
Class and the History of Working People in the Early Republic

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What conceptual tools are available to historians interested in social and material inequality in the early republic? Until recently, class offered a fairly durable approach. Borrowing bits and pieces from Karl Marx, Max Weber, and E. P. Thompson, historians have contended that unequal access to productive property and economic opportunity divided society into horizontal groupings. The members of those groups came to recognize their commonalities (and their differences from members of other groups), instituted cultural and social practices reflecting that group identity, and acted from that identity in the interests of their group—or, class.¹ Such assumptions framed the transformative research

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1. For overviews on class as an analytical category in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American history, see Ronald Schultz, “A Class Society? The Nature of Inequality in Early America,” in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover, NH, 1999), 203–221; Greg Nobles, “Class,” in *A Companion to Colonial America*, ed. Daniel Vickers (Malden, MA, 2003), 259–87; Peter Way, “Labour’s Love Lost: Observations on the Historiography of Class and Ethnicity in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of American Studies*, 28 (April 1994), 1–22; John Ashworth, “Class in American History: Issues and a Case Study,” in *The State of U.S. History*, ed. Melvyn Stokes (Oxford, UK, 2002), 367–86; Christopher Tomlins, “Why Wait for Industrialism? Work, Legal Culture, and the Example of Early America: An Historiographical Argument,” *Labor History*, 40 (1999), 5–34. I discuss class-driven scholarship at greater length in the article upon which this current essay is drawn. See “The

of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that made the lives of working people relevant to the central narrative of American history.

By the end of the 1990s, however, class no longer carried the same weight as an explanatory category in early republic history. Some scholars denied that inequalities could create meaningful horizontal divisions, claiming instead that the American Revolution generated unprecedented opportunity for upward mobility and a classless society. Other historians acknowledged material disparities among Americans, but did not see those differences as particularly significant. With autonomy and agency, the most disadvantaged Americans presumably had the same possibilities for self-making and self-expression as did their wealthy neighbors. One might never know the extent to which the deck was stacked against working people who gathered in taverns, promenaded along urban thoroughfares, and dressed in flamboyant outfits. At the same time, the daily activities of working people revealed not solidarity but extreme antagonism along lines of race, sex, and ethnicity. Violence in the streets and behind bedroom doors indicated that working people did not see themselves in common cause with other workers who looked, dressed, or spoke differently. Class did not seem to account for the experiences of women or people of color, for whom unequal access to property was not the starting point of inequality, but rather the result of other powerful forces like racism, sexism, and imperialism. Ultimately, the social cleavages in the new United States were either too shallow to warrant class formation or too deep to allow it.

Those of us studying the experiences of working people in the early republic find ourselves puzzled how to proceed. Illustrating the inadequacy of a seamstress's wages to cover rent or the unlikelihood of a canal digger becoming a landowner—this is relatively easy. As recent works in sociology such as Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dime* or David Shipler's *The Working Poor* remind us, the day-to-day lives of working people illustrate the larger processes of economic development and suggest a disjuncture between the mythology of boundless opportunity and the reality of arduous labor and persistent poverty.² For the urban work-

Contours of Class in the Early Republic City," *Labor: Studies in the Working Class History of the Americas*, 1 (Fall 2004), 93–109.

2. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dime: On (not) Getting By in America* (New York, 2001); David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York, 2004).

ers of the early republic, the primary challenge was getting and keeping a job as the precondition to procuring food and fuel, paying rent, and meeting the exigencies of illness, injury, and childbearing. Although these workers were female and male, white and black, native-born and immigrant, young and old, enslaved, indentured, and free, they shared a common privation. Their labor did not provide them with anything beyond a hand-to-mouth existence, and instead left them consistently imperiled in their efforts to stay warm or avoid hunger.³

That working people would be poor was not novel in the early republic, nor was this era the first to privilege those who could recruit, hire, or purchase labor and to disadvantage those whose labor was for sale or subject to compulsion. And while the postrevolutionary economy generated new ways for some working people to escape poverty, so too did it offer new ways for wealthier Americans to prosper from the work that did not pay enough (or at all) to bring those performing it out of poverty. Indeed, the rules of economic activity that emerged in the early republic—rules codified in law, enforced through violence, naturalized in discourse, and made routine in social practice—allocated their benefits and costs in ways fundamentally different from the rules that preceded them in the colonial period. These new rules—capitalism is their typical appellation—fell hard upon the majority of laboring people and exacerbated their difficulties in scraping by.⁴

Nonetheless, historians have difficulty speaking about the structural inequalities of power inherent to early republic capitalism and how they shaped the contours of working people's experiences. *Class* would seem like the obvious analytical framework, and American labor historians from the 1960s onward drew on the work of E. P. Thompson to argue as much. Yet three recurrent objections—as often from scholars on the left as the right—have sidelined this version of class as a mode of understanding the past. First, guided by the assumption that class is only operative when workers enunciate a common identity and politics, some historians use the lengthy record of strife between different kinds of workers and the scanty record of working-class political action to dismiss

3. For the most recent scholarship on poverty, see Billy G. Smith, ed., *Down and Out in Early America* (University Park, PA, 2004).

4. Paul A. Gilje, ed., *Wages of Independence: Capitalism in the Early American Republic* (Madison, WI, 1997); John L. Larson, "Code Shifting," unpublished paper presented at PEAES Inaugural Conference, Philadelphia, April 2001.

class as wishful thinking. Second, maintaining that class only functions when a waged proletariat creates surplus value for capitalists, other scholars have declared class premature so long as many workers still toiled in legal bondage or in service and nonfactory jobs. Finally, rightfully recognizing that other structural forces like racism and sexism also create unequal material conditions, other scholars have stripped class of its exclusive power to explain who owns what and works where.

Let me pose this possibility: what would happen if we liberated class from having to meet the weighty preconditions that have traditionally defined it? That is, what if class were not predicated on 1) a shared consciousness, identity, and politics; 2) a functioning wage-labor economy centered on factory production; and 3) its primacy over other mechanisms of inequality like white supremacy and patriarchy? Would there be anything left of class? Would jettisoning these requirements strip class of its explanatory power? Or on the contrary, by asking class to do less, can we also get it to do more—namely provide us with a language to discuss material and social inequality in the new nation? Do we possess a better way of talking about the real human consequences of early republic capitalism in working people's lives?

Class—as a label for the social relations of capitalism—can flourish without requiring working-class solidarity, industrial production, and a “free market” in labor. After all, capitalism flourished in the early republic without generating a coherent working class, without depending upon industrial wage relations, without abandoning unfree labor, and without witnessing an efficient labor market that facilitated equal competition between workers of different sexes, racial groupings, ethnicities, and ages. Once we understand capitalism as a specific system of labor commodification whose very structure predicated the wealth of some on the impoverishment of others, we can redefine class as the social relations that constituted this system. In this regard, there are many things that class is not: an autonomous actor, a historical agent, a predictive model of human behavior, an objective category that exists across time and space, an imagined community. Class is not something you can poke with a stick. But rather it is a way for people who analyze the past and present to explain why—in societies ostensibly organized around the marketplace—some people go to bed hungry, some people are arrested for not working, and some people's backbreaking labor does not pay enough to provide heat in winter.

My premise is that historians should use *class* as a heuristic for the

economic power relations of capitalism. Lest class become a synonym for all economic inequality across time and space, we need a precise definition of capitalism. The extensive literature on early republic capitalism—usually categorized under the rubric of the market revolution—has focused primarily on wider networks of exchange, transportation improvements, increased consumerism, the appearance of banks, and the cultural legitimation of competitive market behavior. But rather than studying the effects of liberal capitalism's ascent or making capitalism a synonym for market exchange or a belief in the profit motive, historians must delve deeper into political economy to locate capitalism in the rules—legal, social, cultural—that determined access to material resources and established who would work for whom under the social fiction of a self-regulating market. As an increasing number of early republic legislators, jurists, intellectuals, journalists, property-owners, and investors came to define society as competitive arena of market activity among liberal subjects, only a small segment of the population could enter that arena on sure footing. Capitalism is a system in which a subset of society has the power to set the rules of commercial exchange, to limit communal access to productive resources, to control the terms of their own labor and that of their family, and to obtain access to the labor of nonfamily members as a mechanism for acquiring additional productive resources.⁵ As contributors to the *Journal of the Early Republic* recently

5. My brief discussion of capitalism draws (with an admitted eclecticism) upon William M. Reddy, *The Rise of Market Culture: The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750–1900* (New York, 1984); David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers with Democracy and Free Labor during the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1993); Michael Merrill, "Putting 'Capitalism' in Its Place: A Review of Recent Literature," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52 (April 1995), 210–26; Christopher Tomlins, "Subordination, Authority, Law: Subjects in Labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 47 (Spring 1995), 56–90; Sonya Rose, "Class Formation and the Quintessential Worker," in *Reworking Class*, ed. John R. Hall (Ithaca, NY, 1997), 133–66; Gerda Lerner, "Rethinking the Paradigm," in *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York, 1997), 146–84; Jacqueline Jones, *American Work: Four Centuries Black and White Labor* (New York, 1998); James B. Schmidt, *Free to Work: Labor Law, Emancipation, and Reconstruction, 1815–1880* (Athens, GA, 1998); Robert Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2001); Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Jeffrey Sklansky, *The Soul's Econ-*

argued in a forum on “human commodification,” what further defines capitalism is the reduction of the labor of material production and social reproduction to a market value and a form of liquid wealth. Some people could reap wealth from their ability to reduce other people to commodities. Perhaps more than we would care to admit, early republic capitalism operated with a kind of contingency that meant some people could be rich and powerful because other people could be rendered poor and powerless.⁶

In that light, we might more fruitfully employ class from a top-down vantage—as the constraints upon the choices and the limits upon the opportunities available to working people in the early republic. This is not a question of whether or not working people were able to maintain their humanity in the face of encompassing market relations. They did. This is what human beings do, as Walter Johnson has recently explained in a critique of how scholars have applied the concept of agency.⁷ Yet in studying working people’s resistance, we have neglected what they were up against and we have left unnamed the larger structural forces arrayed against them. To take a familiar example from the early republic, consider the famous waterfalls leaper, Sam Patch. We need not read Patch’s jumps as an expression of class identity or politics in order to recognize that a new configuration of economic rules emerged between the 1780s and the 1830s to severely limit the prospects of people like Sam Patch, his mother Abigail, or his father Mayo Greenleaf.⁸ Even when people in the

omy: *Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002).

6. David Waldstreicher, “The Vexed Story of Human Commodification Told by Benjamin Franklin and Venture Smith,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 24 (Summer 2004), 268–78; Amy Dru Stanley, “Wages, Sin, and Slavery: Some Thoughts on Free Will and Commodity Relations,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 24 (Summer 2004), 279–88; Stephanie Smallwood, “Commodified Freedom: Interrogating the Limits of Anti-Slavery Ideology in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 24 (Summer 2004), 289–98; Walter Johnson, “The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 24 (Summer 2004), 299–308.

7. Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History*, 37 (Fall 2003), 113–24.

8. Paul E. Johnson, *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* (New York, 2003). To accept class politics as the driving force behind Patch’s jumps is something that apparently does not come easy to many college students. In a recent class, my favorite comment was one to the effect that jumping off a cliff to stop the wheels

past acted in markedly nonclass ways or in ways that appear to present-day scholars as counterproductive to class interest, it should not obscure our recognition of the economic inequalities fundamental to capitalism. In short, class gives us a language for representing the economic power relations of capitalism.

If class did not unite all working people in a common ideology or politics, it does not follow that the early republic was a classless society. A coherent working class seems unlikely in light of the tremendous diversity of the working population in the decades following the American Revolution. By 1820, nearly two million enslaved African Americans worked primarily growing and processing agricultural crops. Much of the cotton they picked traveled north, where it became fabric through the labor of women and children in the new factories dotting the New England landscape. The fabric ended up in urban centers like New York and Philadelphia, where female seamstresses earned piece-rates for the pants, shirts, and shifts they stitched together. In those same cities, a service economy emerged around the labor of domestic servants, laundresses, and hawkers, while the functioning of the broader mercantile economy depended on the infrastructure created by street-pavers, ditch-diggers, hod-carriers, and sawyers. Seamen and stevedores facilitated the movement of goods from place to place. Many men followed seasonal work, spending some months in fisheries and other months performing farm labor for wages. All told, the people performing the labor that made the early republic economy hum were not the craft artisans of traditional labor history, but, in Marcus Rediker's words, a "motley" assemblage of casual, contractual, unskilled, and owned workers.⁹ What they shared was not a common understanding of their exploitation, but something more mundane—that other Americans translated their labor into wealth while making it unlikely that they would be able to do likewise.

Perhaps we can gain a better sense of these workers through a contemporary analogy. In Los Angeles today, the "typical" worker may be a

of capitalism is like getting a body piercing to show your opposition to the World Trade Organization—utterly ineffective.

9. Marcus Rediker, "The Revenge of Crispus Attucks; or, The Atlantic Challenge to American Labor History," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 1 (Winter 2004), 38. See also Richard Oestreicher, "The Counted and the Uncounted: The Occupational Structure of Early American Cities," *Journal of Social History*, 28 (Winter 1994), 351–61.

Filipina medical assistant who empties bedpans, a native-born white female data enterer contracted through a temp agency, or a Mexican man waiting for hire in a Home Depot parking lot. These workers do not share a great deal culturally—nor politically, considering that two of the three cannot vote. None is engaged in industrial production, but all perform labor that is central to the functioning of twenty-first-century capitalism. If we wanted to explain why such workers live in poverty, we might say that they have difficulty making ends meet because recent immigrants, people of color, and non-college-educated woman rarely get lucrative jobs. We might identify racism and sexism as important in determining who performs the dirtiest, most repetitive, and least remunerative jobs. We might note that many major employers have outsourced their workforces in order to avoid the high cost of providing health insurance. We might argue that the government (with encouragement from voters) has become hostile to the rights of workers to organize, of immigrants to access social services, and of the poor to count on a public safety net. We might note that low-wage jobs simply do not provide enough income to meet the high costs of living in a major metropolitan area. All of these observations are valid. While they do not tell us how working people experienced or thought about their material conditions, they do point to the underlying power relations of contemporary capitalism.

This modern analogy is a useful entry into the early republic's preindustrial and industrializing settings, which look in numerous ways like today's postindustrial economy. Whether by virtue of age, sex, race, nativity, or legal status, many early republic workers could not claim prerogatives of citizenship. Many of these workers labored in a service economy, where domestic and day labor had been converted to a wage system before most manufacturing work had been. Moreover, the productive labor in many locales was as likely to be performed by a sweated seamstress as by a republican artisan. Employers juggled different kinds of workers across several legal categories in order to maximize output. Workers who did organize faced conspiracy charges, and reformers made public welfare programs punitive so as to discourage dependence and idleness.

An expanded vision of who performed the essential labor within early republic capitalism makes it more difficult to imagine a common class-consciousness percolating from the bottom up. It also reminds us that American capitalism was not initially centered on the factory nor orga-

nized on a free market in labor. In fact, the tremendous diversity of the laboring population attested to capitalism's reliance upon workers who lacked legal freedom and social equality. In an American society deeply committed to white supremacy and patriarchy, the needs of capitalism were not the only determinants of who worked where or owned what. And indeed, it would be foolish for historians to try to pit white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism (or what historians abbreviate as race, gender, and class) against one another in hopes of proving the most important. We have become adept at understanding how these structures interacted, as well as how working people—situated within multiple structures of inequality—maintained multiple and simultaneous forms of identity. The less we argue about whether an Irish seamstress was fundamentally defined by her Irishness, her femaleness, or her status as a worker, the better off we are. We must see, however, that she navigated an economy whose currents flowed from overlapping systems of inequality and created different vulnerabilities and possibilities for people of different racial status, sex, age, ethnicity, and legal condition.

To return to the initial question of this paper: what tools do we, as scholars, have at our disposal to explain why this Irish seamstress lived in poverty? My answer is to start with the economic power relations of early republic capitalism. We cannot claim that inequality and exploitation were new in this era, but we can highlight that this seamstress found herself competing in a new kind of marketplace that thrived not in spite of competing categories of social difference, but because of them. *Class* provides us with a language to account for the fact that some Americans gained wealth precisely because the rules of the early republic's new capitalist economy made it unlikely that the seamstress could. The material inequalities that beset working people in the early republic demand analysis and explanation. It is not enough to say, "There was poverty." Instead, we need to put a name to the structures that made it so. By recognizing capitalism as a system of power—and allowing class to encapsulate the way capitalism created a contingent relationship between those it advantaged and disadvantaged—we will come much closer to telling the stories of those whose labor animated American economic development.

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