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### Clashing Notions of Liberty in the Gilded Age

The Gilded Age was a time of extraordinarily passionate and violent conflict between workers and employers. Melvyn Dubofsky characterizes industrialists as strategically taking advantage of industrialism to ultimately crush workers and transform societally held conceptions of liberty through often violent and abrupt means. However, while his discussion on values is important, the portrayal is too broad and does not explain in full the level of violence and passion in the conflict that occurred, which cannot only be a product of strategic business or bad character. I argue that instead of wholesale *transforming* values of liberty, forces of technology and immigration massively exaggerated wealth inequality, contradicting existing notions on the protection of liberty. This forced two perspectives on the protection of liberty to materialize in violent opposition to one another.

There are striking similarities in the conceptions of liberty from figures of all backgrounds during this time. William Sumner argues for capitalism on the premise that liberty guarantees one to better their welfare without interference from the state<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, Lucy Parsons advocates for anarchy, declaring that “when the red flag floats over the world the idle shall be called to work.”<sup>2</sup> A New York state court declared in a ruling that liberty meant “the right of one... to live and work where he will, to earn his livelihood in any lawful calling.”<sup>3</sup> These fundamental notions of liberty remain constant, yet the point of disagreement among these figures is on liberty’s protection, or ‘implementation’. Before massive industrialism, though, ideas on the protection of liberty were generally similar, because there needed not to be much intervention: the system was generally self-moderating. Workers – especially skilled ones –

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<sup>1</sup> William Graham Sumner, *The Challenge of Facts and Other Essays*, edited by Albert Galloway Keller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1914).

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Parsons, “I am an Anarchist” (Kansas City: Kansas City Journal, 1886), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865-1920* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1985), 54.

had balancing power over their employers and their businesses<sup>4</sup>. Both a worker that pressed for wages so high it drove employers out of business and an employer whose wages were so low they had no workers could not be successful. Thus, dependency on the workers' skills was key to this consensus: to protect one's liberty, one needed generally to uphold the liberty of the other.

However, as technological advancement decreased the demand for labor and mass immigration increased the supply of labor<sup>5</sup>, this dependency eroded. Employers, who previously found themselves often in heavy control of employees whose skills were needed for business<sup>6</sup>, found that they could forcefully take back that control, for a profit. A business that could pay their workers less was a more profitable one; a defiant worker could be replaced by a strikebreaker or technology<sup>7</sup>. As companies cut wages to compete, making competition fiercer, corporations merged or made agreements to prevent ruinous competition<sup>8</sup>. This further decreased dependency on workers, whose strikes now could do little to damage a business's competitiveness. When this dependency eroded, belief in the principle of liberty itself remained, but ideas around its protection diverged. Contradictions arose from this lack of worker dependency: for instance, by social Darwinism, corporate merging is both unnatural – in explicit defiance of competition, the core principle of evolution – and natural – simply a demonstration of corporate executive's intellectual cunning and virtue bettering their welfare, to the inevitable loss of the “unfit”. Corporations and workers each appropriated their shared ideals of liberty in their now-opposite interests.

“Most discussions on [Lockean] consensus”, Dubofsky writes, “...proceed at an exceedingly high level of abstraction.”<sup>9</sup> Fundamentally, he argues, people's simpler sufferings and joys shape their attitudes as much as abstract principles do. This indeed has merit – yet it is those simpler suffering and joys that shape how one views abstract principles, and thus it is important to recognize the usage of abstractions as a vessel for real experiences. For both workers and corporations, diverging views on the implementation

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<sup>4</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Reagan. “Class Conflict in the Gilded Age.” American History Since 1877: Agency and Structure. Class lecture at Online UW, Seattle, Washington, January 11-15, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Reagan. “Class Conflict in the Gilded Age.”

<sup>8</sup> Michael Reagan. “Class Conflict in the Gilded Age.”

<sup>9</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, 55.

of liberty – the abstract principle in question – was at the center of passionate conflict. Workers were willing to throw bombs and throw their lives into violent strikes under the banner of liberty; Lucy Parsons declares she is an anarchist because “liberty has been named anarchy.”<sup>10</sup> Corporations were just as willing to engage in equally vicious retaliation in the name of liberty: to protect the middle and upper classes from violent strikers seeking to upend the natural principles of hard work and virtue. After Homestead, managers celebrated the restoration of “triumphant democracy” and liberty<sup>11</sup>. These two groups’ respective passionate beliefs in insurance of liberty, and the determinedness at which those beliefs were to be carried out, gave rise to the bloody conflicts of Homestead, Haymarket, and others.

Such violent conflict cannot be simply attributed to greed, bad character, or corruption. While these may be important forces at play, it was a drastically decreasing dependence on the worker’s skills that led to conflict over strong views on the protection of liberty. Technology and increased immigration marked the decreasing value of labor in the industrial era, tearing apart consensus on the protection of liberty while elevating the principle of liberty as something worth fighting ferociously for.

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<sup>10</sup> Lucy Parsons, “I am an Anarchist”, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker*, 51.