

**Free Soil,  
Free Labor,  
Free Men:**

**THE IDEOLOGY OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY  
BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR**

**Eric Foner**

NEW YORK  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
1970

Copyright © 1970 by Eric Foner  
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 70-97024

Printed in the United States of America

## 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."<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 paeans 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 16, 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.

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.

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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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."<sup>7</sup> 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*, 603; 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.

energetic and enterprising class of men, who are desirous of accumulating property rapidly.”<sup>8</sup>

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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup>

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*, 526; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York, 1955), 23–24, 38–43; *New York Tribune*, February 28, 1857; George N. Fuller, ed., *Messages 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.

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 "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:<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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, 1846), 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. Rawley, *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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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."<sup>16</sup> 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, MIHS; *Congressional Globe*, 31 Congress, 1 Session, Appendix, 142.

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."<sup>17</sup>

## 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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, 306-8; 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.

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 Opdyke, *A Treatise on Political Economy* (New York, 1851), 259; William A. Williams, *The Contours of American History* (London, 1961 ed.), 248.

to Greeley on economic matters, and the *Tribune*—the North's "sectional oracle"—reflected his views.<sup>22</sup> 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 workingmen 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 workingmen, "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.<sup>23</sup>

The most striking example of the Whig-Republican doctrine of the harmony of interests was the idea, developed in the 1840's and expanded 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 workingmen against the competition of cheap foreign labor. Unless the tariff was used to increase the prices of foreign manufactures before they entered the American market, 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; Glyndon G. 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.<sup>24</sup> Republican spokesmen for protection almost uniformly 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." Republicans also argued that the development of American industry, fostered by protection, would aid all sectors of the economy, by providing 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."<sup>25</sup>

In spite of their faith in the harmony of interests and their commitment 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 reluctance 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."<sup>26</sup> 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 Protective 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*, 26 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), 320; 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.<sup>27</sup>

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 responsi-

<sup>27</sup>. 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

### 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.<sup>30</sup>

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."<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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*, 328; 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."<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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."<sup>36</sup>

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."<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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."<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup> 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 G. 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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. . . ."<sup>44</sup> 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." <sup>45</sup> Such over-crowding 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." <sup>46</sup> 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." <sup>47</sup>

#### 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*, 60; 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.