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The Wages of Whiteness

Race and the Making of the
American Working Class

Revised Edition



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VERSO

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‘Neither a Servant Nor a Master Am I’: Keywords in the Languages of White Labor Republicanism

This chapter takes its title from a line in Walt Whitman's *Chants Democratic*, a line that also is featured in the epigraph to the first section of Sean Wilentz's recent study of the rise of the working class in New York City.¹ The idea that a recently revolutionary and strongly republican working population tried in the nineteenth century to build a Whitmanesque economy and society without masters and servants undergirds not only Wilentz's work but most of the best of the new labor history on the making of the American working class. The power of republicanism in informing labor's rhetoric and practice is now amply demonstrated. As Herbert Gutman and Ira Berlin have put it, when 'preindustrial workers became a wage-earning class, republicanism neither disappeared nor remained a set of stale patriotic pieties. Instead, workers in Jacksonian America remade it into a distinctive and radical – but nonsocialist – argument against the pervasive inequalities associated with nineteenth-century capitalism.'² The insights, and considerable drama, of recent histories of early labor derive largely from a focus on this remaking of republicanism by labor. The new labor history illuminates the question of how workers creatively pursued the vision of a republic of small producers in which, again in Whitman's words, 'I will be even with you, and you shall be even with me', even as the United States became a land whose citizens increasingly worked 'in shops they did not own and control, at a pace ... often

determined by others.³

But labor republicans in the United States did not only attempt to abolish mastery and servanthood among white Americans. Many of them also acquiesced in the even sharper social divisions between Black Americans and slavemasters. Thus Whitman: 'Slaves are [probably] there because they must be – when the time arrives for them not to be ... they will leave.'⁴ Moreover, republicanism itself carried a strong suspicion of the powerless, not just of the powerful, and a fear that the top and bottom in society would unite against the 'producing classes' in the middle. As virtually all working whites were included in the 'producing classes', that suspicion could fall heavily on slaves and free Blacks. All labor republicans existed in a society that offered the opportunity for white workers to measure their situations not only against the dream of a republic of small producers but also against the nightmare of chattel slavery. If early languages of class have already been located by historians within the context of republican thought and accelerating working class formation, they need also to be located within a *slaveholding* republic in which the constant, even increasing, presence of slavery was, as the Black abolitionist H. Ford Douglass remarked, 'completely interwoven into the passions of the ... people.'⁵

The Hireling and the Slave

In 1814, Francis Scott Key wrote, in a verse of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' not sung before baseball games, 'No refuge could save the hireling and the slave/From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave.' The significant pairing of 'hireling and slave' would echo even into the 1850s as the status of white workers was debated. For Key's original audience the pair of words carried meanings within the context of the War of 1812. Britain prosecuted that war using hated mercenary or 'hireling' soldiers. Also in the British ranks were about three hundred former slaves, promised freedom and protection by British commanders in exchange for their military service. Some of these exslaves helped to burn the White House in 1814.⁶ But Key's words also carried much broader meanings, embodying what a young, republican nation hated and perhaps feared that it might become. We have already examined the multifaceted connotations of *slave*. Those of *hireling* deserve similar attention.

In castigating 'hirelings', Key used a word that captures much of what republicans despised. A nation that depended on hirelings simply could

not be a republic. Anglo-American usages of *hireling* current by the early nineteenth century connected a hireling soldier with a propensity to flee under fire. More broadly, hirelings in various fields, but particularly in politics, behaved as the very opposite of self-sacrificing republican citizens. They made 'reward or material remuneration the motive of [their] actions'; They were prostitutes – indeed Webster's 1829 dictionary of American English gives 'prostitute' as a synonym for *hireling* and further defines *hirelings* as 'perjurers by virtue of their avarice'. As an adjective, *hireling* typically meant both 'venal' and 'mercenary'. In usage it was often succeeded by *press* and *politicians*, adumbrating various aspects of the critique of British corruption that had been a staple of American republican rhetoric since before the Revolution.⁷ As Steve Watts's *Republic Reborn* demonstrates, Americans by 1814 had substantial doubts, and substantial reasons to doubt, with regard to their nation's ability to preserve a republican vision against 'hireling' corruption.⁸

But *hireling* conjured up yet another threat to republican liberty, one perhaps less easily conquered in the long run than the mercenary soldier or even than the acid of corrupt self-interest. *Hireling* meant, of course, 'one who is hired or serves for wages'. That usage, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* observes, was 'opprobrious', with 'serving for hire or wages' being all too nearly synonymous with 'to be had for hire'.⁹ The term was especially opprobrious for American republicans. In particular, the artisanal followers of Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson held that a free government required 'independent' small producers who owned productive property and therefore were neither cowed nor mercenary, as lifelong 'hirelings' would inevitably be. For Paine, 'freedom [was] destroyed by dependence' and *servant* was an opprobrious term. Hirelings and slaves were sometimes connected in popular logic, as in the observation that those who labor for others become 'mere Negroes [growing] lazy, and careless' and in the frequent references to sailors, the outstanding occupational group of waged adult males, as children and as slaves.¹⁰

Thus, the gradual transition to wage labor from 1800 to 1860 (and beyond) was an extremely serious matter for labor republicans. There were, of course, elements within republican thought that discouraged panic and encouraged long-term faith in republican solutions. From Tom Paine to Abraham Lincoln ran a line of thought that held that wage labor was not degrading *per se* – for Paine, man was free in large part because he held 'property in his own labor'. Wage labor could then be a rite of passage on the road to the economic independence of free farming or of self-employed craft labor.¹¹ Moreover, many labor republicans shared with their British counterparts the view that political plots – the corruption

and machination of the powerful and the acquiescence of the servile – gave rise to social inequality. In a republic of freemen, these political evils could be identified and checked, in the long run if not the short.¹²

Finally – and this is the point is least understood by historians – forms of wage labor emerging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were themselves sometimes seen as less productive of dependency and as more ‘republican’ than traditional arrangements. Not only did the number of white indentured servants decline greatly between 1763 and 1830, but practices such as living in with the employing family, agreeing to long-term work for a single family and taking meals at the employer’s table also declined in some areas with astonishing speed. Apprenticeship even came regularly to involve cash payments.¹³ We know far too little about whether these changes were initiated mainly by employers or workers, but it is clear that the worker who struck wage bargains by the day and boarded out was considered less ‘dependent’ (if more *anxious*) than one who worked by the month or the year and boarded in. Paine could thus argue for extending the vote to some propertyless males but not to ‘servants in families’.¹⁴ Sean Wilentz has nicely shown how, without stepping outside the bounds of republican categories, labor radicals in New York City rehabilitated the wage relationship in the 1830s. They argued – admittedly with the rather significant exceptions that journeymen should get the full value for their labor in wages and should themselves decide what that value was – that a wage relationship was compatible, at least temporarily, with a just society.¹⁵

As Asa Briggs emphasizes, populist leaders in early nineteenth-century Britain who had labor followings lamented the loss of the ‘chain of connection’ or the ‘bond of attachment’ between the rich and the poor. Bonds and chains, seen as ties of dependency rather than of sharing, were far less valued in US labor republican thought.¹⁶

But, as reference to bonds and chains should sharply remind us, it was impossible to think about dependency on wages merely in comparison with the position of labor in an ideal republic; the comparison with the truly enslaved also loomed. Such a comparison cut hard, and it cut in two ways. On the one hand, the spectre of chattel slavery – present historically in no other nation during the years of significant working class formation – made for a remarkable awareness of the dangers of dependency and a strong suspicion of paternalism. On the other hand, hard thought about ‘the hireling and the slave’ could make the position of hireling comparatively attractive. The white hireling had the possibility of social mobility as the Black slave did not. The white hireling was usually a political freeman, as the slave, and with very few exceptions the free Black, were

not. The comparison could lead to sweeping critiques of wage labor as ‘white slavery’ but it also could reassure wage workers that they belonged to the ranks of ‘free white labor’. In their early attempts to develop a language of labor, working Americans therefore expressed soaring desires to be rid of the age-old inequalities of Europe and of any hint of slavery. They also expressed the rather more pedestrian goal of simply not being mistaken for slaves, or ‘negers’ or ‘negurs’. And they saw not nearly so great a separation between these goals as we do.

From Servants to Hired People

As early as 1807, the British investor Charles W. Janson published the indignant replies he had received when he visited an acquaintance in New England and asked the maid who answered the door, ‘Is your master home?’ Not only did the maid make it clear that she had ‘no master’ but she insisted, ‘I am Mr. ___’s *help*. I’d have you to know, *man*, that I am no *servant*; none but *negers* are *servants*.’ The *Massachusetts Spy* in 1815 reported that exactly such exchanges occurred frequently, when visitors attempted to address *servants* or to ask about *masters*. Two decades later, a more celebrated observer of American life, Frances Trollope, lamented the difficulty of ‘getting servants’ in Ohio, but then corrected herself to write ‘getting help’. She explained that in the United States, ‘It is more than petty treason to the republic to call a free citizen a *servant*.’ One of her own ‘help’ anxiously expressed to Trollope the hope that she would not think whites in service to be ‘just as bad as if we are *negurs*.’¹⁷

Trollope and Janson were among many foreigners and American citizens to note such avoidance of the term *servant* and the reasons for such avoidance. As the American lawyer John Bristed put it in 1818, ‘There is no such relation as *master and servant* in the United States: indeed the name is not permitted.’ In explaining the disappearance of these terms, especially among farm and domestic laborers, Bristed commented on the tendency of US citizens toward ‘confounding the term *servant* with that of *slave*.’ There was good reason for such confounding, dating from the early imprecisions of colonial usages of *slave* and *servant* right through Noah Webster’s inconsistent distinctions between the two terms in his dictionary of 1828 and the tendency in the South to apply *servant* overwhelmingly to slaves in the antebellum years. Yet another complicating factor was that free Blacks often worked as domestic servants, with the result that the degradations suffered by slaves, by Blacks generally and by

domestics all came to be associated under the heading *servant*.¹⁸

The *Oxford English Dictionary* counts 'hired man, woman, girl [and] people' all as Americanisms of probable early nineteenth-century origins. It stresses connections with slavery, finding the words to have been coined to be 'applied to free men or women engaged as servants (the latter word being formerly used to include slaves).' The *OED* adds that the terms particularly applied to workers 'on a farm' and in or 'around a house'.¹⁹ Albert Matthews's close study of American usages of *hired man* and *help* shows the words to be more complex and even more interesting than the *OED* allows. Matthews establishes some colonial examples of the terms and, in the former case, some British antecedents. But he emphasizes an increase in their popularity in the early nineteenth century and attributes that increase both to a desire to be set apart from Blacks and to postrevolutionary ideals. On the latter point, Matthews agrees with the domestic service reformer Lucy Salmon who, writing in 1897, explained the decline of the term *servant* in postrevolutionary America by pointing out that it was an 'incongruous term in the face of the declared equality of all men, and an obnoxious term in view of the service performed at the South by negro slaves.'²⁰ This juxtaposition of the search for a language of freedom and for a language that would simply set apart and racially stigmatize the wholly unfree makes the popularity of terms like *hired man* and *help* extremely suggestive.

In one sense the developing language of labor was certainly egalitarian; it was largely the creation of those who worked. Daniel Rodgers, in an interesting short passage on antebellum labor and language, argues that euphemistic terms like *help* were inventions of the employers and 'reflected the vain hope that labels would rectify the anomaly of dependence in a society in which self-employment was the moral norm.' He adds that capitalists 'had good reason for the evasion' because they wanted to avoid associating the 'worker who labored at the will ... of another [with] the oldest, bluntest and most troubling word of all: "slave".'²¹ Whether words like *help* functioned in the way Rodgers argues is a fascinating question. Whether they came into being through upper-class initiatives is quite another. On the latter score, the evidence from the early nineteenth century, when *help* and *hired man* became popular evasions, does not support Rodgers's point. Virtually all primary accounts show the new usages being enthusiastically initiated by those whose work was being described. James Fenimore Cooper, who hated the new terms as 'subterfuges', regarded them as creations of the workers themselves: of *help*, he snickered, 'A man does not usually hire his cook to *help* him cook his dinner, but to cook it herself.' The British traveller Charles Mackay similarly

counted the new words for *servant* as marks of self-assertion, however quaint, among whites who did domestic work, and even suggested that the now-familiar 'help wanted' ads took that wording to avoid ruffling the racial and republican sensibilities of those who worked as servants.²² The *Dictionary of American English* aptly summarizes a range of usages substituting *helps* and *hands* for *servants* by saying that the substitutions reflect what the employed 'chose to call themselves'. White female household workers in particular 'resisted' the designation *servant*, in favor of 'helps, helpers or hands'.²³

In popularizing such new words, farm and household workers were not simply becoming racists, but neither were they simply being militant republicans. Rather, they were becoming *white workers* who identified their freedom and their dignity in work as being suited to those who were 'not slaves' or 'not negurs'. White workers were not slaves, and there were excellent reasons, quite without manipulation by employers, for their not wanting to be considered 'like a slave'. Not all these reasons had to do immediately with race. The first recorded instance of an American objecting to being called a servant, in 1784, reflected the sentiments of a white freeman who apparently hated being compared to indentured *whites*. US republicans, moreover, were used to railing against those who sought to enslave others, and several primary accounts of the rise of substitutes for *servant* set the changes squarely in the context of a quest for 'republican liberty' and a desire to be rid of models that had been inherited from 'slavish Europe'.²⁴

But in a society in which Blackness and servility were so thoroughly intertwined – North and South – assertions of white freedom could not be raceless. To criticize Europe as 'slavish' or full of 'dastardly slaves' inevitably called to mind chattel slavery and in several cases high republicanism and high race feeling cohabit on the same page.²⁵ James Flint, a British visitor in the second decade of the nineteenth century, noted that among the poor in the free states that bordered slaveholding states 'certain kinds of labour are despised as being the work of slaves.' He counted shoeblacking and, at times, 'family manufactures' as tabooed and told of paupers in an Ohio poorhouse who 'refused to carry water for their own use' for fear of being considered 'like slaves'.²⁶ We can see in such actions both the frayed strands of republican self-assertion and a sense of whiteness that could at times be self-defeating.

The existence of slavery (and increasingly of open Northern campaigns to degrade free Blacks) gave working Americans both a wretched touchstone against which to measure their fears of unfreedom and a friendly reminder that they were by comparison not so badly off. It en-

couraged an early language of labor that was at once suffused with concern for 'republican liberty' and at the same time willing to settle for what Rodgers calls 'evasions'. Amidst much assertion of independence, the term *hired* subtly became one to be embraced. As *hired* was increasingly placed in front of *man*, *woman* and *girl*, it was also placed before the old term *hand*, especially when referring to farm laborers. In the latter usage – apparently first commented upon when James Flint observed in 1818 that where he visited in the North, 'Laborers are not *servants*, all are hired *hands*' – labor is clearly a commodity, separable from its owner and for sale.²⁷ Some of the sting had been taken from the connection between *hireling* and *slave*.

No Masters: The Mechanic Gets a Boss

Among urban craftsmen, the group that by the Age of Jackson had initiated a significant national labor movement and had launched labor parties and an identifiable artisan wing of the Democratic party, the language of labor displayed more continuity and, seemingly, more self-confidence than did that of farm and domestic workers. The favorite terms to emerge after the Revolution continued to be popular, with *mechanics*' societies proliferating and labor appeals being consistently addressed to *freemen*.²⁸ Other terms, like *artisan*, *member of the working classes*, *tradesman* and *workingman* also achieved significant popularity. No surviving evidence suggests that these terms – with the partial exception of *freeman* – bespoke any conscious desire to set white workers apart from slaves. *Mechanic* and *freeman* blurred lines – or reflected the fact that lines were indeed blurry – between employed and employing artisans. Such words bespoke the tendency, so often remarked upon by historians of antebellum craftsmen, to see the interests of all of the 'producing classes', including working masters and small manufacturers, as united against the parasitic designs of bankers, undeserving paupers, monopolists, aristocrats and corporations.²⁹

But the independence of wage-earning journeymen mechanics increasingly came under a double attack. With wage labor becoming more and more common, the prospect of rising through wage labor to run one's own shop became increasingly problematic. Moreover, journeymen complained that masters required harder, more subdivided work, with fewer informal breaks during the day. Since living standards for most urban artisans did not improve, and may in fact have declined, between 1820 and the 1850s, the extent to which artisans continued confidently to call them-

selves *freemen* and *mechanics* reflected the strength of the republican vision associated with those terms.³⁰ On the other hand, since this very group was producing leaders who by the middle 1830s were calling workers *white slaves*, subterranean tensions and subtle worries about bondage also deserve attention.

Nationally, groups representing the interests of journeymen artisans proliferated in the late 1820s and the 1830s. These organizations sometimes took care to call themselves 'journeymen mechanics' groups but usually they simply and assertively followed earlier local traditions and made themselves the embodiment of *mechanic* interests generally. One of the first great US labor pamphlets was written by William Heighton under the pseudonym 'An Unlettered Mechanic'. Heighton's Philadelphia witnessed, in 1827, the early rise of a city central, the Mechanics' Union and, the following year, of a first experiment in trade union journalism, the *Mechanics' Free Press*.³¹ Perhaps because skill with machines was becoming more vital in many trades, the meaning of *mechanic* as one 'skilled in making machines' took on special importance.³²

In the early thirties, craftsmen in New York City's main shipbuilding district erected a bell to regulate the hours that masters required of journeymen. They called it the Mechanics' Bell, and its earliest historian, himself a labor leader, observed that 'As the "Liberty Bell" rang out the proclamation of liberty from monarchical control, so the "Mechanics' Bell" proclaimed the liberty of leisure for the sons of toil.' 'Mechanics' libraries' and 'mechanics' institutes' sprang up, often with explicit reform purposes. Advocates of Christian labor reforms, including temperance, would later also use the term to name their groups. Mechanic gave a name to New York's state labor organization, to important New England and New York labor papers of the 1840s, to secret societies and to the Nashville anticonvict labor forces of 1850.³³ In sum, *mechanic* had the capacity to unite craftsmen as proud republican workers, to evoke images of social harmony among producers and to legitimate the challenges that employed artisans mounted to the powers of capital. Significantly enough, antilabor organizations of employing master craftsmen and of merchant capitalists avoided calling employed artisans *mechanics*, preferring *journeymen*.³⁴

But even *mechanic* was not an unproblematic term. It was too narrow for broad political and class mobilization, such as attempts to form labor parties, and therefore was at times supplanted by *workingmen's* in the titles of labor groups. Organizations sometimes referred to 'Mechanics and Other Workingmen' in their rather unwieldy titles.³⁵ More important, *mechanic*, for all its egalitarian connotations, still could not avoid raising

the issue of dependency in a slaveholding republic that was unable to put aside fully long-standing suspicions of manual labor. Webster's 1829 dictionary illustrates tensions within the ways the word was used. One noun definition of *mechanic* is neutral and descriptive: 'a person whose occupation is to construct machines or goods. ...' A second definition is even somewhat exalted: 'one skilled in a mechanical ... art'. But negative connotations appear among the definitions of *mechanic* as an adjective. 'Skilled in the art of making machines', one such entry flatly begins, before adding, 'bred to manual labor'. Another reads, 'pertaining to artisans or mechanics, vulgar'.³⁶ A brief item, filling space at the bottom of a column in the radical Jacksonian, urban artisan-oriented *Democratic Exposition and United States Journal for the Country* suggests that some artisans themselves embraced these prejudices: 'The *Mechanic* who is ashamed of his frock is himself a shame to his profession.'³⁷

Moreover, in the South a large number of slaves and free Blacks were still mechanics, and there was little denying that Black workers could do craft labor. *Mechanic* was a term proudly used by, and respectfully applied to, white artisans in the South.³⁸ Southern labor organizations and trade associations used the term. But at the same time there was a clear recognition that 'negro mechanics' and 'negro mechanical labor' existed. No small part of the activities of white mechanics and their allies was directed against Black artisans and at times, in alliance with slave-owning artisans versus free Black mechanics. In arguing for preferential treatment for themselves, white Southern mechanics generally eschewed baiting 'niggers'. Nor did white mechanics often cast Black artisans as inferior workers in their appeals. Instead, such appeals were grounded in the white mechanics' contributions to the communities as taxpayers and as citizens, and as 'white men', the 'legal, moral and civil proprietors of this country and state.' Moreover, it was argued in a way that somewhat undercut the dignity of existing white mechanics that a better class of artisans could be attracted if the trades were 'honourably associated' by virtue of Blacks being expelled.³⁹

Even with these complications, *mechanic* was a term that survived healthily, especially when interspersed with references to the rights of 'American Freemen'.⁴⁰ But journeymen mechanics had masters, according to time-honored usage, and it was here that republican values, worries about wage labor, and anxieties about being compared to slaves conspired to change the language of labor. So long as the master was called by that term because of his craft skills, no violation of republican principles occurred. As Marx observed, the master typically owned the tools used in production and the product and therefore was a capitalist. 'But it is not as

a capitalist that he is a *master*', Marx went on. 'He is an artisan in the first instance and is supposed to be a master of his craft. Within the process of production he appears as an artisan, like his journeymen, and it is he who initiates his apprentices into the mysteries of his craft.'⁴¹

But real changes in small workshops in the US in the early nineteenth century, changes often caused by pressures from merchant capitalists, made many masters act like masters of men rather than of crafts.⁴² As the masters sought greater production and lower costs in a postrevolutionary and slaveholding society, their motivations were closely scrutinized by journeymen whose reactions mixed republicanism and whiteness. It was particularly difficult to be mastered by someone who was not a master of his craft. Thus the Philadelphia General Trades Union in 1836 complained that the 'veriest *botch*' among craftsmen too often assumed '*kingly supremacy* to himself the very moment he becomes a "MASTER MECHANIC".' Earlier and smaller labor organizations had made similar points. During 1806, in the Philadelphia journeymen shoemakers' conspiracy case, a labor appeal referred to 'these masters, as they are called, and who would be masters and tyrants if they could.'⁴³ Well before the term *wages slavery* came into common use, journeymen criticized masters as so-called 'after the slavish style of Europe'. A very early carpenters' organization scored the 'haughtiness and overbearance' of masters as more appropriate to those who 'give laws to slaves ... depriving free men of their just rights.'⁴⁴

A New York City cordwainers' conspiracy case in 1809 saw the defense call for labor rights as a counterweight to the 'rapacity of the masters' who enforced 'despotic servitude'. Workers, according to the pioneer labor pamphleteer William Heighton, suffered 'under a grievous and slave-like system of labor'.⁴⁵ From Heighton's image it was but a short leap to the conclusion that *master mechanics*, as foremen and master craftsmen came to be called perhaps for the first time in the 1820s, were one with slavemasters and that workers were 'white slaves'.⁴⁶ But a different, sidelong leap was also possible. Just as farm and domestic workers addressed the 'servant problem' by finding new words, artisans could find reassurance with regard to the 'master problem' by attempting to abolish the term *master*. Characteristically, workers jumped in both directions at once. Use of the term *white slavery* and avoidance of *master* grew together. The labor movement itself adopted both the embrace of blunt, indeed overdrawn, comparisons with slavery, and euphemistic usages of a newly popular word: *boss*.

As early as the late eighteenth century, the British traveller Richard Parkinson had commented on an American aversion to using the word

master. Parkinson, who arrived in 1798 and spent considerable time in rural Maryland but also stayed in Virginia and in Philadelphia and Baltimore, succinctly showed how republicanism and race intermingled. He found the typical white servant unwilling 'to acknowledge that he works for a master' and therefore insistent on calling the employer *mister* or *sir*. These usages, according to Parkinson, resulted from the 'boast of American liberty and equality', from the servant's 'think[ing] himself more on an equality with the master than with the negro' and from the servant's desire to 'be not a slave'. By 1818, these same sentiments were resulting in the increased popularity of *boss* as a substitute for *master*. In that year, James Flint, author of the most perceptive of the British travel accounts, wrote, '*Master* is not a word in the vocabulary of hired people. *Bos*, a Dutch one of similar import, is substituted. The former is used by negroes and is by free people considered as synonymous with slavekeeper.' Another Briton, Isaac Holmes, wrote in 1823 of *boss* in words almost precisely echoing Flint's, except that they stressed the status of the United States as a 'republican country' rather than a slaveholding one in accounting for the use of the Dutch term.⁴⁷ Thus, the *OED* records *boss* as a word adopted particularly in the United States in the early nineteenth century to avoid the use of *master*. The use of *boss* in this sense was not common enough to find its way into Webster's 1829 dictionary. By 1872, M. Schele DeVere's *Americanisms* could count *boss* the most familiar Dutch-derived word in American English.⁴⁸

By the 1830s, *boss* was specifically and popularly embraced by employed artisans amidst the rapidly developing Jacksonian labor movement. The pioneering labor historian John R. Commons thus identifies the *boss* in labor documents of the period as the 'contractor - successor of the master workman'.⁴⁹ Paul Johnson's study of labor, religion and society in Rochester notes that when one editor there used *boss* in 1829 it was felt necessary to follow it with an asterisk and to provide the definition: 'A foreman or master workman. ... Of modern coinage, we believe.' Five years later, Johnson adds, *boss* could stand by itself without explanation.⁵⁰ The Cincinnati *People's Paper* meanwhile explained that *boss* meant 'master mechanic'.⁵¹ James Fenimore Cooper's *American Democrat*, published in 1837, bristled at the newly popular term, holding that 'the laboring classes of whites' moved by a desire not to be connected with 'negro-slaves' had dispensed with the term *master*. 'So far has this prejudice gone', Cooper lamented, that 'they have resorted to the use of the word *boss*, which has precisely the same meaning in Dutch!'⁵²

Race and the Freeman's Freedom

Cooper regarded those who used euphemisms for *master* or *servant* as lacking in 'manly' qualities. But to see such choices as merely silly, feckless or cowardly is to miss the drama, and tragedy, of workers caught in a situation in which it was difficult not to compare themselves to slaves, almost unbearable to make such a comparison, and impossible to sustain the metaphor. Nor were the new usages without meaning and impact. If republicanism meant different things to different groups, it still carried a resonance; and white supremacy was widely shared, if also variously interpreted. In such a society it was desirable, even imperative, not to be taken for a slave or anything like one. Conventions of *Black* reformers declared, 'To be dependent, is to be degraded.' A *hired hand* could claim and perhaps insist upon small privileges that a *servant* could not. He could see himself in a different way. White native-born Americans not only changed the language of domestic service but also, by the 1830s, in fact largely abandoned domestic service as a job. Avoidance of connections to dependency and to blackness paid, in Du Bois's language, 'public and psychological' wages.⁵³ But there were costs as well, not only in terms of race relations but also the wedding of labor to a debased republicanism.

If there was a 'manly' Jacksonian-era alternative to the kinds of workers' self-identification that Cooper deplored, it was *freeman*. The evolution of this long-used term illustrates the impossibility of avoiding race in constructing a class identity. The evolution of *freeman* also richly suggests the payoffs of whiteness and the tendency of those payoffs to prove spurious - spurious, that is, if we regard an attack on lifelong wage labor to have been a legitimate goal of labor republicanism.

The term *freeman* remained much-prized in the Age of Jackson. Indeed, in an urban society in which work and home became more radically separated and masculinity underwent extensive redefinition, its masculine ending may have had special appeal. Labor appeals often featured calls to 'men' - a term that was sometimes used without 'working', 'trades', or 'journey' in front of it to refer to wage earners collectively. *Workingman* and *Workingmen's* consistently graced the titles of labor groups and the mastheads of the labor press. One important labor newspaper was simply titled *The Man*.⁵⁴ The title *freeman* was worth fighting over. Abolitionist papers took it for their names, as did antiabolitionist Catholic ones. When Walt Whitman launched a democratic experiment in journalism, designed to win a readership of neither *masters* nor *servants*, he called it the *Brooklyn Freeman*.⁵⁵

The word reverberated throughout labor's appeals, with Seth Luther's famous *Address to the Workingmen of New England* setting a standard for highlighting its importance by promising to show 'all TYRANTS, that we are not only determined to have the name of freemen, but that we will LIVE FREEMEN and DIE FREEMEN.' The earliest protests by female textile workers couched their appeals for better treatment in terms of their status as the 'daughters of freemen'.⁵⁶

Freeman continued to carry the double meaning of economic and political independence. Webster's 1829 dictionary gave as its first definition of *freeman* 'one who enjoys liberty ... one not a slave or a vassal', and as its second 'one who enjoys or is entitled to a franchise'.⁵⁷ Before the Revolution, these various freedoms were only imperfectly linked to whiteness amidst patterns of deference, varied forms of economic vassalage among whites, colonial status and limits on suffrage. By the Age of Jackson, the correspondence between who was white and who was a freeman has become a far closer one. Although imprisonment for debt among whites remained a fearsome problem in some areas, the range of economic unfreedom felt by native-born whites had come to be increasingly concentrated on the single category of wage labor. While this dependency was sometimes defined metaphorically as 'wages slavery', it could also be seen in republican terms as merely temporary, as more free than older, paternalistic labor relations and certainly as vastly more free, in republican terms, than chattel slavery. Moreover, given their wide political freedoms – wide in comparison not only with those of slaves and of free Blacks but also with those of the common people of the whole of Europe – white workers in the United States could and did count themselves as *freemen* even as they protested seeming plots to enslave them economically.⁵⁸

Blackness meanwhile almost perfectly predicted lack of the attributes of a freeman. In 1820, 86.8 percent of African-Americans were slaves – in 1860, 89 percent. Free Blacks in the South lacked political rights, as they did in the North to a nearly equivalent extent. As white manhood suffrage became the norm, perhaps one free Black male in fourteen could legally vote in the North by 1860, with tradition barring the participation even of many of these who were technically so qualified. With jury duty, militia service and other civil responsibilities and rights barred to Black Northerners, the typical 'free' Black had, as the historian Jean Baker has tellingly observed, a single accepted public role: that of the victim of rioters.⁵⁹

The very powerlessness of free Blacks made them not only easy but, in republican terms, appropriate and logical victims of the popular masses of white freemen. Because they were dependent, free Blacks were seen as

pawns of the rich and powerful. At exactly the moment that voting requirements reflected the tendency to drop the traditional republican concern about voting by *whites* who were not economically independent, concern focused on the possibility that 'servile' Blacks would vote. The 1821 'Reform Convention' in New York provided the vote to virtually 'every white male citizen' under the new state constitution. The convention also instituted a steep \$250 property requirement and harsher residency laws for Black male voters. The logic of the Republican-dominated convention – Blacks had largely voted Federalist – was, as one historian has recently summarized it, that 'many Negroes had been born in slavery [and] they were filled with a spirit of dependence and consequently would vote according to the wishes of their employers ... which would foster an aristocracy.' In 1825, about one New York City African-American in two hundred was qualified to vote. In 1846, when the issue of expanding Black voting rights in New York was briefly raised, a printer and activist in the artisan wing of the Democratic party stood on his republicanism and his race. 'We want no masters', he began, briefly echoing Whitman before continuing, 'and least of all no negro masters'.⁶⁰

In Connecticut in 1818, a similar pairing of expanded white suffrage and narrowed Black rights occurred, in this case the elimination of Black voting rights altogether. In North Carolina and Tennessee, anomalous Southern states where free Blacks with property had voted, universal white manhood suffrage and Black disfranchisement likewise came together. The broad white suffrage of states in the Old Northwest was from the start joined, with very minor exceptions in Wisconsin, to bars on Black voting. Referenda repeatedly proved such regulations hugely popular among whites.⁶¹

That Blacks were largely noncitizens will surprise few, but it is important to emphasize the extent to which they were seen as *anticitizens*, as 'enemies rather than the members of the social compact.' As such they were driven from Independence Day parades as 'defilers' of the body politic and driven from their homes by Sons of Liberty and Minute Men.⁶² The more powerless they became, the greater their supposed potential to be used by the rich to make freemen unfree. Thus, it was necessary to watch for the smallest signs of power among Blacks, and, since Blacks were defenseless, it was easy to act on perceived threats. We shall see this dynamic very much at work later in discussions of antebellum race riots, but worth considering here are the vehement and usually successful popular objections to any hint that Blacks could be freemen, objections that at times also bolstered white workers' labor market positions.

In New York City, for example, the licensing of cartmen – a group that had perhaps singularly come to define itself as a body of white freemen even during colonial days – continued to be racially based. Though Irish carters were at times licensed, over hot objections, a fully qualified Black candidate found the chief magistrate unwilling to grant a license because 'the populace would likely pelt him [the magistrate] ... when it became known.'⁶³ In the brutal Columbia, Pennsylvania race riot of 1834 defenders of the white rioters modelled their appeal directly on the Declaration of Independence, charging a plot by employers and abolitionists to open new trades to Blacks, and 'to break down the distinctive barrier between the colors that the poor whites may gradually sink into the degraded condition of the Negroes – that, like them, they may be slaves and tools.' Though the animus was ostensibly directed toward the weak Blacks and their designing manipulators, the fear that any change in the status of Blacks could show white freedom to be illusory runs through the document, and 'colored freeholders' were singled out for removal from the borough.⁶⁴

Much popular energy was in fact expended to make the literal legal title of *freeman* absolutely congruent with *white* adult maleness. In Rhode Island in 1822 provision was made to let only 'freemen' vote and to allow only whites to become freemen. But Rhode Island atypically barred many poorer whites from voting, and a strongly artisan-based movement to expand the franchise matured in the mid-1830s. Seth Luther followed his 1832 *Address to the Workingmen* with an equally strong indictment of Rhode Island's 'aristocratic' voting system. The reform forces eventually followed the leadership of the abolitionist attorney Thomas Dorr, but they did not follow his racial liberalism. The Dorr forces' People's Convention of 1841 not only adopted white manhood suffrage but overwhelmingly rejected any attempt to make freemen and voters of Blacks, despite pleas from Providence's overwhelmingly working-class Black community and from the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. If some delegates made a considered decision that liberalization of the suffrage for whites would be jeopardized by taking up racial issues, others cited a simpler logic. One speaker explained that if Blacks could vote they could also win election and 'a nigger might occupy the chair where your honor sits.' The rebellion of the Dorrites ended in defeat, in part because the Black community rallied against the Dorr forces which had spurned them and supported the conservative opposition to Dorr, strengthening loyal militia units. In 1842, a new state constitution broadened the franchise to whites but also to Blacks, who were rewarded for their opposition to Dorr.⁶⁵

In Pennsylvania, suffrage for white males extended to all who were on the tax roles, as an overwhelming proportion of white males were. However, the 1790 state constitution also left open the possibility of Blacks voting and, despite intimidation and subterfuge, a few Blacks did cast ballots. In Philadelphia whites could brag to Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831 that Blacks were effectively driven from the polls by 'public opinion', but in other areas small numbers of Black votes were counted and, in 1837, these ballots apparently turned the tide against Democratic candidates in a county election. Any such exercise of Black power, symbolic or otherwise, loomed as a tremendous threat in a state known for its race riots. The 1837–38 constitutional convention featured protracted hearings on the necessity of denying the franchise to Blacks – hearings that almost precisely coincided with the initial hearings on child labor and labor conditions generally in Pennsylvania. The franchise hearings and concurrent court cases featured arguments holding that Pennsylvania was traditionally 'a political community of white men exclusively', that Black suffrage and racial amalgamation were synonymous, and that Black voters would surely be manipulated by 'evil forces'. Another rationale suggested how thoroughly whiteness could undermine a sense of self-reliant republicanism: if voting meant having to 'jostle with negroes', the white electorate would withdraw altogether. The courts, then the constitutional convention, and finally and resoundingly a referendum disfranchised Blacks. Technically the latter remained 'freemen', but the new constitution limited voting to 'white freemen'.⁶⁶

The case of Pennsylvania illustrates the problem of applying the much-debated term *herrenvolk democracy* to goals of the militant popular racism of the North. *Herrenvolk democracy*, used by the sociologist Pierre L. van der Berghe to denote the ideology of 'regimes like those of the United States or South Africa that are democratic for the master race but tyrannical for the subordinate groups', does partially describe the coupling of gains by poorer whites in political rights and the loss of rights by free Blacks during the early nineteenth century. But subordinate groups, notably 'hirelings', still existed among whites and, in situations such as that in Pennsylvania in 1837 and 1838 racism was not effectively linked to any significant social or political levelling among whites. The labor hearings of the same years produced no action, for example. Rather than levelling, there was a simple pushing down on the vulnerable bottom strata of society, even when there was little to be gained, except psychologically, from such a push. Since republicanism encouraged fear of plots between those above and those below against the independent producers, we should perhaps speak of a *herrenvolk* republicanism, which

read African-Americans out of the ranks of the producers and then proved more able to concentrate its fire downward on to the dependent and Black than upward against the rich and powerful. Only sometimes was that choice of targets effective, in the narrow sense that white supremacy was popular and could be tied, as in New York or North Carolina, to political gains for poorer whites. *Herrenvolk* republicanism had the advantage of reassuring whites in a society in which downward social mobility was a constant fear – one might lose everything but not whiteness. Like republicanism generally, for all its talk about a white people's government, *herrenvolk* republicanism placed mainly negative demands on the state. And *herrenvolk* republicanism could become an unconsidered habit, a turning into the easiest of possible roads. Sometimes this was literally so, as in the numerous antebellum riots that began with more controversial targets and then settled into attacks on the Black community.⁶⁷

Plebeian goals could degenerate, for understandable though tragic reasons, from a republican hatred of slavery to a republican disdain for slaves and for free Blacks, and then to a mere racial pettiness that robbed republicanism of any remaining grandeur. Identifying oneself by negation was a risky business. It was a long way down from Tom Paine to Huck Finn's Pap, who railed:

'Oh, yes, this is a wonderful government, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free nigger from Ohio – a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; ... and there ain't a man in that town that's got as fine a clothes as what he had; ... And what do you think? They said he was a 'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is this country acoming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a state where they'd let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I'll never vote again.'⁶⁸

Notes

1. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Boston 1860, 144; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850*, New York 1984, 21.

2. Herbert Gutman with Ira Berlin, 'Class Composition and the Development of the American Working Class, 1840–1890', in Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, New York 1987, 381.

3. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 144. For a good recent synthesis reflecting the impact of an approach that stresses labor's republicanism, see Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York 1989.

4. Lorenzo D. Turner, 'Walt Whitman and the Negro', *Chicago Jewish Forum* 15 (Fall 1956): 8; Rowland Berthoff, 'Free Blacks, Women and Corporations as Unequal Persons',

Journal of American History 76 (Dec. 1989): 760.

5. Quoted in Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, New York 1988, 26.

6. Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848*, London 1988, 288–89.

7. OED2, 5:299–300; Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, New York 1829, 412.

8. Blackburn, *Colonial Slavery*, 289.

9. OED2, 5:300.

10. Quoted in Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, New York 1976, 134, and in David Brody, 'Time and Work during Early American Industrialism', *Labor History* 30 (Winter 1989): 13–15. See also Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution*, New York 1985, 61–62, and Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Maritime World, 1700–1750*, Cambridge, Mass. 1987, 111. On Paine and servant, see Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785–1850*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1989, 116.

11. E. Foner, *Tom Paine*, 40 and 143–44. On Lincoln, see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, New York 1970, 23, 29–30. On the extent of the transformation to wage labor by the time of the Civil War, see David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872*, New York 1967, 25–31.

12. John Ashworth, 'Agrarians and Aristocrats': Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837–1846, London 1983, 25 and 40–41; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 243.

13. William Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America*, New York 1986, 3–130; Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass. 1979, 258–60; Paul F. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837*, New York 1978, 32–48.

14. E. Foner, *Tom Paine*, 40 and 143–44; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 258–60 and 320–31; Rorabaugh, *Craft Apprentice*, 68–69.

15. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 242–43.

16. Asa Briggs, 'The Language of "Class" in Early Nineteenth-Century England', in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, Urbana, Ill. 1985, 1:4–6. See also Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution*, Chicago 1982, 74–77.

17. Charles W. Janson, *The Stranger in America*, New York 1946 (1807), 88; Richard H. Thornton, ed., *An American Glossary, Being an Attempt to Illustrate Certain Americanisms on Historical Principles* (hereafter AG), Philadelphia 1912, 1:428; Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, New York 1839, 45.

18. John Bristed, *America and Her Resources*, London 1818, 460. Compare Adam Ferguson, *Practical Notes Made during a Tour in Canada, and a Portion of the United States*, London 1833, 233–34. See Webster, *American Dictionary*, 743; OED2, 5:508; and Christopher Tomlins, 'The Ties That Bind: Master and Servant in Massachusetts, 1800–1850', *Labor History* 30 (Spring 1989), passim, for the complexities of usage but also an argument that servant did have more or less precise, limited legal meanings in colonial Massachusetts. See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, New York 1975, 327–32; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812*, Chapel Hill, N.C. 1968, 80–81; Albert Matthews, 'The Terms Hired Man and Help', *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 5 (1898), esp. 229–38; [Thomas Hamilton], *Men and Manners in America*, Edinburgh 1834, 1:104; and AG, 1:428. See also Blackmar, *Manhattan*, 116–22.

19. OED2, 5:299, and DAE, 2:1250.

20. Albert Matthews, 'Hired Man', 229–54, esp. 232, and for the Salmon quote, 230 n1.

21. Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920*, Chicago 1979, 30–31. See Matthews, 'Hired Man', 243–54, on help.

22. James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat; or, Hints on the Social and Civic*

Relations of the United States of America, Cooperstown, N.Y. 1838, 122; Charles Mackay, *Life and Liberty in America*, London 1859, 2:45-46; Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 44-45; Janson, *Stranger*, 88. A partial exception is Francis J. Grund, *The Americans in Their Moral, Social and Political Relations*, Boston 1837, which sees the employer and employed both acting to find substitutes for servant out of a shared republicanism. The labor leader Seth Luther satirizes help in Appendix H of his *Address to the Workingmen of New England*, Boston 1832.

23. DAE, 1:288 and 2:1236. See also Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, New York 1986, 272 n7.

24. Matthews, 'Hired Man', 229; Janson, *Stranger*, 88; Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 44-45; Grund, *Americans*, 236.

25. Webster, *American Dictionary*, 262; Bristed, *America*, 460; Trollope, *Domestic Manners*, 44-45.

26. James Flint, *Letters from America, 1818-1820*, London 1822, 218.

27. Ibid., 98. On *bired hand*, see also DAE, 2:1212 and 1250, and David E. Schob, *Hired Hands and Plowboys: Farm Labor in the Midwest, 1815-60*, Urbana, Ill. 1975.

28. See Chapter 2 and pages 52-56 in the balance of this chapter on *mechanic* and *freemen*.

29. E. Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 15; Paul Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution*, Albany, N.Y. 1981, 30-31; Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 70-71.

30. David R. Roediger and Philip S. Foner, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day*, London 1989, 1-42; Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 59; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*, New York 1989, 354-62.

31. 'Unlettered Mechanic' [Heighton], *An Address Delivered before the Mechanics and Working Classes Generally*, Philadelphia 1827?; *Mechanics' Free Press*, 21 June 1828; Louis H. Arky, 'The Mechanics Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen's Movement', *Pennsylvania Magazine and History and Biography* 76 (April 1952): 145-51.

32. Webster, *American Dictionary*, 523.

33. George McNeill, ed., *The Labor Movement: The Problem of Today*, Boston 1887, 345-48; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 197, 347-48; Norman O. Ware, *The Industrial Worker, 1840-1860*, Gloucester, Mass. 1959, xiv, 200-201; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, New York 1947, 1:115 and 203; W.T.M. Riches, *Industrialisation, Paternalism and Class Conflict: White Workers in Antebellum Southern Industry, 1830-1860*, Coleraine, Northern Ireland 1987, 11.

34. *Columbian Centinel*, 23 April 1825; Roediger and P. Foner, *Our Own Time*, 24.

35. Pessen, *Uncommon Jacksonians*, 3.

36. Webster, *American Dictionary*, 523; Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers*, 30-31.

37. *Democratic Exposition and United States Journal for the Country*, 6 September 1845, 135; Howard B. Rock, 'The Independent Mechanic: The Tradesmen of New York City in Labor and Politics during the Jeffersonian Era' (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1974), 1-5, deepens this point.

38. On the prevalence of *mechanic* in Southern speech and in the titles of artisan organizations, see Riches, *Industrialization and Class Conflict*, 11; P. Foner, *Labor Movement*, 1:263; Herbert Aptheker, *The Unfolding Drama: Studies in US History*, New York 1978, 34; Roger W. Shuggs, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875*, Baton Rouge, La. 1972, 115 and note 39 below.

39. Quote from John R. Commons et al., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, Cleveland 1910, 2:360 and 2:356-75 passim, and Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis, eds, *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, Philadelphia 1978, 1:87-88 and 1:71-88 passim; see also Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 108-9; Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, London 1970, 18-19 and 209-14; Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States*, New York 1927, 69-74; Ira Berlin and Herbert G. Gutman, 'Natives and Immigrants, Free Men and Slaves: Urban Workingmen in the Antebellum South', *American Historical Review* 88 (1983): 1175-1200.

40. Perhaps the most vivid such a combined appeal to 'Brother Mechanics' and 'American Freemen' is the Boston 'Ten-Hour Circular' of 1835, reprinted in Commons et al., *Documentary History*, 6:94-99.

41. Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London 1976, 1029. The passage is not in Marx's *Capital* as first published but is from a projected, and dropped, Part Seven, of Volume 1 of that work. Fowkes's is the first published English translation.

42. John R. Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, New York 1918-35, 1:103ff, remains useful on this point. See also Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn*, Cambridge, Mass. 1972, 20-32.

43. The 1836 quote is from *The Pennsylvanian*, 31 March 1836, emphasis in the original as cited in Richard A. McLeod, 'The Philadelphia Artisan, 1828-1850' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1971), 192; 1806 quote from Anthony Bimba, *The History of the American Working Class*, New York 1927, 79.

44. Mark Lause's forthcoming book on early labor organizations records the first two uses while the third is from Rock, 'Independent Mechanic', 94.

45. Philip S. Foner, 'An Early Trades Union and Its Fate', *Labor History* 14 (Summer 1973): 423-24; Commons et al., *History of Labour*, 1:158-60; Commons et al., *Documentary History*, 5:80.

46. On *master mechanic*, see DAE, 3:1494, for a first use in 1838, but there were earlier uses in the 1830s. For one in Boston in 1832, see Commons et al., *Documentary History*, 6:82, and in 1829; P. Foner and Lewis, *Black Worker*, 1:155, and McLeod, 'Philadelphia Artisan', 192.

47. Richard Parkinson, *The Experienced Farmer's Tour in America*, London 1805, 18-19; Flint, *Letters from America*, London 1822, 33 and 288-90; Isaac Holmes, *An Account of the United States of America*, London 1823, 342. An unpublished account of his pre-1818 apprenticeship in New Jersey by the American sculptor John Frazee uses *boss* for master, but the account was written much later in Frazee's life. See John B. Jentz, 'Artisans, Evangelicals, and the City: A Social History of Abolition and Labor Reform in Jacksonian New York' (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1977), 124.

48. OED2, 1:1009; DAE, 1:288; Webster, *American Dictionary*, 99; M. Schele DeVere, *Americanisms: The English of the New World*, New York 1872, 91-92; AG, 1:91-92.

49. Commons et al., *History of Labour*, 1:7.

50. Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 39 and 42. See also Commons et al., *Documentary History*, 4:287.

51. Commons et al., *Documentary History*, 8:222.

52. Cooper, *American Democrat*, 114. See also [Thomas Hamilton], *Men and Manners*, 1:229, for the view that the 'better orders' were not responsible for spread of *boss*.

53. Quoted in Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860*, Chicago, 1961, 174; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, New York 1935, 700; Stansell, *City of Women*, 155-58.

54. On gender and labor, see Stansell, *City of Women*, esp. 11-12 and 76-129, and the essays by Nancy Chodorow, Heidi Hartman and Mary Ryan in Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, New York 1979; for an early (1817) use of *men* to refer to workers collectively, see G.A. Kleene, *History of the Ten-Hour Day in the United States*, n.p. n.d., 5. On *The Man*, see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 224 n11.

55. For example, the Pennsylvania *Freeman* (abolitionist), and New York *Freeman* (Catholic). On Whitman's *Brooklyn Freeman*, see Malcolm Cowley's introduction to *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Garden City, N.Y. 1948, 7.

56. Luther, *Address to the Workingmen of New England*, Boston 1832, 31; *The Man*, 22 February 1834.

57. Webster, *American Dictionary*, 359.

58. For formal reforms in suffrage, see Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy, 1760-1860*, Princeton, N.J. 1960.

59. Ira Berlin, *Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*, New York 1974, 137; Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the*

Mid-Nineteenth Century, Ithaca, N.Y. 1983, 244-45.

60. Philip S. Foner, *A History of Black Americans: From the Emergence of the Cotton Kingdom to the Eve of the Compromise of 1850*, Westport, Conn. 1983, 206-7 and 339; quote from Berthoff, 'Free Blacks, Women and Corporations', 771.

61. P. Foner, *Black Americans*, 207-9; Berlin, *Slaves without Masters*, 190-92; Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 243.

62. Flint, *Letters from America*, 122; Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 246.

63. Rock, 'Independent Mechanic', 134-35.

64. P. Foner and Lewis, *Black Worker*, 1:175-77.

65. Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism, 1833-1849*, New York 1973, 17-19, 37, 46-48, 53, 129-130.

66. Litwack, *North of Slavery*, 84-86; P. Foner, *Black Americans*, 297-308; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 267; Berthoff, 'Free Blacks, Women and Corporations', 772; J. Lynn Barnard, *Factory Legislation in Pennsylvania: Its History and Administration*, Philadelphia 1907, 7-17.

67. On *herrenvolk* democracy in the US context, and for van der Berghe's definition, see George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, New York 1971, 61, 84, 90-94 and 322.

68. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York 1973 (1884), 36. The novel is set between 1836 and 1846.

White Slaves, Wage Slaves and Free White Labor

In 1836, supporters of New York City's journeymen tailors papered the city with handbills featuring a coffin. The tailors had just lost a conspiracy case and with it their right to organize. The handbill encouraged protest and demanded redress in strong republican language familiar since the Revolution. It appealed to 'Freemen' and to the power of 'Mechanics and workingmen'. But confidence that the cause of independence would prevail was at an ebb. The coffin signified that the 'Liberty of the workingmen [would] be interred!' at the sentencing of the tailors. 'Tyrant masters' had the upper hand, and the handbill's authors made a direct comparison that had been unthinkable even a decade before: 'Freemen of the North are now on a level with the slaves of the South.'¹

The 'coffin handbill' shows both the new ease and the continuing hesitancy with which white workers in Jacksonian America began to describe themselves as slaves. Its unqualified North-South comparison is most striking, but the document also suggests some of the ways in which white workers remained beyond comparison with slaves. The whites, if slaves, were also simultaneously 'freemen'. If 'tyrant masters' had prevailed, according to one line of the handbill, another line settled for invoking the fear of 'would-be masters'. Nor was it clear that the 'slavery' of the tailors was 'wage slavery'. They were cast as slaves not because they were 'hirelings' but because the state had deprived them of the freedoms necessary for defending their rights. The emphasis on the 'slavery' of the tailors in fact proved rather short-lived. After hearing of a more favorable court decision in another conspiracy case upstate, 'the journeymen's fury abated'.²