Beyond Populism: Radical Democracy and the Politics of Cooperation

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ABSTRACT: Emerging from a critique of the concept of "populism" in contemporary democratic theory, this dissertation develops a theory of radical democracy based on the politics of cooperative movements. I argue that cooperative politics help to clarify a central concern for democratic theory that is often obscured by theories of populism: how the popular sovereign can develop a form of social interdependence that facilitates their free and equal participation in self-government. Working through a political history of cooperative movements in the United States from the Civil War to the Cold War, my study traces a series of reformulations of the ideal of "the cooperative commonwealth," beginning with the Populist movement and extending through the Socialist Party and the work of John Dewey and W.E.B. Du Bois. In the end, I argue that cooperative politics requires combining the local work of voluntary cooperation in multiple sites of self-organization with efforts to forge alliances among the popular classes centered on a non-exploitative vision of cooperative interdependence. Such a vision must clarify that cooperation is not simply shared instrumental activity, but a form of free association in which participants' personal autonomy is secured by sharing in the inherently collective work of social reproduction. Cooperative movements' reveal how the difficulty of achieving such cooperation is not a natural feature of human sociality, but an organizational defect of capitalist societies. Today, the project of cooperative democracy does not require an abstract blueprint for the cooperative commonwealth, but an archive of lessons based on the history of cooperative struggles.

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Introduction: Cooperative Democracy Beyond Populism

In both contemporary democratic theory and the public sphere, the idea of populism constellates a series of anxieties about the political health of contemporary liberal democracies – ranging from the stability of their party-systems to the political culture of their electorates – making "populism" one of the most salient terms in contemporary political discourse.[1] According to dominant analytical frames, populism emerges during moments of social crisis, when political leaders claim to represent "the people" against a corrupt "elite," a polarizing form of antagonism that transverses the boundaries of right and left and that shapes political conflict in the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Asia.[2] In the United States, contemporary discussions of populism often reference our own People's Party of the 1890's – one of the original "populist" movements in modern democratic history – but these discussions have often obscured, rather than clarified, the democratic significance of the Populist movement and its afterlives. The People's Party is not significant today because it represents one episode in a history of adversarial visions of popular unity in American history, but because of its attempt to construct an alternative economy based on cooperative democracy.[3]

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[1] The academic literature on populism is large and expanding, and discussions of populism in democratic theory are but one subset of a general literature that extends throughout political science and related fields. For a recent representative survey of the state of the discussion in political science and political theory, see *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For radical democratic justifications of populism coming from the left see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), and Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018). For contemporary liberal critiques of populism see Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) and Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). For a journalistic account of the 'rise of populism' as a defining trend in contemporary politics, see John Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

[2] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[3] A general relationship between populist movements and cooperation is occasionally noted, though rarely explored in depth. Peter Wiles, for instance, noted that cooperatives tend to feature in movements labeled "populist," but concluded that the idealization of cooperatives simply pointed to the movements' characteristic economic immaturity. The North American and Russian cases – often thought to be the historical firsts among populist

The fact that contemporary conversation tends to ignore the Populists' efforts to construct a cooperative commonwealth is a revealing marker of our distance from their own aspirations. For the Populists[4] and their successors, the cooperative commonwealth named a democratic society where the people are all equal co-participants in the making of their shared future, a form of social organization made possible when the gains of social labor redound the common benefit of all citizens.[5] Among these figures, the concrete, practical meaning of the cooperative commonwealth was the subject of contestation, ranging over the kinds of property relations, social infrastructure, and forms of political self-organization it would require. Nonetheless, cooperators were united by the belief that only a cooperative republic could realize the basic promise of popular sovereignty: that the people govern themselves collectively as equals. Alongside organizations of artisan laborers, as well as subsequent socialists and radical progressives, the Populists were committed to what Beatrice Potter, in her classic study of the British cooperative movement, called "the Co-Operative Idea." She wrote that while "the Creed of Universal Competition" held "that the politics and enterprise of the nation should be directed solely to the acquisition of territory abroad and to the accumulation of wealth at home," cooperators believed that the goal of a democratic society should be the shared progress of its

movements – both had a cooperative dimension: the Farmer's Alliance cooperatives in the American case, and the idealization of the cooperative nature of the peasant commune in Russian populism. Cooperatives also feature in Canadian, Scandinavian, African, and Asian movements labeled "populist." See Peter Wiles, "A Syndrome, Not A Doctrine: Some Elementary Theses on Populism," in *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* ed. Ernest Gellner and Ghita Ionescu (USA: Macmillan, 1969), 166-180.

[4] Throughout this study, I use "Populism" to refer to the People's Party, its affiliated organizations, and its integrated reform program (what I call "cooperative market reconstruction"), and "populism" to refer contemporary theories of phenomena labeled "populist."

[5] While this idea of the cooperative commonwealth might immediately identify its aims with those of socialism or communism, debates about the nature of cooperation and the political struggles required to achieve it were more expansive than these terms suggest today. There can be socialist or communist iterations of the idea of the cooperative commonwealth, but as both a practical and conceptual matter, these do not exhaust the possible ways to imagine a cooperative democratic society.

members: "The wealth of the nation was no longer the goal of political and economic action; it was simply a means to an end – the formation of a noble character in the citizen."[6]

Populism's connection to the cooperative idea disappears from contemporary theories of populism not because of empirical ignorance about the Farmers' Alliance cooperatives at the core of the movement, but because of how theories of "populism" mold the phenomena that they aim to describe. For both critics and admirers of populist politics, the category of "populism" filters the difficulties inherent in the ideal of popular sovereignty through a specific problematic: the problems of political identification as a collective "people."[7] Within this identification frame, popular sovereignty's conditions of possibility are premised on the people's symbolic unity, a prerequisite to their ability to forge a common, self-determining will. With identification as the guiding concern, democracy's difficulties revolve primarily around the dynamics of identity-based forms of inclusion and exclusion (who belongs within a specific vision of "the people") and the nature of political representation in a pluralistic society. In other words, theorists wonder if democratic aspirations for 'rule by the people' will manifest in tolerant, open-ended efforts to build electoral majorities through persuasion, or if they will culminate in the formation of a unified popular identity, polarized against the people's adversaries.[8]

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[6] Beatrice Potter, *The Co-Operative Movement in Great Britain* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company, 1987 [1891]), 18-20.

[7] Jason Frank, "Populism and Praxis," *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 629-644.

[8] While anxieties about popular illiberalism shape the worldview of populism's liberal critics more than its radical democratic admirers like Laclau and Mouffe, their left-populist perspective is also defined by the difficulties of melding popular unity and difference within the discourses of popular movements. For them, populist polarization actually facilitates a balance between pluralism and unity among social movements, because they believe that unity around an enemy is part of what allows a plurality of grievances to coexist. Laclau and Mouffe's 'pluralistic' justifications for left-populism are rarely considered by liberal critics who argue that populism is incompatible with pluralism *tout court*. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, Verso: 1985). For a compelling argument that Laclau and Mouffe's focus on the discursive dimension of coalition-building is particularly suited to the dynamics of electoral politics rather than the formation of concrete social alliances see Ellen Meiksins-Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986).

In this dissertation, I argue that the contemporary preoccupation with populism is based on a mistaken assessment of the difficulties inherent in the ideal of popular sovereignty, and that when we move beyond populist preoccupations, we can grasp a theory and practice of radical democracy centered on the ideal of a cooperative society. At the root of this argument is my contention that popular sovereignty's underlying difficulties do not revolve primarily around the people's symbolic unity, but around the difficulty of creating a shared form of self-government that synthesizes personal and collective autonomy through the material organization of social reproduction. From this materialist vantage, aspirations immanent to the ideal of popular sovereignty – specifically, the aspiration to free and equal participation in the activity of self-government – need not culminate either in illiberal populism or liberal pluralism. Instead, popular sovereignty can manifest in how citizens' shared control over their common fate is built into the infrastructure of a democratic economy and society. Moreover, I argue that the problems of inclusion and exclusion in American history are better understood through this materialist lens – as struggles not simply over membership in a liberal polity but over the nature of the division of labor in a settler colonial society founded on the massive expropriation of land, labor, and human possibility.[9]

I develop this theoretical argument about the social basis of popular sovereignty beginning with a study of the cooperative dimension of Populism and extending into how the ideal of the cooperative commonwealth was re-iterated in socialist unions, African-American community development initiatives, and Progressive Era efforts to imagine democratic self-determination in a fully industrialized capitalist society. These initiatives struggled on two related fronts: first, they struggled to construct inclusive and practicable experiments in

[9] On the vexed relationship between ideals of democratic freedom and settler colonialism in US history see, Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2010).

cooperation, and second, they struggled to generate the constituent power necessary to re-shape the basic associational patterns that structured their everyday experience – transforming artificially enforced relations of competition and atomization into free and empowered social cooperation. The possibility of this transformation does not simply depend on reversing the social Darwinian logic of 'the survival of the fittest' – making cooperation, not competition, the natural basis of social organization. Instead, cooperation was the product of intentionality and artifice, and it needed to be created as a shared capacity and institutionalized in democratic organizations capable of channeling the people's political agency in protracted struggles for a better society.

During these struggles, the beginnings of cooperative agency emerged in non-political efforts at self-help, where agents sought to resolve discrete problems through collective action. Whether they resulted in halting success or outright failure, efforts at cooperative self-help proved to many cooperators that the people's own associational possibilities are limited by mutable forms of social and political power. In these moments when social relations seemed capable of change, far-sighted cooperators prepared for political challenges to the powerful forces that hindered their projects. In each case I examine, the theory and practice of the cooperative commonwealth was defined by this relationship between self-help and politics: by the dual imperatives to 1) cultivate immediate experiences of cooperative democratic localism and 2) to form political agencies adequate for struggle against ruling groups. The move to politics not only presumed engaging in conflicts, but it also enlarged the meaning of cooperation: cooperation was no longer simply a form of collective action based on shared interests and goals, but the guiding ideal for a social order beyond exploitation. The body of my dissertation traces these dynamic struggles, exploring not only how they elaborated the practical meaning of

"cooperation" itself, but also how the conflicts they generated reveal a specific catalogue of obstacles to democratic progress in the United States' political and social history.

Ultimately, I argue that this dynamic tension between cooperative self-help and the politics of cooperation remains relevant for a new era of capitalist development in the early 21st century, where financialization, information technology, and new possibilities for automation constitute a new epoch in the history of capitalism and a new terrain of social struggle. In this contemporary context, our political alternatives are often presented as a choice between liberal democracy and some form of populism (whether on the right or the left). There are powerful reasons for this presentation of alternatives: it reflects dominant interpretations of the form that intra-party conflict has taken throughout the liberal democratic world. Nevertheless, examining the history of cooperative politics and cooperative theory in the United States not only shows why a radically democratic alternative to binary choice is possible, but it can also illuminate how the cooperative commonwealth can again become a horizon of expectation for democratic struggles. The cooperative commonwealth is not a mere historical artifact – a dream that belongs to the past and cannot be re-animated. Even in a radically transformed social landscape, the capacity for cooperation remains a latent attribute of our sociality, a capacity that requires active cultivation and transformations in social infrastructure to become the basis of a more democratic society. Then as now, these transformations require political struggle; far from a naïve vision of social harmony, social cooperation is a terrain of conflict.

In the next section of this introduction, I explain why an ideal of cooperation emerged as a solution to an internal dilemma in the ideal of sovereign citizenship descended from the American revolution, revolving around how it envisioned the relationship between personal and collective autonomy in a specific ideology of of 'independent' and 'dependent' labor. I claim

that the imperative to discover a form of egalitarian cooperation derives from the need to synthesize personal and collective autonomy within a theory and practice of democratic sociality. Rather than reconstruct a "radical democratic tradition" cohered by a common intellectual conversation,[10] I argue that the ideal of the cooperative commonwealth emerged from a distinctive problem space that transcended conversations within communities of political actors.[11] While these tensions around the ideal of sovereign citizenship at times emerged from attempts to inscribe citizens in a national democratic project, they are not uniquely "American" – as we will see, cooperators consistently defined themselves within an international milieu. At the same time, struggles for the cooperative commonwealth are also not "un-American" products of foreign collectivist ideologies unsuited to a supposedly inveterate American spirit of competitive individualism. Instead, the imperatives to develop cooperative politics emerged from conflicts in the simultaneously material and symbolic evolution of the United States during its transformation from a burgeoning industrial society into the center of global empire.

The next section explains what I mean by "cooperation" and "the politics of cooperation." It is crucial at the outset to explain why "cooperation" is a *critical* concept, since the term is often used in generic ways that fail to grasp its polemical meaning. Only when we transcend a common-sense notion of cooperation as instrumental collective action can we see why it should be understood as a form of free association that gives meaning to the ideal of popular self-determination and sets a specific horizon for the project of radical democracy. Finally, I explain my project's scope and its underlying methodology, which bridges the history of movements and parties with intellectual history and political theory.

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[10] For one effort to catalogue a radical democratic tradition in the United States see Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
[11] My conception of "problem space" is adapted from David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

I. From Identification to Cooperation: The Dilemmas of Sovereign Citizenship

The underlying premise of democracy is that we are citizens of a self-determining society. While this premise already contains the embryo of democracy's radical ideals – freedom through self-determination, self-determination through equal participation, and the imperative of solidaristic action – the ideal of collective autonomy does not automatically produce a radical interpretation of democracy. Rather, the ideal of a self-determining society is an elementary component of normative justifications of democracy throughout its modern history. For figures ranging from Alexander Hamilton to John Rawls, democracy implies the ideal of a self-made society. Hamilton, for instance, introduced *The Federalist Papers* hoping that the American republic would affirmatively prove "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."[12] For Rawls, citizens of a democracy, "do not regard their social order as a fixed natural order, or as an institutional structure justified by religious doctrines or hierarchical principles expressing aristocratic values," but instead understand their society as the product of their own shared activity and amenable to change through self-reflection.[13] In other words, democracy is not a political order premised on subordinate subjects following the commands of an external sovereign under the threat of force, but a polity where the people themselves are sovereign, forming a body of associated citizens who jointly shape the parameters of their common life.

Insofar as this basic premise of collective autonomy is understood to define the democratic project, democratic theory needs to explain what it means for citizens to participate

[12] *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 1.
[13] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 6.

in their shared self-government as the collective sovereign.[14] Such an explanation not only requires elaborating the status of the individual "citizen" as sovereign (the rights, freedoms, duties, and attitudes that define their status), but a sense of the form that citizens' necessary interdependence with one another takes.[15] Centering social interdependence reveals how democratic aspiration influences society as a whole, affecting the nature of citizens' self-perception and their relations with one another beyond the formal avenues of political participation.[16] To take one representative example from American political culture, Walt Whitman represented democratic sovereignty's broader social and cultural meaning in his poem, "The Prairie-Grass Dividing," which depicts a democratic people through the image of the prairie grasses of the American Midwest. Like the sun-lit grasses standing tall against the horizon, democratic individuals express personal autonomy as they, "go their own gait, erect, stepping with freedom and command – leading not following." In the same instance, each individual, "never constrain'd' never obedient," is an equal member of a democratic people, a form of association that requires "the most copious and close companionship."[17] In Whitman's vision, personal autonomy manifests in practices of independent self-assertion that do not contravene interdependence, but facilitate a specific form of companionship. Since popular sovereignty is inherently collective, accounting for the interdependent character of autonomy

[14] There is a large debate about sovereignty in contemporary political theory, and many theorists reject the idea of sovereignty as inescapably wedded to a variety of social ills, ranging from the lawlessness of emergency rule to a modernist ideal of agency as 'mastery.' Within this debate, my use of the term popular sovereignty resonates most with the perspective of Andreas Kalyvas, who opposes visions of sovereignty premised on command (which fall to a number of contemporary criticisms) to *popular* sovereignty, which is based on the ideals of shared creativity and order-institution. See Andreas Kalyvas, "Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power," *Constellations* 12:2 (2005), 223-244.

[15] For this reason, democratic theory does not simply require a theory of freedom (*pace* contemporary theories of neo-republicanism), but a theory of society and social interdependence.

[16] For one example, see Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[17] Walt Whitman, "The Prairie-Grass Dividing." The Walt Whitman Archive https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1867/poems/42 (Accessed July 20, 2019).

must be an essential part of our theories, and it requires grappling not only with the formation of cultural attitudes but with the concrete shape of the social division of labor. Since interdependent individuals' own capacities for agency are shaped by the social relations in which they live, they cannot achieve autonomy isolated from society. At the same time, collective autonomy will not express self-determination if it does not manifest in the experience of concrete persons. In other words, for sovereignty to be popular, it must not only correspond to forms of empowered agency experienced by individual citizens, but it must also express relationships of power-sharing among them that facilitate their free and equal participation in self-government.

Defining the forms that democratic interdependence takes is not only a task for social theory, but is also a consistent preoccupation in the history of popular movements. As an aspect of their shared sovereignty, the people must actively negotiate the terms of their interdependent self-government, ensuring that their everyday activity enhances, rather than undermines, their joint capacity to subject their society's development to reflective control. Contrary to these expectations, the modern history of democracy does not reveal societies in which popular control over decision-making, resource allocation, and the formation of a richer, freer culture steadily develops. Instead, capitalist democracies are premised on forms of power that actively *inhibit* efforts to unite social development with the people's shared autonomy. In US history, the idea of "cooperation" emerged as a resolution to this problem of squaring expectations of autonomy with interdependence in an emerging capitalist society: how can the social world that the people already constitute jointly be brought under their shared, self-reflective control?

By formulating the difficulties of achieving popular sovereignty through a discussion of the social dimensions of autonomy and interdependence, we are already moving away from today's critics of populism. For these theorists, aspirations to collective self-government are

acknowledged as a component of the democratic ideal, but they are also viewed with skepticism. According to Jan-Werner Müller, sovereign expectations are a reservoir of populist identification, and a central task for democratic theory is to protect against their possible pathologies. For Müller, populism emerges when political actors generate discursive antagonism between "the people," who are posited as a unitary collective and the seat of sovereignty, and "the elite," who are charged with abrogating the people's will. The aspiration to sovereignty can culminate in populist antagonism since any attempt to formulate a coherent vision of "the people" and their will in a pluralistic society creates exclusions and representational distortions, making the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty potentially un-democratic in its consequences: what appears to activate democracy's promise of popular rule actually undermines the procedures of representation that allow for self-government in a complex, diverse, modern society. More concretely, Müller worries that rather than utilize public debate and electoral contests to register popular claims, form competing policy agendas, and work out compromises in the parliamentary arena, populism threatens to delegitimate these procedures in favor of the direct representation of a unity and exclusionary popular will.

Since Müller derives populism from the very ideal of democratic legitimacy, he does not believe that it is a product of foreign barbarians storming the liberal democratic castle. Instead, he claims that populism emerges from an intuitively appealing but ultimately impossible "folk theory of democracy" that inheres in citizens' political expectations. According to this folk theory, the people are self-governing when, "the people as a whole not only have a common and coherent will but also can rule in the sense that the right representatives can implement what the people have demanded in the form of an imperative mandate."[18] Since this wish can never be

[18] Müller, *What is Populism?*, 76. Müller does not explain why this is the inevitable formulation sovereign expectations in popular culture. It would be better to assess the dynamic ways these expectations manifest in popular

fulfilled – the people are always plural and their collective voices are inevitably polyphonic, if not cacophonic – the aspiration to popular unity can only manifest in forms of identification that construct symbolic surrogates for collective autonomy, either by stressing cultural homogeneity among the people (often through a form of ethnic nationalism), or by imagining direct identification between the people and a leader who embodies their will outside the established procedures of preference aggregation and party competition. The first mode of identification undermines the tolerant spirit of a liberal society, while the second undermines the legitimacy of competitive pluralism in the political arena. Opposed to these populist forms of democratic collectivity, Müller poses an alternative: an inclusive, liberal nationalism that is not premised on a homogenizing vision of "the people," but on shared civic values and commitment to pluralistic procedures of democratic decision-making, what he elsewhere calls "constitutional patriotism."[19]

When looking back at the history of populism from this frame, analysts are primed to assess how political actors constructed an inclusive and pluralist or exclusive and adversarial vision of "the people," concerns that essentially revolve around the nature of political rhetoric and discursive identity-construction.[20] For Müller, the anxiety that the aspiration to collective autonomy ends up presuming the creation of a homogenous identity makes these concerns central. Since we cannot formulate a common will that could form the basis of an imperative command to political representatives unless we share a common vision that only identity-based homogeneity can provide, the history of democracy can be understood as a battle between pluralist representation and populist temptation. This frame of reference constructs a particular

culture, rather than formally derive them from how Müller himself envisions the discursive preconditions for popular sovereignty.

[19] Jan-Werner Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[20] See ibid., 87-91. For a historical account of American populism that centers political rhetoric over social struggle see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

problem space in which democratic actors operate. Their dilemma is how to devise mechanisms of representation that can register a plurality of democratic claims, while avoiding the temptation to form a homogeneous sovereign will in response to crises. Democrats have to be active emissaries of tolerance and persuasion, hoping to utilize existing institutional procedures to enact policy changes that all social sectors have the potential to influence.

When we look back at the history of Populism, this problem space not only fails to illuminate the Populists' own efforts to develop an alternative economy, but it also misconstrues the underlying dilemmas of sovereign citizenship that their projects of cooperation sought to resolve.[21] As a consequence, the preoccupation with populism is not only a problem for political history, but also for political theory, since it misconstrues the identifiable problems endemic to constructing an inclusive and transformative democratic politics in the present. At the root of these errors is the strong assumption that popular sovereignty requires a common will that can function as an imperative command to political representatives. Instead, the Populists showed how popular sovereignty can manifest in the people's shared control of their own social activity. In other words, collective autonomy need not rest on the people's symbolic coherence as a collective, but on their capacity to act in relationships of egalitarian cooperation. Rather than search for relationships of sameness to cohere their vision of "the people," the Populists attempted to create a form of cooperative association that advanced their shared self-government. In these efforts, their obstacle was not pluralistic difference, but *their own exploitation* and the relations of power that a society based on exploitation confers to dominant social groups. Asserting that they were sovereign citizens like any other, Populists' struggles for the

[21] To be clear, my claim is that Müller's conception of populism cannot describe the problem that the People's Party and their legatees set out to address. I will not fully justify the claim that his conception of populism also fails to explain what is called "populism" today, but I am also doubtful that his theory has real explanatory power in our current context.

cooperative commonwealth sought to work out a form of association that simultaneously advanced their personal and collective autonomy: in Whitman's image, it would simultaneously facilitate their upright gait and their copious and close companionship. While national chauvinism, racism, and sexism can be justified through the image of a restricted *demos*, we need not see these pathologies as immanent to the very idea of democratic self-determination. Instead, they derive from a more complex and material history of social development, and they can be productively critiqued as violations of democratic sovereignty's underlying aspiration to inclusive power-sharing and creative self-making.

While the ideal of an egalitarian, solidaristic sovereign citizenry should be normatively defended and identified with the cause of democracy, demonstrating why it is not a reservoir of "populism" does not imply that is without its own tensions and dilemmas. In my project, there are two central tensions that engender difficulties for the project of cooperative democracy and define the problem space in which its agents operated, and they both revolve around how theories of economy and society conceive of the relationship between personal and collective autonomy in material terms. The first revolves around the relationship between the independence of sovereign citizens and their underlying interdependence with one another, and the second revolves around how, when problems were identified in these relations of independence, a political force could be created to transform them. These relations may appear to be under the control of the people who participate in them, yet the effort to develop cooperation depends on more than the voluntary reorientation of attitudes and habits, but the politics of divesting ruling groups of unjust forms of power and creating the infrastructural support for cooperative association. We can consider the first the problem of elaborating the social meaning of "cooperation" in inclusive, concrete, and critical terms, and the second as the problem of "the

politics of cooperation": how cooperation can not only become an experience of local possibility but the horizon of a mass democratic project.

To grasp the first issue, we can recall that in early American history, the ideal of sovereign citizenship centered on the relationship between citizens' economic independence and their political standing, a civic ideal that defined the status of white settlers.[22] The ideal of free labor as independent labor had a direct antithesis in the widespread forms of dependent labor practiced by women and slaves, and it was also contrasted with the colonial perception of indigenous societies as 'non-productive.' Clearly, independence for some was purchased at the expense of the dependence or violent expropriation of others, relations of subordination that were naturalized by an ideology of orders that justified excluding some from the democratic sociality of free and equal associates. The primary problem here was not that the 'white settler' was a homogenous identity created so that "the people" could formulate and express their common will, but that the reproduction of settler society was structured around various forms of expropriation. Moreover, the stratifying ideologies on which settler ideology was based did not clarify the nature of social reproduction, but engendered an elementary *mystification* of social relations, based in the very idea of citizens' "independence" itself. If we consider the early republican ideal of independence from a certain perspective, we can see that independence was never independent; it was always dependent on the relationships of subordination that sustained it. Foisting "independence" as a legitimating ideal was a way to conceal the experience of subordinates, since their agency created the conditions for independence even as republican ideology presented citizens' agency as self-standing and self-determining. From this vantage, the problem for the ideal of sovereign citizenship is not the latent danger that popular collectivism

[22] See Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*

will become illiberal and exclusive, but that popular sovereignty would replace the sovereignty of the British Crown with the 'democratic' sovereignty of petty despots, lording their independence over others. In other words, the question is whether the aspiration of the Populist-descended Huey Long to make "every man a King," would lay the groundwork for a stratified society where the freedom of some is won through the subjection of others, or whether the ideal of democratic sovereignty contains principles that can structure a transparent and egalitarian division of labor.[23]

Often, these tensions between autonomy and interdependence are described in theoretical terms as a tension between liberty and equality. While this frame is superior to the preoccupations of populism theory, defining the tension in this way is not capacious enough to grasp the depth of the problem that the cooperative commonwealth aimed to resolve. To grasp this problem, we must clarify why liberty is achieved not only through equality and solidarity, but also through collective autonomy. Otherwise, we will not clarify the practical task of rendering social interdependence more transparent, subjecting it to the self-reflective control of all of the participants whose own activity constitutes society. To take an recent and illuminating example, Alex Gourevitch calls the question of whether the freedom of some always depends on the servitude of others "the paradox of slavery and freedom," and he posits universalizing republican independence as a conceptual and practical solution to the paradox.[24] Following the lead of 19th century workers, Gourevitch's solution offers a specific vision of how autonomy and interdependence can be squared: a form of cooperative association must be worked out that allows everyone to experience personal independence. In his telling, this meant adapting the

[23] On the relationship between Huey Long and Populism see, Alan Brinkley *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin & The Great Depression* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).
[24] Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the 19th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 16.

early republican view that independence requires control over productive property to social conditions where control over productive property can only be collective. Initially, the idea of republican independence manifested in the yeoman ideal that control over landed property could secure independence, or alternatively, in the artisan vision that control over the tools and terms of labor could guarantee independence.[25] When forms of property developed that could only be operated collectively, workers sought to discover a form of cooperation that would preserve their independence as sovereign citizens by devising forms of joint control over productive resources.

Gourevitch's argument lucidly shows how the expectations of sovereign citizens manifested in the late 19th century in cooperative, non-populist ways, and though his argument is centered on the Knights of Labor, it could easily apply to similar ideological innovations by their coalition-partners in the agrarian Populist movement, as I show in the first chapter. At the same time, resolving the paradox of slavery and freedom does not merely require recovering a "lost language of freedom,"[26] but critical reflection on the nature of democratic sociality. It is clear, for instance, that Gourevitch's labor republicans envisioned "cooperation" as a form of industrial self-government at the level of the enterprise, but it is not clear from his account whether they envisioned a fully social form of cooperation that gave shape to a democratic society.[27] The vision of the cooperative commonwealth that emerges is a society of autonomous cooperative

[25] The example of land-ownership already belies that landed property was premised on "independence" for three clear reasons. First, the land was converted to private property through colonialism. Second, the operation of a family farm is a collective, not an individual pursuit. Third, yeomen were frequently not subsistence producers, so emphasizing their "independence" belied their dependence on the market. The narrative of "landed independence" rests on rendering invisible colonialism, the dependent labor of women and children, and forms of market-dependence that actually structured society.

[26] Ibid., 10.

[27] Gourevitch is well aware of Knights' struggles to gain a foothold in local markets, but rather than illuminate their attempts to resolve these problems through practical innovation and social theory, he commits them to a form of voluntarism that sees the struggle for the cooperative commonwealth as fundamentally a project of creating voluntary organizations and re-organizing attitudes and habits. See ibid., 168. The Knights horizons were not limited to this sort of voluntarism, though it did exist their organization.

organizations that relate to one another in an unspecified way, replicating the problem of the "independence" of the yeoman or artisan at the level of the jointly owned enterprise. Concretely, what is swept aside here is whether a competitive market for basic necessities is compatible with democratic, social cooperation.[28] In this way, the project of universalizing independence reproduces a version of the same problem that plagued early republicanism: positing as "independent" experiences that are structured by primary forms of dependence on others, in this case through commodity markets and the social infrastructure that creates them.

More importantly, since all forms of neo-republicanism envision freedom negatively (as "non-domination"), they obscure the positive democratic problem of rendering society more amenable to the shared, self-reflective control of those who compose it. In fact, cooperation was not only formulated as a solution to the problem of domination, but to the problems of heteronomy (being governed by a system of law that you did not co-author) and alienation (being estranged from the powers that you exercise). Within democratic movements, these problems run together and they should be comprehended together. Bringing these issues into our account does not require abstractly imagining a fully dis-alienated society; instead, we can see achieving a greater degree of collective autonomy as a cultural achievement that must be progressively won and that can be undone. Whether or not a form of social organization can be devised that ensures that autonomy is not won through subjection is not something that can be proved in the abstract; it can only be demonstrated experimentally and extended in a process of political struggle. For this reason, the problems posed by the ideal of interdependent sovereign citizens do not merely require a theory of freedom, but a theory of how forms of social relation can be transformed

[28] Outside his critique of the arbitrary power of employers over workers, Gourevitch is concerned with proletarianized labor's dependence on the market. But rather than reflect on the generalized market dependence produced by capitalism, Gourevitch is preoccupied with only one facet of this dependence: the imperative to enter the labor market. See ibid., 161.

through politics. For such a theory, we need to begin to define cooperation and the politics of cooperation more concretely.

II. Defining Cooperation: From Non-Instrumental Solidarity to Political Struggle

One of the reasons why Populism's legacy as a cooperative movement remains obscured in both political history and political theory is that problems endemic to theories of populism have not been alleviated by theories of democratic cooperation. While the idea of "cooperation" is an elementary term in the social sciences, we lack *political* theories of cooperation that are tied to the specific experiences of cooperative movements.[29] As a result, our ideas about cooperation are often overly generic and detached, since they lack elaboration by the historical experiences of agents struggling to develop cooperative social relations. While an exhaustive survey of theories of cooperation in the social sciences is outside the scope of this introduction, it is useful to draw a basic contrast between 'instrumental' and 'non-instrumental' visions of cooperation. While cooperative movements rest on both, they carry the potential to generate non-instrumental solidarities in ways that many theories fail to grasp. Moreover, non-instrumental elements of the idea of cooperation are essential to give meaning to the cooperative commonwealth as a horizon of democratic expectation.

According its literal, etymological meaning – *co* or "with" and *operare* or "to act" or "to work" – "cooperation" can denote a wide variety of social activities. According to prevalent game-theoretic assumptions, cooperation indicates collaborative activity for a common goal, as

[29] Jean-Françios Draperi, for instance, notes how the development in the idea of "cooperation" in classical sociology generally proceeded without reference to the unique experiences of cooperatives or cooperative movements. See Draperi, "From Cooperative Theory to Cooperative Practice," *Revue Internationale de L'Economie Sociale*. http://recma.org/sites/default/files/FROM_COOPERATIVE_THEORY_TO_COOPERATIVE_PRACTICE.pdf (Accessed July 23, 2019).

opposed to competition over a scarce good. If we take theories of instrumental rationality as our starting point, our ideas about cooperation often reduce it to collective action toward a shared end: we cooperate when we want something we can only achieve through the assistance of others. In the instrumentalist frame, cooperation is only possible when we have shared, non-rival ends, since an arena of scarcity necessitates competition among self-seeking individuals over a finite set of goods. In this framework, "cooperation" simply refers to how groups generate joint effort for shared goals, and says nothing else about the nature of their collective action (whether it is egalitarian or hierarchical or whether the ends of action are understood in flatly instrumental terms or have fuller meaning). By contrast, non-instrumental cooperation names relationships with a more open-ended *telos*: cooperators' own self-governing association. Conceived in this way, non-instrumental cooperation does not require a heroic form of altruism, nor does it require a utopian vision of a society without conflict.[30] Instead, democratic cooperation centers an ethical commitment that is simultaneously more simple and more powerful: that the inherently collective nature of all social progress demands that everyone who generates that progress should benefit on equal terms.

In general, democratic collective action involves cooperation of the instrumental kind. Citizens often come together because of shared interests and common goals, and these experiences themselves often create habits of collective action that enhance democratic sociality. Indeed, I argue that the seedbeds for the cooperative commonwealth are precisely these kinds of experiences of community self-help. The Alliance movement, labor organizations, W.E.B. Du Bois's study of the "group economy" among black Americans, and John Dewey's theory of

[30] These ideals often derive from reductive interpretations of communitarian movements, like Owenism or Fourierism. Laclau would perhaps call such ideals as an instance of "The various myths of the *totally* reconciled society" which he charges with eliminating the possibility of politics. See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 63.

democratic problem-solving all illuminate how these elementary efforts to band together to resolve popular problems is an initial locus of democratic possibility. In these moments, cooperation is not created out of a pre-existing atomic individualism. Instead, what makes cooperative self-help distinctive is not that many are formed into one, but that existing forms of social interdependence are re-worked, creating a distinction between the experience of empowered cooperation and the regular pattern of association, which has failed to synthesize personal autonomy with collective self-determination. For some cooperators, these moments created a distinctive form of democratic politicization, making the horizon of an alternative society perceptible. As one iron molder put it in a letter to his union journal: "I do not think I ever thought so much about any one subject before in my life. You know that workingmen do not have much time to think about anything else than how to best keep hunger, nakedness, and cold from becoming members of his family; but, somehow, this thing called cooperation got such a hold on me that I have been, in a manner, lost to everything else. I have dreamed about it, thought about it in the shop, on the street, at church, in fact, everywhere."[31]

Axel Honneth has clarified the meaning of such cooperation in a recent book about the original meaning of socialism. While not all cooperators were socialists, the socialist critique illuminates something essential about how a non-instrumental vision of cooperation can emerge from elementary experiences of solidaristic action. In Honneth's view, early socialists, "employed categories such as "association", "cooperation", and "community" in order to make clear that their very different economic models were based on the principle that the self-fulfillment of each must depend on the self-fulfillment of the other."[32] For socialists, another

[31] Quoted in Steve Leikin, *The Practical Utopians: American Workers and the Cooperative Movement in the Gilded Age* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 28.
[32] Axel Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal* trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 13.

individual is not seen as the potential obstacle to my freedom, nor as an instrumental means for fulfilling it. Instead, free cooperation implies the recognition among society's members that their own self-fulfillment is inextricably bound to the self-fulfillment of all. As Honneth helpfully notes, many socialists did not understand this vision of cooperative social solidarity as merely an ethical exhortation seeking to change attitudes, enjoining people to subjectively perceive others' freedom as a condition of their own. Instead, they saw cooperation as an objective, but incompletely realized principle of the social division of labor, distorted by the capitalist market economy. The social division of labor necessarily creates interdependence, but this interdependence is "systematically concealed by capitalist relations of production: Although subjects produce in order to satisfy economic demand, and thus the needs underlying this demand, they are not motivated by concern for the needs of others, but solely by their own egocentric interest in increasing their own utility."[33] As Honneth clarifies, these positions emerge from immanent critique: market exchange only functions insofar as it satisfies common needs, yet it is not pursued for the sake of these needs, but only for the sake of private profit. The intermediation of interdependence by market exchange means that "in this society … each member is only a "merchant" for the other," so that, "in capitalism, freedom means viewing others as a mere means."[34] In socialist cooperation, the mutual interdependence inherent to the division of labor is openly recognized (rather than repressed through the atomizing logic of commodity production and sale[35]) which "means that individual intentions must be so clearly interlinked that we can only achieve our aims cooperatively, conscious of our dependence on

[33] Ibid., 17.
[34] Ibid., 16, 18.
[35] Honneth is operating with one of Marx's early critiques of John Stuart Mill, before Marx had developed his theory of commodity fetishism. His discussion would have been enriched by integrating the component of reification into this relationship: the experience of interdependence (social relations) becomes transposed onto the relationship between things (money and commodities). See Marx, *Capital*, 163-177.

each other."[36] When we grasp how our shared dependence on one another is a concrete condition for our individual self-fulfillment – each one of us requires the social contributions of others as a basic pre-condition for free self-development – it opens the possibility to conceive of the shared development of all as the ideal guiding our interaction. This would imply a real 'working together,' not in the sense that our private aims simply happen to coincide, but in the sense that we formulate our aims collectively in democratic deliberation: we "do not merely act "together," but "for each other"" in non-instrumental relations of solidarity.[37] In other words, satisfying the needs of others (and having our needs satisfied in return) is an elementary condition of sociality, which, when elevated to a principle of association, can become a guiding rationale for the re-formulation of social relations. As a consequence, the ideal of cooperation has an immediate critical component: the social labor of all cannot merely serve the private luxury of the few, but its surplus must be invested in the common elevation of the entire community, considered as equal.

As Honneth begins to clarify, cooperation is not a form of altruism, nor does it describe a perfectly harmonious society; instead, it names an ongoing project of self-reflective, democratic interdependence whose goal is the free self-government of its members.[38] For Honneth, social cooperation has no discrete goal. Glimpsed when Potter called the *telos* of cooperation "the formation of a noble character in the citizen," or when Whitman referred to the "copious and close companionship" of democratic peoplehood, the ends of cooperation must be themselves 'open-ended.' Today, the purpose of economic activity is almost uniformly presented as

[36] Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, 18.
[37] Ibid., 23.
[38] It might be helpful to state that Honneth's and my position rest on rejecting any attempt to separate political self-determination from social activity, and therefore rejects the separation of the economic and political endemic to capitalism (created by the artificial legal construction of a "private" economy). See Ellen Meiksins-Wood, "The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism," *New Left Review* 1:127 (May/June 1981), 66-95.

economic growth, indexed to the ongoing profitability of a capitalist economy. Capitalist growth offers a number of tangible benefits to workers and consumers, but it not only systematically enriches the few at the expense of the many, but it prostrates our activity to the imperatives of a social system that we set it into motion on a daily basis but cannot democratically control. The cooperative commonwealth has no such discrete end. Instead, its goal is the shared progress of its members, however that progress is worked out in their free association. Giving concrete meaning to this abstract formulation is what the Populists, Socialists, and radical progressives did in both theory and practice.

Beyond the difficulties of formulating the meaning of cooperation within organizations of self-help, cooperation also became a political struggle. The politics of cooperation forces us to recognize that society is not a neutral terrain for our experiments, but a terrain of conflict. While defending an experimentalist attitude toward social change, we need to grasp how political experimentation fundamentally occurs within asymmetries of power and insist that the only alternative to these constraints is transformation, not escape. In Honneth's conception of experimentalism, the dimension of conflict is left unclear. For his democratic socialism, "The addresses of socialist experimental insights will no longer be the members of a certain social group, but all citizens – provided the latter are convinced that their individual freedom can only be realized through cooperation in solidarity in significant spheres of life. The guarantee for the realizability of socialism will no longer be the existence of a social movement with corresponding aims, but the capacity to bring about institutional reforms within the given social reality – reforms that point toward future change."[39] Too little is said here since even reforms require their own agencies – parties, parliaments, and movements – whose development is

[39] Ibid., 74.

always a political struggle in an unequal society. When Rosa Luxemburg criticized Eduard Bernstein's idea that socialism could be gradually created "by means of the progressive extension of social control and the gradual application of the principle of cooperation," she was partly targeting how the socialist demand for workers' cooperative control of their labor cut to the root of capitalist society's organization, precipitating an elementary conflict that required an integrated theory and practice of popular struggle as a condition of its victory.[40] Any account of the politics of cooperation cannot repeat Bernstein's problem, but must clarify the depths of the difficulties that cooperative movements face.

Rather than insist abstractly on the imperative of revolutionary politics, an account of the politics of cooperation should proceed dynamically, exploring a multiplicity of avenues for social transformation that integrate voluntary localism, social reform, and large-scale collective action. A dynamic account of the politics of cooperation refuses to identify the project of cooperative democracy with a single strategy. To take the case of another contemporary advocate of cooperative democracy, James Tully defends a tradition of a cooperative democracy based fundamentally on withdrawal: cooperation, he claims, is fundamentally about divesting from exploitative institutions and setting up parallel cooperative societies at the margins of exploitative economies. For Tully, this cooperative tradition's aim, "is to refuse to cooperate with this undemocratic and unjust mode of production and consumption; to withdraw one's producing and consuming capabilities from commodification; and to exercise productive and consumptive capabilities 'in common' in democratically run cooperatives that are re-embedded in the surrounding social relationships."[41] Strategies of withdrawal have clear limitations in the

[40] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and the Mass Strike* ed. Helen Scott (Chicago: Haymarket, 2008), 44.
[41] James Tully, "To Ways of Realizing Justice and Democracy: Linking Amartya Sen and Elinor Ostrom," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 16:2 (2013), 228.

case of the majority of society's wage-earners – who cannot simply withdraw from the labor market – setting a strong limit to how 'democratic' and inclusive Tully's vision of cooperative democracy could be. Yet rather than fully reject parallel organization, a contemporary account of the politics of cooperation can emphasize learning from what can be done where, and how the integration of a diverse set of cooperative institutions could constellate into a real movement with a shared determination of purpose and a shared horizon of expectation.

III. From Cooperation to the Cooperative Commonwealth, in History and Theory

The democratic project I call "the politics of cooperation" is not derived from philosophical reflection on the nature of egoism or altruism, but is shaped by an investigation into the struggles and experiments of cooperative movements within a specific society – the United States from the Civil War to the Cold War. Rather than project an abstract vision of a totally reconciled community, I argue that these movements and their allied intellectuals formulated a theory and practice of democratic cooperation based on their struggles to re-shape associational life so that political and social power could be shared. Their effort to synthesize personal and collective autonomy did not require the formation of a homogenous cultural identity opposed to pluralism, and it did not simply cohere around the figure of a political enemy. Instead, it emerged out of practical experiments to reformulate associational life. The ideal that these movements generated – the cooperative commonwealth – rested fundamentally on a the reformulation of democratic critiques of political economy that crystalized the laboring majority's hope that their common labor could redound to their mutual benefit. These critiques were based on confrontation with concrete difficulties, and alongside their innovations, we can

elaborate the meaning of "cooperation" beyond its generic connotations and grasp its importance for democratic theory and democratic politics.

In selecting my cases, I prioritized two issues. First, I chose movements and figures who primarily saw in Populism the hope of creating an alternative cooperative economy. In other words, they saw Populism beyond the narrow preoccupations that have come to dominate contemporary populism theory. These figures either shared direct allegiance with the movement – as in the case of the Knights of Labor and Eugene Debs – or they looked back on the movement as a site of cooperative possibility. Second, I chose figures who specifically formulated a radical vision of cooperation linked to the promise of popular autonomy. What unites these figures is a common problem: how can a society of sovereign citizens create a form of interdependence that synthesizes their personal and their shared autonomy in practices of cooperation? After formulating this problem, these figures entered into a practical terrain of struggle against forces impeding the development of cooperative association, ranging from the inaccessibility of finance and capital for cooperative enterprise, the control over society's means of self-reproduction vested in the hands of a capitalist class, the difficulties of forming durable self-managing organizations that could achieve the necessary scale for protracted efforts at social change, the imperative to balance direct control and accountable representation, and a working class divided by race, gender, and skill. These are well-worn problems for democracy that many have struggled to resolve in both theory and practice. What makes this project distinctive is that it explores them with a specific horizon of expectation and with emphasis on a specific democratic problematic: how the organization of economy and society can be reworked to synthesize our personal and collective autonomy, giving meaning to the ideal of popular sovereignty in practices of social cooperation. Based on these common traits, these figures can

be meaningfully put in conversation, despite the numerous missed encounters between them in political and intellectual history.

In the first chapter, I outline the politics of cooperation in the Populist movement. While theories of "populism" prime interpreters to see the Populist division between "the people" and "the money power" as the effect of political antagonism, I argue that it was fundamentally rooted in the Populists' producerist theory of political economy. Derived from critiques that saw concentrated financial power as the driving force behind the maldistribution of wealth, the Populist critique of the money power animated what I call a politics of "cooperative market reconstruction" centered on the aspiration for democratic banking, social control of the means of distribution and communication, and public ownership of natural monopolies. Derived from mid-19th century visions of egalitarian commercial sociality and the concrete experiences of agrarian and proto-industrial producers, the Populists envisioned 'cooperation' as a social arrangement where all producers receive the full value for their labor in a politically constructed market. In such a commonwealth, the rewards to capital and the rewards of labor could be balanced and the equal rights of both respected, ensuring that labor retains the bulk of the value it produced. More than 'regulation' of a pre-existing, naturalized market, the Populists' envisioned distribution and exchange as amenable to democratic political reconstruction, like any sphere of social life. Moreover, rather than constitute a merely 'agrarian' class program, the Populist vision of cooperative market reconstruction was broadly shared by labor organizations from the National Labor Union to the Knights of Labor, and it represented a practical locus of farmer-labor unity and social alliance. Far from capitulation to the direction of American social and political development, the Populist vision constituted an existential challenge to the privileges of the few, a dynamic reflected in their tense struggles over the formation and development of agrarian

wholesale cooperatives, workers cooperatives, and the People's Party itself. Since the social conditions for the development of cooperation were thwarted by the existing social order, the Populists realized that a new political party was necessary as a vehicle for their project, and their independent program took its constructive rationale from their specific vision of the cooperative commonwealth.

In the second chapter, I examine how the idea of the cooperative commonwealth was reformulated within the American socialist movement, and I center my analysis on the figure of Eugene Debs. Debs was allied to the Populist movement in his early career as a trade unionist, and he shared the Populists' basic conviction that if labor were accorded its equal rights alongside capital, its social standing would dramatically improve. Rather than adjust these relations through banking reform and market reconstruction, Debs initially imagined cooperation emerging from the protection of workers' collective autonomy on the job through strong unionism. If workers' could set the terms of their own labor and retain the value of their social contributions in the form of high wages, cooperation could occur between capital and labor on a footing of equality. After repeated failures to develop this kind of unionism, Debs became a socialist, which meant that he no longer believed that any free power-sharing between capital and labor was possible. Instead, Debs believed that capitalist power – rooted in the command of labor made possible by private ownership of means of production that could only be socially operated – needed to be abolished as a precondition for social cooperation. Unlike the Populist view, Debs's vision of the cooperative commonwealth was not predicated on producers receiving the full value of their labor in the market, but on producers receiving their socially due share of collectively produced wealth, measured both in egalitarian opportunities for private consumption and in a democratic reinvestment of the social surplus around the ideal of public luxury. Not only

would socialist cooperation imply more freedom to set the terms of work in collective deliberation, but it would also imply greater freedom from work in a social environment organized around opportunities for shared self-development instead of the narrower goal of maximized private consumption. Instead of a 'commercial' form of sociality, Debs envisioned production and distribution organized within democratically controlled industrial structures, enhanced by the achievements of science and technology, and operated by workers educated to understand the full scope of their role in the division of labor. And instead of forming autonomous cooperative organizations parallel to the capitalist economy, Debs sought to transform an existing social movement – the labor movement – into a site of the formation of cooperative agency through a theory and practice of socialist unionism. Capitalist domination meant that large-scale means of cooperation were inaccessible to workers as an autonomous collective, so a movement must be built to wrest these productive powers from capital and deliver them to freely associated labor. Doing so not only required ideologically converting workers to the cause of socialism in electoral politics, but connecting the praxis of the labor movement to socialist aspirations, a link that could begin to prove in practice how the embryo of workers' comprehensive self-government existed in embryo in the present order.

Next, I discuss the reformulation of the cooperative commonwealth ideal in the political theory of John Dewey. While the Socialists had already begun to update the theory and practice of cooperative democracy for a mature industrial society, Dewey continues this trajectory by linking the aspiration to social cooperation with his specific theory of social intelligence. Like Populists and Socialists, Dewey aspired to unite the people's everyday activity with their collective autonomy, a process that he originally formulated along neo-Hegelian lines in his early ethical writings. Rather than base cooperation in a theory of political economy, Dewey's vision

of the cooperative commonwealth foregrounded ethical concerns, which contributed to both the power and limitations in his theory. Defending democracy from its elitist critics, Dewey's early writings posited a radical vision of dis-alienated popular self-government, effected by the ethical unity of citizens who contribute to the common work of reproducing society while finding personal self-realization in social activity. In Dewey's subsequent philosophical trajectory, the attempt to unify the general (the collective good) and the particular (individual self-realization) within the formation of ethical culture was transposed onto the terrain of a pragmatic theory of action. Dewey now looked to practices of collective problem-solving as a site where relations of social cooperation are developed. Despite his occasional description of pragmatism as 'instrumentalism,' Dewey ultimately did not restrict cooperation to the instrumental pursuit of the solutions to discrete problems, but envisioned it as a general practice of free association oriented toward the shared growth of a community of inquirers. When democratic communities work jointly to solve problems, they constitute and re-constitute a social infrastructure of practices, institutions, and material resources that compose their society and condition the possibility of its free development. Rather than reflect the logic of industrializing capitalism, Dewey understood his vision of cooperative intelligence as incompletely realized by capitalism, and he lamented not only how workers' intelligent contributions to society did not ensure their fair share of the surplus, but also how the domination of class interests within society prevented the free development of social intelligence and restricted democratic cultural advance. As an alternative, Dewey oriented his vision of social democracy around what I call "the infrastructure of intelligence" – the social conditions that would allow for all citizens to participate in the resolution of their common problems, a form of free association akin to that of scientific communities. To secure the infrastructure of intelligence, Dewey also ultimately favored the idea

of forming a broad-based, independent popular party as a vehicle, and I argue that Dewey's normative account the centrality of social intelligence for democratic progress can justify coercive action towards powerful interests.

Finally, I examine how W.E.B. Du Bois integrated a more thorough appreciation of the formative role of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction into a history of capitalist development, interventions that conditioned his own unique vision of the cooperative commonwealth. From his earliest sociological studies, Du Bois examined the history of what he called "the group economy" within African-American political culture, an arrangement of practices he understood as a form of social cooperation. In his early years, he praised the group economy as a strategy for building black wealth. In his later years, he began to believe that the African-American predicament was not rooted in poverty, but in exploitation, and gravitated toward a socialist conception of cooperation as a resolution. Radical Reconstruction had been based on the aspiration to democratize capital and create a society based on equal opportunity. By the 1930's, Du Bois believed that these aspirations were no longer practically feasible. With black Americans shut out of most facets of economic life, including the labor movement, Du Bois chose to reformulate his conception of the group economy around the formative power of consumer cooperatives. Du Bois believed that the democratic community planning made possible by consumer cooperation would create an empowered constituency for socialism among black Americans, which he hoped to connect with the progressive wings of the labor movement and international allies to build a common front against capitalism and imperialism. While Du Bois began to favor more aggressive measures to combat the unconstrained power of wealthy elites – reflecting on the model of Reconstruction's suppression of attempts to restore slavery and white supremacy after the Civil War – he remained hopeful that a peaceful transition to

socialism was possible if the majority of the world's population could strive for a society that did not reproduce war, theft, and plunder as it engaged in the inherently beneficent work of providing for its common needs.

"Equal Rights to All and Special Privileges to None": Populism and the Politics of Cooperative Market Reconstruction

"It is strange that a feature so important as co-operation should engage so little of the public attention. It is one of the grandest themes for the contemplation of mankind." – W. Henry Morgan, *History of the Wheel and Alliance and the Impending Revolution* (1891)[42]

Cooperative experiments were a general feature of late-19th century popular politics, and the People's Party was their most powerful political creation. According to the historian Lawrence Goodwyn, the Populist *ethos* was forged in the Farmers' Alliances, an agrarian self-help movement that cultivated "a massive cooperative vision of a new way to live" as an alternative to the tenancy regime that defined the post-Reconstruction organization of agriculture.[43] From its earliest emergence in the 1870's through its rise and decline over the next two decades, Alliances experimented with a variety of strategies for local self-help, ranging from direct action against evictions and land enclosures, to boycotts, selective buying agreements with local merchants, and cooperative enterprise.[44] More than any of their experiments, cooperatives provided an immediate alternative to tenancy by creating a parallel economy through farmers' own self-organization. Through cooperative warehouses that collectively purchased farm equipment, sold crops, and sought credit, the Alliances became "the most nearly successful effort at counter-institutional change ever attempted in this country."[45] When Alliance members realized that economic cooperation alone could not address the roots of the legal, financial, and

[42] W. Henry Morgan, *History of the Wheel and Alliance and the Impending Revolution* (St. Louis: C.B. Woodward Company, 1891), 209.
[43] Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xi. The analysis of crop-lien system and sharecropping arrangements as forms of "tenancy" comes from Michael Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Farmers' Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880-1890* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 20-33.
[44] For a concise and thorough overview of Alliance activities see Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 117-133.
[45] Schwartz, Radical Protest and Social Structure, 15.

political power arrayed against them, they created a new party – the People's Party – to secure lasting change.

While the Populists' philosophy of cooperation was central to their movement, it has proven difficult to theoretically reconstruct. Without a clear sense of the social, economic, and political dimensions of their theory and practice of cooperation, the Populists' unique vision of cooperative democracy remains obscure. Accounts of the movement that subsume it within a general history of "populism" tend not to interrogate the political or economic dynamics of cooperation. Instead, when confronted with the Populists' "producerist" rhetoric, these accounts often center how antagonism between "the people" and "the elite" mobilized protest, focusing on the movement's sense of collective identity and its ability to navigate the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within an identitarian framework.[46] In this way, populism theory tends to displace a thorough explication of the critique of political economy that inspired Populist producerism and structured their vision of social democracy. While the People's Party used "populist" rhetoric, their organizations targeted a deeper problem for democracy that exceed the populist analytical frame: how self-organized democratic collectives can generate the power to reconstruct their own social relations. Beyond representing "the people," the Alliances' cooperative struggles developed popular power by re-shaping the possibilities of democratic association. Through politicizing their cooperative organizations, Populists did not simply target

[46] For the consequences of centering a "populist" frame to assess the People's Party and its legacies see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). Kazin, for instance, titles his chapter on the Populists "The Righteous Commonwealth of the Late Nineteenth Century" not the cooperative commonwealth. Kazin's arguments are frequently invoked in Müller, *What is Populism*? and Laclau, *On Populist Reason*. For an alternative, deeper framework that locates Populist difficulties with exclusion and inclusion within a social, legal, and ideological history of settler empire, see Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 176-263. For a parallel critique of the limitations of an identification framework to understand the People's Party, see Jason Frank, "Populism and Praxis."

an unrepresentative "elite," but organized a challenge to an entire social infrastructure that exploited the people's labor (what they often called "the money power"[47]).

When the Populist critique of political economy is explored by historians, its cooperative dimension is rarely theoretically reconstructed on its own terms.[48] In part, confusion results from how the movement's multiple ideological resonances have tempted interpreters to cast the Populist experience according to a pre-given ideological mold, each of which has its own political-economic assumptions that shape what "cooperation" might mean. For different commentators, the Populists have appeared as representatives a permanent liberal consensus at the heart of American political culture,[49] as an embryonic force for socialism,[50] or as a clue to the moods and anxieties of the mid-20th century right.[51] Grasping the Populists' vision of cooperative democracy requires suspending these assumptions and directly examining the development of their organizations and ideology. Rather than interpret the Populists through subsequent ideological formations, understanding their theory and practice of cooperation requires reconstructing how Populists and their allies transformed inherited democratic ideals about citizens' autonomy according to shifting experiences of exploitation and new possibilities for collective empowerment. Only then can we understand why they turned to cooperation, first as a strategy of self-help, and later as the guiding ideal for a democratic society.

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[47] For Richard Hoftstadter, the Populists' invocation of "the money power" was an aspect of their "paranoid" conception of history as the product of conspiracies. Hoftstadter's claim overlooks how the idea of the money power had an actual genealogy in farmer and labor movements, which I trace below. See Richard Hoftstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Byran to FDR* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 70-81.

[48] For the most thorough attempt to assess the Populist theory of political economy and its relation to their general vision of politics and society, see Bruce Palmer, *"Man Over Money": The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

[49] Louis Hartz collapses Populism into Bryanism and Bryanism into a generic "American democracy" hardly different from Jacksonianism. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 174.

[50] Norman Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 12.

[51] Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 19-21.

As many scholars have noted, the locus of the Populists' social critique was what Goodwyn called "the greenback critique of American finance capitalism."[52] At the same time, Goodwyn and others have often left the connection between the push for greenback currency and the ideal of cooperation unclarified. By reconstructing the origins of the greenback critique, its connections with inherited conceptions of equality and popular sovereignty, and how both labor and agrarian reformers reformulated it after the Civil War, we can better understand the idiosyncratic nature of the Populists' reform program. At their most radical, greenbackers did not simply seek to stimulate economic activity through inflation by replacing the gold standard with the government-issued currency, as a number of its prominent advocates did argue.[53] Instead, popular appropriations of greenbackism gravitated toward its specific critique of exploitation, which rested on the cardinal cooperative demand that all producers receive the full equivalent for their labor in exchange. When integrated into the ideology of the National Labor Union, Knights of Labor, and Farmers' Alliances, greenback theory helped inspire a political project to cooperatively transform the market – a task at the core of the Populist aspiration for a cooperative commonwealth. In the minds of radical greenbackers, government-issued currency would open the possibility for popular control of the social infrastructure subtending exchange: first through creating democratic financial institutions in lieu of private banks, and then through achieving public control of supply lines and natural monopolies. The Populist focus on distributive infrastructure extended the greenback preoccupation with finance to transportation and communication, positing that only collective, democratic control of market institutions could

[52] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 14.
[53] On the history of greenback agitation and its occasionally divergent camps see Gretchen Ritter, *Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Antimonopoly Tradition and the Politics of Finance in America, 1865-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Ritter notes the tension between popular greenbackism and elite greenbackism, but also does not reconstruct the connection between popular greenbackism and cooperation.

ensure social cooperation. If the people could mobilize their political sovereignty to create this new infrastructure, Populists believed that producers would receive the full reward for their labor, equivalents could be exchanged in economic transactions, and the poverty of labor would be abolished. No longer exploited by the special privileges of bankers, creditors, merchants, and monopolists, Populists believed that the equal rights of all would be secure and the inherently cooperative nature of commerce could be realized.[54]

Neither capitalist nor socialist (as their contemporaries in the Socialist Labor Party did not tire of repeating), the Populist cooperative commonwealth envisioned social cooperation as egalitarian reciprocity among producers and consumers within workplaces, communities, and a politically constructed market. While the nature of their cooperative commonwealth was debated, critiqued, and re-articulated by different actors within the popular camp, the basic aspiration to reconstruct market infrastructure while reforming the state formed the practical basis of the Populists' incipient agrarian-labor coalition. At the local level, workers were able to create incipient forms of cooperation that catalyzed experiences of self-determination, often by using voluntary organizations to exercise social control over aspects of their immediate surroundings: local labor markets, commodity markets, and investment. When these efforts confronted obstacles that were not under their control – and were instead under the control of powerful adversaries – they came to understand their project as an existential threat to the current order of power and privilege, realizing that it could not develop without a combined social and political struggle. Since local cooperative praxis could not deliver the cooperative

[54] In this sense, attempts to see proto-socialism in the Populist vision can be both right and wrong, depending on how one understands the history of socialism. The Populists were not proto-Marxist; instead, they were closer to strains of socialism that Marx himself criticized as "petty-bourgeois socialism," like Proudhonism, whose ideal of social reform was not transcending market exchange through social planning, but *perfecting* market exchange by disclosing how its official justifications (the exchange of equivalents protected by property rights) were undermined in practice. See G.D.H. Cole, *Socialist Thought: The Forerunners, 1789-1850* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 201-218.

commonwealth alone, the relationship between local possibility and a broader political struggle deeply structured not only what "cooperation" meant institutionally and conceptually, but the kinds of collective action the Populists undertook. In their move from self-help to politics, the Populists confronted a basic problem for theories of democratic agency: how can the people not only mobilize local collective action, but become a constituent force capable of structural reforms that allow for social and political power to be cooperatively shared? The move from self-help to organizational consolidation and political struggle did not entail the suppression of local "rebellious aspirations to power" as Laura Grattan claims.[55] Instead, by developing and politicizing their organizations, the Populists came to a deeper appreciation of their collective power, and began to see themselves as "the people": a creative, self-determining force capable of building new social infrastructure that would better facilitate their ongoing self-government.[56] Alongside the whole class of "producers" – a social category that was the source of both Populism's power and some of its important ambiguities – agrarian Populists also began to form an incipient hegemonic coalition with laborers in other sectors.[57] Even if these alliances did not fully materialize, the Populists' effort to orient their coalition around a common theory and

[55] See Laura Grattan, *Populism's Power: Radical Grassroots Democracy in America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), 83. While Kazin calls the Populist cooperative commonwealth a "righteous" commonwealth, Grattan calls it a "rebellious" commonwealth.

[56] As Goodwyn put it in the frontispiece to his book: "The people need to "see themselves" experimenting in democratic forms." See Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, i.

[57] As Richard Bensel has argued, American industrialization after 1877 was firmly under the control of a ruling elite, predominantly institutionalized within the Republican Party and the Supreme Court. Industrialization according to ruling class prerogative was compatible with democratic institutions of mass suffrage and political representation since elites were able to preserve their control of national economic development through legislative brokering between regional demands (through control over tariffs), the Court's willingness to construct a national market by enforcing federal power over inter-state commerce, and Executive protection of the gold standard (which ensured foreign capital investment by keeping currency value and exchange-rates stable). Fusing with the Democrats brought the Populists closest to challenging this reigning power, though fusion had major costs that undermined the cooperative dimension of the movement and the People's Party as a vehicle for social democracy. I explore the dynamics of fusion in this chapter's conclusion. See Richard Franklin Bensel, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

practice of cooperation is one of their most important legacies, and a legacy that would outlast the People's Party.

I. Populism and Cooperation: Negotiating Interpretations

While labor organizations like the Knights of Labor are often readily associated with the idea of the cooperative commonwealth,[58] whether agrarians held a similar cooperative ideology (or a cooperative ideology at all) has been the subject of long-standing scholarly debate. If American agrarians during the 19th century are understood as inherently entrepreneurial and pro-capitalist – either by proponents of the liberal consensus or by leftists who see small farmers' commitment to private land-ownership as inherently tending toward a defense of capitalism[59] – the cooperative nature of the Populist movement is hard to appreciate. From this point of view, the Populist movement may have rested on the formation of agrarian cooperatives, but it is unclear whether the Populists truly aspired to a cooperative society. Since the Populists did not reject "market society" *in toto* like some 19th century socialists and communitarians, does that mean that their cooperative experiments were simply locally oriented, and that they accepted competition as the regulating principle of society?[60] Grasping the Populists' vision of

[58] For the most recent theoretical treatment of the Knights' ideology of cooperation see Alex Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), esp. chapter 4.

[59] Two recent accounts of the relationship between republicanism, labor, and socialism in the 19th century – by Alex Gourevitch and William Clare Roberts – both divorce agrarianism from cooperation given their sense that the relative isolation of agrarian labor and its dependence on small property do not incline toward cooperation. Gourevitch regards cooperative self-organization as distinct to "labor republicanism," which transcended an earlier "agrarian republicanism" based on movements for land-ownership and redistribution, See Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 69-72. Roberts argues that capitalism creates the preconditions for social cooperation only among industrial wage-laborers, since agrarians and journeymen who own their own tools and work in small groups do not experience the unique force of large-scale cooperative labor, and therefore "have no interest on earth in cooperation." William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 349 (epub version). I discuss Roberts' views further in the next chapter.

[60] While more attentive to the potential for connections between agrarian and labor cooperation, Jason Frank claims that "More than a coherent ideology or ideal, cooperation was a multifaceted practice that shaped the Populist vision

cooperation not only requires abandoning a zero-sum contradiction between "cooperation" and "competition," but also appreciating how and why Populists believed that market institutions could be democratized and cooperatively transformed. By creating the analytical space to evaluate the Populist cooperative commonwealth on its own terms, my goal is to clarify its contours, demonstrating how both rural and urban labor probed the deep inadequacies in emerging rationalizations of capitalist power in the late-19th century United States. Moreover, agrarian cooperative experiments – no less than worker cooperatives – cultivated latent capacities for democratic self-determination in ways that directly countered how capitalist development had subjected the entire working class to exploitation, social atomization, and disempowerment. Neither agrarian cooperatives nor workers' cooperatives posed an immediate challenge to capitalism; instead, they were democratic attempts to re-shape the course of social development through the direct agency of producers. In both cases, these experiments demonstrated how capitalist development compromised workers' possibilities for egalitarian democratic agency – the very political agency of the *demos* acting on the principles of mutual support and power-sharing – proving the imperative of an alternative path of social development guided directly by the interests and organizations of the producing classes.

To assess how we might interpret agrarian resistance to capitalism – and to further illuminate why theories of "populism" based on ideational accounts of popular/elite antagonism obscure the politics of cooperation – it is worth recalling Richard Hofstadter's influential argument about the Populist movement. Not only was Hofstadter's argument instrumental for

of the reformed democratic state for which they struggled." Frank, "Populism and Praxis," 22. Demonstrating the connection between cooperative practice and the cooperative commonwealth aspiration is necessary to grasp how cooperative ideology was not simply a reflection of experiences of mutual support in the Alliances, but a way of connecting these experiences to a general social project, instituted by the people's constituent power.

developing general theories of populism in mid-20th century political science,[61] but its limitations also illustrate the importance of understanding how popular resistance to capitalist development manifested at both theoretical and practical levels within the Populist movement. While Hofstadter's efforts to connect the Populists to a "paranoid style" in American politics might appear purely psychological,[62] his arguments were importantly based on an economic history of American agriculture that not only shaped his diagnosis of Populist paranoia, but also limited his ability to grasp both Populism's cooperative dimension and its labor alliances. At the root of Hofstadter's diagnosis is his estimation that, while the ideal of yeoman democracy and its "agrarian myth" was central to early American democratic culture – weaving the ideal of the sturdy, independent farmer into the nation's "patriotic sentiments and republican idealism"[63] – agricultural development during the 19th century undermined this vision of yeoman independence, creating the basis of an 'identity crisis' for large swaths of the population. While farmers held onto their self-image as paragons of republican virtue, he claimed, the development of new agricultural machinery and commercial opportunities transformed them from republican yeoman into a nearly opposite figure: "a harassed little country businessman who worked very hard, moved all too often, gambled with his land, and made his way alone."[64]

While this passage reveals Hofstadter's often-critiqued penchants for exaggeration and condescension, it also reveals an important dimension of the Populist movement: the general market-dependence of late-19th century American farmers as both buyers and sellers of commodities. As Hofstadter notes, by 1860, "The independent yeoman, outside of exceptional or

[61] See Anton Jäger, "The Semantic Drift; Images of Populism in Post-War American Historiography and their Relvance for (European) Political Science," *Constellations* 24:4 (September 2017), 310-323.
[62] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1952).
[63] Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 28.
[64] Ibid., 46.

isolated areas, almost disappeared before the relentless advance of commercial agriculture. … The cash crop converted the yeoman into a small entrepreneur, and the development of horse-drawn machinery made obsolete the simple old agrarian symbol of the plow. Farmers ceased to be free of what early agrarian writers had called the "corruptions" of trade."[65] Taking things much further, Hofstadter then placed this transformation of the democratic citizenry from yeomen into entrepreneurs not as a locus of *political* conflict and contestation, but as the site of repressed *psychological* conflict in the culture of American farmers that, when resolved in favor of private profit over republican virtue, ultimately produced the nation's culture of self-seeking capitalist individualism: "its rage for business, for profits, for opportunity, for advancement."[66] The Populist movement – long understood as one of the nation's most significant mass mobilizations against the process of capitalist industrialization – was not only presented as a primarily psychological drama (displacing the conflict from society and politics), but also as the basis for a powerful ballast of capitalist ideological hegemony.

In Hofstadter's estimation, the material integration of American farmers into the capitalist market implied a kind of vexed ideological integration. Hofstadter believed that capitalist agriculture was good for farmers at the level of their self-interest – it allowed them to increase their yield, retain more of a surplus, and even increase their earnings by speculating on land – so he claims that they largely accepted their new status as entrepreneurs and businessmen, at least in practice. At the same time, market integration made them increasingly dependent on forces beyond their control. Since farmers lacked a complex understanding of the capitalist economy, they understood their relation to these forces in "highly personal terms," since, "An overwhelming sense of grievance does not find satisfactory expression in impersonal

[65] Ibid., 39.
[66] Ibid., 40.

explanations, except among those with a well-developed tradition of intellectualism."[67] Given these intellectual deficits, Hofstadter argued that the mythical yeoman became a useful device for symbolically representing agrarian grievances. Even though Populist farmers acted like commodity-producing entrepreneurs seeking to maximize their personal surplus, they presented themselves to both themselves and society as virtuous yeomen battling corruption. As he claimed, "In Populist thought the farmer is not a speculating businessman, victimized by the risk economy of which he is a part, but rather a wounded yeoman, preyed upon by those who are alien to the life of folkish virtue."[68] In this way, the agrarian myth not only facilitated farmers' own repression of their sins against the virtue they professed, but it also crystallized the symbolic unity of the community of producers ("the pure people") whose way of life was threatened by non-agrarian, constitutively alien forces ("the corrupt elite").

In Hofstadter's estimation, this self-identification as "wounded yeomen" in the capitalist world is at the root of Populist paranoia, creating mythical rather than social-theoretic diagnoses of popular problems. In other words, for Hofstadter, the Populists did not formulate an independent critique of political economy; they only reflected their insecure imbrication in the emerging modern, capitalist culture. Like the consensus school of American historiography in general, Hofstadter failed to grasp how the Populists' cooperative vision emerged out of an immanent critique of inherited ideologies, as new experiences of exploitation and openings for popular empowerment informed how political actors re-shaped their self-understandings. When claiming that, "American traditions of political revolt had been based upon movements against monopolies and special privileges in both the economic and the political spheres, against societal distinctions and the restriction of credit," Hofstadter saw in these tendencies only a reflection of

[67] Ibid., 73.
[68] Ibid.

an embryonic liberal capitalism.[69] The goal of such movements, he claimed, "tended neither to be social democracy nor social equality, but greater opportunities," since opposition to privilege primarily targeted "limits upon the avenues of personal advancement," not obstacles to social cooperation.[70] At a more insidious level, Hofstadter's suppression of the Populist critique of political economy also contributed to his often-critiqued naturalization of anti-Semitism as an element of American agrarian culture. Since he had not reconstructed their theoretical critique, Hofstadter associated the Populist critique of "the money power" not only with a logic of conspiracy, but also with "a kind of rhetorical anti-Semitism" derived from farmers' basic need to symbolize their grievances through a scapegoat.[71] Without any reconstruction of greenback ideology in the history of farmer-labor activism, Hofstadter was unable to see how anti-Semitism within the Populist movement was actually an *abrogation* of the greenback diagnosis, and he misrepresented how racism compromised the Populist movement in the same way that racist ideologies generally compromise popular movements: they divert antagonism away from the material basis of social conflict onto perceived outsiders, generally in the interests of local and national elites who benefit from exploitation but are not targets of racism.

While Hofstadter's argument about the inherent relationship between status-insecurity and popular xenophobia has often been criticized – however useful it has proven for liberal critics of populism – his argument that the Populist movement reflects a general incorporation of American farmers into capitalism at both the practical and ideological levels is more widely

[69] Ibid., 10.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 74, 77-78. Like many contemporary critics of populism, Hofstatder's response to popular racism was not to contextualize it in order to subject it to rigorous critique, but to *naturalize it* as a necessary component of popular culture and its attending status insecurity. There is a large literature on anti-Semitism in the Populist movement that followed Hofstadter's allegations. The question of whether or not there was anti-Semitism in the Populist movement is not up for debate: there was, just like there was anti-Semitism among the northern elite. What an analysis of their vision of political economy can show is that – just like anti-Semitism could become "the socialism of fools" – anti-Semitism in the Populist movement was an *abrogation* of its theory of money and political economy.

accepted. In the most recent synoptic study of populist ideology, Charles Postel reflects a general historiographical consensus that the Populist movement represented an embryonic social democratic force, but he also doubts whether the Populist movement was grounded in a radically democratic vision of cooperation. At the outset of his account, Postel argues that, "The ethos of modernity and progress swept across the cultural landscape of late nineteenth-century America, driven by the winds of commercial capitalism. The Populists mainly shared this ethos."[72] The dominant trend in the Farmers' Alliances, he argues, was not radical democratic cooperation, but the modernization of agriculture. Even as Postel acknowledged that Farmer's Alliance literature professed a belief that the principle of cooperative organization, "may be successfully applied to most, if not all, the business pursuits and enterprises of the country", he nevertheless claims that, "Perhaps only a minority of farmers who engaged in cooperation desired the full program of such a "cooperative commonwealth." But by way of cooperation they did hope to organize agriculture on par with manufacturing and commercial interests."[73] Like Hofstadter, Postel understands rank-and-file Alliance-members as animated primarily by their material self-interests, not by cooperation. According to these assumptions, agrarian cooperatives were not sites of cooperative democracy, but a sectoral pressure group, advocating for farmers' self-interest through collective means on the national political stage.[74]

Despite their many differences, both Hofstadter and Postel misconstrue the radicalism of the Populist movement because they fail to reconstruct its roots: how the idiosyncrasies of American capitalist development re-shaped the social relations of farmers during the late 19th century, provoking a series of cooperative experiments and reformulations of inherited

[72] Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.
[73] Quoting Alliance literature in ibid., 106. The second quote in the sentence is Postel.
[74] Figuring the Alliances as an agrarian "interest group" also inhibits our ability to appreciate their social alliances with labor organizations, which are generally under-emphasized in Postel's account.

discourses of legitimation. Rather than sweep farmers along in general prosperity (no matter how psychologically dislocating), capitalist development not only suppressed agriculture regionally, but rendered farmers increasingly dependent on commodity-crop production, often in exploitative relations of debt that clearly undermined their status as "entrepreneurs."[75] Particularly in the South where the Alliance movement was strongest, crop-lien and other tenancy arrangements meant that farmers' earnings were not a product of their skill as entrepreneurs, but a struggle with creditors and landlords. According to one sociologist, their individual prosperity, "came to depend on how much they could wrest from the landlord rather than their success at lowering production costs and selling at higher prices."[76] Even for small farmers who owned land, market-dependence in the post-Reconstruction South also implied a general reliance on the outsized power of private merchants, who controlled supply chains by coordinating cotton sales, setting interest rates on loans, and inflating prices for consumer goods.[77] Rather than open opportunities for individual self-advancement and progress, increased market dependence often meant increased dependence on monocrop agriculture and the unchecked power of private actors that isolated individuals had little power to confront.[78]

As Goodwyn's account of the Alliance movement demonstrated, these forms of exploitation offered a powerful stimulus to cooperation, and the formation of cooperatives was not only a practical response to these transformations, but the fruit of a search for an alternative political economy developed by mass participation in the creation of new popular institutions.[79]

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[75] Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure*, 73-76 on the economic reasons for the dominance of cotton monocrop agriculture after Reconstruction.
[76] Ibid., 21.
[77] On Southern farmers' struggles with merchants (as well as merchants struggles with planters) see Stephen Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 180-192.
[78] Ibid., 192.
[79] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 32-50.

For the Populists and other cooperative organizations during the Gilded Age, cooperation was not merely an instrumentally designed business strategy to maximize their self-interest, but had a transformative meaning linked to both the experience of cooperative mobilization and a pervasive aspiration to transcend exploitation. In this sense, Goodwyn was right to present cooperation's transformative meaning in broadly cultural terms, demonstrating how it did not merely reflect tactical alliances for the purposes of utility-maximization. He wrote, "The Alliance was more than a party and more than an ethos. It was, in fact, a new way of looking at things – a new culture, if you will, and one that attempted to shelter its participants from sundry indoctrinations emanating from the larger culture that was industrial America itself."[80] At the same time, his conception of Populist cooperative culture also tended to downplay its political and economic dimensions, including its critique of exploitation; he also claimed that Populism, "was also less than a fundamental social theory. Indeed, its achievements in the area of social criticism, while interesting and revealing, do not, in my view, comprise the essence of the passionate happening we call the agrarian revolt."[81] Even if cooperative theory could never capture all the dimensions of movement experience, the Populists' cooperative culture had a social-theoretic component that not only shaped its integrated reform program, but emerged from a creative re-working of democratic ideological inheritances. By reconstructing the greenback theory, we can not only show how it abetted the cooperative experiments of a variety of agrarian and urban laborers, but how it gave them a way envision a transformed society – a cooperative commonwealth where, with equal rights secured and special privileges eliminated, "the merchant

[80] Ibid., xi.
[81] Ibid.

and farmer, lawyer and artisan … [would] dwell together, not as warring enemies, but as kind friends, joining willing hands in the beneficent work of production."[82]

II. "The Power of Money to Oppress": Radical Greenbackism and the Origins of Populist Political Economy

It is notable that all of the political movements which have had origin among those who claim to be the "producing classes" – the Trades Unionists, Knights of Labor, Farmers Alliance, People's Party, etc. – have regarded banks as their natural enemies and financial methods as a point for successful attack upon the bulwarks of money and privilege. – Ellis B. Usher[83]

When Hofstadter attributed the Populists' ideology to the "agrarian myth" and its vexed incorporation into liberal capitalist culture, he failed to concretely dissect their democratic vision and its relationship to an evolving critique of political economy rooted in the experiences of producers. The ideologies formulated to grapple with these experiences were dynamic and contested by multiple parties, and their most radical iterations expressed a vision of social cooperation that underpinned the Populist cooperative commonwealth. As Alex Gourevitch noted in his study of the Knights of Labor, cooperation was centrally bound up in workers' radical demand, not for a "minimum wage" or a "living wage," but for the full value of their labor. As he put it, "The defining feature of cooperation was that the worker controlled the value he created," since full remuneration would materially express the reciprocity necessary for workers to enter into interdependent relations as equal co-participants.[84] As Gourevitch might have emphasized further, this vision of cooperative reciprocity secured by fair distribution relies on the ideal of an exchange of equivalents: workers produce value for which they are due a full

[82] Quoted in Bruce Palmer, *"Man Over Money"*, 20.
[83] Ellis B. Usher, *The Greenback Movement of 1875-1884 and Wisconsin's Part in It*, (Milwaukee: The Meisenheimer Printing Company, 1911), 8. Quoted in Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 108.
[84] Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 131.

return.[85] In step with the Knights, agrarian cooperative movements centered this demand, and they utilized greenback philosophy to envision how labor could retain its full value, democratize access to capital, and exercise social control over the market. Again by contrast with contemporary progressive idioms, the radical greenback tradition did not seek "regulation" of a pre-existing, naturalized market; instead, they sought the active political construction of a market based on popularly authorized social infrastructure – from banks, to granaries, railroads, and communications technology. Cooperative movements descended from greenbackism also took the radical step of acknowledging that their reforms required a political challenge to ruling class power, based in an effort to mobilize the producing classes to claim their sovereign authority against the institutions upholding exploitation.

While the basics of the greenback critique were developed in the mid-19th century, greenback ideology only emerged into public consciousness after the Civil War, when labor and agrarian reformers agitated to make the Union-issued "greenbacks" the exclusive national currency, obviating resumption of the gold standard.[86] In the minds of radical greenbackers, resuming the gold standard not only heavily favored the interests of creditors over debtors, but would also sacrifice an opportunity to wrest control over currency from the hands of private

[85] Marx critiqued this formula of "fair distribution" based on the full value of one's labor for being ultimately incalculable, for neglecting the complexity of devising egalitarian social investments in infrastructure, and also for upholding what is essentially "*a right of inequality*" because it privileges the industrious. For Marx, the demand for the full value of one's labor is unjustifiable from the point of view of the communist axiom "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs." Interestingly, though, Marx also acknowledged that to some extent "these defects are inevitable" in the formulations of workers' parties, because workers inculcated within capitalist ideology tend to express hostility to exploitation in distributional terms. See his *Critique of the Gotha Program* in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 528-532.

[86] The classic account of the struggle over greenbacks is Irwin Unger, *The Greenback Era: A Social and Political History of American Finance*, *1865-1879* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964). For a more sympathetic treatment of the producerist critique, which grasps its connection to "the democratic promise of American life" but does not fully explore the connection between radical greenbackism and cooperation, see Gretchen Ritter, *Goldbugs and Greenbacks: The Antimonopoly Tradition and the Politics of Finance in America, 1865-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 96.

bankers, bringing these powers under the control of the sovereign people. Despite its democratic radicalism, many left-wing historians have lamented the influence of greenback ideology on the labor movement, given its apparently utopian preoccupation with financial reform and its commitment to a broad-based ideology of "producerism" that tended to collapse the distinction between small business owners and wage-labor.[87] Yet we need not confuse evaluation and analysis; demonstrating the radicalism of the agrarian-labor greenback tradition is essential to grasp how it structured the vision of democracy behind rural and urban cooperative struggles. Only this reconstruction can clarify, first, that there actually *was* a radical tendency in greenbackism that probed deeper than the preoccupation with inflation, and second, why subsequent cooperative movements saw meaning it the critique, even as they substantially transformed its prescriptions.

In general, greenback ideology had both a "entrepreneurial" and a "cooperative" dimension, both of which influenced the Populist movement.[88] For pro-greenback industrialists like Alexander Campbell, greenback doctrine was alluring because it promised a stimulus to investment. By relieving loan-burdens through inflation and offering access to easy credit, greenbacks would encourage private economic activity and employment.[89] At the same time, greenback theory was also appropriated by cooperative organizations that emphasized its radical aspiration abolish the poverty of the laboring classes through financial reform. Far from a reflection of a uniquely American tendency toward "classless" democratic ideologies, radical greenbackism belongs within a general international tradition of popular political economy that

[87] See Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1896), 14.
[88] In some ways, the ultimate turn to "free silver" and inflation as a solution to producer's woes reflects the ideological victory of a thinned out, pro-business vision of currency reform over its radical, cooperative counterpart.
[89] On Campbell's role in the greenback movement see Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 426-433.

was also essential for the formation European socialist and cooperative movements.[90] When the Farmers' Alliances and labor cooperatives failed to establish durable footing through their own self-organization, the greenback critique offered a way to envision an alternative political economy based on democratic, social control of the market that would not only allow their local cooperatives to develop, but that would render exchanges between cooperatives mutually supportive – forging truly *social* cooperation within and beyond the immediate sites of production and consumption. Greenbackers were active in forming the first Farmers' Alliances, the National Labor Union, and the Knights of Labor,[91] and their critique of "the money power" shaped how these groups understood the problem of exploitation and its possible remedies. The Populists' financial program – the Sub-Treasury Plan – was itself the re-articulation of a long-standing greenback proposal to replace the private banking system with a public network of locally-rooted banks that would operate in the interests of producers, giving practical form to one of the era's central working-class hopes: "a people's money."[92] For its trenchant attacks on the distribution of wealth and call for organized political action among workers, the labor historian John Commons acknowledged that the radical strand of greenback theory was not simply a

[90] Writing of early European socialists, Roberts notes, "Many of them laid the blame [for inequality] at the feet of the opaque workings of the monetary economy, which, to the republican mind, hid "the empire of force and fraud" that made staggering wealth for some and crushing poverty for others. Hence, they proposed schemes of monetary reform, designed to make exchange transparent and free, and thereby incapable of cloaking the abuse of power." Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 134 (epub). The European genealogy of "popular political economy" is also explored in David McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism, and the Marxist Critique* (London: Verso, 1993).

[91] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 33-35.

[92] The transmission of greenback philosophy through a variety of institutions to the Farmers Alliance, and its influence on the Sub-Treasury Plan is laid out in detail by Chester MacArthur Destler in, *American Radicalism, 1865-1901* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966 [1946]), 50-77. On the idea of "the people's money" see David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 425-447.

business-minded push for stimulants to growth; instead, "the greenback theory was the American counterpart of the radicalism of Europe" during the early phases of the industrial revolution.[93]

Greenback theory originated in the writings of Edward Kellogg, a dry-goods merchant from Brooklyn, NY who developed an interest in political economy after falling into bankruptcy during a financial panic in 1837. In 1849, he published his theories in *Labor and Other Capital: The Rights of Each Secured and the Wrongs of Both Eradicated*, with the assistance of the social reformer Horace Greely.[94] Kellogg not only aimed to diagnose the causes of financial panics, but directed his attention to a deeper problem: why money tends to accumulate in the hands of the few rather than circulate among the workers who produce society's wealth. He argued that the origin of the problem resided in the sphere of circulation and was due to an artificial and "unjust *standard of distribution*" upheld by law.[95] After his book's publication, Kellogg sought attention for his theories, and even sent his proposals to the partisans of the Second Republic in France (he admired Proudhon specifically, whose proposal for a People's Bank is akin to his own National Safety Fund),[96] but his ideas only took hold after his death, when his daughter Mary Kellogg Putnam published a slightly revised version of his book called *A New Monetary System* (1861), whose arguments circulated throughout the agrarian and labor presses and permeated the ideology of popular movements in the wake of the Civil War.[97]

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[93] John R. Commons and John B. Andrews, "Introduction to Volumes IX and X", in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, vol. IX, eds. John R. Commons, Ulrich B. Phillips, Eugene A. Gilmore, Helen L. Sumner, and John B. Andrews (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 34.

[94] Edward Kellogg*, Labor and Other Capital: The Rights of Each Secured and the Wrongs of Both Eradicated* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1971 [1849]).

[95] Ibid., xxxi.

[96] Pierre Joseph Proudhon, "The Solution of the Social Problem," in *Proudhon*'s *Solution of the Social Problem* ed. Henry Cohen (New York: Vanguard Press, 1927), 43-168.

[97] *A New Monetary System* contains a few sections and appendices not found in the earlier volume as well as a biographical sketch of the author, but the argument is consistent. Subsequent greenbackers cited both volumes, and I will quote from the original unless the latter contains passages that more clearly illuminate Kellogg's overall view. See Edward Kellogg, *A New Monetary System: The Only Means of Securing the Respective Rights of Labor and Property and of Protecting the Public from Financial Revulsions*, ed. Mary Kellogg Putnam (New York: United States Book Company, 1961).

Kellogg's writings contained the seeds of both the entrepreneurial and cooperative strands of greenbackism, both of which derived from different interpretations of central assumptions in 19th century American democratic ideology. While the core of Kellogg's argument is his theory of money, there are three other components of his view that shaped his overall perspective and make his theory not simply a theory of currency, but a general account of a democratic society: first, a doctrine of popular sovereignty and equal rights; second, a theory of democratized capital; and third, a vision of a democratically shared social surplus primarily held by private individuals, but also collectively invested in the necessary functions of the state. Since Kellogg believed that money was a fundamentally *legal* invention created by the state, and that its value depended on the price of lending it (the interest rate) and not the value of its material (gold), he considered instituting money a function of political sovereignty that had wrongly been vested in private hands. If financial power could be made independent of the gold standard and brought under the control of the popular sovereign, producers could ensure that their equal rights were respected and that the state accorded no special privileges to a partial class of financiers, ensuring that money would cease to concentrate in the hands of the few, lose its "power to oppress,"[98] and circulate freely throughout the body of the people. With finance under popular control, the people could maintain an evenly dispersed ownership of the nation's productive assets while investing in a limited set of state functions, merging their independence as private individuals with their interdependence as citizens participating in the social division of labor. To grasp the appeal of this basic philosophy for rural and urban producers and explain their subsequent modifications, we first need to clarify each of these points in more detail.

[98] This phrase comes from Harry Tracy, one of the authors of the Populists' Sub-Treasury Plan. For a discussion of Tracy, see below.

Kellogg's theory of political economy aimed to resolve a tension within his political theory of equal rights. He opened his treatise stating, "The laboring classes of all civilized nations have been, and are, as a body, poor. Nearly all wealth is the production of labor; therefore, laborers would have possessed it, had not something intervened to prevent this natural result. Even in our country, where the reward of labor is greater than in most others, some cause is operating with continual and growing effect to separate production from the producer."[99] Explaining labor's poverty in a democratic republic where all citizens are formally equal required a careful diagnosis. In the United States, "The laboring classes make their own bargains with capitalists, and one another; and are all equally protected in the property which they lawfully acquire. Why then do not laborers get all they are justly entitled to receive? Looking at the matter in this light, it wears an appearance of freedom and equal justice; yet results prove the existence of some radical wrong lying below this surface view."[100] Grappling with the gap between the formal profession of equal right and the reality of labor's poverty, Kellogg argued that the root cause of labor's poverty must reside behind the superficial reciprocity of market exchange. If laborers are all free, independent citizens entering into contracts voluntarily, why can they not individually ensure that these contracts preserve their right to receive the full value of their labor? For Kellogg, the imperative of full return for one's labor in exchange is a cardinal republican principle and a demand of equal right, something that must be secured through law. As he claimed, "One of the chief objects for which governments are constituted, is to ensure the protection of the rights of property. The security of these rights is essential to the welfare of the people. … Such crimes as theft, gambling, fraud in business, bribery in courts of law, &c., consist in unjustly obtaining property without rendering an equivalent. To obtain *labor* without

[99] Edward Kellogg*, Labor and Other Capital*, xi
[100] Kellogg, *A New Monetary System*, 28.

rendering a fair equivalent, is also a violation of the rights of property."[101] Given the reality of inequality, Kellogg believed that these legitimating ideals were being constantly undermined, and new laws must be enacted to remedy the problem. Even in a country without aristocratic distinctions, where all citizens possess legal self-ownership, equal political rights, and the protection of their rights to property, an unjust standard of distribution had arisen that violated the equal rights of producers, making a mockery of the claim that the state universally protected property rights.[102]

For Kellogg, producers were unable to receive the full value of their labor in exchange because the laws governing the institution of money – the basis of exchange – were not allowing currency to serve its proper function as a transparent representative of use-values.[103] Instead, the value of money – which Kellogg measured by the average rate of interest – was chronically set too high, allowing financiers, merchants, and creditors to extract excessive value from productive labor by reaping high rewards from lending.[104] In Kellogg's view, while this accumulative power was embodied in the interest rate, it rested on the gold standard. Not only did the gold standard ensure that interest rates would be high by keeping money artificially

[101] Kellog, *Labor and Other Capital*, xv. Also, "Our government professes to found its laws on republican principles, which laws, if just, and justly administered, should secure to every individual a fair equivalent for his labor."

[102] Kellogg therefore rejected the "laissez-faire" republican tradition as reconstructed by Gourevitch, which was based on the notion that "legal self-ownership is enough to secure a person's economic independence. If the wage laborer was "*sui iuris*" or under his own power, then that was enough to know he was independent." Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 47. From Kellogg's point of view, legal self-ownership, even in the case of agrarian labor, was insufficient for independence if distributive mechanisms enforced inequality.

[103] For Kellogg, the notion that "value" always means use-value is simply an article of common sense. "A house that could not be occupied would be worthless, unless its materials could be employed for some other purpose … So of everything necessary to the support and comfort of man, it is valuable because it is useful." Kellogg, *Labor and Other Capital*, 37. In this sense producerism was not tied to an ideal of immediacy; instead it was tied to an ideal of true representation and transparent interdependence. See Frank, "Populism and Praxis," 17.

[104] Later Populists, like Charles Macune, alleged that control over currency volume allowed financiers to manipulate commodity prices. Kellogg himself was blithely unconcerned with price formation (one of the more peculiar aspects of his theory of political economy). Instead, he was preoccupied with how the high cost of borrowing skewed the accumulation of value in favor of non-productive capital and against productive labor.

scarce, but the very idea that the currency's value depended on the value of specie created a fetish of money that mystified its true social role. The gold standard made it seem like money had inherent value, when ideally money would only serve as a medium of exchange and representative of use values, with little accumulative power of its own. Moreover, since gold reserves were under the control of private banks, the gold standard also ensured that bankers possessed a general discretionary power over economic life that wrongfully superseded the self-directing agency of producers. Kellogg believed that by replacing private banks with a new national bank, and by replacing the gold standard with government-issued currency, society could acknowledge that the true function of money is to provide a stable, uniform, and reliable means for the exchange of equivalents. With these reforms, money could become an instrument for just exchange, rather than the basis of an oppressive power wielded against labor.

At the center of Kellogg's argument was his contention that inequality derived from the ability to set interest rates higher than labor's natural power of production, a power that he thought systematically favored a class of non-producers to the class of producers (conceived as a single industrial bloc) and had cascading effects throughout the economy. As he argued:

> There are but two purposes to which the yearly products of labor can be applied. One is the payment of yearly rent or interest on the capital employed, and the other is the payment of labor. If laborers pay to capital, as use or interest for the year, their whole surplus products, the laborers, as a body, work merely for a subsistence, and capital takes their whole surplus earnings. The laborer receives for his year's toil, food clothing, and shelter only, and these, perhaps of the poorest kind; while the capitalist lives in luxury, increases the number of his bonds and mortgages, or with his income buys lands or builds houses to let, which will, in succeeding years, take a still greater sum from the laborer. … If interest on money be too high, a few owners of capital will inevitably accumulate the wealth or products of the many.[105]

Kellogg's treatise is filled with tables that demonstrate the effects of compound interest on productive workers, and he argues that only by fixing the interest rate equal to the value of

[105] Ibid., 75.

labor's own productivity – which he estimates at about 1% per year by measuring growth in average annual productivity since independence – can labor retain the value of what it produces.[106] If interest rates on loans for land and capital are set at 7%, as was common during his time, Kellogg claimed that workers would pay lenders the equivalent of the entire principal in 10 years, ensuring that, over a lifetime of labor, a large percentage of workers' surplus would merely enrich a class of creditors who performed no productive labor.[107] Moreover, he claimed that money's accumulative power did not only operate through individual loans, but had become a general organizing principle of economic life. The accumulative power of interest had already empowered an unrepublican strata of non-producers, who formed a parasitic "money power" that subsisted from exploitation, not so different from an aristocratic or feudal class. While Kellogg often illustrated the corrosive effects of interest through examples of mortgages and capital loans, he also claimed that the extractive power of interest was so entrenched within the economy that it pervaded the market, ensuring that even if an individual laborer does not borrow money at high rates, "a large per cent is taken from the price of his products by the purchaser, in order to enable the latter to pay his interest and live by the purchase and sale … This difference in price must be sufficient to support all who live upon income without labor."[108] The money power had become a general regime of accumulation, reproduced not by conscious design but by the ways that individuals and classes had become incorporated into social relations at different points in the process of reproduction. For this reason, the problem required a radical solution that challenged the very existence of the institutions reproducing the money power.

[106] Ibid., 119-131.
[107] Ibid., 76-77.
[108] Ibid., 283.

As a remedy for financial exploitation, Kellogg advocated abolishing private banks and establishing a national bank that would set the general interest rate equal to labor's power of production. With these reforms, he argued that capital and labor would be remunerated according to strict equality, with the "equal rights" of each preserved: capital would still be loaned for a small fee, but that fee would match labor's creative power, restraining the ability of money-lending to accumulate value faster than labor could produce useful goods. Rather than seek to eliminate interest outright (as in Proudhon's anarchist mutualism), Kellogg believed that lending was socially useful and that money would lose its value if it could not be lent for a fee. He argued that if the failed Continental currency or the French assignats had been the representatives of real property and recognized as national legal tender that could always secure an income by being lent, they would have never lost their value.[109] With the interest rate set at a just level, laborers would be able to rise above the subsistence level, now in control the full value of their labor as a class, and their rights to property would be respected.

To realize these reforms, Kellogg argued that the gold standard mystification needed to be unmasked. Then, workers would be able to appreciate the political (and therefore mutable) quality of money's power to accumulate by interest, and they could call on their political power to re-shape financial institutions, which ultimately derive their legitimacy from the power vested in the democratic state by the popular sovereign.[110] As he contemplated financial reform, Kellogg argued that requiring existing financial institutions to obey a new set of laws would not be enough. Popular sovereignty did not only mean that the people's constituted authorities would

[109] Ibid., 58.
[110] Ibid., 47. These appeals were central to the later appropriation of greenbackism: "Congress is bound to institute money on such a wide and just basis that it shall be under the direct control of the sovereign people who produce the values it is made to represent measure and exchange." Alexander Campbell, *The True Greenback, or The Way to Pay the National Debt Without Taxes and Emancipate Labor* (Chicago: The Republican Book and Job Office, 1868), 12.

administer a distinct sphere ("the economy") according to laws passed by established democratic procedures; instead, it meant invoking the people's right to abolish existing financial institutions and create a new banking system that would valorize labor by the standard of equal right. The current banking system allowed a small group of capitalists to control the value, supply, and direction of currency, and not only would they refuse to voluntarily relinquish this power, but their economic power had already translated into political power deeply lodged within the state. As Kellogg put it, "Capitalists control the money, and through the money control the government."[111] Moreover, as long as specie was considered valid backing for currency, existing control of gold reserves would give the banking industry veto-power over any attempt to introduce a just monetary regime. If the federal government established a new United States Bank that issued paper currency at low interest, but did not abolish specie-backing, "our large capitalists would array themselves against it by collecting their debts in bank-notes, and demanding specie from the bank."[112] To overcome this financial power, workers had to recognize that it was the legal authority that they vested in constituted political bodies – not the value of specie – that gave money its value. To rectify the wrongs of an unjust monetary order that trapped them in poverty, neither uncoordinated individual action nor collective action within the economic sphere alone was enough. Producers needed to develop the capacity for *political* action, using their legislative authority to abolish the gold-standard and create institutions that could ensure a fair return for their labor: "It is impossible to secure to labor its earnings, under systems by which the government and the people depend on a few capitalists to furnish the medium and standard of exchange. In the plan about to be developed, the whole people, through

[111] Kellogg, *Labor and Other Capital*, 231.
[112] Ibid.

Congress, would hold the power, and fix the rate of interest. They can by a vote put the system in successful operation without consulting capitalists, banks, or brokers."[113]

Kellogg's book culminated in a design for an alternative banking system – called "The National Safety Fund" – that would democratize capital and create the social basis of an egalitarian society of producers. However antagonistic to powerful interests, he considered the Fund compatible with the Constitution, which vests the power to institute money and regulate its value in Congress (it is technically only the State governments that are prevented from making "anything but gold and silver a tender in payment of debts.")[114] Rather than abolish private banks by revoking their charters, he designed the Fund to replace the private banking system by attracting mass support from productive workers through undercutting the money power's usurious lending.[115] In an aspiration often repeated in the Populist movement, Kellogg imagined that the money power would not be defeated by violent revolution, but would wither under the power of the ballot. Organizationally, the Safety Fund would be a national treasury with a central office in Washington and local branches distributed evenly throughout the country. It would print two kinds of notes: money and bonds (called Safety Fund Notes), and it would loan money directly to the people based on landed security. Producers would receive money based on the value of their land, owing only 1% interest per year for the loan. Money would be "inter-convertible" for bonds that earned 1% interest, an arrangement that Kellogg thought would incentivize against over-issuing currency. Since drawing currency incurred a debt but converting it for bonds offered a return, producers would only withdraw and circulate the level of currency

[113] Ibid., 230-231. In many ways, this prescription pre-figures the need for independent political action and the third party effort.
[114] Ibid., 250. Populist leaders repeat this Constitutional argument verbatim in their defense of Sub-Treasury plan. See Sidney Rothstein, "Macune's Monopoly: Economic Law and the Legacy of Populism," *Studies in American Political Development* 28 (April 2014), 80-106.
[115] "Every farmer owing money mortgage of his farm, and paying seven percent interest, will probably borrow money from the Safety Fund and pay the debt." Kellogg, *A New Monetary System*, 282.

needed for business at any given time. Safety Fund money would always be of uniform and enduring value because, "the money will be made a balance against the landed estate of the people."[116] Essentially, the people's landed property, rather than the bankers' gold reserves, would become the basis of economic value, eliminating the special privileges of the money monopoly.

Kellogg's vision of a democratic society of producers certainly borrowed heavily from the ideology of agrarian republicanism, with its emphasis on individualism and independence. In Kellogg's view, the fundamental economic unit is the individual male settler and property-owner, in charge of his family's security, confident in his enjoyment of citizenship rights, and achieving prosperity through honest labor.[117] Again in the dominant agrarian republican tradition, Kellogg emphasized reforms that amended property-arrangements in order to place property rights and the freedom of contract on surer footing; his proposals borrowed more from Jefferson's repeal of primogeniture and entail than direct attempts to break up existing fortunes (landed or otherwise).[118] While he was fairly clear-headed about the power behind the gold standard, Kellogg's preoccupation with finance as the root of labor's exploitation failed to grapple with the diverse forms of material, coercive power embedded in the evolving political economy – ranging from land-concentration to the development of permanent wage-labor based on private capital-ownership, not to mention the slave economy (clearly his most glaring omission).[119]

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[116] Kellogg, *Labor and Other Capital*, 256.
[117] See ibid., 80 for a discussion of the family as an economic unit.
[118] He wrote that his plan, "contemplates no agrarian or other similar distribution of property, nor any interference in contracts between laborers and capitalists, or in the usual course of business." Ibid., xii. Against socialists, this means no expropriation, even if Kellogg believed that the original gains were ill-gotten.
[119] Kellogg suggests that, if the power of money to accumulate value is made equal to the power of labor to produce, there will be no general incentive to amass wealth and live off the labor of others. Even holding large estates will lose its allure, since speculating on land will be no more profitable than selling it to an industrious farmer. When productive labor is fully rewarded, he believed that landowners would voluntarily sell land to young farmers and

Yet despite its limitations, the basic aspiration for democratic lending and popular control of finance provided real guidance for cooperative movements, and Kellogg's intuitions about the unrealized cooperative nature of commerce even helped movements formulate a general ideology of "cooperation." Too strong an emphasis on the idea of "independence" in discussions of the American republican tradition can push aside how the devotees of republican independence did not tend to treat individuals as private, competing social atoms (as posited in the formalism of many neoclassical theories of "the market"), but regarded independent individuals as operating within thick *commercial* forms of interdependence. In the agrarian republican case, while settlers constituted an economic unit, their activity was entirely conditioned by the interdependence facilitated by commerce.[120] Kellogg's vision of commercial activity stressed its interconnectedness, derived from his appreciation of the elementary social benefits arising from an equitable division of labor. "Men are social beings," he wrote, "and mutually dependent. To appreciate this important truth, we must consider the inability of each man to provide for himself the numerous wants of his nature; and the ignorance and discomfort to which he would be exposed, were he not benefited by the labor of others."[121] Envisioned as a domain of mutuality, Kellogg thought that the importance of commercial interdependence in a republican society required an exacting commitment to ensuring the universal legitimacy of the

artisans and the majority of the population will become laborers, sharing the burden of social reproduction more equally. Besides the specificities of the slave economy – which fully undermine this possibility in the South where existing patterns of land-ownership directly presupposed slave labor – what Kellogg also revealingly neglects is the power behind emerging capitalism. If those who owned more land could borrow more from the safety fund to purchase machinery, they could easily introduce wage-labor arrangements that undermine Kellogg's own aspiration to giving labor its full reward. This difficulty was not imagined by Kellogg but confronted by later labor-greenbackers. Ibid., 258-259.

[120] To this point, Hofstadter's neat opposition between "republican virtue" and "commerce" is inherently limited in the American case, and was so as soon as republicanism became even remotely democratic. On early republicanism and democracy, with an emphasis on the role of modern capitalist developments in the shaping of the republican imaginary see Ira Katznelson and Andreas Kalyvas, *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[121] Kellogg, *Labor and Other Capital*, xxvi.

laws that shape that interdependence. As Kellogg put it: "All the objections to the proposed currency, upon the ground that it will lessen the incomes of capitalists who are supported by the labor of others, only serve to show the true working of the Safety Fund system; for its object is to furnish a standard of distribution which will cause men to sustain such mutually just relations as to render it generally necessary for all to render an equivalent in useful labor for the labor received from others."[122] Ensuring equal rights could only be realized if the institutional structure subtending the exchange of commodities could be democratically transformed.

In Kellogg's letter to the French revolutionaries in 1848 – appended to his book – he was clearly aligned with the social republicans. He implored French politicians to redress the grievances that had produced the revolution, which he claimed, "could all be traced to one source, inequality of condition."[123] Given the importance of social equality as an animating impulse for revolt, he worried that, "It is yet uncertain that the republic will discover and adopt such measures as will justly reward labor. It is clearly certain that the principle ground of complaint still continues, and may as easily exist under a republic as under a monarchy; and that unless important changes in the monetary laws are introduced, all the sacrifices yet made will have been nearly in vain, and another revolution may be expected."[124] For this goal, he recommended his Safety Fund proposal, arguing that the revolution need only liberate the producing classes from the accumulative power of financiers, merchants, and creditors to "render the republic stable, and to political, add social freedom."[125]

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[122] Ibid., 278.
[123] Ibid., 295.
[124] Ibid., 297.
[125] Ibid., 298. I would love to know what Kellogg thought about the social workshops, but he says nothing about them. He may have envisioned his financial program as an alternative to the social workshops, but his theory does not inherently preclude the possibility of state support for cooperatives, as later labor-greenbackers would demonstrate.

III. Labor-Greenbackism: The National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor, and the Foundations of Labor-Agrarian Cooperation

"The many must act, and they must act together in a system of cooperation that will stop the grinding process." – Terrency Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*[126]

As Chester MacAruthur Destler explained in his study of Kellogg's influence on labor and agrarian circles, the impact of Kellogg's theories after the Civil War was uneven and contradictory. Alexander Campbell, the Illinois industrialist regarded by Destler as the "Moses" of greenbackism, not only popularized Kellogg's theories in pamphlets that he distributed throughout labor and agrarian organizations, but also drew up a bill for the legislative enactment of the Safety Fund, submitted to Republicans in Congress.[127] Campbell and his ally Horace Day aligned themselves with the liberal Republicans, and Day in particular saw the people's money and a new national bank as a way to "relieve the South, restore it to its proper relation to the Union, and "break the backbone" of the Radicals in Congress."[128] The ease with which a singular preoccupation with financial reform could be weaponized against Radical Reconstruction (and its aspirations for comprehensive land-reform and social assistance) shows the impotence of Kellogg's theory of "the money power" to account for the dynamics of "the slave power," and points to one of the several limitations of his theory as an orienting strategic guide in the struggle for a nationwide cooperative commonwealth. At the same time, Kellogg's theories were also appropriated not to substitute financial reform for other popular causes, but to offer an explanation for why labor struggles required popular control over financial infrastructure, a goal that required political action independent from capitalist interests.

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[126] Terrence Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor, 1859-1899* (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1967 [1889]), 459-600.
[127] See Destler, *American Radicalism*, 56; Campbell, The True Greenback.
[128] Destler, *American Radicalism*, 57-58.

Even if Kellogg's influence was not restricted to liberal republicans with conservative positions toward Reconstruction, his followers did not always fully adhere to the radicalism of his theories. While Greenback Party members were the most consistent devotees to his comprehensive program, insisting on the full overthrow of "the money power" in the interests of the producing classes as a whole,[129] Kellogg's theories also tended to be diluted into mere appeals for inflation. As Destler notes, "By 1877, approaching specie resumption, falling prices, and growing hostility to the national debt had lent added strength to inflation sentiment. More and more emphasis was placed upon the argument that the stamp of the government and full legal-tender powers were the sources of monetary value. The legal-tender theory had been propagated first by Kellogg and his followers among the post-war radicals. Now the growing strength of "fiat" money sentiment divorced it from his dictum that money must represent actual value."[130] Rather than the creation of a democratic banking system premised on limiting the gains that could accrue to lending and investment in the interest of producer's equal rights, greenbackism could easily devolve into the demand for a per-capita increase in the volume of currency. This doctrinal tension would later shape Populist fortunes, when the inflationary demand for free coinage of silver won out over the radical demand for the Sub-Treasury system.

The radical elements of Kellogg's theory were not carried forward by industrialists and liberal republicans, but by the agrarian and labor organizations who fought for labor's right to retain the full value of its contribution. The first labor organization to embrace Kellogg's theories was the National Labor Union (NLU). In *Beyond Equality*, David Montgomery lamented the influence of greenbackism on NLU, claiming that it represented a stumbling-block on American

[129] Bruce Palmer notes that within the Populist movement, whites who had belonged to the Greenback Party tended to be the among the most avid supporters of black participation. See Palmer, *"Man Over Money"*, 50. Nevertheless, Greenbackers were also consistent supporters of Chinese exclusion.
[130] Ibid., 63-64.

labor's road to class-consciousness. Rather than root social conflict in the struggle between capitalists and wage-laborers, greenbackism encouraged the belief that, "employer and employee were natural allies, exploited alike by the financier."[131] Even as pro-greenback unionists like the NLU's leader William Sylvis were engaged in intense experiences of class conflict, Montgomery claimed that NLU ideology reflected a widespread, anti-monopoly consensus in reform circles that the producing classes as a whole should guide the national economy – capital and labor cooperating together – rather than a non-productive strata of rent-seeking elites.[132] By focusing on class consciousness before reconstructing the experiences of NLU leaders, we miss the idiosyncratic ways that greenbackism did make sense of experiences of class conflict, even if Montgomery was correct to stress its inherent limitations as a theory of capitalist power. Even more important, the difficulties opened up by the reformulation of greenback theory within cooperative organizations illuminate central dynamics of the politics of cooperation that require clear answers: how to imagine the united political action of workers, how to sustain and scale-up local cooperative experiments, how labor unions and cooperatives would relate to one another, and the social arrangements among cooperatives. These problems only shaped the activities of the NLU, but continued to be decisive for the later Knights of Labor. Each of these difficulties also reveals a dimension of the central problem that cooperative politics confronts: how local democratic collectives can generate the power to transform the structure of social relations they are embedded within – whether these relations flow from the dynamics of the market or the political power of ruling groups. While a number of Knights did dismiss currency reform,[133]

[131] Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 444.
[132] Ibid., 446. Montgomery was right that such an anti-monopoly coalition could easily be a dead end for labor, but that ultimately depends on the place and power of labor in the coalition. His study also shows how many liberal reformers never associated with the history of "populism" shared the Populists' basic sense that the economy was dominated by non-productive earning, in an elementary way pitting "the people" against "the elite."
[133] Mongomery, *Beyond Equality*, 442.

other important figures within the organization like Terrence Powderly found it an integral component of their program, relevant for the idea of cooperation in two ways: first, as a way of securing fair credit for cooperative enterprise, and second, as a way of envisioning what cooperation among cooperatives in a national economy would mean.[134] Reconstructing greenback radicalism within the labor movement not only illuminates how workers sought to build popular power through cooperation, but also how they imagined the formation of agrarian-labor alliances leading up to the formation of the People's Party in the 1890's.

For workers like Sylvis to appropriate Kellogg's theories, they not only needed to abandon the political aims of liberal republicans – Campbell, for instance, declared that financial reform should displace the formation of unions or cooperative organizations since it would, "do more to lift the weight from the backs of the industrial classes and encourage the development of our resources than all the co-operative associations that have ever been formed."[135] They also had to significantly alter Kellogg's approach to labor. With Kellogg's exclusive focus on land as the basis of economic value, the existing theory would fail to resonate with the experiences of workers who contributed to the value of goods through their labor. In a footnote to *A New Monetary System*, Kellogg had claimed that land was the basis of value because, unlike commodities or labor, it forms the natural bedrock upon which all use-value rests, rendering its own value perpetual and stable: "If a laborer who had no property to be represented except his power to labor, could borrow money from the Safety Fund, and his power to labor should fail by

[134] Gourevitch does not discuss greenbackism in his study of the Knights, though he notes that they articulated proposals for "a people's bank making credit available to producer cooperatives" as part of their attempt to transform "the background structure of production and distribution." Evaluating the role of democratic banking within the general cooperative struggle demonstrates how cooperation requires *more than a confrontation with employers*, how it formed a moment of unity between labor and agrarian interests, and it clarifies how late 19th century workers envisioned the transformation of the market and, in Gourevitch's words, "the condition of possibility for the creation and maintenance of an integrated economy of cooperatives." Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 124.

[135] Alexander Campbell, *The True Greenback,* 11.

sickness or death, the Safety Fund would still be bound to redeem this money with a Safety Fund note bearing interest, and this loss would fall upon the people."[136] With the Safety Fund in operation, Kellogg thought that land would become evenly distributed, and all industrious producers would become land-owners who could borrow off the value of their land to purchase capital goods, organizing production voluntarily on the basis of equal exchange. Sylvis's experience in the labor movement – struggling directly against owners of capital who used their command over property to subjugate wage-laborers – made this aspect of Kellogg's theory a non-starter. Even as Sylvis's appropriation of the theory did reflect its presentation of "producers" as a single industrial bloc, his practical involvement in the formation of unions and cooperatives shows that Sylvis's ambition was not to mute class conflict, but to devise a way to undermine the basis of the conflict between capital and labor through cooperative production, a task that required forging the political unity of all workers, regardless of trade, skill, or region.

When the NLU endorsed greenbackism as an aspect of its slate of reforms, it rebuked Campbell by suggesting that monetary reform was necessary but insufficient for cooperation. Cooperation would not simply follow from currency reforms passed legislatively, but had to be practically developed as fully as possible within the existing social order. In making this move, the NLU foregrounded a central dimension of cooperation neglected until now: its practical dimension as a form of agency enacted by workers themselves. In its section called "Co-Operative," the platform affirmed the greenback critique by claiming that for cooperation to become a "sure and lasting remedy for the abuse of our present industrial system" it must be "based on just financial and revenue laws." [137] Yet the platform also argued that "until the laws

[136] Kellogg, *A New Monetary System*, 282.
[137] James C. Sylvis, *The Life, Speeches, Labors, and Essays of William Sylvis* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1968 [1872]), 290.

of the nation can be remodeled so as to recognize the rights of men, instead of classes, the system of co-operation carefully guarded will do much to lessen the evils of our current system. We, therefore, hail with delight the organization of co-operative stores and workshops, and would urge their formation in every section of the country, and in every branch of business."[138]

Sylvis's commitment to the cooperative movement entailed an appreciation for the transformative power of agency within both cooperatives and unions to sustain popular struggles, even if these movements' goals could only be achieved by political means. Sylvis's involvement in the cooperative movement existed alongside his career as a unionist. An iron-molder by trade, Sylvis joined the labor movement after participating in a strike against wage reductions. He rose through the ranks to head the Iron Moulder's International Union, co-founded the NLU, and participated in the International Workingmen's Association, where he was particularly keen to help coordinate immigrant entry directly into the American labor movement.[139] By the time of the NLU's creation, Sylvis had spent years as a union leader, agitating for reform, building membership, and coordinating strikes. Yet as Sylvis' biographer notes, "In a decade (1859-1869) the molders had spent a million and a half dollars on strikes without permanent gain. Pouring money and effort into strikes seemed like pouring liquid into a leaky container."[140] While strikes could effectively combat employer injustice, they were also costly and potentially self-destructive. Moreover, Sylvis began to worry that strikes were ultimately defensive maneuvers, and that "no permanent reform can ever be established through the agency of trade unions" if the roots of employer power were not challenged directly.[141] Rather than abandon hope, Sylvis was

[138] Ibid.
[139] Jonathan Grossman, *William Sylvis, Pioneer of American Labor: A Study of the Labor Movement During the Era of the Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945).
[140] Ibid., 190.
[141] Quoted in Ibid.

convinced that "Man is a progressive animal" and that "progress is destined to go forward until … all mankind shall be free," so he dedicated himself to assessing the roots of labor's ills and discovering a surer remedy to resolve them.[142] Greenback theory seemed to provide the beginnings of an answer for labor's struggles, because it explained why labor would never be able to receive the full value of its labor without a political challenge to the existing system. Citing Kellogg, Sylvis wrote to fellow laborers in the IMU press that for all of their local struggles, they would not be able to emancipate themselves from poverty when the nation's laws permitted the monopolization of the legal representation of value (money) in the hands of the few. He lamented how workers often seemed unbothered by the fortunes of the rich, missing the fact that "no man can become rich without making another one poor."[143] Since all goods are produced by labor, and labor can only produce a finite number of goods, when a privileged few accumulate the bulk of the legal representation of value, they necessarily come to wield a disproportionate power over the products of labor. In an inherently finite pool of resources, such power directly presupposes the poverty of others, and with laws that allow non-producers to accumulate value at a faster rate than producers as a class, this inherently means the subjugation of labor. Following Kellogg, Sylvis believed that the laws upholding the gold standard and existing financial infrastructure were responsible for this condition: "The fault is in the law which governs the distribution of property … The evil is legislative, and the remedy must be legislative, or something worse."[144] Through self-organization and solidarity, unions could fight to prevent wage-cuts and coerce employers to secure better working conditions and shorter hours, but they could never halt the accumulative power of capital and the political power that it

[142] Quoted in Ibid., 189-191.
[143] Sylvis, *The Life, Speeches, Labors, and Essays of William H. Sylvis*, 362.
[144] Ibid., 359.

vested in the hands of a privileged class. For Sylvis, the reigning economic system ensured that, "the very heart's blood of the workingmen is mortgaged from cradle to grave," and the only way out from this subjugation was a direct assault on the privileges that secured it.[145]

Given his difficulties with the defensive character of strikes, and given the difficulty of coordinating a political assault on the money power, Sylvis began to see the formation of cooperatives as a superior strategy for building collective agency, anticipating this ultimate political challenge. The late 1860s saw a multiplication of cooperative experiments, from worker-owned enterprises to agrarian wholesale societies and cooperative stores.[146] The Iron Molder's International Union helped to sponsor one of the more successful cooperative workshops in Troy – a national center of the molders trade. The Troy cooperative followed the pattern of other late 19th century cooperatives and emerged in response to an employer lockout. With the IMU's assistance, the locked-out workers purchased some initial capital and formed a worker-owned foundry; after eighteen months of operation it had earned a profit of $17,000 and served as a model for Sylvis and others. For workers, sharing profits not only increased labor's return (even if it did not yet accord them their full value), but they also became a self-legislating body capable of jointly determining workplace policy.[147] In a reflection on the Troy cooperative, Sylvis boasted that if its success could be duplicated, "there will be no attempts to reduce wages, no lock-outs, no offensive rules posted up in workshops, no display of tyranny. Every reasonable demand will be conceded, and a greater degree of equality will be established in society."[148] Optimistic about future experiments, Sylvis also hoped that cooperative enterprise would develop working-class finances, creating a reservoir of resources that would not only assist in the

[145] Ibid., 360.
[146] Grossman, *William Sylvis*, 205.
[147] Ibid., 199.
[148] Sylvis, *The Life, Speeches, Labor, and Essays of William H. Sylvis*, 393-394.

case of necessary strikes, but that would count among workers' assets in a protracted fight with the money power. Even if workers would only achieve a pittance compared to capital, he hoped that their self-organization and self-financing would catalyze future growth: "The *power* which cooperation confers will be respected, and capitalist will be slow to engage in a tilt at arms with men doubly armed for the struggle."[149]

In his early optimism, Sylvis believed that workplace democracy in the cooperative shop allowed for collective autonomy, but the practical experience of cooperatives proved that local cooperative democracy was itself shaped by the broader social environment. How cooperatives would deal with problems beyond the workplace not only involved strategic questions, but also shaped what "cooperation" itself would mean. At the institutional level, cooperation for the NLU either implied joint-stock companies owned by workers through the apportionment of equal shares among worker-owners, or more ambitiously, cooperatives owned by the Molder's Union and managed directly by associated workers with the coordination of the general Union.[150] Sylvis favored the latter, more radical option.[151] Cooperatively organized workers needed start-up capital for their enterprises (Sylvis's biographer Jonathan Grossman calculated that the initial capital for an iron foundry in the 1860's was $17,100 on average), which meant that workers needed investors.[152] While this problem was slightly obviated if investment costs were lowered to the reach of a large pool of average workers (making workers within the cooperative and their local associates the primary investors), cooperatives on this model often faltered as they

[149] Ibid., 394.
[150] Grossman, *William Sylvis*, 198. The Knights would repeat both of these experiments.
[151] Ibid., 201.
[152] Ibid., 212.

struggled to not only retain profits, but deliver returns (falling even further short of realizing a return for labor's "full value").[153]

On the other hand, funding cooperatives through union dues created a larger pool of small investments and could make sense for the union membership if cooperation could succeed financially. In such efforts, "cooperation" did not just mean joint ownership of the self-determining workplace, but a general social project that animated the labor movement as a whole. For this strategy, unions had to persuade workers to contribute to enterprises where they were not employed, diverting finances from their own strike funds and mutual assistance programs. Sylvis ardently hoped that cooperation could not only inspire, but pay, making cooperative foundries a strategy for both investment and democratic empowerment.[154] For cooperation to pay, though, it had to conform to the strictures of the capitalist market, where the competition of often larger, better capitalized firms imposed its own internal discipline on the cooperative. Moreover, cooperatives were also vulnerable to underhanded forms of competition specifically designed to undercut their success, as when local capitalist firms sold at a loss until the cooperatives went under.[155] The background conditions for the experimental development of cooperatives was a terrain of social struggle, not a neutral plane for the practical testing of hypotheses and aspirations.

Given the endemic problems of credit and capitalization, one can see why Sylvis yearned for financial reform that would democratize access to credit at low interest. Only political reform could deliver such a change, and Sylvis became an ardent supporter of the formation of a labor party. At the same time, Sylvis never appreciated how the local, relatively low capital-intensity

[153] Ibid., 216.
[154] Ibid., 210.
[155] Grossman finds one incidence of this, unsurprising if cooperatives were formed after a lockout. See ibid.

foundries that were the site of his experiences of cooperative labor were on the verge of extinction due to technological advances. Capitalists, not workers, controlled this technology.[156] As Grossman notes, given these constrains on the NLU's experiments, the kind of large-scale cooperation imagined by Sylvis was never attempted under conditions that would have been sufficiently favorable to test the possibility of its success. As Grossman wrote, "A valid experiment would have had to have a cooperative financial structure on a scale large enough to reap the advantages of mass production."[157] Kellogg's Safety-Fund, with its emphasis on land, could not, by itself, have provided the conditions for such a valid experiment; nevertheless, it was rational for Sylvis to see democratized credit alongside a direct restraint on accumulation as preconditions for exploring the development of cooperative association.

Sylvis's problem – how to create the background conditions for cooperative experimentation through the agency of a popular movement – was transferred to the Knights of Labor. Terrence Powderly, one of the Knights' most prominent leaders, referred to Sylvis in his autobiography as "one of the brightest minds in the labor movement" and celebrated his efforts to form cooperatives.[158] Moreover, the Knights straightforwardly inherited Sylvis's basic dilemma: cooperation offered a local experience of democratic autonomy, but this empowerment alone was incapable of exercising social control over the conditions of its further development. More than within the Iron Molder's International Union or the NLU, the Knights engaged in deep strategic and philosophical debates about the meaning of cooperation. In essence, the Knights' divided into three positions, each with a different sense of the politics of cooperation: 1) the proliferation of local, joint-stock cooperatives owned and operated by workers; 2) the

[156] One could argue that this limitation resulted from the preoccupation with finance – rather than private ownership of capital – as the locus of "capitalist" power, but we need not make the issue so zero-sum.
[157] Ibid., 218.
[158] Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 25.

creation of a parallel cooperative economy under the tutelage of the Knights as an order; 3) connecting trade union and producer organizations in broad-based political alliances intent on structural reforms that would abet the development of cooperative social relations. While this last, social-democratic iteration was the most clear-headed and would seek a productive (if insufficiently potent) alliance with the People's Party,[159] it would also lose some of the radicalism of the second option, whose concerns would be later taken up by socialists.

The experience of voluntary, de-centralized cooperatives often crystallized aspirations for a better social order, but these organizations could not deliver workers what they sought – the full value of their labor – and were frequently wrecked on the shoals of competition, under-capitalization, and mismanagement.[160] These problems were already confronted by the NLU and quickly diagnosed within the Knights, pushing one radical local to insist that, "productive co-operation carried out by only a small number of individuals is subject to the competition of private enterprises, which will compel co-operators to fall back upon the wage system," and encouraging their fellow Knights to believe that, "co-operation, in order to benefit all humanity, must be universally applied."[161] At the same time, how would cooperation develop if it did not begin from the imperfect conditions of the existing social order, based on the initial, local initiatives of workers themselves? One of the first, full-scale attempts to resolve this problem came from Henry Sharpe, a president of the Knight's Cooperative Board starting from September of 1883, and the author of a monthly series of articles on cooperation in the organization's major journal.[162]

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[159] On the consequences of the decline of the Knights for the People's Party and American labor overall see Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 30. "The decline of the KOL after 1886 was thus a more critical turning point for both the labor movement and the shape of American democracy than the ebbing of electoral socialism after 1912."
[160] See Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor, 1859-1889* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967 [1890]), 230-239.
[161] "L.A. 1562 vs. Cooperation," *The Journal of United Labor*, 4, no. 4 (August 1883), 537-538.
[162] On Sharpe's role in the Knights see Leiken, *The Practical Utopians*, 60-66.

Sharpe believed that the only way to develop the cooperative commonwealth was through the formation of a parallel, self-contained economy superintended by the Knights as an organization. In Sharpe's view, the fact that the cooperative workplace remained embedded in a competitive market necessarily reproduced the subjection of the laborer. Wage-laborers, in other words, were not merely dominated by the boss, or by the competition of the labor market; even when cooperatively self-organized, the pressure of capitalist competition ensured that their organizations would have to direct their labor process according to its discipline. As he wrote, "A large number of co-operative institutions are established in which the participants become self-governing, become educated, and get all that their labor is worth *in the market*. Yes, *in the market*; but it is a competitive market, and in it co-operative institutions must compete with wages, labor and capitalistic organization; in short, must be part and parcel of competism."[163] Being "part and parcel of competism" meant that labor cooperatives would reproduce the high production quotas, labor discipline, low wages, and firm-specific self-interests endemic to profit-seeking capitalist firms, failing to achieve a fully social form of cooperation that could achieve more ambitious goals that more fully realized cooperation's aspiration to egalitarian mutuality: tailoring production directly to need, utilizing labor-saving technology to maximize laborers' free time and self-education, and creating reciprocity throughout society as a whole. While Sylvis saw financial reform as the solution to this problem – since it would ensure that the market was governed by an initially equitable balance between the gains to capital and the gains to labor – Sharpe imagined that a cooperative market could be created by and for the Knights of Labor as an organization.

[163] Henry Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* 5, no. 5 (July 10th, 1884), 742.

Instead of decentralized localism, Sharpe advocated "integral cooperation," and argued that his proposal could provide a depth of collective autonomy that local cooperatives in a capitalist market were unable to reach. For Sharpe, while decentralized cooperation was too fragile to develop cooperation's potential and reproduced many of the self-seeking habits of capitalist enterprises, integral cooperation "teaches us to hope in the beneficence and sufficiencies of nature, the final equitable arrangement of the labors of mankind, and the attainment of a condition in which, freed by art from base drudgeries, man shall have leisure to cultivate his higher nature and unfold the divinity within him."[164] In part, the utopian aspirations behind Sharpe's vision derived from how he imagined the site of cooperation as a world apart from the existing social order. No longer centered on the democratically controlled workplace, Sharpe shared earlier colonization movements' idealization of independent cooperative colonies. Only after having exited capitalist society entirely would workers be able to liberate themselves from its demoralizing constraints, and "produce by their own labor all those things necessary to the comfort of their lives; they can arrange their labors and distribute their products according to their own ideas of equity; producing all that is necessary to their comfort, they are not compelled to buy or sell; they become self-supporting, they become independent of capital, they become, in fact, the arbiters of their own fate … Upon themselves and nature depends their condition in the world."[165] "Cooperation" for Sharpe thus meant the liberation of labor from the artificial constraints of both master and market, unshackling the creative self-development made possible by equitably sharing the burdens of associated living in a collectively self-made society.

Sharpe attempted to convert the Knights into the organizational basis of a colonization project, financed through dues. This project required persuading a majority of Knights that the

[164] Henry Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* 4, no. 4 (Oct. 1883), 580.
[165] Ibid.

project was worthwhile, which Sharpe failed to do. When outlining his program, Sharpe claimed that the Knights' membership was sufficiently large and contained a sufficiently diverse set of skills among its members to create the possibility of a truly "integral" experiment, meaning that willing Knights could form a comprehensive nucleus of a parallel economy capable of satisfying the bulk of its own needs. In the past, he believed, colonization experiments lacked sufficient diversity of skill to produce a parallel economy, so they needed to concentrate too much energy on creating a surplus to purchase goods from outside sources, re-embedding them from a vulnerable position in the competitive market.[166] In Sharpe's view, the key to resolving this problem was persuading a diverse set of willing workers to colonize western territory, and then organize remaining workers in the Knights as consumers, creating an internal market between the colony and other Knights. Sharpe hoped that enthusiasm for cooperation would encourage the membership to get behind these efforts, and in return for subsidizing the colony's formation, he proposed that the Knights sponsor new benefit programs, specifically retirement housing for elderly workers and schools for workers' young children.[167] If it could succeed, Sharpe thought that the Knights would liberate workers from competition by creating a cooperative market based on full reciprocity. In an integrally cooperative society, he wrote: "behold the *market* is there, and it need not be a competitive market, for the producers and consumers being one and the same people, and all parts of this great system, the exchange of products would be upon an equitable basis ordained by themselves."[168] Such a market would be cooperative if the integral economy could truly satisfy the needs of its members, ensuring that the people, "are not compelled to buy nor sell; they do not live on the labor of others; they seek no exchange of products except on an

[166] Henry Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* 4, no. 7 (November, 1883), 598-599.
[167] Henry Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* 5, no. 3 (June 10th 1884), 716.
[168] Henry Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* 5.5 (July 10th, 1884), 742.

equitable basis; they have established social and industrial equity for themselves in their dealings with the world."[169] In Sharpe's vision, banking reform and other political interventions were unnecessary if a parallel market based on the exchange of equivalents could be created through voluntary self-organization alone.

In Steve Leiken's attempt to account for Sharpe's failure to persuade Knights of the viability of his plan, Leiken opposes Sharpe's centralizing tendencies to the Knights' attachment to a traditional "working-class republicanism" inherently skeptical of concentrated authority.[170] However, Sharpe did not imagine the Knights reproducing the centralizing tendencies of modern society, and he explicitly rejected what he called "State Socialism" since he believed that making the state the guiding agent behind cooperation would supplant cooperation among workers by the coordination of a central authority. Even though his vision for a cooperative colony shunned political involvement, Sharpe nonetheless accepted other Knights' political agitation as a general part of the labor movement, though he insisted that cooperation itself could not be effected by the agency of the state. In his words: "Political action can abolish wage-slavery by handing over to the general government all the industries of the nation, but that would establish a despotism far more tyrannical and hopeless than anything the world has ever seen. *That* can never be. If the individuals are to be allowed to carry on their industries, then political action to clear the obstacles away should go on vigorously; but, side by side with it should go on the work of co-operation among individuals to establish a new industrial system."[171] A far more likely

[169] Ibid. Sharpe's view is similar to British cooperative pioneer William Thompson, who as David McNally explains, "envisioned a network of co-operative communities which would afford 'an unfailing market to each other.' But the 'market' envisaged here is not society's mechanism of resource allocation, or of price formation, but merely a societal arrangement for economic interchange between co-operative communities." McNally, *Against the Market*, 125.
[170] Leiken, *The Practical Utopians*, 64. As is often the case with these overly ideological explanations, Leiken offers one letter to the editor as supposed evidence for this general trend, which expressed anxiety that the agency required to coordinate Sharpe's cooperative efforts would reproduce the same problems of modern trusts.
[171] Henry Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* 4, no. 8 (Dec 1883).

explanation for Sharpe's failure to persuade the Knights is that he was asking the Knights to divert significant resources toward a highly risky enterprise with a uniform track record of failure, and in which workers themselves would not actively participate. Sharpe's vision of the ennobling potential of cooperation would be restricted to the few pioneering colonists; other cooperators sought to find a way to imagine cooperation as a self-transforming practice accessible to all workers in the movement.

A more perspicacious critique of Sharpe's plan was not the return to voluntary decentralization, but the recognition that even Sharpe's deeper vision of collective autonomy in the cooperative colony was insufficiently comprehensive. According to two members of Local Assembly 2913, even integral cooperation is "but partial co-operation at the best, and will never do the working classes any good as a whole."[172] Instead, these Knights argued that only political change – for them, reforms focused on "land, finance and transportation" – could deliver all workers the full value of their labor, ensuring a future where, "all men own and dress the earth till golden grain and fruit bend o'er it, from want receive, none rich none poor."[173] Sharpe's response to this charge – to reiterate that cooperation needed to grow somewhere and that it could only grow if it sets out from a sufficiently "integral" basis – missed the point. His critics claimed that cooperation had to center political struggle – not the strategy of exit – as the basic premise of labor struggle. This turn toward political struggle shifts the parameters of the movement's vision of democratic agency: the way to achieve agency over the infrastructure shaping social relations is not to re-create society by escaping on the frontier, but to struggle against the contradictory tendencies of social evolution that had shaped the contemporary

[172] Henry Sharpe, "Co-Operation," *The Journal of United Labor* 5, no 8 (August 25th 1884), 778, To his credit, Sharpe was gracious enough to print critical letters at the end of his columns.
[173] Ibid.

arrangement of power.[174] For these workers, cooperation is not an exodus from capitalism, but a political struggle within and against capitalist society.

The Local's emphasis on land, finance, and transportation not only reflects the resurgence of the greenback idea of democratic banking, but also concerns about transforming other economic infrastructure alongside finance, acknowledging that financial power is not the singular root of inequality. In Powderly's reflections on the Knights cooperative efforts, he not only targeted financial power, but all the distributive channels that extracted value from productive labor. He wrote, "The odds will be against co-operation as long as the avenues of distribution are in the hands of monopoly, for it is in the interest of the upholders of the present system to discourage every attempt at co-operation, so that the workman will abandon the idea of becoming his own employer … Until industrialists learn to co-operate in the affairs of government, co-operation in any other channel, or business, will be attended with many risks, doubts, and fears."[175] While itself still limited, Powderly's focus on distribution was echoed by others within the organization and shared with agrarian organizations – forming a locus of common diagnosis and common struggle. As Imogene Fales argued in *The Journal of United Labor*, "The great avenues and highways of life, which should be superintended by the Government, in the interests of the people, are controlled by a few individuals for their immediate benefit, and with but little regard to the welfare of the social state." [176] Behind Fales' assertion was the further development of the political ideal of cooperation, carried forward into both the Populist and socialist movements. For her, the people have a fundamental claim to

[174] What this also opens up, though it is not often pursued by Knights, is an acknowledgement of how the violence of settlement shaped the American political economy and state.
[175] Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor*, 469-470.
[176] Imogene C. Fales, "The Organization of Labor," *The Journal of United Labor* 4, no. 3 (July 1883), 557. Fales was one of the few women leaders of the cooperative movement – active with the Knights, Populists, women's suffrage organizations, and other groups – and is all but forgotten today.

supervise all of the infrastructure that subtends their own association, and a clear interest in ensuring that those to whom that supervision is delegated work for the public welfare, not their private benefit. In this mature Populist trajectory, rather than center finance as the singular locus of reform, the greenback push to democratize banking could become one among a plurality of ways to bring market infrastructure under the supervision of the popular sovereign, a tendency ultimately carried out in the Populists' "Omaha Platform," which integrated their proposal for a new federal treasury system with the demands for public, democratic control of the means of distribution.[177]

IV. The Populist Cooperative Commonwealth: From the Alliance Movement to the People's Party

> As a matter of fact, progress has been effected by the slaves, or serfs, co-operating to resist tyranny. In fact, it has always been the only means of escape from its unbearable exactions; and when labor's resistance has been crowned with success it has always resulted in a higher civilization. – Harry Tracy, "Freedom or Serfdom?"[178]

While greenback reformers had a presence in labor organizations like the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor, the Greenback Party had its strongest electoral success among agrarian constituencies.[179] Like the labor movement, the Alliance movement was influenced by former Greenback Party members, and like labor cooperators, agrarians combined local cooperative experiments aspiring to secure producers their full value with greenback diagnoses. As noted earlier, interpreting the Populist cooperative commonwealth is complicated by a

[177] "The Omaha Platform," *A Populist Reader: Selections from the Works of American Populist Leaders* ed. George Tindall (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 90-96.
[178] Harry Tracy, "Freedom or Serfdom?" *The National Economist* 1, no. 3 (April 6th, 1889), 35.
[179] For Greenback party electoral statistics see Richard Bensel, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization*, 273-280.

persistent tendency to see the Populists' social vision as ultimately compatible with capitalism.[180] Yet to say with Jeffrey Sklansky that the Populists' goal was "an "equitable capitalism" in which labor and capital could be harmoniously united," is to miss that the Populists did not seek to unite *capitalists* and *laborers* by suppressing exploitation, as a defense of capitalism would require.[181] Instead, they believed that capital (often understood purely as financial investment) and labor could only be united if labor retained its full reward, which, by organizing the economy around the private profit of capital-owners, capitalism makes impossible. Moreover, while analysts are primed to see workers' joint-stock cooperatives more "anti-capitalist" institutions than agrarian buying and selling cooperatives, Populist cooperatives were not only imagined as qualitatively different from capitalist institutions, but embedded in a general project of cooperative market reconstruction that sought goals incompatible with capitalist development, posing a concrete challenge to ruling class power that was lodged both in the state and in a wide array of social institutions. While Populists did seek to reform property relations and the market, they did not base these reforms on a defense of all forms of private property (capitalist or otherwise), but instead, on an immanent critique of how existing property relations undermined the exchange of equivalents. Like any subset of social relations, they believed that property relations are amenable to reconstruction by the conscious agency of the politically organized people. As Harry Tracy put it, "It should be remembered that all human institutions are but experiments," and amenable to the people's own creative self-determination.[182]

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[180] It should be noted that rarely do the authors who make this claim defend a historically and conceptually *bounded* conception of capitalism. Instead, they analogically associate a variety of "capitalist" institutions (especially markets and private property, both of which antedate capitalism by centuries) with capitalism itself and a categorize anything but a full rejection of these institutions as "compatible with capitalism."

[181] Jeffrey Sklansky, *Sovereign of the Market: The Money Question in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 183.

[182] Tracy, "Appendix," 383.

Despite the shared cooperative aspirations of proto-industrial and agrarian labor, workers and farmers confronted different obstacles and possibilities given their locations within the national economy. Even if we cannot equate the average Populist farmer with an idealized vision of "the entrepreneur," farmers possessed immediate access to the fruits of their labor in ways that allowed different kinds of leverage over merchants and creditors than wage-laborers had against employers. Additionally, the imbrication of family farms within the supply chains and debt-relations that coordinated commodity-crop production created a form of exploitation utterly distinct from that experienced by wage-laborers. As Sklansky observed, "The reconstruction of cotton cultivation in the postwar South, like the explosive growth in grain production from the Midwest, depended largely on farm families working land that they owned, rented, or managed themselves, rather than on the waged workforce mobilized by modern industry. … the tethers that bound the labor of isolated farm families to the capital and landlords and merchants were not wages but debts. Debt, moreover, gathered together grain growers and cotton cultivators, whether yeomen, tenants, or sharecroppers."[183] Still, and against the idea that the relative isolation of agrarian labor undermined their incentives to cooperation, these debt-relations not only organized the social relations of farmers, but were a powerful stimulant to cooperative self-organization, as farmers developed their own independent counter-force to the power of merchants within their voluntary institutions of self-help.

As in the case of labor organizations, the meaning of "cooperation" shifted as the Alliance's cooperative institutions expanded, and the ideal of cooperation hinged on the foundational demand that the producing classes require a full return to their labor, a demand that

[183] Sklansky, *Sovereign of the Market*, 176.

was simultaneously social and political. As Evan Jones put it in one of the first issues of one of the Farmers' Alliance's central journals, *The National Economist*:

> If the people create wealth they certainly would enjoy prosperity if there was a just distribution of the values created by them; but under an unjust system of distribution the producer fails to get his fair and proper share of the product of his own labor … From this we conclude that one of the questions for the people to solve is a means of bringing about a just distribution of the values created by labor … if we should perpetuate our free institutions and the general welfare and prosperity of our people, it is of vital importance that the conservative and industrial classes have a well-defined system of organizations, educational and co-operative, through which they can again obtain control of the products of the farm and prevent their passing into the hands of the great corporations who are now absorbing all the profits from the labor of the producing masses.[184]

While rooted in experiences of local self-help, the agrarian cooperative movement rested on a broad set of social and political aspirations that crystallized a vision of social progress. While Postel attributed their ideas of progress in an important way to the agency of capitalist development itself, it would be more accurate to say that the Populist vision of progress emerged out of their struggle with and *against* this process, particularly the subjugating tendencies of debt-structured market dependence. Such a focus better reveals the particular nature of their vision of a cooperative economy, premised on what one Alliance member called "equivalence of service."[185] Creating such a cooperative, democratic economy required reflection on the progressive potential immanent to the current social order, alongside a search for an integrated reform program that could transcend its limitations. One of the Alliance's major leaders, Charles Macune, wrote a number of serialized essays on history, government, and political economy that elaborated a general philosophy of transformative structural reform that emerged from the concrete experiences of forming and struggling to preserve cooperative agrarian economies. As he wrote,

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[184] Evan Jones, "Organization, Educational and Co-Operative," *The National Economist* 1, no. 1 (March 1889), 4.
[185] "Equivalence of Service," *The National Economist* 2:7 (November 2, 1889), 97.

> Now when we speak of progress we refer to these necessary changes of *structure* in the social organism which contribute to the establishment of a higher moral and social condition of life … The nature of social development is to increase the complexity of the social organism, and consequently the requirements of the individuals composing society. The development of those characteristics of our nature which tend most certainly to fit us to enjoy this complex social condition is the end to which the social and moral training should tend, and the best means of building up these characteristics is the secret of which we are in search.[186]

These integrated aspirations were generated within an initial push by farmers to organize their way out of debt by forming institutions to collectively control their place within commodity and credit markets.

The Farmers' Alliances initially flourished as a cooperative warehousing system that gave farmers an alternative to relying on merchants for credit, supplies, and access to commodity markets. In other words, their cooperative organizations were premised on an underlying social conflict with merchant and were organized directly to circumvent their power. According to Michael Schwartz, the proliferation of debt relationships as a means to control labor emerged during Reconstruction, when efforts to resume cotton production through labor gangs under the control of landowners failed, due to both black and white workers' refusal to accept the proposed wages and conditions of labor and the (temporary) Reconstruction-era legislative defeat of laws oriented toward gang-labor control. Instead, "Farms were rented to tenants, who were financed by the new country merchants. These merchants could control Black and white tenants through the leverage of the credit system."[187] This control manifested in the merchants' monopoly over necessary supplies (from food to medicine) which tenant farmers often purchased on credit, as well as their control over the cotton crop.[188] Merchants control over crops derived not only from

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[186] Charles Macune, "History and Government, No. 29," *The National Economist* 2, no. 3 (October 5, 1889), 35.
[187] Schwartz, *Radical Protest and Social Structure*, 58. Schwartz notes how, in addition to its effects on farmers who grew cotton or began to start growing cotton, the merchant system also occasionally ruined once-wealthy landlords, who became accountable for their tenants' debts if they had countersigned their loans. Ibid., 59. On the emergence of merchants as primary creditors in lieu of banks see ibid., 34.
[188] In some cases, merchants who owned crop-liens also developed technologies for the direct supervision of labor. Ibid., 28-33.

their ownership of liens on farmers' cotton, but also from their role as intermediaries between farmers and the national market. Through their position in the social division of labor, merchants' control allowed for a variety of ways to exploit of the value of farm labor, whether through high interest rates on loans, setting high prices for consumer goods purchased on credit, or controlling the sale of the crop. As Goodwyn claimed, merchants power within the system guided the social activity of farmers in ways that went beyond economic coercion, but "ordered life itself."[189]

To begin to work their way out of these relationships, Alliance cooperative warehouses gathered members' crops to sell straight to consumers, undermining the merchant's power in the supply-chain by offering purchasers the opportunity to buy directly and in bulk. Cooperative buying and selling programs could bring higher returns, but they also created an empowered collective that gave farmers more control over their product than negotiating individually with merchants. Contesting merchants' power over the supply chain immediately brought the Alliances enemies, and they could choose to respond either by direct challenge or evasion. When local mills refused to process Alliance grain because of their hostility to cooperation, for instance, one purchasing agent advocated organizing cooperative mills under the Alliance banner: Alliances could "get up a cooperative mill" and even "have cooperative stores in connection with the mill to handle their own produce."[190] The glimmer of a self-created cooperative economy emerged through concrete experiences of working together in hostile conditions. Evading powerful adversaries through self-organization had initial traction, and began to give members a renewed sense of their collective capacity. If they could get out from under the merchant's thumb, why not extend their movement into new areas that promised more

[189] Goodwyn, Democratic Promise, 25.
[190] Ibid., 49.

shared control over resources? As Populist organizers noted, local experiences of cooperation not only developed social power and political awareness, but also operated to "break up the isolated habits of farmers, improve their social condition, increase their social pleasures, and strengthen their confidence in and friendship for each other."[191] New experiences of political possibility created a new citizenry capable of collective action where there were previously atomized individual producers.

The extent of the movements' difficulties implied that a larger organization was necessary to ward against hostility, coordinate information and political education, and develop the capacity to push for larger-scale reform.[192] As in the case of cooperative workshops, local cooperation could not reliably guarantee higher returns for farmers or relieve the entire farming community's dependence on the merchant, and while initial decentralization allowed Alliances and sub-Alliances to proliferate through voluntary activity, centralization was necessary to scale up farmers' efforts. In part, scaling up also meant developing the ability to include more farmers in the Alliance fold.[193] Farmers deeply indebted to merchants needed an alternate source of loans. The Alliance could have remained an institution for wealthier farmers on the model of other self-help organizations like the Grange, but the movement's politics attracted the entire class of rural producers, who made claims on leaders for solutions that could benefit all. In their words, the imperative was not only to narrow the merchants' scope of control, but to "make a crop independent of the merchant."[194]

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[191] Quoted in Theodore Mitchell, *Political Education in the Southern Farmers' Alliance: 1887-1900* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 10.
[192] On hostility to the Alliance, Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 125.
[193] This aspect of the movements' progress contests the "radical democratic" quality of voluntary decentralization, since greater organizational capacity provided more resources for inclusion.
[194] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 125.

In response to these demands, Alliance president Charles Macune invented a "joint note plan" that offered indebted farmers a way out of corrosive crop-lien mortgages without yet turning from self-help to politics. In the fall of 1887, the Alliance announced that it would issue its own credit to poor farmers in advance of their 1888 crop. Starting at the local sub-Alliance level, all members would estimate their consumption needs for the coming year and issue a "joint-note" that pledged a cotton crop worth three times their requests. As the plan was described in the *National Economist*, "Where there are some in a neighborhood that can not in any possible way trade for cash they will meet together in their sub-Alliances and exchange such pledges as will make each one perfectly safe and jointly secure, by borrowing, if necessary, sufficient funds to carry those who are worthy and in need."[195] These "joint notes" – the result of democratic planning of production and consumption – served as collateral that the Alliance could use to borrow money for supply purchases, and Macune eventually received a $6000 loan from a Houston bank by pledging $20,000 in joint notes.[196] Sub-Alliances would owe interest on these loans at 1% per year – the rate that Kellogg calculated as labor's natural power of production. If it could work, the Alliance's new system would essentially replace the merchant system. Rather than loan their crops to private individuals who wielded power outside any collective control, farmers would pledge their crops to a membership-based institution that strove to secure an adequate return for all producers. The Alliances' goal was the reverse of the merchant's goal of skimming profit off the yearly crop. As Macune claimed, the Alliance, "does not aspire to, and is not calculated to be a business for profit in itself."[197] And as he clarified further, even as the Alliance grew beyond its local origins, it did not intend to become merely one business interest

[195] "Farmer vs. Merchant," *The National Economist*, 52.
[196] Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 128.
[197] Quoted in ibid. 139.

among others. He responded to allegations that the Alliance's growth would simply repeat the problems of the modern trust by stating, "Trusts are wholly combinations of capitalists made for the purpose of using the power of money to oppress labor in order to extort all that labor produces over a bare subsistence, to the end that the capitalist may secure large and unearned accessories to his wealth thereby."[198] Manifest in practices like the joint-note plan, the Alliance system, "is exactly the opposite of a trust. … Selfishness is in no sense the object of its effort, but pecuniary gain up to a standard of exact justice to labor is demanded as a right. Instead of pooling the wealth of its members, it pools their heads and hearts, their strong right arms, and leaves the property of each undisturbed."[199] Through pooling farmers' latent capacities for democratic self-organization and mutually beneficial economic activity, cooperation created a qualitatively different kind of organization grounded in labor's right to retain the value it produced, while also making associated workers within the sub-Alliance, rather than individual farmers, a basic unit of production and consumption.

Even though farmers promised a product worth three times their consumptive needs, their joint notes were rarely taken seriously as a form of collateral (and were precipitously devalued when they were), and the joint-note plan failed to bring the Alliance the necessary revenue to cover farmers' needs. After recovering from the internal crisis that the plan's failure produced, Macune drew up a new plan – one that required political action in addition to economic cooperation. When the joint-note plan failed, Macune realized that the Alliance system could not persist in the current economic environment and continue to serve the whole class of producers. For farmers to work their way out of the merchant system, they needed an alternative source of credit, and the banks simply refused to back that credit. Politicizing the movement to challenge

[198] Charles Macune, "Not the Kind of a Trust," *The National Economist* 2, no. 3 (October 5th, 1889), 40.
[199] Ibid.

these arrangements required pushing for legislative change, either by petitioning existing legislators or forming their own party. Following the greenback critique, Macune thought that the people's legislative organ – Congress – could be entrusted to pass legislation that would implement reforms that furthered cooperative possibility. The plan he devised – the Sub-Treasury Plan – was a modified version of Kellogg's National Safety Fund, and while Macune would resist the third-party push, the adoption of the Plan as a central demand propelled the formation of the People's Party as an independent political force.[200]

While the joint-note plan intended to make the Alliance system a replacement for the merchant system through voluntary cooperation, the sub-treasury system would institutionalize the Alliance cooperative system as an aspect of the democratic state. With the Sub-Treasury system, "cooperation" again developed a new layer of meaning. It was now not only a form of local self-help, but also a political conception of how constituted authorities could facilitate citizens' ability to exercise shared control over social reproduction. The Alliance's inability to develop cooperation's potential through economic collective action revealed how the existing social order restricted the people's capacity for free association and collective self-determination. In their case, bankers' refusal to acknowledge Alliance collateral while they freely operated with merchants revealed how the merchant system was upheld by economic and political coercion, a set of arrangements that farmers had a basic democratic right to reconstruct. These limitations in their social environment inclined Macune and other Alliance members to target banking reform as a central political demand, and primed them to assert the importance of indexing economic

[200] As one scholar of Macune's economic thought put it, "Macune's economic thought is an extension of Edward Kellogg's". Sidney Rothstein, "Macune's Monopoly," 91. On the relationship between the Sub-Treasury Plan and the formation of the People's Party, see Goodwyn*, Democratic Promise*, 169-176.

value directly to the fruits of productive labor (as greenback theory insisted), both of which crystallized in the Sub-Treasury proposal.

In their annual Almanac in 1889, an Alliance committee wrote that the Sub-Treasury system would not only free farmers from the despotism of local merchants, allow farmers to withhold their crops after harvest-time to balance prices, or standardize storage and the grading of farm produce; it would also, "emancipate productive labor from the power of money to oppress."[201] In their view, both political parties had come to believe, "that the masses were passive and reconciled to the existence of this system whereby a privileged class can, by means of the power of money to oppress, exact from labor all that it produces except a bare subsistence."[202] At the root of merchants power was not only their control of credit and their connections with local bankers and cotton-purchasers; it merely showed one face of a financial system that exploited all productive labor. Concretely, the Sub-Treasury proposal would transform the Alliance cooperative warehouse into a public institution, vested with the authority to directly pay farmers cash for their commodity crops (ranging from cotton to grain, corn, wool and sugar), cutting out both merchants and private bankers.[203] While mass sales to merchants at harvest time (often a direct consequence of the need to pay down debts) created a glut that depressed crop prices, the Sub-Treasury system would allow farmers to receive 80% of the

[201] "Report of the Committee on the Monetary System," *The National Economist Almanac, and National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union Handbook* (Washington D.C.: The National Economist Print, 1890), 91. For later agricultural regulations that regulated warehousing and grading but were nevertheless "far less radical than the original proposals" of later agrarian reformers see Sanders, *Roots of Reform*, 298-303.
[202] "Report of the Committee on the Monetary System" *The National Economist Almanac*, 88.
[203] Charles Macune, "EUREKA! Key to the Solution to the Industrial Problem of the Age," *The National Economist*, 2, no. 15 (December 28th, 1889), 225. Sklansky notes how Macune, like Kellogg, admired Proudhon's ideal of coordinating "direct exchange" of commodities of equivalent value under modern complex conditions, and argues that the Sub-Treasury system sought to create these direct exchanges between producers and consumers. Clearly, though, the "consumers" of cotton would likely be large industries that employed wage laborers, a clear problem from the mutualist perspective, which Macune himself did not directly address. See Sklansky, *Sovereign of the Market*, 203.

market value of their crops upon delivery to the warehouse, withholding the full sale until the market price suited the farmer. With the authorization of a sale, the farmer would receive the difference between their initial 80% and the final sale-price, putting the agricultural economy on a cash basis (rather than a credit basis), and ensuring a direct relationship between buyer and seller, mediated only by the public institution of the Treasury.[204] Sub-Treasuries would replace both the private banking system and the merchant system, issuing greenbacks directly to farmers whose value was secured by the basic agricultural commodities on which the nation depended. Rather than land value – as Kellogg had insisted – Macune and the Alliance saw agricultural commodities as the basis of the people's money. Since the Sub-Treasury plan would displace the private banking system, non-productive investment would cease to reap outsized rewards premised on the subjugation of productive labor, stripping money of its "power to oppress."

While it preserved the individual farmer's relationship to the market, Macune did not intend to restore the independent yeomanry of the Jeffersonian imaginary or create a society of small entrepreneurs. Instead, he sought to create the social basis for a cooperative agrarian community. With the growing capacity of factory production in mind, Macune claimed that the Alliance was following contemporary trends that better harnessed the productive power of cooperative labor. He argued that the rural community should be understood as the seat of a cooperative division of labor that related to markets as a single unit, through the public institution of the Sub-Treasury. He wrote, "many occupations are considered as independent from agriculture" ranging from the school-teacher to the blacksmith and carpenter, "and as such the existing relations with agriculturists would be that of an exchange of the products of their labor, but this is not the true situation. The agriculturists, by raising the only surplus that is

[204] Ibid.

exported or exchanged with distant communities, for commodities or their equivalent, are engaged in the leading productive industry, that adds to the aggregate value of the wealth of the community, and consequently all these other occupations are subsidiary or auxiliary to and dependent upon it."[205] Rather than subject community relations to the strictures of the market, the goal of the Sub-Treasury plan was to secure a return for agricultural production that would allow for the rural community as a whole to benefit from the agricultural surplus.

In their attempts to justify this alternative vision of cooperative democracy, agrarians did not reflect an atavistic attachment to community harmony opposed to outsiders, nor did they passively conform to the social vision promulgated by the leading ideologists of their day. As one writer for *The National Economist* stated clearly, the dominant, social Darwinist ideology that free competition allows the survival of the fittest to elevate the community was a thin rationalization of inequality and a corrupted vision of social progress. Contemporary inequalities are not the result of thrift and savings, the author claimed, but force and fraud: "It is well known, however, that it was not difference in ability, enterprise, and thrift that produced the vast and fatal inequalities of wealth in the past. It is equally well known that it is not disparity in natural ability, energy, and frugality that has produced the extreme inequalities in wealth that now exists."[206] The Populists did not believe that competition formed the natural basis of society; instead, their organizations strove for a society where labor was always rendered its full equivalent, making the basis of social reproduction an "equivalence of service" rather than the exploitation of one by another.

[205] Charles Macune, "Political Economy, no. 4" *The National Economist* 1, no. 5 (April 20, 1889), 68. What it would mean for this division of labor to be organized cooperatively is a crucial question that Macune himself did not address.
[206] "Equivalence of Service," *The National Economist* 2:7 (November 2nd, 1889), 97.

While the Sub-Treasury program was one of the Populist movement's most distinctive proposals,[207] it existed alongside their aspirations to convert distributive infrastructure and natural monopolies into democratically accountable public institutions. While their rhetoric often targeted finance and "the money power," these proposals also demonstrate a deeper ambition to democratize the infrastructure governing exchange generally. Macune himself extended his anxieties about financial power to all monopolistic tendencies, particularly those that made new, modern infrastructure into an oppressive power over labor, rather than a series of tools useful to productive labor. He considered the origin of monopoly to be the private control of new technologies of interconnection that should rightly be "the property of the world": "the vast strides made in invention, the application of steam to industrial pursuits, the increased facilities for transportation, and the transmission of intelligence."[208] Alongside finance, he believed that these technologies had become the controlling heights of industry, and their monopolization by uncontested corporate power permitted a small class to reap unprecedented financial rewards from their use. In his view, a primary reason to subject these technologies to strong democratic supervision was not only so that they could be utilized in the interests of all productive workers, but also that no individual or set of individuals could legitimately have an exclusive property right to "*that which is needful to the life of all*."[209] For him, rights to these assets did not respect property and production, but merely licensed the "unlimited private accumulation" that had permitted "the control of the state by a wealthy class," effectively turning the Congress and Courts into its own property.[210] While Macune was clearly hesitant to extend his reasoning

[207] Goodwyn clearly considered it their most radical proposal and called it a "culturally inadmissible idea" even if he considered it in many respects practically defensible. For his discussion see Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise*, 565-570.
[208] Charles Macune, "The Origins of Monopoly," *The National Economist* 1, no. 5 (April 20th, 1889), 67.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.

beyond distribution channels into the emerging technologies of mass production, it is clear that both labor and agrarian workers shared a common aspiration for the democratic control of major social infrastructure, a common philosophy of cooperation premised on the ideal of an exchange of equivalents, and common aspirations to reverse the poverty of labor, creating the social conditions for the free ethical and cultural development of the producing classes, liberated from what Powderly had called "the grinding process" of exploitation.

V. Conclusion: The Contradictions of Fusion and the Ambiguities of Producerism

The formation of the People's Party was a culmination of the cooperative effort, though not without controversy within the movement. Efforts to forge "the general consolidation of all the industrial organizations in the United States" directly in the economic domain were also attempted within the movement, when the Alliance itself attempted to consolidate with a weakened Knights of Labor.[211] As one author wrote, encouraging the effort at economic consolidation, the movement had to overcome,

> the jealousy and distrust between the different classes of producers and workers created by the mistaken belief that their interests were antagonistic. … The thinking mind readily recognizes the fact that every honest producer is equally interested in the establishment of equitable economic and industrial systems; that no honest man will ask or claim more than he is entitled to receive; that no other honest man will seek or desire to prevent him from obtaining this; that no honest many will knowingly support a system that exacts unjustly from one individual in favor of another.[212]

United by a commitment to social cooperation and industrial equity, many within the movement concurred with the Omaha Platform's claim that "the interests of rural and civic labor are the same; their enemies are identical."[213]

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[211] "Co-operation of Forces," *The National Economist* 2 no. 5 (Oct, 26, 1889), 6.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Tindall, *A Populist Reader*, 93.

Translating this unity into a political party and a political program meant something different. W. Scott Morgan insisted that there was a natural bridge between economic cooperation and political cooperation in the form of a new party. In his history of the movement, he recalled addressing an Alliance meeting stating, "That there should be uniform and concerted action on the part of the members of the Order in buying and selling, in the establishment of co-operative enterprises and the advancement of our social and financial condition, no one has ever for a moment doubted … Why then, the same unity of action is not as desirable and as imperative in the overthrow of the vast monopolies that are fattening on the profits of our industry, is a question that remains yet to be satisfactorily answered."[214] As his statements indicated, political action meant taking a constitutively adversarial posture toward existing officeholders and institutions, calling out both parties for their support of unaccountable privilege, and moving the movement away from self-help and toward a direct confrontation with political power. While Macune's analysis of monopoly and the obstacles to creating popular economic infrastructure through voluntary cooperation both justified the turn to politics, doing so not only asked farmers and other laborers to abandon their fidelity to the two major parties, but opened onto larger-scale public conflict on the national stage over the future direction of social development. For these reasons, the turn to a new party catalyzed a deeper sense of popular constituent power that fed off the earlier cooperative experience. As Ben Terrel put it, workers did not only need to assume cooperative control over whatever social resources they could, "We must create public opinion; it controls the world – *vox populi, vox Dei*, the voice of the people is the voice of God – and we must make that voice. How will we do it?"[215]

[214] Morgan, *History of the Wheel and Alliance*, 263.
[215] Ben Terrel, "A Plain Talk with the Alliances," *The National Economist* 1, no. 5 (April 1889), 76.

In the left populist view of Laclau and Mouffe, this process of creating public opinion – constructing a new hegemonic ideology to crystallize popular grievances – is the *central* dynamic of populist struggles. To motivate political action, the discourse of "the people" needs to be polarized against elites, a dynamic that, in Laclau's terminology, creates an "antagonistic frontier" that divides the people from its enemies. He argues that movements must actively cultivate this frontier against an enemy, and that "if this frontier collapses, the 'people' as a historical actor disintegrates."[216] Yet the Alliance movement did not disintegrate for lack of antagonism to merchants and financiers; these elements of their experience remained constant. Terrel was encouraging Alliance members to read the Alliance press, debate its contents, communicate the Alliance vision to their fellow workers, and uphold the standard of their Party. What disintegrated this process of collective action was not a lack of antagonism, but the impossibility of securing credit for a national system of Alliances that would allow the cooperatives to displace the merchant system. As Macune understood clearly, the Alliance system suffered organizational defects imposed on it by the broader society. Merchants and bankers organized commodity-crop production through the coercive power of debt, and only politics could undermine this power.

The imperative of political action to secure the rudiments of a cooperative commonwealth led to a number of difficult decisions. While the People's Party had a number of electoral successes, the party itself was never fused to the Alliances sufficiently to make it a vehicle of the cooperative commonwealth. The height of Populist radicalism – the Omaha Platform – mobilized an electoral constituency, but the People's Party did not hold its nerve as it built its electoral power, and its decision to fuse with the Democrats and attempt an internal take-

[216] Ibid., 89.

over of their party meant that it sacrificed its independent posture and its independent mission. The political organ constituted to build the cooperative commonwealth abandoned the effort to institutionalize their experiments, sacrificing the radical demands of the Omaha Platform for bimetallism as opposed to the Sub-Treasuries and regulation of commercial infrastructure as opposed to nationalization.

Even so, while greenbackers had also inspired the labor movement, and while Populists and the Knights of Labor often had close organizational connections, the Sub-Treasury plan was also an agrarian plan with no clear connection to the interests of other workers. As one Alliance member candidly acknowledged, the Sub-Treasury plan was not for the producing classes as a whole, but was a farmers' program. Even so, "it has the merit of applying to an almighty large class, embracing as it does, all the wealth producers of the republic in its influence." For this member, "Wealth producers" can apply in a singular way to farmers since, "every other class is absolutely dependent upon the class to be benefited by this plan."[217] Such a statement merely expresses the lack of close organizational connection within the party between the social-democratic forces of groups like the Knights of Labor – who also aspired to democratized finance and had experiences coordinating cooperative experiments – with the social-democratic agrarian forces. Rather than a generic proposal for democratized finance, Sub-Treasury warehouses were an institutionalization of the Alliance cooperatives, and by making agriculture the locus of the productive surplus, the plan offered little to cooperators whose control over their own labor remained the subject of tense struggles with employers.

At the same time, the agrarian/labor alliance need not have entailed this deficit of interconnection. Later European socialists often overlooked these possibilities of alliance, given

[217] Oliver Jones, "The Sub-Treasury" *The National Economist* ,3 no. 5 (April 19, 1890) 65.

their experiences of capitalists appealing to farmers based on a common attachment to the centrality of private ownership for the social order as a whole. As Karl Kautsky wrote, "The capitalist parties themselves seek this coalition [with farmers], in part because they need votes, in part because of more profound reasons. They know that today the private property of small producers is the strongest support of the principle of private ownership in general, and therefore of their whole system of exploitation."[218] If this were uniformly true, labor's goal should be to do as the Socialist Labor Party had done, to agitate against the People's Party for the sake of a purely proletarian movement of property-less wage-laborers, encouraging radical Populists to abandon the People's Party and join the electorally insignificant SLP.[219] Yet even Engels, from the vantage of London, bemoaned the doctrinaire and socially weak trajectory of the SLP. Engels claimed in a letter to Friedrich Sorge that the SLP and a similar British party had, "managed to reduce the Marxian theory of development to a rigid orthodoxy, which the workers are not to reach themselves by their own class feeling, but which they have to gulp down as an article of faith at once and without development. That is why both of them remain mere sects and come, as Hegel says, from nothing through nothing to nothing."[220] What would have made the SLP not merely a "sect" would be matching the radical democratic quality of the Populist movement, which was rooted primarily in the creative experimentation of workers' struggling directly against their own exploitation. Rather than a failure to conform to the definite interests of sociologically pure social classes, the impasses of agrarian/labor unity came from the inability of party delegates to synthesize popular demands in a shared program for cooperative democracy.

[218] Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, 216.
[219] On the SLP's sectarian strategies toward the Populists see, Pollack, *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, 85-94.
[220] Friedrich Engels, "Engels to Sorge, May 12, 1894" *Letters to Americans, 1848-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), 263.

In other words, the struggles of American workers to forge social cooperation as a strategy for democratic self-determination were able to achieve a number of local successes, but they never created a political vehicle adequate to confront the political powers arrayed against them – the powers that governed the reproduction of the people's own social relations.

"The Protracted Struggle": Eugene Debs, Socialist Unionism, and the Struggle for Cooperation

"I am not a Labor Leader; I do not want you to follow me or anyone else; if you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are. I would not

lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I led you in, someone else would lead you out. YOU MUST use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourself out of your present condition; as it is now the capitalists use your heads and your hands." – Eugene Debs[221]

Eugene Debs was among the most prominent trade unionists to support the Populist movement. Not only did an anti-fusion contingent within the People's Party support his nomination as the Party's Presidential candidate in 1896, but Debs also lent active support to the Populist cause throughout the 1890's. As early as 1891, he published the Omaha Platform in the *Locomotive Fireman's Magazine* – a craft union journal he edited as part of his first work in the labor movement. In appended comments, he welcomed the possibility that, "a party is coming which will discard and anathematize class legislation and inaugurate a reign of justice," but he was not yet prepared to endorse public ownership of the railways (at the time he believed the cost of administration would be borne by taxes on labor) and he considered the Sub-Treasury plan in need of further refinement if it were to serve labor's interests or avoid excessive inflation.[222] Even though Debs had been active in Democratic Party politics in Indiana since early adulthood, serving as both City Clerk in his hometown of Terre Haute and as a State Senator, by the early 1890's he began to consider a political party independent of the power of wealth as the only democratic political force capable of capable of improving workers' conditions.

By August of 1894 – reeling from defeat in the Pullman strike and on his way to prison for violating a federal injunction – Debs's commitment to the third party intensified. In a speech reproduced in the Kansas Populist journal *People's Voice*, Debs declared, "I am Populist and am in favor of wiping both the old parties out so they will never come into power again. I have been

[221] Quoted in *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches* ed. Bruce Rogers and Stephen Marion Reynolds (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company Cooperative, 1908), 71.
[222] Eugene Debs, "The People's Party," *Locomotive Fireman's Magazine* 15, no. 7 (July 1891), 624-625.

a Democrat all my life and I am ashamed to admit it."[223] As he claimed, he could not support a two-party system in which both parties keep their doors open for corporate bosses, while Populist leaders during Coxey's march were arrested when they tried to give a speech on the steps of the Capitol.[224] Nevertheless, when the Populists endorsed William Jennings Bryan on the Democratic ticket during the 1896 Presidential election, Debs softened his position toward the Democrats and actively campaigned for Bryan. When Bryan lost, Debs again picked up the third-party effort, and formed the Social Democracy of America (SDA) in 1897, an organizational embryo of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) founded four years later, which featured him as its Presidential candidate during the next two decades.

As in the case of the Populists, interpreting Debs and the Socialist Party has been complicated by historical frameworks that fail to illuminate their theory and practice of cooperative democracy. In Debs's case, these historical frameworks have often revolved around the relationship between socialism and iterations of American liberal nationalism developed during the Cold War. Looking back on Debs's legacy during the 1950's, Arthur Schlesinger introduced an edited volume of Debs's writings and speeches that celebrated him as "a great American democrat. The radical passions of the Jacksonians, the Free Soilers, the Populists spoke through Debs – now only in the unaccustomed vocabulary of Socialism."[225] For Schlesinger, though, the goal of linking Debs to an American tradition of radical democracy was to vindicate American democracy, not socialism. In his view, Debs was an honorable figure not only because he courageously stood up for liberal rights like free speech when irresponsible leaders had sacrificed their Constitutional principles to the demands of expediency, but also

[223] "Debs's Advice," *People's Voice* (Aug. 10, 1984), 8.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Introduction" in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs* ed. Arthur M. Schelsinger, Jr., (New York: Heritage Press, 1948), xiii.

because he rejected "the conspiratorial disloyalties of the American Communist Party," proving his commitment to America's "democratic traditions of change through debate and consent."[226] For Schlesinger, what mattered about Debs's connection to the Populists was not their shared politics of cooperative democracy, but their shared politics of national allegiance, embedded in culture of dissent that fought "the political aspirations of the business community" without undermining the competitive pluralism of liberal governance or the imperatives of national security.[227]

While Debs's connection to the Populists is often noted by historians, his role in the labor and socialist movements often places him outside the parameters of many theories of populism. To the extent that theories of populism oppose populist politics based on the majoritarian ideal of "we, the people" to the more narrow class politics of industrial workers, they obscure both the continuities and discontinuities between Populism and Debsian socialism. A left-populist perspective gets us closer to grasping these relationships, but again, its focus on the discursive construction of a popular adversarial identity misses the nuance of Debs's evolving critique of political economy grounded in an ideal of cooperation. From the left-populist perspective, an examination of Debs would emphasize whether he was able to transcend the economistic "workerism" of the Second International that Laclau and Mouffe claim narrowed socialists' vision, preventing them from developing a genuinely "popular" coalition that mobilized antagonism based on anti-elite sentiment. According to this frame, the ability of Debs and the Socialist Party to construct the basis of a new cultural hegemony in opposition to the self-justifications of capitalist elites would depend on how well he articulated the antagonisms latent in American political culture, mobilizing collective action toward the socialist project. Such an

[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid. Apparently neither the Populists nor Socialists fought the economic aspirations of the business community.

approach might resonate with figures who admire Debs for both his socialism and his Americanism, and who understand the relative success of Debsian socialism as an effect of its cultural resonance with American workers. For Debs's biographer Nick Salvatore, Debs was unique among radical figures for his capacity to translate American ideals of individualism and civic participation into a compelling vision of democratic socialism.[228]

As we saw in the case of the Populists, a central emphasis on the discursive construction of collective identities within movements not only displaces conflict from the socio-economic to the cultural sphere, but it also tends to push aside the connections between self-transforming democratic agency and critiques of political economy that diagnose how exploitation structures social relations. Such approaches miss how the Populists and those who carried their legacy connected democratic agency and social-theoretic diagnosis in a politics of cooperative struggle. In Debs's case, left-populist preoccupations also tend to reinforce an unfortunate tendency in the Socialist Party itself, which emerged primarily from its struggle to connect with the labor movement: a tendency to see the goal of socialist organization as *ideological conversion* to socialism measured by votes for Socialist politicians, rather than *cooperative praxis* embodied in the specific organizational activities of socialist unions. Continuous with the Populists and Knights, Debs and other socialists did not just proselytize for social change, but encouraged various forms of cooperative self-organization – in workers' councils, agricultural coops, and mass strikes – which served as catalysts of collective empowerment premised on social struggle. Cooperative agency was not simply a pre-condition for political mobilization, but an effort to build the embryo of a democratic economy within the compromised conditions of the *status quo*, a necessary component of the Socialist Party's struggle for political power and core ingredient of

[228] Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

how Debs understood democratic, egalitarian social transformation. Debsian socialists and radical Populists shared this radical democratic emphasis, which centered participatory, self-forming agency in struggles against exploitation. As Debs's quote at the opening of this chapter indicates, he understood the people developing their capacity to act as a constituent force as an elementary precondition of democratic, socialist change – a capacity that is always latent, and can emerge when empowered collectives come to see themselves as capable of reconstructing their own social relations. As Debs understood, eliciting this agency was not only a struggle against the ideas in workers' heads, but a struggle against how capitalist society organizes social relations. As he indicates in the passage above, the capitalist labor process implies that it is *capitalists* who put workers' "heads and hands" to use, and as his own aspirations for the labor movement show, the ability to recover the capacity for cooperative self-organization was a central way that workers could re-capture this alienated power. For this reason, one of Debsian socialism's major stumbling blocks was the failure of the labor movement to institutionalize these practices of cooperative workplace democracy on a wide scale – practices that were nevertheless concretely developed by socialist unionists who sought to transform the despotic cooperation of the capitalist labor process into free, social cooperation.[229]

Despite Debs's continuities with the Populist radical democratic, cooperative legacy, his vision of democratic socialism also departed from the Populists' vision of cooperative market reconstruction in important ways. At the center of these changes was the move from the radical greenback focus on distributional inequality to the socialist focus on the primacy of production

[229] My use of the term "despotism" comes from William Clare Roberts, who notes that "the despotic command of the capitalist is premised on the capitalist being him- or herself under the sway of market imperatives" making the form of domination in the factory distinct from a form of arbitrary dictatorship or tyranny. Despotism is defined by the fact that "constant flux in the person of the despot [does] nothing to disturb the overall structure of society." See Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 344, 342 [epub].

and property-relations in organizing society. While this shift was transformative – it called into question the meaning of popular "equal rights" to property as well as how social cooperation in the cooperative commonwealth was imagined – Debsian socialism was also in many respects an *extension* of the Populist ideal of achieving social control over "the great highways of life" to all socially necessary and collectively operated infrastructure, not an abrogation of Populism's basic democratic principles.[230] Even so, Debs departed from basic Populist conceptions of property rights and the market. Since Debs believed that the root of capitalist exploitation is capitalists' control over means of production that can only be operated socially, allowing them to control the labor process and extract a surplus within the process of production by extending labor time beyond the cost of reproducing the worker, the very idea that private property rights represent a cornerstone of society needed to be challenged. Instead of a society built on "equal rights" to laborers as well as capitalists, Debs's vision of socialism was premised on the ideal of *shared enjoyment of socially produced wealth*, manifest not simply in a more equal distribution of the surplus to individuals, but in the creation of forms of public affluence that elevate society as a whole.[231] Significantly, the turn to socialism also implied that the "commercial" quality of Populist cooperation was transformed into an ideal of democratically organized industry, significantly altering the socialist perspective on the market. While we are accustomed to associating the socialist critique of the market as entailing a grey, "bureaucratic" or "economistic" ideal of a planned society, Debs himself envisioned democratically controlled

[230] The connection between Populism and Socialism was not just ideological, but institutionally concrete, since the Southwestern socialists were often former Populists. See James Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).
[231] My hypothesis is that the central figure for this element of Debs's vision is not Marx (though he could have gotten it from Marx), but Edward Bellamy. See Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (Ontario: Broadview, 2003 [1888]).

industry as a site of creative self-fulfillment. As he put it, in a socialist society, "The industrial dungeon will become a temple of science."[232]

These changes of focus do not simply result from the innovations of Debs or other socialists, but from concrete responses to the organizational and political difficulties of workers at the turn of the 20th century. For this reason, illuminating Debs's innovations as a thinker does not just require comparing him to other intellectual figures, but reconstructing how he responded to the concrete problems thrown up by changes in the capitalist labor process, in the political balances of power confronted by organized labor, and the organizational capacities of workers in different locations in the scheme of social reproduction. In what follows, I show how Debs's vision of socialism was not just a cultural artifact of a trans-historical "Americanism" hypostatized as the mythical-ideological basis of national unity, but the product of his concrete attempts to wrestle with, reconstruct, and occasionally reject inherited democratic expectations as he confronted new experiences of exploitation and collective empowerment. Too often, many have agreed with Debs's biographer Ray Ginger that, "Debs was never the brains of his party." As Ginger noted, "This description was endorsed by most Socialist leaders, whether radical or reformist. Although they acknowledged Debs' "spiritual" leadership, they steadfastly contended that the was no thinker or theoretician."[233] Even though Debs did not write treatises, he did edit magazines, write articles and pamphlets, intervene in controversies, and give speeches throughout his entire adult life. Failing to accord Debs his intellectual due limits our ability to learn from his experiences. As Debs entered the labor movement in the 1880's and 1890's, he shared the Populist hope of securing parity between capital and labor by agitating for labor's rights, a project that eventually inspired his association with the third-party effort. After his

[232] Eugene Debs, "Industrial Unionism," in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, 241.
[233] Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 378.

defeat in the Pullman Strike, Debs began to reformulate his diagnosis of the obstacles to workers' democracy, and developed a revolutionary ideal of cooperation that animated his hopes for a cooperative commonwealth. After the formation of the SPA, Debs's struggled to transform the labor movement into a site of cooperative agency and the social basis for a political struggle against capitalism. In so doing, he had to wrestle not only with new capitalist technologies of labor discipline (predominantly the spread of Taylorist scientific management), but also the AFL's domination of the labor movement and a divided working class. Ultimately, the SPA sought the hegemonic power to lead society in a new direction, not only by redefining common understandings of the general interest, but by forging social alliances among workers and by proving that the possibility of their comprehensive self-government existed in embryo in the current order. Nevertheless, business elites and their allies succeeded in locating the general interest in the nexus of private capital, economic growth, and consumer welfare. Despite their political failure, socialists developed an alternative vision that has not lost its persuasive power: capitalist interdependence reveals the inherently cooperative nature of social reproduction, but because it rests on exploitation, it ensures that the majority of its participants will never fully benefit from the fruits of their cooperative labor. A truly social form of cooperation would self-consciously begin to ensure the reverse: that the common labor of all elevates everyone, so that society truly 'works together' for its common good.

I. Capital, Labor, and Workers' Control: The Idea of Workers' Democracy in Debs's Early Years

To understand how Debs developed his vision of cooperative democracy, we first need to describe the social context in which his initial political struggles occurred. Debs came to political

consciousness as an active participant in the railway workers' movement, and his initial ideology merged democratic aspirations descended from the American revolutionary heritage with the specific problems that defined workers' craft organizations in the late 19th century. Based on the political assumption that all citizens are equal participants in popular sovereignty, how should their equality manifest within both the workplace and the broader economy? What kinds of property rights, patterns of ownership, and forms of association allowed power to be shared among the people and the majority to rule? In his early years, Debs accepted that both "capital" and "labor" have legitimate social roles with corresponding rights and duties. For workers' organizations, the labor problem revolved around how to uphold workers' civic equality and their capacity for political participation by re-adjusting the relations between capital and labor through both collective organization and political action. In these early years, the ideal of a cooperative commonwealth did not yet structure Debs's politics. Experiences of egalitarian cooperation animated Debs's political struggles, but they did not crystalize into a revolutionary political ideal until a series of impasses persuaded him that power between capitalists and laborers could never be freely shared. Rather than provide a stable structure for Debs's worldview, national ideological expectations and narratives were transformed through Debs's attempts to wrestle with the craft-union movement's contradictory sources of power and vulnerability.

To understand Debs's early trajectory, Salvatore's biography offers crucial insights, but it also reflects the limitations of a framework that centers national culture in an explanation of Debs's career and working-class history more generally. Salvatore productively examines how Debs' worldview was shaped by the social composition, political ideology, and ethical norms that defined his hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana and similar Western towns during the 19th

century. According to Salvatore, communities like Terre Haute tended to embrace an ideology of "deferential democracy," a vision of politics and social harmony that united workers and business leaders around common project of community uplift and individual opportunity.[234] As a hegemonic project, deferential democracy had clear economic underpinnings and social consequences. Despite the power that local business elites wielded over their neighbors, many citizens in rapidly developing towns believed that those elites' private initiative brought common advancement. As long as their power did not solidify into permanent class distinctions that offended civic equality or hampered social mobility, most citizens accepted their entrepreneurial leadership and the opportunities it might create. For workers, aspiring to social mobility within this framework required deferring to business power. As Salvatore explains, local school systems, churches, and other cultural institutions enforced norms that straddled both democracy and deference within a general ideology "that stressed individual potential and community progress within the context of the political traditions of the American Revolutionary heritage."[235] Just as that heritage emphasized equal opportunity and equality before the law, it counseled obedience to authorities and the imperative of hard work to justify individual advancement.

Deferential democracy was also the ideological effect of business elites' need to secure broad community support as a condition of their own prosperity. In the mid-19th century, "One could not aspire to financial greatness in a small Midwestern backwater," so local elites were particularly keen to nurture an ideological consensus that ensured workers' active participation in projects of economic development.[236] Often, this meant embracing the "classless" elements of the American Revolutionary heritage for their own purposes. To maintain the ideological

[234] Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist,* 10.
[235] Ibid. 11.
[236] Ibid., 24

consensus derived from Revolutionary ideals, elites not only had to deliver material benefits, but they also had to guard against allegations that their status derived from systemic factors that favored them as a class and erected barriers to the individual achievement of all. Since private ownership of capital could be perceived as one such factor, separations in the community between capitalists and laborers could not be seen to rend the civic bonds that made everyone a part of the same democratic people.

The success of small entrepreneurial capital's hegemony can be seen in the extent to which workers, including the young Debs, embraced it. In a US Senate hearing on labor conflicts, one worker expressed a widespread view when he asserted, "Now my view of capital and labor is that a community should exist between the capitalist and the laborer, instead of antagonistic feelings."[237] Statements like these were based on specific assumptions about political economy. Since laborers needed capitalists to provide employment, and capitalists needed laborers for production, they key to the labor problem was figuring out how to prevent each party from injuring the other while divining the shared interests that unite them in a common social project. As we saw in the last chapter, greenback theory was centered on this project, even as it transformed the apparently conciliatory ideal of equality between capital and labor into the radical demand for cooperative market reconstruction; though public control of banking and distributive infrastructure, the Populists sought to ensure that financial capital would receive a reward no greater than labor's own power of production.

Salvatore argues that Debs was right when he began to criticize this conception of class harmony, but he also claims that Debs was right to never depart from it completely, particularly its distinctively midwestern-American combination of civic idealism and communitarianism. In

[237] Quoted in ibid., 24.

his view, Debs's ultimate ideal for a socialist society – the cooperative commonwealth – was deeply tied to his memory of the participatory democratic community of Terre Haute and the values of social harmony it instilled. When a fully industrial, capitalist United States undermined that vision of social harmony, he claims, Debs turned to socialism as an alternative vision of regenerated community.[238] Yet to what extent did the "social harmony" of Terre Haute positively influence Debs's mature vision of cooperation? Reconstructing his early work in the labor movement demonstrates how Debs's mature vision of cooperation was one component of a general *rejection* of the ideal of "democratic" class harmony between capital and labor, and it shows how that rejection emerged from the evolution of his understanding of capitalism, democracy, and the kinds of political struggles necessary to bring about a cooperative society. Rather than an atavistic attachment to community harmony, Debs's philosophy of cooperation developed out of an evolving diagnosis of material changes in American society and their social and political consequences. For this reason, "cooperation" did not imply the re-creation of harmonious community bonds that were rent by industrialism; instead, it named an egalitarian practice of power-sharing within both workplaces and communities that had to be actively created by social movements and could only develop its full potential in a political struggle that challenged the power of society's ruling classes.

To understand why Debs initially operated with the expectation of equal rights to both capital and labor, it is crucial to remember that this ideology was not a static system that simply denied class conflict; instead, it gave workers powerful outlets for class struggle and shaped specific forms of self-government that corresponded to the structural power accessible to

[238] Ibid., 151-152. Discussing the ideal of the cooperative commonwealth, Salvatore claims that, Debs, "repeatedly placed that concept within the bounds of American political culture" which implied that he, "scorned the competitive system," while emphasizing redress through the ballot, demanding that labor retain the value it produces, and connecting social aspiration to an ultimately "religious" ideal of fraternity.

different groups of workers. Rather than deny that capital and labor can develop antagonistic interests, it only denied that conflicts between workers and capitalists derive from a fundamental antagonism rooted in capitalist social relations. While radical greenbackism expressed the egalitarian hopes of a number of farmers and proto-industrial workers who sought to strip financial despots of their accumulative power, 19th century craft workers on the railroads and within other industries sought to achieve parity between capital and labor by controlling workplace organization through their unions. While these workers often pushed the boundaries of their deference to capital during conflicts, their claims ultimately rested on criticism of specific injustices committed by capitalists rather than a systemic critique of capitalist society. Within this paradigm, class struggle takes the form of workers organizing to directly correct these injustices, and, if these efforts were impeded or failed, using their rights of political participation to change legislation and restore justice.

Debs's introduction to the labor movement was bound up in this basic theory and practice of trade unionism, and it permeated his work as a clerk and magazine editor for the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF), a fraternal society for railway workers that he joined in his mid-20's after a short stint working on the rails as a teenager. The Brotherhood was initially organized as a fraternal order and mutual insurance society, and like the Farmer's Alliances, it was founded on the values of self-help and moral uplift. Railway workers formed the organization to protect themselves and their families from the catastrophic consequences of on-the-job injury. As Ginger notes, "The wages of firemen did not permit them to pay the premiums charged by private companies; so, if they were injured or killed, their families were forced to rely on charity. The sole escape from this impoverishment rested in a co-operative insurance order of

the workers themselves."[239] In addition to providing insurance, the order hoped that by utilizing self-organization to improve workers' character and provide for their common needs, they would improve their public image, control access to jobs, and garner higher wages from employers as a return for good performance. Through their organizations, they devised a vision of cooperation that revolved on the one hand around workers' relationship to others members of their trade, and on the other hand, a vision of power-sharing between workers and employers rooted in a theory of the appropriate relationship between labor and capital.

An essay called "Mutual Obligations" published when Debs was editor of the *Magazine* made clear that workers bore a heavy responsibility to uphold capital/labor harmony, reflecting the shared interest of both parties in efficient production. The essay stated that, "The locomotive fireman is to a certain extent the custodian of the property of his employer … He can be extravagant or economical in the use of fuel, which in the course of a year amounts to a considerable sum of money. If a fireman neglects his duty in this, if he is unmindful of his obligations in such cases, he falls short of being a first class fireman, he does not recognize mutual obligations."[240] Reciprocally, if firemen operate the property of their employers with economy and skill, employers must uphold their side of the bargain: "The railroad manager is under weighty obligations to treat the fireman as a man, a gentleman – honorably, justly … every right and privilege due to manhood should be recognized."[241] If employers fail to do so, workers had a duty to stand collectively against the injustice.

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[239] Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1949), 22.
[240] "Mutual Obligations," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 11:1 (January 1888), 5.
[241] Ibid., 5. Salvatore emphasizes the importance of "manhood" in Debs's early worldview, and he is right to call attention to its patriarchal overtones. Overall, though, "manhood" is treated as a resource for workers' militancy (though an unfortunate one, given its propensity to encourage sexism). However, while masculine norms can encourage workers to contest unjust treatment, they also provide a source of employer/employee unity if employers can convince workers they are being treated as "men" without suffering a real challenge to their own power.

While these rights and privileges were often embedded in cultural norms tied to masculinity, religion, and public duty, they also reflected a democratic vision of workers' cooperation, manifest in their shared control over the labor process. In general, by negotiating wages, regulating pacing and output, and educating new members, craft organizations protected a fair share of profits and preserved joint control over the workplace. In part, craft-workers' ability to exercise shared control derived from an asset that employers did not possess: skilled knowledge of the production process, what the historian David Montgomery called "the manager's brain under the workman's cap."[242] Through their organizations, "Technical knowledge acquired on the job was embedded in a mutualistic ethical code, also acquired on the job, and together these attributes provided skilled workers with considerable autonomy at their work and powers of resistance to the wishes of their employers."[243] When craft unions formalized these codes, they often referred to them as "legislation," a term that "denotes a shift from spontaneous to deliberate collective action, from a group ethical code to formal rules and sanctions, and from resistance to employers' pretensions to control over them."[244] Workers' legislation set wage levels, established terms for apprenticeship, regulated the calendar, and set output targets that not only governed the firm's operation but often set the duration of the working day.[245] The collective autonomy derived from self-legislation, combined with an ethical vision of preserving workers' dignity alongside that of employers, was a resource for democratic self-determination and class conflict, although it often remained compatible with employers' property rights and the authority that those rights implied within the firm. Even without ownership of the means of production, skilled workers could run a significant portion of the

[242] David Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[243] David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). 14
[244] Ibid., 15.
[245] Ibid., 13-16.

labor process according to their own democratic legislation. When employers refused to acknowledge their rules, organized workers could strike, slow down production, or turn to politics.[246]

BLF workers operated within this basic paradigm of craft union democracy, harnessing the structural power of their skills, ethical code, and capacity for self-organization. As for similar craft organizations, this power was accessible without federating in a common organization with other railway crafts, and it required a sympathetic posture toward employers for the purposes of negotiation. As Montgomery explains, "In general, where a union was strong enough to defy its employers alone and where no major technological innovations threatened its members' work practices, it tended to reach an accommodation with the employers on the basis of the latter's more or less willing recognition of the union's work rules."[247] Within craft-union democracy, workers' cooperation therefore had a limited scope. Cooperation linked experiences in the shop, where new workers were conscripted into the trade's ethical code and developed the capacity to participate in workplace legislation, to industry-wide organizations that defined the practices of the trade. Unlike for workers in the more radical Knights of Labor, cooperation in the Railway Brotherhoods remained restricted to the specific work experience of the designated craft. Cooperation did not extend into the domain of ownership, nor did it seek to transform exchange relations among workplaces. Instead, workers' control meant the collective legislation of work rules for distinct trades in privately owned firms.

[246] This theory and practice of workers' control remained limited to crafts where specialized knowledge gave workers firm-level authority that their "unskilled" compatriots lacked. This made workers' control as elaborated above a distinct possibility of craft unions. As Montgomery notes, "There is no evidence that local assemblies of unskilled workers or of semiskilled operatives ever attempted to regulate production processes themselves in the way assemblies of glass blowers and other craftsmen did." Ibid, 19.
[247] Ibid., 23.

While the BLF did find real power in a combination of deference to employers, organizational capacity, and mutualistic ethics, the organization radicalized during Debs's tenure, spurred by the experiences of its rank and file. In 1877, railway workers had played a leading role during "the Great Upheaval," the first mass strike wave in United States history. A nationwide series of strikes began when railway workers stopped the freight lines in response to a 10% pay cut issued by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. When the Brotherhoods did nothing to respond to the cut or support those on strike, workers formed a secret organization called The Trainmen's Union to coordinate work stoppages along the railway line from Baltimore to Chicago.[248] In response to the violent suppression of the strike by both state and federal authorities, a wave of strikes spread throughout the country, ranging across dozens of trades in cities from Chicago to Buffalo and Galveston. During a general strike in St. Louis that endured for days coordinated by the socialist Workingmen's Party, railway workers re-opened the passenger lines under their own authority independent of management.[249] By the end, President Rutherford B. Hayes admitted that "The strikers have been put down by *force*", leaving more than 100 workers killed, including at least one railway fireman.[250]

The Brotherhoods responded to the Great Upheaval by cautioning workers against risky strikes that undermined their public standing and invited repression. Organizations like the BLF wanted members to uphold craft rules and direct their self-help organizations toward relatively isolated negotiations with employers. In 1880, Debs himself echoed these ideals at a BLF convention, stating, "In times gone by, laboring men who had been imposed on, formed themselves into a mob and with a recklessness that makes us shudder, began to burn and plunder

[248] Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1972), 1-6.
[249] Ibid., 17-20.
[250] Quoted in Ibid., 21. Italics original.

the property of the corporations they were working for … While we always sympathized with these deluded and miserable wretches, we have always felt that they were wrong in acting so violently."[251] Statements like these issued in part from the imperative to protect the real negotiating power with employers that allowed workers to control significant aspects of the parameters of their own labor.

Debs did not hold these views for long. Foremost among the factors that moved him away from the BLF's cautious approach to conflict was his antipathy to the ways that capitalist power manifested politically – that is, how the power of wealth corrupted democratic procedures that were supposed to allow the majority to rule. While craft-union democracy often focused on redressing particular injustices (a wage cut, unfair dismissal, speed-ups), the actions of capital, labor, and the state during events like the Great Upheaval did not seem to point to particular injustices, but to systemic corruption. During the strike wave, the state had clearly sided with capital over labor; the B&O Railroad President's request for the violent suppression of the strike was swiftly granted, while workers did not even get a hearing. Were railroad workers no less citizens of the republic than a railroad president? Capital proved not only that it was continually willing to act unilaterally and despotically toward labor, but that it would freely call on violent state aid to ensure that labor conflicts were resolved in their favor. If the state was more accountable to back-room dealings with capitalists than workers and their representatives, were the people sovereign in name only? In Debs's view, labor organizations needed to prove themselves adequate to these challenges if they were to remain true to their democratic mission. Not only did this imply re-thinking labor's posture toward politics, but it required challenging craft exclusivity to create common organizations capable of coordinating mass labor action and

[251] Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 34.

effectively representing all workers. Not only did craft-union localism alone lack the organizational capacity or political weight to get to the root of these problems, but the forms of cooperation they nurtured seemed under threat without a change in strategy.

By the mid-80's, Debs became convinced that labor needed to learn how to strike peacefully to protect its interests, and he sought to develop labor's strike capacity through larger federations among the Railroad Brotherhoods. Eventually, he was able to successfully organize a Supreme Council of The United Orders of Railway Employees, which would ensure that if a strike were required to protect the rights of a particular craft, all workers would be ordered off the job. Without ever having to order a strike, the mere existence of the united organization helped to prevent unionized workers from being fired, secure wage increases, and enforce contracts.[252] While united effort based on a federated principle clearly worked for some aims, it retained a vulnerable underbelly. Excising that vulnerability came at a cost, though, since it was linked to some the federation's sources of power. Craft codes – derived from the concrete experiences of performing specific tasks in the division of labor with integrity and expertise – were essential to workers' ethical norms and their ability to exercise collective control over the labor process. At the same time, particularistic craft identities also entrenched contradictory interests between firemen, engineers, and switch and brake operators, not to mention other railway workers like porters and maids who were excluded from the federation entirely.[253] Rather than stay off the job, resentful workers might even scab when an isolated craft called a strike, often to retaliate for the corrosive effects of inter-group competition.[254] Initially, Debs

[252] Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 66-67.
[253] White craft organizations excluded porters and maids for reasons that were primarily racist, but they were also sexist (in the case of maids), and part of a general hierarchy of skill perpetuated by these organizations. Firemen, for example, were below engineers and conductors, and above brake operators in terms of pay and privilege. Debs often remarked that racial exclusion was the decisive factor in hobbling the ARU.
[254] On scabbing within the Brotherhoods see ibid.

imagined that the Council would allow full craft autonomy while maintaining collective discipline for negotiations and strikes. Yet in many respects a loosely federated organization was not a common organization. A large-scale organization needed its own ideology that would not entrench but transcend craft interests, that would be willing to organize disciplined strikes when necessary, and that would provide an industry-wide and ultimately broadly popular vision of social change.

These aspirations were embodied in the American Railway Union (ARU), which Debs co-founded in 1893, breaking from the Railway Brotherhoods. During the ARU's first national convention, Debs declared,

> The forces of labor must unite. They dividing lines must grow dimmer day by day until they become imperceptible, and then labor's hosts, marshalled under one conquering banner, shall march together, vote together and fight together, until working men shall receive and enjoy all the fruits of their toil. … Such an army would be impregnable. No corporation would assail it. The reign of justice would be inaugurated. The strike would be remanded to the relic chamber of the past. An era of good will and peace would dawn.[255]

While the move to form an industry-wide labor federation was considered "dual unionism" and treason by some labor leaders like Samuel Gompers,[256] Debs's aspirations were more concretely egalitarian than ever before. He hoped that large-scale industrial unions would tend "to eliminate the aristocracy of labor, which unfortunately exists, and organize them so all will be on an equality."[257] At this point, Debs conceived of the ARU as a vehicle of a form of industrial democracy that realized workers' civic equality on the job, not as the vehicle of a cooperative society. Successful organization and political participation would make labor the equal of capital, institutionalizing a form of capital/labor corporatism that could ensure both social justice (the wages, working hours, and on-the-job authority that made workers co-participants in industrial

[255] Quoted in ibid, 115.
[256] Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 95.
[257] Ibid., 83. Again we see the connection between organizational capacity and egalitarianism.

management), and democratic representation in politics (insulated by labor's strong hand from the corrupting influence of capitalist power).

To forge a common ideology for labor, Debs often appealed beyond craft-workers ethical codes and sought to connect the labor movement to transformative moments in American history, constructing a vision of the labor movement as a broad, popular movement that included all American workers within its ranks. Even if they were not always successful, these appeals to a broad hegemonic vision demonstrate Debs's commitment to focusing labor's attention both within and beyond the workplace, tackling fundamental questions about the direction of American society. Even before the ARU's formation, Debs's encouraged the workers' movement to see its work as continuous with the abolitionists. In the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, he wrote, "There are abolitionists now … those who behold every day other wrongs which they have set out to abolish, wrongs of a character which will admit of neither truce nor compromise, nothing will answer the requirement but their abolition."[258] Like some anti-slavery abolitionists, Debs considered abolition as the fulfillment of political citizenship. In Debs's view, labor was wronged by capital not only because workers were kept poor in a wealthy society, but because capitalist injuries "sap the foundations of citizenship" and undermine the social infrastructure that permits workers to engage in self-government. Such political inequality undermined what Debs called "fair play" between workers and managers on the job, and it also allowed capitalists to wield disproportionate power over the courts and the political system.[259] In Debs's view, workers' struggles needed to target both economic unfairness and political corruption: "The men who do the work demand fair pay for their labor, decent food, decent clothing, decent shelter, homes, such as become American sovereigns, clothed with the high

[258] Eugene Debs, "Abolitionists," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* 11, no. 2, (February 1887), 67-68.
[259] Ibid.

responsibilities of shaping the destinies of the great American Republic."[260] Much the way some imagined abolition as a corrective to the American political system cleansed of the evils of slavery, Debs argued that, "The revolution now in progress is not to change the form of government, it is not to abolish courts, overthrow institutions, but rather to make government, courts, institutions subserve the happiness of the American people. We have sovereignty of the people, we have equality of conditions and responsibilities. We have made the ballot the standard. The majority must rule."[261] While this connection failed to persuade a majority of ARU workers on the imperative of racial equality, it reflects both Debs's vision of abolitionism as a common labor struggle and their connection as an orienting frame for a fully popular movement.

While Debs intensified the radicalism of his *political* critique of industrial relations, he did not yet embrace socialism or break with a cardinal element of the "class harmony" thesis: that antagonism between capital and labor emerged from a breach of justice, not from the inherent social relations structuring production. In his essay on the abolitionists, he claimed that the conflict between capital and labor is not a conflict between social classes, but "a conflict between right and wrong, truth and error, justice and injustice, a conflict between citizens who make everything, build everything and the men who simply supervise and manage."[262] Nevertheless, the head of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) Daniel DeLeon greeted the formation of the ARU as, "a step in the direction of clasping hands with the whole working class in other industries," and claimed that rather than advance narrow vision of workers' craft democracy, it raised, "the real question … – the abolition of the capitalist system of production, the establishment of the co-operative commonwealth."[263]

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[260] Ibid.
[261] Debs, "Abolitionists," *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine* (11:2, February 1887) pp. 67-68.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ginger, 95-97.

II. Populism, Socialism, and the Cooperative Commonwealth

Despite their enthusiasm for the ARU's founding, the SLP was clear that the new union's vision was not socialist. An editorial in their journal *The People* welcomed the organization's break from the craft Brotherhoods' conservatism, but objected to its hope that labor could be made into capital's equal bargaining partner through organization. While the ARU claimed that in the long run, "if the whole trade is organized the company will yield without first awaiting the strike," the socialists argued that capital's social power and its relationship to the state would never allow labor to develop such power. For labor to develop the power to organize and direct society along democratic and cooperative lines, it would not only have to undermine capitalists' capacity to treat labor unjustly, but abolish capital's power over labor entirely. For the SLP, "Capital and labor do not stand in the relation of brothers, not even in that of partners, but in the relation of Exploiter and Exploited, of Master and Slave."[264] In this struggle between exploiter and exploited, labor's appeal to the neutral arbitration of the state and the courts will always be compromised as long as political power is shaped by capitalist economic power. In the socialist diagnosis, the centrality of labor exploitation for the reproduction of society as a whole meant that political and legal power derive fundamentally from economic power. This implies that the state not only would not, but *could not* function as neutral party between workers and employers. Since the reproduction of society depends on the normal operation of capitalist industry, which directly presumes the subjugation of labor, the existing state has an elementary imperative to buttress capital against labor. The strike wave of 1877 had demonstrated this. Paralyzing the railroads caused a general social crisis, and combined elite and popular clamoring for the restoration of commercial activity resulted directly in state violence. Instead of an arbiter

[264] "Light is Breaking," *The People* 3.2, (April 9, 1983), 2.

between capital and labor, the state functioned as "the citadel of capital," meaning that, "While the Government is in the hands of capitalists, labor has no chance of emancipation."[265] While industry-wide organization was a step in the right direction, the SLP argued that the only solution to the labor problem was for labor to develop economic organizations attached to a political party. The ARU's own goals could not be realized "until the economic and the political movement are recognized as inseparable … until Labor marches, its left hand protecting it with the shield of economic organization, and its right hand armed with the sword of its own political party." While the SLP argued that the ARU's diagnosis failed to recognize the full extent of labor's problems, its writers claimed that, "there is a prospect they will soon be."[266]

While Debs would later accede to much of this criticism, he only embraced socialism after confronting the ARU's own impasses. And while the SLP envisioned the labor movement defensively (as a "shield") and the real political struggle as a contest for control over the state, Debs's vision of socialism hinged on the labor movement's *constructive* qualities, specifically on unions' ability to recover workers' capacities for democratic self-management, preparing them to operate society's means of production cooperatively. How to transform the labor movement into a site for the formation of cooperative agency, how the experiences of cooperative labor within capitalism would relate to the socialists ideal of a cooperative commonwealth, and how labor unions would relate to the Socialist Party were all subjects of serious debate and even organizational splits among the burgeoning socialist movement. To appreciate the role of cooperation in Debs's turn to socialism, we need to move beyond doctrinal explanations of his conversion (the often-repeated idea that he became a socialist after reading Marx in prison), and show how the ideal of socialist cooperation emerged out of an immanent critique of the

[265] Ibid.
[266] "Light is Breaking," *The People* 3.2, (April 9, 1983), 2.

economic and political dilemmas of craft-union democracy and industrial unionism. Ultimately, Debs believed that cooperation not only meant shared decision-making in the workplace, but a new organization of society – the cooperative commonwealth – that would invest the social surplus in the cultural elevation of all of society's members considered as equals. Concretely, this vision of the cooperative commonwealth manifested in a series of anticipatory demands that could be articulated by workers, but only realized through the political victory of the Socialist Party: the conversion of workers' coerced surplus labor into liberated free time; the cooperative organization of the labor process according to collective deliberation; production for social use rather than for private profit; and democratic investments of the social surplus that prioritize the *res publica* ("public things") to private affluence.

Before Debs developed these views, the ARU's aspiration for industrial peace between big capital and big labor appeared plausible, and Debs had immediate reasons to keep the SLP's criticism at arms' length. The ARU's first victory in a non-violent, highly disciplined strike against the Great Northern Railroad soon after its formation seemed to validate Debs's hope that when "Labor can organize," it would be able to "demand and command."[267] Yet soon after the Great Northern victory, the ARU's defeated strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company revealed to Debs how thoroughly the state and capital were interpenetrated and how remote the ideal of state neutrality between capital and labor truly was. Not only did the federal government break the strike through an unprecedented arrogation of power to the federal judiciary (consolidated when the Supreme Court in "In Re Debs" unanimously upheld the legality of the federal injunction), but Debs was also sent to prison directly by a judge, without jury trial.[268] In the Pullman strike, strikers had the representation of an industrial union that had proven its

[267] Quoted in Ginger, *The Bending Cross*, 98.
[268] Almont Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971 [1942]), 290-291.

capability to organize disciplined strikes and bring companies to the bargaining table. Even so, the state did not act as a neutral arbiter in the conflict. Instead, the Attorney General Richard Olney coordinated directly with an employers association formed by Pullman executives and other major railway officials to break the strike, who were able to secure the use of federal troops to break the strike against not only the ARU's protest, but the protest of the mayor of Chicago and the Governor of Indiana.[269] From Debs's point of view, when the majority opinion in "In re Debs" declared that Debs's punishment should serve as, "a lesson which cannot be learned too soon or too thoroughly that under this government of and by the people the means of redress of all wrongs are through the courts and the ballot box, and that no wrong, real or fancied, carries with it legal warrant to invite as a means of redress the co-operation of a mob, with its accompanying acts of violence," the Court had only proved how safe these institutions had been made for capitalist control.[270]

In a speech delivered after his release from prison, Debs still believed that, however corrupted, American institutions were based on popular sovereignty and amenable to democratic transformation under majority rule. In a speech delivered upon his release, he said of the ballot,

> There is nothing in our government it cannot remove or amend. It can abolish unjust laws and consign to eternal odium and oblivion unjust judges … It can sweep away trusts, syndicates, corporations, monopolies, and every other abnormal development of the money power designed to abridge the liberties of the workingmen and enslave them by the degradation incident to poverty and enforced idleness, as cyclones scatter the leaves of the forest. The ballot can do all this and more. It can give our civilization its crowning glory – the co-operative commonwealth.[271]

While in prison, Debs did not lose his faith in the power of electoral democracy to fight systemic corruption, but he did begin to re-consider the economic assumptions on which his strategy for

[269] Ibid.,
[270] In Re Debs, 11 U.S. (1895).
[271] Eugene Debs, "Liberty," in *Writing and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, 11.

the labor movement had been based.[272] In a retrospective essay about his discovery of socialism written in 1902, Debs called the Pullman strike his "first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware it was called by that name." By 1902, he had come to regard his aspirations for the ARU as naïve, specifically, his hope that "if [workers] were only organized in every branch of the service and all acted together in concert they could redress their wrongs and regulate the conditions of their employment."[273] Before his encounter with socialist theory, he wrote that "no shadow of a "system" fell athwart my pathway," and he believed that strong unions and democratically accountable politicians could harness the power to institute and enforce just labor relations. After his encounter with socialist theory, Debs believed this strategy could only lead to "perfecting wage-servitude," since corporatist arrangements between big capital and big labor failed to uproot the source of capitalist power over labor: their private ownership of means of production that could only be operated collectively.[274] These insights, he claimed, began to appear in the midst of the Pullman strike itself, during "a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes – and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed*."[275]

When Debs wrote that "*the class struggle was revealed*" he was not only referring to the state's violence against strikers, but to the socialist critique of political economy that he first encountered in prison. After this encounter, Debs no longer believed that conflict between capital and labor resulted from injustices committed by either side, but that it was rooted in capitalist society's basic property relations. More specifically, this meant that he no longer understood the

[272] While not unique, Debs is noteworthy in socialist history for insisting that both socialism's revolutionary nature and the importance of the suffrage went hand in hand.
[273] Eugene Debs, "How I Became a Socialist," in *Writings and Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, 45.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.

relationship between capital and labor as a relationship between labor's instruments and living labor. Capital is not merely a set of tools – productive machinery, investment, and finance – that laborers should master and use. Instead, capital is a form of social power *over* labor. Properly understood, capital is not an object of utility, but a social relation that governs how society's productive assets are deployed in the process of social reproduction.[276] Capital's social power is rooted in private ownership and control of productive assets that could only be operated collectively, which vests capitalists with the authority to direct production and become the masters of laborers, control the surplus they produced, and transform themselves into a ruling class. In other words, capital and labor stand in the relation of exploiter and exploited, and are not partners in a common enterprise whose interests unfortunately tend to conflict. Politically, this means that capital does not need to be mastered by labor; it needs to be abolished.

Despite this retrospective assessment, Debs did not join the existing socialist party after leaving prison – the Socialist Labor Party – but allied his work with the ARU to the People's Party. What connected Debs to the People's Party was not only their common enemies in the ruling elite, but a common interest in organizing the majority of society's workers in a political project to construct a cooperative society. Even before Debs's release from prison, *The Railway*

[276] To understand this position, it is important to grasp that in defining "capital," Marx was not trying to give an empirical definition for the purposes of economic modeling, but to comprehend the specific constellation of social power in a capitalist society. In other words, he was interested in defining the historically specific roles that machinery and finance take on in a capitalist economy (that is, an economy where production is coordinated by the sale and purchase of commodities for profit, and where workers are proletarianized, i.e. divorced from access to means of production and generally market-dependent for the satisfaction of their needs), so he did not believe that one could understand "capital" by pointing to the generic utility of machinery and investment. In theorizing capital's social power, Marx found that he had to disprove the pervasive belief that capital was inherently productive, since this was not only a main normative justification that allowed capitalists to arrogate so much value to themselves, but masked the true source of value: human labor. Capital's "productivity" and its "utility" were really the productivity of exploited labor. Labor's productive power is what actually creates the machinery that functions as "capital," yet it is the imperatives of capital-accumulation that define the labor process and capitalists who control the surplus, not associated labor. See Marx, *Capital v.1*, and his widely-circulated address to the International Workingmen's Association, "Value, Price, and Profit" (which Debs was fond of citing). See "Value, Price, and Profit," in *The Essential Left* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961), 49-103.

Times had published essays, poetry, and reports on cooperation and had forged alliances with Populists. One poem crystallized a central aspect of how both Populists and Socialists understood cooperation, namely that each individual's effort should not be directed toward their merely private gain, but should contribute to the general elevation of all: "He is not truly great/ Who does not elevate/ As he toils on and upward, all his fellow-men./ Rise, then, by raising others;/ Co-operate my brothers;/ You speed your own and all men's evolution then."[277] In similar fashion to the radical greenbackers, one writer for the ARU's magazine not only challenged capitalists' domineering power, but their prerogative to dramatically accumulate value, which the author castigated as a criminal effect of the competitive system and incompatible with democracy. Similar to the Populists, the essay lamented how a small minority possessed such an outsized portion of the legal representation of economic value (money), in a country that nominally respected the "equal rights" of all (including their rights to property). In all cases, the author argued, lawful management of property requires some regulation for the public's health and safety, implying that "the abstract rights of the one man [the property owner] are abridged for the good of all men." If we accept that basic principle, why is "the absorption and gathering in of capital" exempt?[278] Such absorptive power is similarly injurious to the public good, manifest in the "undue, unhealthy, and autocratic power" it vests in capitalists; "millions today are feeling its lash in the restriction of liberty."[279] For the author, capital's crimes are not the result of bad actors or simply the results of private control of banking, but are "the effects of the doctrine of competition run wild."[280] Yet at this point, how and why "the competitive system" produced such dramatic inequalities was still unclear. Did competition just imply that

[277] Miles Menander Dawson, "Co-Operation," *Railway Times* 1, no. 19 (October 1, 1984).
[278] "Capital and Crime," *Railway Times* 1, no. 11 (June 1, 1894).
[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid.

the strong unfairly trampled the weak, in a generic sense? Or were there mechanisms in the competitive economy that could be directly traced to labor's exploitation and its political domination?

When Debs allied with the Populists, he was closest to the most cooperatively oriented anti-fusionists within the Populist movement, who considered him a potential Presidential candidate on their independent ticket. *The Railway Times* not only encouraged ARU members to vote for Populist candidates, but also advertised a "Cooperative Congress" called by members of People's Party, which proposed, "the inauguration of measures that will tend to supersede the present competitive system and usher in a co-operative civilization."[281] Opposing the "competitive system" to "a co-operative civilization" revealed the direction in which Debs was heading, but he did not yet formulate what that would mean concretely. After Debs refused to stand for nomination as the People's Party's presidential candidate,[282] he actively encouraged railway workers to support Bryan. In his address to railway workers on the Democratic campaign, Debs claimed that, however important the gold standard may be to some financiers, it was not at the root of ruling class devotion to McKinley. The battle of the standards, he claimed, would not inspire railroad executives to "turn earth, heaven, and hell" in their effort to discourage votes for Bryan; instead, it was Bryan's promise to curb the courts' power to issue injunctions that led to railway executive panic.[283] The money question, Debs claimed, had been seized on by the Republicans to frighten workers that departure from the gold standard would wreck the national economy and lead to wage-cuts and unemployment; in truth, the ability to

[281] "A Call for Organization," *The Railway Times* (July 1, 1896). On the connection between the Cooperative Congress and Populism see Salvatore, *Citizen and Socialist*, 159.
[282] We can only speculate about why Debs refused this offer. He often tried to refuse the SPA presidential nomination, too, but only got away with that once.
[283] Eugene Debs et. al. "Address to Railway Employes," *The Railway Times* 3, no. 18 (September 15, 1896).

freely receive injunctions was actually what Debs called "the milk in the cocoanut," and Bryan's opposition to that power made him a true friend of the working class.[284] If Bryan could begin to transform the Democratic party in the interests of labor, Debs considered his candidacy worth active support. To help rally railroad workers behind his campaign, Debs claimed that, "American railroads consist largely of British gold and American labor. Government by injunction crowns the former king, and makes the latter his subject. The platform upon which William J. Byran stands is pledged to abolish this despotic usurpation of judicial power, and restore to railway employes [sic] their lawful right to resist reduction and injustice by the lawful means provided by their organizations."[285]

Debs's claim that "American railroads consist largely of British gold and American labor" might have generated affective antagonism among workers who admired their revolutionary heritage, but as he likely knew at the time, his statement was not only a fraction of the story, but it actually deflected workers' attention from the roots of their oppression: the private ownership and control of the capital they set into motion on a daily basis. After Byran's defeat, Debs co-founded The Social Democracy of America, which began to formulate a program based on the specific socialist critique of exploitation. In an interview with Debs about the organization's founding, the interviewer reflected the deep connection that Debs drew between socialism and a cooperative society. They wrote that, "as a cure for the evils which he claims are inherent to the system, Mr. Debs proposes co-operation – co-operation so wide in its applications, so general in its nature, so all pervading in its scope, that altogether different conditions would surround human life and human effort under its control."[286] While he had

[284] Ibid.,
[285] Eugene Debs et. al. "Address to Railway Employes," *The Railway Times* 3:18 (September 15, 1896).
[286] "Large-Scale Cooperation," *The Social Democrat* 4.13, (July 1, 1897), 2.

called the cooperative commonwealth civilization's "crowning glory" after his release from prison, Debs now belonged to an organization intent on achieving a comprehensive form of social cooperation, dismantling "the competitive system" that had kept workers subjugated, and overturning how ruling classes had colonized the power of the state, undermining its connection to the sovereign people.

For this task, Debs found essential resources in the socialism of the Second International. In the 1902 essay on his discovery of socialism, Debs singled out Karl Kautsky as a particularly important guide. As he put it, "the writings of Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped, not merely his argument, but also caught the spirit of his Socialist utterance – and I thank him and all who helped me out of darkness and into light."[287] While there is no confirmed account of everything Debs read in prison, if he read anything by Kautsky in 1894, he would have read his explanation of the German Social Democratic Party's Erfurt Program, published in English as *The Class Struggle*, and first translated by DeLeon.[288] By offering a "systemic" theory of capitalism, Kautsky helped Debs grasp what capitalist competition implied for both workers and capitalists, and it also helped account for the democratic possibilities Debs saw within labor organizations and capitalists' powerful resources for combatting them. Crucially, Kautsky's theory also clarified a central task of the socialist movement, even if his own answer was often unclear: how to convert the forms of mass cooperation created by the capitalist labor process into free and empowering social cooperation. Or, as William Clare Roberts has put it recently, how to

[287] Ibid., 46.
[288] On the history of Kautsky's pamphlet and its widespread influence see Adam Przeworski, "Proletariat into a Class: The Process of Class Formation from Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* to Recent Controversies." *Politics & Society* 7, no. 4 (1997), 343-401.

negotiate the dynamic where, "the cooperation imposed despotically by capital compels laborers to search for a new form of cooperation."[289]

A brief exposition of Kautsky's argument will help clarify what Debs inherited from his analysis and how his later activity in the Socialist movement expanded upon it. Following Marx, Kautsky argued that the imperative of economic competition is not the result of capitalists' avarice or their propensity for injustice, but follows from capitalist society's basic property relations. As he explained, private ownership of the means of production implies economic regulation by "the blind force of free competition" since the combination of private title and the profit motive structurally inhibits regulation through common deliberation:

> Never yet did any system of production stand in such need of careful direction as does the present one. But the institution of private property makes it impossible to introduce plan and order into this system. While the several industries become, in point of fact, more and more dependent upon one another, in point of law, they remain wholly independent. The means of production in every single industry are private property; their owner can do with them as he pleases.[290]

Private ownership of capital implies that decisions about production and exchange respond to the profit interest of capitalists, and since capitalist enterprises live and die by profit, competition for market share, technological superiority, and other advantages ineluctably shapes capitalists' decision-making. Crucially, though, even as competition saturates inter-capitalist economic relations, Kautsky argued that competition had already begun to exhaust itself, as a few firms had begun to systematically win out over their rivals, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of industrial concentration. Not only are victorious enterprises incentivized to suppress competition,

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[289] Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 351 [epub].

[290] Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle,* trans. William H. Bohn (Chicago: Charles Kerr and Company, 1910), 51. Kautsky later acknowledges on 75-76 that these coordination problems are resolved in part by merchants who assist capitalists by constructing the communicative and physical infrastructure for markets, but that merchants are also vulnerable to competition, since they always have to edge out other merchants who are also trying to buy cheap and sell dear. Competition saturates the process, and tends in each major sector toward concentration.

but they have a variety of ways to do so. Some, for instance, develop the ability to bring distinct branches of industry under their control, like American railroad companies that had recently begun operating coal mines. And when invested well, the increased profits of large firms can grow proportionally faster than the smaller profits of weaker competitors, augmenting both their economic and political power.[291]

Despite the fact that competition based on private profit leads to both coordination problems and monopoly power, Kautsky believed that capitalist competition has a positive side, insofar as it lays the groundwork for a new society based on free cooperation. Competition incentivizes the development of labor-saving technologies, integrating "the natural sciences and their practical application" into economic development more than any previous economic system.[292] These developments were clearly positive, and could benefit everyone insofar as they lessen labor's burden. Additionally, industrial concentration constitutes an inherent, partial fix for the problems of capitalist coordination, since it helps to rationalize production and distribution, paving the way for socialist planning. In the meantime, though, Kautsky was clear that competition was socially corrosive, and his critique of competition constituted an ethical core of his positive vision of socialism. Unlike many contemporary economists, Kautsky did not just analyze competition as a regulator of economic interaction, but as a general aspect of capitalist social relations and ideology. Looking at the labor side of the capital/labor divide, Kautsky explained that one of capitalism's distinctive aspects is that economic competition becomes generalized beyond its prior boundaries in pre-capitalist forms of commerce, which

[291] Ibid., 62-71. In his early writings, Katusky had less of a sense than later analysts that crises re-start the competitive struggle (what Schumpeter euphemistically called "creative destruction"). While Kautsky never abandoned socialism, he did ultimately abandon the idea that capitalism would face a terminal crisis that would force a choice between socialism (human progress) and barbarism (the retrogression of society as a whole, undoing capitalism's own stunted achievements). While Kautsky is often understood as a naïve economic determinist, socialism was not truly inevitable in his view, since retrogression was also possible.
[292] Ibid., 43.

transforms society's overall culture. In pre-capitalist societies, subsistence production and various forms of moral economy had once regulated the provision of basic necessities among the poor, and commerce was the provenance of the wealthy. Yet in capitalism, "Commerce today no longer caters simply to superfluity and luxury. The whole system of production, yes, even the sustenance of the people, in a capitalist country, depends on the free and unrestricted action of commerce."[293] In this way too, capitalism departs from all previous forms of social organization, since generalized commodity production and general market dependence means that workers must rely on wages to secure the necessities of life. Access to wages depends on access to work, which also implies competition among workers for the jobs they need to survive. Since the labor market ensures that workers compete with one another for work, competition not only pervades the calculations of mine owners, railroad managers, and merchants, but all members of society.

For Kautsky, as well as for Debs and the SDA, injecting competition so deeply into public culture produces ideological distortions that have a corrosive effect on morals. These distortions often manifest in one or another form of social Darwinism, where competition is understood as the basis of society because it is imagined as the basis of all natural interaction: 'the survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence.' In Kautsky's view, only a scientific analysis of capitalism can counter these false ideologies by demonstrating the system's artificiality; it is not natural, but the social product of the long, internal collapse of European feudalism and its forms of politics, social organization, and empire. Seen clearly, there is nothing natural about capitalist competition, and it does not punish the naturally unfit. Instead, it punishes those who do not or cannot conform to the social power it recognizes and rewards: "The fact is, however, that competition crushes, not so much the truly unfit, as those who happen

[293] Ibid., 44.

to stand in the wrong place, and those who either happen to lack the special qualifications or, what is more important, the capital to survive."[294] For Kautsky, the alternative to this arrangement was to harness the possibility for cooperation that capitalism created within a labor movement that sought to transcend capitalist production entirely, substituting competitive "production for sale" with cooperative "production for use." Though still vague, this distinction denotes the difference between a market system that measures need by ability to pay and where patterns of consumption are shaped by private actors' ambition for profits, and a cooperative system where social utility (rather than market demand) is the criterion of distribution.[295]

The SDA's newspaper, *The Social Democrat*, reflected the influence of socialist theory, and its authors published a number of critiques of competition alongside essays that imagined a cooperative system of production in which society's labor would elevate everyone, rather than merely serve to empower a privileged class. In its first Declaration of Principles, the SDA argued that that the class struggle was rooted in labor's exploitation by capitalists: "While in former times the individual labored on his own account, with his own tools, and was the master of his products, now dozens, hundreds, and thousands of men work together in shops, mines, factories, etc., co-operating according to the most efficient division of labor, but they are not the masters of their products."[296] In line with Kautsky, Debs and the SDA were clear that a system of cooperative production for use would not emerge fully formed, but would instead emerge out of a struggle within the un-democratic and exploited forms of cooperation developed by capitalist society. Yet how and where new forms of cooperation would develop, and defining what exactly

[294] Ibid., 51.
[295] Ibid., 95.
[296] "Declaration of Principles and Constitution," *The Social Democrat* 4.13 (July 1, 1897), 1.

made socialist cooperation qualitatively different from capitalism became core problems for the new organization.

Difficulties arose in part because answers to the problem offered by prominent socialist theorists like Kautsky left a number of important problems unaddressed – most centrally, problems related to agency. A form of agency needed to be devised that would not only mobilize workers, but leverage their collective power to disrupt the capitalist labor process, and at the same time create the seedbeds of new practices of non-exploitative cooperation. While Kautsky did stake socialism's possibility on the political agency of the labor movement, it was unclear from Kautsky's text how exactly the activities of socialist unions would begin to transform the despotic cooperation of the capitalist labor process into social cooperation. A rift in the SDA opened up around how these goals could be achieved between advocates of the formation of a cooperative colony and trade unionist advocates of political action. Debs sided with the political actionists, who joined defectors from the SLP to form the Socialist Party of America (SPA) in 1901. Before discussing how Debs imagined socialist unions could develop this form of cooperative agency, it is worth reviewing the debate between these two camps, since it sheds light on the distinct politics of cooperation that Debs favored and the nature of the ambitions behind the SPA's formation.

The colonists believed that the only way to build a cooperative future was to build cooperative organizations in the present that put their ideals directly into practice. In its first Declaration of Principles, the SDA claimed that as part of its strategy for building a cooperative society, it planned to form a colony in "one of the States of the Union, to be hereafter determined," oriented toward ensuring an opportunity for labor's self-employment in cooperative

industry.[297] Debs himself initially supported the colonization plan for pragmatic reasons and out of a typical ecumenical spirit. He did not stake the cooperative commonwealth on its success, but he thought it might provide genuine relief for union workers who had been blacklisted and were in desperate search of work, and he generally supported the use of a variety of means in the context of a common struggle.[298] Advocates of colonization targeted an important problem, even if they did not have the right solution. For democratic cooperation to develop, workers needed to be more than passive subjects of the forms of cooperation that evolved under capitalism, awaiting its terminal crisis. Sociological examination of capitalism's contradictions alongside ethical appeals to the ideal of a better future were insufficient to develop the collective agency that could actually change society. As one writer put it, "Newspaper and book Socialism is all right to awaken and appeal to the sleeping intellect, but for practical Socialism we must have a practical school where men and women live Socialism every day … We all need a practical education in co-operation. The human race has been going in a wrong direction for many centuries, and we must not expect that all will turn at the word of truth and reason and go cheerfully in the right direction."[299] As another advocate of colonization argued, the imperative of educative practice also derived from the inherent limitations of theoretical prediction, specifically when it came to the question of agency: "We are constantly running up against the results of imperfect generalization in politics and governments, through failure to properly predict all the movements of Alexander Hamilton's "Great Beast," the people."[300] Even if Marx's diagnosis of industrial concentration was a great aid to the movement – it clarifies the reasons behind what "we can see with wonderful distinctness, being worked out under our very

[297] "Declaration of Principles," *The Social Democrat*.
[298] Salvatore, *Citizen and Socialist*, 162-167.
[299] "Colonies are Needed," *The Social Democrat* 4.21 (September 16, 1897), 1.
[300] "A Word to Critics," *The Social Democrat* 4.14 (July 15, 1897), 2.

eyes"—the author claimed that, at a fundamental level, the forms of collective agency that develop in the struggle for cooperation could not be predicted:

> The class consciousness, the discipline and organization which result from the development of the capitalistic labor process is [sic] potential to act in a number of different directions; it may assist and hasten the progress of human emancipation, and it may set back the hands of the clock of human progress … Wisdom would seem to dictate some provisions for the control of this mess, so that its potentialities may be directed into the proper channels. Now this is the mission of the Social Democracy.[301]

Crucially, for colonization advocates, that guidance could only be *holistic*. Cooperators needed to experience the kind of cooperative production by and for the community that they had envisioned, and that they felt confident could become an engine of social progress if they could begin to practically assess its potential and work through its difficulties.

Despite confronting the imperative of clarifying what cooperative, democratic agency would look like, colonists erred on two major fronts. First, in spite of generations of evidence, they believed that, this time, a parallel economy could begin to grow through committed, collective voluntarism. As one critic accurately observed, even if the colony could be successful for a length of time, "it certainly can be so only by virtue of its members' utmost perseverance, self-sacrifice and intrepidity."[302] The cooperative community, "would have to contend against more obstacles than the capitalist in a capitalist community," because it would have no ready access to municipal, state, and national support, and because it would have no ability to challenge the corrosive power of "national and state authority, transportation and communication corporations and the money-lender." Truly realizing "production for consumption" rather than

[301] Ibid.
[302] Carl Pankopf, "Limited Co-Operation," *The Social Democrat* 4, no. 31 (November 25, 1897), 3. Establishing "production for consumption" depends on the possibility of socialist calculation (i.e. you don't measure consumptive needs exclusively by purchases, which only register ability/willingness to pay and is why market demand does not represent society's consumptive needs). Kautsky's role in the socialist calculation debate is relevant, as are the concrete experiments in socialist planning, with all of their flaws.

"production for sale" required a nationwide political movement; the real work of cooperation could not get started until socialists achieved political victory and undermined the basis of exploitation.[303] Second, colonists failed to note the connection between their concerns and those of their adversaries, moving the debate onto common terrain. Advocates of socialist trade unionism were also determined to build a bridge between theory and practice, but they understood the nature of that bridge as a process of social struggle within the existing capitalist institutions that already saturated society. Given the constraints of capitalist society, socialism could not be experimentally tested in a 'neutral' territory on the frontier, but needed to be created through the active struggles within capitalist institutions by the workers who suffered from the ramifying effects of exploitation.

While colonists wanted to experience cooperation in completed form, socialist unionists wanted to guide existing struggles in the labor movement with *anticipatory ideals*, which practically crystallized the real dynamics of workers' experiences, a systematic critique of exploitation, and a constructive vision of a cooperative future. At an basic level, this does not imply exit, but a direct challenge to capitalist society's self-legitimation, which was not only discursively constructed and disseminated in ideology, but embodied the direct organization of production and consumption, encoded in law, and upheld by force. Central to this challenge was undermining how capitalist ideology portrayed private property as the basis of social order. While capitalists' private right of ownership is rationalized as essential for individual liberty in general, socialists demonstrated how those arguments mask capital's actual social despotism. Capitalist private property does not mean the liberty to control one's destiny, but means "private ownership by the individual in the means of production used by co-operative labor," inherently

[303] Ibid.

divesting wage-labor from their title to property.[304] As one writer echoed in *The Social Democrat*, "Competitive ownership means not the right of personal enjoyment and control, but the right to prevent others exercising such ownership. It seeks the control of machinery in order to seize the earnings of those who operated it."[305] By making a generic commitment to "private property" the foundation of social order, capitalist ideology clouds how the private property of capitalists presumes the property-less status of the worker. More specifically, while the ideal of private property-ownership is supposed to underpin individuals' free exercise of agency, capitalist property undermines wage-labors free self-direction, since they can only engage in cooperative labor when brought together by the agency of a single capitalist employer, who retains their surplus and only returns a minimal amount of the social value of their labor as wages.[306] Such an immanent critique of the capitalist labor process could speak to the daily experience of all workers, and could serve as a strong catalyst in the search for an alternative form of free, self-directed cooperation where workers' surplus would redound to their mutual benefit.

At the same time that it proposed colonization, the SDA's platform also contained elements of this diagnosis. A survey of SDA literature reveals four central ideals that defined its vision of the cooperative commonwealth: the full remuneration of workers; the conversion of surplus labor into evenly distributed free time; the democratic organization of work by collective deliberation; and social investment directed toward public luxury instead of private affluence. Continuous with the Populists, socialists hoped that cooperation would give workers the full value of their product, minus only the socially necessary infrastructure for production and

[304] Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, 95.
[305] "Competitive System Doomed," *The Social Democrat* 4, no. 13 (July 1, 1897), 2.
[306] For an argument that cooperation in operating large-scale machinery in capitalism is only possible under the agency of capitalists see Marx, *Capital v. 1*, 447.

distribution. For one commentator, this was the main reason why socialism did not require escape to the frontier, but was the logical extension of trade unionism. The author argued that when workers were artisans, they were able to secure the full value of their product in the market,[307] but when they became employees,

> the workmen no longer received the full product of their labor, as formerly, but only such part of it as the employers chose to give them; and this was usually but a small portion of their product. … The object of the Social Democracy in no way conflicts with the efforts of the trades unions. On the contrary, it aims to do what trades unionism can never do, guarantee to every worker not a part, but all the product of his toil. The trades union is the economic class movement. The Social Democracy the political movement to abolish class, and place all men on economic equality. These two movements should work side by side.[308]

While socialists hotly debated what it would mean to secure labor its "full value" when exploitation ceased, the author clearly drew the connection between workers' demands for higher pay and the anticipatory ideal of a society where workers' labor directly redounded to their benefit rather than the benefit of a privileged class. As Kautsky had put it, "Only socialist production can put an end to the disparity between the demands of the workers and the means of satisfying them."[309]

As a corollary of the demand for full remuneration, the SDA also aspired to the liberation of workers' free time. Its Declaration of Principles stated that, "Human power and natural forces are wasted by this system which makes "profit" the only object in business" and argued that society's wasted potential could only be recovered by a movement that "will give to every worker the free exercise and full benefit of his faculties, multiplied by all the modern factors of civilization," represented in the demand for "Reduction of the hours of labor in proportion to the

[307] Interestingly, the Populist movement was premised on the idea that this was not true, showing another missed opportunity to blend these diagnoses.
[308] "Trades Unionism and the Social Democracy," *The Social Democrat* 4.17 (August 19, 1897), 2.
[309] Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, 201.

progress of production."[310] Claiming that developments of labor-saving technology should correspond to a reduction of work challenged both the logic of inter-capitalist competition (the goal of production should not be to out-compete rivals by amassing profit), as well as the specific nature of capitalist exploitation (it rests on the appropriation of surplus labor time rather than a direct "tax" like under feudalism or ownership of labor *as* property, like under slavery). Just like competition is not a 'merely economic' regulator of capitalist enterprise, exploitation does not only rob workers of the full value of their product. Instead, it shapes their abilities for individual and collective self-cultivation beyond work. Like the Knights of Labor, American socialists imagined a new dawn of labor's freedom as the proliferation of opportunities for self-cultivation and collective progress that included everyone – society truly, 'working together' for its common cultural elevation.[311]

The ideal of socialist cooperation would also revive an element of the early craft-union movement: workers' ability to determine the labor process according to their own collective deliberation. Capitalist ownership and their competitive need to maintain profitability vests managers with both the ability and the imperative to regulate the labor process to maximize their ability to extract the surplus as profit, which they both consume privately and reinvest for their competitive advantage. Workers' self-government could only exist alongside these imperatives in limited forms. The problem was not simply that managers dominated workers – they could fire employees at will, control the parameters of their labor, and unilaterally make decisions about workplace organization – but that these practices derived from an underlying systemic logic: the imperative of surplus extraction. While Debs occasionally protested against the "arbitrary

[310] "Declaration of Principles and Constitution," *The Social Democrat* 4.13 (July 1, 1897), 1.
[311] Gourevitch's discussion of this point is particularly edifying. See Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, 126-132.

power" of bosses, strictly speaking, their power was anything but arbitrary. If the imperative is to produce and distribute as efficiently as possible in the competitive quest to maximize profit, workers' democratic organization – which, in the case of the craft-union movement, revolved around things like designing the work flow, regulating pacing, setting output targets, and collectively determining the norms of work – could only either interfere or conform. Instead of the comprehensive democratic organization of work, capitalist society ensured that the moments available for workers' self-government either existed in a limited "political" sphere functionally separated from the economic sphere (i.e. participation in elections, referenda, etc.), or at the interstices of the workplace (like within in the union). To undo these arrangements, capitalist competition among firms needed to be replaced with cooperative arrangements organized toward directly satisfying social need. Within such a cooperative arrangement, Debs argued that even competition would be restored to its proper place, since it would no longer function as the incentive structure organizing social reproduction, but could become a productive stimulant to collective cultural growth. In his words, "There will still be competition among men, but it will not be for bread, it will be to excel in good works. Every man will work for the society in which he lives, and society will work in the interests of those who compose it."[312]

In its Declaration of Principles, the SDA acknowledged that social cooperation did not only require democracy at work, but a democratic society. It claimed that, "The Social Democracy of America will make democracy, "the rule of the people," a truth, by ending the economic subjugation of the great majority of the people."[313] Capitalists' economic and political power derives from their monopoly (as a class) of society's resources and the direction of its

[312] Eugene Debs, "The Co-Operative Commonwealth," in *Yours for the Revolution: The* Appeal to Reason*, 1895-1922* ed. John Graham (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 64.
[313] "Declaration of Principles and Constitution"

evolution. This power underlies both their public power and their private luxury. Ridding workplaces of exploitation through the organization of cooperatives could begin to undermine this tendency at the point of production, but social cooperation did not simply imply that workers control their surplus as a private collective (what Henry Sharpe had called "the cooperation of competism") but that the common labor of social reproduction redounds to the benefit of all. While the problem of how to democratically administer the surplus is very significant (it raises the issue of bureaucracy and its democratic accountability, what Debs less specifically called "socialist administration"[314]), Debs's vision of cooperation itself provided criteria to assess what such democratic, socialist administration of the surplus would look like. In capitalism, the surplus is reinvested according to the profit imperative, and shapes a society organized around private luxury. A democratically shared surplus would not abandon provision for private leisure, but would heavily emphasize public as opposed to private affluence. Against aristocratic critics of socialism who argued that its 'leveling' aspirations would destroy high culture, social investment in the commons provides a basic, alternative way to imagine how a commonly shared surplus can serve as a catalyst for general cultural progress. While Debs is often identified with the small town environment of Terre Haute, he also admired the utopian urbanism of Edward Bellamy, with its transformation of urban space around abundant opportunities for public gathering and social leisure alongside the ability to enjoy modern conveniences in the home.[315]

Such revolutionary change was certainly a high aspiration, but its justification not only rested on an immanent critique of existing social relations, but also basic insights about social science. According to one author in *The Social Democrat* socialism was in line with scientific

[314] Debs, *Unionism and Socialism*, 30.
[315] Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*. For an excellent analysis of this theme through a study of the Paris Commune and its afterlives see Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015).

trends that acknowledged the material constraints of the social environment in determining social relations, morality, and progress: "Socialism stands firmly on the ground that no true and permanent moral reform can be effected in society or the individual that is not based on economic betterment, change in environment – that is, in the ideas, principles, circumstances, conditions and things by which the individual is made what he is, and by which society is formed and directed as it is."[316] Only socialism, SDA members argued, could harness the power of the railways, telegraphs, mines, and factories transforming the national economy for the common elevation of society as a whole, ensuring that scientific and technological progress is also an agent of social progress. S. H. Comings argued that the next "co-operative age" would "educate the coming generation in all the grand conceptions of our scientific age, and to make our citizenship equal to maintaining the honor of an age of mutualism and a society, where the highest aim shall be great usefulness instead of the vulgar greed for dollars, as now."[317] With these claims, socialists did not seek to create a cooperative commonwealth in an isolated experiment, but sought to re-orient society's legitimating ideals around a hegemonic project of cooperative democracy.

At a fundamental level, realizing these aspirations not only required winning consent, but undermining the ability of capitalists to extract and control the surplus. That project required coercion; capitalists were not going to willingly give over their spoils, let alone their golden goose. For the expropriators to be expropriated effectively, the socialists could not simply form parallel societies, but had to wield political power. As Kautsky wrote, "The state will not cease to be a capitalist institution until the proletariat, the working-class, has become the ruling class;

[316] "Ruskin Reviewed" *The Social Democrat* 4, no. 15 (August 2, 1897), 1.
[317] S.H. Comings, "Co-Operative Education," *The Social Democrat* 4, no. 30 (November 18, 1897), 2.

not until then will it become possible to turn it into a co-operative commonwealth."[318] The debate over how the working class would come to political power is one of the most divisive debates in socialist history.[319] While the question of the means to political victory was indeed crucial, what was equally crucial is how socialists imagined the relationship between their anticipatory ideals and the concrete practice of the labor movement, which built the constituent power among the people necessary for any political victory. For some socialists, the capitalist labor process itself was already generating the possibility for socialist success. As SDA member Margaret Haile put it, "The change of the new order will not be an abrupt one, for the new order has been growing up inside of the old ever since its inception, like the chick in the egg. We have learned under it to produce collectively; it only remains now to break the shell of capitalist ownership, to take over and hold and operate the machinery of production for the common good and to step forth into the new life of the co-operative commonwealth."[320] Yet history would never do socialists work for them, and socialist politics would not be nearly so straightforward. As colonization advocates and advocates of socialist unionism both stressed, cooperative praxis needed to develop in the present, precisely because the cooperation instilled by the capitalist labor process rested on the alienated direction of a class of masters and the disaggregating effects of production for profit. For socialist unionists, the anticipatory ideals of the cooperative commonwealth – full remuneration, liberated self-fulfillment, democracy at work, and a democratic organization of the surplus – needed to find a way to inspire the concrete practices of labor organization. Only then could a constituency for socialism could be forged that was not

[318] Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, 110.
[319] For two of the classic positions in this debate see, Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993 [1889]), Rosa Luxemburg, "Reform or Revolution?" in *The Essential Rosa Luxemburg: Reform or Revolution and the Mass Strike* ed. Helen Scott (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008), 41-105.
[320] Margaret Haile, "Systems Change: A Sketch of the Development of Industrial Systems," *The Social Democrat* 4, no. 35 (December 23, 1897), 1.

only electoral, but also in possession of the constituent capacity to cooperatively re-shape the direction of social development.

III. "The Protracted Struggle": Socialist Unionism and Socialist Politics

Throughout Debs's years with the SPA, one of the party's dominant issues – an issue arguably responsible for its major strategic divisions and splits – was determining the relationship between the party and the labor movement.[321] What was perhaps Debs's most important pamphlet, *Unionism and Socialism: A Plea for Both* (1904), centered on this issue. In broad terms, Debs's pamphlet advocated transforming the labor movement into a site of the formation of cooperative agency, and at the same time, ensuring that the Socialist Party supported the labor movement, remained independent from alliance with capitalist parties and committed to socialist transformation, and articulated a hegemonic vision of the general interest that could win majority support and justify suppressing capitalist exploitation. In his words, "The Union is educating the workers in the management of industrial activities and fitting them for co-operative control and democratic regulation of their trades, – the party is recruiting and training and drilling the political army that is to conquer the capitalist forces on the political battlefield; and having control of the machinery of government, use it to transfer the industries from the capitalists to the workers, from the parasites to the people."[322] Here, and more explicitly than Kautsky, Debs was clear that capitalist production alone did not educate workers in cooperation;

[321] On the extent of organizational conflict over the relationship between the SPA and the AFL and other independent unions see Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928* (Berkeley: Center for Socialist History, 1929), 214-301.
[322] Eugene Debs, *Unionism and Socialism: A Plea for Both* (Terre Haute: Standard Publishing Co, 1904), 26.

labor unions themselves had to take on this task. Debs's hopes for labor depended on the evolution of the movement, which was defined not by the Socialist Party, but by the AFL. This was unfortunate, because it was not the AFL, but workers within the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) who devised the means to counter Taylorist scientific management with a new form of social cooperation that connected empowering self-organization to the aspirational ideal of a society without exploitation. Rather than keep workers passive subjects to how capitalists controlled their 'heads and hands,' radical unionists imagined the large-scale industrial union – organized into nested federations of workers' councils from the shop floor to the industry-wide and regional levels – as a site for the formation of cooperative self-organization and the democratic beginnings of a new order of social reproduction.

Given the centrality of the relationship between the Party and the unions, the power of the AFL was decisive in shaping socialist fortunes. Debs railed against its leader, Samuel Gompers, so consistently because, in many respects, the AFL's conservatism was among the SPA's most formidable obstacles and a major reason for its failure on the industrial front. In trying to transform union practice, the SPA confronted three possible options. First, it could strive to become a labor party on the model of the British Labor Party. In this case, it would partner with the AFL to earn the electoral support of the working class, displace one of the two major parties, and to institute reforms that could gradually introduce socialism without challenging capitalist ownership at the outset. Partnering with the AFL meant compromising with its strategy, as well as the capitalist interests that its strategy protected to ensure access to collective bargaining. Second, socialists could work to transform the AFL from within – called "boring from within" – by earning leadership positions within unions and converting workers to socialism, hoping that a socialist rank and file would eventually buck their conservative

leadership. Third, socialists could support the creation of a parallel labor movement based in industry-wide unionism – called "boring from without" – a movement that, unlike the AFL, sought to include all workers, from immigrants and under-skilled labor to the whole class of productive workers.[323] For his part, Debs often gravitated toward the third option, but never dissuaded committed socialists from boring within the AFL.

Debs's insistence on forging cooperation within the labor movement derived from one of his differences with Kautsky. While both Debs and Kautsky clearly understood the labor movement as a process of developing popular, collective agency – what Kautsky called the "gradual elevation of the working-class" facilitated by their "protracted struggle" in the labor movement[324] – Kautsky's analytical focus gravitated toward the contradictions within capitalism that directly prefigured socialist advance. Such a focus entailed a strong commitment to the historical power of proletarian agency that, while it need not regard socialism as inevitable (since barbarism or 'the common ruin of the contending classes' was always a possible result of crisis), this focus nevertheless attributed an underlying power to proletarian agency that derived fundamentally from historical predictions about capitalism's own development. The consequences of resting analysis on these predictions were serious; as Kautsky once stated, "[If] the conception of the proletariat as the motive force of the coming social revolution were abandoned, then I would have to admit that I was through, that my life no longer had meaning."[325] While Kautsky clearly saw structure and agency as interlocking aspects of social processes, his analytical focus did not center on the unique difficulties that workers' faced as

[323] On "boring from within" and "boring from without" see Phillip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Volume III: The Policies and Practices of the American Federation of Labor, 1900-1909* (New York: International Publishers, 1964).
[324] Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, 197-198.
[325] Quoted in Mike Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas*: *Marx's Lost Theory* (London: Verso, 2018), 6.

they collectively struggled to recover their capacities for democratic self-organization under the constraining conditions of capitalism. While Debs at times made rhetorical reference to the inevitability of victory, his writings and his activism do not evince the same commitment to socialism's place in a progressive historical teleology.[326] While he sometimes echoed the determinist assumptions of the dominant Marxist view, like when he claimed in a campaign speech that, "The capitalist system is no longer adapted to the needs of modern society. It is outgrown and fetters the forces of progress. Industrial and commercial competition are largely of the past. The handwriting blazes on the wall. Centralization and combination are the modern forces in industrial and commercial life. Competition is breaking down and cooperation is supplanting it," he did not address the labor movement with a tone of historical complacency.[327] *Unionism and Socialism* was not a theoretical mediation on history, but a direct intervention in the practice of the labor movement, a plea to workers to recover their own alienated power from the despotic cooperation enforced by capitalism. While he found essential resources in Marxism, Debs did not understand or address the working class as an agent driving the dialectical unfolding of history; instead, he saw the people as a creative agent of their own self-

[326] As an aside, Kautsky's conception of history is the focus of Walter Benjamin's critique of German Social Democrats in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Their conception of historical progress as a linear march through "homogenous empty time" not only blunted their appreciation of historical contingency, but also encouraged them to adopt a vision of the exploitation of nature that he considered incompatible with early socialists' aspirations for cooperative labor. As he put it, "Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement." As a counter to this position, he wrote, "Compared with this positivistic conception, Fourier's fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove to be surprisingly sound." For Fourier, "efficient, cooperative labor" would not subjugate nature to the demands of human consumption – a practice that he though can only be contrasted naïvely with the exploitation of human labor itself – but the liberation of the potentials of nature for the common elevation of all. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 258-259. Debs and Benjamin are very different figures with profoundly distinct worldviews, but as I show below, Debs's hopes for liberating the creative powers of labor might be seen to lie between the Kautskyan view and the Benjaminian view.

[327] Debs, "The Socialist Party and the Working Class," In *Debs, His Life, Writings, and Speeches*, 371.

determination, and their capacity for free cooperation as a latent power that required active practical struggle to develop.

While Debs's emphasis on developing the capacity for "cooperative control and democratic regulation" of industry revealed how he understood that mass cooperation in capitalism would not simply set the groundwork for socialist cooperation, the nature of the cooperation enforced by capital was not itself static. Instead, in the early 20th century, large-scale industry was steadily transformed by new managerial technologies that undermined skilled workers' own practices of self-determination, institutionalized within the AFL. In other words, while capitalist development brought workers together in greater numbers, it also *undermined* how workers' attempts to assert their democratic capacity for cooperative self-management had become institutionalized within their organizations. In *The Fall of the House of Labor*, David Montgomery traced how the AFL began as a movement for workers' control of their own labor, morphed into a significant (however junior) partner in collective bargaining, and ultimately saw much of its organizational capacity eclipsed by the mid-twenties. He argued that the major reason for the AFL's fall was that workers' main source of structural power in the craft union movement – their skilled knowledge of the production process ("the manager's brain under the workman's cap") – was undermined by the new technologies of scientific management. While these developments homogenized the labor force by turning the majority of workers into machine operatives, "that homogenization had not unified the working class" nor had it provided workers with the skills of cooperative self-management that could simply flower when unfettered by exploitation.[328] Instead, these skills needed to be created within fragile movements pitted against the most powerful forces of their time.

[328] Mongomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, 328.

Taylorism was itself premised on a vision of cooperation that offers a productive contrast to the socialist vision of the cooperative commonwealth. A brief discussion of Taylor not only demonstrates some of the effective, discursive power of capitalist ideology that socialists had to counter, but also illuminates the nature of the labor process that socialist unionists sought to transform. In his book-length discussion of his managerial reforms, Frederick Taylor pit the general interest of society as a whole against the self-seeking individualism of both workers and bosses. By displacing workers' self-directed control over pacing and work rules with planned coordination based on scientific study of engineering and efficient motion, Taylor sought to create a system of "the most elaborate cooperation" oriented toward the common welfare.[329] In Taylor's view, the seat of the common welfare was not the working majority, but consumers, "the third great party, the whole people," who depended on the efficient production of goods at low cost.[330] Moreover, Taylor claimed that scientific management would not only ensure the welfare of "the whole people," but could even, "secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee."[331] While maximum prosperity for employers implied "large dividends to the company or owner" as well as "the development of every branch of business to its highest state of excellence," prosperity for labor meant "higher wages than are usually received for men of his class" alongside, "the development of each man to his state of maximum efficiency."[332] On this basis of this instrumental, common interest in utility and capacity maximization, Taylor believed he could ground "friendly cooperation between the management and the men."[333] To realize these ideals, scientific

[329] Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1919 [1911]), 7.
[330] Ibid., 136. In his justification of the federal injunction, Justice Brewer also invoked the people as consumers against the particularistic interests of workers. See "In re Debs."
[331] Ibid., 9.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid., 28.

management required dispossessing workers of whatever power over the production process their skilled knowledge had accorded them. Taylor's time and motion studies broke down the habits of skilled workers into a series of discrete motions, devising techniques for maximizing the efficiency of workers' use of their own bodies, a set of practices taught to new workers directly by management and often incentivized by the introduction of piece-rates instead of flat wages. These practices simultaneously institutionalized the social atomization of workers within their own individual experiences, promoted de-skilling and speed-up, and ensured the formation of new workplace hierarchies. As Montgomery explains, "With the worker so carefully instructed and supervised, it would no longer be necessary for him to possess a broad understanding of the processes in which he was engaged. The ablest craftsman could be promoted from the ranks to the many new foremen's positions, and the rest could be replaced with unskilled men and women, instructed by the foremen in the "one best way" to perform their tasks."[334] The craft culture of transmitting skills alongside the ethical code of unionism was replaced by the direct authority of management who enforced a form of cooperation designed to maximize profits. As Taylor put it, "It is only through *enforced* standardization of methods, *enforced* adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and *enforced* cooperation that this faster work can be assured. And the duty of enforcing the adoption of standards and enforcing this cooperation rest with the *management* alone."[335] Not only did this undermine the associational fabric of workers' organizations, but it rendered their ethical code meaningless. As Montgomery noted, "Such a setting made a mockery of craft-union practice. What meaning had

[334] Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 223.
[335] Quoted in Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 229. Italics original.

a standard machinist's wage there? What worker could pledge to abide honorably by union work rules?"[336]

While Debs had criticized the limitations of craft-union democracy at least since the formation of the ARU, the spread of scientific management (itself a deeply contested process) clearly demanded a reformulation of the theory and practice of workers' democracy. At the time, a number of innovative workers responded to these transformations by developing forms of social cooperation that began to reclaim workers knowledge of the production process and their capacities for self-directed agency on the job, primarily among de-skilled operatives in large-scale factories. Not AFL leaders, but socialists and syndicalists organizing industrial unions developed these cooperative practices to assist workers in their efforts to re-claim their capacities for cooperative agency. Debs was one of the major socialist leaders to actively encourage these efforts, and they were intimately connected to his hope that the self-directing agency of workers' would not only define union practice, but also point toward a broader cooperative horizon that only Socialist politics could fully articulate and advance. As he claimed in a speech in Chicago in 1905, advocating for the movements for industrial unionism,

> The workingman today does not understand his industrial relation to his fellow-workers. He has never been correlated with others in the same industry. He has mechanically done his part. … Now, we teach him to hold up his head and look over the whole mechanism. If he is employed in a certain plant, as an Industrial Unionist, his eyes are opened. He takes a survey of the entire productive mechanism, and he understands his part in it, and his relation to every other worker in that industry. The very instant he does that he is buoyed by a fresh hope and thrilled with a new aspiration. He becomes a larger man. He begins to feel like a collective son of toil. Then he and his fellows study to fit themselves to take control of this productive mechanism when it shall be transferred from the idle capitalist to the workers to whom it rightfully belongs.[337]

The advent of new technologies of mass coordination and supervision might have encouraged de-skilling, but nothing could rob workers of their capacity to subject the social relations in

[336] Ibid, 23.
[337] Debs, "Revolutionary Unionism," in *Speeches and Writings of Eugene V. Debs*, 223.

which they participated to their shared, self-reflective control. As Mongomery clarifies, the design of large industrial plants brought into being a new site of self-determination – the workers' council – and a new kind of revolutionary politics – the mass strike. In his words, "By 1919, "council" and "delegate" were words with revolutionary resonance similar to what "convention" and "citizen" had carried in 1789."[338] While craft union stewards had previously worked alongside their peers, ensured that work rules were obeyed, and notified headquarters in the event of infractions by workers or employers, new mass production industries required a different relationship between workers and their delegates. The experience of new forms of labor control taught mass production workers that they, "needed the permanent presence of an active group representative right there on the production floor, all day every day, and they had to be prepared to defend these representatives against management's reprisals."[339] Skilled toolmakers could not serve these roles, since they often worked separately from machine operatives, who required their own council delegates to express their grievances. Council movements within the IWW and other industrial unions emerged largely out of the experiences of machine operatives, immigrants, and inclusively-oriented workers throughout industries, and they set their sights on winning over "the whole business" by developing power primarily among the least organized.[340]

One advocate of this theory and practice of cooperative unionism was an ironworker and shipbuilder from Portland named James Robertson. Robertson wrote a pamphlet circulated by the IWW that theorized the workers' council not only as a locus of direct democracy or a site of deliberation, but also as a locus of social cooperation. In Robertson's view, "the natural development of the labor movement in America will not be a reform instituted by the "top" for

[338] Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 425.
[339] Ibid., 323.
[340] Ibid., 313.

the "bottom," but a transforming process, now taking place in the rank and file of labor in the workshop, an organic development which constantly strives toward the conscious co-operation of the whole working class – One Big Union."[341] While the relationship between the SPA and IWW was generally fractious, Debs supported the IWW initially and for significant reasons. In 1905, he claimed, "The revolutionary movement of the working class will date from the year 1905, from the organization of the INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD. … The old form of unionism has long since fulfilled its mission and outlived its usefulness, and the hour has struck for a change."[342] While Debs ultimately broke with the IWW over disagreements about its strategies for sabotage and its ideal that "direct action" in the economic arena alone could break the power of capital,[343] his vision of unionism as a form of cooperative agency shared far more with syndicalists than AFL craft-union leaders. Elaborated alongside Debs's theory of socialist politics, Robertson's pamphlet nicely illuminates a series of aspirations that he and Debs shared.

The "organic development" Robertson referred to was the emergence of councils of workers' representatives that operated independently of major unions, and that began to proliferate along the entire division of labor in large factories. When scientific management undermined craft practice, it had only reorganized the social composition that workers' democratic agency had to confront, inciting the development of new creative strategies. When Robertson introduced his pamphlet, it was not on a note of defeat. He claimed that, with mass production, the council movements, and the mass strike, "a new sovereign power now enters upon the field of human affairs. That power is the Crowd, the Masses, Labor."[344]

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[341] James Robertson, *Labor Unionism, Based Upon the American Shop Steward System* (Portland: Keystone Press, 1919), 1.
[342] Debs, "Industrial Unionism," in *Speeches and Writings of Eugene V. Debs*, 226.
[343] Debs claimed that sabotage and the idealization of direct action were, "the tactics of anarchist individuals and not of socialist collectivists" and that they "do violence to the class psychology of workers and cannot be successfully inculcated as a mass doctrine." Quoted in Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States*, 286.
[344] Ibid., 2.

For Robertson, the goal of labor unions was not negotiating between workers' representatives and capital, but creating a site for the formation of cooperative self-determination. "A Labor Union is a living organism having its roots in the soil of industrial conditions. Its conscious purpose is to develop its power from the basis of productivity, along all paths of economic and democratic advancement, finding its culmination in an "Industrial Administration" of the producers, by the producers and for the producers."[345] Rather than represent labor's inevitable self-interest in higher wages, shorter hours, and better work rules, Robertson argued that the AFL's ideal of collective bargaining was simply the ideological rationalization of its specific practices of organization and compromise, which blunted labor's more radical interests in a full return for its social contribution and the democratic organization of work. For Robertson, collective bargaining was "a fungus of the dollar psychology, a stumbling block in the pathway of human progress, and stern necessity demands its removal and replacement with the "direct" participation of the rank and file of labor in the management of their own affairs, in accordance with the known laws of mass co-operation, and in the interest of the economic and social progress of humanity."[346] Like Debs, who also claimed in 1905 that the interests of capital and labor, "can and never will be harmonized permanently, and when they are adjusted even temporarily it is always at the expense of the working class,"[347] Robertson opposed any negotiation between capital and labor, insisting on labor's independent cooperative self-organization: "even if labor could secure ninety-five per cent of what it produced, the "bargain" would still be with the social parasites, who **gain** a living by virtue of their ownership of the natural sources of wealth and the machinery of **social** production and exchange."[348] For

[345] Ibid., 12.
[346] Ibid., 8.
[347] Debs, "Revolutionary Unionism," 212.
[348] Robertson, *Labor Unionism*, 7. Bold in original.

Robertson, at least in principle, socialist unionism did not require any cooperation with management, allowing workers to maintain the independence of their organizations. While Taylor had posited a shared interest in utility-maximization uniting workers, capitalists, and the consuming public in common cooperation, Robertson insisted that maximizing utility within capitalist infrastructure presupposed the exploitation of labor, and that any surplus-appropriation resulting from private ownership undermined cooperation and made free power-sharing between capital and labor impossible. Instead, as Debs put it, socialist cooperation implies that "all will receive their socially due share of the product of their co-operative labor."[349]

By "the known laws of mass co-operation," Robertson had a specific set of practices in mind. He argued that, "In order to develop its power the Unions of Labor must bring into conscious operation two sets of activities, Communication and Reaction."[350] Shop stewards would act as relays of these activities. "Reaction" implied that all grievances by workers should be registered and assessed, a process that clarified the nature of the working experience through the independent, constructive formulations of workers. After collecting grievances, stewards would coordinate in council meetings and strategically present demands based on these grievances to foremen. If the demands are rejected, "the matter then concerns all workers in that industrial plant" and lays the groundwork for collective action.[351] To support these activities, all unions need to maintain a continuous press ("Communication") that not only publishes information about disputes, but propagates, "Technical instruction of members in the process of their industry" beyond their assigned tasks.[352] Contra Taylor, cooperation did not only require

[349] Debs, *Unionism and Socialism*, 37. I have not found any attempt by Debs to say more about how this share will be calculated and returned, other than the general emphasis on undermining exploitation and emphasizing public goods.
[350] Robertson, *Labor Unionism*, 12.
[351] Ibid., 14.
[352] Ibid., 13.

individuals performing their roles in the division of labor effectively under the watchful eyes of management; instead, it required amassing as much of the skilled knowledge of earlier craft workers as possible, ensuring that all workers understood the entire industrial process and became capable of collectively legislating on matters of concern for the entire plant. In other words, the motive force of cooperation was workers' direct participation in decision-making as a collective, not managerial knowledge tied to the maximization of profit.

In addition to these practices of communication and reaction, Robertson imagined the labor union as the site of workers' comprehensive self-education, revealing how social cooperation was not simply instrumental collective action toward a discrete goal, but a form of association oriented toward shared self-fulfillment. He criticized labor union leaders – usually outsiders to the plant – who tried to hold procedural meetings for workers that failed to catalyze their creative energies. Opposed to this tendency, Robertson argued that unions needed to mobilize "sentiments" that were suppressed in the capitalist labor process. He claimed that, "Sentiment is a tremendous factor in human evolution … Used in a scientific manner by the labor press, at mass meetings, social gatherings, etc. it promotes the indirect method through which the workers' intelligence is reached, thereby enlarging their social vision. This is necessary in order to dissolve beliefs, opinions, and ideaology [sic] implanted in the minds of the workers by the paid agents of parasitism."[353] These "sentiments" were not restricted to grievances and ideological antagonism toward parasitic bosses and managers; instead, Robertson insisted on the creative, constituent power of aspirational experiences that fed off of the power of labor itself. Rather than see "unskilled" labor as uniformly dulling, he saw workers' ability to operate powerful industrial machinery as a catalytic experience that could augment their sense of

[353] Ibid., 10.

collective power. But without creating parallel experiences of organization both within *and* outside the plant in workers own institutions, this collective potential would not find an emancipatory outlet. As he wrote:

> Experience is the great teacher of the working people … The district council of workers is destined to be the hub of all local labor activities, not only for district solidarity in strikes, but for educating and organizing the workers for the purposes of handling and solving the economic and social problems of the present and future: local press, educational meetings where scientific lectures are given and social problems discussed; a modern library with a full complement of literature from the standpoint of proletarian science; mass meetings, for the purpose of general education and the arousing of the kinetic power of the masses for social progress; gymnastics, health, culture, amusements, music, drama, art and general aesthetic culture. What! dreams you say, fellow workmen. Well, yes, dreams … Marx, Morris, Liebknecht, Luxemburg, Abe Lincoln … Humanity owes a debt of gratitude to the memory of these pioneer thinkers and dreamers.[354]

For Robertson, the basic connection between industrial labor and empowered self-management was a fundamentally constructive experience that had to be recovered from the dynamics of capitalist labor-discipline. He claimed that, workers' "reasoning processes operate best today where their creative energy operates. They are familiar with the shop environment and no others in human society are better fitted to deal with the conditions of that environment than the workers themselves. Their conditions are material facts, not beliefs and opinions."[355] While workers' mere embeddedness in the production process only reflected the despotic cooperation coordinated by capital, the formation of independent institutions that began to subject the plant to the self-conscious regulation of workers cultivated the beginnings of socialist cooperation. While full socialist cooperation based on the liberation of free time from the imperative of surplus-labor extraction, the democratic organization of work, and the investment of the social surplus in the shared self-fulfillment of all would not be possible until capitalist title no longer conferred the

[354] Ibid.
[355] Ibid., 10.

power to exploit, well-organized council federations could serve as the embryo of cooperative self-management that set the elementary building blocks for the cooperative commonwealth.

While Robertson's ideal for unionism did not come to predominate, his hope that workers' councils and larger district councils could serve as sites of these experiences was not mere fantasy. District councils that institutionalized a parallel workers' culture were formed by the Knights of Labor, and at the time of Robertson's writing, some existed in major cities, where they provided durable spaces for the cultivation of workers' self-directed agency. Even if it was not as democratically rooted or independent of management as Robertson would hope, the San Francisco Building Trades Council was a potential site for the development of cooperative workers' culture, and occupied "a large building that served as a library, meeting hall, and hiring center for all construction workers of that compact city."[356] Far from superfluous, investing in these spaces and these experiences could be clearly justified in a theory of socialist strategy that emphasized the imperative to synthesize cooperative self-organization and socialist aspirations. Alongside than the party meeting, picket, or other forms of popular engagement, district councils directly tied to the daily experiences of workers could have formed more a part of the SPA's overall institutional infrastructure than they did.

While Robertson and Debs shared common aspirations for the labor movement, they departed over the issue of political action. For Debs, the Socialist Party was a central organ for reaching workers' in the political arena, taking positions on the major issues of the day, working to undo inherited ideological assumptions, and creating a constituency for electoral mobilization that could not only win local victories, but keep the ideal of socialist transformation perpetually in public consciousness. In *Unionism and Socialism*, Debs emphasized that union agitation could

[356] Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor,* 299.

not simply take the form of "guerilla war against the effects of the existing system" but that workers in the labor movement should use "their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class," a task that required political confrontation with the representatives and defenders of capitalist interests.[357] Ultimately, Debs believed that the trade union struggle for cooperative self-education was essential for the possibility of democratic social transformation, but that only a political party could leverage demands that represent the class interests of workers as a whole, and only a party could present itself as a plausible agent of these demands. While socialist unions could articulate political demands for, "The collective ownership and control of industry and its democratic management in the interest of all the people,"[358] only a political party could connect these demands to a plausible agent for their institutionalization. Moreover – absent a revolutionary crisis – only a democratic majority secured by elections could authorize the Socialist Party to, as Debs put it, "wipe out the wage system and make the workers themselves the masters of the earth."[359] The syndicalists believed that once the workers' organizations were powerful enough on the economic terrain to challenge capital (once the "One Big Union" was formed), political struggle at the level of the state would be unnecessary since the direct economic coercion of the many by the few would no longer be tolerated. For Debs, this position missed how economic action and political action were inter-penetrated. The labor movement cultivates cooperative power among workers, which itself requires keeping the political horizon of a society without exploitation in view, cultivated in the public sphere by the party; and the political struggle organizes the workers into a cohesive coalition, which is impotent without the organized material power built in the trade unions.

[357] Debs, *Unionism and Socialism*, 22.
[358] Ibid., 44.
[359] Ibid., 26.

IV. Conclusion: Dilemmas of Political Unity

At the same time that Debs sought to connect the economic and political struggles by showing how the demands of both are imbricated, he also occasionally veered toward the belief that socialist unity was *primarily* political in an electoral sense. This implies that even if workers in unions might not act as socialists (they might belong to unions that foreground collective bargaining as the end of labor's struggle, for instance), they could nonetheless *vote* as socialists if they identify with the aims of the Socialist Party. This was a genuine tension in Debs's thought and also in the practice of the Socialist Party. In *Unionism and Socialism*, Debs quoted a prescription by SPA member George D. Herron that counseled SPA members not to focus too much attention on reconstructing the unions, since unions were ultimately "merely a capitalist line of defense within the capitalist system" because they could not interrupt the political power of the capitalist class alone, which was derived both from its economic power, but also from its control of the state.[360] If this is the case, votes for Socialists can actually become more valuable than socialist practice, since it is ultimately the political challenge with capital and the level of the state that can deliver a workers' republic based on cooperative industry. To the extent that these commitments predominate in the socialist movement, the cooperative, radical democratic core of Debs's aspirations (focused on the direct transformation of patterns of association shaped by capital) could take a back-seat to the ideological operation of persuading workers to vote the socialist ticket. The problem with this view is that it misses how ideology is itself a material practice, reproduced not only by the ideas in workers heads, but how legitimating ideologies rationalize the actual patterns of social relation that workers' participate in on a daily basis.

[360] Ibid., 27.

Cultivating agency requires struggle on both ideational and practical fronts: working through the forms of immanent, aspirational, and aesthetic critique that catalyze ideational transformation, and facilitating efforts to transform engrained patterns of association along democratic lines.

At the same time, the SPA's abstraction from the direct experiences of particular subsets of workers could also facilitate necessary synthesis between distinct experiences of economic conflict and exploitation. Such synthetic power is required for any popular party in a complex society, where experiences of exploitation and domination are multiple and diverse. Negotiating this plurality is essential for a hegemonic social project that crystallizes broadly popular aspirations. Incipiently, SPA members tried to achieve such a synthesis in their attempts to retain the movement's connection to Populist agrarianism. While Debs's lifelong effort to connect industry-wide unionism to socialist politics did incline him toward primary involvement with industrial labor, the Party was able to synthesize a plurality of experiences within a common organization, proliferating and connecting sites of struggle. From its formation, the SPA was imbued with an appreciation of the struggles of poor farmers, and a number of leaders sought to include farmers' demands as integral components of the Socialist project. In the early years of the Party's formation, Morris Hillquit acknowledged that even if "The interests of the farmers are not identical with those of the wage workers," both are "a victim of the capitalist system":

> The condition of the farmer as it is to day is practically that of a hired laborer of the capitalist class. Whether the capitalist appears as a landlord or mortgagee, he virtually owns the farm. … If the farmers are not interested in the same immediate demands, in the same progressive steps that the workingman is, the farmer is interested alike with the working man – that is, speaking of the small farmer of course, the poor and oppressed farmer – in the overthrow of the capitalist system, for he is a victim of that capitalist system just as the wage worker is. The agencies and mode of exploitation are different.[361]

[361] Quoted in Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States*, 211.

Given a commitment to popular unity against exploitation, the possibility emerges to build a common ideology of cooperation around distinct experiences of exploitation. Linked to the history of agrarian cooperatives, a number of SPA members saw continued efforts at agrarian cooperative organization as integral to the cooperative commonwealth. At the SPA's 1910 convention, a committee on farmer's concerns outlined a rural socialist program based on the formation of cooperatively owned grain elevators and warehouses, cooperative societies for purchasing agricultural machinery, low-interest loans issued by the state, and direct election of members of the Board of Agriculture by farmers, a program drawn up by socialist farmers.[362] As the Oklahoma socialist Oscar Ameringer argued, the formation of cooperatives was a cardinal component of what made small farmers an important constituency for socialism: "Many of the farmers in the southwest, where I am acquainted, have a good many co-operatively managed enterprises. They have started co-operative general stores, they have started co-operative mills, and they are going into co-operative business down there. The farmer is recognizing the fact that he must be the owner of all the means with which he works."[363] For Ameringer, fighting for the cooperative commonwealth implied working alongside everyone who suffered from exploitation, encouraging the integration of their immediate demands into a general vision of a cooperative society.

For other socialists, these proposals were controversial, not necessarily due to an inveterate industrial, anti-agrarian bias, but because the agrarian question catalyzed a debate about whether the SPA could simultaneously appeal to both property-owning farmers and farm laborers, or whether these groups had zero-sum antagonistic interests. At the root of the

[362] The Socialist Party of America. "Proceedings of the National Congress of the Socialist Party" (Chicago: The Socialist Party, 1910), 216.
[363] Ibid., 222.

controversy was whether private ownership of land inherently vested its owner with the power to exploit, or whether, given the fact that a significant amount of agricultural production still took place on small-holdings operated directly by farmer-owners or tenants, the SPA had reason to believe that they could support forms of non-exploitative private ownership of the direct means of labor. If all forms of private property in productive resources tended toward exploitation, the SPA reasoned that they should follow European socialist parties and include the nationalization of land in their immediate demands, which they expected would appeal to farm laborers who were exploited by land-owning farmers. In defense of small farmer title, Algernon Lee argued that, "In the field of industry, what the Socialist movement demands is the social ownership and control of the SOCIALLY OPERATED means of production, not of ALL means of production. Only to a very small extent is the land now, only to a very small extent is it likely to be for many years to come, a socially operated means of production."[364] And as he clarified further, "Collective ownership is encouraged by the Socialist, not as an end in itself, not as a part of a utopian scheme, but as a means of preventing exploitation, then such ownership is opposed by Socialism."[365] As Lawrence Goodwyn explained in an important essay deeply critical of socialist land policy, American socialists who supported agrarian demands assumed that a program of land ownership based on "occupancy and use only" and nested within a cooperative economic infrastructure would have united the Populist tradition to the Socialist aspiration to transcend exploitation.[366] When other socialists rejected these proposals outright, they did not simply miss an opportunity to broker and compromise with the interests of farmers for the sake of forming an electoral coalition, but rejected an opening to map the entire terrain of exploitation within the

[364] Ibid., 218.
[365] Ibid. 214.
[366] Lawrence Goodwyn, "The Cooperative Commonwealth and Other Abstractions: In Search of a Democratic Premise," *Marxist Perspectives* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1980), 21.

national economy based on the direct experiences of workers. As our examination of the Populist movement showed, agrarian labor was not simply the entrepreneurial work of farmers operating their own means of production and selling commodities in a market, but was shaped by a variety of mechanisms of exploitation emanating from high-interest credit, lack of democratic control over marketing, storage, and distribution, and struggles to retain land-ownership. If agrarian grievances manifested in desires for the security of their holdings, this demand was no more 'pro-capitalist' from a socialist standpoint than trade union demands for higher wages.[367] A successful, democratic socialist party had to balance the synthetic possibilities of the party-form with radical democratic connections to the entire subset of productive workers, acknowledging that forming a constituent, popular force mobilized against exploitation would require complex negotiations around the institutional shape of social cooperation in various sectors of the economy. Rather than simple brokering, the attempt to synthesize experiences based on direct popular connections would inform how the party elaborates principles of cooperation, connects these aspirations to concrete experiments in self-organization that reformulate engrained patterns of association, and articulate political demands that work to entrench cooperative social relations against exploitative social relations. In both their successes and defeats, the People's Party and the Socialist Party began to forge these connections, leaving a record of cooperative political struggles that extend from the redefinition of democratic ideals of social equality and power sharing to the organizational realities of party-formation and political mobilization.

[367] No one at the convention drew this analogy.

The Infrastructure of Intelligence: John Dewey, Social Democracy, and Cooperative Experimentalism

"This basic problem of industrial society is to establish conditions that will place all men in their labor on the plane which the small class of scientists and artists now occupy. Then there will be a real consummation of social life in full freedom. There will [be] a true social democracy."
– John Dewey, *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*[368]

In October of 1933, John Dewey spoke to an audience at the People's Church in Chicago about the need to build a new political party. He claimed that the problems facing the country required more than the piecemeal reforms and compromises with vested interests that existing parties were capable of offering, and he suggested that the political imaginary shared by the major parties had to be replaced by "a new conception of politics, a new conception of government, and of the relation of the government to the people in this country."[369] Dewey advocated such a sweeping vision because he thought that the causes of current problems went to the foundations of the social and economic order; they were grounded in the inability of a system of production based on profit-accumulation and competition to secure genuine political equality and enable democratic problem-solving. As Dewey put it, "we have gone from the war on the

[368] John Dewey, "Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2015), 94.
[369] John Dewey, *Later Works, 1925-1937, Volume 11: 1935-1937,* ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1987), 276.

battlefield between nations to the war in the factory and in the market place between individuals and groups. And it is *that* which demands not a "patching" here and there but some fundamental re-thinking of our social and political relations and the development of a new conception of what government is for: an instrument in the service of the people and not, as under the system of competition for power and competition for command of power, the tool and instrument of selfish and acquisitive interests."[370] To advance this vision of democratic politics, Dewey had helped to form League for Independent Political Action (LIPA) in 1928, an organization that aspired to unite the different factions of the democratic left – ranging from the Socialist Party, The Farmer-Labor Political Federation, trade unions, and other reform organizations – into a new popular party that could serve as a vehicle for social democracy.

When he discussed the new party, Dewey placed his own agitation within a general history of third party efforts in the United States, ranging from the Granger-influenced anti-monopoly parties of the 1870's through the Greenback Party, People's Party, and Socialist Party.[371] He suggested that the Depression had done more to vindicate a renewed effort against the power of organized wealth and privilege than any crisis in recent memory, and wrote that, "events are rapidly educating the voters to realize the flabbiness and futility of the old parties, along with the fact that neither of them has either the desire or the ability to deal in any fundamental way with the causes of our industrial and financial collapse." Going further, he continued to explain that whatever the identity of a new party:

its platform will contain socialistic planks in the sense that it will demand that our enormous natural resources, our vast machinery of production and distribution, and the wonderful technical skill the country possesses shall no longer be used to enrich a privileged few but be directed to serve the well-being of all men and women of good will. Its aim will be to put an end once for all

[370] Ibid., 280. Emphasis original. See also Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy,* 445-451.
[371] John Dewey, "The Place of Minor Parties in the American Scene and Their Relation to the Present Situation," *The Later Works, 1925-1935, Volume 6: 1931-1932* ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 231-238.

to the scandal and the tragedy of want in the midst of plenty, of inability to buy and consume in the midst of abundant production, and to make liberty and equality a reality by bringing about a cooperative industrial society.[372]

Dewey's vision for a "cooperative industrial society" was a new iteration of the cooperative commonwealth. As a theory of cooperative democracy, it contained a number of insights that enrich our understanding of cooperation's political meaning. While Dewey himself never engaged in detailed study of the dynamics of cooperative movements and his vision of the politics of cooperation reflects these limitations, I argue that his perspective would have been enriched, rather than undermined, by such a study. Ultimately, I argue that Dewey's conception of democracy helps to clarify three central dilemmas in the politics of cooperation: first, Dewey helps illuminate the meaning of "cooperation" as a form of free association outside the parameters of liberal individualism; second, his theory offers a way to conceptualize how social and political institutions can abet, rather than impede, cooperative experimentation; and third, his theory of democratic transformation offers a productive emphasis on the contingency of democratic action, even if it suffers from limitations as an account of political conflict and popular mobilization.

Dewey's idea of the cooperative commonwealth centered on his conviction that a democratic society must actively promote the joint self-fulfillment of its members, facilitated by their full participation as intelligent agents in all facets of their social experience. The connection that Dewey drew between democratic agency and social intelligence was not only at the core of his vision of social cooperation, but it also constituted the ethical core of his critique of capitalism. For Dewey, the failure of American social and political institutions to allow the free development of social intelligence constituted their greatest flaw. Dewey was able to formulate

[372] Ibid., 237-238.

these criticisms because he understood social intelligence in a specific way. Rather than conceptualize intelligence as an abstract faculty of isolated individual minds, Dewey conceived of intelligence as an embodied form of associated, reflexive, and experimental action. In other words, intelligence does not inhabit an abstract "intellectual" domain, but, properly understood, is a property of social interaction. In his words, intelligence is "a short-hand designation for great and ever-growing methods of observation, experiment and reflective reasoning which have in very short time revolutionized the physical and, to a considerable degree, the physiological conditions of life."[373] As an inherently social and collective capacity, one bound up not only in the worldviews of society's members, but in the formation of their collective habits and agential possibilities, intelligence and its attendant phenomena – reflexivity, problem-solving, experimental exploration, and personal growth – constituted the core of Dewey's social theory. In Dewey's view, if society were to foreground the value of social intelligence, it would place a premium on egalitarian cooperation. As equal co-participants in the making of society, each person experiences a particular vantage point on the social whole, and each person's contribution to identifying and resolving common problems is equally valuable in devising appropriate solutions. For this reason, Dewey claimed that democracy not only requires an elementary commitment to freedom of conscience and inquiry, but also an equally elementary commitment to the open, practical participation of all citizens in all facets of their common life. As Dewey understood, capitalism made such comprehensive participation impossible, and its tendency to thwart the free, practical cooperation of society's members constituted the core of its ethical and political failure.

[373] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004 [1948]), v. This book was originally published in 1920, and Dewey's conception of intelligence was enlarged beyond these formulations in his later writings on experience, which begin to integrate a new perspective on nature and aesthetics. These later works are important for my overall account, but I do not examine them in depth here.

Drawing the connection between the Populist legacy, cooperation, and Dewey's third party activism is less common than situating Dewey within the historiographical confines of the "Progressive Era" or later developments in American liberal thought. Dewey's emphasis on the democratic value of scientific progress, his philosophy of "pragmatism," and his connections to middle-class social reformers appear to corroborate his place within the secure parameters of an American tradition of liberal reform. Embedding Dewey within these traditions has often suited his liberal admirers and radical critics equally well. Richard Rorty, for instance, celebrated Dewey as an architect of American liberal nationalism, a figure who successfully united American cultural identity to the ideals of liberal democracy, pluralism, and tolerance, and helped provide the nation with its most compelling self-image. He wrote, for instance, that, "Whitman explicitly said that he would "use the words America and democracy as convertible terms." Dewey was less explicit, but when he uses "truly democratic" as a supreme honorific, he is obviously envisaging an achieved America."[374] Critics have often seized on claims like these to claim that Dewey's politics and philosophy are ultimately complicit in the rationalization of American social and political development, making Dewey's vision an inappropriate basis for a critique of power. For Cristopher Lasch, Dewey's philosophy represented a typical response by liberals in the Progressive Era to the onslaught of "large-scale production and mass communications," which he believed undermined the communitarian localism that Dewey himself occasionally admired.[375] In Lasch's view, Dewey's affirmation of "constructive intelligence" and "constructive social engineering" represented the eclipse of Populist resistance

[374] Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17. For trenchant critiques of Rorty's interpretation of Dewey's politics see Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), and Richard Shusterman, "Pragmatism and Liberalism Between Dewey and Rorty," *Political Theory* 22, no. 3 (1994), 391-413.
[375] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1991), 368.

to industrial society, making Deweyan democracy a sign of Populism's defeat.[376] Along similar lines, Bryan Lloyd has argued that Dewey, "welcomed, rather than suspected, the impersonal, cooperative, large-scale, linked-with-production science deployed with such success by the modern corporation. Even as he mourned the human toll of corporate capitalism, he used its language – integration, continuity, division of labor."[377] It comes as no surprise, then, that during Cold War, the philosophy of "pragmatism" became central to a liberal nationalist ideology that defined "political obligation and national loyalty in a secular and imperialist age."[378] For Lloyd and other leftist critics, Dewey's proximity to the ideological language of mid-century liberalism is sufficient to read his work as capitulation rather than critique.

This is unfortunate, since Dewey not only offers a unique critical perspective on American social and political development, but his theory of social intelligence offers a way to conceptualize cooperative activity as a constructive form of agency with a distinct set of obstacles rooted in the material relations of popular disempowerment. Like the Populists and Socialists, Dewey was wrestling with the problem of how to square cooperative activity with self-determination in societies that were becoming increasingly complex, where the social relations in which people were embedded reproduced forms of coercive power that escaped their control and robbed them of the value of their social contribution. Dewey's most radical attribute was not a theory of class struggle, but a basic conviction that any theory of class struggle should also accept: the basic capacities of human agency endow us with an equal ability to participate in self-government, and any limitations in our collective capacity for self-government derive not

[376] Ibid. Specifically, Lasch calls Dewey's theory "too little, too late."
[377] Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890-1922* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 50.
[378] Ibid.

from our anthropological failings, but from limitations in the social infrastructure that we have created.

I. From Social Ethics to Cooperative Intelligence: Cooperation and Industrial Democracy in Dewey's Early Writings

At the time of the Populist movement, Dewey was in the midst of the first decade of his academic career, absorbed in philosophical debates ranging from the nature of psychology to the fundamentals of ethical theory.[379] As he did throughout his career, Dewey developed his philosophical perspective alongside continuous reflection on social and political issues. While Dewey wrote more explicit commentary on politics during his later years, his early writings also evince a clear interest in contemporary controversies. Dewey's impassioned support for the Pullman strike soon after his move to the University of Chicago in 1894 is often mentioned as early evidence of his radical democratic tendencies, but Dewey's commitment to a radical conception of democracy is a consistent feature of his political philosophy from his first writings.[380] In his lectures on political philosophy offered at the University of Michigan in 1892, he singled out contemporary labor relations for specific critique, lamenting how "the value of an individual as an organ of activity is appropriated by others," and claiming that an alternative, just division of labor, "is never complete until the laborer gets his full expression … The kind we now have in factories, – one-sided, mechanical – is a case of class interest; i.e. his activity is made a means to benefit others."[381] In Dewey's mind, this instrumentalization of the activity of

[379] See Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 13-32.
[380] Ibid., 87-88. Dewey wrote in a letter to his wife, "That a representative journal of the upper classes – damn them again – can take the attitude of that Harper's Weekly and in common with all other journals, think Debs is a simple lunatic or else doing all this to show his criminal control over the criminal 'lower classes' – well, it shows what it is to become a higher class." Quoted in ibid., 87.
[381] Quoted in ibid., 50.

workers within production was a basic ethical defect of American society, inhibiting not only individual workers' self-fulfillment, but the general cultural progress of society as a whole.

Dewey's simultaneous focus on the "expression" of workers in their activity alongside any appropriation of the "value" they create was a general aspect of his thinking about inequality that persisted throughout his work, and Dewey tended to emphasize the priority of the ethical to the economic throughout his writings on industrial democracy.[382] In his early work, this ethical focus was deeply connected to his vision of democratic self-government, and it entailed a specific justification for industrial democracy that centered on cooperation. In his first piece of writing on democracy, an essay called "The Ethics of Democracy" (1888), Dewey began to spell out a theory of democracy based on a critique of any social arrangement that subjected the people to the government of the few – a problem he considered endemic to an 'ethics of aristocracy' that still had considerable sway over the minds of major politicians and intellectuals.

In Dewey's mind, any cultural progress toward fuller democracy required abandoning the aristocratic view. According to that view, "The few best, the aristoi, these know and are fitted for rule; but they are to rule not in their own interests but in that of society as a whole, and therefore, in that of every individual in society. They do not bear rule *over* the others; they show them what they can best do, and guide them in doing it."[383] For Dewey, this vision not only suffered the ethical defect of making some into the instruments of others, but it also suffered from a practical defect. History had repeatedly shown that, "the practical consequence of giving the few wise and

[382] Dewey's emphasis on self-cultivation rather than the critique of political economy is what licenses some, like Kenneth Stikkers, to see Dewey's vision of economic democracy as compatible with the 'capabilities approach' to economic justice advocated by Amartya Sen. I do not agree with this interpretation of Dewey, but I acknowledge that Dewey's own lack of clarity around political economy makes this kind of interpretation plausible. See Kenneth W. Stikkers, "Dewey, Economic Democracy, and the Mondgragon Cooperatives," *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (2011).

[383] John Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy" *The Early Works, 1882-1898, Volume 1: Early Essays and Leibniz's New Essays Concerning the Human Understanding* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 242. Italics original.

good power is that they cease to be wise and good," not simply because power corrupts, but because government by the few inherently divorces the activity of government from "the needs and requirement of the many."[384] Effectively, this makes the people "aliens to that which should be their commonwealth. Not participating in the formation or the expression of the common will, they do not embody it in themselves."[385] Dewey argues that the only way to bridge the alienating gap between political power and social need is democracy, a society where there is no governing class set against the many and guiding their behavior, but instead only an association of free individuals jointly participating in shaping their common will. As Dewey wrote, "Government does not mean one class or side of society set over against the other. The government is not made up of those who hold office, or who sit in the legislature. It consists of every member of political society. … in democracy, at all events, the governors and the governed are not two classes, but two aspects of the same fact – the fact of the possession by society of a unified and articulate will. It means that government is the organ of society, and is as comprehensive as society."[386] For Dewey, the fact that all citizens of a democracy are co-constitutors of popular sovereignty not only implies that they possess inherent rights to full participation in all the activities of their society, but that they require a political infrastructure comprehensive enough for their needs, ensuring that their participation is linked to an effective organ of political power. In Dewey's mind, democracy's central aspiration is not simply majority rule, but the creation of a society that closes the gap between governor and governed at all levels, ensuring that the people remain in full possession of their self-determining power, assisted by the social and political infrastructure that they create.

[384] Ibid.
[385] Ibid., 237.
[386] Ibid., 238-239.

While some might believe that citizens require a homogenous identity in order to have a common will, Dewey believed that this idea derived from false assumptions about the nature of individuality. In a critique of Sir Henry Maine's *Popular Government* that occasioned the essay, Dewey wrote that underpinning Maine's aristocratic critique of democracy was the mistaken view "that men are mere individuals, without any social relations *until* they form a contract … men in their natural state are non-social units, are a mere multitude; and that some artifice must be devised to constitute them into political society."[387] From this vantage point, Dewey argued that democracy can only be conceptualized as the rule of the majority envisioned as a numerical aggregate, what Maine had portrayed as, "a heap of grains of sand needing some factitious mortar to put them into a semblance of order."[388] For Maine, if democracy means purely majority rule it was clearly irrational: there is no reason to believe that a majority necessarily produces wise legislation. Rather than simply defend numerical majoritarianism on the analytical terms proposed by Maine, Dewey argued that, by positing society as a numerical aggregate, Maine ignored the associational fabric of social interaction that constitutes the true locus of self-government. For Dewey, at the root of popular self-government was not the confluence of individual private wills expressed in a majority vote, but how the people's possibilities for personal self-development and community bonds reciprocally shape one another and unfold. Self-government therefore requires an active attempt to create the social conditions for the people's free self-development as social persons, a process that Dewey envisioned as the concrete realization of democracy's three cardinal values: liberty, equality, and fraternity.[389]

[387] Ibid., 231.
[388] Ibid. Instead, Dewey insisted that the existence of a majority is the product of society (including the product of the canalizing political institutions that organized the perceptions and interests of a majority).
[389] Ibid. 244.

As noted above, Dewey imagined the integration of citizens through the metaphor of a common will. Again, by this, he did not mean that atomized private citizens would all share the same subjective opinions, nor did he imagine that their common will would be secured by a homogenous identity. Instead, he saw in a society of intersubjective relations among associated citizens a latent possibility to connect particular individual strivings to the common good of the whole, a social arrangement that would merit the name "democracy" insofar as it secured for a freely associated people their constituent power to make and re-make society according to their collective deliberation. Following Hegel against Rousseau, Dewey did not think that particular individual strivings and the general interest would be united by the formation of a general will embodied in law, but through the ethical life of society, specifically through an ethical vision of what he called "personality."[390] As Dewey wrote, "the full significance of personality can be learned by the individual only as it is already presented to him in objective form in society; it admits that the chief stimuli and encouragements to the realization of personality come from society," suggesting that individuals' capacities for self-fulfillment are inseparable from the general, background structures of social interaction. At the same time, individual particularities are each their own moment of these social processes, a doctrine that, "holds that the spirit of personality indwells in every individual and that the choice to develop it must proceed from the individual."[391] So long as individuals were not conceived as pre-social atoms who could only be formed into a stable society by an external compulsion (whether the fiction of an original contract or the coercive discipline of a governing class), Dewey understood the possibility of

[390] See Wesbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, 14-15. Hegel's doctrine of ethical life as the synthesis of abstract right, civil society, and the state is outlined in G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[391] Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy," 244.

ethical unity between the common good and individual experiences not only as a possible ethical horizon, but as a cardinal component of the ideal of democratic self-government.

Dewey was clear that his critique of aristocracy extended into industrial relations. Insofar as American society had embraced the democratic ideal, he claimed that, "We have, nominally at least, given up the idea that a certain body of men are to be set aside for the doing of this necessary work."[392] At the same time, American society constitutively failed to live up to this ideal: on the industrial front, "society is still a sound aristocrat."[393] For Dewey, the imperative of a democratic organization of the economy raised the question of "the supposed tendency of democracy toward socialism, if not communism."[394] Alongside his critique of Maine's disaggregation of the people into a numerical mass, he claimed that democratic equality was not an arithmetic principle – one that simply implied an equal division of resources – but an ethical principle, centered on the development of individual personalities connected to the common good. In Dewey's mind, socialism was on the right track insofar as it aspired to make industry into a social institution where individual activity and the common good can be synthesized, but he argued that it would become undemocratic if some agency were to merely administer the economy to the detriment of individual initiative and responsibility.[395] When he imagined socializing industry, he did not envision its administration by bureaucracy, or even the application of external rules to govern industrial activity, but instead as the internal reconstruction of economic relations along cooperative lines. He wrote, "We admit, nay, at times we claim, that ethical rules are to be *applied* to this industrial sphere, but we think of it as an external application. That the economic and industrial life is *in itself* ethical, that it is to be made

[392] Ibid., 248
[393] Ibid., 246.
[394] Ibid., 246.
[395] Ibid., 247.

contributory to the realization of personality through the formation of a higher and more complete unity among men, this is what we do not recognize; but such is the meaning of the statement that democracy must become industrial."[396] For Dewey, if ethical unity among citizens pursuing a common will were to become possible, it would require that all facets of their experience reflect a basic harmony between individual striving and the common good. Even if his vision does not manifest in strict numerical equality, Dewey argued that it required "a democracy of wealth," and he argued that without a more equal distribution of wealth, society would not be able to close the gap between governor and governed, implying that its civil and political institutions would reflect the one-sided domination of wealthy interests over the general interests of the people as a whole.[397]

As Axel Honneth clarifies, Dewey gained his confidence in the possibility of reconciled ethical life from a naturalistic vision of Hegelian philosophy, one that saw pre-political forms of cooperative action as the original, experiential locus of self-government. "If this natural-like process of a communal employment of individual forces on the part of all society's members is raised to consciousness and viewed as a cooperative project, then that ideal evolves that bears the name "democracy.""[398] Similar to the practices of mutual aid in early cooperative movements, Dewey understood basic experiences where members of an associated group seek to realize their own freedom in non-instrumental relations of solidarity as the elementary building-block of democracy. According to Honneth, the core problem of Dewey's early theory is was his overly optimistic assumption that, on the basis of these initial experiences, "if all members of society could actualize their own developmental potential on the basis of equal opportunity, they would

[396] Ibid., 248. Italics original.
[397] Ibid. 246.
[398] Axel Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today" trans. John M. M. Farrell *Political Theory* 26, no. 6 (Dec. 1998), 763-783, 769.

want of their own free will to become good cooperative partners in the social division of labor."[399] Whether Dewey took this confidence from Hegelianism or Christian idealism, Honneth argues that he ultimately abandoned this naïve assumption, and replaced his ethical idealism with concrete investigations into social psychology and the philosophy of science. In these studies, Dewey did not presume the possibility of ethical reconciliation, but sought to understand how personal self-realization and social compatibility could be squared through the concrete practices of collective problem-solving that formed the basis of social intelligence.

To see why Dewey retains the ideal of social cooperation as a form of free association even as he makes this turn toward a theory of problem solving, it is important to grasp that while Dewey may appear to simply transition from ethics to instrumental rationality – positing that personal and social interests can unite only when individuals share a common goal in solving a discrete problem – Dewey continued to imagine experimental problem solving in terms that exceeded its instrumental utility. In his turn toward pragmatism, Dewey did not lose his ethical commitment to de-instrumentalizing our relationships to one another; he did not seek to replace a society where some are the instruments of others with a society where each is the mutual instrument of the other. What binds cooperators in joint problem-solving is not only an instrumental interest in resolving a specific problem, but the practice of cooperative experimentation as its own form of self-realization. Because Dewey did not see intelligence as a merely 'discursive' form of rationality, but as an embodied practical activity, he insisted that intelligence was only possible through the active participation of agents in formulating and undergoing experimental activity. For these reasons, Honneth rightly notes that Dewey's experimentalism is better grasped by the idea of "social cooperation" than the ideas of

[399] Ibid., 771.

"communicative consultation" of "intersubjective speech" common to theories of deliberative democracy.[400]

To give a better sense of how Dewey envisioned the relationship between instrumentality and non-instrumental relations of solidarity in his emerging vision of industrial democracy, we can examine a few passages in his subsequent works. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey emphasized how, with the right background conditions in place, productive labor can serve as a self-fulling moment of integration with one's natural and social environment that directly facilitates the growth of agential capacities. While production always has an instrumental quality, he also noted that reducing production to pure instrumentality severs it from forms of self-fulfillment that are elementary to the experience of agency. He wrote that, "A skilled artisan who enjoys his work is aware that what he is making is made for future use. Externally his action is one technically labeled "production." It seems to illustrate the subjection of present activity to remote ends. But actually, morally, psychologically, the sense of the utility of the article produced is a factor in the present significance of action due to the present utilization of abilities, giving play to taste and skill, accomplishing something now. The moment production is severed from immediate satisfaction, it becomes "labor," drudgery, a task reluctantly performed."[401] If laborers deserve to appreciate their skill and creativity in the act of production, Dewey did not believe that this would be restricted to the isolated experience of individual laborers. If this were the case, one could imagine managerial attempts to increase work satisfaction as a possible result of Dewey's meditations on agency. Instead, Dewey was clear that these relations of personal

[400] Ibid., 766-67.
[401] John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: The Modern Library, 1930 [1922]), 271. In the syndicalist vision explored in the last chapter, these values were extended to machine operatives not by restoring craft practice, but by educating workers to fully apprehend the scientific technology and engineering feats of modern industry so that they fully shared in society's scientific advances, a shift of perspective also deeply congenial to Dewey's own views.

self-fulfillment could only be truly realized in shared cooperation with fellow-workers, and that cooperation needed to extend to the organization of labor itself. In *Democracy and Education*, he wrote that "the great majority of workers have no insight into the social aims of their pursuits and no direct personal interests in them. The results actually achieved are not the ends of their actions, but only of their employers. They do what they do, not freely and intelligently, but for the sake of the wage earned."[402] Again, this instrumentalization of activity remained ethically problematic for Dewey, since it ultimately posited a managerial *aristoi* that provided workers with the rationale for their own behavior in a one-sided fashion, inhibiting the latent possibility that the self-fulfillment of each could become the condition for the self-fulfillment of all in arrangements reached by common deliberation and problem-solving.

While Dewey's vision of cooperation clearly resonates with the earlier views we have explored, it also suffers from a series of ambiguities. First, without an underlying economic rationale to critique exploitation – whether the Populists' opposition to the confiscation of their value in the market or the Socialists' critique of exploitation based on the labor theory of value – Dewey had trouble clearly formulating what a "democracy of wealth" would imply. Clearly, this imprecision left room for ambiguity. What prevents a "democracy of wealth" from manifesting in a combination of high profits, high wages, and mass consumption? Against the suggestions of Lasch and Lloyd noted above, Dewey would have clearly rejected the basic, Taylorist idea that cooperation between labor and management could result from efficient productivity, which would maximize the utility of both classes and serve the public interest within the confines of the existing social order. This vision was indeed offered in progressive terms that resonate with concepts used by Dewey: the reconstruction of society through scientific experimentation, a

[402] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2007 [1916]), 192.

defense of the public interest, and the reconciliation of individual strivings with the general good. At the same time, Dewey's axiomatic commitment to a simultaneously *democratic* and *social* union of the particular and the general clearly warded off these conclusions. In Dewey's view, a democratic solution to the problems of aristocratic industrial relations required forms of skilled participation and non-instrumental solidarity that were more akin to the aspirations of socialist unions than Taylorist managers.

At the same time, the absence of a theory of capitalism in Dewey's philosophical apparatus made it difficult to assess why economic relations inhibited the forms of cooperation Dewey favored, and it also limited the possibilities of Dewey's strategic thinking. These difficulties not only manifest in Dewey's imprecise use of terms (pitting a "democracy of wealth" against "aristocracy" could describe the aspirations of 18th century bourgeois revolutionaries against feudal privilege as much as aspirations for workers' democratic control of industry), but they also point to an underlying difficulty in his social theory. As in the last chapter, this difficulty revolves around the relationship between structure and subject. While Honneth praises Dewey's turn to social psychology, Dewey's effort to resolve the gap between the particular and the general through a theory of psychology rather than a theory of political economy (which was Marx's route out of Hegelian idealism) always carried the risk of missing how society's material infrastructure reproduces regular, distinct patterns of habit-formation among different social classes rooted in economic dynamics. At issue is not simply whether Dewey discusses different forms of domination that result in different forms of habit-formation (which he does), but the role of political economy in shaping his overall social theory. While Dewey was clear that for the reformulation of social habits, "There must be a change in objective arrangements and institutions. We must work on the environment not merely on the hearts of

men," he did not explicitly theorize political economy as a central site where these "objective arrangements" are shaped.[403] Part of the reason for this oversight was that Dewey often conflated economic determinism with utilitarianism – the idea that, as he put it, "Desires first for the primary necessities of life and then for power over others and for enjoyment of the luxuries due to wealth are the only explaining causes" of social behavior[404] – but his aversion to these arguments also related to his important insistence on the power of ideas to remake society. Against a strong tendency in Marxism, Dewey was right that social progress does not occur through a kind of brute conflict among classes alone, but through combinations of practical struggle and ideological reformulation.[405] As we will see in the next section, Dewey's mature political philosophy began to correct for an earlier, overly ethical discussion of the structuring power of economic change on social habit, and, at the same time, he would retain his insistence on the creative power of social intelligence to democratize society.

II. The Infrastructure of Intelligence: The Great Community and the Cooperative Commonwealth

In Axel Honneth's estimation, one of Dewey's productive moves from his early to his later writings was his discovery of the idea of "the public sphere" as a mediating arena between state and society where citizens collectively form their democratic will through public deliberation. For Honneth, this turn toward the idea of the public demonstrates how, "it is only where methods of publicly debating individual convictions have assumed institutional form that, in social life, the communicative character of rational problem solving can be set free … It was

[403] Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 22.
[404] Dewey, *Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy*, 4. This oversight would later metastasize in his unsatisfactory critique of Marxism in *Freedom and Culture*, which I will leave for fuller discussion at a later time.
[405] Ibid., 4-5.

now possible for [Dewey] to grant to procedures of unconstrained opinion and will formation a much greater role in true democracy."[406] For Honneth, this move is essential for Dewey's continued effort to seek the reconciliation of individual expression and social freedom, since the public sphere becomes a domain in which the desires and opinions of citizens can be communicatively negotiated. At this stage in the exposition of Dewey's views, a number of further ambiguities can be introduced, and they center around the depth of the "social" quality that Dewey accorded to cooperation and the nature of his specific conception of "the public." Resolving these issues also cuts to the core of Dewey's radicalism, since Dewey's response to these difficulties demonstrates the inadequacy of most theoretical appropriations of his arguments, which rest not on his own social theory, but on theorists' own attachment to the neoclassical theory of the market and their hopes for its administrative regulation. Moreover, the difficulties that arise demonstrate why, in envisioning the cooperative commonwealth, Dewey stuck to its radical democratic core rather than adapt its normative orientation to victories of anti-democratic forces over the people's own cooperative self-government.

In basic outlines, Dewey understands "the public" as a community of concern that develops when social interactions create consequences that a directly associated group cannot manage alone.[407] While Dewey understands this idea in expansive terms – as we will see below – it is often glossed in terms that are more narrow than Dewey's original meaning. To take one example, Charles Sabel simply assimilates the public's role to the management of market externalities. In his explanation of Dewey's idea of the public, he writes: "Private transactions, paradigmatically in the form of bi-lateral contracts, often had consequences for others not party

[406] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation," 773.
[407] John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012 [1927]), 46.

to the agreement: externalities, as we would say."[408] From this point of view, while the *consequences* of market activity may become public concerns – and therefore justly amenable to political regulation by the state – market relations themselves constitute a "private" and non-political bedrock of society that is itself not the site of political reconstruction. Along different lines, Sabeel Rahman reads Dewey as a classic Progressive Era proponent of the expansion of the administrative state, but one who hoped that the spread of administrative agencies would help constellate issue-area publics that focus democratic lobbying effort and help make economic relations more transparent.[409] At an underlying level, both positions resonate with Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public, which he portrays as a sphere of deliberation and public will formation "outside the realm of the state and the economy," that generates legitimating or delegitimating discourses that seek to influence established institutions.[410] As he clarifies: "Discourses do not govern. They generate a communicative power that cannot take the place of administration but can only influence it. This influence is limited to the procurement and withdrawal of legitimation."[411] In all cases, the idea of "the public" is conceptualized as a sphere of discursive norm-generation that can influence administrative agencies, often in their efforts to regulate the consequences of private activity.[412]

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[408] Charles Sabel, "Dewey, Democracy, and Democratic Experimentalism", *Contemporary Pragmatism* 9, no. 2 (December 2012), 35-55, 38.
[409] Sabeel Rahman, *Democracy Against Domination* (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2017). Rahman is close to my understanding of Dewey's view, but he fails to fully reconstruct the centrality that Dewey accorded to democratic experiences of cooperation as an underlying basis of self-government. Democratically accountable public administration is a part of his vision of the cooperative commonwealth, but only a part.
[410] Jürgen Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 453.
[411] Ibid., 452.
[412] See Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994). For Habermas, the possibility of cooperative self-government in the way that Dewey envisioned in his early years is not only inadequate to the complexity of modern societies, but it also demands too much ethical homogeneity to be compatible with pluralism.

What each of these perspectives misses is the depth of Dewey's unique, context specific argument about the problem of the public in the early 20th century United States. Reviewing the specificity of his argument is central for appreciating how he integrated a deeper appreciation for the structural power of economic change in shaping social perceptions and agential possibilities in these later years. Dewey did not orient his argument about the public to the problem of market regulation *per se*, but to a deeper problem that was also shared by socialists in the previous chapter: the entire edifice of industrial society increases the people's capacities for collective power, but these agencies are not under the cooperative control of the agents who set them into motion on a daily basis. When the people participate in the relations of production, distribution, communication, and political negotiation created by what Dewey called "the Great Society," the consequences of their own activity far outrun their individual apprehension.[413] In Dewey's mind, this creates the elementary conditions for a new 'public' to emerge and subject the consequences of these new practices to democratic supervision, but as of yet, no public had adequately emerged. As Dewey puts it, "The public is so confused and eclipsed that it cannot even use the organs through which it is supposed to mediate political action and polity."[414] In other words, the public's problem is not simply a need for administrative regulation, but as John Medearis helpfully notes, the result of Dewey's continued preoccupation with the problem of *alienation*, specifically the alienation that occurs when the people's own capacities for self-government are thwarted by the very institutions they participate in, rendering their activity subordinate to the guiding agency of external powers over which they exercise no direct control.[415]

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[413] Dewey got this term from the British Fabian Graham Wallace. See Graham Wallace, *The Great Society: A Psychological Analysis* (London: MacMillan, 1914). Wallas proposes comprehensive trade-union management of the economy as a possible basis of a new industrial state that could deal with the problems of the Great Society, and my sense is that this suggestion likely resonated with Dewey.
[414] Public, 107.
[415] See John Medearis, *Why Democracy is Oppositional* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2015), 73-80. Neither Maderis nor Dewey uses this claim to motivate a comprehensive critique of the capitalist market economy.

In the 1920's, while figures like Walter Lippmann had begun to reiterate Maine's arguments about atomic individualism to launch a general critique democracy – Lippmann argued that the very idea of the public was a wishful figment of the democratic imagination in a society of private individuals who were largely bystanders to political affairs – Dewey sought to subject the status of the public to simultaneous historical and philosophical critique.[416] For Dewey, the public was not a fantasy, but a latent organizational possibility in any complex society. The public's problem was that that the forms of social intelligence upon which public consciousness in the Great Society were built – "our enormous natural resources, our vast machinery of production and distribution, and the wonderful technical skill the country possesses" – had not yet created democratic political agencies adequate for their cooperative control by a self-governing community. As Dewey wrote, "Industry and inventions in technology, for example, create means which alter the modes of associated behavior and which radically change the quantity, character and place of impact of their indirect consequences. These changes are extrinsic to political forms, which, once established, persist of their own momentum. The new public which is generated remains long inchoate, unorganized, because it cannot use inherited political agencies."[417] For Dewey, the problem of the public was not any defect in human rationality or collective agency, but that the public did not possess adequate political instruments to subject the consequences of associated activity to democratic supervision. Dewey placed the onus for democratic deficits not on the people, but on the quality of their institutions. As he continued, inherited political agencies that subsist after major economic transformations,

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For Dewey's lack of clarity with respect to the democratic value of the market see Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 47. For a penetrating critique of the capitalist market as constitutively alienating see Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*.

[416] See Walter Lippman, *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1925).

[417] John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems,* 56.

"prevent that development of new forms of the state which might grow up rapidly were social life more fluid, less precipitated into set political and legal molds. To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting change. The public which generated political forms is passing away, but the power and lust of possession remains in the hands of the officers and agencies which the dying public instituted. This is why the change of the form of states is so often effected only by revolution."[418] For Dewey, a central problem of democratic transformation was discovering an organizational form for collective organization with autonomy from the existing governing infrastructure, that was capable of organizing a public based on clarification of the consequences of the people's own associational activity, and that could leverage the collective power to create new infrastructure that facilitated the people's ongoing self-government. Ultimately, these were among Dewey's unrealized hopes for the new party.

Grasping what Dewey meant when he insinuated that a 'previous' public had formed the existing, inadequate state requires clarifying how he understood the current predicament more fully. In a later essay for the socialist journal *Common Sense*, Dewey acknowledged that "there is something to be said for the assertion that the so-called democratic states of the world have achieved only "bourgeois" democracy. By "bourgeois" democracy is meant one in which power rests finally in the hands of finance capitalism, no matter what claims are made for government of, by and for the people."[419] In Dewey's view, these "bourgeois" forces were behind the formation of modern liberal states and representative democracy. While these were themselves progressive achievements, Dewey thought that the institutions of parliamentary representation, the vision of liberal individualism and popular suffrage they occasioned had not only proven

[418] Ibid.
[419] John Dewey, "Democracy is Radical" in *The Later Works, Volume 11,* 269.

inadequate to democratically manage the new society, but had become defined by capitalist interests and had come to transparently serve these interests in a kind of corrosive functional unity. As Dewey noted, "The forms of associated action characteristic of the present economic order are so massive and extensive that they determine the most significant constituents of the public and the residence of power. Inevitably they reach out to grasp the agencies of government; they are controlling factors in legislation and administration."[420] As he put it elsewhere: "The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislatives chosen by majority vote, have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public."[421]

Again, the problem of the public was not simply to create a bureaucratic apparatus to manage this complexity according to some vision of the general interest, but the formation of "an inclusive and fraternally associated" social grouping that would re-claim the people's collective intelligence based on a renewed appreciation of the consequences of their activity.[422] At a fundamental level, this required the creation (or transformation) of agencies that would serve as nodes of information and political education. At the basic experiential level, a public begins to form when the consequences of associated behavior begin to exceed the direct self-management of an individual community. "When these consequences are intellectually and emotionally appreciated, a shared interest is generated and the nature of the interconnected behavior is thereby transformed."[423] This transformation creates a constituency that aspires to subject those

[420] Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 99
[421] ibid., 100
[422] Ibid., 65.
[423] Ibid., 54. As Dewey clarifies, the opposite of a public action is a private action, but this does not mean an transaction in the marketplace. His example is a private conversation.

consequences to scrutiny, creating an elementary bridge between particular activity and a general interest. Inherently, the formation of the public requires elementary relationships of representation. By definition, a public emerges when a local group is effected by consequences of activity beyond their immediate control, so any attempt to control these consequences requires joint activity by the public constituency and representative agencies beyond their group.

In this relationship, Dewey claims to have defined the proper function of the state and public officials. While the public requires its own forms of self-organization based in local practices of cooperation (more about this in a moment), Dewey also claims that, "The public … is organized in and through those officers who act in behalf of their interests," setting up a dynamic tension between the public, representative institutions, and the immediate social interactions that compose shared experience.[424] To appreciate what Dewey means by "officials" it is important to note that he does not necessarily mean "experts," "elites," or "bureaucrats," though these associations are often grafted to Dewey's more abstract, functional use of the term.[425] Dewey makes clear that officials are not necessarily defined by any epistemic or status-superiority, but by their function as representatives of the public. "Officials" are those who assume the role and responsibilities of attending to public concerns; for this reason, the inverse of "official" is not the ordinary citizen, but the private individual. As Dewey writes, "It is not without significance that etymologically "private" is defined in opposition to "official," a private person being one deprived of public position," and he notes that the concrete role of a public official can extend to anyone who assumes a public function, including "a citizen-voter" who

[424] Ibid., 54.
[425] This is a basic problem in Melvin Rogers argument about the public in his *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* (New York: Columbia Univeristy Press, 2009), as well as in many discussions of Dewey that try to mediate between his account of progressive era democratic politics and Walter Lippmann's expert-driven account in *Public Opinion*. Dewey uses the term "official" in an expansive functional sense, and the idealization of "the expert" comes from Lippmann, not Dewey.

"expresses his will as a representative of the public interest."[426] And as he specifies further, officials do not populate a remote administrative sphere divorced from society but are themselves always meaningfully embedded within society: "The buildings, property, funds, and other physical resources involved in the performance of this office [of representation] are *res publica*, the common-wealth."[427] Rather than immediately attach to Progressive-Era administrative state-building, Dewey's conception of officials extends to all offices that care for the consequences of associated action in response to public problems, whether politicians, educators, trade union delegates, or voters. In a similar fashion to the late 19th century American socialist Laurence Gronlund, Dewey sought to recognize how the social roles often considered 'private' were actually public functions whose everyday activity significantly affected the experiences of all members of society. Arguing against the view that socialism's inevitable fate would be the construction of a vast civil service that would dominate society, Gronlund retorted, "Civil Service increased, you say. Then you are truly nearsighted. What else now are our merchants, our foremen, our superintendents, our bank presidents, our cashiers … Is there not an immense number of men now, occupying private positions intent only on their interests or the interests of their employers and *yet to all intents and purposes [are] officials of Society?* The only change, then, which our Commonwealth will bring about in that respect is to change these *private functionaries* into *public officials*."[428] As Gronlund and Dewey both emphasized, recognizing the public quality of private roles only implied a greater opportunity to subject the panoply of social activities that shaped democratic association to popular supervision. From the

[426] Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 48; 81.
[427] Ibid. 48. This quote also shows how "the public" is not simply located in a symbolic and discursive media sphere. Rather, it is an epistemic dimension of concrete social practice, where problems are identified and solutions proposed. Rather than think of it as a rarefied sphere, it might be more productive to think of it as *one aspect* of an overall material social process of interaction.
[428] Laurence Gronlund, *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965 [1890]).

public's standpoint, the key is that officials "employ [their powers] for the public and do not turn them to their own private benefit," an inherent problem in any relationship of representation.[429]

While Dewey believed that the formation and recognition of official agencies would assist democracy by offering effective organs for the people to resolve their common problems, he based his hopes for a new industrial state on the public's basic capacities for social intelligence. While Dewey clearly believed that more public agencies were necessary to manage a modern economy democratically, too strong a focus on bureaucratic expansion overlooks the extent to which Dewey relied on the practices of "local neighborhood groups carrying on, though intimate meetings and discussions, the management of their own affairs," which Dewey thought was necessary "if political democracy was to be made secure."[430] Dewey expressed this idea through the concept of "community," but it was also intimately related to how he understood social intelligence and social cooperation. In an often-quoted remark, Dewey wrote that democracy "is the idea of community life itself."[431] In Honneth's view, Dewey's focus on community is a precondition for citizens to draw any substantial connection between the coordinating rationality of the state, public sphere, and officials, and the experiential reality of citizens cooperatively addressing problems. "Society's members must have been able to see in advance that, through their cooperative action, they are pursuing a common goal, in order to be able to understand the establishment of democratic institutions of self-organization as the means for a political solution to their problems of social coordination."[432] While the ideal of 'community' is often used in vague terms, the radical consequence of this position resides in how

[429] Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 57. Dewey does not hold the view that the tendency for private egoism can be surpassed by any political formation, and neither does he hold the view that it is a necessary regulator of politics.
[430] John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1939), 40.
[431] Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 122.
[432] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation," 775-776.

it recalls Dewey's early views about industrial democracy in "The Ethics of Democracy." Since no domain of social activity is inherently 'private' and citizens have an elementary democratic right to participate in the identification and resolution of common problems at all levels of society, these practices of cooperative experimentation must extend into the social sphere, ensuring that effective public representation is subtended by workplace democracy. To begin to clarify what this means, we can see how Dewey aimed to model an ideal division of labor on the community of scientific inquirers. In his *Logic*, Dewey explained this view in the following way:

> An inquirer in a given special field appeals to the experiences of the community of his fellow workers for confirmation and correction of his results. Until agreement upon consequences is reached by those who reinstate the conditions set forth, the conclusions that are announced by an individual inquirer have the status of an hypothesis … The point involved comes out clearly when the social consequences of scientific conclusions invoke intensification of social conflicts. For these conflicts provide presumptive evidence of the insufficiency, or partiality, and incompleteness of conclusions as they stand.[433]

Just like it is only through actual negotiation of conflicts that emerge among equal individuals that adequate scientific practice is conducted, Dewey aspired for all social sectors to adopt these practices, a goal he recognized carried profound consequences for the reorganization of society. In *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey describes the spread of such cooperative experimentalism through society as the achievement of a "free culture," where experimental problem-solving becomes a collective habit in all facets of society. A free culture, in Dewey's view, would be a cooperative culture where the synthesis between particular and general interests would not be effected by coercive power, but through non-instrumental relations of social solidarity modeled on the community of inquirers – a form of association where all participants attempt to discover creative resolutions for shared problems and act within an arena of common concern. While

[433] John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938), 490.

Dewey often described the development of free culture as the proliferation of an *ethos*, he was also clear that it was an institutional problem:

> The predicament is that individuality demands association to develop and sustain it and association requires arrangement and coordination of its elements, or organization – since otherwise it is formless and void of power. … Persons acutely aware of the dangers of regimentation when it is imposed by government remain oblivious of the millions of persons whose behavior is regimented by an economic system through whose intervention alone they obtain a livelihood … the kind of working together which has resulted is too much like that of the parts of a machine to represent co-operation which expresses freedom and also contributes to it. No small part of the democratic problem is to achieve associations whose ordering of parts provides the strength that comes from stability, while they promote flexibility or response to change.[434]

In Dewey's view, the proliferation of these cultural habits would be tantamount the conscious attempt to center the cultivation of social intelligence as basic principle of social relations, a project that required egalitarian cooperation. Such intelligence could only be cultivated collectively, and it required real investment in the infrastructure that would sustain it. In Dewey's mind, the creation of this infrastructure was the cardinal task for the public as well as a comprehensive ethical vision of self-government. "The notion that intelligence is a personal endowment or personal attainment is the great conceit of the intellectual class, as that of the commercial class is that wealth is something which they personally have wrought and possess."[435] As Dewey knew well, these problems were interrelated, and any attempt to create the infrastructure of intelligence implied a direct challenge to the power of wealth.

III. The Means and Ends of Cooperative Reconstruction

Dewey's aspirations to liberate the possibilities of social intelligence and connect them to effective, public means of problem-solving constitutes a clear – if institutionally not fully

[434] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 167
[435] Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 156.

elaborated – guiding ideal for democratic transformation. In contemplating any process of transformation, Dewey's theory of action consistently warned about the separation of means from ends, which he viewed as phases of a continuous, integrated process of experimental action.[436] In *Human Nature and Conduct*, he warned specifically against positing an ideal that was not tethered to means for its realization, writing "The "idealist" sets up as the ideal not fullness of meaning of the present but a remote goal. Hence the present is evacuated of meaning. It is reduced to being a mere instrument, an evil necessity due to the distance between us and significant valid satisfaction."[437] Concretely, this implies that if fuller social cooperation is the goal of Deweyan democracy, that cooperation cannot be posited merely as the end result of a transformative means disconnected from cooperative practices themselves. At an elementary level, this proscription appears to forbid the socialist theory of revolution. As we saw in the previous two chapters, repeated practical attempts to form cooperative forms of economic organization failed due to infrastructural facets of capitalist society that were extremely difficult to change by political means. Moreover, given the scale of modern industry, workers would never be able to 'become their own capitalists' like late 19th century iron-molders had, by purchasing capital to form their own independent cooperative. The only way to lay claim to these means of production was to seize capitalist property – based on the normative justification that that property was merely a tool of exploitation, not the legitimate incarnation of its owners own agency and individual liberty – a project that required the revolutionary organization of workers in the trade union movement. Off of these assessments, socialists argued that true cooperation could only be achieved not only after capitalist property had been transformed into social

[436] See Alexander Livingston, "Between Means and Ends: Reconstructing Coercion in Dewey's Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 3 (2017), 522-534.
[437] Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 274.

property, but after workers had formed a democratically planned economy that indexed production to need, decreased the working day in proportion to productivity, and emancipated workplace organization from the disciplinary constraints of the competitive market. These were eminently practical conclusions derived from cooperative experimentation. Does Dewey's argument about ends and means imply discarding the ideal of socialist cooperation in a post-revolutionary setting? Does the socialist ideal of social cooperation reduce the present struggle to being "a mere instrument" in the struggle for an end that makes the present "evacuated of meaning"?

Despite his relationship with the Socialist Party, Dewey never clearly addressed this question head on in the terms just outlined. On Dewey's own terms, though, Debs's and Robertson's vision of socialist unionism as an anticipatory practice should allay this worry. In the socialist union, practices of cooperation are built up that can still hold the fuller ideal of social cooperation as an end-in-view. If they can be institutionalized and supported by the labor movement, these practices could constitute part of how an incipient Deweyan 'public' comes to consciousness of its own alienated intelligence and begins to create new institutional forms for the management of public affairs (immediate workers' councils, district councils).[438] What Dewey would have added to these formulations was his insistence on a broad view of social intelligence, not reducible to economic self-management alone. Building up these broader, cultural resources required looking beyond the admittedly short-sighted idea that if capitalist

[438] This is where Dewey's limits as an observer of the labor movement are revealed. Dewey never wrote a analysis of workers collective action comparable to the products of party-oriented labor intellectuals. While Dewey must have known about the council movements around the First World War and the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 which produced so much theoretical literature on the left, he did not contribute in any direct way. That said, we can link his insights about practical action and self-organization to these practices in order to illuminate the benefits and drawbacks of Dewey's overall theory.

property were divested of its power to exploit, social cooperation would straightforwardly follow. As he wrote:

> The facts that justify economic emphasis do not prove, however, that the issue of co-operative democratic freedom can be settled by dealing directly and exclusively with the economic aspect, if only because command of the means which would be needed to effect desirable changes in industry and in the distribution of income can be achieved only by the aid of correlative changes in science, morals and other phases of our common experience. The fact brings out in sharp outline that as yet the full conditions, economic and legal, for a completely democratic experience have not existed.[439]

What Dewey shared with socialists was a clear aspiration to understand how such conditions might come to exist.

While there are many attributes that separate Dewey and a figure like Debs, what distinguished Dewey most from socialists like Debs is his strong emphasis on the importance of voluntary persuasion in effecting democratic change. From his early neo-Hegelian reflections on the idea of "personality," Dewey always believed that democracy implied a primary emphasis on eliciting individual volition through persuasion as a means to effect change. As he had put it, "The democratic ideal includes liberty, because democracy without initiation from within, without an ideal chosen from within and freely followed from within, is nothing."[440] While this emphasis clearly did not outlaw coercion as a strategy for reconstructing the background conditions for cooperative experimentation, the ideal of voluntary initiative is central to Dewey given the premium he placed on social intelligence as an ends and a means. While Livingston clearly demonstrated how Dewey believed that the use of coercive action could be understood as a democratic means to provoke inquiry and catalyze the public's intelligence, he also clearly did not believe that a protracted struggle between propertied and dispossessed social classes would lead to the democratic victory of workers, nor was he confident that such a process would

[439] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 73.
[440] Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy", 245.

intelligently create a social infrastructure adequate to subserve the public's intelligence.[441] In *Freedom and Culture*, Dewey wondered about whether the general idea of socialist transition was adequate to the problem it had set for itself:

> Consider, as an example, the argument that since the *processes* of industry, on the side of both labor and capital, have become collective, ownership and control must also be collective, resulting in elimination of private income from rent, interest, and dividends. From the standpoint of democracy, this end, which is put forward in the interest of the maintenance of democracy, raises the problem of the possibility of its execution by democratic methods. Can the change be effected by democratic means? After it is effected, supposing that it is, can production and distribution of goods and services be effected except by a centralized power that is destructive of democracy?[442]

For Dewey, achieving these results democratically did not primarily require a political battle, but an agency capable of intelligent transformation that could clearly link ends and means in a process of change. Particularly because the future is always uncertain, action cannot assume that sacrificing the values underpinning its ideal end could ever meaningfully advance that end; rather, it would likely set society on the wrong evolutionary path. Dewey's response to the question above was to echo his argument in *The Public and its Problems* about the need for the public to "break existing institutional forms": "The very necessity for change only makes urgent the question of whether the existing agencies of democracy are competent to effect the change … It is the basic problem which has precedence over the various plans and policies that are urged from one quarter or another."[443] The primary agency that Dewey himself tried to create to create the basis for this project was the LIPA – again positing that a third party independent of capitalist parties could serve as the political and organizational vehicle for a process of cooperative, social democratic transformation.

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[441] See Livingston, "Between Means and Ends."
[442] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture,* 70.
[443] Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, 69.

A social democratic party intent on creating and re-working the infrastructure for social intelligence would need to exercise coercion against powerful interests, and it would also work to re-shape the associational life of citizens. One way we might think of the normative basis of such a project is to extend an insight from Livingston, when he writes that, "Deweyan democracy opposes coercive means used to impose *outcomes on inquiry* rather than coercion used to spark a *process of inquiry*."[444] Coercively imposing an outcome on inquiry violates the experimental method because it is a form of ideological indoctrination; it imposes *ex ante* restrictions on the content of the experimental process, inherently prohibiting the free process of problem-solving. On the other hand, Dewey understands inquiry as a social practice whose preconditions are formed by the infrastructure of social habits; insofar as he is committed to deepening the vitality of social intelligence, Dewey can justify the use of coercive action to reconstruct the conditions of possibility for successful collective experimentation.[445] Unlike liberal theories that see the precondition of free association as a 'rule of law' that inhibits some agents from harming or impinging on the freedom of others, Dewey aspired to unite the particular and the general by ensuring the free practice of cooperative, experimental association. Through the LIPA and a parallel organ called The People's Lobby, Dewey lamented how all of the early measures of the New Deal were, "compromised, prejudiced, yes, nullified, by private monopolization of opportunity."[446] Even the TVA, which he called "the most promising enterprise of the New Deal," was compromised since "The new values that will result from it are going to be absorbed by those who monopolize the land and the machines that are made out of

[444] Livingston, "Between Means and Ends," 530.
[445] Livingston's argument is that Dewey understood the Pullman strike as a democratic means because it sparked a process of inquiry about underlying problems with the capitalist organization of labor and capitalist influence on political power; my argument would extend this justification into a normative case for the expropriation of private control of the means of social intelligence.
[446] John Dewey, "Socialization of Ground Rent," in *Later Works vol. 11,* 256.

the products of the land."[447] Yet in a confused way, Dewey referred to Henry George's idea of taxing the value of ground rent as a solution for this problem, leaving the gains accruing to private ownership of capital unaffected. At the same time, he advocated progressive taxation as a step toward socialization, criticizing "Over-zealous advocates of socialization of all means of production, distribution, and exchange," hoping that progressive taxation could constitute a majoritarian proposal for the legal and consensual transfer of resources back to the people, in preparation to pay for public services and future efforts at socialization.[448] The possible success of such proposals presumes a strong organized constituency outside the state, willing to sustain a conflictual public legislative and legal battle – another reason why an independent party organ would serve an essential role in Dewey's projected efforts. Like any social democratic proposal, Dewey's hope for intelligent reconstruction using both new agencies (parties, unions, farmer organizations) and inherited agencies (legislature and bureaucracy) moves the axis of conflict for cooperative politics away from the direct confrontation of social classes on the economic terrain. It gains in the possibility of more clearly and explicitly linking the ends of a new industrial state that subserves self-government to institutional means that preserve enough continuity to provide a stable basis for experimentation.

Had Dewey squared himself with a consistent theory of political economy, his powerful ethical exhortations that social intelligence should be the common inheritance of all of its participating members in order to facilitate their free self-government might have been connected to a clearer strategy. If this was the case, he might not have fallen into the illusions of Georgism in the midst of the Depression. Dewey's aspirations for social democratic transformation were not obviously wrong-headed, but the failure of 20th century social democracy to prevent its own

[447] Ibid., 257.
[448] John Dewey, "Taxation as a Step to Socialization," in *Later Works vol. 11,* 265-266.

decline into neoliberalism now count among the lessons of historical experiments that cooperative theory needs to take into account. Those results are not a referendum on the ideal of a parliamentary road to socialism, particularly not the effort to combine parliamentarism with participatory activity along the lines that Dewey hoped. Indeed, Dewey's effort to insist that local 'grass roots organization' is truly democratic when it is based on non-instrumental, cooperative relations of solidarity and collective experimentation is his most valuable enduring legacy as a democratic theorist.

Cooperation Against Empire: W.E.B. Du Bois from the Group Economy to Socialist Internationalism

Assessing W.E.B. Du Bois's legacy for political theory remains a site of scholarly controversy. Over the course of his long career from the turn of the 20th century through the 1950's, Du Bois combined historical, sociological, and philosophical study with concrete interventions in political strategy, leaving behind a long record of reflections on some of the major political transformations of the 20th century. Characterizing the meaning of these reflections for contemporary political theory is often complicated by the array of positions Du Bois adopted across his career, a feature of his legacy that has often garnered him advocates

from opposed ideological positions. As Charles Mills put it, Du Bois has been characterized as a ""Talented Tenth" elitist, democrat, Eurocentric snob, celebrant of the folk tradition, integrationist, separatist, Marxist, black nationalist, Stalinist, radical democrat, prophetic pragmatist – the list of possible and actual descriptions of Du Bois's political identity is long and contradictory."[449] In this chapter, I will not try to overcome these contradictory assessments through a comprehensive account of Du Bois as a political thinker, as others have attempted to do.[450] Instead, I will follow one thread that unites Du Bois's earliest and latest work and that reveals both consistency and change in his understanding of democracy – namely, his interest in developing a theory and practice of cooperation as an integral component of democratic politics. From his early sociological studies at Atlanta University to his embrace of international socialism at the end of his life, Du Bois wrestled with the meaning and possibilities of social cooperation, not only as a specific organizational strategy for black Americans in their struggle against segregation and white supremacy, but as a general aspiration for a democratic society.

Clarifying Du Bois's theory of cooperative democracy and setting him with a common radical democratic legacy as the Populists and Socialists requires two inter-related arguments. First, it requires a response to critics who see a persistent elitism in Du Bois's thinking. From this point of view, Du Bois may have championed democracy, but he always imagined the radicalization of democracy as an elite-led project. Adolph Reed, for instance, acknowledges a connection between Populism, cooperative theory, and Du Bois, but distinguishes Du Bois from the Populists' radical democratic legacy. In Du Bois's autobiography *Dusk of Dawn: The*

[449] Charles W. Mills, "W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Liberal" in *A Political Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois* ed. Nick Bromell (Lexington : University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 20.
[450] For three book-length accounts of Du Bois as a political theorist, see Manning Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005); Adolph L. Reed Jr., *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Robert Gooding Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2009).

Autobiography of a Race Concept (1940), he described how he had come to see the People's Party as, "a third party movement of deep significance" and he lamented how it was kept from power, "on the one hand by the established election frauds of the South, of which I knew, and by the fabulous election fund which made McKinley President of the United States."[451] Nevertheless, Reed argues that Du Bois's elite-led vision sharply distinguishes him from the Colored Farmers' Alliances, which "represented an indigenous strain of black populism" based on participatory democracy.[452] For Reed, Du Bois's fundamental commitment was not to the popular classes, but "to the "cultured classes," that is, not simply the black middle class writ large, but that complement that was trained in the techniques of modern civilization … It was this stratum he saw leading his cooperative commonwealth in the 1930's and 1940's, and to whom he assigned a place atop the black population."[453]

To address this argument, I trace the shifts in Du Bois's evolving understanding of the economic basis of black political strategy throughout his career. Du Bois's early emphasis on the black middle class was not simply the effect of cultural elitism, but emerged from his understanding of the political-economic dynamics of leadership and cultural uplift. As the impasses in his early activism grew apparent and his theory of political economy transformed, so did his conception of democracy and the kinds of agency required to radicalize it. Since his earliest sociological studies at Atlanta University at the turn of the 20th century, Du Bois hoped that African-American progress could rest on the development of a "group economy" based on the ownership and cooperative management of small capital. At this point, Du Bois saw the economic basis of the African-American predicament as *poverty* – making building wealth the

[451] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Millwood: Kraus-Thompson Organization, 1975 [1940]), 29, 54.
[452] Ibid., 60.
[453] Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 65.

solution. Democratized capital ownership could facilitate racial progress if it was balanced by practices of mutual aid that ensured the provision of social insurance, secure employment, and public goods like education and social infrastructure that benefitted the whole community. When Du Bois had developed a clearer criticism of capitalism by the 1930's, he did not upend this vision, but modified it. Now, he understood *exploitation* as the economic basis of social problems, which could only be solved by the cooperative transformation of social relations. When Du Bois broke with the NAACP during the Depression for its lack of a meaningful economic program, he proposed a new vision of the group economy, this time rooted specifically in consumers' cooperatives and argued that it could form the organizational basis of a peaceful transition to socialism. In these years, Du Bois's mature vision of democratic cooperation emerged, based in practically suppressing how the profit motive shapes economic activity, and his conception of democratic agency was also sharpened, which was based on forging connections between plural sites of popular power that harness the people's latent material force against exploitation.

From the beginning of his career, Du Bois sought a political force that could drive cultural and economic progress, centrally for black Americans, but also for all modern societies grappling with the contradictions between democracy, capitalism, and empire. Using a contemporary idiom, he often called this progress "uplift." Although Du Bois began his career thinking that uplift must be led by "exceptional men" of culture (who he called "the Talented Tenth"[454]), his ultimate answer to the problem of social progress sought to clarify how black Americans could become the agents of "social reconstruction" in the context of an international, interracial movement against imperialism. Like others in this study, Du Bois's attempt to

[454] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth" in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver. (New York, W.W. Norton, 1999).

theorize social reconstruction responded to a basic dilemma in the people's status as a self-determining constituent power. Achieving the collective ability to subject engrained patterns of association to reflective self-control – the essence of what Du Bois understood as "social reconstruction" – requires a combination of organizational innovation, popular self-education, and political struggle. For Du Bois, the cardinal example of social reconstruction in American history was Reconstruction itself. Reconstruction demonstrated how mass popular agency, economic re-organization, and political negotiation can produce a transformation in social relations that, however fragile, meaningfully advances the cause of democracy.

The formative power of Reconstruction and its failure has, so far, not been a central element of our examination of the ideal of the cooperative commonwealth. While Debs had tried to link labor's cause to the memory of abolition, Dewey's vision of the formation of "the Great Society" did not mention the Civil War or Reconstruction. Integrating a clear account of slavery, war, and Reconstruction into the historical memory of the push for the cooperative commonwealth centrally concerns the role of racism and the dynamics of popular interracial unity in the history of popular-democratic struggle in the United States, and it also points to equally profound questions about the formation of the American state and the consolidation of a national ruling class around a political project that while not at all internally unified, formed a stable enough base for a broadly shared project of imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th century. Du Bois's sensitivity to these dynamics in his mature years changed how he envisioned the nature of cooperation, its alliances, and its social history in the United States. Du Bois's mature conception of democracy was not meant to vindicate Reconstruction, but to correct for its failures and its inherent limitations. In place of radical Reconstruction's emphasis on democratized capital, Du Bois substituted a program of social cooperation; in place of its

reliance on Northern financial and industrial hegemony, Du Bois sought the revolutionary alliance of the Third World, an incipient array of agencies who could strive for a world that, as he put it, was not based on the imperative to "lie, steal and kill" as we provide for our common needs.[455]

I. Beyond Elitism?: Making Space for Cooperative Agency

If our historical memory of Du Bois's politics remains defined by a series of competing and even contradictory positions, each one claimed by sympathetic interpreters, it is difficult to form a clear understanding of his place in African-American political history and his lessons for us today. Such a comprehensive assessment is complicated not only by the shifts in Du Bois's intellectual career, but also his central importance for African-American intellectual history. As Reed correctly notes, "Du Bois's prominence overloads the ideological significance of characterizing him and defining his legacy. Examination of the historically conditioned foundations of his thinking, therefore, has taken a backseat to establishing or reaffirming his position in history."[456] Against the temptation to vindicate Du Bois and secure his place in an intellectual pantheon, Reed seeks to historicize Du Bois's contributions, and by contextualizing Du Bois within the intellectual culture of early 20th century progressive reform, he hopes to reveal Du Bois's limitations for contemporary politics. In contrast to those who appropriate Du Bois for democratic purposes, Reed argues that Du Bois's defining characteristic was his continuous insistence on the black cultural elite as the bearers of social progress. In studies that associate Du Bois with radical democracy, Reed observes that "all too often his elitism is

[455] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 58.
[456] Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought,* 4.

mentioned offhandedly, without critical examination or careful description of its substantive characteristics."[457] This is a deep mistake, Reed argues, since "the elitist strain in his thought runs far deeper and is connected with his most basic views concerning proper social organization in general and organization of the Afro-American population in particular."[458] By eliding Du Bois's elitism, critics not only fail to see how it conditioned the radicalism of Du Bois's later years – manifest in his association with authoritarian forms of socialism and inegalitarian forms of Pan-Africanism – but they also mischaracterize his basic views about political agency, social organization, and democratic progress.

Reed is right that the elite-centric strategy that defined Du Bois's early career needs an explanation, but the explanation he offers fails to establish a frame that explains the shifts in Du Bois's career. According to Reed's contextualist interpretation, Du Bois's worldview borrowed from three strands of American progressivism that permeated his education and shaped his foundational studies. Each strand represents a distinct response by reform-minded intellectuals to the rise of industrial capitalism. According to Reed, Du Bois's politics were shaped, "in a critical intellectual environment dominated by three ideological responses to the consolidation of corporate industrialism: collectivism, the cooperative commonwealth (the font of homegrown American socialism), and antimodernism."[459] For Reed, each of these trends was a distinctly *intellectual* response to capitalist development, and each reflected intellectuals' specific role in a new division of labor shaped by the imperatives of corporate consolidation, scientific labor management, and new forms of national and international economic interdependence.[460] For

[457] Ibid., 53.
[458] Ibid., 53-54.
[459] Ibid. On this point, Reeds argument contrasts strongly with Gooding-Williams' "Afro-modernist" interpretation of Du Bois, and in many respects offers a convincing counter to this dimension of Reed's view.
[460] Ibid., 17-19.

progressive collectivists in particular, meeting these challenges often required abandoning the 19th century dogma of *laissez-faire*, and as a corrective, they often emphasized rationalizing economic and political procedures by superseding the conflicting interests of the competitive private sphere with neutral, scientific accounts of the general interest. From this movement emerged not only directly economic innovations like Taylorism, but calls for a "new nationalism" that would unite a large, fractious country around a common progressive project, opposing tendencies toward "drift" with new techniques of "mastery" based on scientific expertise.[461] The result of these tendencies was that, "The positive valuation of consciously *organized* society is a distinctive outlook of corporate-era intellectuals," a basic orientation that shaped the political consciousness of the Harvard-educated Du Bois as much as others of his generation.[462]

Despite the importance of situating Du Bois's within his historical milieu, the three strands of reform ideology that Reed analyzes cannot account for his early interest in cooperative democracy or anticipate the subsequent transformations in his vision of social cooperation.[463] Specifically, Reed's interpretative frame mischaracterizes the meaning of the cooperative commonwealth ideal, missing an opportunity to grasp Du Bois's evolving connection to the democratic core of its politics. Nevertheless, Reed's anxieties about Du Bois's progressive inheritances are important and illuminating, and will set the distinctiveness of Du Bois's evolving position into sharper relief. For Reed, progressive collectivism is fundamentally based on the vision of a technically rational society, organized scientifically by elites who can supersede the competing pressures of particular interests and provide the blueprint for a more

[461] On the democratic theory of the New Nationalists see Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy.* For a more critical view see Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*.
[462] Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 18.
[463] Reed derives these categories from James Gilbert, *Designing the Industrial State*.

efficient, harmonious, and just social order. Its goal is to confront rising industrialism with a political project of rationalization, spearheaded by experts. While Reed acknowledges that Du Bois did not embrace this ideology entirely, he does claim that Du Bois accepted collectivism's basic premise that innovations in social organization must be effected by educated, scientifically minded elites. Since collectivism's a vision of "the technicization of social life"[464] ultimately sits awkwardly with a number of Du Bois's constitutive commitments – like his aspiration to articulate the "spiritual strivings" latent in black culture or his phenomenology of double consciousness[465] – Reed accounts for these tendencies by noting that Du Bois's views also "reflected the tracings of an antimodernist tension"[466] that romanticized black folk culture. The romantic tendency emerges from a backward-looking response to industrialism that longed for what rising industrialism threatened – traditional patterns of sociality undermined by urbanization, migration, technological change, and increasingly anonymous forms of social interconnection.

Yet from his earliest writings, Du Bois's understanding of cooperation reflected neither a scientific ideal of technological rationalization, nor a romantic attachment to specifically racial forms of community. Instead, it rested upon concrete analysis of how group economic activity developed in black communities as a result of both popular and elite organizational initiatives, adaptations to changing social conditions, and basic drives for democratic autonomy. Reed's third progressive option – the cooperative commonwealth – can clarify Du Bois's aspirations if it is properly understood. In his account of this trend, Reed acknowledges the connection between

[464] Ibid., 19.
[465] See Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in *The Souls of Black Folk*. For Reed's account of Du Bois's theory of double consciousness and its relationship to contemporary psychology see Reed, *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought*, 93-126.
[466] Ibid., 25.

cooperation and Populism, but then allows a specific subset of cooperation's representatives – specifically Laurence Gronlund and Edward Bellamy – to define the ideal as a whole. For Reed, the defining feature of the cooperative commonwealth is that it represents "the community's reassertion of its control over industrialization," not by means of developing new associational patterns among citizens, but by the state taking on the task of forming solidarities in place of the pre-industrial, personal forms of interdependence that structured pre-industrial communities.[467] In his words, the cooperative commonwealth implied that, "The state … was to become the community, substituting the precision of self-regulating – and thus totalitarian – rational administration for the more personal and relational basis of legitimacy that had been abolished by large-scale industrialization."[468] In this analysis, the concrete, innovative practices of cooperation institutionalized within the Farmer's Alliances become absorbed into an idealized vision of "community" threatened by industrialization. Since pre-industrial farmers and artisans cannot reverse the process of history and restore their community bonds, only the state can become the bearer of social cooperation. Within this framework, "cooperation" devolves into a subset of "collectivism," and in an industrial setting, implies a necessarily ill-fated attempt to restore harmonious interconnection by means of scientific, bureaucratic management.[469] From this point of view – which echoes the republican nostalgia of some Populist admirers like Goodwyn and Lasch – the onset of industrial society renders the Populist hope for cooperative democracy impossible, since in the context of large-scale industry and national economic integration, its basic aims could only be fulfilled by elite-led rational management: the

[467] Ibid., 24.
[468] Ibid.
[469] This interpretation is also a misinterpretation, perhaps of Gronlund's claim that all workers in the cooperative commonwealth will become "civil servants," which is actually quite like Dewey's argument about the public.

coordination of productive activity according to scientific standards for the purposes of efficiency, not democratic power-sharing between equals.

As we have seen, though, the rise of a fully industrial capitalist society rested on defeats for cooperative democracy, but it did not render social cooperation impossible. Grasping Du Bois's contribution to theorizing how cooperative democracy could develop through popular political agency requires acknowledging that the possibilities of association are themselves a mutable social product, amenable to change by a combination of voluntary effort, political struggle, and infrastructural changes in the operation of power. This is so in part because social cooperation is not simply the result of communitarian bonds that capitalism had rendered obsolete, nor is it the product of technically rational coordination; instead, it names the egalitarian practice of sharing power for the common advancement of all. Du Bois was surely a creature of the early 20th century, but as an analysis of his first sociological studies shows, his relationship to progressive reform, social scientific investigation, and critiques of power are more nuanced than the above frames allow. As Du Bois examined how black Americans developed a capacity for collective action during slavery, were incorporated into capitalist social relations during Reconstruction,[470] and developed incipient forms of collective power through both self-help and political action, his worldview was indeed framed by the tensions between capitalism and democracy that defined the progressive era. Yet at the same time, understanding the nature of his early middle-class progressivism and its ultimate mutability require clarifying how his initial emphasis on the black middle class was not simply the effect of elitism, but the product of his specific understanding of leadership, political economy, and social progress as they had

[470] Reconstruction was not a problem for most progressives in the way that it was a problem for Du Bois. If anything, their use of the term "reconstruction" took on a rational-technical form that was foreign to Du Bois, given his appreciation of the intensity of political and ideological struggle surrounding the experience of Reconstruction.

already played out in black history. Du Bois was clear that the political leadership of a talented tenth required material support within black communities, which created the imperative for ownership and control over capital – what Du Bois initially called "the group economy." To be effective, Du Bois hoped that leaders would not simply follow the path of acquisitive materialism, but support race-conscious plans of community development that uplifted the group as a whole. While Du Bois subsequently abandoned his hope that black capitalism embedded in a cooperative group economy could facilitate political democracy, how and why he held these views in his earliest writings sheds important light on the meaning of his emphasis on middle-class leadership, the nature of his ideological transformations, and how the basic aspiration to cooperation drove Du Bois in a more egalitarian direction.

II. The Origins of Cooperation: The Idea of the Group Economy in Du Bois's Atlanta Studies

Du Bois joined the faculty at Atlanta University in 1897 and began to collaborate on the University's annual series of studies of black American social life. Du Bois's research in Atlanta informed his evolving political judgments and left an enduring mark on his worldview. While Du Bois's Atlanta studies are often noted by scholars, their significance for his evolving understanding of democracy tends to be under-emphasized. Even according to Manning Marable – a defender of the radical democratic Du Bois – the Atlanta studies reflect the height of Du Bois's embeddedness in a black middle-class milieu. For Marable, "Du Bois's activities at Atlanta University were one dimension of a broader trend among the small black middle class toward professional organization and race-conscious development."[471] While Marable defends

[471] Marable, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 31-32.

Du Bois's later socialist commitments, he also leaves them disconnected from the Atlanta-era study on cooperative economics, *Economic Co-Operation Among Negro Americans*, missing an opportunity to trace how and why Du Bois's understanding of social cooperation changed throughout his career. Marable observes how, "The major attempt of the volume was to illustrate collective activity within the private sector and to suggest methods for stimulating "the group economy" of black Americans,"[472] and notes the connection between this vision and Du Bois's interest in consumer cooperatives during the Depression, but he fails to reconstruct why Du Bois placed the middle class at the core of the group economy in his earliest studies and consumers' organizations three decades later. Charting this trajectory not only illuminates changes in Du Bois's own thinking, but alternative responses to the problem of cultivating democratic self-determination in capitalist societies.

The goal of the Atlanta studies was to provide thorough investigations of different aspects of what was called "the Negro Problem," covering issues ranging from health and economics to religion and charitable organizations. To grasp the significance of these early studies, it is helpful to note that Du Bois's conception of black political strategy always rested on explicit economic foundations, even if these foundations are not the central aspect of some of his most well-recognized texts. To take one prominent example, in his well-known disagreements with Booker T. Washington, Du Bois emphasized political agitation against segregation alongside higher education as necessary components of political strategy, in contrast to Washington's appeasement of Jim Crow politicians and his emphasis on industrial training.[473] While the debate positioned Du Bois on the side of civil rights and high culture against Washington's crass materialism held together by corrosive compromise and measured in dollars

[472] Ibid., 61.
[473] Du Bois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 34-45.

and cents, Du Bois and Washington shared a basic expectation that black Americans would have to actively mold their place within the American capitalist economy for social progress to be possible. When Du Bois wrote, for instance, that, "So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him,"[474] he reflected their shared conviction that social progress implied operating within capitalism to amass the necessary wealth for social progress.

While their views overlapped in this basic sense, Du Bois and Washington differed with respect to the kind of political leadership they envisioned guiding progress, a disagreement that not only reflected different opinions about education, but also about political economy. Specifically, they disagreed about what ideal of economic development would underpin race progress and about the nature of the economic base on which race leadership would rest. Washington's "Atlanta compromise" advocated alliance between Southern capital and black labor (pitted against the prospect of Southern white leaders seeking white immigrant labor) as the basis for black workers to begin to amass earnings, purchase land and capital, and work toward civic equality.[475] Educational institutions like Tuskegee not only trained students for earning and property-ownership, but rested on a supporting coalition composed of the Southern elite, black industrialists, and industrial educators. Du Bois's "talented tenth," by contrast, were teachers and other cultural leaders who communicated an integrated, aspirational political vision in both universities and common schools. As he wrote in his essay, "On the Wings of Atalanta," "In the Black World, the Preacher and Teacher embodied once the ideals of this people, – the strife for another and a juster world, the vague dream of righteousness, the mystery of knowing; but to-day

[474] Ibid., 45.
[475] Booker T. Washington, "The Standard Printed Version of the Atlanta Exposition Address," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 167-170.

the danger is that these ideals, with their simple beauty and weird inspiration, will suddenly sink into a question of cash and lust for gold."[476] Embodying such a comprehensive vision did not mean spurning political economy for the sake of high culture, but required a distinct vision of political economy based on a distinct supporting coalition. The Atlanta Studies themselves were funded by voluntary contributions by scholars, community members, and Northern philanthropists, and a number of these studies actively explored how the talented tenth not only carried the potential to advance the group, but were themselves a social product of the black community.[477] The talented tenth played a specific role within Du Bois's theory of the group economy, and the fact that he saw the educated middle class as the driving force behind social progress was a function of Du Bois's understanding of the concrete possibilities available to black Americans for economic development. In his Atlanta years, Du Bois's aim in formulating the possibilities of the group economy was not to overcome exploitation generally, but to illuminate how black communities could organize self-sustaining economies within a capitalist system oriented toward the common welfare of the group. He understood the basic principle of the group economy as a generic form of cooperation for mutual benefit, one that often manifested in voluntary financial contributions to a self-help organization that provided public goods.

Before Du Bois's arrival at Atlanta University, the University's annual studies began with two investigations of black urban life, encouraged by graduates who had taken up work in urban areas and convinced the University that "there exists a great need for a systematic and

[476] Du Bois, *Souls*, 57.
[477] Despite the democratic limitations of his early strategy, it is worth noting the value and clear-sightedness of Du Bois's attempt to not only produce a comprehensive sociology of black American society, but to also reflect on the conditions of possibility for his own theoretical production and role within it.

thorough investigation of the conditions of living among the Negro population of cities."[478] Over the next two decades, the University conducted a yearly study of a particular component of black life and that culminated in a publication and an annual conference open to educators and the public. Du Bois served as the editor of the series during his tenure at the University (from 1898-1914). In addition to informing scholars and the general public, he specifically hoped that the studies would instruct the work of black schoolteachers. In 1900, he addressed a group of primary school teachers in Athens, Georgia, soliciting their participation in the studies and encouraging them to understand themselves as bearers of both cultural progress and economic development. Du Bois acknowledged that of all social problems, the problem of envisioning economic opportunity for graduates is particularly salient for black teachers. Among all aspects of black life, he wrote, one problem stands out:

> This is the problem of earning a living: the question as to how the scores of young people whom we are annually sending forth from our schools are going to be able to earn their bread and butter in a respectable way. It is nothing strange or unusual that this economic problem should be the question of questions for the Negro in the opening years of the 20th century. It is the logical fruit of slavery and always where there are freedmen there must be poverty. The struggle for bread must be hard and the condition of survival is such economic cooperation as will furnish wages suited to the wants of the new laborer.[479]

When Du Bois invoked "cooperation" here, he invoked his specific vision of the group economy. For Du Bois, even though black Americans were often organized as a group – both voluntarily in their own religious and cultural organizations and involuntarily through segregation – they had not yet developed the capacity to institute social relations that could catalyze progress. After lamenting how the South was full of black workers of "increasing skill and willing strength" and naturally possessed "abundant resources only half-developed," black communities had yet to

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[478] Editors, *Mortality Among Negroes in Cities* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1896), 3.
[479] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Postgraduate Work in Sociology in Atlanta University" in *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses 1887-1961* ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 69.

discern how to harness these potentials for their progressive development.[480] In Du Bois's view, this impasse pointed to a problems within the organization of the black community itself. Speaking to the teachers, he asked, "What does this mean? It means that the fault lies in the organization – in the whole social situation and that unless we thoroughly understand and carefully study the delicate and intricate relations of this great group of men we shall not know how to train the heads and hands of the freedmen's sons to develop the rich resources of this land."[481] Even as Du Bois correctly criticized Washington's tendency to "shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders … when in fact the burden belongs to the nation,"[482] he nevertheless believed that tactically, black communities (like any other oppressed group) require empowering forms of self-organization to channel their efforts for social progress, and he recognized that in oppressive conditions, these forms of self-organization are always difficult to institute and sustain. In essence, Du Bois was wrestling with a basic dimension of the problem of collective autonomy: how could black Americans develop the shared capacity to re-organize and transform their own social relations as they challenged the powers that curtailed their progress?

In Du Bois's view, this transformation of social relations would not emerge by appeasing the Southern elite's demand for labor, but required organizing a black elite capable of guiding a different kind of economic development based around the common advancement of the entire black community. This is why Du Bois primarily envisioned teachers and cultural leaders, rather than businessmen connected to Southern industry, at the head of this development. For cultural leaders to serve this role, they had to distance themselves from the materialist culture of the "New South" elites. In his address to the Athens teachers, he counseled them to not "succumb to

[480] Ibid.
[481] Ibid.
[482] Du Bois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," 45.

the temptation to ape the extravagant dressing and living of the leaders of the White south; so long as they try to rise by showing off and by practicing the arts of demagoguery among these simple-minded people or so long as they let their efforts to earn bread and butter utterly absorb and choke the intellectual life – so long will culture and civilization fail where it is most needed."[483] Serving as the bearer of cultural ideals required an ethical commitment on the part of educated black citizens, but at least in embryo, the sense of solidarity and uplift implicit in the pedagogical relationship incentivized identification with students' aspirations as both individuals and as a group. Moreover, since black teachers taught in segregated schools, a vision of race-consciousness often structured the environment and helped to secure identification across class lines between the black middle class and the lower classes who Du Bois hoped they would serve.

Du Bois believed that the educated middle class required a general strategy for progressive change based in scientific study of the current economic situation of black Americans, and his goal in the Atlanta studies was to contribute to this body of knowledge. Ideally, teachers would come to understand the unique possibilities offered by the group economy, opening possibilities for alternative paths of economic development that were integrated with the aspiration to both a freer culture and broadly shared progress. From his first study in 1898, Du Bois explored the historical development of the group-centric economic progress that black Americans had cultivated since slavery, a preoccupation that eventually culminated in the 1907 study, *Economic Co-Operation Among Negro Americans*. Du Bois's first study of cooperative economics appeared in that first study, called *Some Efforts of American Negroes For Their Own Social Betterment* (1898). Its goal was to answer a general question that Du Bois thought structured contemporary commentary on the black political condition: "What is

[483] Ibid., 67.

the Negro doing to help himself after a quarter century of outside aid?"[484] To address this question, the study examined five different kinds of self-help organization: the church, secret societies, mutual insurance societies, cooperative business, and charity organizations. In his introduction, Du Bois noted, "The main answers to this question hitherto have naturally recorded individual efforts in education, the accumulation of property and the establishment of homes. The real test, however, of the advance of any group of people in civilization is the extent to which they are able to organize and systematize their efforts for the common weal; and the highest expression of organized life is the organization for purely benevolent and reformatory purposes."[485] By focusing on self-help, Du Bois hoped to portray a specific side of black social life that not only undermined the racist assumption that black Americans simply awaited the help of others, but also identified a persistent set of practices of mutual aid that black Americans had engaged in since slavery.[486]

Some Efforts reveals Du Bois at his most openly capitalistic. In the opening of his discussion of cooperative business, he even criticized slavery for subjecting the enslaved to a form of communism that sapped their private initiative and undermined the entrepreneurial skills required upon emancipation: "There are undoubted proofs that the native Africans, or at least most Negro tribes, are born merchants and traffickers, and can drive good bargains even with Europeans. Little trace of this, however, survived the fire of American slavery. Communism in goods, abolition of private property, and absolute dependence on the master for daily bread almost completely robbed the slaves of all thought of economic initiative."[487] Cooperative

[484] W.E.B. Du Bois, ed. *Some Efforts of American Negroes for Their Own Social Betterment* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1898), 4.
[485] Ibid.
[486] On the specific role of cooperative business within the study, he wrote, "we have a few instances of co-operative business effort reported which typify the economic efforts of the weak to find strength in unity." Ibid.
[487] Ibid., 21.

business represented one way of reclaiming that initiative, and in ways that did not simply encourage private earning and integration into white society, but that sought the common uplift of the group. As much as cooperative enterprise, Du Bois was particularly interested in how self-help organization could help bring resources under community control, and he noted how segregation itself often created these organizations' condition of possibility. For instance, he observed how "the pressure of race prejudice" had segregated real estate markets, creating openings for black-owned building and loan associations like The Workingmen's Loan and Building Association of Augusta, GA, which had purchased over 100 homes for its members over the course of its nine-year existence.[488] While Du Bois saw these forms of cooperation as instances of private enterprise and as a means to property ownership, he hoped these imperatives could be shorn of their tendency to stratify the black community into distinct classes, and instead be shaped by cooperative sensibilities that raised the cultural level of the group as a whole.

In this first discussion of the group economy, Du Bois praised black leaders who invested in community development and criticized those who did not, he also acknowledged an inherent tension between black elites' economic interests and racial uplift. In a footnote, Du Bois noted that the fact that black businessmen often invested in white-owned organizations that were explicitly racist rather than community uplift is unsurprising; overall, the goal of profit drives decision-making. "The money of men who have successfully accumulated property is attracted mainly by the returns to be gained and less by philanthropic or sentimental reasons; that of the lower and middle classes is more influenced by considerations of race pride and social advance."[489] The key was not to simply appeal to the generosity of black businessmen, but to find a middle strata that could connect organizational talents and resources with a positive vision

[488] Ibid., 24.
[489] Ibid., 25.

of reform. Nevertheless, he also observed optimistically that even among black elites, group-consciousness meant that opportunities for race uplift could be encouraged: "It is however, no mean compliment to Negro business enterprise that it has thus early been able to attract 20% of the well-to-do of the race in competition with the business of an industrial age."[490] In this context, he held out the specific example of the Coleman Manufacturing Company, a cooperative cotton-mill spearheaded by a black business leader named W.C. Coleman.[491] While started by (and named after) Coleman, the mill was organized as cooperative joint-stock enterprise where all workers were granted ownership shares. At the same time, Du Bois also acknowledged the efforts of a segregated black labor union, the Cotton Jammers and Longshoremen's Association No. 2 of Glaveston, Texas, which exercised cooperation by pooling its dues to buy tools and pay workers' sick and death benefits.[492] While the example of Coleman clearly shows one exemplary way that the talented tenth could combine private initiative and group leadership, Du Bois was also clear that the leaders of building and loan associations and trade unions also fulfilled this role; they helped to coordinate voluntary efforts to secure the control of resources and opportunity for common uplift. When Du Bois wrote in a subsequent study, *The Negro Artisan*, that "above all, black men of light and leading, College-bred men, must be trained to guide and lead the millions of this struggling race along paths of intelligent and helpful co-operation,"[493] he held out multiple avenues and institutional sites where race leaders could facilitate cooperative organization and the progressive development of the group economy.

In 1907, Atlanta University conducted its most thorough investigation of the group economy, *Economic Co-Operation Among Negro Americans*. Du Bois's opening remarks begin

[490] Ibid., 25.
[491] Ibid., 27.
[492] Ibid., 26.
[493] W.E.B. Du Bois, ed. *The Negro Artisan* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1902), 8.

to reveal shifts in worldview over this nine-year period. In this study, Du Bois drew a clearer contrast between economic competition and economic cooperation, he began to explore the historical foundations of the group economy more thoroughly, and he broadened his assessment of the development of black social cooperation since slavery. He began the study claiming:

> the economic development of Negro Americans at present is at a critical state. The crisis arises not so much because of idleness or even lack of skill as by reason of the fact that they unwittingly stand hesitatingly at the cross roads – one way leading to the old trodden ways of grasping fierce individualistic competition, where the shrewd, cunning, skilled and rich among them will play on the ignorance and simplicity of the mass of the race and get wealth at the expense of their general well being; the other way leading to co-operation in capital and labor, the massing of small savings, the wide distribution of capital and a more general equality of wealth and comfort.[494]

Still, Du Bois's conception of cooperation was not socialist. He saw no inherent division between capital and labor that undermined the possibility of free cooperation between them. Instead, cooperation implied adjusting the relationships between capital ownership and labor for the benefit of the group, often by ensuring an even distribution of basic resources like land, increasing black workers' access to well-remunerated skilled labor, and combining private enterprise with community organizations that provided public goods. As Jessica Gordon-Nembhard has observed, "his intention in these early studies appears to be to document the variety of ways in which African Americans shared the costs, risks, and benefits of economic activity that helped Black families and communities."[495] Nevertheless, Du Bois clearly departed from political economists who viewed the economy as a zone of instrumental rationality, driven by each individual's aspirations for their private advantage. In his study, economic competition does not form a natural basis of sociality, and his research showed how the history of black

[494] W.E.B. Du Bois, ed. *Economic Co-Operation Among Negro Americans* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907), 4.
[495] Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 32.

economic association was structured by a diverse set of both cooperative and competitive practices.

The study found the origin of economic cooperation in black cultural societies, which Du Bois argued were initially formed during slavery. When isolating the cases for a study on economic cooperation, Du Bois noted that, "so completely do these cultural aspects of their group efforts overshadow the economic efforts that at first a student is tempted to think that there has been no inner economic co-operation, or at least that it has only come to the fore in the last two or three decades. But this is not so."[496] The study therefore examined how economic cooperation was embedded in a variety of social institutions, centering a single dimension: "the conscious effort in economic lines not, primarily, so far as individual effort is concerned, but so far as these efforts are combined in some sort of effort for mutual aid, that is: it is a matter of group co-operation that we have before us."[497] While centered on practices of mutual aid, Du Bois also acknowledged that the cooperation his study examined "is not always democratic co-operation," since the basic notion of 'mutual benefit' does not itself imply an egalitarian sharing of power.

Du Bois's exposition proceeded historically, culminating in a survey of contemporary forms of economic cooperation. In the slaveholding American colonies, Du Bois no longer argued that the possibility of property-ownership and commerce among the enslaved repressed their economic initiative; instead, he claimed that economic cooperation manifested within religious organizations and secret societies among the enslaved that organized black social life around mutual support. For Du Bois, this kind of cooperation had roots not only in the basic impulse for local self-help, but was nurtured by the transformation of religious cultures that

[496] Du Bois, *Economic Co-Operation Among Negro Americans*, 10-11.
[497] Ibid., 11.

originated in Africa but developed in the New World, what he called "Obeah worship."[498] For this reason, Du Bois wrote, "A sketch of co-operation among the Negro Americans begins naturally with the Negro church" which was "the first distinctively Negro American social institution."[499] Again, Du Bois's approach integrated economy and society, and it framed social cooperation as embedded in spiritual efforts to create common sensibilities and collective organization among the enslaved.

These collective efforts manifested in two primary ways under slavery: insurrection and mutual insurance. In the first case, religious self-organization not only nurtured collective aspirations to political freedom that motivated revolt, but also became the organizational locus of those revolts.[500] Du Bois wrote that, "Tendencies toward political autonomy still showed themselves in the insurrections that took place from time to time,"[501] and noted how these were often led a spiritual leader who, "found his function as the interpreter of the supernatural, the comforter of the sorrowing, and the one who expressed rudely but picturesquely the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen people."[502] Such leadership conveyed a "spirit of revolt" that not only gave form to the group, but crystalized and guided collective aspirations to autonomy.[503] In Du Bois's view, "we must find in these insurrections a beginning of co-operation which eventually ended in the peaceful economic co-operation."[504] (See figure 1). What unites peaceful cooperation and revolt is not only the effort to constitute the group as a

[498] Ibid. 19.
[499] Ibid., 24.
[500] Ibid., It was in the church, "or rather the organization that went by the name of church, that many of the insurrections among the slaves from the sixteenth century down had their origin." Du Bois also notes that both Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner were preachers, ibid., 25.
[501] Ibid. 20.
[502] Ibid., 24. Du Bois quotes a source here, but there is no clear attribution.
[503] Ibid., 21. Assessing Du Bois's understanding of "race" is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth noting that here, it is not race but the shared affective representation of a common condition that unites the group. Both Reed and Gooding-Williams have instructive discussions of Du Bois's early understanding of race.
[504] Ibid., 24.

group (a question of identity as a collective actor), but also the effort to actively re-work the parameters of social life through concrete practical struggles. The basic principle of cooperation for shared freedom could materialize in a number of forms and strategies, but in each instance, the enslaved organized their collective material force to create a freer experience of sociality.

Religious organizations also became mutual benefit societies, initially in charge of coordinating burial services and providing aid for the families of the deceased. Here Du Bois cited a study from Hampton University that stated, "from reliable sources we learn that more than seventy-five years ago there existed in every city of any size in Virginia organizations of Negroes having as their object the caring for the sick and the burying of the dead. In but a few instances did the society exist openly, as the laws of the time concerning Negroes were such as to make it impossible for this to be done without serious consequences to the participants."[505] Du Bois argued that as soon as slaves began to be emancipated and flee to the North, these societies became openly organized.

[505] Ibid., 21.

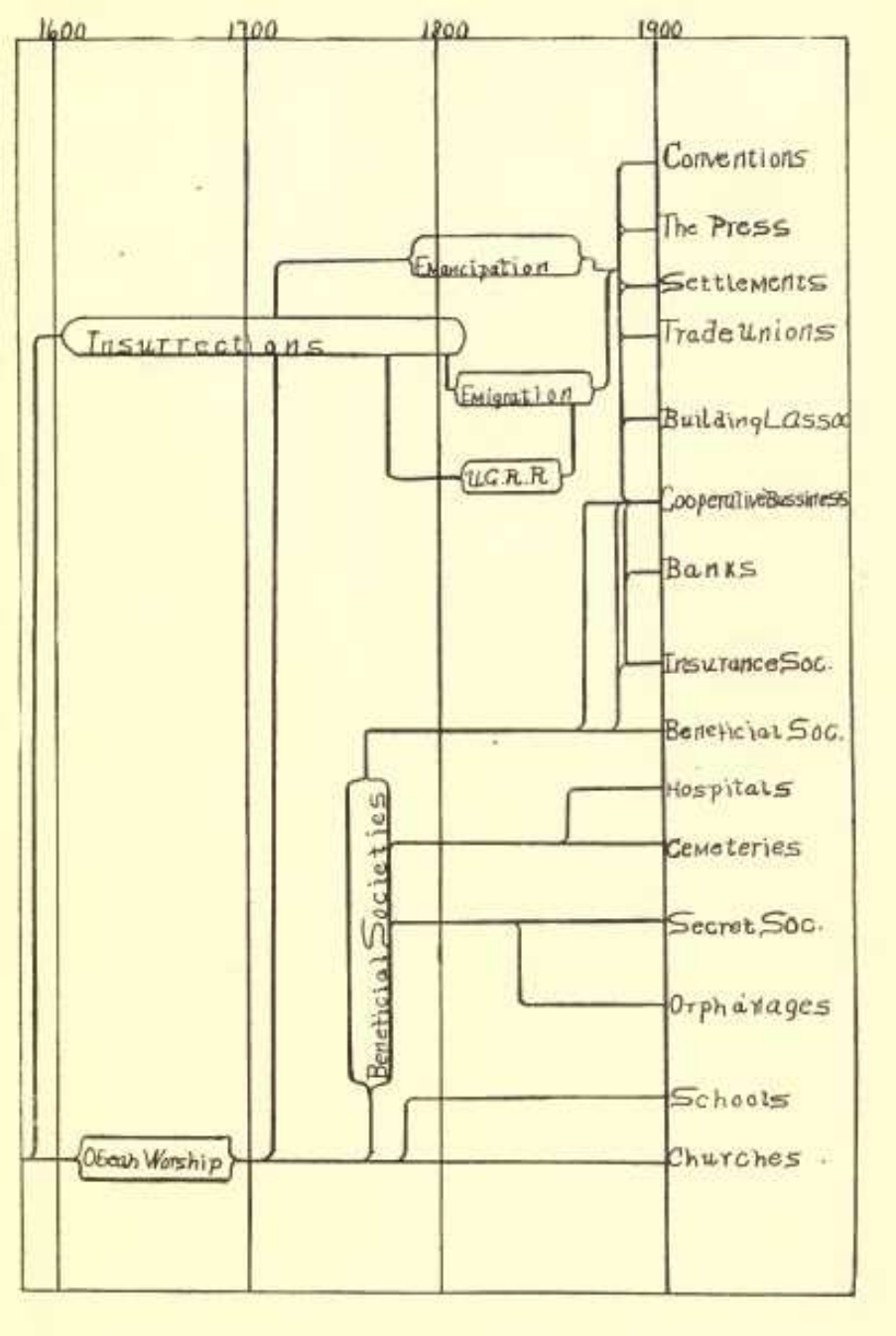

Figure 1: Du Bois's genealogy of the group economy.[506]

[506] Ibid., 55.

One of these organizations became the African Methodist Church, whose articles of association from April 12, 1787 declared that its members "unanimously agree, for the benefit of each other, to advance one shilling in Pennsylvania silver currency, a month; and after one year's subscription from the date thereof, then to hand forth to the needy of this society, if any should require, the sum of three shillings and nine pence per week of the said money; provided, this necessity is not brought on them by their own imprudence."[507] As Du Bois went on explain, economic cooperation in the form of pooling finances not only allowed for mutual insurance, but also provided resources to coordinate efforts at escape and manumission and to collectively purchase property. Institutionalized now in religious organizations outside the plantation system, the same spirit of revolt now "led to widespread organization for the rescue of fugitive slaves among Negroes themselves, and developed before the war in the North and during and after the war in the South, into various co-operative efforts toward economic emancipation and land-buying." [508] In Du Bois's view, all other forms of economic cooperation that defined the group economy descended from these basic practices: "Gradually these efforts led to cooperative business, building and loan associations and trade unions."[509]

Du Bois also explored how basic principles of social cooperation linked practices developed during slavery and after emancipation. He claimed that under slavery, "a kind of quasi co-operation was the buying of freedom by slaves or their relatives," which he considered a predecessor to the formation of workers' cooperatives.[510] When emancipated slaves saved their earnings to emancipate others, they directly connected their own productive labor to the realization of another's freedom. Like in the cooperative shop, productive labor for these

[507] Ibid.
[508] Ibid.
[509] Ibid.
[510] Ibid., 140.

workers was not an individualistic pursuit of private advantage, but a process of securing common needs oriented toward a shared freedom. Upon emancipation, this impulse toward social freedom manifested in the desire to create workplaces that operated for the equal and mutual benefit of all members, where the fruits of labor would no longer secure the rule of a privileged class but redound to the common benefit of all.

After emancipation and the collapse of Reconstruction,[511] Du Bois explored how cooperative organizations now encountered new possibilities and difficulties. Emancipation conferred citizenship and the possibility of more open and powerful organization (though secrecy remained necessary in many cases). Even so, the civic emancipation of the enslaved did not grant them the power to cooperatively re-shape their social relations. Cooperation could develop in local experiments, but the larger success a cooperative group economy remained distant. With black labor now integrated into a variety of forms of agricultural debt and wage labor arrangements, the problem of social freedom was not resolved, but became bound up in the general labor problem of the late 19th century. Du Bois cites the formal address of a convention of black organizations held in Nashville on May 6-9, 1879, which criticized the relationship between capital and labor in similar terms to the Populist movement. It stated that, "with a fair adjustment between capital and labor, we as a race, by our own industry, would soon be placed beyond want and in a self-sustaining condition."[512] Adding the specific inequalities of racism, they also claimed that under current conditions, "Our toil is still unrequited, hardly less under freedom than slavery," and continued: "This unfortunate state of affairs is because of the

[511] Du Bois covers the Reconstruction period in ibid., 32-45, largely through an analysis of the promise and limitations of Freedmen's Bureau (articulated more fully in *Souls*) and by examining number of diaries and autobiographies of Union generals that corroborate the organizational initiatives of the freedmen upon emancipation. I cover elements of Du Bois's mature argument about Reconstruction below, which interestingly relies on some of the same source material he used in this initial study.
[512] Ibid., 52.

intolerant spirit exhibited on the part of the men who control the state government of the South today. Free speech in many localities is not tolerated. The lawful exercise of the rights of citizenship is denied when majorities must be overcome … in places of public amusement, in the jury box, and in the local affairs of government we are practically denied the rights and privileges of freemen."[513] For these authors, the problem of inequality was primarily political: if political rights could be substantively granted, black workers would be able to organize for their common benefit, ensure an adequate return for their labor, balance the relationship between capital and labor, and exercise the liberties that allow them to participate in democratically shaping their future.

Even with these political goals unattained, black citizens still organized a variety of forms of economic cooperation. In particular, Du Bois noted, "A remarkable Negro organization," called The Farmers' Improvement Society of Texas, which was organized in 1890 by R.L. Smith, a local leader who became a state legislator on the Republican ticket in 1895.[514] Organized with similar goals to the Alliance system but integrated into the Republican party through Smith, the organization held a charter from the state of Texas that declared, "*We Pledge Our Members* – 1st To fight the credit or mortgage system, which is the Negro's second slavery. 2nd To improve our method of farming, we want closer attention to business, improved stock, better crops and better financial returns. 3rd To co-operate in buying and selling. We can buy cheaper by buying together. By selling together we can sell higher. By co-operation, stores can be established and manufactories built and our boys and girls given employment."[515] The

[513] Ibid.
[514] On Smith and his relation to the Alliances see Omar Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886-1900* (Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 99. Smith appears to have co-opted the Alliance program and directed it away from the People's Party toward the Republican Party.
[515] Du Bois, *Economic Co-Operation*, 173.

organization had considerable durability, and by 1907, it had 10,000 members and provided health and crop insurance, collectively purchased land for members, ran its own agricultural training centers, and held agricultural fairs for its members and the broader community.[516] In organizations like these, Du Bois saw the group economy as an emerging reality, ripe for cultivation by college-educated, race-conscious leaders.

In addition to Alliance-style cooperative organizations, Du Bois also explored the formation of worker cooperatives, and his discussion reflected a familiar optimism based on a specific analysis of cooperation's struggles. He situated black productive cooperation within the broader history of workers' efforts to form their own self-managed enterprises, and wrote that, "The history of co-operative business among Negroes is long and interesting. To some it is simply a record of failure, just as similar attempts were for so long a time among whites in France, England, and America. Just as in the case of these latter groups, however, failure was but education for growing success in certain limited direction, so among Negroes we can already see the education of failure beginning to tell."[517] Du Bois appeared to derive this sense of optimism from a report written for the study by Mason A. Hawkins of Baltimore High School. Hawkins took an active interest in a number of cooperatives operating in Baltimore, and his assessment echoed the analysis offered by some Knights of Labor: productive cooperation begun by workers struggled because of limited access capital and because of inexperience in business. With a combination of patient accumulation of savings before beginning the undertaking, expert guidance that had learned from past errors, and the firm commitment of its participants, productive cooperation could begin to succeed as well as any other business. Hawkins wrote, "the faith of our people in standing by co-operative enterprises in face of the signal failures of

[516] Ibid., 173.
[517] Ibid., 149.

co-operative undertakings among us here, is most remarkable. And at the present time, so ready and willing is the support of the masses of the people, that the most pessimistic would hesitate to say that the dozen or more co-operative enterprises now will not come through all right."[518] While Hawkins's report applied to employee-owned joint stock cooperatives, Du Bois's overall analysis of cooperation remained embedded in his broader visions for the group economy, and he included analyses of black-owned cotton mills, coal mines, and dockyards that paid wages to black workers (in some cases alongside ownership shares), as well as family owned oyster beds that operated with the guidance of a chartered trade association similar to the Farmers' Improvement Society.[519] Again, any organization where black capital and labor organized as a group oriented toward mutual benefit constituted social cooperation.

Despite the proliferation of instances of economic cooperation that their study uncovered, Du Bois noted that cooperation remained localistic in nature and oriented toward self-help. Earlier in the study, when discussing organization for the purposes of migration from the South, he noted that despite the existence of cooperative sensibilities, "Since 1880 immigration to the North has gone on steadily, but there has been no large co-operative movement."[520] How could such a movement be brought about? Since embryos of the group economy already existed in a number of places, Du Bois thought that its progressive development primarily required guidance by educated leadership informed by contemporary social science. Du Bois had become familiar with forms of group economy since his first sociological study of Philadelphia, and his further studies convinced him that they existed wherever black Americans created their own semi-autonomous economic environments. At the conclusion of the study, Du Bois wrote,

[518] Ibid., 150.
[519] Ibid., 152, 159-164.
[520] Ibid., 54.

We have studied the various forms of co-operation, but there is a larger from which I have elsewhere called the Group Economy. It consists of such a co-operative arrangement of industries and services within the Negro group that the group tends to become a closed economic circle largely independent of the surrounding white world. … today in every city of the United States with considerable Negro population, the colored group is serving itself with religious ministration, medical care, legal advice, and education of children: to a growing degree with food, houses, books, and newspapers.[521]

Du Bois estimated that nearly one half of black citizens were in some way embedded in the group economy, and welcomed the rise of an independent black press as an integral component of the system and a possible catalyst for future organization. Later, as the editor of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, Du Bois himself wrote a number of articles on cooperatives, held meetings of a short-lived Negro Cooperative Guild in the *Crisis*'s main office, and he worked alongside cooperative organizations like the Cooperative League of America to help develop cooperative organizations in black communities.[522]

Reflecting on the possibilities of the group economy, Jaqueline Jones noted that it offered the "mixed blessings of semiautonomy."[523] Du Bois understood its possibilities along similar lines. Even as Du Bois always hoped for an end to segregation and race prejudice, the group economy appeared to reinforce rather than dismantle segregation. At the same time that segregation offered opportunities for group-cohesion and self-determination, these opportunities could not only reinforce racial division, but they developed within parameters imposed by the broader society. Nevertheless, Du Bois's studies showed how within segregated spaces, the group economy could contest dominant patterns of social investment and economic association for the common benefit of the group. Still, access to society's central resources and major industries, its legal institutions, and political power all required challenging the color line. In

[521] Ibid., 179.
[522] Gordon-Nembhard, *Collective Courage,* 103-108.
[523] Quoted in Gordon-Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 77.

both his early and mature writings, Du Bois wrestled against these limitations, but also accepted that, under the constraints of a racist society, racial self-organization could serve as a progressive social force if it tended toward internal empowerment and always left open the possibility for coalition-formation across racial division. As he put it elsewhere, his goal was never to reinforce segregation, but always to, "work for the emancipation of all men from caste through the organization and determination of the present victims of caste."[524]

In addition to the thorny dynamics of segregation, Du Bois's early theory of the group economy also struggled with a series of difficulties that he had not yet addressed. The first was economic: what does it mean for there to be "cooperation" between capital and labor? Does this mean that black capitalists hire black workers and pay decent wages? Is there any credible hope that "race-consciousness" would ameliorate the tendency of those who own and control industry to maximize profit at the expense of workers? As Du Bois himself would later recognize, his early studies shared a common theory of political economy with Washington that understood "capital" as the legitimate savings of thrift and wise investment: it was rightfully accumulated by effort and it could be utilized both profitably and productively by the right kind of leadership. By the 1930's, he considered this assumption to be the group economy's greatest flaw. He wrote that the group economy's democratic limitations arose from the fact that, "such co-operation as we have carried out within the race has been carried out in accordance with the private profit idea; that is, we have tried to make the incentive success and the enriching of our own owners of capital."[525] Finding an alternative model of cooperation required deeper reflections not only on the meaning of "cooperation" itself, but also the nature of popular agency. Methodologically, Du Bois had focused narrowly on educating the educators; he hoped his study of cooperation would

[524] Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 311.
[525] Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 151.

influence teachers' and college-educated students' conception of the political economy of race uplift. This methodological orientation was interrelated with his programmatic conclusions. On the one hand, Du Bois showed a democratic core of cooperative effort in his emphasis on self-help, and the basic tendency of the oppressed to organize for mutual benefit. On the other hand, even though Du Bois had granted that not all forms of cooperation explored in his study were democratic, his lack of a rigorous distinction between elite-led cooperation and cooperative democracy manifested in how freely Du Bois's melded organizations that appeared to institutionalize democratic decision-making within production and consumption and organizations that merely apportioned ownership shares or paid wages. Rather than suppress these questions, though, Du Bois used them to reformulate his vision of the group economy after two decades of work with the NACCP.

III. "An Economic Nation Within A Nation": Cooperation as Social Reconstruction

After his 1907 study, Du Bois's interest in cooperation continued, but it did not take on a new meaning that focused his conception of political strategy until the mid-1930's. By then, Du Bois's political aspirations were aligned to socialism, which he defined in his latest years as, "a planned way of life in the production of wealth and work designed for building a state whose object is the highest welfare of its people and not merely the profit of a part."[526] Du Bois always understood creating such a society as a lengthy process inevitably fraught with defeats, mistakes, and compromises, and he was always clear that it would require collective agencies that operated on multiple fronts. While socialist theorists have long noted Du Bois's contribution to theorizing the racial dimensions of capitalist development by connecting Atlantic slavery and its racial

[526] Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois*, 57.

myths to a general account of capitalist modernity,[527] Du Bois also contributed to socialist theory both theoretically and strategically by transforming his early vision of a cooperative group economy into an organizational power-base for socialist transformation.[528] While Du Bois's critics were right to clarify some limitations of his proposal, they often did so by pitting his strategy of democratic community planning against socialist labor politics in ways that failed to grasp the subtleties of alliance-formation and the variety of possible strategies for forging democratic cooperation. What appeared to many as Du Bois's naïveté about the possibilities of racial self-organization within American capitalism was not result of his lack of clarity about socialism's formidable obstacles; instead, his unique proposal was the result of his continued aspiration to catalyze the latent power in black social organization to not only fight racism and propel integration, but also to create concrete embryos of alternative democratic futures for society as a whole. The latent possibilities of parallel economies were revealed to Du Bois during his early studies of the group economy, and they were transformed by his major study of Reconstruction. His persistent belief in cooperative empowerment through community organization that descended from these foundational studies informed his specific contribution to socialist thought.

As noted above, Du Bois's efforts to develop the group economy by encouraging cooperative organizations existed in tandem with his editorship of the *Crisis*. Yet when Du Bois began to make cooperation the center of his political vision in the 1930's, it precipitated a break with the organization's more conservative leadership. In Du Bois's telling, despite the severity of

[527] See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983).
[528] Gary Wilder appreciates this dimension of Du Bois's contribution, though he fails to connect Du Bois's early writings on the group economy to his later work. Wilder is too silent about Du Bois's critics and the practical feasibility of his plans, but his conception of cooperation as an anticipatory practice is close to mine. See Gary Wilder, "Anticipation," Political Concepts. https://www.politicalconcepts.org/anticipation-gary-wilder/#fn32

the Depression, NAACP leaders continued to regard dismantling segregation as their goal, and they were as hostile to thoroughgoing social critique as any program that appeared to support segregation.[529] By the 1930's, Du Bois had begun to believe that American economic evolution disproved the viability of the NAACP strategy; capitalism had not only demonstrated its instability in its propensity toward crisis, but the concentrations of wealth and power that rested on exploited white and black labor alike could not be challenged by desegregation alone. These realities needed to be faced squarely with a plausible program for direct economic and social uplift that could nurture the collective agency of the popular classes themselves.

Du Bois's laid out the rationale for his decision to leave the organization alongside his counter-proposal in a short essay called "A Negro Nation Within the Nation," and he justified both more extensively in another essay called "The Negro and Social Reconstruction." In that latter essay, he wrote that civil rights groups like the NAACP, "were for the most part no clearer than Mr. Washington in their conception of fundamental economic forces and impending industrial changes."[530] Not only did they fail to grasp the dynamic forces of economy and society, but despite their real successes in particular instances, the inherent limits of their central goals were clearly on view. The NAACP had shown that white Americans would sympathize with the cause of civil rights, but also that white allies were unlikely to fight for social equality, ensuring that, "the difficulties which faced the Negroes in the basic matter of earning a living were still so large and went so deep that the Negroes themselves did not have the power to make effective their demands for their rights."[531] For Du Bois, these limitations disclosed the fundamentally social and economic basis of popular power, which not only proved the

[529] Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 312-313.
[530] Du Bois, "The Negro and Social Reconstruction" in *Against Racism,* 117.
[531] Ibid., 121.

limitations of catering to the conservative philanthropic interests of white elites, but illuminated the generic limitations of a purely civil rights struggle. Even though Southern disenfranchisement was a glaring injustice, Du Bois had come to consider achieving voting rights as a decisively partial victory: "On the whole … the social and economic emancipation of the Negro race by means of the ballot has failed of any great success, but perhaps the failure has been no greater in the case of Negroes that it has in that of whites. It has simply made the fact more clear that without economic reconstruction political freedom and power is impossible."[532] Effectively, civil rights organization without a comprehensive and plausible economic strategy reduced black political agency to demanding rights that they had no material collective power to democratically enforce and guarantee. For Du Bois, the fundamental question for political strategy became cultivating this collective agency, oriented toward social reconstruction. By social reconstruction, Du Bois envisioned a process like the experience of Reconstruction itself, when a significant portion of the country underwent a dramatic change in its basic patterns of social relation under the imposing power of the popular classes, which, inspired by the Russian Revolution, he called "the dictatorship of the proletariat."[533] Du Bois's did not advocate for revolution and proletarian dictatorship in response to the Depression – in fact, he considered Communist efforts to organize Southern blacks as a separate nation for revolution not only ignorant of local possibilities, but "suicidal."[534] Even as Du Bois's study of the Civil War and

[532] Ibid., 122.
[533] As Du Bois noted in *Dusk of Dawn*, "I think it was the Russian Revolution which first illuminated and made clear this change in my basic thought [that, as he put it, "Negroes must proceed constructively in new and comprehensive plans of their own"]. It was not that I at any time conceived of Bolshevik Russia as ushering in any present millennium. I was painfully sensitive to its failures, to all the difficulties which it faced; but the clear and basic thing which appeared to me in unquestioned brightness, was that in the year 1917 and then, after a struggle with the world and famine ten years later, one of the largest nations of the world made up its mind frankly to face a set of problems which no nation was at the time willing to face, and which many nations including our own are unwilling fully to face even to this day." Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 284.
[534] Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 142.

Reconstruction instilled him with the sense that violence often accompanies social change, his ambitions for socialism rested on the peaceful transformation of the group economy, envisioning cooperation as both a means and end in a process of social reconstruction.

Du Bois's proposal outlined in "A Negro Nation Within the Nation," was immediately controversial. Broadly speaking, Du Bois's plan would reformulate the group economy around consumers' cooperatives, which would organize black buying power and community investment. At the time, Du Bois was confident that the winds of history were on the side of change and that, "Greater democratic control of production and distribution is bound to replace existing autocratic and monopolistic methods."[535] In his view, strategic thinking needed to integrate black Americans into this general historical movement, preparing them to enter "the new industrial State" that he saw looming on the horizon.[536] While withering in its criticism of racism within the AFL, Du Bois's essay did not counsel abandoning the labor movement for this project, simply pitting economic nationalism against class struggle. Yet at the same time, he did place a theory of the group economy, and not a theory of the labor movement, at the center of his proposal. He wrote that, "Negroes can develop in the United States an economic nation within a nation, able to work though inner cooperation, to found its own institutions, to educate its genius, and at the same time, without mob violence or extremes of race hatred, to keep in helpful touch and cooperate with the mass of the nation."[537] Organized in neighborhoods, churches, and cultural centers in the segregated enclaves of black America, Du Bois thought that consumer cooperation could direct black buying power toward black business while utilizing a cooperative philosophy of race uplift to suppress the profit motive. As he elaborated, "By letting Negro

[535] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Seventh Son: The Thought and Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois,* ed. Julius Lester (New York: Random House, 1971), 404.
[536] Ibid.
[537] Ibid., 405.

farmers feed Negro artisans, and Negro technicians guide Negro home industries, and Negro thinkers plan this integration of cooperation, while Negro artists dramatize and beautify the struggle, economic independence can be achieved. To doubt this is possible is to doubt the essential humanity and the quality of brains of the American Negro."[538]

As a basic proposal for dealing with Depression-era conditions, Du Bois's essay was not only spurned by liberals in the NAACP, but harshly criticized by the black Left. For these figures, whether Du Bois's proposal for cooperative economic nationalism is possible does not depend on "the essential humanity and the quality of brains of the American Negro," but on whether a cooperative group economy within American capitalism was a plausible strategy for the problem Du Bois had isolated: how can the members of an oppressed group develop the capacity to transform their own social relations as they transform the political and social power that exploits them? As E. Franklin Frazier wrote, "When Garvey proposed a grandiose scheme for building a black commercial empire Du Bois ridiculed his naïveté. But what could be more fantastic than his own program for a separate non-profit economy within American capitalism?"[539] More specifically, Frazier argued that a parallel cooperative economy could do nothing about capitalist control of credit and the production of major commodities, and if cooperatives could not compete with these capitalist institutions on the terms they set, the group economy would be unable to offer impoverished black workers a feasible economic alternative. However imposing black buying power in the aggregate, it was an illusion to think that it could be intelligently directed toward an internal group economy when the nation's major industries were under the powerful control of the capitalist elite; no amount of race-conscious consumption

[538] Ibid., 406.
[539] E. Franklin Frazier, "The Du Bois Program in the Present Crisis" in *Race: Devoted to Social, Political, and Economic Equality* (Westport: Negro Universities Press, 1970 [1935]), 13.

could change the basic social fabric of production. For Frazier, this implied that, "With thousands of Negroes being displaced from the farms of the South while many more thousands are depending upon relief in the cities, a co-operative program could only adopt "Share Your Poverty" as a slogan."[540] And if it did not descend into a poverty-sharing program, the base of Du Bois's group economy would be restricted to the middle-class, since its initial steps would require black organizers with sufficient means to establish, finance, and keep the cooperatives afloat.[541] Du Bois again looked to the guiding role of the "finest, most vigorous and best educated Negroes"[542] in leading the effort, a comment that perhaps inspired one of Frazier's most acerbic criticisms: "Nothing would be more unendurable for him than to live within a Black Ghetto or within a black nation – unless perhaps he were king."[543]

Frazier's polemic appropriately highlighted the limitations of the group economy as a comprehensive anti-capitalist strategy, though it did not exhaust how Du Bois's understood its potential. Like others, Frazier pitted Du Bois's proposal against the movement to integrate labor unions and unite black workers with radical workers across the color line. For Frazier, the end of this integration was not a new social order, but political radicalization: it gave the both the black and white worker "a realistic conception of capitalist economy and the hopelessness of his position in such a system."[544] For Frazier, the agency to reconstruct society could only be built in socialist unions that directed these thwarted energies toward a political party, and this organizational task required direct and clear agitation in industrial unions as well as in politics,

[540] Ibid.
[541] Discussing the history of black consumer cooperatives in general, Gordon-Nembhard notes that, "Success was often easier with members who had a stable income and what we now call a "living wage" – enough salary to raise a family. … Often groups of civil servants were seen as a stable pool from which to draw membership, or at least to initiate the cooperative and stabilize it." Gordon-Nembhard, *Collective Courage*, 82.
[542] Du Bois, *Seventh Son*, 407.
[543] Frazier, *Race*, 12.
[544] Ibid., 13.

where black and white workers should unite to clarify the limitations of the capitalist system and proselytize for socialism. With these goals, Du Bois's program only muddied the waters by substituting race-identification for class and by envisioning an illusory nation-building power easily absorbable into capitalism.

Yet Du Bois was more circumspect than Frazier, and did not propose his reiteration of the group economy as a comprehensive alternative to the Depression or as an alternative to the labor movement. While Du Bois did believe that consumers' organizations could facilitate some immediate relief, he saw consumers' organization as strategy to prepare black Americans for a further transformation toward socialism by beginning to organize their shared capacity for democratic planning. Against Frazier, Du Bios did not see political radicalization as an end; cooperative agency could be built in the present, even if it was only an embryo of the goals that he and Frazier shared. The appropriate dispute between their positions is whether there was any progressive, democratic potential in linking consumer cooperation to community planning, including whether such a project could ally with an integrated labor movement, as well local and regional political power, to form a pluralistic locus of cooperative agency. Behind the brief explanation of Du Bois's plan articulated in "A Negro Nation Within a Nation" lay a fuller exposition of his argument in "The Negro and Social Reconstruction" as well as major mature study, *Black Reconstruction in America*, which contains the core of Du Bois's mature conception of democracy. An examination of both clarifies why Du Bois conceived of the group economy as a transitional experience toward socialist cooperation, and it also shows how Du Bois's conception of cooperation was not simply a form of coordination leveraged by middle-class elites, but the gradual creation of a cooperative community with a broad-based emancipatory vision.

Du Bois's hopes for the group economy underwent three constitutive transformations by the 1930's. First, he no longer formulated the black predicament as rooted in *poverty*, but rather in *exploitation*. Overcoming impoverishment required building wealth (often under capitalist auspices), whereas overcoming exploitation required social reconstruction – a new way of organizing production and consumption and allocating society's surplus around a vision of cooperation. Second, while the group economy was always the product of forms of collective agency, Du Bois changed how he understood the relationship between agency and leadership. While Du Bois had focused extensively on educating the educators in his early years, his later discussions of cooperation clarified how cooperative organization was animated by the dynamic agency of its participants. And finally, Du Bois dove deeper into the strategic dilemmas of social reconstruction, including the nature of its alliances, organizational forms, and ideological background.

In his final autobiography, Du Bois acknowledged that his early debate with Washington concealed significant overlap. He wrote of their proposals that, "These two theories of Negro progress were not absolutely contradictory. Neither I nor Booker Washington understood the nature of capitalistic exploitation of labor, and the necessity of a direct attack on the principle of exploitation as the beginning of labor uplift."[545] While Du Bois and Washington had once seen the accumulation of capital as the precondition of black freedom – but disagreed about how that capital would be accumulated and managed – the elder Du Bois saw a "direct attack on the principle of exploitation" as the orienting aim of black politics. While Du Bois's encounter with Marx helped to provide this insight,[546] the centrality of exploitation also emerged from his concrete historical analysis in *Black Reconstruction*. In his study of Reconstruction, Du Bois

[545] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois,* 236.
[546] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Marxism and the Negro Problem," *The Crisis* 40, no. 5 (May 1933).

argued that in the United States, the reality of exploitation was often obscured by the pervasive assumption that capital is the legitimate product of thrift and savings. In his view, the dominant ideology of radical Reconstruction – which he celebrated as "the abolition-democracy" – as well as Du Bois's own previous views were structured by what he called this "American Assumption":

> The American Assumption was that wealth is mainly the result of its owner's effort and that any average worker can by thrift become a capitalist. The curious thing about this assumption was that while it was not true, it was undoubtedly more nearly true in American from 1820 to 1860 than in any other contemporary land. It was not true and not recognized as true during Colonial times; but with the opening of the West and the expanding industry of the twenties, and coincident with the rise of the Cotton Kingdom, it was a fact that often a poor white man in America by thrift and saving could obtain land and capital.[547]

Now, Du Bois believed that behind capital was not thrift or saving, but the power to exploit. In the United States, race often helped conceal this reality by diverting the experience of exploitation onto non-whites. For the poor white in the mid-19th century, land could often be purchased as the result of "thrift and saving," but behind that purchase lay Native dispossession. In the Cotton Kingdom, land ownership was monopolized by the wealth generated by exploiting black labor, to the disadvantage of poor whites. To shore up this regime, which kept landless or land-poor whites in grinding poverty, Southern elites cultivated a racial consensus that revolved around antagonism to enslaved blacks. Though he notes that poor Southern whites did resist planter rule, Du Bois argues that not only were their ambitions foreshortened by fears that disturbing planters would incite slave rebellion, but he also demonstrates how a middle class of whites who worked as slave-traders, police, and merchants were deeply tied to plantation owners, were adamantly pro-slavery, and forestalled any popular white unity.[548] Divided by

[547] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1962 [1935]), 182-183.
[548] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 26-27.

slavery and race, the disadvantaged classes on whom the burden of social reproduction rested most heavily never formed a popular bloc capable of altering social arrangements. Outside the slave states, where land, small capital, and entrepreneurship were available for whites, settler insiders could credibly believe that small property ownership and the profit motive could maintain a universal class of producer-citizens and form the social basis of American democracy, and their aspirations were often the bedrock of the nation's democratic ideals. But however democratic, these ideals always rested on the exploitation of others – not only on the primitive accumulation of Native genocide, but on the fruits of slave exploitation that empowered Northern finance and investment. Du Bois argued that it was not until Reconstruction that universal democracy became conceivable, when radical Republicans sought to integrate black labor into the egalitarian small-producer tradition through the redistribution of plantation property and the formation of multiracial democracy under Northern military tutelage.[549] If radical Reconstruction could succeed, ensuring that wealth rested in the hands of the broad mass of the people regardless of race and that popular strivings were truly rewarded according to merit, the nation's basic democratic aspirations could be realized.

Du Bois had initially aspired to this vision, and he never fully abandoned its democratic substance. As he said of Thaddeus Stevens in the 1930's, "If he had succeeded, he would have changed the economic history of the United States and perhaps saved the American farmer from his present plight."[550] Ultimately, though, Du Bois argued that this vision was sundered from within by its political-economic assumption that capital represents the legitimate gains of thrift and wise investment. While this ideal once embodied a democratic aspiration for a society open

[549] Ibid. Du Bois says a few things about Native struggles in the text, but they are not integrated into his account of Reconstruction specifically.
[550] Du Bois, *Seventh Son*, 402.

to talents and without hereditary, aristocratic distinctions, it had now become simply a mask for industrial despotism; the rationalization of capital as legitimate social power simply buoyed the rule of those who owned and controlled the means of social labor, allowing them to exploit workers, amass wealth, and control the political system. In Du Bois's telling, the democratic problem with these capitalist assumptions only fully emerged in the United States after the "counter-revolution of property" that ended Reconstruction, when Southern elites accepted their subordination to Northern industry and finance in exchange for a free hand to restore white supremacy. This compromise meant that the nation was reorganized not around popular democracy for all, but by a counter-revolutionary South and a North and West under the increasing control of big business. For Du Bois, "This control of super-capital and big business was being developed during the ten years of Southern Reconstruction and was dependent and consequent upon the failure of democracy in the South, just as it fattened upon the perversion of democracy in the North."[551] As he put it in a later essay, and in a direct rebuke to some arguments on the left that Reconstruction was the completion of the nation's bourgeois-capitalist revolution: "What ensued in the South after emancipation was not at all the classical bourgeoisie revolution but something far more complicated and reactionary."[552]

For Du Bois, a clear lesson of Reconstruction's failure is that the goal of radical democracy cannot be providing land and capital on a wide basis as abolition-democrats during Reconstruction had believed, but required the creation of a cooperative commonwealth where social labor retains its surplus for democratic use and distribution and where the basis of exploitation in the private ownership of the means of social labor is abolished. While *Black*

[551] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 584.
[552] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Social Planning for the Negro, Past and Present," *Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 1 (January 1936), 114..

Reconstruction did aim to rehabilitate our historical memory of Reconstruction's black and white political leaders after decades of slander, Du Bois clearly argued that their vision could not have succeeded. If Reconstruction was an "unfinished revolution"[553] for Du Bois, it was not simply because its defeat ensured that its goals remained the task of future generations, but because its underlying democratic ideology failed to anticipate how capitalist development would turn its democratic vision into a rationale for labor's exploitation. Du Bois wrote *Black Reconstruction* not to vindicate its leaders, but to situate the unique political experience of emancipation and Reconstruction within the history of American capitalism and to clarify the role of democracy in a worldwide struggle against exploitation. As he ended his first chapter, "Out of the exploitation of the dark proletariat comes the Surplus Value filched from human breasts which, in cultured lands, the Machine and harnessed Power veil and conceal. The emancipation of man is the emancipation of labor and the emancipation of labor is the freeing of that basic majority of workers who are yellow, brown, and black."[554] Even as Reconstruction offered lessons for the future, directing reconstruction against exploitation required a different ideology, different organizational strategies, and different agencies.

Given Du Bois's assessments of the dire situation after Reconstruction – he essentially argued that a corporate "super-government" nearly impermeable to democratic pressure was formed in its wake – it is hard to portray Du Bois as naïve about the power behind American capitalism and the difficulties of developing reconstructive agency adequate to creating a radically democratic, cooperative society. "The Negro and Social Reconstruction," clarified his appreciation of these difficulties both during and after reconstruction, and there, he used a renovated critique of Washington to explore their ramifications. Importantly, his critique of

[553] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).
[554] Ibid., 16.

Washington also had consequences for his own earlier hopes for the group economy. Specifically, he noted how Washington failed to anticipate the inherently limited power of accumulating earnings to purchase capital in a mature capitalist society, as well as his inability to perceive capitalism's tendency to suppress the social power of small land-ownership and skilled labor, the two economic arenas on which he concentrated his energies to develop black wealth.[555] But as Du Bois also clarified, capitalist progress also undermined crucial aspects of the group economy infrastructure through concentration and competition. The black-owned credit unions, building and loan associations, grocery and drug stores, and workers' cooperatives that formed the bedrock of the early 20th century group economy were all steadily out-competed by larger enterprises superintended by mostly white capitalists, a tendency that was only exacerbated during the Depression.[556] For Du Bois, these developments only solidified how abolition-democracy's hope to furnish the freedmen with the material basis of their economic independence by offering access to land and skilled labor was destined to be swallowed by capitalism, unless the basic principles of the group economy could be reformulated.

Du Bois responded to these challenges by shifting the locus of economic agency from production to consumption. While inherently limited, targeting consumptive power did offer a locus of cooperative activity that could catalyze collective agency. Du Bois's plan aspired to more than Nikhil Pal Singh has suggested, since it did not simply seek to organize black communities into a distinct "public" and locus of their own political self-awareness, but sought to materially reshape community relations by consciously directing consumption patterns toward

[555] Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 116. This subordination of agriculture not only manifests in ratcheting down the cost of raw materials, but it also re-shapes the organization of agriculture and incentivizes concentrated land ownership. We have seen the effects of capitalism on skilled labor in Chapter 2.
[556] Ibid., 129.

both local and broader cooperative goals.[557] As noted above, Du Bois was impressed by the incipient potential of black buying power, and wrote that, "Two million eight hundred thousand Negro families must spend at least two billion dollars a year."[558] Even if black Americans were excluded from powerful positions in the nation's major industries and labor unions – "we have no decisive economic place in production or transportation, in commerce or credit, or in government"[559] – he argued that black Americans do have a basic independent power as consumers and therefore the possibility to shape production: "The economic process today does not logically begin with production, but with consumption. We do not consume in order to produce. We produce in order to consume."[560] While it would have been better to clarify that capitalism implies production for profit, which requires both adhering to and *shaping* patterns of consumption, organized consumer power in capitalism is not illusory.

For Du Bois, what transformed this latent power into self-conscious agency was the potential to organize black buying power along cooperative lines, opening the possibilities for democratic planning and community investment. He believed that, "proper adult education and economic organization among intelligent American Negroes" could consciously direct consumption toward a series of concrete aims that had already been raised by black activists: the reduction of the cost of staples by wholesale purchasing; supporting black business and boycotting racist employers ("don't by where you can't work"); creating an internal market by investing in cooperative enterprises that produce goods that communities need; targeting local

[557] For Singh's argument that Du Bois was engaged in a "reconstruction of democratic publics" rather than a reconstruction of society see Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 66-78. Singh agrees with Du Bois's critics that his consumer program is not an alternative to capitalism, but then salvages Du Bois's argument on a merely discursive level: if it could not succeed, it could stimulate the formation of black self-awareness and "make the unthinkable thinkable." 78. As we saw in the last chapter, this would not capture Dewey's view of the public.
[558] Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 143.
[559] Ibid., 146.
[560] Ibid., 146.

industries where competition with national industry is not too severe; and seeking integration with white labor and consumer organizations to the extent possible.[561] Du Bois considered each of these to be immediate and achievable goals, and while none of them would deliver a socialist society, each pointed to a concrete limitation of existing capitalist economy and would enhance the awareness and agency of cooperators through their own participation in the cooperative movement. Consumer cooperation helps to make economic processes more transparent by turning an abstract "market" into an intelligible series of relations through which production might be organized through shared self-reflection on community needs. For Du Bois, cooperatives and related cultural institutions would also create space for black communities to develop greater awareness of their needs and aspirations without enduring a prior battle against discrimination, frequently an uphill battle that risked becoming an end in itself.

Du Bois also believed that a cooperative group economy could train socialists by actively working to suppress the profit motive, which he did not understand as a natural aspect of human consciousness or sociality but the artificial product of specific forms of social organization. Since it structured society, the profit motive could not be simply "abolished," but had to be unlearned through empowering experiences of cooperative association. It was these experiences that Du Bois wanted to guide the reformation of existing group economies. While he suggested that these economies often faltered for lack of coherent organization (led by informed elites who understood the ins and outs of cooperative economics), he also wrote:

> But, there is even a greater drawback and cause of failure than this lack of organization. It is that such co-operation as we have carried out within the race has been carried out in accordance with the private profit idea; that is, we have tried to make the incentive success and the enriching of our own owners of capital. What I propose is a complete revolution in that attitude; that we begin the process of training for socialism which must be done in every labor group in the world an in every country in the world, by organizing a nationwide collective system on a nonprofit basis

[561] Ibid., 143-144.

with the ideal that the consumer is the center and the beginning of the organization; and that to him all profits over the cost of production shall be returned.[562]

Du Bois did not quite make the "nonprofit" basis of his plan clear, or what it meant that the consumer would retain "all profits over the cost of production," but it appears that his reference to the nonprofit quality of consumer cooperation was a reference to basic Rochdale principles.[563] At the end of "The Negro and Social Reconstruction," he recommended a book called *What is Cooperation?* by James Warbasse, the founder of the Cooperative League of America, that explains the non-profit basis of consumers' cooperation. While Warbasse exaggerated when he wrote that consumer cooperation "eliminates the profit motive from industry"[564] since cooperatives purchase goods from firms producing for profit in a market, he does illuminate how consumer cooperatives can manage their own surplus on a democratic, non-profit basis. As member-based organizations, when cooperatives purchase goods according to their own collective deliberation, the members then own the goods in common. When members go to the store, they do not technically "buy" the goods, but each "takes away with him what he has already paid for."[565] The cooperative holds a surplus, derived from a difference between the purchase price and sale price, but it does not keep this surplus as profit. Instead, the surplus is in part a loan to the cooperative that allows it operate and keep goods stocked – and it is only loaned since a portion of the surplus is paid back to members each quarter in proportion to their expenditures – but it is also a form of tax that the cooperative can retain for democratically designed social investment.

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[562] Ibid., 151.
[563] Reed's argument that Du Bois was an American Fabian is corroborated by this connection, in ways that his book could have explored further. Du Bois met Beatrice and Sidney Webb during his travels in London, and was familiar with their writings, which also encouraged consumer cooperation as an element of the transition to socialism, and also argued for forging labor/middle-class alliances in local communities around shared democratic values where possible.
[564] James Warbasse, *What is Cooperation?* (United States: Vanguard Press, 1927), 25.
[565] Ibid., 26.

Du Bois was attracted to this idea not because it would create a fully cooperative society, but because it would begin to train people to think of production and consumption as forms of cooperative service, not as opportunities for profit-seeking and accumulation.[566] He wrote that consumer cooperation would help create both the skills and the attitude necessary for democratic planning since, "you cannot get social planning with every person struggling for his own advancement."[567] He also hoped that communities would come to recognize that their self-education required developing a critical awareness of the limitations of prevailing economic discourse, and come to ensure that their effort "pays for popular education of the people in the meaning and expansion of co-operation,"[568] combatting the corrosive effects of the surrounding acquisitive culture. While Du Bois had once thought of "uplift" as the result of instruction by college-educated elites, he now discovered a form of social practice that would raise the social character of groups through their own deliberate agency. There is no need to balk at the progressive teleology of this vision; Du Bois was clear that competitive individualism was a lower form of sociality that kept people exploited and impoverished, and that developing social cooperation would be a civilizational advance, a struggle for progress that could inspire workers and artists, middle-class teachers as well as the chronically unemployed. Moreover, Du Bois thought that the community benefits of cooperation could be proven in practice. Like the early Rochdale Pioneers and some Knights of Labor, Du Bois hoped that a cooperative group economy could begin to use its consumptive power to shape local markets, utilizing organization to create a market for cooperative production, which might also create employment opportunities for those out of work during the Depression.[569]

[566] The idea of substituting "profit" for "service" also comes from Warbasse.
[567] Ibid., 152.
[568] Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 152.
[569] Ibid., 151.

Despite his enthusiasm for cooperative training, Du Bois had a realistic sense of its limitations. While he thought of the cooperative group economy as "an economic nation within a nation,"[570] he was clear that black Americans were not a nation and did not seek to build a separate sovereign state. The nation metaphor was limited since, "all legal and police powers are out of our hands and because large industries, like steel and electric power, are organized on a national basis and impenetrable by small groups."[571] A socialist society would have to devise a cooperative way of managing all of society's infrastructure, which for most socialists, implied a prior organization of workers in all major industries. Moreover, Du Bois was aware that even the limited advances of a cooperative group economy would struggle in hostile conditions. Du Bois wrote: "The real difficulty of any such organization would be the competition and undermining retaliation of surrounding capitalism" which would manifest "not simply in underselling, but in deception, in propaganda, in unjust laws and mob violence. In the end, it could only be counteracted by unusual race loyalty and by such combining of political power with the laboring classes of America as they could be made to agree to."[572]

Du Bois's critics often ignored these overtures to uniting organized labor with cooperative group economies, but the possibility of their alliance was central for Du Bois. Du Bois had always maintained his only apparently paradoxical stance that integration would be facilitated rather than undermined by separate, race-conscious organizing, and he clearly understood that socialism required dismantling the color line as well as the cooperative operation and design of social infrastructure generally. In his explanation of the consumers cooperative plan, he also acknowledged that solidarity was as important if not more important than militancy,

[570] Du Bois, *Seventh Son*, 405.
[571] Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 123.
[572] Ibid., 152.

arguing that, "The real problem them, is this concert of the workers. The real emphasis today should not be on revolution but on class consciousness, and labor's uplift. This is the job of socialism, and the first proof of conversion is the abolition of color and race prejudice among the laboring class."[573] In his mature years, achieving integrated, egalitarian, and empowered communities among all workers was as much a part of how Du Bois envisioned "social reconstruction" as the internal reformation of the black group economy.

While Du Bois did at times express despair of the prospects of mass labor unity on a true footing of equality, interracial labor cooperation and its difficulties was a central theme of his analysis of Reconstruction. Du Bois's famous characterization of whiteness as a "psychological wage"[574] in *Black Reconstruction* is often described as a structural feature of American society that prevents both labor unity and labor militancy – white workers experience whiteness as a symbolic "wage" on top of their earnings, so they measure their self-worth by their superiority to non-whites and do not see the need to participate in the labor movement. Du Bois never made this generic argument. Instead, he argues that the "sort of public and psychological wage" of whiteness manifests not in merely subjective gratification but in real material privileges like access to schools that receive public investment, the ability to vote, and racial monopoly on well-paid public service jobs in clerical roles and especially the police force.[575] Du Bois consistently refused two corrosive options that haunt the politics of race and class: making race-prejudice into a permanent fixture of American society on the one hand, and on the other, neglecting the depth of racism's structuring power to the detriment of both social analysis and strategic thinking.[576]

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[573] Ibid., 143.
[574] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction,* 700.
[575] Ibid., 700-701.
[576] A widespread problem we have today is that liberal whites re-configure their own version of theories like "the wages of whiteness" to prove that the educated and "status-secure" white middle and upper class, and not white labor, are the appropriate allies for anti-racist politics. Yet these elites have never ceased to prove what Du Bois noticed about the NAACP – that they can be allies for anti-discrimination, but not social equality.

Du Bois's concern with the possibility of labor unity permeates *Black Reconstruction*, and manifests prominently is his persistent effort to understand why the dominant factions of the American labor movement did not see emancipation as integral to their own struggles. He notes how some labor leaders were able to traverse the color line and, even as they saw black workers being conscripted into what they considered wage-slavery, they strove to integrate emancipated black labor into their fight to abolish all forms of slavery. Du Bois quoted a speech by William Sylvis, who welcomed black labor into the National Labor Union by claiming that after emancipation: "We are now all one family of slaves together, and the labor reform movement is a second emancipation proclamation."[577] Yet Sylvis and the NLU were in a minority, as shown not only by the history of the AFL, but by limited support Southern white labor offered Reconstruction. In part as a counter to how racism prevented white labor from seeing black struggles as both related to and distinct from their own, Du Bois presented emancipation as a labor upheaval, designed to clarify to international labor movements everywhere the contribution of enslaved people to modern mass labor politics. As much as an interest in Marxism, this desire to re-narrate Reconstruction as an experience of mass strike and proletarian dictatorship was meant to situate emancipation alongside the large-scale strikes that paralyzed industries in the decades following the war, as well as the labor revolution that founded the Soviet Union. While he at no point underplayed how Reconstruction was propped up by the financial and military support of Northern capitalist industry – and in this and other senses was not literally a dictatorship of the proletariat[578] – he nevertheless aimed to show how labor politics decisively shaped Reconstruction's fortunes through its own repertoire of democratic agency.

[577] Ibid., 356.
[578] Du Bois clearly acknowledges the limitations of this category: "universal suffrage does not lead to a real dictatorship until workers use their votes consciously to rid themselves of the dominion of private capital. There

In developing his argument that emancipation constituted a "general strike," Du Bois centered a basic question about the Civil War: no one can deny that the North did not enter the war to end slavery, so why did it culminate in emancipation? In Du Bois's view, emancipation was indeed a military necessity, but Northern pragmatism would not have seized upon it as the key to victory if it were not for the agency of the enslaved, who deserted plantations when the Union army entered Southern territory. To ground his argument, Du Bois relied on the testimony of Union generals, who described the experience of vast numbers of fugitive slaves approaching their armies: "The arrival among us of these hordes was like the oncoming of cities. There was no plan in this exodus, no Moses to lead it. Unlettered reason or the mere inarticulate decision of instinct brought them to us. Often the slaves met prejudices against their color more bitter than any they left behind. But their own interests were identical, they felt, with the objects of our armies."[579] In Du Bois's view, abandoning the plantation did not simply represent "the mere inarticulate decision of instinct," but a determination to abolish the conditions of labor to which they had been subject. In his estimation, the enslaved had no way to know whether the Union army would facilitate progress, but they were motivated by a basic revolt against their conditions of labor to seize the opportunity offered by an invading army: "This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a half million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the plantation system, and to do that they left the plantations."[580] What proved both the intentional and the political quality of the strike for Du Bois was that, when conscripted into the Union army as soldiers and workers, black Unionists actively sought to set the terms of their

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were signs of such an object among South Carolina Negroes, but it was always coupled with the idea of that day, that the only real escape for a laborer was himself to own capital." Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction,* 381.

[579] Ibid., 64.

[580] Ibid., 67.

labor and refused conditions that appeared to reinstate slavery. "The Negroes were willing to work and did work, but they wanted land to work, and they wanted to see and own the results of their toil. Here was a chance to establish an agrarian democracy in the South: peasant holders of small properties, eager to work and raise crops, amenable to suggestion and general direction. All they needed was honesty in treatment, and education."[581] Again, Union generals themselves reported how where this honesty in treatment was granted, there was success, and where it was not, there were failures.[582]

Whether white labor could be made to identify with these historical experiences and see the collapse of Reconstruction as a tragedy for their own movements certainly depended on whether race-prejudice would insulate this identification, but it also depended on the shape of historical memory and the concrete politicization of common forms of social inequality in the present. *Black Reconstruction* recognized the Populist movement as such a moment of labor unity. For Du Bois, the only real problem with Populism was that it occurred too late, when the mass of an earlier generation of white workers had already sided with the Democratic party and its elites over the multi-racial democracy built during Reconstruction:

> It was not until after the period which this book treats that white labor in the South began to realize that they had lost a great opportunity, that when they united to disfranchise the black laborer they had cut the voting power of the laboring class in two. White labor in the populist movement of the eighties tried to realign the economic warfare in the South and bring workers of all colors into united opposition to the employer. But they found that the power which they had put in the hands of the employers in 1876 so dominated political life that free and honest expression of public will at the ballot-box was impossible in the South, even for white men. … The South has since become one of the greatest centers for exploitation of labor in the world, and labor suffered not only in the South but throughout the country and the world over.[583]

[581] Ibid.,
[582] Du Bois also shows how the origins of the Freedmen's Bureau lie with a number of these generals who learned lessons about what freedmen would accept as a result of these practices of collective self-assertion.
[583] Ibid., 353.

Whether Northern capital would have tolerated a Reconstruction based on mass interracial labor unity is another question, but Du Bois was right to note how the collapse of Reconstruction hampered the political possibilities of both white and black labor in the South. When circumstances create moments when the common interests between black and white labor become hard to conceal, organizations need to be in place that allow for federation among a variety of cooperative organizations that can prepare a political assault on privilege.

For such an assault, Du Bois called attention to the importance of coercion against the dictatorship of capital. Cooperation could develop voluntarily in socialist unions and among community groups, but it required some form of organized repression of elites to fully develop in the spheres of influence they controlled. Du Bois was admirably clear-headed about the difficulties involved in developing the constructive agency of the people and an organized force capable of suppressing capital. Following the Soviet experience, he wrote that, "The current theory of democracy is that dictatorship is a stopgap pending the work of universal education, equitable income, and strong character. But always the temptation is to use the stopgap for narrower ends, because intelligence, thrift and goodness seem to impossibly distant for most men. We rule by junta, we turn Fascist, because we do not believe in men."[584] Against this generic lack of faith in the agency of oppressed people, Du Bois argued that not only was this cynicism frequently proven wrong, but that social analysts and political actors alike have a "moral duty to see that every human being, to the extent of his capacity, escapes ignorance, poverty and crime," ensuring that democratic strivings are never repressed by cynicism or despair.[585] In this context, Du Bois plainly favored the ideal of popular domination of elites, claiming that even if popular rule is unwieldy and beset with errors: "The only unforgivable sin

[584] Ibid., 382.
[585] Ibid., 383.

is dictatorship for the benefit of Fools, Voluptuaries, gilded Satraps, Prostitutes, and Idiots. The rule of the famished, unlettered, stinking mob is better than this and the only inevitable, logical and justifiable return."[586] While Dewey was concerned about the possibility that the infrastructure of social intelligence would be too disturbed by popular domination of elites, and that these repressive means would not carry within them the end of advancing cooperative social freedom, Du Bois was willing to risk the possibility of building a new world on the ashes of the old. While Du Bois clearly knew that the idea of proletarian dictatorship could backfire – even if its original Ancient Roman meaning as the office of an individual was reformulated as the historic role of a class – he needed some way to express the structural imperative to suppress the power of elites in a period of social transformation.

The ideal of proletarian dictatorship underwent a central transformation when it was used to justify forced collectivization (the dictatorship of the proletariat over the peasantry), which is a program that Du Bois would not have been likely to support. Instead, given his emphasis not only on plural alliances within working classes, but also even on his interest in working alongside middle classes, we can understand Du Bois's position as one that recognized the need for a mass, political attack on privilege that refused to specify the form that attack would take. At times he seems to think that such a process is possible social democratically – by the imposing political power of a majority in the established institutions of liberal democracy – and other times he seems to keep the form of coercion unspecified. With respect to these questions – the subject of volumes of analysis on the left – Du Bois reaches some limits as a socialist theorist. Without using the term "hegemony," though, Du Bois showed how cooperative politics could become a hegemonic politics – one that operates by fostering consensual cooperation in the

[586] Ibid., 382.

spaces where these experiences can be made possible, and partially out of these experiences, it generates the justification for coercing privilege through a robust account of the good of the commonwealth. Democracy will not be radicalized through the insistence on political rights or the petitioning of leaders soaked in the rationale of the institutional and economic *status quo*; it requires the formation of collective agencies capable of suppressing anti-democratic forms of association, cultivating collective power through incipient, anticipatory alternatives, and matching these initiatives with a hegemonic political force capable of re-appropriating the social wealth controlled by ruling classes.

IV. Conclusion: Internationalism and Pluralizing Dual Power

Du Bois's quasi-nationalist arguments might be better understood, not as a variety of black nationalism, but as a way of configuring the relationship between concrete sites of dual power and internationalism. Du Bois was clear that part of the cooperative group economy should be seeking the alliance of not only white labor in the United States, but international labor. "The Negro and Social Reconstruction" argued that,

> If American Negroes, taking the path of organizing their consumers' power, should be able to raise their working classes to dominate within their own group and to such a command of income and resources that they would not be objects of charity and dole, they can not only ally themselves with the white laboring classes in the United States and Europe, but equally well with the black laborers of the West Indies and South America and of Africa; and with the colored laborers of India, China, and Japan; and if this union could be cemented by mutual interests, by co-operative exchange of commodities … all this might lead to so strong an economic nexus between colored and white labor that the day of industrial imperialism would be over. It is a far-fetched dream, but it is worth the contemplation.[587]

International cooperative exchange based on socialist consciousness would be difficult to facilitate, but it demonstrates Du Bois's expansive sense of socialist organizational sites and his

[587] Du Bois, *Against Racism*, 156.

interest in exploring ways they might relate to one another as they developed cooperative empowerment.

Du Bois's conception of alternative sites of power was deeply social: community planning was a form of cultural "uplift," now driven by the direct agency of the people in their efforts to develop new patterns of social relation that suppressed the profit motive and promoted egalitarian links in all directions that would receive them. Developing the "integration of cooperation" both within and between them would be a struggle, but this is as true of the labor movement as federations of community planning organizations (or radical municipal experiments). Du Bois's network of cooperative organizations could not claim to be a state-making force, but, like the secret religious organizations under slavery, they might develop both social cooperation and a spirit of revolt. How that spirit would manifest need not be predicted in advance, but if the relations of exploitation become intolerable, multiple sites of dual power can prepare for a political assault on privilege, irrespective of the borders of nation or race. At the end of his life, Du Bois's channeled his own spirit of revolt into an idiosyncratic, ecumenical vision of communism. He wrote his final biography with an interlude that declared his hope to, "help the triumph of communism in every honest way I can: without deceit or hurt; … I know well that the triumph of communism will be a slow and difficult task, involving mistakes of every sort. It will call for a progressive change in human nature and a better type of manhood than is common today. I believe this possible, or otherwise we will continue to lie, steal and kill as we are doing today."[588] By the end of Du Bois's life, communism was the vision of uplift that crystalized his hope for cultural, political, and material progress.

[588] Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois,* 57-58.

Conclusion: Cooperative Democracy Today

Today, when our political alternatives are often presented as a choice between liberalism and populism, the history we have explored should show us that there is another cooperative route, if we are willing to struggle for it. In fact, we can also describe contemporary political

divisions outside the liberalism/populism dichotomy, based on a cleavage between the forces intent to entrench old hierarchies, divisions, and privileges, and the persistent efforts to work out alternative models of economic self-organization that seek to utilize new technological capacities for egalitarian and ecological ends. In the midst of all of today's talk about populism, we have numerous examples of resurgent Populism, from the formation of a network of cooperative organizations in Jackson, Mississippi,[589] to green energy cooperatives that aspire to democratically control the electrical grid as part of a broader plan for decarbonization,[590] and electricity coops fighting telecommunications companies for the right to provide high-speed internet to rural areas that these companies have persistently ignored.[591]

As in the past, all of these experiments depend on cultivating local empowerment based in the democratic values of self-help, self-education, and social solidarity. While the history we have surveyed shows that local cooperation always reaches its limits, it also shows that these concrete experiences are an essential component of the politics of cooperation. Whether in Alliance meetings, socialist unions, or local group economies, experiences of mutual support that demonstrate the possibility of alternative models of social relation constitute an elementary building block of cooperative transformation. This is far from merely a tactical point, reflecting the fact that any social movement requires an active membership or it will wither. Instead, it reflects the imperative to practically synthesize experiences of personal autonomy and collective

[589] Kali Akuno & Ajamu Nangwaya, *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi* (Montreal: Daraja Press, 2017)
[590] Gar Alperovitz and Johanna Bozuwa, "Electric Companies Won't Go Green Unless the Public Takes Control," *In These Times*. http://inthesetimes.com/features/green-new-deal-solar-power-local-control.html (Accessed July 24, 2019).
[591] April Simpson, "State Laws Slow Down High-Speed Internet for Rural America," *Stateline*. https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2019/01/11/state-laws-slow-down-high-speed-internet-for-rural-america?utm_campaign=2019-01-14+SW+with+blurbs&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Pew (Accessed July 24, 2019)

empowerment, opening the possibility for participants to envision shared democratic progress. In these moments, non-instrumental solidarity can develop and become politicized.

In the past as today, one of the major limitations to cooperative localism is workers' lack of access to productive capital. This is an elementary aspect of capitalist domination that sanguine accounts of the symbiosis between capitalism and democracy tend to ignore: the majority of the people do not have access to the means of our livelihood without submitting to an employer vested with the power to exploit our labor. While shoemakers and iron workers in the Knights of Labor could try to resolve this problem by becoming their own capitalists in an independent cooperative during the late 19th century, the steel-workers and shipbuilders of the early 20th century could never purchase the necessary capital to repeat these experiments. Instead, some of them joined a socialist party that could seek to divest private owners of their illegitimate title to socially operated means of production, allowing for the possibility that workers could exercise self-government on the job. While there have been numerous attempts in political theory to envision workplace democracy without repeating the problems of 20th century socialist planning,[592] the basic problem identified by socialists remains: when ownership rights to socially operated capital are vested in private hands, the possibilities of democratic control of industry become, at best, limited to participation in decision-making without challenging the basic power that the prerogative to exploit labor vests in capitalists. If we make such a vision of 'industrial democracy' our ultimate horizon, we forego the possibility to envision what the struggle for a cooperative commonwealth could entail today. Falling short of undermining exploitation is significant because exploitation not a narrowly 'economic' issue that pertains to distribution alone; instead, it vests in owners a fundamental power to shape the labor process

[592] For one prominent example, See Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

according to the strictures of capital accumulation and profitability. Contemporary labor practices continue to show the galling lengths that private owners will go to ensure profitability at the expense of workers' control of their own labor. Amazon, for instance, owns a patent for robotic trolleys that would require employees to work inside cages in highly automated warehouses.[593] These technologies have not yet been implemented, and strong unionism and employee representation could fight them, but these institutions cannot alter private capitalists' fundamental imperative to accumulate capital by ratcheting down on labor discipline and replacing labor with machinery. This ensures not only that conflicts over workplace autonomy will continue to shape democratic societies, but also that the class power of capital will retain the upper hand. As earlier socialists knew well, the control over the surplus vested in the hands of capitalists not only constrains democracy at work, but limits the possibilities for democratic social development since we cannot utilize the surplus our labor creates democratically, embodied in public luxury and shared cultural progress.[594]

Even if one believes that this fundamental imbalance of power derived from exploitation is a problem for democracy, the failures of 20th century socialism remains an albatross around the neck of the international left, stultifying our collective potential to project a future beyond capitalism.[595] While insufficient in itself, experimental localism is one way to quell the narratives of failure and betrayal that often continue to define the left's political consciousness. Such a nexus of theory and experimental practice is also crucial if radical democratic theory will

[593] Matt Day and Benjamin Romano, "Amazon has patented a system that would put workers in a cage, on top of a robot," *The Seattle Times* September 7, 2018 (Accessed July 24, 2019) https://www.seattletimes.com/business/amazon/amazon-has-patented-a-system-that-would-put-workers-in-a-cage-on-top-of-a-robot/

[594] For a nice attempt to place control of the surplus as the definitive issue for socialism in a way that problematizes both capitalism and bureaucratic planning, see Richard Wolff, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 103-110.

[595] See Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

maintain a connection to popular movements, which always theorize as they work to push past the barriers to democratic progress. Today, there are signals of a new kind of cooperative movement, based less on the organizations of the mass party and mass union, but on practices of networked association and modular forms of production that utilize new information technology to share resources. As in the past, these attempts to forge cooperation try to square the autonomy of self-directed work with the free interdependence of associates. While the early 20th century socialist movement came to favor unions over cooperatives, today's activists tend to favor networking a plurality of organizational sites within common projects centered around the ideal of an alternative economy. Often, this plurality of organizational sites includes seeking to use the state at various levels, whether municipal or national. To take a representative example, the Symbiosis Research Collective argues that, "building networks of radically democratic, cooperative institutions can sustain our communities and our collective struggle in the near term, organize our base to win fights with the state and private sector, begin eroding public support for the current dysfunctional system, and, in time, become the dominant institutions of tomorrow's world."[596] As Symbiosis claims, "The community institutions proposed here are modular. They can stand alone as individual projects, fine-tuned to solve specific problems created by the current system's failures, but they are designed to be organized as a network. By working together and mutually reinforcing one another, these institutions can qualitatively change the power relations of a city or neighborhood, and lay the groundwork for new macro-structures of self-governance and civil society."[597] The fundamental question raised by these contemporary innovations is whether they are a re-iteration of voluntarist strategies destined to reach dead-ends

[596] John Michael Colón, Mason Herson-Hord, Katie S. Horvath, Dayton Martindale, & Matthew Porges, "Community, Democracy, and Mutual Aid: Toward Dual Power and Beyond," *The Next System Project*, 3. https://thenextsystem.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/Symbiosis_AtLargeFirst-corrected-2.pdf
[597] Ibid., 7.

by avoiding large-scale political action, or whether they can learn from limitations encountered in the past while discovering the new openings for cooperative agency in our evolving contexts.

As Kali Akuno of Cooperation Jackson argues, there is a paradoxical way that zones of capitalist disinvestment create opportunities for a new developmental models today. He claims that capitalism has always proceeded through a process of uneven development, not only in the global system, but within imperial metropoles. Areas like Mississippi have long been underdeveloped in the context of the national political economy, serving primarily as sites of resource extraction rather than loci of intensive capital accumulation. For Akuno, this disinvestment creates its own opportunities: "We harness this breathing room by exploiting the fact that there is minimal competition in the area to serve as a distraction or dilution of our focus, a tremendous degree of pent up social demand waiting to be fulfilled and a deep reservoir of unrealized human potential waiting to be tapped."[598] Rather than focus on agrarian wholesale cooperatives or consumers' societies, Cooperation Jackson aspires to build a network of cooperative organizations that seek to manage a healthy food supply for poor communities, control recycling and waste, and cooperatively develop new information technologies that reduce the cost of access to capital (like 3D print manufacturing), alongside political projects to resist gentrification and transform municipal government.[599] In many ways, their project is a continuation of Du Bois's group economy, now updated for an era of ecological anxiety and advanced technological capacity. As Akuno and his cooperators know well, becoming an island of socialism in a sea of capitalism can only bring limited success. That is why they seek to politicize their organizations, positioning cooperation as a protracted struggle within and against existing social and political institutions, and taking a leading role in general social fights (like

[598] Akuno, *Jackson Rising,* 11.
[599] Ibid., 15-16.

anti-gentrification), in ways that progressive unions can also do. By building organizational capacity and public standing, the group aspires lead an alternative development model for the city of Jackson that can network with other like-minded cities throughout the world, sharing their modular experiments with others and learning from an ecosystem of efforts at municipal self-determination from Caracas to Barcelona. In other words, the connection between local self-determination and internationalism that Du Bois dreamed of is now facilitated in ways that he could have never imagined.

One of the contemporary intellectuals who has done the most to articulate these trends is Paul Mason, one of Cooperation Jackson's many influences. Mason's perspective is useful to conclude because, even if it is not articulated as such, he formulates a new politics of cooperation for the early 21st century that reflects both the promise and limitations we have seen throughout this study. At a basic level, Mason is trying to comprehend how new experiences of cooperation can not only be forged today, but how these experiences can become inclusive principles for a new division of labor that requires political confrontation to develop. In his book *Post-Capitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (2015), Mason argues that new technology creates the conditions for an emergent commons based in free and abundant information. He writes that, "With infotech, large parts of the utopian socialist project become possible: from cooperatives, to communes, to outbreaks of liberated behavior that redefine human freedom."[600] He claims that economic development is no longer driven by the mass capital infrastructure of the late 19th and early 20th century and the wage-labor necessary to operate it, but by the value-added of information technology and a reduced need for labor. At the same time, since information is a non-rival good – my using it does not prevent you from using it – a society that develops through

[600] Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 29-30 [EPUB].

innovations in machine learning and automated production will struggle to domesticate these innovations through the institution of private property. For Mason, this means that, "The main contradiction today is between the possibility of free, abundant goods and information and a system of monopolies, banks and governments trying to keep things private, scarce and commercial."[601] In other words, our society is riven by a contradiction between network and hierarchy, with the former representing the forces of innovation and progress and the latter (Mason hopes) are destined to become a historical relic alongside the privileges of the feudal nobility. In his view, engaging in this conflict requires embedding political parties and unions within the network, and it does not require the old socialist belief that social cooperation is only possible after the political victory of workers over capitalists. As he writes further, "The socialists of the early twentieth century were absolutely convinced that nothing preliminary was possible within the old system … The most courageous thing an adaptive left could do is to abandon that conviction. It is entirely possible to build the elements of the new system molecularly within the old. In the cooperatives, the credit unions, the peer-networks, the unmanaged enterprises and the parallel, subcultural economies, these elements already exist."[602]

What makes these experiments more feasible today is that Mason believes that new forms of information technology can not only reduce the need for work, but can redefine the work we need to do along the lines of non-hierarchical networked cooperation, what he calls a "third managerial revolution."[603] For Mason, cooperative self-management would not be based on an external authorities commanding the labor of others, but on "modular, target-driven work, with

[601] Ibid., 26.
[602] Ibid., 475. As we saw in Chapter 2, this is an overstatement, but socialists of the Second International did generally cease to believe that a parallel economy was possible without disrupting the class power of capitalists in both the economy and state.
[603] Ibid., 554.

employees enjoying a high degree of autonomy" as they participate in making and re-making the firm's practices by cooperatively solving problems.[604] In his view, such a form of management is already emerging in innovative sectors as a technically superior alternative to top-down control, since it is more adept at pooling resources to innovate and resolve issues: "the best human process for dealing with volatile outcomes is teamwork – which used to be called 'cooperation' … cooperative, self-managed, non-hierarchical teams are the most technologically advanced form of work."[605]

Moreover, Mason believes that while earlier cooperatives struggled to get a foothold in the capitalist market, the cheapening of technology and automation of labor made possible by abundant information can allow a cooperative ecosystem outside the market. Today, Mason thinks that we can actively encourage the development of cooperative, non-market production through initial investment secured through democratic politics.[606] Since innovation and progress are on the side of collaborative production and free and abundant information, the most dynamic sectors of the economy should be given explicit formulation along cooperative lines. He claims that, "What we need are co-ops where the legal form is backed up by a real, collaborative form of production or consumption, with clear social outcomes."[607] Like Symbiosis, Mason sees the traditional ecosystem of the left – party, union, state – as modular elements of a network, and sees no fundamental conflict between them. In this way, he imagines that a kind of radical, adaptive social democratic politics could facilitate the emergence of an alternative on multiple levels: through creatively using Open Source software to bypass the rationality of existing

[604] Ibid., 554.
[605] Ibid., 553.
[606] In this sense, Mason repeats a refrain in the history of the politics of cooperation, going all the way back to Louis Blanc: state aid for cooperatives.
[607] Ibid., 533-534.

practices of managerial control, subsidizing cooperatives through municipal grants, and developing lifestyle transformations catalyzed by an interconnected world of shared knowledge. This is why, in Mason's view, the agent of post-capitalist struggle will not be the old working class, but what he calls "networked humanity."[608] As he states, it was not trade unions and a left party, but "networked individuals who have camped in the city squares, blockaded the fracking site, performed punk rock on the roofs of Russian cathedrals, raised defiant cans of beer in the face of Islamism on the grass of Gezi Park, pulled a million people on to the streets of Rio and São Paolo, and now organized mass strikes across Southern China."[609]

Mason's arguments are clearly intended to kindle optimism, but they would benefit from a clearer-eyed assessment of the difficulties faced by cooperative movements in the past. The first issue that his book raises for a study of the politics of cooperation has to do with forming inclusive and durable organizational sites of cooperation. Cooperation Jackson's aspiration to develop cooperatives around low capital-intensity automated production could offer an opportunity for organizational growth, but it cannot itself provide an alternative for the majority of Jackson's working class. As we saw in the move from Populism to Socialism, in many ways unions are a more inclusive site of cooperative agency than independent cooperatives, since they reach workers in the role that capitalist society inevitably designs for the majority of them: sellers of labor-power. On this issue, Jackson's effort to link cooperatives and trade unions is promising, and on this front, modularity and network organization do exhibit real strengths by balancing functional autonomy and interconnection in ways that seemed unwieldy in the past.

Again on the theme of inclusivity, Mason's image of "the networked individual" needs to explain how this personality type connects to the asymmetrical forms of social power available

[608] Ibid., 417.
[609] Ibid., 417-418.

to different groups within networks. Mason clearly has in mind a character type broader than the metropolitan middle classes who are often associated with a 'networked lifestyle,' emphasizing the possibilities that new technologies open for all. He notes, for instance, how migrant workers have re-made internet cafes into zones of workers' autonomy, which we might see as akin to the bar-rooms and public parks that defined earlier phases of working class activism.[610] Even so, "the networked individual" lacks the sociological specificity of a category like "working class," creating an imperative to clarify how such a political subject really reflects a diverse strata of agents, on whom the perils and possibilities of social developments like automation fall very differently. It is not enough for figures like Mason to simply acknowledge these differences, or claim that the difficulties they raise can be ameliorated by policies like basic income; they need to be an element of the very categories we use to describe social agents as potential cooperators.

Again on the issue of automation, Mason should also clarify more explicitly than he does what differentiates his use of the term "cooperation" from attempts by capitalists to rationalize their model of networked production as a superior or necessary form of cooperation. As we saw with Taylorism, scientific managers understood their time and motion studies as the building blocks of a form of cooperation that bridged the conflict between capital and labor, making efficiency and profitability the standard of productive activity in the interests of the consuming public. Modular production and networked association might have an emancipatory dimension, but they are not inherently emancipatory, in the same way that mass industrial production could promise alleviation for labor by producing cheaper goods more efficiently but also carried new forms of de-skilling and discipline. Whether new information technologies produce an emergent commons or caged Amazon workers surveilled as they perform modular tasks depends

[610] Ibid., 415.

fundamentally not on technology, but on power. Workers need to exercise this power through self-organization and politics, but they also need to clearly formulate an alternative to the vision of social organization rationalized by their adversaries. This requires more than invoking "cooperation" as a generic ideal of equality and social harmony, but elaborating its political, polemical meaning. In so doing, we need to stress the non-instrumental, normative core of what I've been calling the cooperative idea: that all of our contributions create our shared progress, and that each of us has an elementary right to benefit equally from the abundance we create.

Finally, if we do not account for how the diffuse agency of the network can cohere into a self-aware movement capable of enduring struggles with powerful forces, the possibility of synthesizing personal and collective autonomy in new forms of networked association will remain unfulfilled. In Mason's account, the ideal of networked association remains too diffuse; not only is its polemical character left vague, but the phenomenological nature of networked interdependence and its relationship to the solidarities of direct organizing and mass action that have defined the left is unclear. To take one representative example, Mason's attachment to the network as a model of cooperation goes too far when he dismisses the idea that capitalism will be overcome by what he calls "forced-march techniques," drawing a sharp contrast between determined mass action and the emergence of the embryo of a new order within the shell of the old.[611] Institutions like parties and unions that defined earlier cycles of left politics cannot be subsumed within the network to the point that their mass, democratic character becomes erased. As we saw in the case of the Socialists, the party does not only serve as a hub of information and coordination, but also helps instill an integrated ethic to democrats who understand themselves as the active bearers of a better society. These efforts to constitute a mobilized, self-determining

[611] Ibid., 17.

popular force, institutionalized in a coherent organization, whose open ended goal was the furtherance of their own shared autonomy remains an enduring lesson of the history we have examined. However different today's capitalism might be, the mass institutions of party and union have not lost their centrality for anti-capitalist struggle, even if their role can be conceived more dynamically than it was in the early 20th century. Renegotiating the terms of social interdependence does not only require new forms of voluntary cooperation, but requires mobilizing the people's power to alter the course of social development, a process that is inherently conflictual and requires durable and coherent self-organization.

As we saw throughout this study, cooperation is not a natural facet of sociality simply waiting to be liberated, but an active project that requires deliberate, self-aware political struggle to achieve. We cannot know whether a renewed cooperative struggle will succeed, and we cannot predict in the form of a blueprint what form a cooperative commonwealth would take. What makes the struggle worth engaging is that the ideal of cooperation appeals directly to our aspirations to merge our own self-determining agency with that of our companions, expressing democracy's normative core: a society of freely self-governing citizens. Having robust democratic expectations that transcend the deadening realities of working to get by in the empire is a necessary component of any democratic politics. When these expectations can be practically connected to new possibilities of social organization, we can begin to see the artifice that surrounds us – the might that masks as right – and recover our elementary constituent capacities to re-create our world anew.

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