

The Panic of 1837 as an Opportunity for Radical Economic Ideas

The Panic of 1837: Getting By and Going Under in a Decade of Crisis

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In the midst of the cold winter of 1838, an announcement in the *New Era*, a newspaper aimed at New York’s workers declared, “Workingmen! To the rally! ‘Democracy seeks not the glory of the nation, but the happiness of the people.’” The posting implored those “mechanics and workingmen” who were “unqualifiedly hostile to the connexion of banking incorporations with the government of the people, and in favor of an ‘independent treasury’ for the safe keeping of the people’s money” to come out to the park. It’s signatories included a list of easily recognizable names to New York artisans, such as Levi Slamm, Fitzwilliam Byrdsall, Robert Beatty, and Daniel A. Robertson.¹ There was nothing particularly new or unique about the advertisement. Appeals to fight for the “happiness of the people” and rhetoric about state-chartered monopoly banking and an independent treasury seemed almost ubiquitous in the city’s 1830s newspapers. Had the same group of men signed a similarly worded notice a year or even six months earlier, historians would not give special notice and simply include it as part of the their discussion of the mid-1830s labor upheaval led by groups like the General Trades’ Union and Loco Foco Party. However, both of these organizations ceased to function earlier that autumn as the effects of the Panic of 1837 struck New York City. So, without the structure of a union or pro-labor party to contextualize the meeting led by Slamm, Byrdsall, and others, historians have either disregarded the economic critiques made by, or addressed to working men in these years or relegated such actions to the confines of traditional party politics. This paper seeks to recapture the voices of some of the Panic-era New Yorkers who continued to confront what they saw as corrupt economic systems even outside of organized, collective labor resistance.

During the Panic of 1837 and the depression that lasted through 1842 in New York City, the dearth of large-scale organized labor activity did not mean the absence of debate or a lack discussion

¹ *New Era*, February 24, 1838. Levi Slamm was an ex-LoCo Foco and General Trades’ Union delegate from the Locksmiths’ Union, Fitzwilliam Byrdsall was the former recording secretary of the Loco Foco Party, Robert Beatty was a former operative in the Working Men’s Party, General Trades’ Union and Loco Foco Party, and Daniel A. Robertson served on a number of Loco Foco sub-committees.

about the emerging network of market capitalism. Instead, individual pro-labor radicals and amorphous non-partisan groups used newspapers, pamphlets, and speeches to engage the public about the relationship between government and the economy. In order to best examine the way that these activists operated during the Panic, I have chosen to follow three men: Robert Townsend Jr., Gilbert Vale, and Clinton Roosevelt. All three previously worked as operatives in the Equal Rights Party (dubbed the Loco Focos by their detractors); Townsend and Roosevelt served as office holders and Vale was a county convention delegate. At one time united as fellow insurgent Loco Focos, their personal economic ideologies diverged greatly during the Panic in regards to religion, free trade, and the government's role in organizing the financial system. I would like to argue that the absence of a united organized labor movement during the Panic years provided a space for individuals and small groups to advance radical economic ideas without having to tailor them to union interests or political party platforms. Freed from the internal politics and pressures of maintaining labor movement discipline, these writings did not merely rehash pre-panic proposals and arguments, but rather unleashed a variety of nuanced and sometimes conflicting plans for economic justice that far outstripped earlier ideas. Maybe it was the severity of the Panic of 1837 that caused an evolution in these writer's ideas or maybe it was just the opportunity to think outside of a group setting, but either way, new ideas flourished even as the organized labor movement suffered.

It is helpful to pause briefly for a quick note on one of the terms that inhabits this paper: radical. Scholars have debated who was a true Jacksonian radical in New York since the days when true Jacksonian radicals still wandered around the Bowery. I utilize a rather expansive definition of radical, because I find it useful to follow one provided by Gilbert Vale himself. In the first edition of *The Diamond*, Vale wrote that the journal would be:

Radical in its character, supporting Equal Rights and THE GREATEST HAPPINESS TO THE GREATEST NUMBER, and of course opposed to privileges and monopolies and in support of the largest Education to the people, as a means of preventing crime and sustaining liberty. The

Diamond will be a Reformer while abuses exist, and an independent supporter of good government and the Constitution.”²

In other words Vale simply defined a radical as one who sought to reform society and correct governmental and economic inequality; under this definition every Loco Foco was some type of radical. While such a conception might have been too conservative for some observers at the time and since, it does speak to the battle that many activists representing a wide range of views believed they were waging against an all powerful “monied aristocracy.” In this way many individuals—whether or not they belonged to any particular organizations—saw themselves and others as radicals.

There have been numerous studies of Jacksonian-era organized labor and radical politics in New York and alongside their varied interpretations, they universally agree that the Panic of 1837 dealt a serious setback to the emerging mass labor movement.³ New York’s trade unions thrived between 1833 and the early 1837 under the umbrella coordination of the General Trades’ Union (GTU). Some estimates placed unionist strength in 1836 at over 20,000, or up to two thirds of the city’s working men. Within a few months of the May 1837 bank collapse, more than one third of wage laborers lost their jobs in the prolonged depression that followed the initial bank collapse and wages fell by about one third between the 1837 and the revival of the economy in 1842. Faced with such overwhelming challenges, journeymen could not afford to pay dues to the city’s craft-specific trade unions, which disbanded along with the GTU. It would be half a dozen years until artisan societies would reemerge in any large public fashion. In *Chants Democratic*—Sean Wilentz’ seminal book on workers and class New York—he uses the February, 1837 Flour Riot as a metaphor for understanding the coming of the

2 *The Diamond*, May, 1840.

3 For some examples, see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), Bruce Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1967), Walter Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen’s Movement, 1829-1837* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1945).

Panic and the collapse of the labor movement. Following a rally by the Loco Foco Party (LFP), several hundred individuals broke off from the crowd and attacked warehouses where they believed hoarded flour was being kept in order to artificially raise prices. Wilentz argues that in the melee, “the techniques and class consciousness of the unions were laid aside, replaced by the direct action and moral economy of a food riot.” Faced with hunger and poverty then, he adds that during “the hard times of late 1830s and 1840s . . . the class consciousness of the unions was driven to the margins of public life” as workers “turned to other more immediate concerns, above all to insuring that their families had enough to eat.”⁴ The ramifications of his interpretation are clear. During the mid-1830s unionists came together to fight for control of their labor and workshop production, but when the panic and depression arrived, they had to feed their families and looked for whatever work and wages they could find at the expense of their class solidarity.

This narrative contains two problems in its reading of the mass labor protest of the 1830s that have serious ramifications for our understanding of the how the Panic of 1837 affected labor activists. The first presumption Wilentz makes is to postulate union members as divorced from their role as family breadwinners during the slightly better economic times in the mid-1830s and concerned with the scramble for household survival only during a financial depression. Such a reading of journeymen’s motivations as unionists depends too much on their particularized ideas of class consciousness and not enough on their lived experiences as members and primary providers of working families.⁵ The second, but more important assumption made here is to directly connect ideology (in the form of class consciousness) and the organizational structure of trade unions. In other words he explicitly links

4 Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 294-296. Even the pro-worker textbook *Who Built America?* notes that during the panic, “The labor movement plunged into crisis. With so many jobs lost and so many people desperate for work at any pay, strike threats quickly lost their power. With so many of their members out of work, and being helpless to defend the wages and conditions of the rest, unions dissolved.” Bruce Levine and others, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society* Vol. One (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 342-343.

5 I make this argument more fully in Joshua R. Greenberg, *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Household in New York, 1800-1840* (Gutenberg<e>, Columbia University Press, 2006).

‘genuine’ worker protest with unionism, isolating it from other types of activity. While this analysis fits well with a declension model that economic radicalism went into hiding when labor organizations failed, it does not leave enough of an opening to investigate pro-labor developments during the panic and the depression. Radical critiques of market capitalism certainly did not disappear during the tough years, but a labor historiography so tied to these specific organizations often misses the activities of decentralized individuals. If anything, the audience for an individual radical speaker had the potential to expand once they were removed from the organized labor context. Gilbert Vale even advertised one of his 1837 lectures on political economy “especially to Females interested in Housekeeping, but [also] useful to statesmen, merchants, bankers and mechanics.”⁶

A related trend can be seen in political historiography, where the end of the New York Loco Foco Party in the fall of 1837 usually halts any discussion of an insurgent assault on the government until the emergence of Mike Walsh and his Subterranean Radicals in the mid-1840s. In 1835 the Loco Focos broke away from the mainstream Tammany Hall Democratic Party over several issues related to economic policy including the latter’s support for state-chartered monopolies, exclusionary incorporation laws, and an expanded bank note currency system. Never able to gain significant numbers in New York City, the Loco Focos did manage to play spoiler and provide the margin of victory in a series of contests between the Democrats and Whigs that culminated in a resounding win for the Whigs in local Spring elections of 1837. As the Panic began to grip the nation, Martin Van Buren’s speech supporting an independent treasury and several other LFP platform issues provided motivation for factional reconciliation and the third party quietly dissolved back into Tammany’s ranks by November, their demise due as much to their tactical success as their electoral failure.⁷ The demise

6 *The Beacon*, June 3, 1837.

7 On the Loco Focos, see Jabez Hammond, *The History of the Political Parties in the State of New-York: From the Ratification of the Federal Constitution to December, 1840* (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen, 1842), 489-503, William Trimble, “Diverging Tendencies in New York Democracy in the Period of the Locofocos,” *American Historical Review* 24, issue 3 (April, 1919), 396-421, William Trimble, “The Social Philosophy of the Loco-Foco Democracy,” *American*

of the Loco Focos did not spell an end to panic-era debates about political economy, but unlike unionists who lacked any organizational possibilities to launch their assaults from during the panic, ex-Loco Focos found themselves with a home inside the Democratic Party throughout the lean economic years.

The lack of an independent worker party during the late 1830s and early 1840s meant that many of New York's labor operatives drifted to the Democratic Party and by doing so have provided scholars with an easy narrative of political compromise. This story tends to corral all of the era's financial policy debates into the machinations of second party system worker co-optation and factional infighting.⁸

Bruce Laurie sums up this view:

In the immediate aftermath of the panic, labor advocates fell back on the politics of hard money; they lampooned bankers and speculators in language consistent with the received politics of the Democratic party. By midpoint in the depression labor had leaders without a movement; with few exceptions the leaders had become minor functionaries in the Democratic party.⁹

Removed from the context of the LFP, it is easy to see these men as low level political hacks who sold out during the economic downturn of the panic, but this does not fully capture the totality of these men's lives. While some former Loco Focos did become minor Democratic agents that merely towed the party line, others worked vigorously to push Tammany toward their hard money, anti-monopolistic stance, and a third group decided to shun mainstream party politics altogether and address the public directly. Historians need to be more flexible in examining radical assessments of panic-era political economy by allowing for certain individuals' experiences outside of traditional organized movements.

Journal of Sociology 26, issue 6 (May, 1921), 705-715, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1945), 190-209, Carl N. Degler, "The Locofocos: Urban 'Agrarians,'" *Journal of Economic History* 16, issue 3 (September, 1956), 322-333, Leo Hershkowitz, "The Loco-Foco Party of New York: Its Origins and Career, 1835-1837," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 46, number 3 (July, 1962), 305-329, Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class*, Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, Anthony Gronowicz, *Race and Class Politics in New York City Before the Civil War* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 59-85, and Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 17-48.

8 This can be seen in Sean Wilentz's recent study, where he simply titles his chapter on these issues, "The Politics of Hard Times." See Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 456-481.

9 Laurie, *Artisans Into Workers*, 215.

One bibliographic reason for the trajectory of this political story could be related to cataloging. A quick scan of the OCLC subject headings for many of the radical texts on political economy written during the period from 1837-1842 reveals certain trends. Gilbert Vale's monthly periodical *The Diamond*, in which his *Manual of Political Economy* was published, is labeled as Political Science—United States—Periodicals. The collection of William Leggett's writings edited by Theodore Sedgwick is listed as United States—Politics and government—1829-1837. Perhaps the most interesting pamphlet of the era, Clinton Roosevelt's *The Science of Government, Founded on Natural Law* appears under the heading United States—Politics and government—Miscellanea. Englishman Thomas Brothers' *The United States of North America As They Are, Not As They Are Generally Described Being a Cure For Radicalism*, a long manual on diverse topics from banking and paper money to Native American policy, is cataloged only as United States—Politics and government—1829-1837 and 1837-1841. Even a non-partisan address calling for an independent treasury by controversial speaker Frances Wright in which she tried to focus on financial questions and steer clear of politics by specifically giving “no especial offense either to Whigs or Tammanies” is still listed under Whig Party (U.S.) and United States—Politics and government—1837-1841.¹⁰ While such classifications should not really affect a scholar's analysis of the era, they do represent a certain limitation in how we view the actions of independent individuals rather than those associated with an identifiable movement or organization. The fact that it can be a challenge to glean the proper context for such individuals just reinforces the need not to force categorization.

The first individual that I would like to discuss is Robert Townsend Jr., who by the Panic of 1837 was already established as one of the most “organized” men in New York City. For nearly three decades he participated as part of, and enjoyed leadership positions in, nearly every major labor

¹⁰ Frances Wright, *What is the Matter? A Political Address as Delivered in Masonic Hall, Oct. 28, 1838* (New York: Published for the Author, 1838), 3.

movement organization. Almost thirty years earlier he drafted a strike manifesto as the head of a subcommittee of the Journeymen House Carpenter's Union and during the labor upheaval of the 1830s he belonged to the Union Society of House Carpenters. By this point in his career, Townsend was a senior, professional unionist and parlayed this position into stints as a delegate to the General Trades' Union and the National Trades' Union in 1834. On the political front, he belonged to the Working Men's Party during 1829-1830 as a member of the Ward Eight Vigilance Committee and chair of a state-wide Working Men's Convention. Later, he was elected to the New York State Assembly as a fusion Loco Foco/Whig candidate in 1836. Alongside his pro-labor activities, Robert Townsend also advocated several religious causes during the Jacksonian years from Sabbatarianism and temperance and also signed a petition to end slavery in Washington DC in 1831.¹¹

Robert Townsend did not cease his interest in pro-labor economic issues when the General Trades' Union and the Loco Foco Party that he was a part of collapsed in the early days of the Panic of 1837, but he did use the moment to retool his message. Always an organization man, Townsend decided against striking out completely on his own and elected to help found a group called the Social Reform Society, which he headed from 1839-1840. Little information remains about this amorphous collection of former Loco Focos and pro-labor activists that included Warden Hayward, a printer and bookseller who helped organize the LFP meeting preceding the Flour Riot, and Francis C. Treadwell, a lawyer and inventor who was later active in the Dorr Liberation Society and George Henry Evans' National Reform Association.¹²

11 For more on Robert Townsend Jr.'s life, see Chapter Two in Greenberg, *Advocating the Man*.

12 Treadwell was active in trying to get Thomas Dorr out of prison after his failed rebellion in Rhode Island and later invented a machine for molding dough into crackers in 1856. See Francis C. Treadwell, *The Conspiracy to Defeat the Liberation of Gov. Dorr; or, The Hunkers and Algerines Identified, and Their Policy Unveiled: to Which is Added, a Report of the Case Ex Parte Dorr: Comprising Motion to Supreme Court of the United States: Petition of Sundry Citizens of Rhode Island: Affidavits Showing the Treatment of Gov. Dorr by the Inspectors of the Prison: Argument of Counsel, and the Decision of the Court* (New York: John Windt, 1845), *New York Daily Tribune* October 15, 1845, and Leander Bishop, *A History of American Manufactures, From 1608-1860: Exhibiting The Origins and Growth of the Principal Mechanic Arts and Manufacturers, From the Earliest Colonial Period to the Adoption of the Constitution; and*

The nebulous character of the Social Reform Society comes through in the range of topics covered in its few extant publications. Two of its tracts follow a strict constructionist view of political economy and attack the constitutionality of state issued bonds as overstepping the federal prohibition against states to “emit bills of credit.”¹³ Such fears of government intervention into currency matters did not stray too far from former Loco Foco platforms and earned widespread support from other labor movement veterans. After attending one of their meetings, George Henry Evans commended the society for their work opposing state bonds and banks and looked “with confidence” for their aid in “effecting a radical revolution in the state of society in the United States,” albeit by “peaceful and constitutional means.”¹⁴ By the end of 1840, a power struggle led to a change of leadership when Francis C. Treadwell wrested control from Robert Townsend and began moving the group’s agenda in a different direction. The last of the society’s major pamphlets addressed the citizens of Rhode Island and advocated for a liberalization of their suffrage laws to include more poor and working men. While not a surprising issue for many former members of the Equal Rights Party, the pamphlet seems relatively far afield from their previous debates on New York state financial policy.¹⁵

Comprising Annals of the Industry of the United States in Machinery, Manufactures and Useful Arts (Philadelphia: Edward Young and Co., 1864), 512.

13 F.C. Treadwell, *State Bonds* (New York, n.p., 1839), 2. The second society publication on the issue was written by Junius and is usually attributed to Calvin Colton who wrote a number of tracts under that alias, but I do not believe that he was author and doubt highly that he was involved in the Social Reform Society. See Junius, *Reply to Webster. A Letter to Daniel Webster ... In Reply to His Legal Opinion to Baring, Brothers & Co. Upon the Illegality and Unconstitutionality of State Bonds, and Loans of State Credit* (New York, W. Hayward, 1840). For more on Colton as Junius, see Alfred A. Cave, *An American Conservative in the Age of Jackson: The Political and Social Thought of Calvin Colton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1969).

14 “Social Reform Society,” *Radical, in Continuation of the Working Man’s Advocate*, January 1, 1841.

15 *Address to the Citizens of Rhode Island Who are Denied the Right of Suffrage* (New York: n.p., 1840). Some earlier sources doubted that this pamphlet actually originated in New York and thought it was actually from a writer in Rhode Island. See John Bach McMaster, *A History of the United States, From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1919), 167 and Arthur May Mowry, *The Dorr War Or The Constitutional Struggle in Rhode Island* (Providence: Preston & Rounds Co., 1901), 48-49. Many influential New York labor advocates including Levi Slamm, Alexander Ming Jr., and Ely Moore weighed in on the Dorr Rebellion and voting in Rhode Island, even offering their support to Thomas Dorr in the form of volunteer troops. One newspaper even referred the uprising as the “Rhode Island Loco-Foco revolution.” *Boston Atlas*, April 20, 1842. See also Ely Moore, *Oration Delivered Before the Mechanics and Workingmen of the City of New-York, on the Fourth of July, 1843, in the Methodist Episcopal Church Greene Street* (New York: John Windt, 1843), 16, George M. Dennison, *The Dorr War: Republicanism on Trial, 1831-1861* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1976), Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American*

However, it was the society's first publication of the inaugural speech by Robert Townsend Jr. that offered its most noteworthy contribution to Panic-era analyses of political economy. In *An Inquiry into the Causes of Social Evil*, Townsend managed to merge his Loco Foco anti-paper money economic beliefs with his evangelical religious views to create a moral attack on the banking industry and monied interests. Townsend specifically unleashed an assault on those bankers and money speculators that he saw as profiting from usury. He argued that there was only,

one *radical vice*, which, up to this hour, has ever existed in a greater or less degree among all civilized nations, and which has in it the seeds of all individual corruption, and consequently of the disease, decay, and death of nations—I allude to the *everlasting* character given to money by means of the *interest* it is made to draw.¹⁶

On one level, this was a standard Loco Foco critique of speculators and agents who manipulated loans and pushed paper money around to steal profits on discounted bills. The majority of the economic content in the speech follows this familiar language of producers vs. non-producers, aristocrats vs. paupers, and the need to more equitably distribute wealth and happiness. Against the backdrop of the bank failures and thousands of workers stuck holding worthless bank notes, this could have been expected. Other writers of the era also picked up on these issues; two years later Edward Kellogg published the first of his series of 1840s assaults on usury as being destructive to the nation's workers.¹⁷ But something else was going on in this speech to the Social Reform Society. By framing usurious behavior as a moral vice rather than just economic corruption or greed, Townsend sought to tie political economy to religion.

Robert Townsend went on to elucidate what he saw as the central position of religion in

Radicalism, 1833-1849 (New York: Random House, 1973), and Arthur May Mowry, "Tammany Hall and the Dorr Rebellion," *American Historical Review* 3, Number 2 (January, 1898), 292-301.

16 Robert Townsend, *An Inquiry Into the Cause of Social Evil: An Inaugural Address, Delivered July 8, 1839* (New York: Published by the Society, 1839), 4.

17 See Edward Kellogg, *Remarks Upon Usury and Its Effects: A National Bank A Remedy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841), Edward Kellogg, *Currency: the Evil and the Remedy* (New York: W.H. Graham, 1846), and Edward Kellogg, *Labor and Other Capital: The Rights of Each Secured and the Wrongs of Both Eradicated* (New York: Published by the author, 1849).

identifying and confronting dangers to an equitable and fair democracy. He continued to hammer at the sin of usury by placing it a biblical context as a “crime so obnoxious to christianity, that the primitive christians held it to be *worse than parricide*, dooming its perpetrators, without benefit of clergy, to the penalties of eternal perdition”¹⁸ Going on to explain that while many modern Christians sanctioned usury, they had really turned their back on God’s true word. The key to this model of merging economic reform and religious reform was that it was not primarily about one or the other, but instead the notion that proper Christians would follow certain economic behavior and just economic actors would follow the proper teachings of Christ. For Townsend, it made complete sense to address financial matters such as usury or banking through religious terms because he equated capitalist ideology to a competing faith. He wrote that the “aristocratic system of political economy has also its own system of religious faith. Its god is gold or mammon; its temples of idolatry, banks—believing that ‘the blessing of God, *it maketh rich*, it counteth gain godliness, as well as the possession of property the proof of merit.”¹⁹ Robert Townsend was not particularly groundbreaking with his morally motivated economic analysis; several of other individuals published writings in panic-era New York that blended religion and political economy (and did it more convincingly), including Alonzo Potter, Francis Wayland, and Orestes Brownson.²⁰ What made Townsend different was that he was known as a pro-labor leader while those other men already had public reputations as religious leaders when they offered their spiritually guided views on finances and the panic.

The portrait of a mid-panic era Robert Townsend championing such a morally infused notion of economic reform is quite a bit at odds with the way he is portrayed in some of the historiography of the Loco Foco Party. Discussing the LFP, numerous scholars characterize him “guilty of political

18 Townsend, *An Inquiry Into the Cause of Social Evil*, 9.

19 *Ibid.*, 10.

20 See Alonzo Potter, *Political Economy: Its Objects, Uses, and Principles* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1840), Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy* (New York: Leavitt, Lord & Company, 1837), and Orestes Augustus Brownson, *The Rich Against the Poor: The Labouring Classes; Reprinted from the Boston Quarterly Review, of July, 1840* (New-York: Sold at Elton’s publication offices, 1840).

expediency,” “more a politician than a laborist,” and a Whig sympathizer with “considerable experience in political manipulation,” who used other radicals to diminish the political power of Tammany Hall.²¹ However, part of the reason that he is often portrayed as at odds with the “real” radicals around him comes from the fact that he was often at odds with many of his fellow radicals over what role religion should play in their analysis of the economy. As a Loco Foco convention speaker, he was quite able to offer up standard pro-labor rhetoric without reference to scripture or biblical justification, reminding his audience to “let a man’s worth be estimated not by his wealth, but by his usefulness in society,” but this speech seemed to lack the inspiration and fire that his later address contained.²² Townsend was always certainly a gifted politician. He could turn a phrase and managed to convince both enough Loco Focos and Whigs to vote for him in 1836 that he was elected to the state assembly, however he never fully expressed his complete worldview until the panic.

While the trajectory of Robert Townsend’s public activism clearly showed his long-standing desire to support both pro-labor, radical economic positions simultaneously with his enthusiasm for promoting certain moral behavior, it was actually the absence of the Trade Union and Loco Foco movements during the Panic of 1837 that provided him the space and opportunity to forge a united appeal. Going back to his days of the Working Men’s Party there was always a tension within New York’s organized labor movement over the issue of religion. In cities such as Albany or Baltimore religiously minded journeymen explicitly and publicly embraced the use of faith as part of their critique of working conditions, but this was never the case within New York’s more diverse laboring community.²³ Most labor activists were culturally, rather than spiritually Protestant or Catholic with

21 Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class*, 72, Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, 68, and Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 294.

22 The speech was given at a Convention of Mechanics, Farmers and Workingmen, at Utica, September 17, 1836, and was reprinted in *The Democrat*, October 19, 1836.

23 See Anthony Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution: An Account of the Coming of the Machines, The Making of a New Way of Life in the Mill Hamlets, The Triumph of Evangelical Capitalists Over Socialists and Infidels, and The Transformation of the Workers Into Christian Soldiers in a Cotton-*

small, motivated groups of irreligious artisans balancing the equally modest number of evangelical working men like Robert Townsend. Trade unions and the Loco Focos opted to push religion to the side in order to minimize potential conflicts, but that decision did not come without some conflicts. Back in 1830 as an influential member of the Working Men's Party faction headed by Noah Cook, Townsend and others were accused of trying to forge a "Church and State Party."²⁴ Trying to keep the issue from ripping labor organizations apart, official trade union movement newspapers even announced that "religious or irreligious discussions, will be excluded from our columns."²⁵ In order to keep the peace, supporters of evangelical religion like Townsend occasionally pushed their interests to the side to uphold a truce with secularists. When the panic hit and he no longer felt the pressure to conform to the religious policies of the trade unions and Loco Focos, Townsend helped form the Social Reform Society and used their inaugural meeting to espouse his vision of a Christian economy and Democracy. Not everyone was happy with his decision.

Even though he worked alongside Robert Townsend Jr. as a Loco Foco, Gilbert Vale approached issues of politics, economy, and especially religion from a very different perspective and the distance between them seemed to widen during the Panic of 1837. After a failed period training for the ministry in England, Vale emigrated to New York City in 1829 and quickly began printing pamphlets, books, and journals aimed at working men. He came to public attention most notably for his investigation of the prophet Matthias and his followers, including Isabella Van Wageningen (who later

Manufacturing District in Pennsylvania in the Years Before and During the Civil War (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978) and David G. Hackett, *The Rude Hand of Innovation: Religion and Social Order in Albany, New York, 1652-1836* (New York: Oxford Press, 1991), Jama Lazerow, *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1995), William R. Sutton, *Journeyman for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), and William R. Sutton, "Tied to the Whipping Post: New Labor History and Evangelical Artisans in the Early Republic," *Labor History* 36 (Spring, 1995), 251-81.

²⁴ *Free Enquirer*, Nov. 13, 1830. For an example of religious content in Cook's paper, see "Affliction" in *New-York Reformer, Farmers', Mechanics', and Working Men's Champion*, Sept. 10, 1830.

²⁵ *The Democrat*, March 9, 1836.

changed her name to Sojourner Truth).²⁶ During the Loco Foco revolt, Vale acted as a low level operative and served as a delegate to the group's county convention in 1836. After the dissolution of the party he focused on his writing, publishing two periodicals—*The Beacon* and *The Diamond*—as well as a positively-received book on the life of Thomas Paine.²⁷ In the mid-1840s, he joined other former Loco Focos in supporting the land reform promised by Evan's National Reform Association and became a leader of the New York Industrial Congress in 1850.²⁸

Even though, or maybe because he had trained for the clergy as a young man, Gilbert Vale became a militant Deist and follower of Thomas Paine in his adulthood and his strong opinions on religion moved to the forefront of his work. Friend and fellow National Reform Association radical Lewis Masquerier wrote that in all of Vale's "writings and publications, he attacked the errors of religions and governments," adding that "Mr. Vale was a disciple of Paine in his political opinions; but he neither affirmed nor denied the being of a God, and saw no proof for another life beyond the clouds, or below the surface of the earth."²⁹ Some of Vale's irreligious views came out through his book on Matthias, which was less a report on a controversial figure and more of a warning of religious zealotry. He premised his study on its benefit to society:

Philosophers have often sought the point where fanaticism ends, and knavery begins, and to what extent fanaticism may set aside the most established code of morals in their own persons, while in others not operated on by the same spirit, they would condemn in the most absolute terms; in fact, when men do wrong in the name of God, it becomes a matter of real interest to know the motives which prompt to the wrong, or the cause from which it flows.³⁰

In many ways this encapsulated Gilbert Vale's views on religion; there was a fine line between personal

26 Gilbert Vale, *Fanaticism; Its Sources and Influence, Illustrated By the Simple Narrative of Isabella, In the Case of Matthias, Mr. and Mrs. B. Folger, Mr. Pierson, Mr. Mills, Catherine, Isabella, &c. &c.* (New York: Gilbert Vale, 1835).

27 Gilbert Vale, *The Life of Thomas Paine, Author of "Common Sense," "Rights of Man," "Age of Reason," &c., &c. With Critical and Explanatory Observations on his Writings; and An Appendix, Containing His Letters to Washington, Suppressed in His Works at Present Published in this Country* (New York: Published by the author, 1841).

28 Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class*, 95-96, Bridges, *A City in the Republic*, 113, and Mark A. Lause, *Young America: Land, Labor, and the Republican Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 14 and 17.

29 Lewis Masquerier, *Sociology, Or, The Reconstruction of Society, Government, and Property* (New York: Published by the author, 1877), 105-106.

30 Vale, *Fanaticism*, 4.

moral belief and dangerous antisocial behavior and if believers got too much power they posed a real threat to the freedom and liberties of others. Likewise, he used his *Life of Paine* to champion confrontation with corrupt religious forces even it seemed difficult. He noted that “in the history of nations there are periods of fanaticism, but a steady progress in liberality.”³¹ As long as he—like Paine—was willing to fight for the cause, the triumph of the individual over group superstition was destined.

Such fears about religion obviously came into conflict with the convictions of Robert Townsend Jr.. Just after Francis Treadwell displaced Townsend to gain control of the Social Reform Society, Vale issued a blistering assault on what he saw as the dangerous course that Townsend had been attempting to follow early in the organization's existence. It is worth quoting him at length:

In its commencement this society was threatened with fanaticism; an effort was made to establish a Christian party in politics, by someone who thought he could deceive (*humbug* would be more emphatic, if not more elegant) the community . . . to identify political reform with scripture, to use scripture phraseology, and to prove by scripture as well as reason the propriety of certain reforms: to stand aloof from open (honest) unbelievers, and thus to beat their equally paltry opponents with their own weapons. The good sense of the society saw this hypocritical course would be undignified, sectarian, and dishonest, and we have no more of the Christian party in politics; but this course objectionable for a society, would be perfectly justifiable in some individuals.³²

A couple of points are apparent in Vale's venomous attack. First, he clearly saw Townsend's desire to forge a Christian party that merged biblical justifications of political economy and moral views of proper government as dangerous to society. Second, he lamented the notion that honest and unbelieving reformers would be pushed to the side in Townsend's plan. And third, he directly challenged the earnestness of Townsend's religious beliefs, anticipating the charge of later historians that Townsend was just a political hack trying to manipulate voters for power. While it is relatively impossible to know how sincere Townsend's religiosity was—I tend to believe it more than other scholars and definitely

31 Vale, *The Life of Paine*, 174-175.

32 *The Diamond*, July 1840.

more than Vale—it is useful to see the debate within the context of the Panic of 1837 and depression that followed.

It may seem that the dispute between Gilbert Vale and Robert Townsend Jr. was not much more than a petulant, personal spat, but something more telling about panic-era radicalism was going on here. As fellow travelers during the Loco Foco Party years, both Vale and Townsend (like numerous others) made the decision to bifurcate their views on religion and political economy because of their hopes that the power of the organization would deliver on its principle to provide “the greatest good of the greatest number.”³³ This did not mean that they necessarily turned their backs on their beliefs; Townsend was active in the Sabbatarian movement and Vale published his exposé on Matthias at the same time that they advocated for the Loco Focos. However, they were mostly willing to abide by the party’s attempt to limit religious and irreligious discussions in order to agitate for a more pure economic platform.³⁴ When the LFP evaporated during the panic and depression and there was no longer a need to compromise or tailor their messages to stay in line with party discipline, both former Loco Focos felt free to bring their views on religion front and center alongside their thoughts on political economy.

33 This motto goes back to British reformer Jeremy Bentham, but the Loco Focos probably picked it up because it was a favorite of their intellectual guru, William Leggett. For some examples see *The Plaindealer*, January 21, 1837, March 25, 1837, and June 3, 1837. It appeared in a resolution drafted after a mass Loco Foco meeting in the Park. See Fitzwilliam Byrdsall, *The History of the Loco-Foco or Equal Rights Party: Its Movements, Conventions, and Proceedings With Short Characteristic Sketches of Its Prominent Men* (New York: Clement and Packard, 1842), 151. Townsend also used the quote in his speech to the Social Reform Society, Townsend, *An Inquiry into the Cause of Social Evil*, 5.

34 Limiting religious discussion in the LFP did not always work smoothly. Writing from his own comfortable position of hindsight and outside of immediate party pressures in 1842, former recording secretary Fitzwilliam Byrdsall alternatively referred to the Loco Focos as the “Methodists of Democracy” and Loco Focoism as consistent with “Christian Democracy.” See Byrdsall, *History of the Loco-Foco or Equal Rights Party*, vi and 189. Likewise, party inspirational leader William Leggett defined “Democracy” as a “divine system of Christian morals applied to politicks, embraces, in its comprehensive creed of equal rights and equal duties, the whole family of man.” See *Plaindealer*, July 22, 1837. Perhaps the best, but relatively obscure indication of religious tension in the movement can be seen in a billboard that appeared following the spring election of 1837. The broadside contained a satirical sermon by Reverend Jedidey Birchard, who was labeled with the initials “L.L.D., D.D. and A.S.S.” to properly denote his pomposity. The sermon mocked that “the disciples were all Loco Focos—and Jesus was a leader of Loco Foco.” See Jedidey Birchard, *Loco Foco forever!!! Or, Downfall of Tammany!!!: Being the heads and tails of a discourse delivered by the Right Rev. Father in God, Jedidey Birchard, L.L.D., D.D. and A.S.S., at the Chatham Show Shop, on last Sabbath Ev’g.* (New York: s.n., 1837).

While religion obviously set Robert Townsend Jr. and Gilbert Vale apart, it should also be noted as a quick aside that this was just one of the nuanced ways that panic-era writers expressed their individual visions of political economy. It was certainly not one that every labor activist concentrated on. Clinton Roosevelt—who I will discuss in more detail in moment—navigated a moderate religious position somewhere between Vale’s skepticism and Townsend’s near-evangelism in his pamphlets. He did worry about the power and judgement of the clergy and feared that “under the garb of christianity—intended for man’s greatest good—ignorance and bigotry have filled the world with blood.” However, at the same time he believed in following Christ’s charge to “feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, to make peace on earth, and good will amongst men.”³⁵ What comes through in his writings is a nod to the creator and God-given rights, but almost nothing in the way of specific theological discussion. This centrist posture would have been easily accepted by a majority of New York’s Panic-era working men, who identified generally as Protestant or Catholic, but did not necessarily look to religion or irreligion for guidance on matters of political economy.

Gilbert Vale wrote consistently throughout the panic-era, but it was his 1841 supplement to *The Diamond*, entitled *Manual of Political Economy* that he most forcefully brought together his views on religion and economics. His discussions of financial policy mirrored Paine in the way they championed the individual and free trade and opposed any government restrictions on market engagement—from the tariff to incorporation laws. He feared too much government involvement in currency matters and was even so adamant about letting the individual function as an economic free agent, that he broke with many other panic-era radicals over their support for co-operative or utopian communes.³⁶ He called out Robert Owen as a “dictator” and argued that the “harmony, and prosperity of such a society” as his

35 Clinton Roosevelt, *The Science of Government Founded on Natural Law* (New York: Dean and Trevett, 1841), 30.

36 Some of those radicals, he had long-standing relationships with. Going back to the days of the Working Men’s Party, Vale’s support of Free Enquiry had made him an ally of Robert Dale Owen, whose controversial work on birth control Vale published. See Robert Dale Owen, *Moral Physiology, or, A Brief and Plain Treatise on the Population Question* 10th ed. (New York, Gilbert Vale, n.d.). Vale also sold numerous titles by Owen and Frances Wright from his office.

community in New Harmony was fraught because of its foundation on “despotism, tyranny, and fraud” in violation of “equal rights.” He saw a problem with “any plan which denies individual property, and demands continued common services, must restrain individual liberty, and fail to bring out talents, energies, and virtues, peculiar to a competitive state.”³⁷ His key point here was that even if a harmonious end could be created through a communitarian system, it did not justify the means of limiting individual rights and fair competition, a policy he believed that more noble and bound to produce the best results.

Gilbert Vale’s commitment to the freedom of the individual in the face of coercive pressure from the government—or even other radical reformers like Owen—was not merely how he approached political economy, it also related directly to his fear of religious extremism. He stated quite clearly that without contemplating it most people believed that “*majority should govern the minority*: and this is the key to all the miserable legislation in the world, and the foundation of most of the evils; this is the father of the religious and political persecutions, and the grand impediment to improvement.” Vale made sure to clarify this attack on republican government by tying his position together within the context of his two underlying themes: the need to protect the individual and the danger from extreme religion. He noted that when legislators could pass laws on any subject and “decide by a *majority*, then *any* religious body which could obtain a majority, could and would oppress the rest, and persecute *according to the law*.”³⁸ While not explicitly calling for a direct democracy or state of anarchy, he was reminding his audience of their need to remain constantly vigilant to large, powerful institutions that sought to restrict their individual rights and behaviors. Sometimes these threats came from economic or political institutions that tried to limit their ability to engage the market on their own terms and sometimes the threats came from religious institutions that tried to limit their ability to engage the

37 Gilbert Vale, *Manual of Political Economy, A Supplement to the Diamond* (New York: Published at the Beacon Office, 1841), 40.

38 *Ibid.*, 39. Italics in original.

spiritual world on their own terms.

In the case of Robert Townsend and Gilbert Vale, the collapse of the organized labor movement during the economic downturn in the late 1830s and early 1840s provided an opportunity for each of them to crystallize diverging radical ideas about political economy that they had been developing for years, but had been restricted from exploring in full due to the internal pressures to uphold labor movement platforms related to downplaying religion. Each of their panic-era plans contained morsels that harkened back to their days as members of the Equal Rights Party—fears of corrupt bankers cheating workers for Townsend and fears of authoritarian power restraining individual freedom for Vale—even as they explored new conclusions that moved them into oppositional positions. For Clinton Roosevelt, however, the Panic of 1837 proved less of an opportunity to follow his underlying beliefs to their logical conclusions and more a transformative event that completely reshaped his understanding of the relationship between government and the economy. By the middle of the depression, he had left his Loco Foco beliefs behind and published one of the most fascinating manifestos of the era.

If anyone could be cited as a representative Loco Foco, it was Clinton Roosevelt. Not a laboring man—he worked as a lawyer and mechanical inventor and was born in a house that later became the headquarters of Standard Oil—he served as one of the movement’s intellectual leaders and respectable faces.³⁹ Already known for his writings on the tariff and paper currency before the split from Tammany Hall, Roosevelt helped publish and edit *The Democrat*, a Loco Foco organ that ran for nine months starting in March, 1836. In November of that year he was elected to the New York State Assembly along with Robert Townsend Jr. as a fusion Loco Foco/Whig candidate and prominent critic of the monopoly banking system. In running for state office, Roosevelt pledged to try to remove all circulating paper currency under ten dollars, repeal laws preventing workers from trying to negotiate their wages as individuals or as part of a trade union, oppose state monopoly incorporation laws, and

39 See Clinton Roosevelt’s Obituary in the *New York Times*, August 10, 1898.

eliminate imprisonment for debt. As a member of the Assembly, he tried to get a subcommittee to investigate usury among state chartered banks, but the report was tabled without action.⁴⁰ Roosevelt's career as an elected politician ended during the beginning of the Panic in 1837, but not before he helped create an Equal Rights movement that tried to level the political economy playing field by removing the government from individual's free market engagement.

Clinton Roosevelt first came to many New Yorkers' attention with the publication of his 1833 pamphlet, *The Mode of Protecting Domestic Industry, Consistently With the Desires Both of the South and the North, by Operating on the Currency*, which attacked the protective tariff by showing how the banking system prevented contemporary financial strategies from fulfilling any of their promised benefits. He wrote that traditional notions of free trade called for buying goods where they were the cheapest and selling them where they get the best prices, assuming that due to differences in natural resources and skills, "the sum of good to all will be increased by a free interchange of superfluities."⁴¹ However, Roosevelt noted that it was paper currency manipulations and not an organic, invisible hand that determined the inflated prices at which these goods were bought and sold. Even in this early writing, he did not fully ascribe to an unbridled laissez-faire view, objecting to the slogan, "men should be let alone, and things will regulate themselves."⁴² His main problem with this version of free trade is that he believed that it originated with the idea that "every act of man originates in selfishness." This bothered the soon-to-be Loco Foco Roosevelt, who conceived of the best political economy as honest individuals helping the largest possible number in society, rather than a system that benefit dishonorable economic actors such as the "pirate or robber (who) plunders and murders only because he desires the property of others, and cares not how much other suffer so he enjoys."⁴³ Two aspects of

40 Byrdsall, *The History of the Loco Foco, Or Equal Rights Party*, 88-89 and 114.

41 Clinton Roosevelt, *The Mode of Protecting Domestic Industry, Consistently With the Desires Both of the South and the North, by Operating on the Currency* (New York: McElrath and Bangs, 1833), 1.

42 *Ibid.*, 6.

43 *Ibid.*, 10.

his early economic ideology were on display in this quote: first, the desire for economic justice over sheer mercenary profit and second, the protection of individual economic rights, including private property. Both parts would become critical planks in the liberal Loco Foco Party platform and as we have seen, inspire the later writings of Gilbert Vale.

Roosevelt's discussion of domestic industry started with Hamilton's economic policy in order to trace the relationship between the tariff and banking back to its roots. He acknowledged that ideally under this system:

the BANKS were to furnish the people with *more money*, that they might make *more purchases* . . . the Tariff was to *raise the prices*, of foreign goods so high, when brought to our markets, that domestic manufacturers would have an advantage, by thus being enabled to offer their fabrics *cheaper*. . . then it was by *raising the prices* of foreign goods, it brought in competition with domestic, that domestic goods were to be preferred. Let us not forget this.⁴⁴

Roosevelt claimed that the American economy did not work this way in reality. Just as in his analysis of free trade, he cited bank currency as the problem. While the tariff was supposed to encourage domestic production by raising prices on imports and giving a competitive advantage to American manufacturers, it was operating simultaneously with an increase in domestic paper money circulation. The additional cash in the economy caused commodity price inflation which acted to negate the tariff's desired effect. At its root then, Roosevelt argued that the "American or Hamiltonian system is contradictory and altogether incapable of protecting domestic industry and commerce."⁴⁵

Once he identified the problem with Hamilton's economy, Clinton Roosevelt offered his plan for how to best protect both northern industry and southern planters and better expand the nation's wealth. He argued that "instead of operating on foreign goods to raise their prices in our markets by means of a tariff *we must operate upon the currency*, and by reducing the amount of bank paper, cause

44 Ibid., 14.

45 Ibid., 17.

the money prices of domestic productions to sink below the money prices of goods in England.”⁴⁶ So, getting rid of all circulating bank notes under ten dollars would keep prices low and give northern manufacturers benefits without a protective tariff that tied the hands of southern producers. Writing in the midst of both the Nullification Crisis and the Bank War, Roosevelt joined a heated national discussion about protectionism, but offered a unique approach that actually had little to do with the machinations of the tariff itself.⁴⁷ Instead, he argued that the key to America’s happiness and prosperity was the price of goods being consumed and produced by the nation’s workers. The key to those prices was the quantity and quality of the country’s currency. The domestic economy, therefore, could be saved by removing small paper notes from circulation, destroying the corrupt banking system that promulgated it, and installing a largely specie-based economy that rewarded labor and not just speculation and usury (Townsend picked up on these ideas of usury in his later speech).

Roosevelt’s ideas about the dangers of paper money manipulation circulated widely, inspiring both the New York Loco Focos and even national debates. As late as the presidential election of 1844, a political cartoon appeared called *Whig Appeal For An Excuse* that attacked Whigs plans for their planned protective tariff. Vice presidential nominee Theodore Frelinghuysen was pictured in the image with the idea of teaching “Free Trade” and “Tariff” doctrines to students, while Henry Clay suggested that he may have to attack opponents of the plan if they raised objections based on “Roosevelts mode of Protecting Domestic Industry.”⁴⁸ By this point however, Clinton Roosevelt’s own ideas about political economy had greatly evolved from his early 1830s writings. Before the Panic of 1837, Clinton

46 Ibid., 19.

47 On the Tariff, see David F. Ericson, “The Nullification Crisis, American Republicanism, and the Force Bill Debate,” *The Journal of Southern History* 61, Number 2 (May, 1995), 249-270. On the Bank War, see Peter Temin, *The Jacksonian Economy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969), Howard Bodenhorn *A History of Banking in Antebellum America: Financial Markets and Economic Development in an Era of Nation-building* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), John M. McFaul, *The Politics of Jacksonian Finance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 16-57, and Edward S. Kaplan, *The Bank of the United States and the American Economy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999).

48 H. Bucholzer, *Whig Appeal For An Excuse* (New York: James Baillie, 1844).

Roosevelt was a standard bearer for the Loco Foco's anti-monopoly free market liberalism, but as the economy imploded and New York's working population suffered his views began to change. Even into early 1838 he delivered a series of speeches that echoed his well-established positions opposing paper money and state monopoly banking that he later collected and distributed in the pamphlet *Practical Lectures on Banking, Exchange, and Fraudulent Speculations*.⁴⁹ However by 1841, Roosevelt no longer called for more individual freedom within capitalism or cosmetic reforms to the banking and tariff system, he called for an entirely new economic structure.

His radical plan emerged in a pamphlet entitled, *The Science of Government Founded on Natural Law*. The treatise followed a dialog between the author and a "producer" concerned with finding an answer to the injustice that "those who produce the most by genius and industry secure the least, while those who seek not to perform that which is truly useful to society, accumulate the most of all the fruits, of toil and ingenuity."⁵⁰ Coming in the midst of the panic and depression, this was not a mere call for improved wages or working conditions for laborers, it was a challenge to replace the nation's broken political economy. Roosevelt—like many other Americans—noticed that in the wake of the financial collapse, the government was not equipped to deal with and respond to problems on a national scale. The failure of city, state, or even national authorities to respond to the unemployment and suffering unleashed by the panic was reflected in sour views of politicians. For some, this meant turning on Martin "Van Ruin" and favoring Whigs by getting rid of the current administration in the election of 1840 and for others this meant supporting more radical Democrats who had been Loco Focoized in their commitment to challenge banks and paper money.⁵¹ However, for Roosevelt, the problems of corruption and stagnation were too great for minor reforms or mere changes in the

49 *Evening Post*, January 6, 1838.

50 Roosevelt, *The Science of Government Founded On Natural Law*, 12.

51 On the Election of 1840, see James Roger Sharp, *The Jacksonians Versus the Banks: Politics in the States after the Panic of 1837* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), Michael Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development From the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 151-191 and Robert Gray Gunderson, *The Log-Cabin Campaign* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957).

personnel running the government. He noted that since “bands of monopolists have corrupted legislators,” and even monied interests controlled the courts, workers were “sent to prison as conspirators” if they would dare to “seek to meet the most unjust depreciation in the value of the money given to us as wages.”⁵² What was needed was a completely different relationship between the government and the economy where officials were held responsible for the system’s ability to produce enough, to make sure that everyone received enough, and at the end of the day, ensure happiness.

In crafting a government run and co-ordinated political economy, Roosevelt jettisoned much of his liberal notion of individual rights and free market engagement in favor of a more social understanding of prosperity. He noted that “none can be entirely happy or unhappy by himself alone. We must assist each other. . . much greater good can come from many than from any one alone.”⁵³ His earlier writings lamented that economists planned for mankind’s selfishness, but now he sought to use that impulse to society’s advantage by refocusing it. Overall, he looked to “harmonize the interests of men by an organization of men and things, by which it will be to the immediate self-interest of everyone to act consistently with the greatest good of all.”⁵⁴ Roosevelt acknowledged that on some level this probably sounded too idealistic; the way to make it work was government accountability. Coming in an era when several utopian plans to manage the economy competed for public attention, Clinton Roosevelt explicitly distanced himself from Robert Owen’s community system as not having enough accountability or a proper mechanism for getting the industrious and the lazy to share the workload. He likewise noted that Fourierism (and by extension Albert Brisbane’s writings) was an “abstraction” that did not have enough safeguards in the form of laws, prisons, or hospitals for those “not sane enough to act on principles.”⁵⁵ To make an organized economy work, Roosevelt argued, it not

52 Roosevelt, *The Science of Government Founded On Natural Law*, 13.

53 *Ibid.*, 19.

54 *Ibid.*, 33-34.

55 *Ibid.*, 45-46. For more on Robert Owen’s system in New Harmony and the rest of the United States, see John F.C. Harrison, *Quest for the New Moral World: Robert Owen & the Owenites in Britain and America* (New York: Charles

only had to be planned, but its participants had to accept responsibility for their actions and their decisions.

In order to demonstrate the accountability in his system, Clinton Roosevelt's *Science of Government* seems to thrive on its order and its sequential levels of classification, even going so far as to include flowcharts and a detailed image of what Political Science looks like as its frontispiece. Reviews reacted to Roosevelt's precision, noting that under the system, "everything is to be discipline, control, direction, government."⁵⁶ The basis of Roosevelt's scientific system started with two questions: "1st. What are the wants of man? 2d. How are they to be supplied?" His answer to these queries divided mankind's wants into three categories which provided him the foundation of his governmental science. To fulfill want number one, "clothing, food, and shelter for the body," agriculture, manufactures, and commerce must be organized. To fulfill want number two, "security for our persons and our property," law, war, and medicine must be regulated. And to fulfill want number three, "general knowledge, refinement, amusement and glory," the fields of Natural History, Physiology, Moral Philosophy, Literature, Mathematics, and Fine Arts must be refined. Each of these categories he further subdivided to create the most orderly and complete classification of natural science possible. For example, Agriculture was divided into Temperate, Warm, Hot, and Water regions, with the Warm region responsible for producing "Cotton, Rice, Orange, Fig, Vine." Manufactures included: Clothing Materials, Viands, Metals and Minerals, Drugs, Paints, Dye-stuffs and Medicines, and Machinery. Likewise, Law included a Court for the correction of errors, a Police System, and a

Scribner's Sons, 1969), William E. Wilson, *The Angel and the Serpent: The Story of New Harmony* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), George B. Lockwood, *The New Harmony Movement* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), Robert Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen: A Biography* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), and Ian Donnachie, *Robert Owen: Owen of New Lanark and New Harmony* (Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press, 2000). On Albert Brisbane, see Arthur Bestor Jr., "Albert Brisbane—Propagandist for Socialism in the 1840s," *New York History* (April, 1947), 128-140 and Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ *United States Democratic Review*, August 1841. Edgar Allan Poe wrote a harsh review of the book. See *Graham's Magazine*, August 1841.

Court of Arbitration, while Literature was divided into Modern (English, French, German) and Ancient Languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew).⁵⁷ These impressively detailed lists are not just a rhetorical flourish to provide some examples his system, they are critical to way he wanted to construct a relationship between government and economy.

Once the economy was categorized, Roosevelt's plan called for officers to oversee individual parts of the system, cooperating with each other while they provided economic management and trained others to complete their required work. At this point in the discussion, the producer asked the author how such an orderly system could commence from scratch. Roosevelt's answer was telling for the way it re-conceived the role of workers (whether agricultural, commercial, manufacturing, or intellectual) in a post-panic economy and is worth quoting in full. He explained in detail:

by dividing and subdividing, and simplifying all their duties, the risk of failure is so lessened that, as armies have been heretofore well officered and prepared for active service by a previous exercise, by like means and by degrees, may we also accomplish our object. I refer you to the diagrams, by which the bearing and dependencies of all the parts, may be at a glance perceived. On this, the lines of accountability are shown converging to a point from each inferior to a superior officer, and the superior being in like manner accountable with others to a higher. We thus go on, until one is enabled to perceive at a glance where anything is wrong in government, and apply the remedy, by holding the officer having charge of the department accountable at once.⁵⁸

Two aspects of this rationale jump out as significant to Clinton Roosevelt's vision of a government organized economy: the desire to divide and simplify work, making it less difficult to learn and the vertical integration of the economy with officers held responsible for what happens below them.

Roosevelt's insistence on subdividing worker duties marked a dramatic departure from earlier pro-labor stances. During the mass union movement of the mid-1830s, New York's journeymen vehemently protested when masters tried to increase production by simplifying and breaking down the

⁵⁷ Roosevelt, *The Science of Government Founded on Natural Law*, 69-73.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

skilled aspects of their craft work.⁵⁹ Likewise, skilled artisans relied on the “art and mystery” they learned through apprenticeships to make particular claims to their critical place within the economy and their independent position as family breadwinners.⁶⁰ However, the Panic of 1837 shocked Clinton Roosevelt into reexamining Loco Foco and trade union notions of liberal ideology that he had championed just a few years earlier. He no longer believed that if barriers were removed from individual market engagement, workers and their families could prosper. The economy and the government had gotten too large, unwieldy, and mismanaged. What was needed was not less regulation and oversight, but more, total governmental co-ordination of the economy, but done in the spirit of cooperation and social benefit.

As for how work actually got done under Roosevelt’s government and its system of accountability, he did not perceive of work quotas or force to ensure that all jobs were staffed. Instead, he assumed that officials would assign the more industrious more work for more reward and the less industrious less work for less reward. While the producer questioned the potential for chaos if everyone got to choose their own profession, Roosevelt said that anyone of good character (which was undefined) could try to find “the occupation most congenial to his taste and feelings.” He accepted that the process would regulate itself as “few are desirous of undergoing all the awkwardness of new occupations, when once their ‘hands are in’.”⁶¹ Again, here as in his explanation of how work was to be done, Roosevelt demonstrated his move away from relying on the solitary skill and achievement of individual working men and toward a social mode of production. When the producer asked if

⁵⁹ See Wilentz, *Chants Democratic* and Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

⁶⁰ For a standard trade union defense of craft skill, see Ely Moore, *Address Delivered Before the General Trades' Union of the City of New-York, at the Chatham-Street Chapel, Monday, December 2, 1833* (New York: James Ormond, 1833). For an earlier example of the swashbuckling persona of the skilled artisan, see John Bradford, *The Poetical Vagaries of a Knight of the Folding-Stick of Paste-Castle. To Which is Annexed, the History of the Garret, &c. &c.* (Gotham: Printed For the Author, 1815). For a more detailed discussion of breadwinning and craft skill, see Chapter Four in Greenberg, *Advocating the Man*.

⁶¹ Roosevelt, *The Science of Government Founded on Natural Law*, 78-79.

agricultural workers and land holdings should be divided into “individual possessions,” he responded that instead, “men should work in large companies together.”⁶² This was a pretty far cry from his earlier defense of individual freedoms and property rights, but it was just one of many features of his Loco Foco platform to receive a major overhaul in *The Science of Government*.

One of the most important parts of Clinton Roosevelt’s new system was the replacement of paper money and bank notes with bills of exchange based on labor performed. He explained that once a worker in the new political economy produced anything, they would deposit the articles with an appraiser who would value the product in terms of “*time of labor*.”⁶³ The product was then brought to a store for sale and the producer received a bill of exchange in the appraised labor/time amount: one hour, one day, one week, one month, etc. Using the bills of exchange, citizens could then buy what they wanted from the government monitored storehouses. Even though he had problems with Robert Owen’s community system, these bills of exchange functioned very closely to the “time money” used to buy “time stores” at New Harmony. For complex production, such as home building, each part of the total would have a separate labor/time estimate and workers would be compensated for the parts they produced. Roosevelt argued that the key to the currency system was that its valuation was direct, rather than indirect. He complained that all contemporary money was flawed because it was indirectly valued via the time and labor it took to obtaining precious metals. Stated another way, an artisan was not really being directly paid for the value of their work, they were being paid for the equivalent of a certain amount of specie. This gap in this valuation process opened up bankers and money marketeers to manipulate currency rates.

Clinton Roosevelt’s hostility to banking and paper money was evident from his pre-LoCo Foco days, but his move to time/labor bills of exchange represented a new panic-era understanding of how

62 Ibid., 82.

63 Ibid., 86.

bank notes operated in the economy. Rather than just getting rid of smaller bank notes, the panic convinced Roosevelt of the need for a whole new currency position. When banks stopped payment on their notes in the spring of 1837, Americans from all walks of life responded by forgoing the bank note system and printing up their own bills—called shinplasters—often at fractional amounts as low as 6½ cents. However, taking banks out the process did not make the system any more useful or reliable for workers. All shinplasters really did was expose the fact that none of the current circulating paper money—whether it was a bank note from the most secure institution or a piece of cardboard issued by a tavern—had any “intrinsic value” other than the confidence it inspired in others.⁶⁴ Roosevelt wanted to get away from such indirect and unstable methods of exchange and so developed his bills of exchange. Like other aspects of his plan for restructuring the nation’s political economy, his approach to banking and currency was not tied down to his earlier ideas or previous writings. The Panic of 1837 and the depression that followed shook the American economy to its core and Clinton Roosevelt believed that he needed to start from the ground up to fix it. Using his observations of the failure of the government during the financial crisis and free from his former role as a party politician or standard bearer, Roosevelt crafted a truly radical vision of political economy without the help or support of any labor organization or institution.

The stories of Robert Townsend Jr., Gilbert Vale, and Clinton Roosevelt provide particularly insightful accounts of how the Panic of 1837 helped alter, extend, and challenge radical views of political economy and how historians have overlooked these discussions, but not every pro-labor critic of the era was a former Loco Foco. I would like to conclude with a quick discussion of a short tract

64 For a good discussion of shinplasters in New York, see George P. Morris, *The Little Frenchman and His Water Lots, With Other Sketches Of The Times* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1839), 136-137. (Italics in original) There are numerous stories of the etymology of the term shinplaster, see Morris, *The Little Frenchman*, 137 and Frederick W. Seward, *Reminiscences of A War-Time Statesman and Diplomat, 1830-1915* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), 21-22. Shinplasterers technically operated on the right side of the law, while counterfeiterers also produced a huge supply of fake notes which complicated the paper money system. See Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiterers: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

called *A Letter to Mechanics and Working Men, on the Wages of Labor* written by New York carpenter Paul Inglis in 1840. Inglis saw the economic dislocation, mass unemployment, and lowered wages of the panic as coming directly from a federal government that he saw moving away from paper currency to a hard money system. He cited the veto of the Bank of the United States and plans for an independent sub-treasury as signs of an attack on workers' wages by depriving the economy of enough currency to function properly. Using both the statistics of workers' wages in other countries and his own personal household budget, Inglis tried to show that more, not less money needed to be put into the economy in order to raise wages, because there was not enough specie in circulation to meet everyone's needs. His own wages had dropped from \$600 a year, respectable for a skilled artisan in 1837, to \$300, barely enough to support his family of six. At least on the surface, Inglis attempted to craft a non-partisan appeal to all workers, "without any reference to his attachment or opposition to either of the great political parties," while reminding his audience that the stakes were high because the "prospects and happiness of your children depend upon it! are you willing to sacrifice *them*, to sustain a party?"⁶⁵ There is not much new about Inglis' argument (it recycles a lot from Bank War era tracts), but coming in the midst of the economic context of the late 1830s and early 1840s it should be seen as an interesting example of the way that the panic and depression radicalized individuals to demand changes to the nation's political economy. That is not how it is read by historians.

Published in September of 1840, Paul Inglis' treatise is rarely cited, but when it is scholars typically funnel it into a political historiography about how the Whig Party tried to appeal to mechanics and laborers during the hard cider campaign. However, I think that it is critical that we allow for a more nuanced reading of panic-era economic discussions. The absence of major trade unions or a pro-labor third party in New York City during these years meant that politically, almost every worker aligned

65 Paul Inglis, *A Letter to Mechanics and Working Men, on The Wages of Labor by Paul Inglis, Carpenter* (New York: n.p., 1840), 3 and 15.

with either the Whigs or the Democrats, but it is an oversimplification to likewise characterize all public debates about currency, banking, wages, and labor as the creation of party hacks. Inglis' appeal contained as well reasoned a condemnation of sub-treasury financial policy as any worker that weighed in on currency or banking issues during the earlier mass union moment of the mid-1830s and his own personal account insightfully focuses on the real effects of the panic on his wages and his ability to act a proper breadwinner. There should be room in our understanding of the Panic of 1837 that allows for Inglis the economically radicalized individual and not merely Inglis the low level Whig polemicist. Or maybe he was actually both. While it doesn't completely explain why Paul Inglis' voice has been left out of the story of the Panic of 1837, it is telling that the OCLC subject heading for his pamphlet simply reads: New York. New York. 1840.