

# **THE ORIGINS OF RIGHT TO WORK**

Antilabor Democracy in  
Nineteenth-Century Chicago

**Cedric de Leon**

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## TRACING THE ORIGINS OF RIGHT TO WORK

On December 6, 2012, a Republican-controlled Michigan legislature passed “right to work” legislation, allowing workers in this longtime labor stronghold to receive the benefits of union contracts without having to pay the dues or comparable service fees that support the daily operation of unions. Amid mounting protests from thousands of union members outside the state capitol in Lansing, Republican governor Rick Snyder said that the law was “about being pro-worker, about giving the freedom to choose who they associate with.” Though “right to work” laws make it extremely difficult for unions to represent their members and secure strong contracts, Governor Snyder added, “I support the unions in many regards; I support their right to organize. This has nothing to do with collective bargaining. I continue to be an advocate of collective bargaining in Michigan.” State Senate majority leader Randy Richardville echoed Mr. Snyder’s sentiments. He said, “I have long been a supporter of collective bargaining, but whether you support collective bargaining or not, it should be the worker’s freedom to choose whether or not he or she belongs to a union . . . what this ultimately comes down to is the individual worker” (Skubick 2012).

A century and a half earlier, in another midwestern town just three hours west of Lansing, Republican mayor and *Chicago Tribune* editor, Joseph Medill, spoke before throngs of Chicago workers striking for the eight-hour day. In a move of either astonishing faith in his fellow man or outright effrontery, Medill declared, “Journeymen have the lawful right to combine by trades or unions and

determine the conditions on which they will exchange their labor for wages, but they have no legal right to compel any outside worker to accept their conditions or to sell his labor only at their price, for that would be to destroy his personal freedom and liberty of action" (*Chicago Tribune*, May 16, 1872, 4).

Though separated by 140 years, the two sets of statements are based on the same premise. The spokesmen of the Republican Party, past and present, concede the right of workers to assemble and to set rules for their own organizations, but employ the rhetoric of liberty in ways that delegitimize the workers' most effective strategies for improving their wages and working conditions. In each case, the weakening of workers' collective power is justified as a safeguard to individual freedom. Governor Snyder speaks of the worker's right to associate with whomever he or she likes, while Medill cautions against infringing on the individual worker's "personal freedom and liberty of action." Although free riders are often reviled for reaping all the benefits of the team's efforts while doing none of the work, these appeals insist that the free rider is entitled to shirk his duty. They encourage workers to accept the higher wages and benefits that unions are able to negotiate relative to nonunion workplaces, while not contributing financially to house and staff the organization, advertise its objectives, and mobilize the rank-and-file behind a common list of demands. Beyond shrinking the operational budgets of labor organizations, the "right to work" dulls the urgency of collective action. If workers are unwilling to contribute dues, they are unlikely to put themselves out in other ways as well: they might choose not to sign a public petition, attend a rally, or walk a picket line. In sum, the "right to work" encourages wholesale divestment from the financial and organizational means through which unions can bring pressure to bear on recalcitrant employers and then frames the resulting power imbalance as the moral imperative of a free society.

This book is about the bait-and-switch that has historically constrained American workers' freedom under liberal capitalist democracy; enticed with the American Dream, they are simultaneously denied a collective route to fulfill its promise. I trace the present moment back to the time of Joseph Medill when employment relations were being rewritten in the context of slave emancipation. It was then that the United States became an antilabor democracy—one that, despite occasional assurances to the contrary, was hostile to the notion that workers possessed any rights beyond the ability to bargain one-on-one with their employers.

This is not to say that American workers are forever doomed by history or that a more progressive future was somehow foreclosed by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It is to say, rather, that workers have had, and must therefore always

be prepared, to defend their hard-won collective rights in the face of a political and economic system that was set up to preserve only the right of individuals to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment.

That outcome was hardly preordained, for both antebellum politicians and workers were deeply critical of the individual wage contract, often calling it wage “dependency” or “slavery,” because it rendered white men subservient to a master class. This arrangement was less troubling when it was still possible for most workers to start their own businesses and become master craftsmen themselves, but political discourse shifted as workers became permanently mired in wage labor. The cost of doing business increased even as workers earned and saved less, thus putting a life of economic independence out of reach to all but the wealthiest merchants, manufacturers, and commercial farmers. Accordingly, during the Jacksonian era (1828–1844), the Democratic and opposition Whig parties often framed their competing economic policies as ones that would enable white men to escape wage dependency and become self-sufficient farmers. Between 1846 and 1861, as Americans colonized the land that would become the continental United States, the major parties fractured over whether slavery should be permitted in the new western territories. All factions agreed, however, that the goal of land policy should be to preserve a path to self-sufficiency for less affluent white men. Indeed, it was only in the years immediately after the Civil War that the wage contract became understood in mainstream political discourse as a safeguard to personal liberty. Politicians, in what became known as the doctrine of “free contract,” held that even the poorest white man was free, because no one could make him enter into a wage contract unless he agreed to the terms. Yet even then, it was the political establishment that espoused that view, while workers rejected it as a fancy reinterpretation of wage slavery.

If free wage labor is the central feature of capitalism—its *sine qua non* as Marx, Weber, and countless others have argued—then the emerging industrial order had something less than the full-throated political support of antebellum actors. Accordingly, any adequate examination of workers’ place in the transition to liberal democracy must reconcile the persistent critique of wage dependency with the outpouring of support among Northern workers for the cause of “free labor” prior to and during the Civil War. The ensuing chapters address the following puzzle: Why did the critics of wage dependency reorganize in favor of liberal capitalist democracy only to reject it shortly thereafter? While other accounts (e.g., Hattam 1993; Stanley 1998) emphasize the importance of the law and social actors on the ground (e.g., classes, ethnic groups, voters), I argue that mass parties pressed formerly adversarial class and ethnic voting blocs into the service of liberal capitalist democracy and then incurred the wrath of immigrant

workers when they abandoned the critique of wage dependency in favor the doctrine of free contract and its core implication, the right to work.

Specifically, my answer unfolds in a narrative of the changing relationship between political parties and workers, for the key is to understand that while the critique of wage dependency persisted, its target changed through three phases of partisan struggle. In the Jacksonian era, the close relationship between Democrats and workers was built on that party's populist critique of economic dependency, on the one hand, and the increasing inability of workers to escape such dependency, on the other. But in 1846 both the Democrats and the Whigs became internally divided over the question of slavery extension. The crisis shifted the terms of political debate away from the critique of wage dependency under capitalism toward a critique of dependency under slavery. Instead of arguing about the tyranny of banks and other economic institutions, parties and workers debated whether southern planters would monopolize western lands and thereby prevent workers from becoming independent farmers. In the North, the specter of a "slave power conspiracy" reshuffled the parties' electoral bases, uniting previously antagonistic class and ethnic voting blocs (i.e., elites and nonelites; native-born and foreign-born) into a grand free labor coalition under the leadership of the Republican Party.

This is only half the answer, however, for while the first two phases explain why the critics of wage dependency came to the defense of free labor, antebellum politics do not explain why workers later rebelled against the very social order they helped to establish. This is where the third phase in the relationship between parties and workers comes into play—a phase during which Joseph Medill loomed large. Northern workers bought, and Republicans sold, the claim that barring slavery from the western territories would allow them to escape wage dependency in the nation's cities. What workers did not—and could not—know is that the North's triumph in the Civil War would be used to delegitimize collective bargaining.

As labor unrest mounted during and immediately after the war, the major parties despaired of a strategy to settle the so-called labor question and return to issues like the tariff that once peaceably organized the terms of political debate. Eventually, both parties advanced a contractual vision of free society. In contrast to its previous incarnation as a slaveholding republic where some laborers were forced into the service of their masters, the republic—now formally without slavery—would protect the right of all workers to exchange their labor freely in a one-on-one negotiation with their employers. Workers, recognizing that the doctrine of free contract was merely a glorified version of wage dependency, were persuaded by trade unionists, socialists, and anarchists to reject the major parties' appeal in favor of strikes, boycotts, independent third parties, and revolution.

The political establishment responded by drawing a powerful implication from the doctrine of free contract, the right to work, and used it both as a rhetorical tool to mobilize those frightened by labor's uprising and as a rationale for antilabor state violence. A trade union, politicians argued, coerced individual employers and workers into a collective agreement that was tantamount to the enslavement of free white men. Collective agreements prevented the individual's "right to work" at whatever wage he wanted, while simultaneously prohibiting another individual, the employer, from paying that wage. Revising the English common law doctrine of labor conspiracy, postbellum political elites imposed a double standard on the modern employment relation. Though late nineteenth-century employers were incorporated increasingly as combinations like partnerships, corporations, and companies, the right to work framed the employer combination as a free rights-bearing individual, a "corporate person," and the labor combination as a conspiracy in restraint of trade. Having constructed both trade unionism and the slave power as plots subversive of individual liberty, northern party leaders ordered the police and military to break strikes and eradicate the labor movement just as they did the Southern rebellion. Thus, the Northern victory in the war was pro-labor to the degree that it ended the institution of slavery, but antilabor in the sense that it enabled political elites to forcibly subdue workers' collective attempts to address economic inequality under capitalism.

To bring these complex dynamics to life, I use the case of Chicago, Illinois from the beginning of the Jacksonian era in 1828 through the Gilded Age, ending with the infamous Haymarket Affair of 1886–1887. I weave the national and local contexts together by showing that factionalism among state and local parties disrupted coalitions of voting blocs in the electorate. I track ward-level electoral returns over time as well as the shifting rhetoric of party leaders and workers on the issue of wage dependency. The data suggest three things. First, the base of the Jacksonian Democratic Party was a coalition of immigrant (primarily German and Irish) majority-worker wards. Second, the Republican base during the political crisis over slavery was a coalition of German majority-worker and native-born middle-class to affluent wards. Finally, the industrial strife of the postbellum period alienated Chicago workers from the major parties, leading the former to establish revolutionary organizations and a Workingman's Party. Throughout this period, the grist of Chicago politics was the discourse of dependency, but its character changed and its capacity to bind workers to the two-party system waned. When that happened, the political establishment used the right to work to justify and ultimately enact its repression of the labor movement.

I extend the long-standing scholarly conversation on democratic transitions, American exceptionalism, and related dynamics, through a focus on political parties. Parties politicize and depoliticize—in theoretical parlance "articulate"

and “disarticulate”—social divisions such as region, race, and class as they struggle for power and in the process occasionally remake the social order. In that capacity, parties may mobilize coalitions for and against democratic reform and incline or disincline communities toward certain types of social organization such as capitalism or socialism. Parties, however, are not omnipotent. When they fail to do the work of articulation or when their articulatory projects fall flat, the governed may withdraw their support, and political elites, in turn, may resort to violence to preserve the social order as they did in the postbellum era. Nor are party politics by any means the whole story. The economic, legal, and ethnoracial contexts of this period each played a role in inaugurating the right to work and the antilabor democracy that it justified. Adding the context of partisan struggle, however, enriches our knowledge of this critical moment in American history, for politicians interpreted, altered, and even directed these other areas of social life. What is missing from existing accounts, in short, is the rough-and-tumble world of party politics.

## **Alternative Theories of Antilabor Democracy in the United States: First Order Implications**

In my critical overview of the literature, I distinguish between the “first” and “second” order implications of my argument. Although the act of “bringing parties back in” contributes to a wide range of research, not all of it bears directly on the relationship between labor and American democracy. By first order implications, then, I refer to those bodies of work that address this relationship head-on. These are the literatures on American exceptionalism, which examines the antilabor tendencies in U.S. political culture, and democratization, which theorizes the conditions favorable to democratic transitions and expansions. By second order implications, I have in mind scholars for whom the relationship between labor and democracy is a tangential or non-issue, but who are nevertheless impacted by the claim that political parties shape social life. These include analysts of class and racial identity as well as electoral politics.

### **American Exceptionalism**

American exceptionalism denotes the vast literature that arose in response to Werner Sombart’s ([1906] 1976) now century-old question, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” Those familiar with this research will know that it supplies several alternative hypotheses to the one I propose here, ranging

from the complex to the monocausal and ahistorical. The latter include several accounts of the putative “conservatism” of the American worker. I do not refute these more problematic examples of the genre, because others have capably dispatched them elsewhere (see, for example, Katznelson 1981; Kimeldorf 1988; Voss 1993), but I discuss three highly sophisticated answers to Sombart’s puzzle that are of a historically sensitive variety.

Kim Voss’s foundational book, *The Making of American Exceptionalism* (1993), was a response to the ahistorical accounts alluded to above. Contrary to claims that American workers were intrinsically allergic to socialism, Voss insisted that the Knights of Labor, the hugely popular late-nineteenth-century labor federation, had cultivated a homegrown working class radicalism that was every bit as critical of capitalism as its European counterparts were, going as far as to call for the abolition of the wage system itself. However, the Haymarket Affair of 1886–1887, in which anarchists were accused of throwing a dynamite bomb at police in Chicago, led to the violent suppression of the Knights nationwide and forced the American labor movement in a more conservative direction.

Though Voss rightly emphasizes the centrality of antilabor state violence in the postbellum order, her periodization is somewhat at odds with the historical record in two respects. First, the Knights’ critique of wage dependency had a long pedigree and was once pervasive among political elites—that stratum of actors that would later order the police and military to forcibly subdue the labor movement. Second, large-scale antilabor violence occurred well before Haymarket (for instance, in the nationwide railroad strike of 1877), yet those episodes of state coercion failed to put the labor movement in a defensive crouch. To bridge these gaps, we require an alternative account that can accommodate both the early critique of wage dependency and the growing divergence between workers and political elites on that question over time.

Another highly influential group of scholars in the American exceptionalist tradition consists of those who emphasize the enduring hold of the English common law doctrine of labor conspiracy as well as its institutionalization in the judicial system (see, for example, Hattam 1993; Steinfeld 1991; Tomlins 1992). Victoria Hattam’s now canonical work in this area is a prime example. Her research was largely a response to other legal scholars, who held that an early Massachusetts Supreme Court case, *Commonwealth v. Hunt* (1842), essentially legalized labor unions in the United States (Hattam 1992, 47–48). In contrast to the *Hunt* thesis, Hattam argued that antilabor prosecution under the conspiracy doctrine continued well after 1842, picking up precipitously from the Civil War to the 1880s, when judges began to use the injunction as a new tool to thwart strikes. The implications of her research went beyond legal studies to explain

American exceptionalism, for, she argued, it was the judiciary that compelled the labor movement to advance a more conservative set of strategies in improving workers' lot under capitalism.

Legal scholars have contributed mightily to our understanding of the U.S. labor movement, but they have largely sidestepped or downplayed the importance of political parties in this process. In formulating her judiciary thesis, for instance, Hattam directly undercut the notion, first propounded by Sombart, that the American two-party system smothered progressive third party alternatives (1993, ix). Another example of this tendency is Amy Dru Stanley's (1998) *From Bondage to Contract*, according to which social scientists, abolitionists, labor reformers, and jurists—but not parties—placed freedom of contract at the center of the postbellum social order.

The deliberate exclusion of parties runs into several problems. To begin, in the American system of “party government,” politicians controlled the very means of violence that the state used against labor and shaped jurisprudence on worker rights by becoming judges themselves, often running, and being elected, on a party slate. U.S. Supreme Court justice Melville W. Fuller, for instance, was a staunch Chicago Democrat and was instrumental in crafting that party's anti-labor position before he was elevated to the court. Indeed, free contract and the right to work together comprised a language of mass mobilization that the political establishment had hoped would galvanize a silent majority, who were terrified of labor's revolutionary fervor. This was so much the case that in Illinois, labor conspiracy was encoded not in a body of jurisprudence handed down by judges based on legal precedent, but in *statutory* laws authored by politicians in the state legislature in direct response to large-scale job actions. The role of political parties remains an untold part of the story that Hattam and others have capably begun to tell.

I end this commentary on the American exceptionalist tradition with a book that is peculiar for placing parties at its center: Ira Katznelson's (1981) *City Trenches*. On his account, political parties, beginning in the antebellum period, mobilized workers according to ethnic identity, while relatively tolerant labor laws (e.g., *Commonwealth v. Hunt*) allowed American workers to resolve their workplace grievances through trade unions. The historical split in American workers' consciousness—class identity at work, ethnic identity at home—has prevented a more progressive and structural challenge to capitalism, which would apply a militant class analysis not only to the workplace, but to society as a whole.

Katznelson did what few other analysts had done apart from Sombart himself, which was to argue for the role of parties in precluding socialism in the United States. Yet, putting aside the problematic characterization of the *Hunt*

ruling, *City Trenches* is hindered by an overemphasis on the politics of ethnicity. Katznelson's claim regarding the nature of urban electoral coalitions was based on an influential school of historiography at the time of the book's publication that rewrote antebellum political history to reflect the dominance of ethnonreligious divisions (Benson 1961; Formisano 1971). But as more recent syntheses suggest, ethnicity was only one of several important modes of political identification in the American case. For example, I argue here and elsewhere that the mid-nineteenth-century Republican Party articulated workers as northern subjects. This unified formerly antagonistic foreign- and native-born ethnic groups in the free labor coalition and thereby undermined ethnic politics in their previous form. John B. Jentz and Richard Schneirov (2012) have likewise shown that Chicago workers embraced a multiethnic class-based political identity after the Civil War. I would add that workers did so, not in isolation from parties, but in direct interaction with them: the politics of community and work were intertwined in Chicago, and those politics were as motivated by class as they were by ethnicity. There is little room in Katznelson's otherwise useful account for the politicization of alternative or intersecting identities over time, due to a relatively inflexible view of urban parties as ossified ethnic machines. This, in turn, prevents an examination of the erratic trajectory of Chicago workers' support of free labor from the Jacksonian era, through the political crisis over slavery, and on to the Gilded Age.<sup>2</sup>

## Democratization

In reviewing the democratization literature, we go from inquiring into the absence of a particular social order—socialism, to the presence of one—liberal capitalist democracy. The most prominent studies on that subject hold that democratization occurs because of the mobilization of competing class coalitions, though they differ on which social class is the most consistent vanguard of democratic change. For Barrington Moore (1966), it is the bourgeoisie. For Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986), democratic coalitions result from bargaining among antagonistic factions of the elite. For Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John Stephens (1992), the working class is the most consistent advocate of democratic reform; whereas for Jeffrey Paige (1997), neoliberal democracy's prime movers in late twentieth-century Central America were the informal urban sector and rural workers.

The exclusive emphasis on class dynamics, however, leaves a number of questions unanswered about the case at hand. Take, for example, Moore's famous typology of the three routes to the modern world. That typology is essentially a story of winners and losers. The fascist or reactionary route is taken when a

weak bourgeoisie joins with powerful landowners to repress peasants and workers. The communist route to modernity entails the opposite outcome: workers and peasants successfully mobilize to dispossess landed and urban elites. Finally, when a strong bourgeoisie unites with nonelites to defeat large landowners, the outcome is liberal democracy (Moore 1966, 413).

Thus, in the American case, a strong northeastern industrial class led midwestern farmers in a war that eventuated in the defeat of southern planters. The bourgeois-farmer alliance, Moore argued, was made possible by the Northeast's increasing reliance on midwestern consumers and the simultaneous turn in southern trade toward Great Britain in the 1850s. Shifting markets allowed northeastern industrialists and southern planters to walk away from each other despite a long history of economic interdependence. In addition, the convergence of northeastern and midwestern class interests shattered a preexisting agricultural alliance between the Midwest and the South, which "helped to make unnecessary for a time the characteristic reactionary coalition between urban and landed elites" (Moore 1966, 140–141).

There are numerous empirical and analytical problems with this account. Though the North's victory in the Civil War served the interests of capital more than those of free white labor, and though a cross-class coalition was critical to the rise of liberal democracy, Moore was wrong about the class coalitions of the antebellum period, due largely to his inattention to political parties. Farmers and workers of all regions, even in the South, tended to vote for the Democratic Party, whereas industrialists and planters tended to vote for the Whigs. Antebellum class coalitions, according to Moore's typology, were thus predictive of the fascist and communist routes to modernity. Furthermore, the bourgeoisie was by no means in a strong position to rule, for the Whig Party was perpetually in opposition, while the Democrats dominated antebellum politics. If Moore was right about the Northeast-Midwest alliance that eventually prosecuted the war, then he left a crucial question unanswered: Why did rank-and-file Democrats leave their party to unite with their adversaries in the Whig Party, over whom they enjoyed at least political, if not economic, dominance?<sup>3</sup>

Looking ahead to the postbellum period, we might ask another question: If the Northeast-Midwest coalition made a reactionary alliance against farmers and workers "unnecessary," why did the end of the war witness the violent repression of precisely these sectors of society? As one anonymous reviewer of this book insightfully pointed out when comparing U.S. Reconstruction to the Arab Spring in Egypt, we must explain why bad things end up happening to good people. The problems with the democratization literature, then, are really not just about the focus on social class with its resulting inattention to party dynamics, but also about a focus on the moment of transition itself, with much less emphasis

on its aftermath. Yiching Wu's (2014) work on the Chinese Cultural Revolution refers to this vexing moment as "demobilization," because Mao and his allies were confronted with the challenge of having to wind down the revolution after they themselves had incited it. Similarly, we might ask whether Reconstruction was a moment in which Northern political elites felt it necessary to confront the revolutionary fervor of the free labor coalition, as workers connected the dots from the emancipation of black slaves to their own unrequited emancipation from industrial servitude.

## **Alternative Theories of Class, Racial and Electoral Politics: Second Order Implications**

Having thus pointed out the gaps in the literatures that bear directly on the relationship between labor and American democracy, we turn now to those scholars for whom that relationship is less central. This section explores the ways in which an inattention to parties leads to a number of open questions about the factors affecting voting behavior and the formation of class and racial identity.

### **Subjectivist Theories of Working Class Formation**

A book about collective bargaining and the frustration thereof presupposes that workers at some point became conscious of the need for collective action. In the humanities and social sciences that process is often called "working class formation" or just "class formation." Though the details of this process have been debated since Marx's time, the debate reemerged with renewed vigor in the second half of the twentieth century. The two great camps in that debate correspond to what Pierre Bourdieu (1989) once called the "objectivist" and "subjectivist" moments of class.

For objectivists, workers are always and already a class by virtue of their structural location at the bottom of the capitalist system. The fact that workers do not own the means of production (e.g., factories, land) while their employers do, automatically places the two groups in different social classes, whose competing economic interests all but ensure that theirs will be a relationship of mutual hostility (see, for example, Anderson 1980, 40; Dahrendorf 1959, 148–149; Marx and Engels [1848] 1998; Wright 1990, 272).

Subjectivists countered that such arguments lead scholars to unfairly chastise workers for not behaving in appropriately revolutionary or "classlike" ways (Mann 1973, 32–33; Parkin 1979; Somers 1997, 77). Accordingly, subjectivists advanced a more forgiving framework. On their account, workers must first

identify as a class before one can say definitively that such a class has come into existence. Moreover, workers arrive at that identity in their own way and time, often in the course of labor disputes with their employers. The myriad historical and cultural factors impinging on a specific case of class formation imply that the process may or may not culminate in the revolutionary endgame that objectivists hope for and expect given workers' exploitation under capitalism (see, for example, Katznelson and Zolberg 1985; Steinmetz 1992; E. P. Thompson 1963, 9, 11).

The subjectivists prevailed in that debate, owing largely to their openness to the plain fact that workers have not always, nor in the same fashion, embraced an insurrectionary class politics. Indeed, one might plausibly argue that subjectivist theories of working class formation are flexible enough to accommodate the erratic trajectory of workers' politics in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.

Subjectivists generally assume that when workers embrace class identity, they do so in the context of the workplace and in opposition to their employers. Yet the trajectory of class formation in mid-nineteenth-century Chicago does not fit neatly with that assumption. The anger of Chicago workers was directed not only at their employers, but also at southern planters and political parties. The first political organization of Chicago workers was a land reform league established in 1848 to protest the expansion of slavery into the western territories. Workers organized the city's first unions as the slavery issue subsided in the early 1850s, but organizing dropped off as the controversy over slavery extension reemerged. Unions surfaced again during the Civil War, and it was then that workers began increasingly to identify as a class unto themselves, instead of as northerners together with the farmers and employers of their section. Moreover, while workers' analyses of their deteriorating conditions in the postbellum period referenced unscrupulous employers, they reserved a distinct animosity for the major political parties, whom they accused of abandoning the critique of wage dependency in favor of free market liberalism. In short, the historical development of Chicago working class politics requires an alternative theory based on contexts outside the workplace.

## **New Immigrant Groups and White Racial Identity**

The Republican Party mobilized northern workers of European descent by arguing that the westward migration of southern planters would render them industrial slaves, no better than their agricultural counterparts to the South. Organized worker opposition to slavery extension, which began in the 1840s as the parties took up the issue, was therefore partly an attempt to claim the privileges of whiteness, chief among these being access to cheap land.

This claim requires a serious engagement with “whiteness studies,” a subfield in the scholarship on U.S. race relations. The latter proceeds from the assumption that racial identity is fundamentally a relational construct: the notion that some people are “black,” for example, is meaningless outside a racial cosmology or hierarchy in which others are not. Students of whiteness seek to shift scholarly attention from people of color toward the dominant racial group, without whom the very notion of “color” would be impossible. From there, this perspective advances two key analytical claims. First, Anglo-Americans did not automatically view other immigrants of European descent (e.g., Irish, Jews) as white and therefore one of them. Accordingly, the research on whiteness has tended to focus on the ways in which new immigrant groups mobilized to claim the “privileges” or “wages” of whiteness. These include access to coveted jobs, low-interest home mortgages, college admissions, and political power. Second, the literature suggests that whites justify the imbalance in resources that such privileges engender by resorting to the rhetorical themes of abstract liberalism such as individual freedom and choice. For example, numerous studies point out that whites rationalized their opposition to residential desegregation during the Civil Rights era by insisting on their freedom to pick their friends and to send their children to neighborhood public schools (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Brodtkin 1998; Citron 1969; Cohen 2003; de Leon 2011; de Leon et al 2009; DuBois [1935] 1998; Hirsch 1983; Ignatiev 1995; Jackson 1985; Katznelson 2005; Lassiter 2006; Lipsitz 1998; MacLean 2006; Mills [2002] 2004; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Roediger 1991; Sugrue 1996, 2008). Thus, Mills writes that the “framing of the United States as . . . [a] liberal democracy . . . has facilitated and underwritten . . . massive evasions on the issue of racial injustice” ([2002] 2004, 239).

Though whiteness studies have greatly extended our understanding of U.S. race relations by focusing attention on the “unmarked” dominant group, the field is nevertheless somewhat ill-equipped to handle the case at hand in two respects. To begin, the aforementioned privileges are said to result largely from state transfer payments, laws, and regulations that favor whites and disadvantage nonwhites. But as Stephen Skowronek famously observed, the early to mid-nineteenth-century American state was fundamentally a weak state of “courts and parties” (1982, 24). That is, it did not possess the administrative capacities of the New Deal welfare state, for instance, which was responsible for institutionalizing many of the white privileges in question. Thus, a more precise account of nineteenth-century U.S. race relations must inquire into the ways in which political parties and the judiciary used their own authority to mobilize support for racial privileges. There is also the related problem of “periodization,” the way in which scholars view the development of white racial identity over time. Mills and others rightly suggest that the rhetoric of liberal democracy has

been used to justify a racialized distribution of power and resources, but liberalism, as I imply above, only began to eclipse competing ideologies like the critique of wage dependency after the Civil War. Indeed, the idea of a free society based on voluntary individual contracts was liberalism's way of justifying wage dependency in a political and economic order suddenly without slavery. Any research designed to explain the trajectory of European immigrant workers' racial identity from the early to the late nineteenth century must therefore necessarily begin with an examination of white racial formation *before* the advent of liberal democracy. Yet, with the notable exceptions of Theodore Allen (1994), Noel Ignatiev (1995), and David Roediger (1991), the literature on whiteness has tended to center on post-Civil Rights race relations. Furthermore, when antebellum race relations are taken seriously, it becomes clear that whites did more than just resort to the convenient rhetorical themes of abstract liberalism to preserve or gain access to resources: the partisan appeal to white racial identity was one of several factors that made liberalism possible in the first place.

### Voter-Centered Approaches to Electoral Politics

Lastly, a book on the interaction of parties and workers pulls for an engagement with the scholarship on electoral politics. The dominant approaches in that field are voter-centered, meaning that the outcome of an election or series of elections is said to be due primarily to dynamics within the electorate itself (e.g., the entrance of women into the workplace or the growing number of immigrant voters). The goal of much of this literature is to identify the determinants of "vote choice," why a given voter casts her ballot for one party or candidate but not another. I have described the competing schools of thought elsewhere as the "social voter," "partisan voter," and "issue voter" perspectives (de Leon 2014). The social voter or "sociological" approach holds that individuals vote the way they do out of loyalty to a social group such as one's class or religion (e.g., she votes for the Labour Party, because she is a worker; he votes for the Islamist party, because he is Muslim) (Berelson et al. 1954; Knoke 1976; Lazarsfeld et al. [1944] 1948; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Manza and Brooks 1999). The partisan voter or "social psychological" approach holds that the way one votes depends on her or his long-standing familial loyalty to a political party, otherwise known as "party ID" (e.g., she votes for that party, because her father and grandfather did) (Campbell et al. 1954, 1960; Converse 1964, 1966; Key and Munger 1959; Miller and Shanks 1996; Smith 1989; Stokes 1963). Finally, the issue voter perspective explains differences in vote choice based on one's rational policy preferences (e.g., I am voting for that candidate, because I agree with her on abortion) (Black [1958] 1963; Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Fiorina 1981; Hotelling 1929; Key 1966;

Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Merrill and Grofman 1999; Nie et al. 1976; Pomper 1972; Smithies 1941).

The trouble with the social and partisan voter approaches is that individual demographic characteristics and familial loyalties are generally stable. If a voter is Protestant, for instance, she is unlikely to become Catholic in the next election cycle or even in her remaining lifetime. Likewise, if one's family has traditionally voted for a certain party, that pattern is not likely to be overturned in the short term. Yet in the decade and a half just prior to the Civil War, the allegiances of voters across the United States shifted erratically. Between 1846 and 1848, for example, the traditional voting blocs of the Whig and Democratic parties split and recombined in unprecedented coalitions. In the next six years, the status quo ante slipped back into place as the erstwhile strongholds of the major parties became strongholds once more. The mid-1850s, however, witnessed a mass exodus of voters from the major parties into the upstart political organizations that eventually prosecuted the war. Antebellum voting behavior begs the following question: Why did the old parties lose control of their coalitions in the mid-1840s and reestablish their hold between 1848 and 1854, only to squander it so completely by 1860? Any account of the mid-nineteenth-century American case must explain the volatility of electoral politics in that period, and stable loyalties, whether to social group or party, are unable to do so.

The social voter approach in particular is hard pressed to explain why some social cleavages or differences (e.g., class, race, religion) become politically salient at a given time, while others do not. To use another example, the distinction between free and slave states—the so-called sectional cleavage between North and South—had, by 1860, existed in the United States for almost a century without a civil war. Similar debates over slavery had occurred in 1789, 1819, and 1833, all of which eventually receded as economic issues quickly returned to the fore. We might therefore ask why the political crisis over slavery came to a head in 1860 and not before.

The theoretical traditions that comprise the issue voter approach are better able to account for short-term shifts. The realignment tradition, for example, holds that the advent of new issues (e.g., civil rights, the environment) in the electorate has the power to disrupt existing patterns of party dominance (see, for example, Abramson et al. 2010; Beck 1974; Brady 1988; Burnham 1970; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Key 1955, 1959; Sundquist 1983). One might argue that in each triumph and reversal above, voters' rational policy preferences simply changed.

There are at least three problems with this perspective. First, although scholars of realignment employ competing metaphors (e.g., "flash points," "evolution") to describe the rise and fall of political regimes, most theories assume

that power shifts rhythmically from one party to another over time (de Leon 2014; Pierson 2004). This sense of time, or “temporality” as academics call it, has a mechanical feel in stark contrast to the turbulent temporality of partisan struggle in practice. Second, the role of parties is unclear: one gets the sense that political organizations are at the mercy of voters’ preferences, as if those preferences are not themselves shaped by political campaigns. Finally, and perhaps most important, there is the problematic assumption of rationality. If we assume that the divergence in antebellum voter sentiment was due in part to the competing “interests” of Northerners and Southerners, then we come face to face with a vexing analytical conundrum, namely, that Northern and Southern interests predict precisely the wrong political outcome. The dispute between the North and South turned on whether slavery should be permitted where it had never before existed. If Northerners had let the South secede, they could have claimed title to the West and prohibited the extension of slavery unilaterally. One might very well argue that it was in the interest of Northern voters to let the South go without a fight. Conversely, in seceding, Southerners effectively forfeited their right to the western territories. One might suggest that it was in the interest of Southerners to remain in the Union, reach a compromise, and thereby ensure slavery’s expansion into the West albeit on a limited basis. Of course, as we now know, the exact opposite occurred: Northerners moved to crush the Southern rebellion, Southerners seceded from the republic and suffered the end of slavery in defeat, while the total “cost” of that conflict (to put it in rational choice terms) climbed to upward of 750,000 lives, the largest death toll of any war in American history (Hacker 2011).

## Political Articulation

I resolve the foregoing dilemmas by building on the theory of “political articulation,” according to which, “*party practices naturalize class, ethnic, and racial formations as a basis of social division by integrating disparate interests and identities into coherent sociopolitical blocs*” (de Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009, 194–195).

The theory may be broken down into three parts. First, parties make divisions or cleavages such as class, race, and religion politically salient. This is not to say that demographic differences are fictional. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims, for example, each have distinct (if related) traditions to be sure, but whether they matter for the purposes of political division depends on whether or not parties articulate them as a basis of contention. Next, parties go through the trouble of politicizing social differences, because victory depends on the parties’ ability to mobilize an enduring majority coalition; that is, to frame their

own supporters as the natural majority who should rule and their opponents' supporters as the illegitimate minority who should not. Third, political articulation is not just about the successful naturalization of cleavages, for the converse implication is that coalitions unravel when parties fail to do the work of articulation or else advance a vision of the social order that falls flat in the face of competing political projects. The reproduction of political power hinges on the ability of parties to not only achieve but also maintain what Antonio Gramsci (1971) called "hegemony," the acquisition of mass consent to govern. Consent is by definition impermanent and thus always at risk. When the governed withdraw their consent, power may then pass from hegemony to domination, such that political elites give up on cultivating support through persuasion and instead coerce the unruly masses into submission. It is this ongoing struggle between competing political projects and the tension between coercion and consent that accounts for both the short-term shifts leading up to the advent of antilabor democracy in Chicago and the ensuing repression of the labor movement.

By comparison, the American exceptionalist tradition is somewhat limited in its capacity to explain the historical emergence of the postbellum antilabor regime, because it either sidelines the role of parties in government (e.g., in writing labor conspiracy laws and commanding the police and military) or assumes an unchanging relationship between parties and workers (e.g., as primarily ethnic in character). The political articulation framework solves this analytical problem by pinpointing the rise of antilabor democracy at the end of three sequences of party-worker interaction, when political elites abandoned the critique of wage dependency in favor of the doctrine of free contract and the right to work.

The puzzle of U.S. democratization has two parts. The first is why midwestern nonelites realigned with their erstwhile political adversaries in favor of a liberal capitalist democracy. Here a focus on parties allows us to argue that Republicans used the specter of a slave power conspiracy to shift the terms of political debate away from a critique of wage dependency under capitalism to a critique of wage dependency under slavery, thus unifying formerly adversarial voting blocs into a northern free labor coalition. The second part of the democratization puzzle is the reactionary response of political elites to the labor question. This I interpret as an instance in which political parties, having attempted and failed to acquire the consent of the governed, then secure the latter's cooperation by force.

Moving on to second order implications, the seemingly paradoxical trajectory of working class identity in this period likewise rests on the rise and fall of party projects. Antebellum parties deployed the critique of wage dependency to articulate white workers first, as a class of "producers" together with white farmers, and then, as northern "free labor" together with the white elites and farmers of their section during the political crisis over slavery. The immediate postbellum period

was an instance of failed articulation, for the parties' contractual vision of a free society offended workers who remained suspicious of wage dependency. Trade unionists, socialists, and anarchists were then able to articulate workers to their organizations as a class.

The scholarship on U.S. race relations must contend with (a) the fact that the antebellum state was insufficiently developed to distribute racial privileges in the way that the New Deal state later did; and (b) the fact that liberalism only began to eclipse other political ideologies after the Civil War and thus cannot account for why white racial identity had by that point already been so bound up with the expectation of economic independence. I address these problems by demonstrating that the concept of white privilege was advanced, not by the antebellum state, but by antebellum politicians, who promoted territorial expansion and land reform to workers of European descent as a solution to wage dependency.

Finally, the dominant voter-centered approaches to electoral politics are unable to account for the political volatility of this period, both because of their emphasis on long-term stable factors such as partisan and social group loyalties and because of a focus on rational interests, which in this case lead away from civil war. The trajectory of party development, by contrast, tracks much better with the political behavior of American workers than these dominant approaches to vote choice. The antebellum parties were once able to keep the focus of the polity squarely on economic issues and away from slavery. However, the unexpected defeat of Martin Van Buren for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1844 touched off a chain of partisan reactions and counter reactions, including a final backlash that badly undermined the American party system's ability to contain the politicization of slavery. Specifically, Van Buren's defeat fueled a pivot in public policy toward territorial expansion, which begged the question of the status of slavery in the new territories. The ensuing debate led to the exodus of Free Soil Democrats and their base among immigrant workers into the Republican Party, a brand new party that unified Democrats, Whigs, and all others who opposed the westward expansion of slavery. After the war, when politicians pivoted yet again and embraced the wage contract as a metaphor for freedom, immigrant workers defected from the mainstream party system to unions, labor parties, and revolutionary organizations.

By solving the above analytical problems in this way, this book aligns with a long-standing, but now resurgent, scholarly emphasis on the influential role of political parties in social life. Beyond Gramsci, scholars will no doubt recognize that my arguments bear a remarkable resemblance to Adam Przeworski's earlier work on the ways in which socialist parties cultivate working class identity (e.g., Przeworski 1977; Przeworski and Sprague 1986). In addition, this book shares much in common with classic historiographical accounts of the contentious

relationship between nineteenth-century American workers and political parties (e.g., Hugins 1960; Montgomery 1967; Pessen 1967; Wilentz 1984). My claims also dovetail with recent arguments about the role of political parties in abortive democratic transitions (e.g., Redding 2003; Riley 2010), transitions to social democracy (e.g., Desai and Riley 2007; Heller 1999), and transitions to free market economics (e.g., Tuğal 2009).<sup>4</sup> Scholars of U.S. race relations tend to focus on the antagonism between social groups (e.g., whites vs. non-whites) and racial states (e.g., apartheid South Africa). Yet at least a few insist that political parties may either downplay or heighten supposed racial differences (e.g., Chen 2009; Frymer 2008; Gerteis 2007; Hiers 2013; Redding 2003; Roediger 1991). With respect to the research on electoral politics, an intrepid handful of sociologists have dared to say that parties help us understand the sometimes infuriating outcomes of democratic life. Apart from Manali Desai, Dylan Riley, Cihan Tuğal, and yours truly, the list includes Ron Aminzade's (1981, 1993) earlier work and the current work of Stephanie Mudge (Mudge and Chen 2013) and Adam Slez (Slez and Martin 2007).

I am not the first sociologist in recent years to argue that parties matter. What makes this book different from my colleagues' work, however, is that it makes political parties the focal point of synthesis, bringing together these otherwise isolated bodies of work to explain the dynamics of labor movements, class and racial formation, democratization, and electoral politics simultaneously. On this account, parties stand at the intersection between the state and civil society. That is, parties divide civil society into competing coalitions or blocs as they struggle for power; in that role, they often shape and reshape class and ethnoracial identity. At the same time, parties control the system of nominations, appointments, and elections to political office, which is to say that they hold the reins of state power. They are thus able to further politicize social differences by, for example, providing social services or tax breaks to some, while denying them to others. But perhaps more insidiously, when the people reject the parties' proffered vision of society (i.e., who is the majority and who is the minority; who is good and who is bad), from their perch atop the state, they are able to make laws, appoint loyalists to the judiciary, and unleash the police and armed forces—all to the disadvantage of their adversaries. As I demonstrate, the dual influence of political parties on both the state and civil society has had vast repercussions for the freedom of workers under liberal democracy.

## **Methods, Case Selection, and Data**

Any case study of large-scale social transformations must confront three challenges. The first is the methodological legitimacy of single case analysis. In fact,

comparative historical methodology has moved beyond the notion that a single case is merely a single observation or data point, and thus can only generate tentative theoretical claims. As Rueschemeyer has argued, case studies “can test theoretical propositions as well, and they can offer persuasive explanations,” in part because they must go through “frequent iterations of confronting” alternative “explanatory propositions with many data points.” This iterative process of fitting theoretical ideas to the complexities of a single case, “allows for a close matching of conceptual intent and empirical evidence” (Rueschemeyer 2003, 318).

But if a single case can do so much, one might still ask, “why Chicago”? As the queen city in the home state of both Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas (the 1860 presidential nominees of the Republican and Democratic parties respectively), Chicago was a key theater in the political crisis over slavery. It is no coincidence, for example, that the Republicans chose Chicago to host the fateful Republican National Convention of 1860, which nominated Lincoln for the presidency. Douglas’s primary residence was in Chicago, and it was there that he died two months after the South fired on Fort Sumter. Beyond housing the leadership of the nation’s two great parties on the eve of battle, Chicago supplied the vanguard of labor unrest that swept across the North during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. Not only the infamous Haymarket Affair of 1886–1887, but also the nation’s first May Day strikes for an eight-hour day took place in Chicago. The city’s English-language trade union paper, the *Workingman’s Advocate*, was both the organ of the Chicago labor movement and one of the most influential labor journals in the country. With leadership comes grave responsibility, however, and Chicago workers bore the brunt of labor repression in this period. For example, in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, police, military, and paramilitary groups killed approximately thirty men and boys, many of whom were buried anonymously in lime pits, while another 200 were wounded, the largest number of casualties of any city in the nationwide job action. This suggests that an important rupture occurred in the politics of American workers during the post-bellum period and that Chicago was at the epicenter of that rupture.

Third, a case study of this importance must provide data that are sufficiently persuasive of its central claims at the local level but also “scale up” to the state, regional, and national levels of analysis. With respect to voting data, proponents of the dominant voter-centered approaches to electoral politics may insist that only individual-level survey data can provide evidence for the arguments advanced here. To this, I apply Adam Przeworski and John Sprague’s famous line that “this study is a study of voting, but not of voters” (1986, 3–4, 10–11). That is, my focus is not on the individual-level determinants of vote choice, but

rather the effect of party development and practices on large-scale social transformations. In any case, individual-level survey data are simply unavailable for the period in question: pollsters and social scientists only began administering surveys in the 1930s. Accordingly, I cross-check individual-level manuscript census data on ethnic and socioeconomic settlement patterns in Chicago from Einhorn (1991) and Hirsch (1990) against archival ward-level electoral returns to present the most accurate picture possible of changing voting patterns by ward. I also track the development of the critique of wage dependency through a content analysis of party and labor newspapers and the minutes of labor meetings and rallies. For insight into the importance of patronage, factionalism, and other “backstage” party dynamics, I look to the private papers of party leaders and operatives. Lastly, because Chicago and Illinois politics were so central to the political crisis over slavery and the titanic clashes between capital and labor after the war, I make a special effort to draw on archival data that put local players in direct conversation with statewide, regional, and national figures.

## Chapter Organization

For those eager to plot the arc of the narrative, I provide a brief preview here. Chapters 2 through 5 are the key thematic chapters that drive the momentum of the narrative, from the Jacksonian era, through the political crisis over slavery and the Civil War, and ending with the doctrine of free contract, the right to work, and antilabor state violence after the war.

Chapter 2, the first thematic chapter, answers the question: What was the critique of wage dependency and just how mainstream was it? It examines the ways in which the Democrats and Whigs sought to articulate workers to their respective parties through economic policy. This political project was anchored in a framework of civic standing that celebrated self-sufficiency especially among farmers and artisans and stigmatized wage workers, slaves, and women for relying on others for their own survival. The leaders of each party accordingly worked to frame their policies as ones that would enable less affluent white men to become or remain economically independent.

In Chicago, the foregoing national narrative manifested itself in the dominance of the Democratic Party under the leadership of *Chicago Democrat* editor and U.S. congressman John Wentworth. The early Democratic organization was strongest in the north and west sides of Chicago, where German and Irish immigrant workers predominated, and weakest on the Lakeshore where the affluent native-born minority resided.

Chapter 3 addresses why the critics of wage dependency reorganized in favor of a liberal capitalist democracy. The answer lies in the back-and-forth political struggle to articulate workers and other constituents as northerners in the decade and a half before the Civil War. A battle for leadership succession in the Democratic Party in 1844 prefigures this monumental transformation, for the losing faction in that conflict would later oppose the expansion of slavery to the western territories as Free Soil Democrats and eventually as Republicans. Free Soil Democrats insisted that the westward migration of southern planters would prevent white workers from resettling as farmers in the West.

The split over territorial policy led to a rift between the Illinois Democratic organization led by Stephen A. Douglas and the Chicago Democratic machine led by John Wentworth, who took up the Free Soil banner as Congress debated the status of slavery in the newly conquered northern half of Mexico known as the Mexican cession. The emergence of the Free Soil cause, in turn, prompted Chicago workers to establish their first political organization, a chapter of the National Reform Association, which likewise sought to bar slavery from the western territories for fear that planters would monopolize the land and condemn workers to a life of industrial servitude. Eventually, the Democrats' once dominant coalition of Irish and German majority-worker wards fractured and gave way to a Republican free labor coalition of German majority-worker and native-born middle-class to affluent wards.

Chapter 4 answers the relatively straightforward question, "What was the relationship between Chicago parties and workers during the war?" Though workers responded enthusiastically when their political leaders called on them to fight at the start of the war and rallied behind their assassinated leader Abraham Lincoln at war's end, in between they had become observably alienated from the political establishment. By 1864, Chicago workers had organized a multiethnic citywide labor federation called the General Trades Assembly and published their own newspaper, the *Workingman's Advocate*, in a bid to establish a prolabor lobby. The political strategy of Chicago's incipient labor movement was to support only prolabor candidates, regardless of party affiliation. These developments comprised an intermediate stage on the way to organized labor's wholesale repudiation of the party system during Reconstruction.

The last narrative chapter answers the question, "What were the implications of the North's victory in the Civil War for the political relationship between parties and workers?" While Chicago workers continued to protest their deteriorating conditions, now in an emerging liberal democratic order formally without slavery, the major parties responded by equating collective bargaining with the slave power as related conspiracies against individual freedom. When liberalism's

contractual vision of a free society failed to peaceably articulate Chicago workers into mainstream politics, party leaders used state violence to subdue labor's revolt and rationalized their military offensive as a safeguard to the right to work.

Workers meanwhile saw the parties' abandonment of the critique of wage dependency and the antilabor violence it permitted as a betrayal of their military service and the promise of the war, which they saw as nothing less than the emancipation of white men from permanent industrial servitude. Accordingly, Chicago workers took the cause of their economic independence into their own hands by striking for an eight-hour day, which they thought would provide some semblance of independence by allowing equal time for work, rest, and leisure. In addition, they organized a Workingman's Party and established revolutionary organizations. Throughout this period, white workers increasingly referred to themselves as a class at odds with the class of capitalists and their allies in the political establishment.

The concluding chapter circles back to the first and answers the question, "What can the origins of right to work teach us about the condition of American workers and the U.S. labor movement under neoliberalism?" It teaches us first that the antilabor ethos of nineteenth-century liberalism is alive and well. Contemporary right to work rhetoric derives from the original postbellum claim that workers must be free to bargain with their employers on an individual basis. Second, it tells us that workers are not likely to take the status quo lying down. As they did during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, contemporary American workers have come out en masse to resist the widening economic inequality of the neoliberal order. Finally, the story of antilabor democracy in Chicago suggests that though workers are not doomed by liberalism, they nevertheless face their forebears' battle to preserve labor rights in a context that has been historically hostile to collective bargaining. The state is not their only obstacle, however, for the peculiar intersection of race and class in the founding of American liberal democracy framed economic independence (or in contemporary parlance, a middle-class lifestyle) as a distinctly white privilege. Rather than challenge the racialized basis of this fantasy, the Obama administration has revived its promise by closely courting the support of white middle-class suburban voters, secure in its prediction that racial minorities, including now Latinos, will flock to the president's standard for lack of any viable party alternative. The potential for rebirth in the U.S. labor movement will hinge on its ability to forge a path of political independence, rejecting both the hostility of the Republican Party and its status as a captured constituency in the Democratic Party.

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## THE CRITIQUE OF WAGE DEPENDENCY, 1828–1844

**And where is that band who so vauntingly swore,  
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion  
A home and a Country should leave us no more?  
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution.  
No refuge could save the hireling and slave  
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,  
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.**

—Francis Scott Key (1814)

In this third verse of “The Star Spangled Banner,” Francis Scott Key draws a distinction between the United States and Great Britain. Key, like many of his countrymen at the time, believed that Britain was ruled by an aristocracy, and that as in any such arrangement, those who fought in defense of the aristocracy did so only because they were fundamentally unfree; unfree, in that they were wholly dependent on their lords and masters either for wages, as in the case of “the hireling,” or for their room and board, as in the case of “the slave.” Thus, when Key writes that neither could be saved “from the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,” he is in fact boasting that even as the British shelled a Baltimore fort in 1814, the minions of the monarch could not be saved from the terrible onward march of American liberty.

“The Star Spangled Banner” evinces a central feature of early American political discourse, namely, a deep distrust for any form of government that would nurture dependency as the natural condition of men. It is anchored in what Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994) have referred to in another context as the “discourse of dependency.” This discourse, which finds its ideological origins in the republicanism of the American Revolution, placed a premium on a man’s capacity to live independently of naked economic interest (Banning 1978; McCoy 1980; Pocock 1975; Wood 1969, 1992). By this logic, those who were dependent on others for their own survival—wage workers, women, children, and slaves—could not be trusted with the welfare of the republic as a whole.

In their desperation, they might be persuaded to sell their political support in exchange for some monetary remuneration (Boydston 1990; Roediger 1991; Wood 1992). By contrast, white male artisans and family farmers were viewed as the icons of independence, for it was imagined that they lived comfortably enough off their own labor that they could steer the course of the republic without prejudice to their own enrichment. Dependency and citizenship were therefore not categories that applied evenly to everyone: they referred to specific racial, class, age and gender groupings. One of the central preoccupations of the Jacksonian two-party system, then, was enabling the economic and political independence of white men.

This chapter foregrounds what most other studies of large-scale social transformation have slighted—that 1) political parties used evocative discursive tropes to shape voters' identities and interests; and 2) voters must recognize themselves in the rhetorical appeals of politicians for social transformation to take hold. Although I take economic change as seriously as other scholars of this period do, I contend that such change does not lead inexorably to a certain kind of politics. In the last century, we have seen fascists, socialists, nationalists, and liberals press the theme of economic change into the service of radically different political agendas. Likewise in the Jacksonian era, Democrats argued that the emerging "market revolution" would result in the economic dependency of the common man, while the opposition Whig Party countered that the market revolution signaled a new age of shared prosperity and insisted that the Democrats' demagogical resistance to commercial measures would stall progress and deprive farmers and workers of a shot at economic independence in the new economy. In doing so, the Whigs argued, Democrats made the common man the party's political dependent. In sum, neither "the economy" nor "economic interest" has an objective face—they are continually interpreted and reinterpreted by parties in struggle.

The articulation of competing electoral coalitions and cleavages notwithstanding, politicians are not free to interpret these matters in any way they please. Rather they are constrained by a common set of inherited rhetorical devices that they deploy to frame and counterframe the fundamental divisions of American society in ways that authorize their own party as the "natural" governing party and disqualify the opposition as the embodiment, for instance, of all that is "un-American." To use a contemporary international example, post-Soviet Russian politicians use the specter of Stalinism to undermine the credibility of their political adversaries. Similarly, in the Jacksonian era, each party stigmatized the other as the agents of dependency, alike in every way to the British aristocracy, while drawing a direct line of succession between their own party and the patriot ranks of the American Revolution.