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The Myth of the Classless Society: Henry Carey and the Anti-Labor Origins of U.S. Political Economy (1820s–1830s)

Matteo M. Rossi 

Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Torino, Torino, Italy
Email: matteo.rossi@unito.it

Abstract

The essay argues that the idea of the United States as a classless society was never a faithful representation of the U.S. socioeconomic reality, but constituted a myth elaborated since the 1830s by the first generation of U.S. economists to oppose the insubordination of Northern white workers, their mobilization through strikes, their politicization of class, and their critique of wage labor. It was precisely to counter the workers' discourse, the essay maintains, that the first U.S. economists, most importantly Henry Charles Carey (1793–1879), developed an ideological representation of U.S. society as a classless structure devoid of fixed boundaries, in which industrious individuals could improve their condition through labor and in which social positions reflected a scale of talents and merits. By studying the early writings of Carey, but also of Theodore Sedgwick (1780–1839), Francis Wayland (1796–1865), Henry Vethake (1791–1866), Alonzo Potter (1800–1865), and Francis Lieber (1800–1872), the essay shows how economists used the myth of the classless society to scientifically legitimize the coming of capitalism to the United States, as well as to delegitimize class conflict. This anti-labor reaction, the essay argues, marked the very emergence of political economy in the United States as a science aimed at justifying the order of society through a mystified representation of its power relations, while the myth of the classless society would persist as a fundamental ideological pillar in the legitimation and naturalization of American capitalism.

Keywords: Henry Charles Carey; classless society; political economy; capitalism; labor movement

The myth of the United States as a classless society has been a persistent pillar in the legitimation of American capitalism. The idea that opportunities for upward mobility in the United States are equally open to everyone, and that social distinctions are not the result of birth but of talent, has allowed to naturalize and justify the hierarchies brought and strengthened by capitalism up to the present. This essay argues that the political meaning of such myth can only be understood by looking at its origins in

the 1820s and 1830s United States, when it was elaborated as a scientific and ideological tool to oppose the language of class brought forward by the first labor insurgency in the North. In fact, it was precisely to counter the workers' denunciation of capitalist labor relations and their mobilization through trades' unions and strikes that, since the 1830s, the first generation of U.S. political economists, most importantly Henry Charles Carey (1793–1879), started to represent U.S. society as a fluid structure that, while maintaining hierarchies, was open, scalable and devoid of permanent distinctions. Deploying the tools of economic science, U.S. economists developed a scientific representation that rejected the language of class and denied the existence of fixed classes in the United States, in the attempt to remove any theoretical ground for social conflict. It was this anti-labor reaction that marked the origins of U.S. political economy as a science aimed at legitimizing the order of society through a mystified representation of its power relations.

The scholarship on early-nineteenth-century U.S. economic thought has largely underestimated the social and political context in which ideas concerning U.S. classlessness were first elaborated. Accordingly, with the brief exception of Michael O'Connor in 1944,¹ historians failed to recognize that the reflection of early economists in the 1830s moved from the need to counter the workers' claims.² This has been largely due to a historiographic tendency (often reinforced by the new histories of U.S. capitalism) to overlook the relevance of workers' struggles in the 1830s. In Carey's case, most historians have interpreted his political economy as a faithful representation of the U.S. socioeconomic reality and his critique of Malthus and Ricardo as an anti-British, nationalist reaction, when instead it moved from a fight against the labor movement. Carey's main scholars never noticed his opposition to the workers' struggles in the 1830s Philadelphia.³ Others, focusing only on Carey's later protectionist writings from the 1850s, have understood his "labor argument for protection" simply as a reaction to industrialization and to its social ills, without understanding its ideological character.⁴ Even those historians who went the furthest in grasping the anti-labor, conservative elements of early U.S. political economy, like Sean Wilentz and Martin Burke, did not trace it back to a direct fight against the workers' discourse.⁵ Instead, Andrew Dawson concluded that, by ignoring the labor movement, Carey failed to address the issue of class, when his goal was precisely that of concealing it.⁶ At the same time, several historians of the nineteenth-century United States have accepted the economists' depiction of classlessness as a conventional sociological truth, reiterating their discourse and failing to see its political and ideological meaning.⁷ Thus, the myth of U.S. classlessness has often been assumed by twentieth-century historiography and social sciences, making it even harder to deconstruct its premises and recognize the mystification it involved.

Drawing both on economic treatises published in the 1830s and on newly found archival material on Carey, this essay seeks to fill a gap in the historiography on U.S. economic thought, by showing that one of the main ideological pillars of U.S. capitalism was not forged out of an objective observation of the nineteenth-century social reality, but rather as an ideological weapon elaborated in the thick of a conflict around class. In doing so, by uncovering the history that economists concealed within their theory, the essay aims to offer a reassessment of early U.S. economic science as an attempt to legitimize capitalist labor relations against the threat posed by class struggle. In Carey's case in particular, this reinterpretation can cast a new and different light not only on his

early writings in the 1830s, but also on his following economic and political reflection up to the 1870s.

Northern workers and the politicization of class

After the 1780s, the process of capitalist transformation driven by the U.S. integration into the world market had started making cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia into established commercial hubs and growing manufacturing centers, in which wage labor was affirming itself over other forms of dependent employment. In the 1820s, however, such process was drastically accelerated by the construction of canals and railways and by the further commercialization of agriculture. The increasing prices of lands, the declining prices of agricultural products, and the enhanced competition forced a mass of Northern farmers to sell their land and move westward in search of cheaper land, or eastward in search of wages in larger cities.⁸

This drastic expansion of the urban population, together with the growing competition, triggered a transformation of artisan workplaces, with the concentration of laborers in larger workshops, the division of tasks, the spread of outwork, and the increasing recourse to the labor of women and children.⁹ While textile manufactories remained confined to rural settings, labor-intensive changes in small workshops ushered in a peculiarly metropolitan form of industrialization.¹⁰ Having become little more than contractors for merchant capitalists, master craftsmen could maintain their profits only by compressing wages and production costs, dividing tasks, increasing rhythms, reducing piecework rates, enforcing a more stringent time discipline and abandoning task-oriented work habits.¹¹ The growing division of tasks in particular allowed masters to substitute experienced workers for half-trained journeymen, women, and apprentices who were soon dismissed.¹² This segmentation and hierarchization of the workforce, then, resulted in an overall wage reduction, in a lengthening of the working day and in the disruption of traditional artisan rules.¹³

Thus, in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, while master craftsmen experienced unprecedented possibilities of accumulation, journeymen increasingly became dependent upon wage labor for life.¹⁴ The coming of capitalism had therefore unleashed overall accumulation while hardening social distinctions, impoverishing both rural and urban workers, separating the interests of masters and journeymen, and making upward mobility for the latter increasingly difficult.¹⁵ Simultaneously, the legal restriction of economic alternatives, through wage forfeitures, criminalization of strikes and vagrancy laws, reinforced power asymmetries and consolidated the coercive nature of wage labor.¹⁶ These findings of labor history concerning the proletarianization of Northern urban workers have been reinforced by economic historians who showed that the remarkable growth of Northern economy in the first half of the century was accompanied by a stark increase in income inequality.¹⁷

Since the late 1820s, Northern (white and male) U.S. workers, both journeymen mechanics and factory operatives, were ready to describe this transformation through the language of class. Until the early-nineteenth century, economic and political thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic had taken for granted the division of society into “classes,” “ranks,” or “orders” with conflicting interests. While British economists like David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus had described such conflict to be irreconcilable,

U.S. post-revolutionary statesmen like James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay had faced the problem of how to build republican institutions capable of moderating it.¹⁸ In most cases, U.S. and European thinkers had used social classification and taxonomy as a tool to scientifically understand society in order to govern it, never disputing the existence of classes, but rather contending about where to draw the lines among them, about what kind of relations connected them and about the political consequences of such classification.¹⁹ Since the 1820s, U.S. workers in the North started to appropriate this social classification, while reversing its political meaning and turning it into a vehicle to contest their worsening conditions.

At first, they did so under the influence of British Ricardian socialists, whose writings circulated widely in Northeastern cities and were often reprinted in workers' journals. However, the agrarian utopianism expressed by Robert Owen's socialism, and later by Fourierite associationism, could hardly speak to the immediate needs of U.S. journeymen and factory workers, who took up the Ricardians' theoretical framework but radicalized their vision of class. The most relevant examples of such discourse can be found in labor journals created since the late 1820s, as well as in the discourse of journeymen leaders like Thomas Skidmore and George Henry Evans in New York,²⁰ Seth Luther in Boston,²¹ and most crucially William Heighton in Philadelphia, an immigrant shoemaker who had a decisive role in the first journeymen's organizations, as well as in the creation of the *Mechanics Free Press*, the first newspaper entirely written by journeymen.²²

While previous social taxonomies tended to describe U.S. society as divided into three or more classes corresponding to different productive sectors, workers in the 1820s presented it as drastically polarized into two. They bisected society along an axis that opposed those who produced wealth without enjoying it and those who enjoyed it without producing it. "We must consider our country as containing two classes," Heighton declared in 1827: on the one hand "the working or productive class," whose labor created "every article which comes under the term wealth," and on the other "the non productive or accumulating class," which "produce nothing valuable, but grow rich by accumulating the productions of the former."²³ Despite being "the only producers of wealth," Heighton attacked, workers "as a class [...] have no prospect before them, but the gloomy one of endless toil and hopeless poverty."²⁴ Similarly, Evans observed "one portion of society living in luxury and idleness," while "the numerous portion" was "groaning under the oppressions and miseries imposed upon them by the former."²⁵ Others, like Skidmore, identified property as the main criterion of social distinction, but proposed a very similar depiction of society as fractured between a small minority of "proprietors" who could "live on the labor of others, and themselves perform none," and a vast majority of "non-proprietors," who were "doomed, of right, to the slavery of toil."²⁶

Such bifurcated classification was not used by workers as an instrument to understand society, but rather as a political tool to denounce their worsening conditions. In particular, their restriction of the concept of productive labor immediately turned it into a vehicle of politicization.²⁷ To Heighton, in fact, "productive labor" included all those manual efforts that created "some real, tangible article of wealth,"²⁸ but not the intellectual efforts of those who directed production. The working class was thus made up of "those alone, who actually put their hands to productive or official labor, and

not those who employ them,” thus including both skilled and unskilled workers, while drawing a clear-cut line of fracture between employees and employers of any kind. In this respect, the opposition between producers and non-producers had not to do with the productive character of labor *per se*, but rather with different positions within the labor relation, mirroring the opposition between labor and capital. What historians have defined as “producerism,” then, was instrumental for workers not simply to vindicate their social usefulness as artisans or their rights as republican citizens, but most crucially to denounce a structural oppression that forced them to labor in order to subsist, while guaranteeing and reproducing their subordination as a class.

To Heighton, this oppression had its fundamental root in wage labor, that is in the coercive, albeit legally sanctioned, exchange of money for labor, which the working class had “no other alternative than to accept”²⁹ because of the need to earn a subsistence. “Necessity compels us to work for such prices as are offered,” Heighton wrote, “we must either do this—resort to fraud or theft, or perish by hunger and nakedness.”³⁰ To Skidmore as well, workers deprived of the ownership of land could obtain “the means of *physical existence*” only “at the price of slavery,” or otherwise they would “perish.”³¹ It was this “legal robbery” that to Heighton maintained the working classes in poverty while allowing others to accumulate. In this respect, wage labor was repeatedly described by Northern workers as an extortive relation that, while being formally free, was substantially similar to “never-ending slavery.”³² In a slaveholding republic, the recourse to the lexicon of slavery by Northern white workers to describe their conditions was of course full of racial ambiguities³³ and it is undeniable that their politicization of class was realized at the cost of ignoring, if not explicitly defending, hierarchies based on race, as well as those based on sex. At the same time, the discourse on “wage slavery” became a powerful tool to denounce the exploitative core common to different forms of dependent labor.

In the context of this structural oppression, affirming that talent, honesty, industry, and sobriety could guarantee improvement to the working class was to Heighton a “wilful misrepresentation.”³⁴ According to the *Mechanics’ Free Press*, this meant that the “merits” agitated by the “advocates of Individual Competition” were nothing more than “a justification of the command which their system enables them to retain and acquire over the yearly products of your labour.”³⁵ Overall, then, Northern workers proved to be aware that the coming of capitalism had brought a deepening of social distinctions that rendered social mobility impossible, making birth into an inescapable destiny. In doing so, to workers wage labor was reintroducing a form of “tyranny” and “aristocracy,” while in forcing them to work longer hours and in impeding their political participation it was depleting the material foundations of republican government, as well as their own rights as citizens.³⁶ Thus, the conflict over class intersected with a conflict over the meaning of republicanism, in which employers understood equality as the defense of equal entrepreneurial rights, while workers saw it as the guarantee of economic and political independence, incompatible with wage labor and with the new hierarchies brought by capitalism.³⁷

This conceptual politicization of class soon turned into a vehicle of organization for workers throughout the North, with the question of hours acting as a catalyst.³⁸ While strikes and walkouts had dated back to the 1780s, in the late-1820s workers’ struggles took a leap forward, both through the creation of the first trade unions, such

as the Mechanics Union of Trade Associations, created in Philadelphia in 1827 with Heighton's crucial contribution,³⁹ and through the experience of Working Men's parties that for a brief period spread throughout the North in the late 1820s.⁴⁰ Then, after the parties' failure, in the first half of the 1830s journeymen mechanics and textile factory workers started creating city centrals, the General Trades' Unions, which in New York and Philadelphia soon reached more than ten thousand members and joined in the National Trades' Union in 1834. This growing communication was crucial in causing the highest moment of class confrontation in the 1830s United States: the Philadelphia general strike of 1835, which won the ten-hour working day for most white, male and skilled workers in the city, while triggering a series of strikes throughout the North that was interrupted only by the financial panic of 1837.⁴¹ Thus, between the 1820s and the 1830s, U.S. workers in the North developed a radical and polemical use of social taxonomy, turning the language of classification into a language of revolt against the classed order of society⁴² and developing a politicization of class that ushered in the first insurgence of white labor in the United States.

Henry Carey, political economy and the classless society

It was against such discourse that, since the mid-1830s, the first generation of systematic U.S. economic thinkers started outlining a new and different representation of U.S. society. In order to disprove the workers' denunciation of a classed, hierarchical, and oppressive society, as well as to counter their critique of wage labor, economists elaborated a new scientific argument to present the United States as a social structure that, while maintaining superior and subordinate positions, was open, fluid, and devoid of permanent class boundaries, allowing every industrious individual to climb its scale. While late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century U.S. economic and political thinkers had assumed the existence of a class division, since the 1830s U.S. economists started denying the applicability of the workers' discourse to the United States in an attempt to conceal the very existence of class as a power relation. After its politicization by workers, then, the concept of class could not simply go back to sociologically describe society but had to be rejected altogether. It was therefore not by chance that, in the first U.S. economic treatises from the 1830s, the depictions of classlessness systematically appeared in the context of bitter attacks against strikes and the trades' unions.⁴³

The economist who first and most directly engaged a political and ideological battle against the workers' discourse was Henry Charles Carey from Philadelphia. A former publisher who would become the most influential nineteenth-century U.S. protectionist, both in his economic treatises and in his anonymous articles for Philadelphia newspapers signed as "Franklin" (presented here for the first time) Carey endeavored to disprove the vision of class fostered by workers.⁴⁴ In 1828, he directly attacked Heighton's and the journeymen's vision of class on the pages of the *Mechanics' Free Press*. Carey's stated goal was to counter the workers' "errors" that were fueling "a warfare between producers and non-producers." The first and most crucial error, in his perspective, was the journeymen's restrictive definition of "productive labor" and of the "productive classes," which they limited "to those who actually make something out of something tangible." On the contrary, he argued, all those who participated to production in any form could be said to contribute to it, since there could be "productions

and producers of many sorts,” creating something “more or less tangible, or drawn from intellectual objects.”⁴⁵ A second related error, Carey continued, was the idea that only the so-called concrete “producers” could be considered essential to society. Instead, in his perspective, “every work whether manual, mental or active” had to be considered “useful to society” and entitled “to a reward proportionate to the extent and durability of its utility,” as well as to the level of “skill” it involved.

To Carey, then, not only the mechanics were “only one out of several useful classes,” but their manual labor was less valuable (and for this reason less rewarded) than that of several non-manual and intellectual occupations which had a crucial role in the “preservation and distribution of productions,” up to the point of being “indispensable to a well organized society.” Following such conclusions, Carey revised Heighton’s social taxonomy, stressing “the need of a more correct classification into at least five classes,” including “manual producers,” “mental producers,” “preservers of production, or managers and keepers,” “distributors of productions or helpers” and finally “idlers,” the sole truly “useless” class.⁴⁶ Thus, inaugurating a conceptual strategy that would later become common among nineteenth-century economists (not only in the United States), against the workers restriction of the concept of productive labor, Carey proposed to re-enlarge it in the attempt to deny workers the monopoly of social utility and to devalue manual labor so as to justify its subordinate social position.⁴⁷ Most crucially, by vindicating the indispensable productive role of intellectual labor, Carey endeavored to justify the superior reward of capitalists, as well as to affirm that only through a cooperation between capital and labor could production be carried on.

In 1835, only a few months after the Philadelphia general strike, in his first systematic treatise, the *Essay on the Rate of Wages*, Carey revisited his anti-labor reaction through the tools of economic science. In order to debase the workers’ discourse on class, Carey felt the need to counter first the British economists’ notions that a fundamental conflict of interests existed between capital and labor. In fact, Carey complained, it was the depiction of “wages and profits” as “natural antagonists” realized “by many political economists” that had given rise “to trades’ unions” and “to the cry of the poor against the rich.”⁴⁸ In particular, to Carey both workers and British economists failed to understand the true laws regulating wages. On the one hand, workers were mistaken in believing that the rate of wages was “altogether arbitrary”: a notion that had caused “the numerous ‘strikes,’ or ‘turns out’ we have seen, the only effect of which has been loss to both employers and workmen.” Instead, “workers and labourers” should understand “that the division between themselves and the capitalist, or the rate of wages, is regulated by a law immutable as are those which govern the motion of the heavenly bodies,” which would offset any attempt to raise wages through strikes, trades’ unions or legislation.⁴⁹ On the other hand, British economists, particularly Ricardo and Malthus, had incorrectly maintained that, due to growing population and decreasing agricultural returns, in the long term the rate of wages could never exceed the level of subsistence required to reproduce the workforce.⁵⁰ Instead, Carey argued revisiting Nassau Senior’s wage-fund doctrine,⁵¹ the rate of capital accumulation naturally tended to outpace the rate of population growth and therefore allowed the rate of wages to grow accordingly.⁵²

To Carey, then, the “natural rate of wages” was constantly increasing. Through this reinterpretation of the wage-fund doctrine Carey could thus overturn Ricardo and

Malthus, while at the same time ideologically naturalizing the binding character of market mechanisms against the pretense of organized workers to collectively influence the remuneration of their own labor. In fact, he insisted, wages could grow, but only spontaneously, according to the rules and the temporality of the market, and only as a consequence of the accumulation of capital. The question of the working classes' worsening conditions could thus be presented as a problem of low productivity, shifting onto workers the responsibility for their low wages, which were "fully equal to their deserts as producers."⁵³ If workers understood this, Carey argued, they would spare themselves and their employers "the enormous loss that has arisen out of their recent combination." Instead of fighting their employers, Carey warned, they should try to become so.

[Workers] should see in the fact that the great majority of the master workmen have risen by their own exertions to the situation they at present occupy, abundant evidence that nothing is wanting to them but industry and economy. [...] So far should they be from entertaining feelings of jealousy towards those who, by industry and economy, succeed in making themselves independent, that they should see with pleasure the increase of capital.⁵⁴

Thus, Carey argued, while structurally rising wages allowed the worker to become independent, strikes and trades' unions only prevented such possibility by slowing down production. The only way for workers to improve their condition was therefore to apply themselves more and more productively to fuel the accumulation of capital.⁵⁵ Explicitly attacking the labor movement's denunciation of an increasingly hierarchical and oppressive social structure, Carey argued that in the United States "industry and economy" could allow workers to cross class boundaries, presented as only temporary elements of distinction. By affirming the possibility of social mobility, Carey could also legitimize the persistence of class hierarchies between employers and employees as the result of superior talent or effort, revealing how a classless society did not amount to an egalitarian one. Class boundaries could be crossed by deserving individuals, but they could never be eliminated.⁵⁶

One year later, Carey reiterated the same idea in a new series of articles signed as "Franklin" on *The Pennsylvanian*, a Philadelphia newspaper close to organized workers. In spring 1836, at the end of a long strike won by journeymen printers, Carey went back to attack trade unions. Once more, he argued that the different social positions occupied by employers and employees merely reflected a difference in their productive efforts. "Every employer," he explained to workers "was but a short time since, a Journeyman like yourselves," having risen simply "by industry, and economy."⁵⁷ Therefore, if a worker "has talents, his wages are large, and he accumulates a fortune. If he be destitute of it he continues in a subordinate station. If he be industrious and economical he becomes an employer;—if on the contrary he remains a journeymen to the end of the chapter."⁵⁸ To Carey, once more, social hierarchy did not depend upon birth, but it was legitimate precisely because it reflected a natural scale of individual talents, abilities, and efforts which fairly determined who would pay a wage and who would receive it. If in 1828 Carey had endeavored to broaden the concept of productive labor in the attempt to defuse its politicization, here he speculatively tried to widen the concept

of capital so as to include not only tools and machines but even skills, further blurring class distinctions. Since every instrument of production could be considered a form of capital, Carey insisted, everyone could be considered a capitalist to a certain extent.

What is capital, and who are the capitalists? Furniture is capital, a loom is capital, a wheelbarrow is capital, a house, a piece of land, a cotton mill, a boat, a sloop, a ship, all are capital. A man who has accumulated a little furniture is a capitalist man. [...] We are almost all capitalists, and the only difference is that some have accumulated more than others”⁵⁹

Unfortunately, Carey deplored, far from endeavoring to improve their condition through labor, in the 1830s workers were trying to obtain higher wages through strikes, which was not only unreasonable, but also useless, since any increase would soon be compensated by market mechanisms. Moreover, in his view it was the trades’ unions themselves that, having an inherent tendency “to lessen industry”⁶⁰ and therefore to lower wages, constituted an “unrepublican” threat to the workers’ freedom.⁶¹

Finally, in his *Principles of Political Economy*, published in three volumes between 1837 and 1840, Carey systematized his vision of individual improvement within a classless, non-egalitarian society, scientifically grounding it upon a theory of value. Reversing Malthus’s principle of population, he argued that the growing population would boost development, increasing the possibilities of cooperation and technological advancement. In the context of this “constant improvement in the machinery of production,” to Carey the value of a commodity would not be measured by the quantity of labor necessary to produce it in the past, but by the quantity of labor hypothetically necessary to reproduce it given the present level of technical capacities.⁶² Thus, economic development would trigger a double dynamic of value, gradually lessening the value of commodities in terms of labor, while simultaneously increasing the value of labor in terms of the commodities it could produce. To Carey, this changing relation also involved an alteration of the power relation between capital and labor. Since capital was itself a commodity, he argued, the amelioration of productive techniques would reduce its value in terms of labor. As a consequence, the owner of this devalued capital could claim a smaller share of the product of labor in exchange for its use.⁶³ Labor’s increasing value in terms of capital would thus allow the worker to consume more, to appropriate a larger share of the product and to have easier access to the ownership of capital itself, soon experiencing “a constantly increasing facility in becoming himself a capitalist.”⁶⁴ Therefore, the growing productivity of labor would allow social mobility and the crossing of class boundaries for industrious and diligent workers.

At the same time, to Carey, the social rise of the worker would not be attended with an impoverishment of the capitalist, since wealth would still grow at a pace such as to guarantee increasing absolute profits, despite the proportional fall in their rate. Thus, through his theory of value, Carey could argue not only that the interests of labor and capital were “in perfect harmony with each other,”⁶⁵ but that they could not be considered as separate, if not temporarily. Capitalists and laborer were presented as largely overlapping figures: as different phases of the same path of individual improvement within a classless society in which conflict had no reason to exist since social positions reflected individual talents. Not only a harmony of class interests, then, but

their fundamental unity. According to Carey's theory of value, property relations and class distinction did not pre-exist and structure the functioning of economic exchange, but rather were determined by market relations themselves.⁶⁶ It was this abstraction from social relations that allowed Carey to describe the U.S. class structure as the result, and not the precondition, of relations of exchange and cooperation among individuals.

Thus, Carey presented capitalist development as a path to social mobility for workers, precisely at the time when that same development was making workers in Northern U.S. cities increasingly impoverished and dependent on coercive power relations. This contradiction was exposed by Karl Marx in the *Grundrisse*. In criticizing Carey's theory of value, Marx explained that the possibility for capital to be reproduced with less labor thanks to increasing productivity did not mean that the worker could work less or needed "fewer working days to appropriate capital for himself." This reduced time, in fact, was not "gained for the worker." To Marx, on the contrary, increased productivity meant an increase in surplus labor (the time during which the laborer worked for capital and not for himself): that is an intensification of exploitation. Moreover, if increasing productivity reduced the cost of reproducing all commodities, to Marx this would not lead to an expansion of real wages, as Carey had derived, but it would allow capitalists to reduce nominal wages, since the reproduction and subsistence of the workforce itself would become cheaper.⁶⁷ Far from giving control to workers, Marx concluded, capitalist development worsened their condition. Far from blurring class boundaries, it tightened them.

It was through this mystified representation that, in the *Principles of Political Economy's* third volume, Carey could also overturn the labor movement's discourse on "wage slavery" by presenting the Northern laborer as a "freeman." Against the workers' tendency to assimilate slavery and wage labor to denounce their shared nucleus of coercion and exploitation, Carey presented the Northern worker and the Southern slave as the two opposite poles within the spectrum of human freedom, constituting "the highest and lowest political condition," with the former enjoying a degree of freedom unparalleled in the world.⁶⁸ In doing so, Carey could thus reject the workers' equation, redrawing a sharp contrast between slave and wage labor to legitimize the latter. Thus, despite not providing a full apology for the commodification of labor (which he would embrace only later), by indicating the diligent submission to wage labor as the only road to freedom and improvement, Carey contributed to the conceptual shift from republication conceptions of freedom as independence toward capitalist definitions of freedom as self-ownership.⁶⁹ In this respect, his political economy of the classless society in the 1830s anticipated the emergence of an ideology in the North that, through the systematic comparison with Southern slavery, could describe wage labor as "free labor" in the attempt to reconcile Northern workers with their own condition.⁷⁰

In the course of this long intellectual and political fight against the workers' discourse on class, then, Carey offered a vision of U.S. classlessness that allowed him to justify capitalism and its social relations, while at the same time delegitimizing labor struggles. First, against the workers' polarized depiction of U.S. society and their claims of a monopoly of social usefulness, he proposed a more complex taxonomy and affirmed the crucial role of intellectual labor in the creation of wealth to justify profits. Then, through a reinterpretation of economic concepts, Carey blurred the distinction between capital and labor in the attempt to show their necessary complementarity.

Most crucially, against the claim that classes constituted an inescapable and oppressive destiny, Carey argued that social positions could be easily climbed by any industrious individual and that therefore social hierarchies reflected differences in merit and efforts. This allowed him not only to reject the workers' pretense to improve their condition through collective struggles but also to scientifically legitimize and naturalize the very persistence of class hierarchies in a classless society, in which it was irrelevant which specific individual occupied which position, as long as social positions of dominion and subordination were preserved. In such society, then, class lines might be crossed, but never levelled or abolished. Improvement itself to Carey could be a story of individual emancipation precisely because it could not be a story of collective emancipation for workers as a class, leaving untouched a vertical social structure that individuals had literally to climb. Overall, then, through this anti-egalitarian, anti-labor depiction of U.S. classlessness, Carey could justify the social order brought by the affirmation of capitalism, formalizing a powerful ideological tool against class struggle.

The classless society and the anti-labor origins of U.S. political economy

In the second half of the 1830s, Carey's anti-labor arguments were reiterated by the most important U.S. political economists of the time, in Philadelphia as well as throughout the North, since his reflection was part of a broader intellectual and political reaction against the emergence of class conflict in the United States. Particularly after the labor movement's retreat in the wake of the 1837 economic crisis, economists engaged a semantic strife with the labor movement, systematically coupling the depiction of the United States as a classless society with attacks against the trades' unions.

A first example was offered by the jurist, turned political economist, Theodore Sedgwick (1780–1839) in 1836 in his *Private and Public Economy*. To prove that “labour is a different thing in the United States, from what it is in most other countries,” Sedgwick rejected the social classifications imported from Europe and amplified by U.S. workers, and particularly the idea that those who lived by manual labor could be considered “the only producers of wealth.”⁷¹ In his view, instead, all those who were paid for services, including lawyers, physicians and merchants, had to be considered as “laborers,” despite being differentiated by the level of their wages, paid according to their “intelligence.” Sedgwick thus accepted the existence of classes and social differences as “natural,” something to which U.S. workers had to “submit to.” In his perspective, the division between “higher and lower classes” according to differences in “knowledge,” “property,” and “power” was necessary and “incontestable.” However, while assigning specific places to individuals, in Sedgwick's vision “Providence” did not impose them “to remain there,” instead directing them “to be careful and diligent to get wisdom and education, so that they may advance.”⁷²

Here laid the specificity of the U.S. social order, Sedgwick argued. While in Europe social positions were permanent throughout life, in the United States individuals enjoyed a “power of *self-elevation*” that granted to all, “without distinction, [...] many opportunities of elevating themselves, of passing from one business to another, from one class to another” through the acquisition of “property” and “knowledge.” Precisely in this guarantee of an equality of opportunities consisted, according to Sedgwick “the true plan of a free government.”⁷³ To those who had “combined” in trades' unions

in the attempt to raise wages and limit working hours, Sedgwick reminded that the only “combination” that could improve their condition was the one between labor and capital, which allowed them to be productive.⁷⁴ Thus, against a restrictive understanding of productive labor, Sedgwick vindicated the social relevance of professional and entrepreneurial classes and described classes as crossable through labor and intellectual improvement, while legitimizing the persistence of a social hierarchy.

A similar line of reasoning was offered in 1837 by Francis Wayland (1796–1865), a Baptist minister and president of Brown University, whose *Elements of Political Economy* soon became, together with Carey’s *Principles*, the most read economic work in the early-nineteenth-century United States.⁷⁵ Without going as far as Carey in the scientific denial of class, Wayland endeavored to prove the mutual interdependence of classes, arguing that social distinctions did not entail conflicting interests. Accordingly, he attacked the labor movement’s politicization of productive labor, and particularly the notion that all wealth was produced only by one class. All forms of “human industry,” he explained, had to be considered of “essential importance to the sustentation of the human race.”⁷⁶ In other words, “the capitalist and the laborer are equally necessary to each other” and, above all, “the *accumulation* of capital, is as much for the interest of the laborer as of the capitalist himself.” Therefore, “all attempts to excite the prejudices of the poor against the rich,” currently fostered by “unprincipled men,” could only prove “injurious to the interests of both classes.”⁷⁷ Thus, in order to better their condition, instead of protesting through trades’ unions, workers should have diligently applied to work. In fact, Wayland wrote, thanks to the opportunities guaranteed in the United States, “the common laborer, if industrious, virtuous and frugal, may not only support himself, but, in a few years, accumulate a valuable little capital.”⁷⁸

In the same year, Henry Vethake (1791–1866), a professor of mathematics and later provost of the University of Pennsylvania, used similar arguments in his *Principles of Political Economy*, published in Philadelphia. Very close to Carey (despite being a follower of Ricardo on trade policy), Vethake issued a further attack against strikes and trades’ unions, coupled with a scientific attempt to blur class distinctions through a reinterpretation of economic concepts. In his view, economists should not simply try to broaden the meaning of “productive labor” but should assume the goal of “getting rid of the distinction between the productive and unproductive labourers,” so as to recover a correct view of society as a unitary whole and to prevent workers from considering themselves as “the only *useful* portion of society.”⁷⁹

Thus, pushing beyond Wayland’s vision of class interdependence, Vethake argued that not only a semantic but even a terminological change was necessary. In fact, he lamented, as long as political economists kept writing “of the *separate* classes of landlords, capitalists, and labourers,” they would keep justifying the laborer “in his estimation” of the relevance of his labor. On the contrary, economists should endeavor to remove any theoretical and lexical ground for the politicization of class, showing that, in the United States, “the same person may unite in himself the characters of landlord, of capitalist, and of labourer, or of any two of them.” In other words, to Vethake economists had to explain that “instances are continually presented of capitalists who labour themselves in superintending the application of their capital to production,” as well as that “the farmer, who is the owner of the land which he cultivates, is manifestly at once both landlord and capitalist.”⁸⁰ Only “by inculcating upon the rich and the poor

that their interests, properly understood, are not in opposition to each other," Vethake argued in the final pages of his treatise, "the political economist contributes effectually to remove the grounds of controversy between them, and to secure the internal tranquility of society." Only this way, he concluded, "the revolutionary temper of the times can be allayed."⁸¹ In other words, only by showing the classless character of U.S. society, in Vethake's perspective, could economists fulfill their duty in delegitimizing class struggle. Thus, in tackling the problem of social classification, Vethake spelled out the political and ideological function of political economy as a science that, through a specific representation of society, had the explicit goal of legitimizing its order.

In January 1838, the *New-York Review* published a lengthy review of Carey's *Essay on the Rate of Wages* written by Alonzo Potter (1800–1865), a professor of philosophy at Union College in Schenectady, New York, who had lived in Philadelphia in the 1820s. The article, later included in Potter's *Political Economy*,⁸² was titled *Trades' Unions*. In fact, the notice of Carey's book was only a pretext for a systematic exposition of the dangers that organized workers posed to economic improvement, equal rights, and morality.⁸³ Potter started from the problem of the distribution of property, agitated by those classes "usually, but in this country very inaptly denominated the Working classes."⁸⁴ In fact, he explained, in the United States, where "hereditary distinction and privileges" had been abolished, property was neither disrespected nor appropriated by a caste, but it could be gained or lost according to everyone's merit. The republican character of American government thus defined a fluid social structure that allowed for both upward and downward mobility.

Property can be perpetuated in no family, except by enterprise and virtue; while there is nothing in theory, and but little in the practical operation of our laws, to prevent the humblest citizen from reaching the highest eminence of wealth or power. There is no *class* of rich or poor. Through improvidence and vice, the children of the opulent are perpetually descending from their elevation, [...] while at the same time the indigent and unfriended rise to occupy their places. In such a state of things, industry and thrift cease to be derogatory; they become associated in the minds of the people with merit.⁸⁵

The full realization of such picture, however, to Potter was currently obstructed by the "untiring spirit of change" of trades' unionists, whose demands had revealed an erroneous conception of republican equality. "With such men," Potter complained, "equal rights mean not an equal title to the protection of law—not equality of privilege, but equality of condition." However, since "the natural endowments of men are entirely unequal," it was impossible "to equalize their condition," since it would require eradicating inequality "from the constitution of Nature."⁸⁶ In Potter's perspective, then, a republican government ought not to guarantee property to everyone, but to assure that, from the start, everyone had the same chances of getting it, so that social inequalities could reflect inequalities of talent, industry and parsimony. In this respect, then, an equality of opportunities was the true and only meaning of "equal rights" granted by republics. Instead, the "organized combination" of workers had to be considered as an unrepublican interference with the rights of employers, of the "agricultural class," of "non-associated workmen," often compelled to strike with violent threats, and of

apprentices, because of the restrictions they wanted to impose upon their employment.⁸⁷ Then, even if they could advance the journeymen's condition, they would do it at the expense of all other classes.

In any respect, Potter insisted, the level of wages could not be raised through strikes, since it could only be determined by the inescapable laws of the market and specifically by the "proportion between supply and demand," whose mechanism would soon compensate every wage rise by reducing the number of employers willing to hire.⁸⁸ This did not necessarily mean that wages would be destined to remain unaltered. On the contrary, Potter argued, "as Mr. Carey has shown at length in his work on wages," wherever capital increased faster than population, the demand for labor would constantly rise faster than the supply, "and the rate of wages [...] will gradually though perhaps slowly increase." It was therefore an error "to imagine that large profits are incompatible with high wages, and that we can maintain the latter only by depressing the former." Contrary to what Ricardo had argued, then, wages and profits could grow together. Or at least, Potter continued, "such has been the case in this country."⁸⁹ In fact, far from being "fast sinking to a condition of 'white slavery,'" as the union's orators had argued, U.S. workers were "participating in the progress of the ages."⁹⁰ Thus, reiterating many of his arguments, Potter further exposed the fundamentally anti-labor character of Carey's political economy and the extent to which it could be used as a scientific tool against the workers' mobilization.

One final example of the U.S. economic thinkers' reaction to class struggle was offered by Francis Lieber (1800–1872), arguably the most influential jurist in the nineteenth-century United States, in his *Essays on Property and Labor* published in 1841. Here, he directly dealt with the worker's (particularly Thomas Skidmore's) denunciation of the growing "inequality of property."⁹¹ To this problem, Lieber explained, workers had tried to answer by creating "associations to enforce higher wages," and by establishing cooperatives to hold profits as "common property" with the goal of the "abolition of wages." Both of them, in Lieber's perspective constituted an attempted "equalization of property" that, if implemented, risked causing "the destruction of property and prevention of its accumulation," up to the point of depriving labor of its "only support": capital. Cooperative efforts to Lieber were hopeless in that they tried to counter the most fundamental elements of human nature, that is the affirmation of "individuality" through accumulation. Even if wages were too low, Lieber recognized, the remedy to this could not imply "a change in the nature of things," that is in the fact that commodities, included labor, received their prices on the market according to their "desirableness." Wages, therefore, could not be artificially heightened without causing "ruin and mischief," since they represented a "natural and necessary effect of the state of things - of the relation of man to the things around him."⁹² As an objective result of market forces, then, the level of wages would be fundamentally unresponsive to actions that, even if successful, would soon be counterbalanced by a decreasing demand for labor. To Lieber the "strikes of Trades' Unions" were "very apt to drive whole branches of industry into foreign regions, and always drive capital, that is, the support of labour, from the places where they happen."⁹³ In his perspective, then, the fact that private property might be unequally divided should not hide the fact that it represented "the very tie of society"⁹⁴ and that as such it had to be defended against all attempts to abolish or redistribute it.

Moreover, Lieber added in the essay's conclusion, those who had attacked property had done so moving from an arbitrary definition of the "working classes," which included only those who worked "physically." In his perspective, this was a mistake since no laborer could actually be said to employ only pure brute force without using at least some degree of his intellectual faculties, or without using an instrument that was necessarily the result of invention. Therefore, both "intellect" and "capital," and those who owned them, had to be considered as crucial components of production. To Lieber, it was simply wrong "to draw a distinct line fit to divide society into two antagonistic parts," since several intermediate positions existed between "the poorest woodsman" and "the richest manufacturer."⁹⁵ Thus, Lieber as well, arguing for the inescapable character of market laws, coupled a strong attack against the trades' union with a contestation of the workers' polemical classification of U.S. society.

Conclusion

Already in the 1820s and 1830s, then, the idea of U.S. classlessness was not a faithful representation of the U.S. socioeconomic reality, as too often historians have described it. The coming of capitalism and wage labor had already begun transforming U.S. society into a hierarchical structure in which birth largely determined individual destiny. Thus, the classless society constituted a myth since its very conception: a scientific and ideological weapon deployed by the first generation of U.S. economists to oppose the insubordination of Northern white workers. It was against their politicization of class that in the 1830s economists started to conceptually redraw and blur class boundaries, affirming their porosity and developing a representation of the United States as a mobile, crossable social structure in which hierarchies reflected different merits. In the writings of Henry Carey, but also of Theodore Sedgwick, Francis Wayland, Henry Vethake, Alonzo Potter and Francis Lieber, this new taxonomy was explicitly and systematically associated with attacks against strikes and trades' unions, revealing to what extent the origins of the idea of U.S. classlessness were rooted in the need to reverse and deny the workers' discourse.

This anti-labor reaction marked the very foundation of U.S. economic science, which defined itself in opposition to the British political economy's principles of scarcity and conflict precisely in the attempt to reaffirm American exceptionalism against a class struggle that risked making the United States far too similar to the conflict-ridden European nations. Thus, this conceptual move defined the birth of U.S. political economy as a science that did not aim to describe society as it was, but rather to justify its order through an ideological and mystifying representation that tried to conceal the existence of class as a hierarchical structure of dominion with the goal of disciplining labor into accepting capitalist social relations. In doing so, the first U.S. economists gave shape to a scientific depiction of U.S. society that in the following decades (and perhaps centuries) would become a fundamental ideological pillar in the legitimation and naturalization of American capitalism.

The reconstruction of the conflict over class emerged in the North between the 1820s and the 1830s can therefore help in illuminating a crucial moment both in the history of U.S. economic thought and in the nineteenth-century history of the concept of class. This conflict started from the pages of labor newspapers and later moved

to the pages of economic treatises, shaping their theoretical and conceptual elaboration of economic ideas in a way that intellectual historians have largely failed to notice. However, it is only by taking into account this conflict that it is possible to explain the political meaning of the early-nineteenth-century representations of U.S. classlessness. Only by relating economic ideas to their social context and their polemical objects, or rather by diving intellectual history within social history, it is possible to grasp the anti-labor foundation of U.S. economic science as the nineteenth-century ideology of American capitalism. This is all the more important in Carey's case, since such foundation would continue to shape his long economic and political reflection up until the 1870s.

In the context of a historiography on capitalism that too often studies it as detached from its social relations,⁹⁶ understanding the first U.S. economists' reaction to class struggles is therefore crucial to show how the strategies for legitimizing capitalism were never formulated in a vacuum, nor at a merely intellectual level, but always emerged from a concrete conflict with the subjects that refused to be dominated by capital's command.

Notes

1. Michael J. O'Connor, *Origins of Academic Economics in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 190–91.
2. For examples of this tendency: Ernest Teilhac, *Pioneers of American Economic Thought in the 19th Century* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967); Paul K. Conkin, *Prophets of Prosperity. America's First Political Economists* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Christopher W. Calvo, *The Emergence of Capitalism in Early America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020).
3. Abraham D. H. Kaplan, *Henry Charles Carey. A Study in American Economic Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1931); George W. Smith, *Henry C. Carey and American Sectional Conflict* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1951); Arnold W. Green, *Henry Charles Carey. Nineteenth-Century Sociologist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951); Rodney J. Morrison, *Henry C. Carey and American Economic Development*, vol. 76 (Philadelphia: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 1985).
4. James L. Huston, "A Political Response to Industrialism: The Republican Embrace of Protectionist Labor Doctrines," *The Journal of American History* 70 (1983): 35–57.
5. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic. New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Martin J. Burke, *The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). Stephen Meardon also recognized the Whig, elitist character of Carey's thought: Stephen Meardon, "Reciprocity and Henry C. Carey's Traversies 'On the Road to Perfect Freedom of Trade,'" *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 33 (2011): 312–13.
6. Andrew Dawson, "Reassessing Henry Carey (1793–1879): The Problems of Writing Political Economy in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American Studies* 34 (2000): 465–85.
7. For example, with words that might have been directly taken from nineteenth-century economic treatises, Daniel Walker Howe wrote that early industrialization in the North gave "opportunity for social mobility and thus blurred the line between capitalist and working classes." Daniel W. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 542.
8. Sharon V. Salinger, "Artisans, Journeymen, and the Transformation of Labor in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (1983): 62–84; Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers. Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), 15–25; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15–33; Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton. A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 57–82.
9. Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 28–45.

10. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 32.
11. David R. Roediger and Philip S. Foner, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day* (London-New York: Verso, 1989), 8–9. See also: Edward P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present* 38 (1967): 56–97; Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976).
12. Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 5; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 31; Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 175–98.
13. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 34.
14. Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); David Montgomery, “The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City,” *Labor History* 9 (1968): 3–22.
15. For a different interpretation of the impact of early industrialization on artisans: Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 540–46.
16. Robert J. Steinfield, *The Invention of Free Labor. The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Seth Rockman, “The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism,” in *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives & New Directions*, ed. Cathy D. Matson (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 51–60.
17. Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey Gale Williamson, *Unequal Gains: American Growth and Inequality since 1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 96–141. Their findings are compatible with those of the “Kuznets Curve,” concerning the increase of income inequality in the early phases of industrialization: Simon Kuznets, “Economic Growth and Income Inequality,” *American Economic Review* 45 (1955): 1–28.
18. Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, 1995, 24.
19. *Ibid.*, 52.
20. On Skidmore and Evans: Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970), 58–65, 71–76; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 172–215, 335–43.
21. On Luther: Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, 87–91; Louis Hartz, “Seth Luther: The Story of a Working Class Rebel,” *New England Quarterly* 13 (1940): 401–18.
22. On Heighton: Louis H. Arky, “The Mechanics’ Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingmen’s Movement,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76 (1952): 142–76; Philip S. Foner, *William Heighton: Pioneer Labor Leader of Jacksonian Philadelphia* (New York: International Publishers, 1991); Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720-1830* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 221–33. On the *Mechanics’ Free Press*: Rodger Streitmatter, *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 4–10.
23. William Heighton, *An Address, Delivered Before the Mechanics and Working Classes Generally, by the Unlettered Mechanic* (Philadelphia: Office of the Mechanics’ Gazette, 1827), 4.
24. William Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies and to the Working Classes Generally, by a Fellow-Labourer* (Philadelphia: Young, 1827), 4.
25. “Prospectus,” *Working Man’s Advocate*, October 31, 1829.
26. Thomas Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!* (New York: Alexander Ming, 1829), 4, 125.
27. Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, 65–66.
28. Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies*, 6.
29. *Ibid.*, 4.
30. Heighton, *An Address, Delivered Before the Mechanics*, 8–9.
31. Skidmore, *The Rights of Man to Property!*, 25.
32. Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies*, 12.
33. The range of attitudes went from Skidmore’s opposition to black slavery to Heighton’s complete silence on it, to the fully pro-slavery implications of the discourse on “white slavery” in Evan’s case. See: David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London-New York: Verso, 1991), 43–64; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 2010), 59–63.
34. Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies*, 41.
35. *Mechanics’ Free Press*, August 23, 1828.
36. On working-class republicanism in the 1830s, see: Eric Foner, “Abolitionism and the Labor Movement in Ante-Bellum America,” in Eric Foner (ed.), *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 57–76.

37. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 244–45.
38. Roediger and Foner, *Our Own Time*.
39. Leonard Bernstein, “The Working People of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the General Strike of 1835,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 74 (July 1950): 322–39; Arky, “The Mechanics’ Union of Trade Associations,” 163–73; Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 79–83; Schultz, *The Republic of Labor*, 231–33.
40. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 172–216.
41. Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States. Volume 1. From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), 115–18; Bernstein, “The Working People of Philadelphia,” 336–39; Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*, 90–92; Roediger and Foner, *Our Own Time*, 31–33.
42. Maurizio Ricciardi, “Si può ancora dire classe? Appunti per una discussione,” *∫connessioni precarie*, April 16, 2023.
43. One of the few discussions of how early-nineteenth-century political economists answered to the workers’ discourse can be found in: Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, 108–32.
44. I found two series of “Franklin” articles: one published in the fall of 1828 in the *Mechanics’ Free Press* and one published in the spring of 1836 in *The Pennsylvanian*. There are three reasons for attributing them to Carey. The first one is that the 1836 series was clipped within the scrapbooks in which, according to his disciple William Elder, Carey collected his unsigned newspaper articles. The second reason has to do with the lexical and argumentative affinities between the 1836 series and the 1828 series, and between both and Carey’s later writings. The third reason is that in one of the 1828 articles Franklin claimed to be a publisher just like Carey himself: that is to be a “producer [...] of maps, landscapes, engravings and drawings of all objects of nature, [...] printed books on various subjects” (*Mechanics’ Free Press*, November 1, 1828). Carey’s scrapbooks are held within the *Miscellaneous Works of Henry C. Carey* at the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania. I want to thank John Pollack for his precious help in consulting them.
45. Franklin, “Principles and Errors No. I. Producers,” *Mechanics’ Free Press*, September 12, 1828.
46. Franklin, “Principles and Errors No. I. Producers.”
47. Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, 65.
48. Henry Charles Carey, *Essay on the Rate of Wages* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1835), 15.
49. Carey, 15–17.
50. Carey, 20.
51. Nassau W. Senior, *Three Lectures on the Rate of Wages*, 2nd ed. (London: Murray, 1831).
52. Carey, *Essay on the Rate of Wages*, 24, 26. See also: Dawson, *Reassessing Henry Carey*, 473.
53. Carey, *Essay on the Rate of Wages*, 76.
54. Carey, 17–18.
55. In the first volume of *Capital*, Karl Marx attacked Carey’s *Essay on the Rate of Wages*, deeming as “absurd” his conclusion that “wages everywhere rise and in proportion to the productivity of labour” from the fact “the level of wages more or less corresponds with the average intensity of labour.” Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*, Chapter 22, *National Differences in Wages*, ed. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 705.
56. Stanisław Ossowski distinguished between two concepts of classlessness: on the one hand the egalitarian vision of classlessness described by Marx and Engels in imagining the post-revolutionary communist society; on the other hand, the non-egalitarian, hierarchical vision of classlessness elaborated by liberal-democratic thought (particularly in the United States). Carey, as well as other U.S. economists, clearly subscribed to this second meaning. See: Stanisław Ossowski, *Class Structure in the Social Consciousness* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1963), 100–18.
57. Franklin, “To the Mechanics of the City and County of Philadelphia – No. 1,” *The Pennsylvanian*, March 14, 1836.
58. Franklin, “To B. No. 1,” *The Pennsylvanian*, April 6, 1836.
59. Franklin, “To the Mechanics of the City and County of Philadelphia – No. 6,” *The Pennsylvanian*, March 23, 1836.
60. Franklin, “To the Mechanics of the City and County of Philadelphia – No. 5,” *The Pennsylvanian*, March 18, 1836.
61. Franklin, “To the Mechanics of the City and County of Philadelphia – No. 6.”

62. Conkin, *Prophets of Prosperity*, 267.
63. Henry Charles Carey, *Principles of Political Economy. Volume I* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1837), 15–16.
64. Carey, 142.
65. Carey, 339.
66. Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy*, 80–86.
67. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Notebook VI, *The Chapter on Capital*, ed. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1978), 579–81. See also: Marx, *Capital. Volume One*, 1976, 705.
68. Henry Charles Carey, *Principles of Political Economy. Volume III* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1840), 95.
69. Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, 58–63; James Parisot, *How America Became Capitalist: Imperial Expansion and the Conquest of the West* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 176.
70. Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 271–86; Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 47–74; Rockman, “The Unfree Origins of American Capitalism,” 350.
71. Theodore Sedgwick, *Public and Private Economy. Part First* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836), 219, 235. On Sedgwick: O’Connor, *Origins of Academic Economics*, 170–72.
72. Sedgwick, 221–24.
73. Sedgwick, 225.
74. Sedgwick, 242–43.
75. On Wayland: O’Connor, *Origins of Academic Economics*, 172–90; Joseph Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization. Volume II* (New York: Kelley, 1946), 758–70; Conkin, *Prophets of Prosperity*, 116–23; Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, 109–10.
76. Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy* (New York: Leavitt, Lord and Company, 1837), 37–38.
77. Wayland, 405–6.
78. Wayland, 340; Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, 109.
79. Vethake, *Principles of Political Economy*, 38–39. On Vethake: O’Connor, *Origins of Academic Economics*, 191–204.
80. Vethake, 73.
81. Vethake, 405.
82. Alonzo Potter, *Political Economy. Its Objects, Uses, and Principles* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1840), 233–302. On Potter: O’Connor, *Origins of Academic Economics*, 204–13; 48; Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization. Volume II*, 826–33; Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, 1995, 112–15.
83. Alonzo Potter, “Trades’ Unions,” *New-York Review* 2 (1838): 5–68.
84. Potter, “Trades’ Unions,” 5, 7.
85. Potter, 9–10.
86. Potter, 10–12.
87. Potter, 17–18.
88. Potter, 37–45.
89. Potter, 41.
90. Potter, 27–28.
91. Francis Lieber, *Essays on Property and Labor, As Connected with Natural Law and the Constitution of Society* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841), 179–80.
92. Lieber, 180–87. Or, as he wrote in the conclusions: “legislation cannot raise wages by law.” Lieber, 210.
93. Lieber, 188.
94. Lieber, 192.
95. Lieber, 207–8.
96. Jeffrey Sklansky, “Labor, Money, and the Financial Turn in the History of Capitalism,” *Labor Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 11 (2014): 23–46; Matteo Battistini, “Un progetto in movimento: il capitale in azione nella nuova storia (politica) del capitalismo americano,” *Ricerche di storia politica* 3 (2022): 179–93.