

Free Soil,
Free Labor,
Free Men:

THE IDEOLOGY OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY
BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

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With a New Introductory Essay

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of the political system. These central ideas will provide the initial focus for this study of Republican ideology. The study will then examine the distinctive ideological contributions of each of the elements which made up the Republican party—radicals, former Democrats, and moderate and conservative Whigs. The attitudes and opinions of these groups on specific issues will be analyzed, but always with a view to discovering their basic values and assumptions. Finally, the Republican response to the competing ideology of nativism will be discussed, as well as their attitude toward race, an issue which illuminated many of the virtues and shortcomings of the Republican world view.

Like all ideologies, the Republicans' was more than merely the sum of its component parts: it must be understood as a total Gestalt, whose elements blended into and reinforced one another. Indeed, the key to its widespread acceptance was its multifaceted nature. A profoundly successful fusion of value and interest, the ideology could appeal in different ways to various groups within the party, and it gave northerners of divergent social and political backgrounds a basis for collective action. It provided the moral consensus which allowed the North, for the first time in history, to mobilize an entire society in modern warfare.

I

Free Labor:

THE REPUBLICANS AND NORTHERN SOCIETY

On May 26, 1860, one of the Republican party's leading orators, Carl Schurz of Wisconsin, addressed a Milwaukee audience which had gathered to endorse the nomination of Abraham Lincoln. "The Republicans," Schurz declared, "stand before the country, not only as the anti-slavery party, but emphatically as the party of free labor." Two weeks later, Richard Yates, the gubernatorial candidate in Illinois, spoke at a similar rally in Springfield. "The great idea and basis of the Republican party, as I understand it," he proclaimed, "is free labor. . . . To make labor honorable is the object and aim of the Republican party."¹ Such statements, which were reiterated countless times by Republican orators in the 1850's, were more than mere election-year appeals for the votes of laboring men. For the concept of "free labor" lay at the heart of the Republican ideology, and expressed a coherent social outlook, a model of the good society. Political anti-slavery was not merely a negative doctrine, an attack on southern slavery and the society built upon it; it was an affirmation of the superiority of the social system of the North—a dynamic, expanding capitalist society, whose achievements and destiny were almost wholly the result of the dignity and opportunities which it offered the average laboring-man.

The dignity of labor was a constant theme of ante-bellum northern culture and politics. Tocqueville noted that in America, "not only work itself, but work specifically to gain money," was considered honorable, and twenty years later, the New York editor Horace Greeley took note

1. Carl Schurz, *Speeches of Carl Schurz* (Philadelphia, 1865), 108; *Speech of Hon. Richard Yates, Delivered at the Republican Ratification Meeting . . .* (Springfield, 1860), 6.

pursuit of wealth thus became a way of serving God on earth, and labor, which had been imposed on fallen man as a curse, was transmuted into a religious value, a Christian duty. And the moral qualities which would ensure success in one's calling—honesty, frugality, diligence, punctuality, and sobriety—became religious obligations. Weber described the Protestant outlook on life as "worldly asceticism," since idleness, waste of time, and conspicuous display or expenditure for personal enjoyment were incompatible with its basic values.⁴

There was more to the Republican idea of free labor, however, than the essentials of the Protestant ethic, to which, presumably, the South had also been exposed, for the relation of that ethic to the idea of social mobility was highly ambiguous. On the one hand, the drive to work zealously in one's calling, the capital accumulation which resulted from frugality, and the stress on economic success as a sign of divine approval, all implied that men would work for an achievement of wealth and advancement in their chosen professions. But if one's calling were divinely ordained, the implication might be that a man should be content with the same occupation for his entire life, although he should strive to grow rich in it. In a static economy, therefore, the concept of "a calling" may be associated with the idea of an hierarchical social order, with more or less fixed classes. But Republicans rejected this image of society. Their outlook was grounded in the Protestant ethic, but in its emphasis on social mobility and economic growth, it reflected an adaptation of that ethic to the dynamic, expansive, capitalist society of the ante-bellum North.

Contemporaries and historians agree that the average American of the ante-bellum years was driven by an inordinate desire to improve his condition in life, and by boundless confidence that he could do so. Economic success was the standard by which men judged their social importance, and many observers were struck by the concentration on work, with the aim of material advancement, which characterized Americans. Tocqueville made the following observation during Jackson's presidency: "The first thing that strikes one in the United States is the innumerable crowd of those striving to escape from their original

4. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958 ed.), *passim*. Cf. Christopher Hill, "Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism," in Frederick J. Fisher, ed., *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1961), 15-39; Stuart Bruchey, *The Roots of American Economic Growth 1607-1861* (New York, 1965), 42-43, 197.

of "the usual Fourth-of-July declamation in behalf of the dignity of labor, the nobleness of labor." It was a common idea in both economic treatises and political pronouncements that labor was the source of all value.² Lincoln declared in 1859 that "Labor is prior to, and independent of capital . . . in fact, capital is the fruit of labor," and the *New York Tribune* observed that "nothing is more common" than this "style of assertion." Republican orators insisted that labor could take the credit for the North's rapid economic development. Said William Evarts in 1856, "Labor, gentlemen, we of the free States acknowledge to be the source of all our wealth, of all our progress, of all our dignity and value." In a party which saw divisions on political and economic matters between radicals and conservatives, between former Whigs and former Democrats, the glorification of labor provided a much-needed theme of unity. Representatives of all these segments included paucans to free labor in their speeches; even the crusty old conservative Tom Corwin delivered "a eulogy on labor and laboring men" in an 1858 speech.³

Belief in the dignity of labor was not, of course, confined to the Republican party or to the ante-bellum years; it has been part of American culture from the very beginning. In large part, it can be traced to the fact that most Americans came from a Protestant background, in which the nobility of labor was an article of faith. One does not need to accept in its entirety Max Weber's association of the "Protestant ethic" with the rise of capitalism in Europe to believe that there is much validity in Weber's insight that the concept of "calling" provided the psychological underpinning for capitalist values. Weber pointed out that in Calvinist theology each man had an occupation or calling to which he was divinely appointed. To achieve success in this calling would serve the glory of God, and also provide visible evidence that an individual was among the few predestined to enter heaven. The

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York, 1966), 552; Horace Greeley, *The Crystal Palace and Its Lessons* (New York, 1852), 28; David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality* (New York, 1967), 253; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945), 314; H. C. Carey, *Principles of Political Economy* (3 vols.: Philadelphia, 1837-40), I, 19; Amasa Walker, *The Nature and Uses of Money and Mixed Currency* (Boston, 1857), 5; *Ohio State Journal*, June 18, 1859; Chicago Press and Tribune, August 24, 1859. 3. Roy F. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (9 vols.: New Brunswick, 1953-55), III, 478; *New York Tribune*, November 11, 1857; Sherman Evarts, ed., *Arguments and Speeches of William Maxwell Evarts* (3 vols.: New York, 1919), II, 449; *Cincinnati Gazette*, September 2, 1858.

energetic and enterprising class of men, who are desirous of accumulating property rapidly."⁸

The Republican idea of free labor was a product of this expanding, enterprising, competitive society. It is important to recognize that in ante-bellum America, the word "labor" had a meaning far broader than its modern one. Andrew Jackson, for example, defined as "the producing classes" all those whose work was directly involved in the production of goods—farmers, planters, laborers, mechanics, and small businessmen. Only those who profited from the work of others, or whose occupations were largely financial or promotional, such as speculators, bankers, and lawyers, were excluded from this definition. Daniel Webster took a similarly all-embracing view. In his famous speech of March 7, 1850, Webster asked, "Why, who are the laboring people of the North? They are the whole North. They are the people who till their own farms with their own hands; freeholders, educated men, independent men."⁹ And the Republican definition, as it emerged in the 1850's, proved equally broad. Some Republicans did exclude commercial enterprise from their idea of labor—the Springfield *Republican*, for example, suggested that three-quarters of the traders in the country should go into some field of "productive labor." In general, however, Republicans would agree with Horace Greeley that labor included "useful doing in any capacity or vocation." They thus drew no distinction between a "laboring class" and what we could call the middle class. With Webster, they considered the farmer, the small businessman, and the independent craftsmen, all as "laborers."¹⁰

If the Republicans saw "labor" as substantially different from the modern-day notion of the "working class," it was partly because the line between capitalist and worker was to a large extent blurred in the ante-bellum northern economy, which centered on the independent farm and small shop. Moreover, for the Republicans, social mobility

8. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 528; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955), 23-24, 38-43; New York *Tribune*, February 28, 1857; George N. Fuller, ed., *Messengers of the Governors of Michigan* (4 vols.: Lansing, 1925-27), II, 315.

9. Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*, 21; Irwin Unger, *The Greenback Era* (Princeton, 1964), 30-31; *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster* (18 vols.: Boston, 1903), X, 92. Cf. Joseph L. Blau, ed., *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy* (New York, 1947), 203; Bruchey, *Roots of American Economic Growth*, 207.

10. Springfield *Republican*, January 16, 1858; Horace Greeley, *Hints Towards Reforms* (New York, 1850), 9. Cf. Bernard Mandel, *Labor: Free and Slave* (New York, 1955), 13.

social condition." On the eve of the Civil War, the Cincinnati *Gazette* reported that things had not changed. "Of all the multitude of young men engaged in various employments of this city," it declared, "there is probably not one who does not desire, and even confidently expect, to become rich, and that at an early day."⁵ The universal desire for social advancement gave American life an aspect of almost frenetic motion and activity, as men moved from place to place, and occupation to occupation in search of wealth. Even ministers, reported the Cincinnati *Gazette*, "resign the most interesting fields of labor to get higher salaries." The competitive character of northern society was aptly summed up by Lincoln, when he spoke of the "race of life" in the 1850's.⁶

The foremost example of the quest for a better life was the steady stream of settlers who abandoned eastern homes to seek their fortunes in the West. The westward movement reached new heights in the mid-1850's, and it was not primarily the poor who migrated westward, but middle class "business-like farmers," who sold their farms to migrate, or who left the eastern farms of their fathers. "These emigrants," said a leading Republican newspaper of Ohio, "are not needy adventurers, fleeing from the pinchings of penury. They are substantial farmers." Those without means who came to the West were interested in obtaining their own farms as quickly as possible, because to the American of the nineteenth century land was not the bucolic ideal of the pre-capitalist world, but another means for economic advancement. Tocqueville noted that the small farmer of the West was really a landed businessman, an entrepreneur who was prepared to sell his farm and move on, if he could get a good price. What Horace Greeley called "the nomadic tendency" of Americans contributed to the rapid expansion of the western frontier. "The men who are building up the villages of last year's origin on the incipient Railroads of Iowa," said the New York editor, "were last year doing the like in Illinois, and three years since in Ohio." The acquisitive instincts of western settlers were described by Kinsley Bingham, the first Republican governor of Michigan: "Like most new States, ours has been settled by an active,

5. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 803; Cincinnati *Gazette*, June 11, 1860.

6. Marvin Fisher, *Workshops in the Wilderness* (New York, 1967), 65-67; Cincinnati *Gazette*, November 20, 1857; Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, IV, 240, 438. Cf. Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (New York, 1960 ed.), 123.

7. Joseph Schafer, "The Yankee and the Teuton in Wisconsin," *WisMh*, VI (1922-23), 135; *Ohio State Journal*, April 6, 1854.

was an essential part of northern society. The ante-bellum Republicans praised the virtues of the enterprising life, and viewed social mobility as the glory of northern society. "Our paupers to-day, thanks to free labor, are our yeomen and merchants of tomorrow," said the *New York Times*. Lincoln asserted in 1859 that "advancement, improvement in condition—is the order of things in a society of equals," and he denounced southern insinuations that northern wage earners were in condition—insinuations that northern wage earners were "fatally fixed in that condition for life." The opportunity for social advancement, in the Republican view, was what set Americans apart from their European forebears. As one Iowa Republican put it:¹¹

What is it that makes the great mass of American citizens so much more enterprising and intelligent than the laboring classes in Europe? It is the stimulant held out to them by the character of our institutions. The door is thrown open to all, and even the poorest and humblest in the land, may, by industry and application, attain a position which will entitle him to the respect and confidence of his fellow-men.

Many Republican leaders bore witness in their own careers to how far men could rise from humble beginnings. Lincoln's own experience, of course, was the classic example, and during the 1860 campaign Republican orators repeatedly referred to him as "the child of labor," who had proved how "honest industry and toil" were rewarded in the North.¹² Other Republican leaders like the former indentured servant Henry Wilson, the "bobbin boy" Nathaniel P. Banks, and the ex-laborer Hannibal Hamlin also made much of their modest beginnings in campaign speeches.¹³

In the free labor outlook, the objective of social mobility was not great wealth, but the middle-class goal of economic independence. For Republicans, "free labor" meant labor with economic choices, with the

11. *New York Times*, November 18, 1857; Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, III, 462, 478; *The Debates of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Iowa* (2 vols.: Davenport, 1857), I, 193. Cf. *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 1 Session, 1025; *New York Tribune*, October 25, 1856; *Cleveland Leader*, April 21, 1855; John G. Palfrey, *Papers on the Slave Power* (Boston, 1848), 53.

12. Schurz, *Speeches*, 113; *Chicago Press and Tribune*, August 1, 1860; William M. French, ed., *Life, Speeches, State Papers, and Public Services of Gov. Oliver P. Morton* (Cincinnati, 1866), 117; *Speech of Hon. Richard Yates*, 11; Charles E. Hamlin, *The Life and Times of Hannibal Hamlin* (Cambridge, 1899), 356-57.

13. Thomas Russell and Elias Nason, *The Life and Public Services of Hon. Henry Wilson* (Boston, 1872), 17; Fred Harvey Harrington, *Fighting Politician, Major General N. P. Banks* (Philadelphia, 1948), 1-3; *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 1 Session, 1006; James A. Hawley, *Edwin D. Morgan 1811-1883: Merchant in Politics* (New York, 1955), 80.

opportunity to quit the wage-earning class. A man who remained all his life dependent on wages for his livelihood appeared almost as unfree as the southern slave.¹⁴ There was nothing wrong, of course, with working for wages for a time, if the aim were to acquire enough money to start one's own farm or business. Zachariah Chandler described in the Senate the cycle of labor which he felt characterized northern society: "A young man goes out to service—to labor, if you please to call it so—for compensation until he acquires money enough to buy a farm . . . and soon he becomes himself the employer of labor." Similarly, a correspondent of the *New York Tribune* wrote in 1854, "Do you say to me, hire some of the thousands and thousands of emigrants coming to the West. Sir, I cannot do it. They come West to labor for themselves, not for me; and instead of laboring for others, they want others to labor for them." The aspirations of the free labor ideology were thus thoroughly middle-class, for the successful laborer was one who achieved self-employment, and owned his own capital—a business, farm, or shop.¹⁵

The key figure in the Republicans' social outlook was thus the small independent entrepreneur. "Under every form of government having the benefits of civilization," said Congressman Timothy Jenkins of New York, "there is a middle class, neither rich nor poor, in which is concentrated the chief enterprise of the country." Charles Francis Adams agreed that the "middling class . . . equally far removed from the temptations of great wealth and of extreme destitution," provided the surest defense of democratic principles. In a nation as heavily agricultural as the ante-bellum United States, it is not surprising that the yeoman received the greatest praise. "The middling classes who own the soil, and work it with their own hands," declared Thaddeus Stevens, "are the main support of every free government."¹⁶ But the exponents of the development of manufactures also looked to the small capitalist, not the very wealthy, as the agents of economic progress. "The manufacturing industry of this country," said Representative

14. Arnold W. Green, *Henry Charles Carey, Nineteenth Century Sociologist* (Philadelphia, 1951), 118-19; Greeley, *Hints*, 354; *The Address of the Southern and Western Liberty Convention to the People of the United States; the Proceedings and Resolutions of the Convention . . .* (Cincinnati, 1845), 21.

15. *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 1 Session, 1093; *New York Tribune*, November 29, 1854. Cf. *Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette*, September 27, 1856.

16. *Congressional Globe*, 30 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 103; Boston *Advertiser*, clipping, Charles Francis Adams Diary, November 2, 1860, Adams Papers, MHS; *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 142.

adding to the holdings of the rich. The primary aim of the Jacksonians was not to redistribute the property of the rich, but to open the avenues of social advancement to all laborers. Several historians have pointed out that, despite their disagreements over such matters of economic policy as tariffs and banks, Democrats and Whigs did not differ on such basic assumptions as the value of economic individualism, the rights of property, and other capitalist virtues. Nor should Jacksonian rhetoric be confused with a lack of enthusiasm for the economic development which most northerners saw as an essential part of social progress. Democrats insisted that their economic policies of free trade and destruction of economic privilege would allow free play to natural economic forces, and actually speed up economic advancement.²⁰ Salmon P. Chase, for example, condemned the government's aid to the Collins Steamship Line in the 1850's, by arguing that if a real economic necessity existed, steam lines would be established by private enterprise, whether the government subsidized them or not. Similarly, Democratic free-traders like William Cullen Bryant argued that competition with foreign producers would stimulate the growth and progress of American firms, while protection would only encourage sluggishness. Democrats who entered the Republican party in the 1850's thus shared the Whig commitment to the nation's economic growth, even while they differed on the specific economic policies that would facilitate it.²¹

Most Republicans, of course, were former Whigs, and they accepted the economic outlook, expressed by Carey and propagated in the pages of the *New York Tribune*, that there existed no real conflict between the interests of different social classes. Since all classes would benefit from economic expansion, this argument went, all had a stake in the national prosperity. "The interests of the capitalist and the laborer," Carey wrote, "are . . . in perfect harmony with each other, as each derives advantage from every measure that tends to facilitate the growth of capital." During the 1850's, Carey served as a consultant

20. W. R. Brock, *An American Crisis* (London, 1963), 240-41; Joel H. Silbey, *The Shrine of Party* (Pittsburgh, 1967), 27; Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1948), viii, 62; Douglas T. Miller, *Jacksonian Aristocracy* (New York 1967), 36-39.

21. *Congressional Globe*, 33 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 303-4; New York *Evening Post*, February 10, 1859. Cf. George Opydyke, *A Treatise on Political Economy* (New York, 1851), 259; William A. Williams, *The Contours of American History* (London, 1961 ed.), 248.

Samuel Blair of Pennsylvania, "must look to men of moderate means for its development—the men of enterprise being, as a class, in such circumstances." In their glorification of the middle class and of economic independence, the Republicans were accurately reflecting the aspirations of northern society. As Carl Schurz later recalled of his first impressions of the United States, "I saw what I might call the middle-class culture in process of formation."¹⁷

II

The Republicans' glorification of northern labor might have led them to a radical political appeal, in which the rights of workingmen were defended against the prerogatives of the rich and propertied. And there was a substantial body of Republicans—the former Democrats—who came from a political tradition which viewed the interests of capitalists and laborers as being in earnest conflict. As Marvin Meyers points out, the political rhetoric of Jacksonian Democrats involved a series of sharp social antagonisms. They insisted that there existed real class differences between rich and poor, capital and labor, and consciously strove to give their party an anti-wealth persuasion.¹⁸ Democrats traditionally opposed measures like the protective tariff, which they viewed as government aid to the capitalist class, and paper money, which they claimed, robbed the laborer of a portion of his wages by depreciating in value.¹⁹

Behind the radical rhetoric of the Jacksonians, however, lay a basically middle-class perception of the social order. They believed that the social opportunity inherent in northern society would enable most laborers to achieve ownership of capital, and they were also convinced that the growth of the northern economy would lead to an increasing equalization in the distribution of wealth, rather than merely

17. *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 410; Carl Schurz, *Reminiscences of Carl Schurz* (3 vols.: New York, 1907-08), II, 158. Cf. H. C. Carey, *The Past, The Present, and the Future* (Philadelphia 1872 ed.), 323; Philadelphia *North American and United States Gazette*, August 26, 1856.

18. Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*, 10. Cf. Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 168, 308-8; Blau, ed., *Social Theories*, 199-207; Charles T. Congdon, *Reminiscences of a Journalist* (Boston, 1880), 61; William Trimble, "Diverging Tendencies in New York Democracy in the Period of the Locofocos," *AHR*, XXIV (April 1919), 406. 19. *Congressional Globe*, 29 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 767-71; Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 115-31; Martin Van Buren to Samuel Medary, February, 1846 (draft), Martin Van Buren Papers, LC.

to Greeley on economic matters, and the *Tribune*—the North's "sec-
tional oracle"—reflected his views.²² Other Republican papers, like
the *Springfield Republican*, also stressed the "perfect and equal mutual
dependence" which existed between capital and labor. Republicans
consistently deplored attempts of labor spokesmen to arouse hostility
against the capitalist class. "We are not of the number of those who
would array one class of society in hostility to another," the *Cincinnati
Gazette* announced during the social dislocations caused by the Panic
of 1857. Greeley agreed that "Jacobin ravings in the Park or elsewhere,
against the Rich, or the Banks," could in no way alleviate "the distress
of the poor." The conservatism implicit in the harmony of interests
outlook was reflected in Lincoln's remarks to a delegation of working-
men during the Civil War. Condemning those who advocated a "war
on property, or the owners of property," the President insisted that as
the fruit of labor, property was desirable; it was "a positive good in the
world." That some had wealth merely demonstrated that others could
achieve wealth, and the prospect encouraged individual enterprise.
"Let not him who is houseless," Lincoln told the workmen, "pull
down the house of another; but let him labor diligently and build one
for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from
violence when built." In other words, the interests of labor and capital
were identical, because equality of opportunity in American society
generated a social mobility which assured that today's laborer would
be tomorrow's capitalist.²³

The most striking example of the Whig-Republican doctrine of the
harmony of interests was the idea, developed in the 1840's and ex-
panded in the next decade, that the protective tariff was designed
primarily to advance the interests of labor. Led by Greeley and
Webster, Whig spokesmen developed the argument that the tariff was
really intended to protect American workmen against the competi-
tion of cheap foreign labor. Unless the tariff was used to increase the
prices of foreign manufactures before they entered the American mar-
ket, according to this argument, the only way for American business-

22. Carey, *Political Economy*, I, 339; A. D. H. Kaplan, *Henry Charles Carey*
(Baltimore, 1931), 47-52; Clyndon C. Van Deusen, *Horace Greeley, Nineteenth
Century Crusader* (Philadelphia, 1953), 83; *New York Tribune*, August 28, 1851,
January 17, 1855; Jeter A. Isely, *Horace Greeley and the Republican Party 1853-
1861* (Princeton, 1947).

23. *Springfield Republican*, July 15, 1857; *Cincinnati Gazette*, November 2, 1857;
New York Tribune, January 6, 1855; Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, VII, 259-60.

men to compete would be to depress their wage payments to the low
European levels.²⁴ Republican spokesmen for protection almost uni-
formly made this their major argument in the pre-war decade. "Mr.
Chairman," declared a Pennsylvania Congressman as he opened a
tariff speech in 1860, "I rise to advocate the rights of labor." Re-
publicans also argued that the development of American industry,
fostered by protection, would aid all sectors of the economy, by pro-
viding an expanding market for farm produce. Greeley insisted that a
country without a home market for agriculture "can rarely boast a
substantial, intelligent and virtuous yeomanry. . . . It may have
wealthy Capitalists and Merchants, but never a numerous Middle
Class."²⁵

In spite of their faith in the harmony of interests and their com-
mitment to economic progress and social mobility, there was a certain
suspicion of wealth within the Republican party. To some extent this
was a natural reaction on the part of those who witnessed the re-
luctance of what Greeley called the "wealthy, timid, and mercantile
classes" to support anti-slavery. It was well known that in the major
cities of the East the wealthiest citizens placed the preservation of
the Union (and of their markets and business connections in the
South) above agitation of the slavery question. In Massachusetts,
Conscience Whig leaders like Sumner, Wilson, and others had long
condemned the political alliance between "the lords of the loom and
the lords of the lash"—the cotton manufacturers and merchants of
Massachusetts and the southern planters. Even the sedate *Springfield
Republican* complained that "property . . . has frequently stood in
the way of very necessary reforms, and has thus brought itself into
contempt."²⁶ Like their Boston counterparts, New York merchants
were notorious for their close economic, political, and personal ties
with the South. "Our greatest obstacle," one Republican wrote William

24. F. W. Taussig, *The Tariff History of the United States* (7th ed., New York,
1923), 63-67; George B. Mangold, *The Labor Argument in the American Pro-
tective Tariff Discussion* (Madison, 1906), 90-95; John R. Commons, "Horace
Greeley and the Working Class Origins of the Republican Party," *PSQ*, XXIV
(September 1909), 473-74, 487.

25. *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 1844; Greeley, *Hints*, 252-53.
26. Isely, *Greeley*, 265; *The Works of Charles Sumner* (10 vols.: Boston, 1870-
83), II, 81; Mary Peabody Mann, *Life of Horace Mann* (Washington, 1937), 326;
Springfield Republican, December 19, 1857. Cf. Charles Sumner to Salmon P.
Chase, November 16, 1848, Salmon P. Chase Papers, LC; Charles Francis Adams
Diary, October 4, 1848, Adams Papers.

Seward in 1856, "is the respectable fashionable well to do class," and the *New York Tribune* spoke of the "plain tendency to a union between the slave capitalists of the South and the moneyed capitalists of the North." During the 1856 campaign, Republicans throughout the North found themselves in difficulty when the wealthiest businessmen refused to contribute money to the party's coffers.²⁷

But Republican attacks on "the money capitalists" had deeper roots than political antagonisms. Many Republicans, of both Democratic and Whig antecedents, were deeply suspicious of corporations and of economic concentration. Israel Washburn, a leading Maine Republican, expressed a common fear when he warned of the danger "that the money-power will be too much centralized—that the lands and property of the country, in the course of time may come to be held or controlled by a comparatively small number of people." To some Republicans the growth of corporations was a harbinger of just such a development. Amasa Walker, the Massachusetts economist who left the Democratic party to join the Free Soilers and Republicans, insisted at the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1853 that "this system of corporations is nothing more nor less than a moneyed feudalism. . . . It concentrates masses of wealth, it places immense power in a few hands. . . ." Walker's objections to corporations reflected the traditional economic anxieties of the small farmer and independent artisan:

Corporations change the relation of man to wealth. When a man has his property in his own hands, and manages it himself, he is responsible for the manner in which he does it. . . . But when the management of property is put into the hands of corporations, the many delegate the power of managing it to the few. . . . It aggregates power, of course, and necessarily all the property of the Commonwealth, included in these corporations, must be put into the hands of a few men. . . . Hence, the agent of a factory, or a corporation of any kind, has absolute control over all persons connected with that corporation.

At the same convention, the Whig William Schouler, who was soon to become a leading Republican editor, indicated that he felt corporations were merely devices enabling businessmen to escape responsibilities

27. Philip S. Foner, *Business and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1941), *passim*; George E. Baker to Seward, December 20, 1856, Seward Papers; *New York Tribune*, December 28, 1859; James A. Rawley, "Financing the Frémont Campaign," *PamHB*, LXXV (January 1951), 25-35.

bility for paying their debts.²⁸ The Republicans' distrust of corporations typified the ante-bellum American outlook. In an economy in which most mills and factories were still owned by individuals or by unchartered joint-stock companies or partnerships, the corporate form was generally confined to enterprises like banks and transportation companies, which serviced the public at large. Indeed, most were quasi-public in nature.²⁹

III

"The middle class," wrote the Catholic social critic Orestes Brownson, "is always a firm champion of equality when it concerns humbling a class above it, but it is its inveterate foe when it concerns elevating a class below it." Brownson's statement can be taken as a critique of the free labor ideology. For while it is true that the Republicans insisted on opening the opportunity for social advancement to all wage earners, it must be borne in mind that as true disciples of the Protestant ethic, they attributed an individual's success or failure in the North's "race of life" to his own abilities or shortcomings. Given the equality of opportunity which the Republicans believed existed in northern society, it followed that economic success was, as Horace Greeley argued, a reflection of the fact that a man had respected the injunctions to frugality, diligent work, and sobriety of the Protestant ethic.³⁰

In the North, one Republican declared in 1854, "every man holds his fortune in his own right arm; and his position in society, in life, is to be tested by his own individual character." This belief explains the fact that for all their glorification of labor, Republicans looked down upon those who labored for wages all their lives. "It is not the fault of the system," if a man did not rise above the position of wage earner, Lincoln explained, "but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune." Poverty, or even the failure to advance economically, were thus individual, not

28. I. W. [Israel Washburn], "Modern Civilization," *Universalist Quarterly*, XV (January 1858), 23-24; *Official Report of the Debates and Proceedings in the State Convention . . . to Revise and Amend the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (3 vols.; Boston, 1853), II, 58-62. Cf. *National Era*, February 8, 1849; *Cincinnati Gazette*, November 25, 1857.

29. G. Heberton Evans, *Business Incorporations in the United States 1800-1943* (New York, 1948), 10, 20-21; Louis Hartz, *Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776-1860* (Cambridge, 1948), 40, 57.

30. Williams, *Contours*, 274; Greeley, *Hints*, 16.

social failures, the consequence of poor personal habits—laziness, extravagance, and the like. Greeley believed that “chance or luck,” had “little to do with men’s prosperous or adverse fortunes,” and he complained that too many men blamed banks, tariffs, and hard times for their personal failures, while in reality the fault was “their own extravagance and needless ostentation.” The *Springfield Republican* summed up this outlook when it declared in 1858 that there could be “no oppression of the laborer here which it is not in his power to remedy, or which does not come from his own inefficiency and lack of enterprise.”³¹

The free labor attitude toward the poor was made doubly clear in the aftermath of the Panic of 1857, when northern cities were struck by widespread unemployment and labor unrest. Demonstrations of the poor—“never before witnessed in the towns of the abundant West”—occurred all too frequently.³² As they were to do many times subsequently, Republicans blamed the Panic not on impersonal economic forces, but on the individual shortcomings of Americans, particularly their speculation in land and stocks which had reached “mania” proportions in the years preceding the crash, and on generally extravagant living. The *Cincinnati Gazette* defined the basic economic problem as an overexpansion of the credit system, rooted in too many “great speculations.” But speculation was only one aspect of the problem of general extravagance. “We have been living too fast,” complained the *Gazette*. “Individuals, families, have been eagerly trying to outdo each other in dress, furniture, style and luxury.” The *Chicago Press and Tribune* likewise blamed “ruinous extravagance” and “luxurious living” for the economic troubles, and both papers urged a return to “republican simplicity,” and the frugal, industrious ways of the Protestant ethic.³³

This kind of advice infused the Republican answer to the problems of the poor in the difficult winters of the late 1850’s. Republican papers throughout the North urged the unemployed to tighten their belts and

31. *New York Tribune*, May 15, 1854; May 8, 1858; Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, III, 479; Greeley, *Hints*, 326; *Springfield Republican*, October 20, 1858.

32. *Cleveland Leader*, June 16, 1858; Arthur C. Cole, *The Era of the Civil War* (Springfield, 1919), 203; Floyd B. Streeter, *Political Parties in Michigan 1837-1860* (Lansing, 1918), 260-61; *Chicago Press*, October 31, 1857.

33. *Chicago Tribune*, January 14, 1858; *Cincinnati Gazette*, September 30, 1857, October 8, November 11, 1858; *Chicago Press and Tribune*, July 3, 1858. Cf. *New York Times*, October 8, 1857; *Springfield Republican*, November 10, 1857.

retrench their expenditures. The *Chicago Press and Tribune* went so far as to say that drunkenness and laziness accounted for nine-tenths of the pauperism in the West, and that the only remedy was “a little wholesome hunger and a salutary fit of chattering by reason of excessive cold.”³⁴ Some Republicans did favor emergency public works to employ those unavoidably out of work, but they tended to oppose public charity, on the grounds that this led to dependence and rendered the recipients unwilling to work in the future.³⁵ And when the poor took to the streets demanding bread and work, Republicans reacted with shock and indignation. The *National Era*, one of the most radical Republican journals on the slavery question, declared that the noisiest demonstrators were those who were poor because of their own faults. “We do not believe,” said the *Era*, “that the noisy meetings in our Eastern cities, pretending to be composed of working men, represent the real feelings of the working classes. . . . Their style of proceedings and spirit have a flavor of communism about them; they suggest a foreign origin.” The reaction of Republicans to the poverty of the late 1850’s revealed the basic deficiency of their middle-class free labor outlook. Even as they demanded equal opportunity for social advancement for all laborers, they also subscribed to an ideology which told them that an almost perfect opportunity for social mobility existed. They could therefore say with Senator Harlan of Iowa that their object was to place the laborer “on a platform of equality—let him labor in the same sphere, with the same chances for success and promotion—let the contest be exactly equal between him and others—and if, in the conflict of mind with mind, he should sink beneath the billow, let him perish.”³⁶

Of course, the ideology of mobility was never quite so simple that it condemned out of hand all who failed to achieve success. As Stephan Thernstrom has pointed out, many nineteenth-century Americans recognized that environmental and social factors could hinder a man’s social advancement. Republicans like Lincoln and Greeley had a genuine compassion for the plight of the poor, and were sincerely

34. *Chicago Press and Tribune*, December 3, 1859. Cf. *Chicago Press*, December 4, 1857; *Cleveland Leader*, June 18, 1855; *New York Times*, December 26, 1854.

35. *New York Evening Post*, October 23, 27, 1857; *New York Times*, October 22, 1857; *Springfield Republican*, November 13, 14, 1857; January 13, 1858; *Chicago Tribune*, January 15, 1857.

36. *National Era*, November 12, 1857; *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 276. Cf. *New York Times*, November 10, 11, 23, 1857.

interested in their advancement. They recognized that not all the poverty in the nation's urban centers could be blamed on the character deficiencies of the poor. Thaddeus Stevens, for instance, insisted that it was wrong to blame the unemployed for their plight, for "almost all of them would rather work even at moderate wages, if they could find employment, than to go from house to house and beg."³⁷

Yet even the most sympathetic Republicans clung to the free labor ideology, and their prescriptions for the ills of society reflected this. Greeley, for example, used the *New York Tribune* to expose the shocking working conditions in many New York City shops, and, unlike many other Republicans, supported a legislative limit on hours of labor. He even believed that the government had the responsibility to guarantee work for all who wanted it.³⁸ However, his belief in the harmony of interests made him unable to view laborers as a distinct class with its own interests—rather, they were merely nascent capitalists, whose aim was to acquire capital and achieve economic independence. He therefore strenuously opposed self-conscious working-class actions like strikes, though he agreed that laborers could join unions to peacefully petition for higher wages. But shutting down their employers' businesses, and preventing other laborers from working struck Greeley as intolerable. Strikes were a form of "industrial war," the antithesis of the labor-capital co-operation which Greeley desired. If a worker found his wages inadequate, Greeley wrote, he should not "stand idle" by striking, but should take another job or move to the West. And while Greeley recognized the social barriers to economic advancement in the cities, he also believed that it was primarily in the lowest class "that we encounter intemperance, licentiousness, gambling," and other vices.³⁹

Other Republicans shared Greeley's outlook. Those Republicans, like Lincoln, who endorsed the right to strike, usually meant that laborers should be free to leave their jobs and take others, rather than

37. Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress* (Cambridge, 1964), 73-75; *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 1956. Cf. Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, VII, 466-67; Charles M. Segal, ed., *Conversations with Lincoln* (New York, 1961), 65-67.

38. Van Deusen, *Greeley*, 98; *New York Tribune*, September 21, 1853, May 18, 1854; Greeley, *Crystal Palace*, 31.

39. *New York Tribune*, April 20, 1854, November 3, 1853, March 3, 1854. Cf. Van Deusen, *Greeley*, 72-77; Isely, *Greeley*, 198-200.

that they should shut down the establishments of their employers. The *Boston Atlas* and *Daily Bee* declared strikes "fundamentally wrong," and the *Cincinnati Gazette*, in criticizing a western railroad strike, observed, "We are not speaking of *leaving* work—that all men have the right to do; but of combining to interrupt and arrest the machinery. The first is a plain, individual right. The last is a conspiracy against the interest, and even the safety of the public." And many Republicans opposed legal limits on working hours, on the grounds that, as Samuel Gridley Howe put it, "It emasculates people to be protected in this way. Let them be used to protecting themselves."⁴⁰

The basic Republican answer to the problem of urban poverty was neither charity, public works, nor strikes, but westward migration of the poor, aided by a homestead act. The safety-valve conception of the public lands, popularized half a century later by Frederick Jackson Turner, was accepted as a reality by ante-bellum Republicans. Nascent labor organizations and workingmen's parties had made free land a political issue in the 1830's, by urging it as a panacea for the ills of eastern urban society. Their simple argument—that encouraging the westward movement of eastern workingmen would reduce labor competition in the East and thereby raise wages, provided one basis for the homestead arguments of the 1840's and 1850's.⁴¹ This was the aspect of the plan which attracted Horace Greeley, who became the homestead's leading propagandist. "The public lands," he wrote, "are the great regulator of the relations of Labor and Capital, the safety valve of our industrial and social engine," and he never wavered in the advice he offered to New York's poor and unemployed: "go straight into the country—go at once!" Greeley also stressed the economic benefits which would accrue to the entire country from the rapid settlement of the West, but the primary aim of his homestead policy was to reduce the excess laboring population of the East. Under his editorship, the *New York Tribune* carried the word of the great opportunities

40. Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, IV, 24; Mandel, *Labor: Free and Slave*, 159; *Boston Atlas* and *Daily Bee*, February 20 1860; *Cincinnati Gazette*, January 7, 1858; Laura E. Richards, ed., *Letters and Journals of Samuel Gridley Howe* (2 vols.: Boston, 1909), II, 385.

41. Joseph C. Rayback, "Land for the Landless, The Contemporary View" (unpublished master's thesis, Western Reserve University, 1936), 14-16; George M. Stephenson, *The Political History of the Public Lands from 1840 to 1862* (Boston, 1917), 103-4; Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage, The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (Princeton, 1942), 98-99.

for labor in the West far and wide, and the demand there, not only for farmers, but for skilled craftsmen, artisans, and laborers of all kinds.⁴²

It is well known how the homestead issue became increasingly sectional in the 1850's. Republicans believed that the settlement of the western territories by free farmers would prove an effective barrier against the extension of slavery, and this made some eastern anti-slavery men, who feared that free land might set off a migration which would depopulate their states, willing to accept the homestead idea. For the same reason, southerners increasingly opposed any plan for giving free land to settlers.⁴³ The Republican platform of 1860 gave the homestead plan a ringing endorsement, in a plank which Greeley said he "fixed exactly to my own liking" on the platform committee. The homestead plan played a key role in the Republicans' free labor outlook, for in their view, the measure was essential to keeping open the geographical and social mobility which was the hallmark of northern society. Free land, said Richard Yates, would aid "the poor but industrious laborer," in his search for economic advancement, and the *National Era* agreed that the policy would offer "an equal chance to the poor of all states. . . ."⁴⁴ The Panic of 1857 gave a great impetus to the Republicans' support for the homestead idea. They blamed the large-scale urban unemployment on the difficulty workers had in securing land. Too many men, said the *Cincinnati Gazette*, had "crowded into the cities," while there was an "abundance of land to be possessed" further West. Some Republicans saw for the first time the specter of a permanent population of urban poor. "In many of the free states," said Illinois' Orville H. Browning, "population is already pressing hard upon production and subsistence, and new homes must be provided,

42. Robbins, *Landed Heritage*, 94; *New York Tribune*, July 1, 1854, April 18, 1856, February 14, July 4, November 7, 1857. Cf. Roy M. Robbins, "Horace Greeley: Land Reform and Unemployment, 1837-1862," *AgH*, VII (January 1933), 18-41.

43. Fred A. Shannon, "The Homestead Act and the Labor Surplus," *AHR*, XLI (July 1936), 642-43; Stephenson, *Public Lands*, 145, 162, 173, 193-96; Rayback, "Land for the Landless," 31-34, 44-45, 62-65; *Cincinnati Gazette*, January 12, 1859; George W. Julian, *Speeches on Political Questions* (New York, 1872), 57; *Chicago Democrat*, August 19, 1854.

44. Kirk H. Porter and Donald B. Johnson, comps., *National Party Platforms 1840-1856* (Urbana, 1956), 33; Horace Greeley to Schuyler Colfax, June 20, 1860, Greeley-Colfax Papers, NYPL; *Congressional Globe*, 33 Congress, 1 Session, 506; *National Era*, November 12, 1857.

or the evils of an overcrowded country encountered."⁴⁵ Such overcrowding would effectively bar eastern workers from sharing in the economic mobility which was the heritage of free laborers.

As an expression of the free labor mentality, the homestead idea was defended in middle-class, capitalistic terms. "The friends of land reform," George Julian assured Congress, "claim no right to interfere with the laws of property of the several States, or the vested interests of their citizens. They advocate no leveling policy, designed to strip the rich of their possessions." Richard Yates agreed that "the measure is not agrarian [that is, socialistic]. It does not take your property and give it to me. . . . It does not bring down the high, but it raises the low."⁴⁶ What the homestead policy did propose to do was to aid the poor in achieving economic independence, to raise them into the middle class. If the policy of free land were adopted, said Greeley's *Tribune*, every citizen would have the essential economic alternative "of working for others or for himself." The homestead policy would transform the dependent poor of the cities into prosperous yeomen. "It would," said Schuyler Colfax, "by giving them independent freeholds, incite them . . . to rear families in habits of industry and frugality, which form the real elements of national greatness and power." And Congressman Owen Lovejoy summed up all these arguments with another whose spirit must have been congenial to all Republicans. The homestead measure, he declared, "will greatly increase the number of those who belong to what is called the middle class."⁴⁷

IV

In the eyes of the Republicans, northern society exemplified the best aspects of the free labor ideology. The ideal of equal opportunity for social mobility and economic independence seemed to them to be not dreams but living realities. Lincoln declared that the majority of

45. *Cincinnati Gazette*, October 26, 1857; *Speech of Hon. O. H. Browning, Delivered at the Republican Mass Meeting, Springfield, Ill., August 8th, 1860* (Quincy, 1860), 10. Cf. Julian, *Speeches*, 66; *Cleveland Leader*, October 24, 1857.

46. Julian, *Speeches*, 51; *Congressional Globe*, 33 Congress, 1 Session, 502. For the contemporary usage of "agrarian," see "Agrarianism," *Atlantic Monthly*, III (April 1859), 393-94.

47. *New York Tribune*, February 18, 1854; Hollister, *Colfax*, 161; *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 175.

northerners were neither capitalists nor employees—rather, they worked for themselves in shops and farms, “taking the whole product to themselves, and asking no favors of capital on the one hand, nor of hirelings and slaves on the other.” To southerners who compared northern laborers with their own slaves, Lincoln insisted that the North had no class who “are always to remain laborers.” “The man who labored for another last year,” he insisted, “this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him.” To Republicans, northern society was the model of what Henry Wilson called “a progressive, permanent, Christian civilization,” and Republican speeches contained abundant praise of their social order. Republicans admitted that in the cities—which were carried by the Democrats anyway—there was poverty, intemperance, and ignorance, but the Republican areas of the North represented the best of middle-class America. “Sir,” said a Connecticut Congressman, “a majority of the citizens of my State occupy that happy social position which is a medium between a wealthy aristocracy on the one hand, and a poverty, which is generally wedded to ignorance, on the other.” And Henry Wilson extolled the social order of Massachusetts, where laborers were “more elevated than can be found in any other portion of the globe,” and where “our soil is divided into small estates,” not large plantations.⁴⁸

The same ideal social order characterized the free states of the West, according to Republican leaders of that section. In rural Ohio, said Congressman Philemon Bliss, “the farmer works his own farm; the mechanic labors in his own shop, and the merchant sells his own goods. True, labor is there sold, but mainly as a temporary expedient to enable the laborer to acquire a small capital. . . .” According to Senator James Doolittle, four-fifths of the population of Wisconsin were economically independent. The superiority, indeed, the all but perfect character of northern society, was graphically depicted by Carl Schurz:⁴⁹

Cast your eyes over that great beehive called the free States. See by the railroad and telegraph wire every village, almost every back-

48. Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, III, 478, II, 364; New York Tribune, October 6, 1856; *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 1 Session, 1356; *How Ought Workingmen to Vote in the Coming Election?* Speech of Hon. Henry Wilson, at East Boston, Oct. 15, 1860 (Boston, 1860), 2; Russell and Nason, *Wilson*, 71.
49. *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 241; 1 Session, 982; Frederic Bancroft, ed., *Speeches, Correspondence, and Political Papers of Carl Schurz* (4 vols.: New York, 1913), I, 131.

woods cottage, drawn within the immediate reach of progressive civilization . . . look upon our society, where by popular education and continual change of condition the dividing lines between the ranks and classes are almost obliterated; look upon our system of public instruction, which places even the lowliest child of the people upon the high road of progressive civilization.

How accurate was the Republican picture of northern society? On visiting the United States in the 1820's, the German economist Friedrich List was impressed by the fact that “the best work on Political Economy which one can read in that modern land is actual life.” The Republicans’ concept of free labor was obviously a reflection of their experiences in the economic and social life of the North, particularly the Republican North, whose heartland had a predominantly agricultural population, with small towns and independent farmers. The idea that labor created all value, and that all men could aspire to economic independence, were products of the age of independent craftsmen and yeomen, and up to the Civil War, the northern economy could still be described in these terms.⁵⁰ It is true that the industrial sector of the economy was expanding rapidly, especially in the 1850's, and that by 1860, the United States had achieved an industrial status second only to Great Britain's. In New England and some of the middle states the rise of the factory system and large-scale production gave a glimpse of the industrial nation which was to emerge later in the century. But on the eve of the war, large factories and great corporations were the exception, not the rule, even in New England. In the West, manufacturing establishments were widely dispersed, located near raw materials such as flour and lumber, and servicing local markets. The typical enterprise employed only a few workmen and only a small amount of capital, and was owned by an individual or partnership. Throughout the North, manufacturing firms had an average of only ten workmen each, and, as Bernard Mandel points out, even in New England the expansion of so important an industry as boot and shoe production in the 1850's and 1860's was due largely to the establishment of many new small plants, not the expansion of old ones.⁵¹

50. Kaplan, *Carey*, 29; Chester McA. Destler, *American Radicalism 1865-1901* (New London, 1946), 25-26.

51. Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States 1790-1860* (New York, 1961), v-vi, 159-63, 204; Oscar and Mary T. Handlin, *Commonwealth. A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861* (New York, 1947), 201; Victor S. Clark, *History of Manufactures in the United States* (3 vols.: New York, 1929), I, 455-56; Harry L.

On the other hand, the Republican image of northern society was already outdated in some respects. The decade of the 1850's, according to George R. Taylor, witnessed "the emergence of the wage earner—a permanent working class, yet in 1859, Lincoln could state that the wage system 'does not embrace more than one-eighth of the labor system of the country.' Census statistics for the pre-war period are notoriously inaccurate, but Lincoln's statement was surely in error. David Montgomery estimates that almost 60 per cent of the American labor force was employed in some way, not economically independent, in 1860. And, particularly in the large eastern cities, where large-scale immigration was increasing class stratification and holding down the real wages of all workers, the prospect for rising to self-employment was already receding.⁵² Nor did the homestead act provide the safety-valve which Republicans claimed. Many studies have shown that it was eastern farmers, not wage earners from the crowded cities, who were able to take advantage of the offer of free land. Moreover, the 1850's saw the widespread introduction of agricultural machinery in the West, resulting in increased production, but raising the costs of farming and making it more difficult for farm laborers to enter the ranks of independent yeomen. Western farmers were already faced with a loss of their economic independence, as they came to rely on banks for credit. Lincoln could say, "I scarcely ever knew a mammoth farm to sustain itself," but the age of large-scale mechanized farming was fast approaching.⁵³

We know today, of course, that in spite of the wide acceptance of

Wilkey, "Infant Industries in Illinois as Illustrated in Quincy, 1838-1856," *Journal of the ILLSHS*, XXXII (December 1939), 474-97; Isaac L. pp-ncott, *A History of Manufactures in the Ohio Valley to the Year 1860* (New York, 1914), 130-31, 152-59; George R. Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution 1815-1860* (New York, 1951), 247; Mandel, *Labor: Free and Slave*, 16-17.

52. Taylor, *Transportation Revolution*, 270-300; Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, III, 459; Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 26-27; George R. Taylor, "The National Economy Before and After the Civil War," in David T. Gilchrist and W. David Lewis, eds., *Economic Change in the Civil War Era* (Greenville, Del., 1965), 15; Miller, *Jacksonian Aristocracy*, 31-33, 81-127, 182. Cf. Bruchey, *Roots of American Economic Growth*, 208.

53. Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* (2 vols.: New York, 1947), II, 295-96; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge, 1950), 239-40; Clarence Danhof, "Farm-Making Costs and the Safety-Valve, 1850-1860," *JPEc*, LXIX (June 1941), 317-59; Cole, *Era of the Civil War*, 364; Fred Gerhard, *Illinois As It Is* (Chicago, 1857), 317; Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture 1815-1860* (New York, 1960), 96-97; Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, III, 475.

the ideology of social mobility, the years after 1860 saw a steady diminution of the prospects for a worker or farm laborer to achieve economic independence. This does not mean that industrialization and mechanized agriculture ended social mobility—on the contrary, the evidence is that they expanded it. But the mobility of the age of the independent producer, whose aspiration was economic self-sufficiency, was superseded by the mobility of industrial society, in which workers could look forward to a rising standard of living, but not self-employment. On the eve of the Civil War, however, these developments still lay largely in the future. If economic mobility was contracting in northern cities, the old social opportunity was at least close enough in time to lend plausibility to the free labor ideology. And in the rural and small-town North, the Republican picture of northern society corresponded to a large degree with reality. The two decades before the Civil War witnessed a substantial improvement in the level of living of western farmers, the result of the transportation revolution and the rise of eastern markets for their products. Farm tenancy was increasing, but the number of northern farmers was still double that of farm laborers and tenants. The factory system was expanding, undermining the economic independence of the small craftsman and artisan, but western industry was still concentrated in small towns and in small-scale enterprises. And according to Douglass North, the small towns and villages of the Republican heartland "showed every sign of vigorous expansion."⁵⁴

In what Stuart Bruchey has termed "an essentially fluid society," with "broadly egalitarian economic opportunity," the free labor outlook had a strong cultural authenticity.⁵⁵ A well-organized, persistent person could expect to achieve economic success, and a skilled wage earner could reasonably look forward to the day he acquired enough capital to start a small business of his own. The free labor ideology became inadequate, of course, when applied to the permanent wage earners and unemployed of ante-bellum northern society, but increasing numbers of these were Irish immigrants who, Republicans believed, lacked the qualities of discipline and sobriety essential for social ad-

54. North, *Economic Growth*, 153-54; Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston, 1966), 128-29; Gates, *Farmer's Age*, 272-73; Taylor, "National Economy," 7-8; Bruchey, *Roots of American Economic Growth*, 60.

55. Bruchey, *Roots of American Economic Growth*, 206-07.

vancement. When Republicans extolled the virtues of free labor, they were merely reflecting the experiences of millions of men who had "made it" and millions of others who had a realistic hope of doing so.

When Republicans spoke of their party's basic constituency, it was these successful middle-class northerners they had in mind. Charles Francis Adams declared that the party was composed of "the industrious farmers and mechanics, the independent men in comfortable circumstances in all the various walks of life," while the Democrats drew their support from the very rich and "the most degraded or the least intelligent of the population of the cities." Similarly, Seward, when visiting Great Britain, was struck by the parallel between British and American voting patterns. "All artisans and manufacturers are republicans—all their employees (speaking in general terms) are conservative. How like the United States." (Seward's statement again reminds us that when Republicans referred to themselves as a party of "free labor," they meant that their supporters were primarily middle class, not "employees.") Republicans also insisted that there was a high correlation between education, religion, and hard work—the values of the Protestant ethic—and Republican votes. "Where free schools are regarded as a nuisance," declared the *Chicago Democratic Press* after Buchanan's defeat of Frémont, "where religion is least honored, and lazy untruth is the rule, there Buchanan has received his strongest support."⁵⁶ And an Iowa Republican, comparing the election returns with census data on education, concluded that wherever free schools were most common, the Democrats were in the minority. The image which Republicans had of their party was vividly summarized by the Springfield *Republican*.⁵⁷

Who form the strength of this party? Precisely those who would most likely be expected to,—the great middling-interest class. The highest class, aristocratically associated and affiliated, timid, afraid of change, . . . and the lowest class . . . those are the forces arrayed against Republicanism as a whole. . . . Those who work with their hands, who live and act independently, who hold the stakes of home and family, of farm and workshop, of education and freedom—these as a mass are enrolled in the Republican ranks.

56. *Boston Advertiser*, clipping, Charles Francis Adams Diary, November 2, 1860, Adams Papers; Frederick W. Seward, ed., *Seward at Washington* (2 vols.: 1891), I, 384; *Chicago Democratic Press*, November 19, 1856. Cf. *Springfield Republican*, November 8, 1856.

57. *Debates of Iowa Constitutional Convention*, II, 702; *Springfield Republican*, November 1, 1856.

They form the very heart of the nation, as opposed to the two extremes of aristocracy and ignorance. . . .

Although a great deal of work needs to be done before the social basis of the ante-bellum political parties can be established with precision, it is safe to say that the Republicans were weakest in the large cities and strong in the North's rural areas and small towns. A Pennsylvania Congressman described his district—"the most intensely Republican one of the State"—as follows:⁵⁸

We find it densely populated, mainly with a rural people. Thickly planted, each on its own few acres we behold the unpretentious, but neat and comfortable dwellings of free laboring farmers, with as many tradesmen, manufacturers, and mechanics, mostly located in the villages, as the wants of the region require.

But although Republicans celebrated the rural virtues, they left more than a little room for those "tradesmen, manufacturers, and mechanics . . . located in the villages."⁵⁸ They recognized that economic development was bound to result in an increase in the urban population, and that a growing nation needed artisans, craftsmen, and capitalists as much as farmers. John Bigelow of the *New York Evening Post* pointed out at the height of the Panic of 1857 that it was preposterous to urge the poor to go from urban centers to the country, because there were as many opportunities for social advancement in industry and commercial towns as on the farm. Indeed, Bigelow predicted that the independent yeoman would rapidly lose ground to the large-scale capitalist farmer, and he urged the urban poor to stick to "mechanic arts," rather than going into agriculture.⁵⁹

58. *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 288-89. W. R. Brock states that the typical Republican constituency was a rural area with small towns, where most of the population was middle-class and the capitalist ethic pervaded the culture. Brock, *American Crisis*, 8-9, 244-45. Cf. Carl N. Degler, "Labor in the Economy and Politics of New York City, 1850-1860" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1952), 295-96, 329-30; Wilfred E. Binkley, *American Political Parties* (New York, 1947 ed.), 214, 221.

59. For Republican glorification of rural virtues, see *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 136-37, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 1510, 2 Session, 1018. To a large extent, of course, this kind of talk was political rhetoric, reflecting the political fact of life summarized in the title of one newspaper's election post-mortem in 1856: "The Country for Freedom—the Cities for Slavery." *Ohio State Journal*, November 7, 1856. Cf. Ollinger Crenshaw, "Urban and Rural Voting in the Election of 1860," in *Historiography and Urbanization*, ed., Eric Goldman (Baltimore, 1941), 43-66.

60. *New York Evening Post*, December 31, 1857; Margaret Clapp, *Forgotten First Citizen: John Bigelow* (Boston, 1947), 117-18.

Few Republicans were as pessimistic as Bigelow about the prospects for the family farm, but most were firm advocates of economic development. As Leo Marx points out, Americans eagerly embraced the new technology of their expanding capitalist economy, and the western states cried out for railroads and industry. "Industry," said the *Indianapolis Journal*, "is as essential to the development of a virtuous community as education," and the *Chicago Press and Tribune* declared that the western economy was too dependent on agriculture, and needed manufactures for a balanced economic order. Many western Republicans who supported a protective tariff in the late 1850's had just this view in mind. One Iowa Congressman said he favored protection because he wanted to see the abundant water power of his state "applied to mechanical use. I want to see manufactures spring up there . . . [and] machinery be put up and set in motion throughout every beautiful valley of the State."⁶¹

Republicans therefore accepted the growth of industry as one part of the nation's economic development, and in the 1850's they took a broad view of the power of the federal government to aid in economic growth, supporting such measures as the tariff, homesteads, and internal improvements. But they also believed that industrial development should take place within the context of the society with which they were familiar, and they emphatically rejected the idea that industrialization and the rise of great cities and large factories necessarily went hand in hand. The idea that the North could remain a society of family farms and small towns, while still experiencing the benefits of industrialization, was put forward most clearly by Henry C. Carey, the Pennsylvania economist. Carey insisted that industrialization would lead to an increase, not a decline, in economic opportunity for the laborer, for it would create a balanced, diversified economy in which many different enterprises competed for the services of labor and thus drove wages upward. Carey's advocacy of the protective tariff was based on precisely this premise—that the growth of industry was essential to the betterment of the worker, for "where all are farmers, there can be no competition for the purchase of labor."⁶² His ideal

61. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York, 1964), 207-8; Kenneth Stampp, *Indiana Politics During the Civil War* (Indianapolis, 1949), 11; *Chicago Press and Tribune*, July 29, 1859; *Congressional Globe*, 38 Congress, 1 Session, 2021. Cf. 36 Congress, 1 Session, 2024; *Debates of Iowa Convention*, I, 108.

62. H. C. Carey, *The Slave Trade, Domestic and Foreign* (Philadelphia, 1856), 57. Cf. [Henry C. Carey], *How to Increase Competition for the Purchase of Labor* (np, nd), 4.

was a decentralized economy, centered on the small town, in which artisans, farmers, and small factories all served the needs of a small regional economy. One of his associates, a Pennsylvania Congressman, explained that the aim of protection was not to build up large-scale industries, but to "locate communities around an industrial point." Carey believed that the producer and the consumer should exist side by side, and that long-range transportation—either of western food to the East, or of manufactured goods from Europe or from the East westward—was in large degree a waste of labor and money. "The nearer the grist-mill is to the farm," he wrote, "the less will be the labor required for converting wheat into flour, . . . the nearer [the farmer] can bring the hatter, the shoemaker, and the tailor, the maker of ploughs and harrows, the less will be the loss in labor in exchanging his wheat for their commodities."⁶³

Carey shared the farmer's suspicion of the nation's great commercial centers, which, he wrote, profited from the labor of others, "while producing nothing themselves." He envisioned a society of "little towns and cities," each a local center of manufacturing, serving the surrounding countryside, and providing a market for its industrial produce. The economy of New England approximated his idea most closely, although he and other Republicans were disturbed by the increasing concentration of industry there. One of his economic disciples wrote that he would like to see the large amount of machinery concentrated in the city of Lowell "divided among twenty or thirty little towns."⁶⁴

Of course, Carey's ideas were in a sense romantic, for at the same time that he extolled the virtues of the "little towns and cities" of the North and urged a regional, locally oriented economy, the nation was moving toward an increasingly centralized industrialism and a national market. Yet in Carey's writings we can see the optimism and self-confidence of northern society. For his image for the nation's future involved no fundamental social reorganization—it was basically an extension of the northern present as he saw it.⁶⁵ Tocqueville had

63. *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 1848; Carey, *Slave Trade*, 59, 294. Cf. Henry C. Carey, *Financial Crises: Their Causes and Effects* (Philadelphia, 1863).

64. Henry C. Carey, *The Harmony of Interests, Agricultural, Manufacturing, and Commercial* (New York, 1856), 145; Carey, *Past, Present, Future*, 320; E. Pershine Smith to Henry C. Carey, October 3, 1855, Henry C. Carey Papers, HSPa; Cf. Henry C. Carey, *Principles of Social Science* (3 vols.: Philadelphia, 1858-59), I, 44-45, II, 236-37.

65. On this aspect of the idea of progress, see also Rush Welter, "The Idea of Progress in America," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XVI (June 1955), 404-5.

observed that Americans had a "lively faith in human perfectibility," and that they thought of society as "a body progressing," rather than as a static structure. But in the Republican conception of progress, the North would retain the social order of the 1850's, while making the distribution of income even more equitable, and social mobility even more accessible, through continuing economic development.⁶⁶

V

The contradictions and ambiguities of the free labor ideology, the tension between its conservative aspects and its stress on equality of opportunity and an open society, reflected the world view of the northern middle class. If the social outlook of the Republican party was in many ways conservative, it was not because it defended privilege but because Republicans were satisfied with the economic and social order they perceived in the North. In post-war years, the same cult of the self-made man and of economic success would come to be a justification of every action and privilege of the business class, but in the antebellum world of the Republicans, the promise of economic advancement implied not the rise of big business but the guarantee of mobility to the laborer. Many Republicans insisted that equality of rights and opportunities was a cardinal principle of their party; Seward, for example, stressed that the Republicans stood for "one idea . . . the idea of equality—the equality of all men before human tribunals and human laws." And Lincoln summarized the egalitarian aspects of the free labor outlook when he declared, "In due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men . . . all should have an equal chance."⁶⁷

To the self-confident society of the North, economic development, increasing social mobility, and the spread of democratic institutions were all interrelated parts of nineteenth century "progress." Each step in the progress of civilization, said Henry Carey, voicing his character-

66. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 343. Cf. *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 435; Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community* (Stanford, 1959), 116.

67. Irvin C. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America* (New Brunswick, 1954), 152-59; Baker, ed., *Seward Works*, IV, 302; Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, IV, 240. Lincoln used precisely these terms in defining the Union cause in his address to the joint session of Congress in July, 1861: "On the side of the Union, [the Civil War] is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial weights from all shoulders . . . to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life." Basler, ed., *Lincoln Works*, IV, 438.

istic optimism, "is marked by a tendency to equality of physical and intellectual condition, and to the general ownership of wealth." Horace Greeley predicted that the age which had witnessed the invention of railroads, telegraphs, and other marvels could not depart "without having effected or witnessed a vast change for the better, alike in the moral and the physical condition of mankind." The important point was that material and moral developments were but two sides of the same coin. "Good roads and bridges," wrote the *New York Tribune*, "are as necessary an ingredient to the spread of intelligence, social intercourse, and improvement in population, as schools and churches." An Indiana Republican Congressman declared on the eve of the Civil War that throughout the world, manufactures and commerce were "the missionaries of freedom," and William Henry Seward agreed that "popular government follows in the track of the steam-engine and the telegraph."⁶⁸ It was but a short step, and one which Republicans took almost unanimously, to the view that for a society as for individuals, economic progress was a measure of moral worth. As Henry Adams later recalled, he was taught in his youth that "bad roads meant bad morals." On this basis, northern society was eminently successful. But when Republicans turned their gaze southward, they encountered a society that seemed to violate all the cherished values of the free labor ideology, and seemed to pose a threat to the very survival of what Republicans called their "free-labor civilization."⁶⁹

68. Carey, *Past, Present, Future*, 415; Greeley, *Hints*, 49; *New York Tribune*, August 22, 1856; *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 2 Session, 1042; Seward, *Seward*, II, 359.

69. [Henry Adams], *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1918), 47; *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 1914.

The Republican Critique of the South

In 1856, William H. Seward told the Senate that he regarded slavery as "morally unjust, politically unwise, and socially pernicious, in some degree, in every community where it exists." For many Republicans, including Seward, who was considered by many "the intellectual leader of the political anti-slavery movement,"¹ the third of these reasons was the major basis of their opposition to the spread of slavery. If the free labor outlook gave Republicans a model of the good society, it also provided them with a yardstick for judging other social systems, and by this standard, slave society was found woefully wanting. The most cherished values of the free labor outlook—economic development, social mobility, and political democracy—all appeared to be violated in the South. Instead, the southern economy seemed stagnant to Republicans, the southern class structure an irrevocably fixed hierarchy, and southern society dominated by an aristocracy of slaveholders. To Republicans, the South appeared as an alien and threatening society, whose values and interests were in fundamental conflict with those of the North.

The northern image of the South was not, as some historians appear to believe, based merely on the imagination of abolitionists. Many Republican leaders had first-hand knowledge of economic and social conditions in slave society, and Republican newspapers carried countless reports from travelers to the slave states and the testimony of southern spokesmen themselves. The burden of this evidence was

1. George E. Baker, ed., *The Works of William H. Seward* (5 vols.: Boston, 1853-84), IV, 517; Carl Schurz, *Speeches of Carl Schurz* (Philadelphia, 1865), 108-9. Cf. *New York Times*, February 7, 1855.

always the same—the southern economy was backward and stagnant, and slavery was to blame. William H. Seward, for example, was convinced by his visits to the South in 1835, 1846, and 1857 that aside from all moral considerations, slavery would have to be abolished as an intolerable obstacle to regional and national development. His reaction to his first trip to Virginia was vividly recorded in his journal:

It was necessary that I should travel in Virginia to have any idea of a slave State. . . . An exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly-neglected roads, and, in every respect, an absence of enterprise and improvement, distinguish the region through which we have come, in contrast to that in which we live. Such has been the effect of slavery.

Seward's impressions were reinforced on his subsequent journeys to the South. In 1846 he found that in the Old Dominion "the land was sterile, the fences mean, and a universal impress of poverty [was] stamped on all around me." To his political alter ego Thurlow Weed, Seward described slavery as a serpent, gorging itself on the life-blood of Virginia. Later that year, Seward visited New Orleans, and again he observed how slavery impaired economic development. The geographical situation of the city, he wrote his wife, would seem to ensure its commercial supremacy. "Yet the city is secondary, and the state unimportant. . . . Commerce and political power, as well as military strength, can never permanently reside, on this continent, in a community where slavery exists."²

Seward's impressions of the South were so vivid that he wrote the New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith that he had never visited slave society "without wishing that at least one northern man from every town could be with me to see the practical workings of slavery." Other Republicans who visited the South were similarly impressed. "As you travel along, you will see the works of slavery," one of them told the Buffalo Free Soil Convention in 1848. "A worn out soil, dilapidated fences and tenements, and an air of general desolation." Congressman Henry L. Dawes wrote his wife in 1858 that after viewing the Virginia countryside near Washington he was convinced that "if the region were not cursed with slavery it would be the most delightful country

2. Frederick W. Seward, ed., *William H. Seward: An Autobiography* (New York, 1891), 288, 776, 806; William H. Seward to Thurlow Weed, April 22, 26, 1846, Thurlow Weed Papers, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.

in the world."³ Republicans whose families had once lived in the South told the same story. "It was slavery that drove me from my native state," declared an Iowa Republican. "... Slavery withers and blights all it touches ... slavery is a foul political curse upon the institutions of our country; it is a curse upon the soil of the country, and worse than that, it is a curse upon the poor, free, laboring white man."⁴ The indictment of slavery by southern anti-slavery men like Cassius Clay and Hinton Helper was phrased in precisely these terms. Clay had visited New England in his youth, and was struck by the prosperity of the region, despite its poor soil and climate, while his native state of Kentucky, with greater natural resources, languished. "I cannot as a statesman, shut my eyes to the industry, ingenuity, numbers and wealth which are displaying themselves in adjoining states," he told the Kentucky legislature, and during the 1840's and 1850's he addressed countless thousands of northerners on the superiority of free to slave society.⁵ Hinton Helper's condemnation of slavery and its effect on the non-slaveholders of the South was also circulated widely in the free states. Helper's points had all been made before, but as Horace Greeley wrote, "Mr. Helper, as an undoubted son of the South, speaking from personal observation and experience, speaks with an authority and a weight which no outsider can have."⁶

During the 1850's, leading northern newspapers sent correspondents into the slave states to give their readers first-hand descriptions of southern life and of the debilitating effects of slavery on the southern economy. Frederick Law Olmsted's series of letters which were published in the *New York Times* and later expanded and reprinted in

3. Seward to Gerrit Smith, March 25, 1847, Gerrit Smith Papers, Syracuse University; *Oliver Dyer's Photographic Report of the Proceedings of the National Free Soil Convention at Buffalo, N.Y., August 9th and 10th, 1848* (Buffalo, 1848), 11; Henry L. Dawes to Mrs. Ella Dawes, May 21, 1858, Henry L. Dawes Papers, LC. Cf. Harold Schwartz, *Samuel Gridley Howe Social Reformer 1801-1876* (Cambridge, 1956), 154.

4. *The Debates of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Iowa* (2 vols.: Davenport, 1857), II, 681-82.

5. David L. Smiley, *Lion of Whitehall, the Life of Cassius M. Clay* (Madison, 1962), 22-23, 158-59; Horace Greeley, ed., *The Writings of Cassius M. Clay* (New York, 1848), 46, 202-6. Cf. Clay to Chase, March, 1842, Salmon P. Chase Papers, HSPa.

6. Horace Greeley to Edwin S. Morgan, May 3, 1859, Edwin S. Morgan Papers, New York State Library; Hinton R. Helper to Gerrit Smith, October 4, 1856, Smith Papers; *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 16. Cf. 30 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 836; Richmond Republican, cited in *National Era*, November 25, 1847.

three books, were the most widely read of these reports. Henry J. Raymond called Olmsted's letters the "best report that has ever been made of the industrial condition and prospects" of the South, and endorsed Olmsted's conclusion that without slavery, the wealth of the South would be vastly increased.⁷ Olmsted's findings were echoed by the *New York Tribune's* correspondent in a series entitled "The Southerners at Home," published in 1857, and by the *Cincinnati Gazette's* "Letters from the South," which appeared a year later. The *Gazette's* reporter insisted that the natural resources of Kentucky and North Carolina were woefully underdeveloped, and that the substitution of free for slave labor would increase the wealth of these states by millions of dollars and "cause this whole region to become an exceedingly productive one."⁸

The economic superiority of free to slave labor became a major argument of the Republicans in their attempt to win northern votes. The conservative Bostonian, Robert Winthrop, remarked in 1856 that the typical free-soil speech consisted of one-third Missouri Compromise repeal, one-third Kansas outrages, "and one-third disjointed facts, and misapplied figures, and great swelling words of vanity, to prove that the South is, upon the whole, the very poorest, meanest, least productive, and most miserable part of creation. . . ." Elaborate statistical comparisons between northern and southern states were commonplace in Republican speeches and editorials. In one such exercise, the *New York Times* compared the population growth, property values, manufacturing, agriculture, railroads, canals, and commerce of pairs of free and slave states—New York versus Virginia, Ohio versus Kentucky, Michigan versus Arkansas, etc. In every department, the free state was far in the lead.⁹ Such comparisons, according to Republican spokesmen, proved that "socially, economically, politically, the slave labor-agricultural system is a failure." And many Republicans believed that such

7. Francis Brown, *Raymond of the "Times"* (New York, 1951), 124; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (New York, 1856), 138-40, 185; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (New York, 1863), 295-96; Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas* (New York, 1861), xiii.

8. *New York Tribune*, June 10, 1857; *Cincinnati Gazette*, October 5, 1858. Cf. August 19, 27, 1858.

9. Robert C. Winthrop, Jr., *A Memoir of Robert C. Winthrop* (Boston, 1897), 188; *New York Times*, September 5, 1856. Cf. *Congressional Globe*, 33 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 321-27, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 1887; *New York Tribune*, February 15, 20, 1854, September 12, 18, December 20, 1856; *Cincinnati Gazette*, August 22, 1855, April 2, 1858, July 28, 1860.

arguments were far more effective politically than mere moralizing about slavery. Seward, for example, as astute a politician as the Republicans had, stressed the economic effects of slavery in speech after speech in the 1850's. The very words and images he used to describe slavery reflected this emphasis. Slavery, Seward declared, wished to lay its "paralyzing hand" on the new territories; it "polluted" the soil; it was a "blight," a "pestilence," and an "element of national debility and decline."¹⁰ The institution had brought upon the South "the calamity of premature and consumptive decline, in the midst of free, vigorous and expanding states." In speeches in 1855 and 1856 he asked New Yorkers to compare the development of New York with that of Virginia, once the Empire State's equal. "Go ask Virginia—go ask even noble Maryland, expending as she is a giant's strength in the serpent's coils, to show you her people, canals, railroads, universities, schools, charities, commerce, cities, and cultivated areas." And on his western campaign tour in 1860, Seward extolled the development of that region, attributing it to the exclusion of slavery. At Lansing, Michigan, he declared that the states which were burdened with slavery had suffered "exhausted soils, sickly states, and fretful and discontented people," and in Kansas he observed that the value of land in a free state averaged three times greater than its value in a slave state.¹¹

Despite their persistent use of anti-slavery arguments based on political economy, Republicans did not always make clear what it was in slavery that caused the impoverishment of the South.¹² Often they

10. Cincinnati Gazette, November 22, 1858; Baker, ed., *Seward Works*, I, 61; III, 272; IV, 88, 336, 349-50, 470.

11. Baker, ed., *Seward Works*, III, 97; IV, 25-52, 87, 394; *Immigrant White Free Labor, or Imported Black African Slave Labor. Speech of William H. Seward at Oswego, New York, November 3, 1856* (Washington, 1857), 1.

12. Although it is not the purpose of this work to evaluate in economic terms the Republicans' view of the South, it should be noted that economic historians have recently re-examined the question of the relative economic development of the sections before the Civil War. Richard Easterlin has compiled figures showing that per capita income of southern whites was not substantially lower than that for northerners, although southern income did decline relative to the North's between 1840 and 1860. And Stanley Engerman argues that the rate of southern economic growth exceeded the national average. On the other hand, Julius Rubin points out that there was a substantial maldistribution of income within the South, with a small group of wealthy planters and a large subsistence sector of poor white farmers, and Engerman acknowledges that educational facilities in the South were quite deficient compared with the rest of the nation. Moreover, the aggregate figures used by Easterlin and Engerman conceal the great regional differences within the South. The South Atlantic and East South Central states had per capita incomes significantly below the national average, while the high

were content to draw the comparison between free and slave states and let their listeners draw their own conclusions. But when Republicans did explain the economic backwardness of the South, they placed the greatest stress on the effect of slavery upon southern labor—both slave and free. Some Republicans believed, to be sure, that the Negro was by nature wasteful and lazy, and that his labor, therefore, could never be as productive as the white man's; this same argument, moreover, was used by southerners in belittling the statistical arguments of Republican spokesmen. But usually Republicans argued that it was not the Negro himself who was to blame for the South's backwardness; it was rather that the institution of slavery deprived him of both the education and the incentives which made the labor of northern free-men so productive. Slavery, said Seward, reduced the slave to "a brute . . . incompetent to cast a shuttle, to grease or oil a wheel and keep it in motion," and Lincoln charged that southerners believed the ideal laborer was not an educated, skilled freeman, but "a blind horse upon a tread-mill."¹³ Such labor had perhaps been unavoidable in the colonial era, when slavery had been introduced to meet a shortage of labor, but it was out of date in the modern world. What a diversified economy needed, Seward insisted, was "no longer the ignorant labor of barbarians, but labor perfected by knowledge and skill, in combination with all the scientific principles of mechanism." Few slaves, he noted, could perform such complicated tasks as lumbering, quarrying, manufacturing, and mining. As long as so much of its labor force was uneducated, the South could never aspire to the diversity of economic pursuits so essential to regional growth.¹⁴

But even educated slaves would not be as productive as free labor, figure for the West South Central states was, in large measure, the result of Louisiana's profitable sugar industry and the Mississippi River trade. Richard Easterlin, "Regional Income Trends, 1840-1950," in Seymour Harris, ed., *American Economic History* (New York, 1961), 525-47; Stanley Engerman, "The Effects of Slavery Upon the Southern Economy," *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, IV (1967), 71-97; and Julius Rubin's contribution to David T. Gilchrist and W. David Lewis, eds., *Economic Change in the Civil War Era* (Greenville, Del., 1965).

13. "Free-State Letter" of Judge George H. Williams, *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, IX (1908), 260-61; Baker, ed., *Seward Works*, IV, 600; Roy F. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (9 vols.: New Brunswick, 1953-55), IV, 479-80. Cf. *Ohio State Journal*, March 29, 1856; New York Tribune, June 2, 1855.

14. Baker, ed., *Seward Works*, IV, 378-79. Cf. III, 13; Richard Hildreth, *Despotism in America* (Boston, 1840), 132; Wellesville Patriot, February 7, 1854, clipping, Box 20, Chase Papers, HSPA.

Republicans maintained, because slaves lacked the incentive which inspired free laborers—the hope of improving their social condition and that of their families. “Enslave a man,” Horace Greeley explained, “and you destroy his ambition, his enterprise, his capacity. In the constitution of human nature, the desire of bettering one’s condition is the mainspring of effort.” George Opdyke of New York, a leading merchant and something of an economist, wrote that the slave did as little labor as he could because he had no personal stake in the results of his effort. “He knows that however much of revenue he may produce, his own share will be strictly limited to the necessities of life.” The same conclusion was reached by Olmsted after his journeys to the South.¹⁵

The effects of slavery on the southern economy, however, were not confined to the slave himself. Tocqueville and many other visitors commented upon the contempt in which labor of any kind was held in the South, and Republicans insisted that the South’s refusal to honor “the dignity of labor” was another cause of its economic backwardness. According to Olmsted, any kind of work which slaves performed was automatically considered unfit for a southern white man. “Manual agricultural labor is the chief employment of slaves in the South,” he reported. “For manual agricultural labor, therefore, the free man looking on, has a contempt . . .” Martin Van Buren agreed that both slaveowners and poor whites disdained labor—and the latter were themselves held in contempt because they had to work to support themselves. The divergent attitudes of the two sections toward labor were summarized by the conservative former Whig, Thomas Ewing, in 1858. Labor, he declared, “is held honorable by all on one side of the line because it is the vocation of freemen—degrading in the eyes of some on the other side because it is the task of slaves.”¹⁶

Of all the evils of slavery, none seemed to impress Republicans more than the poverty and degradation of the mass of southern non-slave-

15. *Congressional Globe*, 30 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 835; George Opdyke, *A Treatise on Political Economy* (New York, 1851), 330; Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 711; Olmsted, *Back Country*, 305. Cf. John C. Underwood to Henry C. Carey, November 6, 1860, Henry C. Carey Papers, HSPA.
16. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, eds., J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York, 1966), 318; Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 712; Olmsted, *Back Country*, 299; John Bigelow, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Samuel J. Tilden*, (2 vols.: New York, 1885), I, 569; C. L. Martzoff, ed., “Address at Marietta, Ohio, 1858. By Hon. Thomas Ewing,” OAHQ, XXVIII (1919), 194.

holders. Olmsted was shocked by the condition of the poor whites with whom he came in contact in the South, and drew a vivid portrait of their ignorance, poverty, and the utter hopelessness of their situation in slave society. The young British journalist E. L. Godkin likewise visited the South before the Civil War, and reported that he had never met men “in whom hope, energy, and courage to all outward appearance, seemed so utterly extinguished.”¹⁷ In describing the poor whites of the South, Republicans seemed to vacillate between outright contempt and compassion. John C. Palfrey, for example, drew a contrast between the independent laborers of the North and “the very different specimen of humanity known as the *mean white man*, the *poor buckra*, in the southern States . . . the poor, shiftless, lazy, uninstructed, cowed non-slaveholder of the South.” And George Weston declared that because of slavery three-quarters of the South’s white population “retire to the outskirts of civilization, where they live a semi-savage life, sinking deeper and more hopelessly into barbarism with every succeeding generation.”¹⁸ Generally, Republicans blamed the lack of educational opportunities and the degradation of labor in slave society for the position of the poor whites. “They are depressed, poor, impoverished, degraded in caste, because labor is disgraceful,” Jacob Collamer of Vermont put it in 1856.¹⁹

The plight of the poor whites was compounded, as Republicans saw it, by their lack of opportunity to rise in the social scale. In the Republican portrait of southern society, there were only two classes of whites—the slaveholding aristocracy and the very poor. “In the slave states,” Timothy Jenkins of New York told the House of Representatives, “there is in substance no middle class. Great wealth or hopeless poverty is the settled condition.” An Ohio Congressman agreed that the South “builds up no middle class of intelligent farmers, artisans, and mechanics, who constitute the real strength, who make the real

17. Broadus Mitchell, *Frederick Law Olmsted, A Critic of the Old South* (Baltimore, 1924), 102; Olmsted, *Back Country*, 12-13, 297, 303ff.; Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 537-39; Rollo Ogden, ed., *Life and Letters of Edward Laurence Godkin* (2 vols.: New York, 1907), I, 29-30. Cf. *Cincinnati Gazette*, October 5, 1858, July 28, 1860; *New York Tribune*, December 1, 1855, June 9, 1856.
18. *Congressional Globe*, 30 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 315; George Weston, *The Poor Whites of the South* (Washington, 1856), 5. Cf. Bigelow, ed., *Tilden*, II, 569; *Great Mass Meeting on the Battle Ground of Tippecanoe . . . Speech of General J. Watson Webb* (np, [1856]), 14.
19. *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, 3 Session, Appendix, 53. Cf. 31 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 142.

wealth, and are justly the pride and glory of the free states." ²⁰ The comparative lack of a middle class effectively blocked any hope of social advancement for the mass of poor whites, for it was all but impossible for a non-slaveholder to rise into the southern aristocracy. "The northern laboring man," Cassius M. Clay told an Ohio audience in 1836, "could, and frequently did, rise above the condition [in] which he was born to the first rank of society and wealth; but [I] never knew such an instance in the South." A Wisconsin Republican journal declared that even Stephen A. Douglas should recognize the superiority of free to slave institutions, because Douglas himself had risen from poverty to national leadership. "Had Douglas been born in a slave state," this newspaper continued, "his inheritance of poverty would have clung to him." And the *Chicago Democratic Press* summed up what Republicans felt was the most salient difference between North and South—so far as labor was concerned when it declared in 1854, "Fortunes are frequently inherited at the South—they are rarely made." ²¹

In the eyes of many Republicans, slavery's impact upon labor was visible not only in the South but in the areas of the free states settled by southern migrants. The southern parts of the states of the lower West—Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa—were inhabited by migrants from the slave states, while the northern areas were settled by easterners. The hostility between the two groups of settlers was proverbial. "In this state," wrote an Indiana politician, "we have various phases of public opinion; the enterprising Yankee of Northern Indiana, despises the sluggish and inaminate [sic] North Carolinian, Virginian, and Kentuckian in the southern part of the State," while the southerners were equally hostile to their northern neighbors. ²² The westerners of northern background, most of whom went into the Republican party, believed that their portion of the Northwest reflected the best aspects of free labor civilization. "One thing is certain," wrote a resident of

²⁰ *Congressional Globe*, 30 Congress, 2 Session, Appendix, 103; 35 Congress, 1 Session, 774. Cf. *Chicago Weekly Democrat*, March 8, 1856; *Cincinnati Gazette*, August 25, 1858.

²¹ *Cincinnati Gazette*, July 31, 1856; *Racine Weekly Advocate*, March 6, 1854; *Chicago Democratic Press*, August 5, 1854.

²² J. Herman Schaumberg, ed., "The Letters of Godlove S. Orth, Hoosier Whig," *IndMH*, XXXIX (December 1943), 367; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness, Lincoln in the 1850's* (New York, 1964 ed.), 6; *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Ohio, 1850-51* (2 vols.: Columbus, 1851), II, 637; *New York Tribune*, August 12, 1854.

Illinois in 1850, "that where New England emigrants do not venture, improvements, social, agricultural, mechanic, or scientific, rarely flourish. . . ." In the Western Reserve of northern Ohio, a correspondent of the *New York Tribune* maintained in 1857, there was "a neatness and a *home-ish* look to the farms and villages . . . which are not characteristic of the parts settled by Virginians and Kentuckians." Both these writers could have cited statistics to show that Republican areas of the Northwest tended to be more prosperous, economically progressive, and more literate than Democratic areas, particularly those settled from the South. ²³

To Republicans, the southern Northwest seemed, as George Julian remarked, like parts of slave states transplanted onto free soil. Such an attitude was understandable when one remembers that southern Ohio, for example, with its large farms raising tobacco and its close commercial relations with the South, did reflect much of the southern way of life. ²⁴ When Republicans looked at these areas they were most struck by the ignorance and shiftlessness of the inhabitants. "The Southern portions of the States of Illinois and Indiana," according to one newspaper, "have become proverbial for the intellectual, moral, and political darkness which covers the land." A correspondent of Lyman Trumbull's wrote with disdain of the portion of Illinois' population "which comes directly or indirectly from slave states and which reads but little," and it was true that the southern Northwest had the highest illiteracy rate in the section. ²⁵ The southern-born settlers seemed content with their status in life, and appeared to lack the typical northern desire to improve their condition. One traveler in Illinois expressed surprise that southern settlers were content "to shelter their families in a mere

²³ Arthur C. Cole, *The Era of the Civil War 1848-1870* (Springfield, 1919), 13-14; *New York Tribune*, June 27, 1857; W. R. Brock, *An American Crisis* (London, 1963), 245; Harry E. Pratt, ed., "Illinois as Lincoln Knew It," *Papers in Illinois History*, XLIV (1937), 153, 166-67; Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Illinois Political Attitudes, 1854-1861," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1951), 4; Lois K. Mathews, *The Expansion of New England* (Boston and New York, 1909), 208-9.

²⁴ George W. Julian, *Political Recollections, 1840-1872* (Chicago, 1884), 72; David H. Bradford, "The Background and Formation of the Republican Party in Ohio, 1844-1861," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1947), 33-34; Henry C. Hubbard, "Pro-Southern Influences in the Free West 1840-1865," *MVHR*, XX (June 1933), 47-49.

²⁵ "Egyptian Darkness," unidentified news clipping, Scrapbook, Logan Family Papers, LC; H. Wing to Lyman Trumbull, November 28, 1859, Lyman Trumbull Papers, LC; Henry C. Hubbard, *The Older Middle West 1840-1880* (New York, 1936), 38.

shantee or mud-walled cottages," while Yankees farther north built neat log cabins, schools, and churches. The air of superiority with which Republicans looked upon the southern settlers in the free states was expressed by George Weston, the former Democrat from Maine who became a prominent Republican editor:²⁶

It is unquestionable that the immigration from the South has brought into the free states more ignorance, poverty, and thriftlessness, than an equal amount of European immigration. Where it forms a marked feature of the population, as in Southern Illinois, a long time must elapse before it is brought up to the general standard of intelligence and enterprise in the free States.

The Republican critique of southern society thus focused upon the degradation of labor—the slave's ignorance and lack of incentive, and the laboring white's poverty, degradation, and lack of social mobility. The result was not only regional economic stagnation, but a system of social ethics entirely different from that of the North. The moral qualities of free labor, hard work, frugality, and interest in economic advancement seemed absent in the South. When Republicans visited the slave states they were struck by the character of the people even more than the poverty of the region. The Cincinnati *Gazette's* traveling correspondent reported in 1858 that he was astonished by the "lack of invention and resource, the clinging to old and now unprofitable ways" among southern laborers, and he added that there seemed to be "a sort of sluggish inactivity" throughout slave society. Compared with the North, this writer declared, the South seemed to be a "dead society." Samuel Gridley Howe visited the South in the 1840's and commented upon the "inefficiency and irresolution which characterizes all classes of people," and the broken-down fences, dirty streets, and unkempt homes whose inhabitants seemed too lazy to repair them. Henry L. Dawes was similarly impressed by the sluggish pace of life in the South, by the "sameness of poverty and unthrift" in the southern landscape. And the New York *Tribune's* correspondent Bayard Taylor reported from Kentucky in 1855 that despite their poverty and degradation, people seemed to be "content with things as they are."²⁷

26. John S. Wright, "The Background and Formation of the Republican Party in Illinois, 1846-1860" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1946), 4; Weston, *Poor Whites*, 7.
27. Cincinnati *Gazette*, August 25, 31, September 3, 1858; Laura E. Richards, ed., *Letters and Journals of Samuel Gridley Howe* (2 vols.: Boston, 1909), II,

The whole mentality and flavor of southern life thus seemed antithetical to that of the North. Instead of progress, the South represented decadence, instead of enterprise, laziness. "Thus it appears," wrote the anti-slavery writer and historian Richard Hildreth, "that one plain and obvious effect of the slaveholding system is to deaden in every class of society that *spirit of industry* essential to the increase of public wealth."²⁸ To those with visions of a steadily growing nation, slavery was an intolerable hindrance to national achievement. Seward, who believed that a stable and prosperous American nation could serve as the base for an overseas empire which would spread American influence and power throughout the world, saw most clearly the way in which slavery stood in the way of national greatness.²⁹ Slavery, he declared, was "incompatible with all . . . the elements of the security, welfare, and greatness of nations." It impaired the strength of the entire country and subverted the "intelligence, vigor, and energy" which national growth required. This was why, as early as 1845, Seward declared that abolition was the most important object which could occupy the attention of American statesmen. The question of restricting and ultimately abolishing slavery, he declared, was the question of "whether impartial public councils shall leave the free and vigorous North and West to work out the welfare of the country, and drag the reluctant South up to participate in the same glorious destinies."³⁰

II

"The aim of the present black republican organization," the New York *Herald* charged in 1860, "is the destruction of the social system

110-11; Henry L. Dawes Journal, June 27, 1852, Dawes Papers; New York *Tribune*, May 24, 1855. Cf. *Congressional Globe*, 36 Congress, 1 Session, 1914.
28. Hildreth, *Despotism*, 115-16. Cf. William Stocking, ed., *Under the Oaks* (Detroit, 1904), 46; Cleveland *Leader*, January 29, 1858; George N. Fuller, ed., *Messages of the Governors of Michigan* (4 vols.: Lansing, 1925-27), II, 293.
29. On Seward's view of empire, see Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (New York, 1967), 206-11; Baker, ed., *Seward Works*, I, 57, 250; III, 12-13, 188; IV, 166-70, 333; Walter La Feber, *The New Empire* (Washington, 1963), 24-32.
30. Baker, ed., *Seward Works*, I, 76, IV, 395; *The Address of the Southern and Western Liberty Convention to the People of the United States; the Proceedings and Resolutions of the Convention . . .* (Cincinnati, 1845), 18; Seward, ed., *Seward Autobiography*, 717. Cf. the statement of the New York Times, May 16, 1857: "Whatever impedes the advance or interferes with the prosperity of the nation, of the United States, as a grand consolidated empire, will excite the attention and invite upon itself the indignation of the northern States. . . ."