolish the dependence of the wage-laborer on the employer, they could at least limit the kinds of arbitrary power he could exercise over the terms of contract. More generally, this analysis of the contract helped explain why employers sought dependence. Insofar as structural domination translated into personal domination in the setting of terms, employers enjoyed an arbitrary superiority in the ability to extract concessions from the workers.

The Third Moment of Wage-Slavery: "The Caprice of he who Pays the Wages"

The ability to impose terms on the contract easily slid into an even more objectionable form of domination in the workplace itself. In fact, we can only fully appreciate the intellectual debt these critics owed to specifically republican thinking when we consider their description of life after the contract is made and once the worker entered the workplace. Here is where the subjection became most "classically republican" in the sense of one individual being under the power of another specific will. Labor republicans' most deeply felt grievances were often not just with what the contract said – long hours and low pay – but with what it left unsaid – everything else. With respect to the million and one conditions of work not spelled out in the initial agreement, the silence of the contract really expressed the muteness of the worker and the voice of the employer. Both as a matter of legal right and of cultural assumption, it was expected that once the contract was made the worker would passively obey the commands of the employer.

⁶⁰ "Labor's Disadvantage," *JUL* VIII, no. 27 (January 7, 1888), 2554.

⁶¹ "Wages Slavery and Chattel Slavery," 702.

⁶² "Industrial Ideas Chapter I," *JUL* VII, no. 3 (June 10, 1886), 2085–88, 2085. "Chapters on Labor: Chapter v (Continued)"; "A Sketch of Political Economy Chapter I"; Egbert Hasard, "Our Full Fruition," *JUL*, August 15, 1880.

⁶³ Robert D. Layton, "Salutatory," *JUL*, October 15, 1881.

⁶⁴ The Master Workman of L A 1573, "An Essay on the 'Evils Resulting From Long Hours and Exhaustive Toil,'" *JUL*, October 15, 1881, 159–60.

⁶⁵ Richter, "Discharge of a Mechanic," 2077.

Consider the four following passages. They are a small selection among dozens of similarly worded complaints, each oozing with that familiar republican contempt for servility and dependence:

Is there a workshop where obedience is not demanded – not to the difficulties or qualities of the labor to be performed – but to the caprice of he who pays the wages of his servants?⁶⁶

Thus is sycophancy deified in our workshops ... thus is abject servility ennobled, as it were, by bosses and foremen.... He who is a thorough, quiet, firm and independent [worker], the boss looks on as his most dangerous enemy, for he cannot be changed or put down; but he who is the most sycophantic, pandering to all the whims of his boss, the boss looks upon as his ideal workman, to be raised above his fellows as an example for them to look up to, watch and imitate.⁶⁷

Liberty consists in being able to satisfy all one's wants, to develop all one's faculties, without in any way depending upon the caprice of one's fellow-beings, which is impossible if man cannot produce upon his own responsibility. So long as the workman works for a boss, a master, he is not free. "You must obey," the master will say, "for since I assume the responsibility of the undertaking, I alone have the right to its direction."⁶⁸

the degrading influence of the wages-slavery system.... To be dependent upon an employer who frequently merits disdain and inspires disgust, and yet be compelled to execute his commands and submit to his caprice; to have no thought but that which is filtered through the brain – less powerful than his own – of a boss, an employer, a master.⁶⁹

This language is so familiar that, if we changed just a few words, we could easily imagine these were the grievances of American colonists or early British parliamentarians condemning the arbitrary power of colonial governors and the absolute monarch. Yet these words now described the world of the voluntary labor contract. They were directed at a new relationship, one in many ways much more pervasive, because of its immediacy and daily regularity, than that of a people subject to their arbitrary magistrate. A worker spent many hours of a day, for most of his life, working for a boss.

It is important to observe that these critics of workplace domination were not (just) indicting the bad character of a few employers. Instead, the "caprice" here referred to the objective features of the labor contract as a sale of the labor commodity. Their claim was that a contract necessarily involved subjection of the worker to the employer regardless of how that employer then used his power. A labor contract, said one Knight, "assumes that labor shall not be a party to the sale of itself beyond rejecting or accepting the terms offered. This purchase of labor gives control over the laborer his physical intellectual, social and moral existence. The conditions of the contract determine the degree of

⁶⁶ Unsigned, "Chapters on Labor: Chapter VIII (Continued)," *JUL*, December 25, 1885 1153.

⁶⁷ "Hard Words of 'Nobody,'" *JSP* 2, no. 71 (February 15, 1885).

⁶⁸ "Industrial Ideas Chapter III," *JUL* VII, no. 5 (July 10, 1886), 2109–11, 2010.

⁶⁹ "Industrial Ideas Chapter VI," *JUL* VII, no. 10 (October 25, 1886), 2169–70.

this rulership."⁷⁰ It was a mockery of the idea of consent to say that the worker, by agreeing to sell his labor, had thereby consented to every command of the boss, and thus followed only his own will. The actual contract was exactly the opposite, an agreement *not* to control those decisions – an agreement of subjection.

✓ In fact, to labor republicans, the whole point of the contract was that the worker had consented to evacuate his will, to suspend its exercise for the period of employment. Outside violating the very general terms of the contract, the employer was at liberty to do what he liked. Here was where labor republicans drove home their argument against the laissez-faire republicans. The basic logic of any contract to sell property was that sale of a commodity involves giving over ownership and control rights of that commodity to the buyer. But the special character of the labor commodity – as a physical commodity (the body) inseparable from the seller's person – meant the labor contract was necessarily an agreement to give up control over the seller's will for the duration of the working day. That, said George McNeill, was why the contract was by definition an instrument of subjection:

Labor is more than a commodity in that he who sells his labor sells himself. The present system is in conflict with republican institutions.... Man should sell the product of his labor, and there can be no liberty until man has restored his right and power to sell the product of his time, skill, and endurance.⁷¹

A labor contract is necessarily a kind of "sale of oneself." It would not be a sale of labor if the purchaser, namely the employer, were denied the right to do with it as he pleases. It was therefore an inescapable aspect of the contract that the worker would, while at work, have to substitute the employer's will for his own. Any good republican knew that being subject to the will of another was the definition of servitude:

We have a market for labor which is a slave market.... Labor is activity of the various mental and physical powers which are inseparably connected with the person who sells it. A sale of labor is a transfer of the use of this bodily and mental activity during the hours of labor, and consequently a dominion over it during that time.⁷²

Here was why they said the labor contract was inextricably tied to making the worker live by the "caprice" of another. Whether the employer ruled benevolently or cruelly, it was still the case that the worker was under the arbitrary power of the employer – a power defended in law.

Of course, labor republicans were quick to add that, although wage-labor would still be servile if the employer was benevolent, the great evil of this condition was to be found in the way in which employers actually tended to use their power. After all, the employer's aim was to extract as much work as

⁷⁰ "Labor's Disadvantage," 2554.

⁷¹ *Report of the Industrial Commission* Vol. 7, 115.

⁷² "Review of Cherouny."

possible for as little pay. That is to say, employers did not possess some irrational will to dominate, or at least not all of them; instead, they materially benefited from their relationship of domination and thus exercised their power in ways that maintained that authority and worked against the interests of workers. During a famous 1883 inquiry into labor relations by the U.S. Senate, one Senator asked a witness, "well, what is the nature of the intercourse between the superintendent and the employes [sic] generally?" The witness, Secretary of the Executive Board of the Knights of Labor, John McLelland, answered, "generally the superintendent is overbearing – orders on one side and submission on the other."⁷³ Their examples of this overbearing use of power included "abolition of the luncheon privilege,"⁷⁴ being fired for reading a labor paper or expressing political views,⁷⁵ sexual harassment,⁷⁶ arbitrary penalties and wage-deductions,⁷⁷ and unnecessarily dangerous workplaces.⁷⁸ Many strikes of the period were sparked by the desire to eradicate these practices and more generally to demand greater worker control over the activity work.⁷⁹ Workers were at once deprived of the fruits of their labor and denied control over that labor.

The labor republican analysis of the labor contract helps us understand their view of machinery. Labor republicans, as we shall see later, were not luddites who viewed technology itself with suspicion, but they did object to the way in which it became part of the employer's apparatus of control. If workers were expected to be spontaneously and seamlessly obedient to the commands of bosses, then machines presented a terrifying, modern image of the perfection of this servitude. The automatic and inhuman capacity to serve the commands of the employer without resistance became a nightmarish ideal. A characteristic version of the complaint began: "[M]en are made to work harder than they used to, many employers attempting to run their productive capacity up to near that of machinery." It continued, "thus, while machinery is itself the product of labor, it is used to rob and enslave labor."⁸⁰ The Senate testimony

⁷³ *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital*, 219.

⁷⁴ *Report of the Industrial Commission Vol. 7*, 116.

⁷⁵ Swinton, "Making War on This Paper."

⁷⁶ "The Present Need of Woman," *JUL* VII, no. 14 (November 25, 1886), 2211; Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (1983), 323–39.

⁷⁷ "The Yonkers Strike," *JSP* 2, no. 73 (March 1, 1885).

⁷⁸ "Some Economic and Social Effects of Machinery"; "Labor's Disadvantage."

⁷⁹ For examples that include loss of the lunch hour, employer rape and arbitrary fining of female garment-workers, and loss of the comfort of sitting on stools see (Testimony of George McNeill), *Report of the Industrial Commission Vol. 7*, 116; Paul Buhle, "The Republic of Labor: The Knights in Rhode Island," in *From the Knights of Labor to the New World Order: Essay on Labor and Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 20; Levine, *Labor's True Woman*, 56–59.

⁸⁰ "The Thing in a Nutshell," *JUL* I, no. 7 (November 15, 1880), 67.

of a Knight gave the same account of machines mediating the enslavement of worker to employer:

We find in many of those large institutions that the men are looked upon as nothing more than parts of the machinery that they work. They are labeled and tagged, as the parts of a machine would be, and are only taken into account as a part of the machinery used for the profit of the manufacturer or employer. . . . The working people feel that they are under a system of forced slavery.⁸¹

Forced labor

Machines, on this account, increased productivity not just by simplifying tasks but by breaking down the worker's will into a more easily employed, less resistant apparatus. As another Knight put it, "the employer exercises over labor an influence that can scarcely be given a name, but it is potent and is felt by labor in all his affairs." His opinions are not his own but belong to his master."⁸² Here was a further reason why labor republicans thought that, "the wage-labor system . . . makes the employer a despot, and the employee a slave."⁸³ Having given up control over his activity, the worker was then made to conform his activity to inhuman standards of behavior.

It is worth pausing to note how far the republican theory of liberty has traveled here. Recall that the early English republican, Algernon Sidney, despite writing words that the Knights found so inspiring, was author of such statements as "if there be a contest between me and my servant concerning my service, I only am to decide it: He must serve me in my own way, or be gone if I think fit, tho he serve me never so well; and I do him no wrong in putting him away."⁸⁴ In those lines, Sidney sounds more like a forefather of the labor republicans' worst enemies. During a Knight-led strike of carpet-weavers, the employer's journal complained of the way organized Knights "attempt to dictate to the proprietors of mills with regard to management of their business." They worried that the strike, if successful, would leave them "nominal owners of the mills, but practical control . . . would have been vested in the Knights of Labor."⁸⁵ In fact, those nineteenth-century figures who objected to workers "seeking to legislate concerning the ways in which industry shall be carried on" and accused them of trying to "overbear the rightful authority of the employer"⁸⁶ could very well have laid more direct claim to being Sidney's intellectual progeny than the Knights. To argue that labor contracts and the workplace were sites of domination was no simple, straightforward extension of the republican concept of liberty. It required careful analysis of

⁸¹ *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital*, 218–19.

⁸² "Labor's Disadvantage."

⁸³ McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 454–5.

⁸⁴ Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government Vol II* (Edinburgh: G. Hamilton and J. Balfour, 1750), 339.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Levine, *Labor's True Woman*, 86.

⁸⁶ Francis Amasa Walker quoted Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract*, 83.

the dynamics of a labor contract and the wider consequences of property rights. Perhaps the most innovative element of this analysis was the critique of the commodification of labor and its relation to domination in the workplace. While the labor republicans gave a coherent account of wage-labor as wage-slavery, it was at war with a certain common sense, not to mention with a prevailing interest in an alternative and narrower interpretation of the republican theory.

"To Engraft Republican Principles into Our Industrial System"

By now it should be clear what labor republicans meant when they said "our rulers, statesmen and orators have not attempted to engraft republican principles into our industrial system, and have forgotten or denied its underlying principles."⁸⁷ They meant that the paradox of slavery was unresolved. Workers still experienced various forms of servitude. For one, the formal apparatus of the state was corrupt, undermining the legal independence of the citizen. And even if the rule of law were universally effective, the three interconnected forms of domination would remain. The propertyless worker was structurally dominated prior to the contract, and personally dominated in the making of the contract and once at work. The logical thrust of this critique was to say that slavery would remain so long as the labor contract was the basis for organizing the distribution of and control over work.

But what, then, could it mean to "engraft republican principles on [the] industrial system?" The answer to that question required more than critique. After all, the "industrial system" referred to more than the relationships between workers and employers. It also comprised a changed relation *among* workers and changes in the nature of work itself. Perhaps the defining feature of this new organization was its collective character. Labor republicans frequently observed that the ostensibly atomistic features of this system, based on individual effort, private profits, and "competition,"⁸⁸ were in fact reorganizing themselves on a cooperative basis. This reorganization of work was already visible in the "combination of employers" into a "union whose object was to make profit from the sale of their product, and to secure from other men as much labor as possible, at the lowest rate of compensation."⁸⁹ The tendency toward combination was no accident. It was the natural consequence of a society based on the pursuit of self-interest: "America is at the front of the forward line of evolution. It has taken the lead in developing competition to the extreme form in which it destroys competition."⁹⁰ Although it currently

⁸⁷ McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 456.

⁸⁸ Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor 1859-1889*, 30.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Henry Demarest Lloyd, *Wealth against Commonwealth* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963 [1894]), 180.

served the interests of the few, that was not a necessary consequence of this organizational trend:

no fault should be found with this tendency to combine. It is the natural tendency of organic life.... The system by which a *few* combine to enrich themselves at the expense of the many, is the very system by which the *many* can protect themselves against the few and secure an independence and happiness now unknown.⁹¹

Competition had produced monopoly, cartelization, and other large corporations.⁹² Individualism had turned into its opposite.

The isolated, industrious competitor had only a spectator's role to play in this world. As Powderly put it, "we may boast of the individual enterprise of the American people as much as we please, but it has NO CHANCE when thrown into competition with the combination and the pool."⁹³ When competing against a massive supply of labor and large corporations, it was nearly impossible for the individual, on his own, to exercise much control over the terms of his contract. This was true not just in the labor market but inside the workplace. Workers were brought together in factories, their individual activities joined together as part of a shared process, and the regulation of tasks brought under the unified control of the manager.⁹⁴ We shall return to the labor republican response to the technical side of industrial production, but the point here regards the social aspect. Labor was now inescapably organized on a collective basis, as an integrated activity requiring conscious coordination among workers.

It was evident from this consolidation of productive activities that the time when each worker might individually control his activity, as a matter of personal dominion, was receding. There was no turning this aspect of production back to the days of the small producer. According to Powderly,

Once it was deemed a healthy sign to have different lines of railway running through a town. Cheap freight rates and easy transportation could be expected then but to-day that hope is dead, and combination of interests will stand between the town and prosperity if the railways will it so.⁹⁵

What mattered to Powderly here was not just high prices, but the way in which the competitive process tended toward its opposite. In an inversion of the (increasingly mythological) Lincolnian story about the temporary wage-laborer earning enough to buy his own plot or tools, Powderly relates the story of a man who bought land with his small, 50-dollar savings, and then watched

⁹¹ Mrs. Imogene C. Fales, "The Organization of Labor," *JUL IV*, no. 5 (September 15, 1883), 557.

⁹² This is a fact that registered across the economy and culture of the United States at the time. See Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*.

⁹³ Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor 1859-1889*, 462, capitalization in original.

⁹⁴ For a description of the reorganization of work see Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, 1-9.

⁹⁵ Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor 1859-1889*, 462.

the value of that land increase over time to 25,000 dollars because of social changes beyond the man's control.⁹⁶ For Powderly, "labor ... increased the price of his land until he pompously asserts to-day that his own habits of thrift have won for him such large gains. His thrift was but an insignificant factor to the enterprise; it was co-operation that made him rich, but all co-operators did not share the profits of the labor done."⁹⁷ In this passage, the concept of "labor" is linked to the concept of "co-operation" in a new and significant way. Labor is no longer just the concrete, particular process by which specific articles are produced – the cobbler and his shoes, the tailor and his shirts – but an abstract, collective or "co-operative" process. The various activities, by which railroad track was laid, agriculture produced, iron manufactured, and workers clothed and fed, had all contributed to turning a 50-dollar piece of land into a 25,000-dollar boon. The value of the individual piece of property was, in a sense, a collective product.⁹⁸

The puzzle that labor republicans had to sort out was how, exactly, it would be possible to make the idea of independence consistent with these inescapable collective or "cooperative" features of modern labor. After all, the original vision of free labor had assumed that the citizen-worker would enjoy the kind of mastery associated with pure dominion. By their own analysis, later labor republicans appeared to inherit a choice between unattractive alternatives: nostalgia for the days of artisanal production, or, what amounted to almost the same thing, giving up on the republican theory altogether. If their critique of wage-labor was accurate, it nonetheless appeared to be a further implication of their social analysis that there was no forward looking project to be offered in republican terms.

"Abolish as Rapidly as Possible, the Wage System, Substituting Co-operation Therefore": Cooperation and Independence

The labor republicans responded to the historical challenge by arguing, with the consistency of a party line, that the principle of cooperative production could resolve the dilemma of how to universalize republican liberty in an industrial economy.⁹⁹ An economy of interdependent producer and consumer cooperatives, collectively owned and managed by workers, could eliminate the forms of subjection that arose in the labor market. As famously stated in

⁹⁶ Ibid., 455–59.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 462–63.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 456.

⁹⁹ See the defense of cooperation in just about every representative text of the time. Jelley, *The Voice of Labor*, 253–74; McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 508–31; Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor 1859–1889*, 452–70; Sharpe, "Co-Operation"; William H. Sylvius, "Co-Operation," in *The Life, Speeches, Labors and Essays of William H. Sylvius*, ed. James C. Sylvius (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872). Also Horner, "Producers' Co-Operatives in the United States, 1865–1890," 1–52; Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 41–46.

the Declaration of Principles of the Knights of Labor, and repeated endlessly in various speeches and pamphlets, the basic proposition was "to abolish as rapidly as possible, the wage system, substituting co-operation therefore."¹⁰⁰ The idea of cooperation was so central to the Knights' vision that the *Journal* ran a specially edited section in each issue under the heading "Co-operation," which included reports from cooperative ventures around the world, extracts of cooperative tracts, potted histories of cooperation, advice for forming cooperatives, and the correspondence of members.¹⁰¹ They also formed a fund to help promote cooperatives, and one of their major cooperative activists, John Samuel, wrote the most widely distributed "how-to" manual for starting a cooperative.¹⁰²

The labor republicans saw the cooperative principle as a modern answer to republican problems for two interrelated reasons. First, as we have seen, labor republicans believed that the cooperative character of labor was already a *fact* about industrial society, but it had not yet been articulated as a principle. The principles of individual ownership and freedom of contract were in some sense in conflict with the realities of the economy that had grown up underneath them. In one pithy formulation, "men's expanding powers of cooperation bring them to the conscious ability to unite for new benefits; but this extension of individuality is forbidden in the name of individuality."¹⁰³ Cooperation was an alternative principle, suited both to the moral and social realities of an industrial republic. As one study of cooperation argued, "co-operation is equally adapted to large or small enterprises-to very moderate or most extensive operations," because it was a matter of who governed the work activity and who received the profits, not the scale of the undertaking.¹⁰⁴ This adaptability of cooperation reflected the underlying reality that both large and small undertakings shared the same essential feature of being coordinated, not isolated, labor activities.

Second, cooperation was not just a fact of industrial organization but also an alternative to the principle of "competition" defining the wage-labor system. It meant shared ownership and control of productive resources. As one proponent argued, there would be an evolution from a "degrading stage of mere wage slavery to one of profit-sharing, in which all are recognized as equals, or better still, to a universal system of co-operative production."¹⁰⁵ It must be noted that the distinction between profit-sharing, in which workers received some of the profits after debts and dividends were paid, and "true" cooperation,

¹⁰⁰ Jelley, *The Voice of Labor*, 203.

¹⁰¹ The section was started by Henry Sharpe, first head of the Knights' Co-operative Fund. This section ran alongside feature articles on similar topics.

¹⁰² Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 12–13. On Samuel's pamphlet, see John Samuel, "An Experiment Which May Be Tried in Any Local Assembly," *JUL*, July 1886, 2139.

¹⁰³ Lloyd, *Wealth against Commonwealth*, 178.

¹⁰⁴ Jelley, *The Voice of Labor*, 262.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 362, quoting David Ross.

which included worker ownership and management, was not always clear.¹⁰⁶ Cooperation had multiple meanings as an organizational principle,¹⁰⁷ but it nearly always meant something akin to every worker having access to productive resources through membership in an association of producers.

Even more important, unlike the conception of cooperation first put forward by the famous Rochdale pioneers, who were a major influence in American circles, labor republicans insisted on *producer*, not just consumer, cooperatives.¹⁰⁸ Consumer cooperatives aimed at using collective purchasing power to cut out middlemen, eliminate merchant profits, and sell at cost to keep basic goods cheap. Although labor republicans formed many consumer cooperatives, they were clear that the principle of cooperation had to be applied to production, otherwise it could hardly meet the challenge of wage-slavery. Shared ownership and control addressed structural dependence by giving a worker an alternative to selling his labor. It gave him control over more of what he produced, which meant freedom from the compulsion to work for another. As Sylvis put it, cooperation "renders the workman independent of necessities which often compel him to submit to hectoring, domineering, and insults of every kind."¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, as a form of control not just ownership, cooperative production eliminated workers' personal subjection to employers in the workplace. They were under their own, collective authority.

The identification of cooperative production with the recovery of control over work was one of the labor republicans' most important conceptual moves. Because industrial labor was cooperative as a matter of fact, there was no return to the farmer's individual control over his activity. Instead, the productive control of the free laborer could only mean equal, collective rule over their joint activity. That they were trying to make sense of how a worker could

¹⁰⁶ E.g., "Co-Operation: a Lecture Delivered before the Local Assemblies of Easton, PA., by Charles Summerman, of the State Labor Bureau of New Jersey," *JUL* VI, no. 17 (January 10, 1886); "To Wages Add Profits: Economic Doctrine Not Down in the Books," *JSP* 1, no. 8 (December 2, 1883).

¹⁰⁷ There were various meanings of cooperation in play at this time, not all of them theorized in republican terms. For a discussion of these meanings, see Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920*, 40-45; Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 4-6, 28. It is worth noting that this republican cooperative movement was not exclusively American and bears strong affinities to European socialist currents at the time. Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*, 22-23. John Stuart Mill's discussion of cooperative enterprises in *Principles of Political Economy* articulates many of the same ideas, and there is evidence that some of the labor republicans were aware of his work. E.g. Ira Steward, *The Eight Hour Movement: A Reduction of Hours Is an Increase of Wages* (Boston: Boston Labor Reform Association, 1865), 9-10. On Mill's 'republicanism' see Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government*, 155-201.

¹⁰⁸ On the influence of the Rochdale Pioneers and their transformation in the American context, see Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 31-32.

¹⁰⁹ William H. Sylvis, "The Uses of Co-Operation," in *The Life, Speeches, Labors and Essays of William H. Sylvis*, ed. James C. Sylvis (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872), 392.

be independent, not just "not poor," further explains why they tended to identify cooperation with active worker management, not just profit-sharing. As one Knight put it, the advantage of "co-operative industry" over the "wage system" was that "each man can feel that he is a proprietor; when he can feel that he is working for himself and not for a master; when he can feel and know that his brain and muscle weighs equally in the scale."¹¹⁰ Terence Powderly said nearly the same thing in 1880, during his first annual address to the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor, "the method by which we hope to regain our independence ... [is] by embarking in a system of COOPERATION which will eventually make every man his own master-every man his own employer."¹¹¹

Ideally speaking, cooperation guaranteed independence in the workplace by inverting the relationship between worker and manager. "To abolish wage slavery and to be our own bosses"¹¹² generally did not mean rejection of technical expertise or the need for managers.¹¹³ Instead, the principle was that managers would be accountable to workers, "running their own shops, choosing their own directors and overseers."¹¹⁴ If the cooperative idea did not reject the need for managerial expertise it did reject the converse – that workers were naturally inferior or lacked the competence to make decisions about the daily workings of the business. It is important to note this aspect of the argument for cooperation. The critics of labor republicanism not only claimed workers had no legal or moral right to demand control over the workplace, they also rejected the idea that labor could exercise this control competently. For labor republicans, however, the connection between cooperative institutions and the idea of independence lay not just in the negative case against subjection to the boss, but also in the positive idea that workers had the capacity for self-government and should be free to develop and exercise these capacities in their daily lives. The positive and negative aspects of the argument were really two sides of the same coin – subjection was wrong because the worker had the positive capacity for independent judgment. "What is it to be a SLAVE?" asked a Knight in the *Detroit Labor Leaf*, "It is to be a person consciously capable of self-government, and to be, at the same time, subject to the will of another person."¹¹⁵ Cooperation appealed to this conscious capability for self-government, imputing it to all workers, in contrast, say, to William Graham Sumner's famous claim that only "captains of industry" were competent to make economic decisions.¹¹⁶

This aspect of the cooperative message carried over into more immediate efforts to exercise control in the workplace that fell short of creating a

¹¹⁰ Jelley, *The Voice of Labor*, 261.

¹¹¹ Powderly, *The Path I Trod: The Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly*, 269.

¹¹² "Chapters on Labor: Chapter VI," *JUL* VI, no. 2 (October 10, 1885), 1093-95.

¹¹³ E.g., "Legalize Co-Operation," *KoL* 1, no. 42 (January 22, 1887); C. S. Griffin, "Our Letter Bag: Co-Operation," *KoL* 1, no. 39 (December 30, 1886).

¹¹⁴ McKee, "Co-Operative Shoe Factory," 796.

¹¹⁵ "What Is It to Be a Slave?," *Labor Leaf* 1, no. 47 (September 30, 1885).

¹¹⁶ Sumner, "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over."

cooperative enterprise. For instance, in Wanskuck, Rhode Island an assembly of Knights protested against the hazardous intensification of work. Threatening various collective actions against management, the assembly convinced management to back down, and for a time the Knights assembly was "administering the shop-floor life as a whole, by establishing the pace, cooperation between workers, and evaluation of the final product."¹¹⁷ In another example, a local assembly of garment workers at the Riverside Mills in Rhode Island saw management's decision to remove stools as the last straw in what they called a "whole history of petty tyrannies that they had been subjected to for many weeks past."¹¹⁸ The Knights' threat of organized action forced the return of stools and other concessions. Here again, the assertion of collective control, from within the wage-labor relationship, allowed these Knights to limit their subjection to bosses. When the Knights in Thibodaux, Louisiana organized the strike of cane cutters against the plantocracy, one suspects that workers were drawn to this sense that they should not have to obey passively their overseers and might even one day run things themselves.¹¹⁹

Perhaps the most powerful evidence of the connection between cooperation and independence as a positive capacity of self-government is found in the extraordinary initiative of local Knights assemblies in setting up their own cooperatives, often without any initial guidance or help from their national organization. The Knights' local papers were full of announcements of new cooperatives formed – newspapers and textile mills, coopers and shoe-makers, glass blowers and miners, groceries and farms.¹²⁰ Moreover, the Knights spread the cooperative idea to groups that had been excluded from earlier phases of the cooperative movement, including unskilled workers, blacks, and women.¹²¹ Female workers organized their own cooperatives and housewives even applied the cooperative concept to their own work, creating shared housework and purchasing schemes.¹²² Here were workers taking seriously the idea that they did not just have to take orders. It is no surprise that cooperation made a quantum leap from prior decades, leading to roughly

¹¹⁷ Buhle, "The Republic of Labor: the Knights in Rhode Island," 3–39.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 20.

¹¹⁹ See description of this episode in the Introduction.

¹²⁰ Just about every issue of papers like *Labor Leaf*, *Knights of Labor*, and *John Swinton's Paper* contain such lists. For instance, the August 26, 1885 issue of *Labor Leaf* reports the earnings from the Industrial Cooperative Association of New England, and notes the activities of the Plymouth Rock cooperative shoe store, the Kingston Co-operative Foundry, and the Co-operative Store of Salem. Or, the November 13, 1886 issue of *Knights of Labor* reports on the following cooperatives: cigarmakers in Weaverville, Pennsylvania; glassmakers in Des Moines, Iowa; Philadelphia cigarmakers and hatters; Wilmington glass-workers; Frankford textile workers; and women garment workers in Chicago.

¹²¹ On this conservative dimension of earlier cooperative efforts, see Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 33–41.

¹²² Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," 326, 328–29.

500 producer cooperatives, and thousands of consumer co-ops, employing tens of thousands of workers.¹²³

It should be noted that the Knights not only made the idea of cooperation more universal but also changed its scope. A national organization of labor made possible thinking of cooperative production not just as a local activity but also as coordinated economic activity on a national scale. They sometimes referred to cooperation as not just a few experiments but what they called "a universal system of co-operative production" or "integral co-operation:"

not any kind, or any measure, of co-operation will outwork our emancipation from the wage-condition ... integral co-operation is the whole or complete organization of production and distribution for the benefit of the whole body of those concerned in the production. ... A body of men in integral co-operation ... would practically have formed an industrial state, the members of which employing their own labor and consuming their own products would be self-sustaining, therefore independent of the money-market and of the wage-market.¹²⁴

This view of cooperative production as an "industrial state" stood in contrast to the separate, utopian communities of the early Owenites and Fourierists for whom secession from wider society was a real possibility. The Knights also made thinkable a somewhat more centralizing vision than that of earlier cooperators, who, at most, conceived of city-wide markets. For labor republicans, the purpose of forming smaller cooperatives was so that they would grow, by brute success and by example, into a kind of republican state within a state that could continue to expand:

If those members of the different branches of industry that believe the only solution to the labor question is co-operation, let them come to the front and organize our physical, moral and financial forces into a state within a state, that is, to produce what it becomes necessary to consume according to our natural wants; once accomplished, we would not have to depend on others for a bare living.¹²⁵

Although formation of these local cooperative colonies could happen right away, and its members would immediately be free of the dependence of wage-labor, their wider aim was not separation from society but social transformation. Such colonies were viewed as exemplary instances of the possibilities for a nationally integrated cooperative system. As the *Journal* put it, they sought

to influence such a large body of people as compose this nation, and we seek to bring its government into line with our ideas, we shall have a successful experiment to which we can refer, to emphasize our arguments.¹²⁶

¹²³ Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 2.

¹²⁴ "Co-operation" *JUL* V, no. 1 (May 25, 1884), p. 694. Also "Integral Co-operation," *JUL* IV, no. 11 (1884), 664.

¹²⁵ Henry Fecker, "A Paper Read before L.A. 1450: Lawrenceburg, Ind., Jan 14, 1884," *JUL*, March 1884 657.

¹²⁶ Hasard, "Our Full Fruition," 46.

Cooperative colonies were not worlds unto themselves but inspiring examples of what it would mean to replace wage-labor with cooperation wholesale. Some labor republicans were aware that this integrated cooperative could only permanently succeed on a consciously organized, national basis. It needed the support of a background set of economic conditions, regulated by law, which made each cooperative's flourishing possible. Powderly summarized these demands, spelled out in greater detail in various platforms,¹²⁷ as "a just and humane system of land ownership, [public] control of machinery, railroads, and telegraphs, as well as an equitable currency system."¹²⁸ One issue of the *Journal* ran, with approval, a proposal to allow groups of workers to incorporate, issue government-backed debt, and form cooperatives that would be supported by government price and wage controls.¹²⁹ Nationalization of land and public utilities, a people's bank making credit available to producer cooperatives, and a system of labor legislation all entailed major transformations in property relationships and public regulation. Put another way, cooperation was only a way of eliminating the structural dependence of wage-laborers because it transformed the background structure of production and distribution. The change in this background structure was the condition of possibility for the creation and maintenance of an integrated economy of cooperatives.

At their most ambitious, some labor republicans even proposed creating a parallel cooperative economy that would expand over time. It would have its own public credit system and issue currency notes, based on labor time, usable in markets, created by the Knights, selling only cooperatively produced goods.¹³⁰ The author of "Chapters on Labor" even put forward an "Industrial Constitution" whose articles include the creation of a "federation" of producers whose purpose was to create a "unity of action between all the producers of each State and nation, and afterwards between the producers of the whole world." It would include a "federal fund," and a system for providing producers tools and land, as well as a propaganda arm for spreading information and coordinating activities.¹³¹ Henry Sharpe went so far as to argue that "the Order has arrived at the time when its organization should be at least as complex as

¹²⁷ The Knights of Labor platform included appropriation of communications and transportation networks, cheap credit, constraints on banks, publicly managed money depositories, health and safety regulations, recognition of unions, redistribution of public lands to "actual settlers; not another acre for railroads or speculators," eight hours legislation, and a Bureau of Labor Statistics. Many of these were understood as preliminary measures on the way to a truly cooperative system. "Knights of Labor Platform – Preamble and Declaration of Principles."

¹²⁸ Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor 1859–1889*, 514–15.

¹²⁹ "Important Action by the U.S. Senate (concluded)," *JUL* 3, no. 4 (1882), 278.

¹³⁰ Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 43–46, 58–66; Horner, "Producers' Co-Operatives in the United States, 1865–1890," 191–93. See especially Henry Sharpe's proposals for the Cooperative Guild, published in the June 10 and 25 issues of the *Journal* as "Article I" and "Article II" as well as the articles such as Sharpe, "Co-Operation," 776–77.

¹³¹ "Chapters on Labor: Chapter VII," *JUL* VI, no. 13 (November 10, 1885), 1119.

that of a State" able to administer a wide variety of programs.¹³² Although this highly integrated version of the cooperative commonwealth remained notional, the much more successful system of boycotting as well as the ethos of buying only Knights-produced goods, was a partial realization of this effort to centrally coordinate economic activity in a way that supported the formation of cooperatives. Closely connected to this idea was the highly contentious issue of a national cooperative fund, run by the Knights of Labor, which would help cooperatives raise capital and compete against non-cooperative enterprises. Originally a voluntary fund, briefly made compulsory, the Knights saw it as a way of drawing on its hundreds of thousands of members to accumulate capital they could not acquire on credit markets or by selling shares. The fund itself was mismanaged from the start, but all accounts of cooperation during this period note that the dramatic growth of cooperatives was a consequence of the Knights' ability to support them financially and to coordinate buying efforts.¹³³

The eventual failure, though partially attributable to the empirical decline of the Knights, was also linked to the ambiguities of cooperation itself. Many Knights thought that too much centralization or compulsory cooperation threatened the emancipatory aims of cooperation itself, and these views tended to win out in debates about the cooperative fund. Others thought local, decentralized action would be sufficient. This particular problem remained an unresolved puzzle in the cooperative vision of the labor republicans. But, in the broader scope of ideological controversy, it was mostly a family quarrel about means not ends. Nobody disputed that cooperative production was the way of eliminating subjection to employers and of making possible each person's "capabilities of self-government."

The argument in favor of cooperation marked an important conceptual shift away from the social assumptions of earlier republicanism. Where the individual producer had been the original instance of economic independence, it was now possible to separate the normative core of that individual's freedom from its earliest institutionalization. As one labor republican put it, "the remedy does not lie in the direction of a return to the old slow methods of production. But if the workman may not again aspire to a separate business carried on with his own capital in his own little shop, he may reasonably aim at something which would constitute its economic equivalent."¹³⁴ Not only did the cooperative ideal require distinguishing the free labor of the individual from the individuated assumptions of the small producer, it meant that free labor was established in

¹³² Quoted in Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 61.

¹³³ On the fate of the fund, see Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 44–46. Leikin notes that the Knights' ability to centralize and coordinate information, capital, and practical assistance was crucial to the cooperatives that did develop. *Ibid.*, 65–83. On the importance of Knights' centralized "network of support" to the effectiveness of local action, see also the discussion in Levine, *Labor's True Woman*, 98–101.

¹³⁴ "Labor's Disadvantage."

and *through* each laborer's relations with others, rather than *prior* to or *absent* these social relations. That is to say, independence or "non-domination" was no longer conceived as a way of acting without the need to coordinate one's own labor with others, but rather as equal control over that shared activity. Liberty was a quality of collectively regulated interdependent relations, rather than a legally guaranteed separation from others. In this sense, the cooperative ideal brought to the fore something that had always been true – independence, even of the yeoman farmer, had been predicated on a collective regulation of the production and distribution process. The cooperative principle extended this logic to make labor a kind of public activity. It introduced popular sovereignty into the workplace itself: "[T]here is to be a people in industry, as in government."¹³⁵ The space of politics itself was redrawn to include the daily relations coordinating the interactions of laborers. That is why, when labor republicans spoke about "a republicanism of labor, as well as a republicanism of government,"¹³⁶ they conceived of this republicanism in political terms, not just as an instrument for increasing wages.

The Value of Independence: Free Labor and Free Time

The change in the meaning of independence went hand-in-hand with a new way of thinking about its value. After all, the defense of cooperative production was not a straightforward glorification of work. To be sure, labor republicans held the idle rich in great contempt: "[I]f the wage system were abolished and the equities of co-operation placed in its stead, the vast army of non-producers would vanish, and humanity would be in a better condition."¹³⁷ But their target here was not leisure itself so much as those who lived off the dependent labor of others. In fact, labor republicans saw their conception of cooperative production as intrinsically linked to the quest for more leisure time. The cooperative commonwealth was not merely offered as an alternative community of free and virtuous producers, whose independence contrasted with an aristocratic ideal of slave-holding leisure. Instead, collective control over labor was a first step to gaining control over and expanding free time. The great value of independence was thus not just being able to develop one's capabilities in work, but also in gaining greater freedom from work. As the Knights put it, the aim of their organization was "to secure to the workers ... sufficient leisure in which to develop their intellectual, moral and social faculties ... to enable them to share in the gains and honors of advancing civilization."¹³⁸

It is here that labor republicans believed they were fully resolving the long-standing paradox of slavery and freedom, a paradox that could be articulated

in terms of the relationship between production and consumption. One of the great evils of the existence of a class of dependent laborers was not merely the denial of the dignity of free production, but also the benefits of all around consumption. Sylvis presented this reunification of producer and consumer as a resolution of an ancient historical dilemma, originating with the separation of society into freeman and slave: "[M]an himself, shall waken from the trance of ages, and the producer and the consumer, the creator of enjoyments and he who revels in them, shall be one and indivisible once more."¹³⁹ But why, exactly, did free labor also mean less labor, and why was free labor not enough?

One reason they thought leisure was necessary for the development of individual capacities had to do with machine production. If various capacities of self-government could be developed in the workplace itself, industry also routinized work to the point where it could become deadening rather than self-developing.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, there was more to life than work. There was a whole series of relationships in which one might develop oneself: "[H]e who has become citizen, neighbor, friend, brother, son, husband, father, fellow-member, in one, is just by so many times individualized."¹⁴¹ Unstructured time and opportunities for consumption were thus also essential elements to one's all around development. Work was the central thing but not the only thing. Its burdens could be lightened, and the enjoyment of leisure increased, if the full promise of machine production were realized.

Yet, if labor republicans were often dazzled by the growth of human productivity, they saw its potential used against them rather than for them.¹⁴² As the author of the "Chapters on Labor" wrote, the Knights' project is, "to satisfy more and more every day the ever-increasing wants of mankind with the least possible effort, which we can accomplish only through the exercise of industry."¹⁴³ Statements like these signaled a disavowal of the somewhat more austere republicanism that saw the very demand for material comfort and cultivation as corrupting "luxure."¹⁴⁴ Yet they were also distinct from a later consumerism, which placed a value almost exclusively on the importance of having more material wealth. Labor republicans saw opportunities both for the expansion of material consumption and free time, which was why they put their hopes in a world in which "the laborer shall receive his fair share of the increasing wealth of the country created by his labor, and his proportionate

¹³⁹ Sylvis, "Address Delivered at Chicago, January 9, 1865," 172.

¹⁴⁰ "Some Economic and Social Effects of Machinery"; The Master Workman of L A 1573, "An Essay on the 'Evils Resulting From Long Hours and Exhaustive Toil'."

¹⁴¹ Lloyd, *Wealth against Commonwealth*, 178.

¹⁴² "A Sketch of Political Economy, Chapter XI," *JUL* V, no. 21 (March 10, 1885), 927; "Chapters on Labor: Chapter V (Continued)"; "Some Economic and Social Effects of Machinery"; "Industrial Ideas Chapter IV."

¹⁴³ "Chapters on Labor: Chapter I," *JUL* VI, no. 3 (1885), 998.

¹⁴⁴ On virtue and commerce, see Chapter 5.

¹³⁵ Lloyd, *Wealth against Commonwealth*, 183.

¹³⁶ Steward, "Poverty," 434.

¹³⁷ Jelley, *The Voice of Labor*, 255.

¹³⁸ "Knights of Labor Platform," 30-31.

share of the leisure which the inventions of the age permit."¹⁴⁵ Industrial production made some work less attractive, and increased both the appeal and possibility for enjoying free time.

Yet their lived reality remained long hours and low wages. The problem, according to labor republicans, was political not technological. Workers did not control property and thus did not control the impact of labor-saving technologies on their time, activity, and standards of living. Here is where cooperation entered as a solution. As Terence Powderly put it in an address to the General Assembly of the Knights of Labor,

The machine must become the slave of the man, instead of keeping the man in attendance on and subordinate to the machine. A plan of co-operation through which the workingman may control the machine he operates must one day supercede the present system.¹⁴⁶

Powderly's point was that workers could only benefit from machine production if they controlled the wealth it produced. The major benefit would be greater wealth with fewer hours of labor. As another Knight put it,

At this rate, then, three and a half hours work would be sufficient to provide him with as much as he receives now for ten hours' work... If all men ... were their own employers they would naturally benefit by the amount of wealth they produced, but our present wages system permits employers to absorb all the wealth produced, with the exception of a bare subsistence given to the laborer.¹⁴⁷

The basic reason why cooperative production was linked to free time was that it would allow workers to "absorb" more of the wealth they produced.

Labor republicans worked out this general argument about cooperation and leisure in the language of political economy. Political economy was important because, as an increasingly authoritative discourse, it appeared to say that their project was impossible. For instance, eight-hours legislation was one of the dominant demands of the nineteenth-century labor movement as a whole, and of labor republicans in particular, because it was a first step to reclaiming control over their time.¹⁴⁸ One important argument in favor of this legislation, made famous by Ira Steward, who founded the Boston Eight Hour League, was the seeming paradoxical claim that "a reduction of hours is an increase in wages."¹⁴⁹ Prevailing political economy suggested this was impossible. There was a fixed wage fund, which limited the level of wages anyhow. But more to the point, reduced hours at a given wage meant lower total wages, pure and

simple. Moreover, fewer hours worked meant less produced overall, and thus a decline in overall wealth; or, if wages *did* increase then profits declined, which would reduce incentives to produce wealth, again reducing aggregate wealth.¹⁵⁰ Steward had a number of responses to this argument, some of which led in the more limited direction of arguing that higher wages raised aggregate demand.¹⁵¹ But the one that most interests us connected the debate about hours and wages to the political economy of cooperation itself.

For Steward, not to mention other leading Knights,¹⁵² maximum hours legislation naturally led to cooperation. "Eight Hours reduction will give [laborers] the time necessary, and other questions will follow,"¹⁵³ said Steward. This process of reflection would allow workers to alter their demands. Starting at wanting higher wages they would come to demand the "republicanization of labor" itself.¹⁵⁴ From "the trial of the Eight Hour system ... there will be a call for the Six Hour system" and eventually "with Six Hours a day ... all industries will glide naturally and almost insensibly into Co-operation."¹⁵⁵ If, on the one hand, maximum hours legislation allowed workers to make more wage demands and eventually demand cooperative control, on the other hand, it was only cooperation that would allow this reduction of hours to be fully compatible with increased levels of consumption. Steward spelled out the reasons why:

We are sometimes asked, "whether we can accomplish as much in Eight hours as in Ten hours?" To this we reply: "Perhaps not, the first day, or even the first year, in some case; though in time, as inventions multiply, we are sure to produce very much more." But whether we can or cannot is not the question to ask us; it is whether we can *get* as much of what we do produce?¹⁵⁶

In other words, because cooperation was based on workers controlling the full, or at least "fair," value of what they produced, it would take them fewer hours

¹⁵⁰ Steward identifies these as the main objections of his adversaries. Steward, *The Meaning of the Eight Hour Movement*.

¹⁵¹ Steward, "Poverty," 428; Ira Steward, "A Reduction of Hours an Increase of Wages," in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, ed. T. Fly (Norman: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 284-301; Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 249-60; Roediger, "Ira Steward and the Anti-Slavery Origins of American Eight-Hour Theory." On the development of under-consumptionist theories, and their adoption by the American Federation of Labor and other social reformers, see Currarino, *The Labor Question in America*, 60-85. Although some labor republicans eventually took the argument in this direction, it is a mistake to make it the whole of their view, as Glickman does. Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 93-128. See also, Alex Gourevitch, "Review: Rosanne Currarino's the Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age," *Historical Materialism* 21, no. 2 (2013), 179-90.

¹⁵² Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor 1859-1889*, 471-525; Jelley, *Voice of Labor*, 228-37; McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 470-82.

¹⁵³ Steward, *The Eight Hour Movement: A Reduction of Hours Is an Increase of Wages*, 12.

¹⁵⁴ Steward, "Poverty," 434.

¹⁵⁵ Steward, *The Meaning of the Eight Hour Movement*, 15.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁵ The Master Workman of L A 1573, "An Essay on the 'Evils Resulting From Long Hours and Exhaustive Toil,'" 160.

¹⁴⁶ Terence Powderly, "Opening Address to General Assembly," *KoL* 1, no. 27 (October 9, 1886).

¹⁴⁷ "Eight Hours a Day," *Labor Leaf* II, no. 2 (November 18, 1885), 2.

¹⁴⁸ Roediger, "Ira Steward and the Anti-Slavery Origins of American Eight-Hour Theory."

¹⁴⁹ A claim found in various of Steward's writings and speeches, especially Steward, *The Eight Hour Movement: A Reduction of Hours Is an Increase of Wages*. Ira Steward, *The Meaning of the Eight Hour Movement* (Boston: Ira Steward, 1868).

to earn substantially more than they earned during the longer hours of the current system. In *this* sense, fewer hours meant higher wages.

In fact, the shift to cooperation would ultimately make the standard of "higher wages" obsolete, as the worker would no longer be asking a separate employer to pay him more. As one Knight put it, the point of the cooperative organization of work was "to *change the form of demand from increase of wages to participation in profits.*"¹⁵⁷ Or again, on William Sylvis' account, the change in demand was a change of principle: "[W]e will not only secure a fair standard of wages, but all the profits of our labor."¹⁵⁸ In their support, labor republicans regularly observed the enormous wealth of their society as proof that labor was already productive enough to meet everyone's needs at an ample level, *even if* hours were reduced.¹⁵⁹ If anything, they thought, it was surprising that anyone, especially students of political economy, thought it so difficult to both increase leisure time and consumption levels.

The mistake of mainstream political economy, according to labor republicans, was that it accepted some contingent social facts as necessary and then built its laws out of those facts. As the author of 'Sketches of Political Economy' wrote:

Although political economy, in its restricted sense, treats only of the laws which govern the production, distribution and consumption of wealth, we shall have frequent occasion to revert to the consideration of subjects previously mentioned.¹⁶⁰

The "subjects previously mentioned" were the nature of human liberty and the role of property regimes in advancing or restraining that liberty.¹⁶¹ In a sense, labor republicans thought it was true that reducing hours could not increase wages *if*, in the "restricted sense" of current political economy, one assumed that the labor contract was free and that political economy only pertained to voluntary transactions in markets. But here was the mistake – political economists had assumed what they could not prove: that the labor contract was free. It was not, and thus the laws of political economy described not the general laws of a system of free exchange but a system of domination.

According to labor republicans, the economic laws of a cooperative commonwealth, based on universal independence not wage-slavery, were different. They were based on the full realization of republican liberty and thus the full value of one's labor. Their political economy aimed to show that a cooperative economy was based on a different system of producing and exchanging value. This use of political economy was an advance over earlier republican

¹⁵⁷ Fales, "The Organization of Labor," 558.

¹⁵⁸ Sylvis, "Address Delivered at Buffalo, N.Y., January, 1864," 114.

¹⁵⁹ "A Sketch of Political Economy Chapter I"; "Industrial Ideas Chapter II"; "Chapters on Labor: Chapter V (Continued)"; McNeill, *The Labor Movement*, 475–6.

¹⁶⁰ "A Sketch of Political Economy Chapter I," *JUL*, May 25, 1884, 699.

¹⁶¹ See especially Chapters 1 and 2 of the Sketch. See also "Industrial Ideas Chapter I"; "Chapters on Labor: Chapter I."

uses. As we saw previous chapter, the early Workies primarily imbued political economy, especially the labor theory of value, with the task of giving scientific expression to the worker's domination. We have already seen that labor republicans accepted this critical power of the labor theory of value. But they added to it the further role of giving a positive account of how a cooperative economy would function. They felt it necessary to demonstrate that a reduction in hours worked did not necessarily entail a reduction in prosperity – that is, a reduction in the ability to enjoy free time. Through this use of political economy, they sought to articulate the logic of a cooperative commonwealth, and to demonstrate how it made possible each laborer's independence by, at once, increasing his control over the work process while also increasing his opportunities not to work.

The primary way the labor theory of value served the argument for cooperation was by explaining why cooperation was instrumentally necessary for expanding the amount of free time available to workers. The defining feature of cooperation was that the worker controlled the value he created. That workers were so productive already meant it would take little time to produce those goods each worker and his family personally needed, leaving much more of the day free. That, for instance, is why for Steward the move from the wages to the cooperative system is not just about higher wages but ultimately a transformation of class relations:

the simple increase of Wages is the first step on that long road which ends at last in a more equal distribution of the fruits of toil. For Wages will continue to increase until the Capitalist and Laborer are One.¹⁶²

While under the wage-system the worker had to spend the whole day working for another to acquire those goods he needs, under the cooperative system the cooperator would "earn" goods of the same value in a much shorter amount of time. He would thus be a producer *and* consumer, creating wealth and having time and means to enjoy it. Here the labor theory of value, as an account of the time spent working, revealed why cooperative production was necessary to increase leisure time for all workers.

This argument was an essential step in establishing the *value* of independence. Independence, in the form of cooperative work, was an attractive political value in an industrial setting not just because it stood opposed to forms of economic domination, but also because it expanded the opportunities for self-cultivation. This is what the author of "Industrial Ideas" meant when he said

man requires such surroundings as will enable him to develop and progress. These surroundings should be entirely independent of the good-will or caprice of his fellow men. If it be not so, man cannot be said to enjoy liberty.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Steward, *The Eight Hour Movement: A Reduction of Hours Is an Increase of Wages*, 6.

¹⁶³ "Industrial Ideas Chapter I," 2085.

If independence now meant the equally interdependent relations of cooperative producers, it found its value in the free development of each individual. That free development occurred not just in exercise of self-governing capacities at work, but also in the freedom to develop the whole range of capacities when at leisure.

Conclusion: The Paradox of Slavery and Freedom Revisited

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the labor republicans developed a novel vision of the cooperative commonwealth. It was novel for being industrial, not agrarian, and for imagining a society of producer cooperatives in which individuals governed themselves at work and cultivated themselves at leisure. This was a new way of conceiving of both the condition of republican liberty and its value as a political ideal. Historians of political thought have noted that the subtraction, addition, and modification of meaning is an inescapable part of putting ideas to use.¹⁶⁴ Absent these conceptual shifts, political ideas remain either irrelevant, vague, or at the very least, incommensurate with the task of persuading actors to act. This chapter has shown us that the labor republicans engaged in this characteristic form of "conceptual innovation."¹⁶⁵ They were, after all, not professional philosophers but political actors, hoping to persuade hundreds of thousands to support their cause in a dynamic and evolving historical situation. If we take a step back, we recall that it was not just the immediate context of the industrial revolution and the different class interpretations of republicanism that shaped labor republican thinking. They also inherited the much longer standing paradox of slavery and freedom and the related effort to universalize republican liberty.

From the standpoint of this paradox, we can gain a new, more global appreciation of the significance of labor republicanism. It was no mere American exception. Instead, it was an attempt to make sense of wage-labor from the standpoint of an established tradition of thinking about freedom and politics. If that tradition provided the basic evaluative ideas, it was the new historical developments – permanent wage-labor, industrial production, class conflict, new juridical and economic discourses – that forced a clarification and evolution of those concepts. Labor republicans did not merely borrow the moral force of the republican contempt for slavery. They also deepened and modified it by developing an analysis of the structural and personal forms of domination specific to permanent wage-labor. Moreover, by developing the positive argument for cooperative labor, they gave an answer to how republican liberty could be universalized in industrial conditions, not just as a nostalgic

negation of those conditions. Finally, in the process of identifying economic independence with cooperative production, they gave a new account of the value of that independence – as a condition that made possible self-cultivating leisure, not just free labor.

Historians of political thought have shown that a standard feature of republican thought has been the idea that "it is only possible to be free in a free state."¹⁶⁶ We might summarize the labor republican contribution by saying that they added the thought that "it is only possible to be free in a free society." Indeed, to labor republicans, a certain kind of defense of the formally "free state" (i.e., constitutionalism, representative government, and legal equality) had become the means by which a few arrogated to themselves the benefits of liberty, converting the universalizing aspirations of earlier republicans into the basis of a new kind of aristocratic privilege. The original promise of political republicanism had been betrayed and, in certain hands, become a "false idea of liberty ... defended by the governing classes!"¹⁶⁷ The paradox of slavery and freedom had been reconstituted under this *laissez-faire* republicanism.

The labor republicans do not have to have been fully aware of the paradox of slavery and freedom for them to have been part of it. Although sometimes self-conscious that they were part of a grand historical drama,¹⁶⁸ they were just as often concerned entirely with the present. Under the pressures of the moment, labor republicans pushed the republican theory of liberty in unexpected directions. Although their thoughts possessed an internal coherence, they did not have the aims of a system builder beginning from first principles and following out each logical inference. Instead, faced with the fact of industrial wage-labor and the inherited but underdetermined ideal of free labor, labor republicans gradually worked out a series of intermediate steps, regarding the nature of economic domination in industrial capitalism, the role of political economy in analyzing these relations, and the relationship between cooperation, technology, work and leisure. It is only in retrospect that we can reconstruct the coherence as if it were a systematic whole.

At this point, we might be inclined to ask just how universal the labor republican project was. I do not mean how successful it was in practice, but whether it truly sought to eliminate dependent labor. A powerful test of this question lies in their views on women and labor. If women were to perform uncompensated labor for men, then that would leave in place a class of dependent workers, casting doubt on the universality of their vision. A complete study of the role of women in the Knights is beyond the scope of this book,

¹⁶⁶ Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*, 60.

¹⁶⁷ "Chapters on Labor: Chapter V (Continued)" 1082.

¹⁶⁸ There are numerous references to thoughts like "the whole process of civilization has been to emancipate human beings from the condition of slavery." "Wages Slavery and Chattel Slavery," 702.

¹⁶⁴ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics Vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103–44.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 87, 145–57.

but others have done much of the work, leaving us with enough information to draw the following conclusions.¹⁶⁹ It is undoubtedly true that, until the rise of the Knights of Labor, cooperation was a highly masculine ideal, and presupposed that women would serve a subordinate and separate role.¹⁷⁰ The economic independence of men was predicated on the domestic service of women. However, the Knights, although they never shed certain ideas about "true womanhood" and female domesticity, were far more progressive in claiming equal political and economic rights and meaningful public roles for women than any organization of the day, not to mention many subsequent labor organizations.¹⁷¹ They were the first organization to call for "equal pay for equal work"; they defended female suffrage; they gave women leadership positions within the organization; and they created a bureau of women's work. Women organized their own Knight assemblies and participated in mixed ones; they formed numerous cooperatives and trade unions; and most of the leading feminists of the day, from Mother Jones to Susan B. Anthony, at some point held membership in the Knights.

The Knights even extended their critique of dependent labor to include housework and domestic service. They were the first to organize domestic servants, nearly all of whom were women. Labor papers recognized "'the house-keeping wives of laboring men' as a 'class of people'" whose working days were sometimes harder and longer than those of their paid husbands.¹⁷² The Knights were also committed to educating women as citizens, and their reading rooms and papers promoted key feminist works of the day, such as August Bebel's *Women and Socialism*.¹⁷³ They tended to take women seriously as possessing the same "capacities for self-government" as men.

There is little doubt that the Knights labor culture was often masculine and fraternal,¹⁷⁴ that women faced sexism, and this sexism was sometimes destructive to the Knights efforts to make their appeals truly universal.¹⁷⁵ But even a brief glance at some of the Knights' major papers and most significant strikes shows that the logic of their argument was powerful enough not only to draw women to their own, independent action, but also to drive Knights to public

¹⁶⁹ The material for the following discussion is taken from Robert E. Weir, "A Dubious Equality: Leonora Barry and Women in the KOL," in *The Knights Unhorsed: Internal Conflict in a Gilded Age Social Movement* (Wayne State University Press, 2000), 141–60; Levine, *Labor's True Woman*; Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor"; Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 51–55, 180–90.

¹⁷⁰ Leikin, *The Practical Utopians*, 26, 41–46.

¹⁷¹ Weir, "A Dubious Equality: Leonora Barry and Women in the KOL," 141–60; Levine, *Labor's True Woman*; Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor."

¹⁷² Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," 328.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 327.

¹⁷⁴ Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil*, 51–55.

¹⁷⁵ Weir, "A Dubious Equality: Leonora Barry and Women in the KOL."

expressions of support for and pride in the public exercise of power by women. Articles like "What Women Are Doing" described new jobs and social roles for women; "Knights of Labor and Women's Rights" reminded readers of the Knights' support for "equal pay for equal work" and for "equal rights for woman, not only in the field of industry, but of legislation"; "The Present Need of Women" told readers that wage-labor oppressed women too; "Organization For Women" celebrated women's self-organization in strikes and cooperatives; "Women Not Wanted" scorned social conventions not allowing women to go outside unaccompanied by men.¹⁷⁶ One article even noted that women were editing their own bible, based on their own reading and interpretation of the text, which included greater gender equality and sympathy for labor reform.¹⁷⁷ It is also worth recalling support of self-organization and equal rights for women contrasted with the conservative views that employers of women trotted out to, among other things, suppress their participation in strikes and boycotts.¹⁷⁸

In sum, to the degree Knights *did* share widespread views of women's natural difference, they did *not* tend to think women deserved simply to work for men, and did believe women deserved economic and political independence. The best evidence of the universality of their general message is the degree to which women took it as a sign to act on their own initiative and organize and educate themselves, even against sexist views of some male Knights. Historians who have studied this issue closely have therefore come to the conclusion that, "[t]he Knights' commitment to equal rights inherently challenged conventional notions of domesticity and woman's sphere. Yet the Knights simultaneously asserted industrial reform and social renewal in the name of domestic idealism."¹⁷⁹ These "seemingly contradictory goals" arose from the fact that their arguments about wage-labor and republican liberty were in some tension with an inherited view of "true womanhood."

In all, although not entirely successful in overcoming certain prejudices, labor republicanism was not just some defensive attempt to defend the craft privileges of white male workers. It was well in advance of much public opinion at the time. The attempt to universalize economic independence was, for a time, a serious project with real bite, bringing housewives and carpet-weavers, black plantation workers, and white shoe makers, together in a single organization with the shared purpose of replacing wage-labor with cooperative production.

¹⁷⁶ Mary P. Hankey, "What Women Are Doing," *JUL* VII, no. 40 (June 10, 1887), 2430; "Knights of Labor and Women's Rights," *JUL* VII, no. 17 (January 25, 1887), 2246; "The Present Need of Woman"; "Organization for Women," *JUL* VII, no. 19 (January 22, 1887), 2262; "Women Not Wanted," *JUL* VII, no. 14 (November 25, 1886), 2212.

¹⁷⁷ "A Bible for Women," *KoL* I, no. 34 (November 27, 1886).

¹⁷⁸ Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," 327.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 330–31.

Coda: From Freedom to Virtue

If labor republicans appealed to republican liberty to argue for profound social change, then we should recall that the concept did not always generate such a transformative vision. It is important to mark the difference. Recall from Chapter 1 that the plebs of ancient Rome claimed their freedom in the form of basic concessions. Their *libertas* was defensive, aimed at restricting the most arbitrary forms of power, not offensive, in the sense of radically altering social relations. Of course, to claim this minimal liberty they engaged in numerous offensive actions, most famously the “secessions” of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. It is no stretch to say that when plebeian soldiers “seceded” or fled Rome instead of fighting its wars, they were engaging in some of the earliest recorded general strikes. Livy claimed this withholding of military labor nearly brought down the Roman republic more than once.¹⁸⁰ But the resultant victories were mostly defensive: representation through the tribune, abolition of debt-bondage and basic procedural protections from the magistrates. As one historian of political thought puts it, “for Livy, the tribunes are initially a sort of shield, a largely protective weapon – not a sword, a primarily offensive weapon.”¹⁸¹

The original bequest of Roman political theory therefore comes across as rather modest. The plebs were mostly “satisfied with their liberty consisting primarily in the persons and powers of the tribunes and were not terribly interested in moving onto the highest levels of the *cursus honorum* or attaining a more proactive role in shaping their own collective destiny.”¹⁸² A constitutional balance between given social orders guaranteed non-domination. This way of thinking about freedom presupposed a premodern social ontology in which society was formally constituted as separate orders. Recall from Chapter 1 that this is why plebs worried about “the arbitrary power of an order in Roman society, an order with immense material and coercive power that would be otherwise unchecked.”¹⁸³ Republican liberty was compatible with radical inequality and strict hierarchy precisely because plebs just sought a space free from arbitrary rule by their superiors.¹⁸⁴

As in many other areas of political theory, Machiavelli inaugurates the reconfiguration of these inherited ideas by moving in the direction of a more “offensive” republicanism. On the one hand, in his commentaries on Livy, Machiavelli adopts the classical social ontology. He says “since in every republic there is an upper and a lower class, it may be asked into whose hands it is best to place the guardianship of liberty.”¹⁸⁵ One answer, says Machiavelli, is

that “in the former there is a great desire to dominate and in the latter merely the desire not to be dominated.”¹⁸⁶ Taken in isolation, this quotation, which neo-republicans have used,¹⁸⁷ reproduces the defensive picture of republican liberty. But we know that Machiavelli also showed more than just sympathy for the “populares” against the “ottimati,” he sometimes supported quite violent, quasi-revolutionary claims by the poor against privilege.¹⁸⁸ The liberty of the people here started to mean the conquest of social and economic power, not formal protections.

Machiavelli’s world, however, remains a society of orders. Freedom is either something asserted by lower orders against the upper class, or the product of the clash of orders, but it does not describe the same condition for all. It is only with the reorganization of society into formally free individuals that the independence of each citizen could be conceived as something uniform, equally and universally owed to all. Only then can we imagine someone like William Sylvius looking forward to the day in which “Capitalist and Laborer are One.”¹⁸⁹ As we have seen, the constitution of society as a body of formal equals is also the historical precondition for the rise of new relations of structural and personal domination against which labor republicans presented their cooperative alternative. Labor republicans claimed their liberty in a fluid, rather than static, social order in which everyone was at least nominally recognized as equally free.

Importantly, labor republicans did not see themselves as making an abstract moral appeal to their betters but as making a demand for practical solidarity among all those members of the dependent, laboring class. The theory of the cooperative commonwealth was in this sense intrinsically connected to a specific sociopolitical practice: that those denied liberty seize it for themselves. Here was the full shift from a “defensive” to “offensive” conception of republican liberty. The transformation of society required forms of social and political cooperation. Such collective action was only possible if workers developed and exercised certain qualities in themselves. They needed not just a conception of liberty but a sense of virtue.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 116.

¹⁸⁷ Skinner, “The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty,” 292–309.

¹⁸⁸ See especially Yves Winter’s superb essay. Yves Winter, “Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (November 8, 2012), 736–66. Also McCormick, “Machiavelli against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School’s ‘Guicciardinian Moments,’” 615–43. For a different appraisal of the redistributive element in Machiavelli see Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*, 49–86.

¹⁸⁹ Steward, *The Eight Hour Movement: A Reduction of Hours Is an Increase of Wages*, 6.

¹⁸⁰ Livius, *The History of Rome*, Vol. 2, book 1.

¹⁸¹ Kapust, “Skinner, Pettit and Livy: the Conflict of the Orders and the Ambiguity of Republican Liberty,” 393.

¹⁸² Ibid., 397.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 398. See also discussion in Chapter 1.

¹⁸⁴ This is the force of Kapust’s critique of Skinner and Pettit. Ibid. 389–98.

¹⁸⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. Leslie J. Walker (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998), 115.