

THE WORKING MAN'S VISION OF LIBERTY

Hartmut Keil
(Leipzig)

In recent years, historians have addressed the question of who in nineteenth-century America was entitled and positioned to make use of the participatory potential that American democratic society offered because of its fluid social structure and mass-based political system. They have increasingly pointed to the important role that culture played in utilizing this potential, and to the varied cultural traditions that ethnic groups especially, but other groups as well, used to realize this goal.¹ Contemporary Americans had also been concerned with this issue, foremost among them Ralph Waldo Emerson, who sixty years after American political independence called for an end to European cultural predominance and for the creation of a genuinely American cultural heritage.² But who should be – and in fact who turned out to be – the creators and supporters of such an American tradition? The political rhetoric of the Jacksonian era was clearly egalitarian and all-encompassing: “The people”, the “common man” were to be the carriers of this new democratic culture.³ Yet there was no doubt in Emerson’s and other writers’ minds that this task must rather be shouldered by a cultural aristocracy – an elite recruited from patrician, Brahmin New England society and the commercial circles that had become well established in the seaports on the Atlantic coast.

This view seems to be most evident when it comes to the issue of cultural production (and therefore dominance). Emerson and his contemporaries observed

1. Some of the histories that address pertinent issues with different approaches are: Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, Hill & Wang, New York, 1982; Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth-Century America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1977; Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1978; Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1978. Cf. also ethno-cultural analyses such as Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics 1850-1896*, Free Press, Chicago, 1970, as well as his *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1979; Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971. Of the many analyses of black culture, cf. Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1974; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1976; Lawrence L. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1977. For labor movement history, cf. Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. Ira Berlin, The New Press, New York, 1987, and Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class History*, Knopf, New York, 1976.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar”, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, general editor Alfred R. Ferguson, Vol. I: *Nature, Addresses and Lectures*, Introduction and Notes by Robert E. Spiller, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1971, pp. 52-70.

3. Of the substantial literature on the Jacksonian era, see e.g. the widely contrasting views of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1945, and Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War*, Heath, Lexington, MA, 1973. Cf. also Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1984, and Wilentz, “On Class and Politics in Jacksonian America”, *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982), pp. 45-63.

and commented upon the onset of industrialization.⁴ But did they perceive and acknowledge as meaningful and valid cultural contributions the parades staged by New York City's artisan associations, the strike poems of the Lowell factory girls, let alone the worksongs of Irish laborers digging the Erie Canal or of slaves tilling the cotton fields, to mention just a few of the many examples that readily come to mind?⁵ In their analyses of nineteenth-century developments, even cultural historians in our own time have tended to downplay important components of cultural production of the lower and working classes, concentrating instead on audience reception of products not originating from among the lower ranks but rather offered the latter for consumption by cultural, and later mass, market institutions beyond their control. Lawrence Levine also succumbs to this perspective in his provocative analysis of the emergence of cultural hierarchy.⁶ By showing how cultural elites successfully imposed their standards and contained the threatening urban masses, he unwittingly adopts his subjects' perspective, casting mass audiences in a passive, non-productive mode.

In this paper I want to suggest instead that we take working people as seriously as other social groups, i.e. that we not allow ourselves a one-dimensional understanding of them, positioning them merely in their work contexts. It is in fact the close interrelationship between that context and their social and cultural needs that must be addressed in order to understand how closely connected notions of personal liberty were to everyday concerns and their fulfillment. We must analyze the social contexts in which different social and cultural needs arose and the ways in which cultural forms contributed to a sense of shared meaning and thus of political and personal liberty. Can we be certain, for instance, that ordinary people interpreted political traditions in the same way as did the guardians of the status quo? If the lower sort tried to convey their own meaning to a larger public, were they dismissed as parochial? Was an American tradition of liberty carved out by a mechanism of exclusion rather than inclusion and participation? All of which, I suppose, culminates in the question of whether, or to what degree, working people shared the concept of liberty as offered by the larger society?⁷ If their concepts were substantially different from accepted values, where do we locate these differences? If shared traditions existed, how did these blend with alternative values and expressions? My tentative answers to these questions rest on the following assumptions:

4. On contemporary reaction by intellectuals and writers to industrialization cf. Leo Marx's classic analysis *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1964.

5. Books on labor in the early republic that deal with these and other working people are Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1980; Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1979; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

6. Lawrence A. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988.

7. For definitions of the concept of working-class culture, see *Arbeiterkultur*, ed. Gerhard A. Ritter, Verlagsgruppe Athenäum, Hain, Scriptor, Hanstein, Königstein/Ts., 1979); Jürgen Kocka, *Arbeiterkultur*, Special Volume, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* Vol.5. (1979), Raymond Williams, *Culture*, Fontana Paperbacks, London, 1981; Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana Paperbacks, 1976; London, 1988; Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*; T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities", *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), pp. 567-593. Cf. also the collection of essays in *Chicago-Projekt: Untersuchungen zur Arbeitswelt und Lebensweise deutscher Arbeiter in Chicago, 1850-1915*, ed. Hartmut Keil, *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 29:2 (1984).

The prevalent 19th-century perception of American society as a liberal state without significant class divisions implied the concept of a shared culture; in effect it sanctioned the definition of culture and liberty by social elites and precluded in turn the recognition of contributions that arose outside this mainstream, sometimes, as in the case of socialist culture, even branding them as un-American. Working people, however, tapped other rich sources excluded from the bourgeois redefinition of culture that were oral, symbolic, ritualistic, and therefore by definition communal and participatory.

This paper will discuss what relevance the concepts of work, democracy, and culture had for the emergence by and for working people in nineteenth-century America of participatory forms that gave substance to their notion of liberty. In the first section, "Traditions of Work – Culture in Context", it will try to convey a sense of changes in the work place as they affected various groups of workers. In the second section, "Democracy – Community and Participation", it will emphasize the specific view on democratic traditions that groups of workers held and the practical meaning they gave to it. In the third section, "The Uses of Working-Class Culture", it will turn to various expressions of working people's culture from a decidedly functional perspective.

1. Traditions of Work – Culture in Context

Historians have for a long time tried to make sense of the peculiar development of the American working class in the course of industrialization in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their interest was initially motivated by the obvious fact that in the United States, quite in contrast to European industrializing countries, no socialist or labor party with any significant political impact emerged. Ever since Werner Sombart in 1906⁸ accounted for American "exceptionalism" by the ideology of the liberal state, safeguarded by a political system that effectively controlled third parties, and sufficiently supported by the reality of a higher standard of living for workers, a wide range of explanations have been offered for this development. Over the past twenty years labor and social historians have turned to the composition of the American working class itself and come up with a rich mosaic of distinct groups of working people.⁹ However, these findings have been interpreted as evidence of the

8. Werner Sombart, *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* [J.C.B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], Tübingen, 1906. This book was originally published as "Studien zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des nordamerikanischen Proletariats", *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 21 (1905), pp. 210-36, 308-46, 556-611. It was printed as an English translation, "Study of the Historical Development and Evolution of the American Proletariat", *International Socialist Review* 6 (1905), pp. 129-36, 293-301, 358-67. A critical English version of the book was published in 1976, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, trans. by Patricia M. Hocking and C.T. Husbands, ed. and with an introductory essay by C.T. Husbands and a foreword by Michael Harrington, International Arts and Sciences Press, White Plains, NY, 1976. More recent works which have taken up Sombart's question and challenged several of his conclusions, are *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism*, University of California Press, 1974, Berkeley, 1984, eds. John H.M. Laslett and Seymour M. Lipset; *Why is there no socialism in the United States. Pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas de socialisme aux États-Unis?* eds. Jean Heffer and Jeanine Rovet, Edition de l'École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 1988.

9. The countless number of studies that have appeared cannot be listed here. In a way the culmination of the new labor history has been the two-volume history published by the American Social History Project

fragmentation of the American working class by skill level and traditions of work, political and ideological socialization, religious affiliation, local, urban and regional differences, gender-specific work allocation, and ethnic occupational specialization and organizational isolation.¹⁰ Twenty years ago Herbert Gutman, in a seminal article in the *American Historical Review*, gave a synthesizing interpretation of this phenomenon of diversity, showing how the composition of the American working class kept changing fundamentally over three generations at the very time that industrial development thoroughly transformed the American economy.¹¹

Gutman's arguments, as well as research by younger historians who have produced an impressive number of fine monographs, are well known and have almost become the accepted wisdom now. These findings need not be repeated here.¹² However, for the purpose of my argument I will identify some of the work contexts and the major transformations that in my opinion bear directly on the topic of workers' culture.

First let us turn to the impact of artisan culture in the United States. Although medieval guild traditions were obviously absent, quite similar practices and ways of life developed around the structure and experience of work in the early republic. Master artisans prided themselves on their autonomy and on the control they exercised over the production process. Although work relations were hierarchically structured, a paternalistic affirmation of responsibility by master artisans for their apprentices and journeymen and the conviction of the latter that they were part of a larger community contributed to a sense of shared values and the conviction that artisans, along with Jefferson's cherished yeoman farmers, were the backbone of the republic, the core of its citizenry and the carriers of what historians have called "plebeian culture".¹³

Sean Wilentz has reminded us that this unified world began to disintegrate as early as in the 1820s and 1830s.¹⁴ We should not, however, dismiss its impact after those decades too quickly, because we know that autonomous workers continued to play a decisive role into the 1880s. Although the work context was no longer the same, and although master craftsmen now were employed by entrepreneurs in large factories, they still retained control over production.¹⁵ Frank Couvares, among others,

at the City University of New York that was initiated by the late Herbert G. Gutman and completed under the direction of Stephen Brier: *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture & Society*, Vol. 1: *From Conquest & Colonization through Reconstruction & the Great Uprising of 1877*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1989; Vol. 2: *From the Gilded Age to the Present*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1992.

10. The theme of fragmentation is central in Gerald Rosenblum, *Immigrant Workers: Their Impact on American Labor Radicalism*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.

11. Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919", *American Historical Review* 78 (1973), pp. 531-88.

12. Cf. for those works the bibliographies in American Social History Project, *We Who Built America*, and Leon Fink, *American Labor History*, American Historical Association, Washington, D.C.

13. Cf. among others Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1976; Paul Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1981; Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1983; Francis G. Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877-1919*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1984.

14. Sean Wilentz, "Artisan Republican Festivals and the Rise of Class Conflict in New York City, 1788-1837", *Working-Class America: Essay on Labor, Community, and American Society*, eds. Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1983, pp. 37-77.

15. For elaboration and application of that concept, see David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1979.

has described how skilled workers ran their units in the Pittsburgh iron and glass works as basically autonomous shops, that it was they who hired and fired their helpers, and that it was they who decided the pace and direction of work. The same sense of autonomy and pride prevailed among them, as well as a similar context of a plebeian culture that occupied center stage.¹⁶

An additional important element that, surprisingly, has not often been included in the discussion of the impact of artisan and plebeian cultures must be mentioned. The genuinely American tradition that Wilentz, Alan Dawley and others have so richly documented was being reinforced by immigrants from Europe who shared many of the values that American artisans subscribed to. Because of their similar work experiences, and what is even more, because also of their sympathy for European jacobinism, the master and journeymen artisans who kept arriving from Europe in significant numbers during the course of the 19th century could thus easily identify with their American brethren. And because journeymen had traveled widely and worked throughout Europe as part of acquiring experience on the job, they also carried along an international orientation that often turned out to be decisive in overcoming ethnic parochialism and in fostering solidarity among workers of various backgrounds in America's industrial centers.¹⁷

Other changes in America's work force during the process of industrialization included its diversification along gender, ethnic and racial lines. These new developments usually were the result of specific work arrangements in companies employing large numbers of workers and dominating city neighborhoods in the emerging industrial belt or entire mill towns, like the textile river towns in New England or the Pennsylvania mining towns. Because of space, I can refer to a few selected examples only.¹⁸ It was unmarried women from the New England farms who were drawn to Lowell's cotton mills in the 1830s and who, despite efforts by paternalistic mill owners, developed their own distinct way of life around the work and living arrangements they found upon arrival. A homogeneous work force here, as well as in countless other locations in 19th century industrializing America, established common patterns of everyday life that employers viewed with suspicion, sensing that they reflected worlds apart from their own.¹⁹

16. Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburgh*, pp. 13-20.

17. Charlotte Erickson, *American Industry and the European Immigrant, 1860-1885*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1957; Charlotte Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants: The Adaptation of English and Scottish Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century America*, University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, Fla., 1972; Bruce C. Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1992; "Struggle a Hard Battle": *Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed. Dirk Hoerder, Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, IL, 1986; *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920: Recent European Research*, ed. Dirk Hoerder, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1983; John B. Jentz, "Artisan Culture and the Organization of Chicago's German Workers in the Gilded Age, 1860 to 1890", in *German Workers' Culture in the United States 1850 to 1920*, ed. Hartmut Keil, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1988, pp. 59-79.

18. Cf. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers*; Dawley, *Class and Community*; Dublin, *Women at Work*; Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983; Susan Levine, *Labor's True Woman: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1984. General histories of working women are Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1982; Barbara M. Wertheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1977. Cf. also Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1981.

19. Dublin, *Farm to Factory*; Dublin, *Women at Work*; Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Era of World War I*, Free Press, New York, 1979; *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New*

Women's impact, both as industrial or domestic workers and as wives in working-class families, kept increasing in the nineteenth century. Even before the advent of the sewing machine, outwork arrangements gave employers access to cheap female labor and tied housewives and their daughters into the industrial economy. This experience enabled women to develop an understanding of industrial work itself and of the importance of supporting social and cultural networks for their own as well as for their husbands' and sons' organizational efforts.

Still another perspective helps to point out the tremendous changes in the composition of the work force in a society that within a few decades vastly expanded and consolidated its territorial base, enormously increased its industrial output so that by 1890 it had taken the lead among industrializing countries, and in order to reach that position needed, and was able, to attract large numbers of immigrant workers. Ethnicity and race, along with gender, became increasingly relevant categories to characterize American working people as the technological transformation of the economy and of industry absorbed more laborers with lower skill levels who were placed into the production process like readily interchangeable parts.²⁰ Three points in time, each separated by a period of forty years, help underscore this increasing significance of ethnic, racial, and gender divisions within the American work force. In 1820 it was by and large homogeneous, with the important exception of the free and bound black population. By 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, an enormous influx of immigrants from Ireland, the British Isles, Western and Northern Europe as well as from China had led to job displacements of free blacks and old stock female workers, and to the predominance of artisans from abroad in selected crafts and of unskilled laborers in building, construction and transportation. Finally, at the turn of the century, a wide range of nationals from Mediterranean countries and Eastern Europe had joined the American labor force, along with freedmen who were uprooted from Southern farms in increasing numbers and tried to gain a foothold in the urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest. All of the newcomers, as well as the immigrants who had arrived earlier, established cultural and social pockets in neighborhoods where they not only coped with the new work environment but where they were also able to maintain cultural traditions and memories.²¹

This fundamental transformation of work and the labor force thus had significant implications for the American landscape of working-class culture which changed from a homogeneous whole to a patchwork pattern composed of distinct ethno-racial territorial and occupational imprints, concentrations of life styles, ethnic boundaries and overlaps defined by language and by cultural institutions, racial accommodation and antagonism acted out in contested public space. We should

England Mill Women (1840-1845), ed. Benita Eisler, Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1977; Mary H. Blewett, "Shared But Different: The Experience of Women in the Nineteenth Century Work Force of the New England Shoe Industry", *Essays from the Lowell Industrial History Conference on Industrial History* (1981).

20. For an insightful overview of those changes see David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1982.

21. Recent histories of immigration that take note of the problems of work and neighborhood are Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, Harper Collins, New York, 1990; Thomas Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History*, Free Press, New York, 1983; John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington: 1985. Cf. also Hoerder, "Struggle a Hard Battle"; Hoerder, *American Labor and Immigration History*; Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*; Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*.

beware of nostalgically celebrating this rich variety of cultures that went largely unnoticed and often unrecorded as an idyllic and harmonious ensemble where, in fact, there were irreconcilable differences, cleavages, and fights for recognition. Indeed we must ask if the image of a patchwork tends to reinforce such a nostalgic view, since it implies a new quality of the finished product from rags, by themselves worthless, expertly fit together. On the other hand, neither should we succumb too easily to the temptation to declare this complex landscape of working people's lives simply as "fragmented" and thus lay to rest the challenge to our analytical ability to make sense of this difficult terrain. So the question remains: Were there no unifying elements?

2. Democracy – Community and Participation

In this section emphasis will be placed upon structural similarities in ethnic working-class communities despite the antagonisms between groups. There were comparable patterns of expectation as well; both need to be looked into, if we want to understand working people's distinct cultural system.

First, there is overwhelming evidence that workers laid claim to sharing the tradition of American independence. They considered themselves an important element of the "producing classes" who maintained and defended republicanism even when, in their view, it became increasingly threatened by capitalists, bankers, and corrupt politicians.²² Their basic trust in political bodies – the courts, the police, and the militia – was a sign of their identification with a state that in their view safeguarded their rights as citizens of the republic. Solidarity among workers thus continued to include responsibility for the common good – at least until the depression of the 1870s and the railroad strike of 1877, when the powers of the state were for the first time ruthlessly directed against protesting workers. It may not come as a big surprise that a writer from Germany who had been active in the emerging socialist movement in a long poem directly expressed outrage against what he perceived as capitalists' encroachments upon citizens' rights.²³ More important – because this view was received by a much greater working-class audience – was the same message as it became encoded in the plot structure and plot resolution of dime novels. In a brilliant analysis of that genre, Michael Denning has convincingly shown that dime novels were "enactments of social conflicts and cleavages",²⁴ but in order to decipher their meaning for young male and female workers these stories

22. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872*, Knopf, New York, 1967; Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy*; Richard Schneirov, "Class Conflict, Municipal Politics, and Governmental Reform in Gilded Age Chicago, 1871-1875", in *German Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1850-1910: A Comparative Perspective*, eds. Hartmut Keil and John B. Jentz, Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, IL., 1983, pp. 183-205.

23. For a satire that scathingly exposed such practices, see Heinz Ickstadt and Hartmut Keil, "A Forgotten Piece of Working-Class Literature: Gustav Lyser's Satire of the Hewitt Hearing of 1878", *Labor History* 20 (1979), pp. 127-140.

24. Michael Denning, "Cheap Stories: Popular Fiction and Working Class Culture in Nineteenth Century America", in *The Crisis of Modernity: Recent Critical Theories of Culture and Society in the United States and West Germany*, eds. Günther H. Lenz and Kurt L. Shell, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1986p. 112. See also his book-length study *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, Verso, London, 1987.

need to be read as allegories.²⁵ Only then can their happy endings be understood both as “escapes from the nightmares of bourgeois myths” and as enactments of “utopian longings”.²⁶ As to African American workers, Leon Fink reminds us “that the political ideals of white America had not escaped [the] attention [of former slaves] either”.²⁷ He cites the angry protest of a committee of freedmen, when war-conscripted Sea Island plantation lands were returned to their former owners, which read:

This is our home, we have made These lands what they are ... We have been always ready to strike for Liberty and humanity yea to fight if needs be to preserve this glorious union. Shall not we who are freedmen and have always been true to this Union have the same rights as are enjoyed by Others?²⁸

When groups of immigrant workers appropriated this tradition in a changing social and political context, they often used it selectively, blending it with their own traditions or more or less reinterpreting it for their own needs. In a few instances, this could mean a felicitous junction of quite similar currents, as in the case of European artisans who were easily accepted by America’s artisan community because their tradition of jacobinism was so close to American republicanism.²⁹ Even German craftsmen who were committed to social democratic visions of a classless society did not cut their ties to a radical democratic heritage but instead reinterpreted the Declaration of Independence, not only exploiting its symbolic value but also using many of its demands.³⁰ Christian symbolism was also a way of relating to common traditions in a nation that saw itself as a chosen and favored people.³¹ This could take some strange twists and turns; thus a Christmas play written by a German socialist resident of New Orleans in the late 1870s completely reinterpreted that holiday’s meaning by replacing Christ’s coming into the world with socialism’s arrival and by depicting the latter as the true redeemer.³² Other immigrant workers for whom the church remained the central institution, could better relate to subtler references to the early Christian communitarian tradition.³³

There is thus convincing evidence of the explicit appropriation of the symbols of the American democratic tradition. However, I suggest that it was the communal egalitarian setting where the practical relevance of that tradition came to bear. Democracy was not an abstract notion, but implied a common, a shared, experience,

25. Denning, “Cheap Stories”, p. 117.

26. Denning, “Cheap Stories”, p. 122.

27. Fink, *American Labor History*, p. 8.

28. Letter by Henry Blum et al. to “the President of the United States”, October 28, 1965, National Archives as collected and edited by the Freedmen and Southern History Project, University of Maryland; as quoted in Fink, *American Labor History*, 8.

29. Cf. Levine, *The Spirit of ‘48*; and Bruce Levine, *The Migration of Ideology and the Contested Meaning of Freedom: German-Americans in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Occasional Paper No. 7, German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., 1992.

30. For examples cf. *We, The Other People: Alternative Declarations of Independence by Labor Groups, Farmers, Woman’s Rights Advocates, Socialists, and Blacks, 1829-1975*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1976; *German Workers in Chicago: A Documentary History of Working-Class Culture from 1850 to World War I*, eds. Hartmut Keil and John B. Jentz, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1988.

31. Herbert G. Gutman, “Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age”, *American Historical Review* 72 (1966), pp. 74-101; Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers*.

32. Heinz Ickstadt, “German Workers’ Literature in Chicago — Old Forms in New Contexts”, *German Workers’ Culture*, ed. Keil, p. 206.

33. Gutman, “Protestantism”; Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers*.

despite the fact that boundaries did indeed exist – by the criteria already discussed – that separated groups from each other. This notion of a shared experience structured and pervaded working people's lives, and it is basic for an understanding of workers' culture. The bonds of kinship, town, and region, for example, took on enormous importance during the process of migration for individuals and families, where choice of settlement depended as much upon knowledge of supportive networks of relatives and former neighbors in a familiar recreated cultural setting as upon the availability of work.³⁴ The daily routine on the shop floor, in turn, and the mutual dependence because of the demands of the production process required a basic willingness to cooperate from workers who often came from quite different cultural backgrounds and who shared work with people socially and culturally living in different worlds. Because of the common experience on the shop floor, however, these workers came to depend on, and often mutually respect, each other.³⁵ The harsh reality of working-class life in America's urban centers was also conducive to social bonding. The lack of public supportive networks in cases of illness, accident, death of the father or mother, unemployment, and destitution shifted the burden onto friends, neighbors, charitable religious institutions, voluntary associations and labor union locals. Proximity of work place and home reinforced social togetherness and common activities after work hours. Although ethnic groups usually went their separate ways, we know that ethnic neighborhoods were not ghettos and that their boundaries overlapped, especially in business streets where stores attracted a variety of customers.

The housing situation for working people decisively, although indirectly, contributed to group contact and cohesiveness. From New York City's crowded tenements to Chicago's trowel-shaped multi-family frame houses, urban working-class quarters were shabbily built and maintained, inadequately supplied with facilities, and poorly lighted and ventilated. People therefore escaped to the public and semi-public spaces³⁶ that offered better service and amenities as well as the company of one's equals, neighbors, friends, fellow workers, parishioners, or members of the same association – and more often than not a person would fit several of those categories. Be it private clubs with restricted public access, pubs where workers would meet for lunch and before heading back home after work, beer halls and beer gardens where families – not only German families – even took their children, or church or political party festivals where people were invited to join regardless of affiliation – all of these places substituted for the restricted options of working people's homes, reinforced collective outlooks and activities, and helped overcome and shatter ethnic and gender boundaries. One must, however, add the sour note that racial barriers did in fact remain unshaken.³⁷

34. For examples of chain migration drawing people from the same villages, regions, and countries to initial settlements in the United States, see *A Century of European Migrations, 1830-1930*, eds. Rudolph J. Vecoli and Suzanne M. Sinke, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1991.

35. Montgomery, *Workers' Control*; Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburgh*, 13-22.

36. Perry R. Duis, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston: 1880-1920*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1983; Klaus Ensslen, "German-American Working-Class Saloons in Chicago: Their Social Function in an Ethnic and Class-Specific Cultural Context", *German Workers' Culture*, ed. Keil, pp. 157-180; Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1983; Francis G. Couvares, "The Triumph of Commerce: Class Culture and Mass Culture in Pittsburgh", in *Labor, Community, and American Society*, eds. Frisch and Walkowitz, pp. 123-152.

37. For the extent and function of racism in the working class cf. the book by David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Verso, London, 1991.

Once we move beyond the description of the routine of everyday life, the notion of a shared experience in a communal egalitarian setting becomes even more persuasive. Preparations for festivities involved many people and often many associations. Their programs were planned so as to relate to people's immediate world and daily concerns, and they also aimed at involving the whole neighborhood. As a matter of course, they used public spaces – the streets for parades, picnic grounds for large gatherings, spacious halls in the winter for balls – to accommodate large crowds and to attract by-standers' attention. In such instances, the distinction between culture producers and audience becomes problematical, even dubious. For the purpose was to get everyone involved, to make them active participants themselves in the event – parading in a demonstration, performing in a play, giving a speech, preparing and selling food, or just enjoying other people's company.³⁸

There are other, less obvious, and therefore perhaps more striking, examples that also point to the importance of the participatory communal setting. Samuel Compers' famous account in his autobiography of how he was introduced to the writings of Karl Marx comes to mind.³⁹ As a young man, he worked in a cigar shop where a worker would be chosen during working hours to read aloud to his fellow workers so that they would be entertained and educated during their dull, repetitious and long work routine. This was by no means a unique situation. Detroit cigarmaker Charles Erb relates a quite similar experience.⁴⁰ Reading was not necessarily a solitary undertaking but, as cultural historian Michael Denning has reminded us as well,

the reading of popular fiction in 19th century working class cultures does have social, familial, and communal aspects. The consumption of commercially produced fiction retains some of the aspects of storytelling traditions, even as it supplants those older oral traditions.⁴¹

What then were the effects of this communal, participatory, and egalitarian setting on the forms and expressions of working-class culture?

3. The Uses of Working-Class Culture

One characteristic of the culture of working people has been implied throughout the preceding pages. Working-class culture tried to address people's needs, was part and parcel of their daily lives and thus intimately tied into, and intertwined with, their leisure time and recreational activities. Cultural events and cultural forms employed on such occasions had to be suited both in their content and their communicative structure to reach out to audiences and include them as participants. It was therefore no coincidence that participatory settings and forms predominated. On the one hand public gardens and streets were chosen as places of leisure activities

38. Cf. Wilentz, "Artisan Republican Festivals"; Hartmut Keil and Heinz Ickstadt, "Elements of German Working-Class Culture in Chicago, 1880 to 1890", in *German Workers' Culture*, ed. Keil, pp. 81-108.

39. On contemporary reaction by intellectuals and writers to industrialization cf. Leo Marx's classic analysis *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, in *op. cit.*

40. Richard J. Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1986, p. 63.

41. Denning, "Cheap Stories", p. 114.

and celebrations for the obvious reasons referred to above. At the same time, such settings by their very nature also tended to be open and inclusive, inviting and attracting even those who happened to pass by. Of course this has always been one of the major reasons for staging demonstrations and open air rallies. Thus labor parties and trade unions tried to gain a wider audience beyond their committed members by deliberately using popular forms of entertainment that were generally known and accepted and not burdened with ideological meaning.⁴² On other occasions, organizations also applied the inverse strategy of attaching new and specific content to well-known folk cultural forms.

Some of the most popular attractions during working people's celebrations and festivities were games offered for adults as well as for children. Except for boxing or fist fights, which early took on semi-professional characteristics, these games were not contests between individuals, but encouraged groups of people to step forward and join in. Be it relay, sack or boat races, tug-of-war, or baseball games, these were always collective competitions involving substantial numbers of participants.

For the same reason, preferred forms of cultural production were also group-oriented. Singing played an important role, again almost never in the form of soloists performing for an attentive audience but usually as choirs or singing societies. On several occasions – as when the German singing societies of the United States gathered to celebrate their Song Festival – such groups joined efforts to form a mass chorus that counted many hundred voices.⁴³

The theater and the stage are other obvious examples. Larry Levine and other scholars who have studied working-class leisure have shown that both its setting and its productions invited involvement by the audience.⁴⁴ More often than not performances were given in smoke-filled halls run by saloon keepers eager to make a profit by selling their beer. Short plays enacting recent happenings within the community were presented – like Bartley Campbell's production in Pittsburgh in 1878 of the play *The Lower Million*, in which the local author John Ellsler depicted events from the great railroad strike of 1877. Couvares describes and analyzes its plot as follows:⁴⁵

Its locus is a Pittsburgh iron mill. When the mill owner treats a workers' committee with contempt, the workers strike and join the growing crowd in the streets. The play's hero, Frank Farwell, is a mechanic and aspiring inventor who is loved – and whose inventions are financed – by the mill owner's daughter. The villain is one Gilbert, who wants to seize control of both the mill and the mill owner's daughter. These are stock characters, as are Gilhooley, the Irish worker, and Geister, the German. But their very simplicity and conventionality allowed men like Ellsler to set them in motion in such a way as to register, with extraordinary immediacy, the state of public opinion upon questions of great moment. Thus Farwell and his

42. Cf. Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours*; Couvares, "Triumph of Commerce"; Keil and Ickstadt, "Elements"; Harmut Keil, "Immigrant Neighborhoods and American Society: German Immigrants on Chicago's Northwest Side in the Late Nineteenth Century", in *German Workers' Culture*, ed. Keil, pp. 25-58.

43. *Documentary History*, eds. Keil and Jentz, pp. 284-291.

44. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburg*, pp. 32-50; Christine Heiss, "Popular and Working-Class German Theater in Chicago, 1870 to 1910", in *German Workers' Culture*, ed. Keil, pp. 181-201; cf. also Denning, "Cheap Stories", pp. 110, 114.

45. Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburg*, pp. 42-43.

ethnic comrades 'stand up for the workingmen's rights' at the same time that they expose Gilbert's plot and save the mill owner from ruin.

Couvares concludes:

Among the numerous judgments made along the way one stands out: The skilled craftsman is the key to the industrial system in the Iron City; he is the link to all varieties of workingmen and the savior of honest management as well.

Plays like this were often performed alongside shallow farces, vaudeville, or music acts. Audiences were raucous and outspoken, commenting upon the quality of the fare they were exposed to. Sometimes even the distinction between producer and performer became blurred, as when the author of a play appeared on stage in one of the roles he had created.⁴⁶

In addition to their group character, these cultural forms show the persistence of oral orientations and traditions. We cannot simply account for this fact by pointing to a high level of illiteracy among the lower classes in American society, who quite to the contrary, and compared to their European counterparts, showed an astonishing degree of literacy. An explanation must rather be sought in the emotional appeal that these forms carried which only came to life as staged performances in a public setting. Because of these very qualities such forms induced people to get involved.

We must then understand such performances not only as vehicles that interpreted, and gave meaning to, selected topics they addressed but as events in and by themselves, as public enactments that momentarily held a magic spell, acts that in themselves created a sense of mutuality and community.⁴⁷ As repeated reenactments accompanying working people in their routine entertainments throughout the seasons and over the years, these patterns of celebrations and festivities took on aspects of communal public rituals laden with symbolic meaning that reminded people of their common fate and renewed and maintained their sense of solidarity.

Several examples come to mind where workers reaffirmed their claim to a plebeian heritage and democratic culture. The early Fourth of July celebrations were such annual occasions where working people redirected the course of the republic to the original values as they understood them in a joyous public ritual.⁴⁸ Even when groups like the socialist movement carved out their own specific tradition from a variety of sources, they used similar patterns of periodic ritualistic public celebration to keep their members dedicated to the cause: Annual commemorations of Thomas Paine, and later of the Paris Commune, the Haymarket martyrs, and finally May Day are cases in point.⁴⁹

However, these latter examples once more raise the issue of inclusiveness. How representative of working-class culture was, for instance, the annual Haymarket remembrance? Who participated? Weren't these just isolated groups unable to cut

46. For examples cf. Heiss, "Popular and Working-Class German Theater", 194-195 and Keil/Ickstadt, "Elements", p. 97.

47. Couvares refers to an "ethic of mutualism"; *Remaking of Pittsburgh*, p. 20.

48. Wilentz, "Artisan Republican Festivals", pp. 46-51; Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburgh*, p. 50.

49. For examples of such celebrations among the Chicago socialist and anarchist movements in Chicago, see *Documentary History*, eds. Keil and Jentz, pp.252-276.

across ideological and ethnic lines, or who were at best only momentarily successful in relating to broader segments of the working class? In other words, we are confronted again with the problem of the fragmentation of working-class participants and audiences. I want to leave aside ideological implications; obviously there were important differences as well as common grounds. I would like to turn attention instead to the consequences of such ethnic divisions for the emergence of mass popular culture.

In the latter course of the nineteenth century, as new groups and more immigrants entered the American working class, the English expression became less of a communicative vehicle that could bind working people to a common language and cultural tradition. I find it significant that working-class culture in this problematic situation could have recourse to a tradition that relied less on written and oral expressions (for, obviously, oral traditions did not overcome the language barrier either) than on visual images that carried meaning regardless of linguistic orientation and that could be used to circumvent language fragmentation. It is for the same reasons, of course, that symbolic actions and public rituals remained important means of communication and interpretation as well. Commercial mass popular culture, as it emerged around the turn of the century, also relied on such trans-ethnic and intercultural expressions, be it music, penny arcades, the nickelodeon, or especially film. New technological developments now accelerated the transition to a visual culture that incorporated many elements of the old forms and expressions while redefining the terms of production and the message that the new products carried. In the course of this technological and cultural transition the old meaning of workers' solidarity and community seems to have been lost and a new power relationship between producers and consumers established.⁵⁰ This new relationship can perhaps best be understood as a contest between market interests that tried to affirm their hegemonic hold over mass audiences and those audiences who in turn tried to maintain at least a semblance of autonomy.

50. Cf. the arguments by Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences", *American Historical Review* 97 (1992), pp. 1369-1399, and the comment by T.J. Jackson Lears, "Making Fun of Popular Culture", *American Historical Review* 97 (1992), pp. 1417-1426.