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Source: *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 93, No. 1 (Jun., 2006), pp. 17-36

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4486058>

Accessed: 04-05-2016 13:23 UTC

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The Politics of “More”: The Labor Question and the Idea of Economic Liberty in Industrial America

Rosanne Currarino

In the midst of the catastrophic depression of the 1890s, American Federation of Labor (AFL) president Samuel Gompers griped that labor was tired of “Sympathy without relief, Mustard without beef.” America’s workers, he insisted, wanted “more”—“more leisure, more rest, more opportunity . . . for going to the parks, of having better homes, of reading books, of creating more desires.” “More” was the AFL’s official answer to the labor question of the late nineteenth century: the question of how to reconcile a permanent class of wageworkers with a nominally republican society. Faced with proletarianization, drastic economic instability, worker unrest, and a volatile job market, the AFL leadership did not call for an end to wage labor. Instead, it demanded higher wages and shorter hours for workers, demands that were, in the lexicon of the AFL, self-consciously “practical.”¹ Although those “pure and simple” demands were couched in economic terms, they moved past narrowly construed monetary concerns to larger questions of social welfare, personal liberty, and full participation in society.² As Gompers explained to the *North American Review*’s readers in 1892, “We tacitly declare that political liberty with[out] economic independence is illusory and deceptive, and that . . . only . . . as we gain eco-

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For comments and suggestions, I would like to thank Daniel E. Bender, Dorothy Sue Cobble, David Engerman, Gerald Friedman, Lawrence Glickman, Matthew Pratt Guterl, James Livingston, Richard Oestreicher, Grace Palladino, Kathy Peiss, the Penn Economic History Forum—especially Walter Licht, Alan Dawley, and Daniel M. G. Raff—Timothy B. Smith, Jonathan Steinberg, Christopher Warley, and the staff and anonymous readers of the *Journal of American History*, especially David Nord.

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¹ Samuel Gompers to Editor, *Cigar Maker’s Journal*, New York, Oct. 30, 1895, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, vol. IV, ed. Stuart B. Kaufman et al. (Urbana, 1991), 74; “Eight Hours on Government Work. Extracts from Statement by President Samuel Gompers,” *American Federationist*, 11 (March 1904), 308. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) did not represent most workers in the United States, nor did Samuel Gompers represent the views of all its members. But, as David Montgomery and Julie Greene have noted, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the AFL was increasingly the public voice of labor, and as president for all but one year from 1886 to 1924, Gompers was the public face of the AFL. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York, 1987); Julie Greene, *Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881–1917* (New York, 1998), esp. 9–12.

² On the breadth of AFL demands, see, for instance, Samuel Gompers, “Annual Report to A. F. of L. Convention, Detroit, Mich., December, 1890,” in *Labor and the Common Welfare*, ed. Hayes Robbins (New York, 1919), 2; Samuel Gompers, “Annual Report to A. F. of L. Convention, Kansas City, Mo., December 1898,” *ibid.*, 8; Samuel Gompers, “Annual Report to A. F. of L. Convention, Atlanta, Ga., November 1911,” *ibid.*, 20. By the twentieth century, the term “industrial democracy” incorporated many of the demands and assumptions of what this essay calls “more.” “Industrial democracy,” though, had vastly different meanings for different groups. On its meanings, see Joseph A. McCartin, “An American Feeling: Workers, Managers, and the Struggle over Industrial Democracy in the World War I Era,” in *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein and Howell John Harris (Cambridge, Eng., 1993), 67–86; Howell John Harris, “Industrial Democracy and Liberal Capitalism,” *ibid.*, 43–66.



The twenty-eight-year-old Samuel Gompers posed for a portrait in 1878, when he was president of the Cigar Makers International Union Local 144 (CMIU) in New York. His experiences during the depression of the 1870s and with German American socialists in the CMIU shaped what he called his "practical" labor philosophy. *Courtesy George Meany Memorial Archives.*

nomic independence can our political liberty become tangible and important." "Every advantage gained in the economic condition of the wage-workers," he further insisted, "must necessarily have its political and social effect, not only upon themselves but upon the whole people." For Gompers, demands for "more" were not only calls for higher wages; they were also demands for "all" that was "essential to the exercise and enjoyment of liberty."³

The AFL was not alone in articulating such broad meanings of more. As intellectual and cultural historians have shown, Americans from a wide range of backgrounds were deeply concerned about the labor question and "social politics" at the end of the nineteenth century. If, as Daniel T. Rodgers has observed of social politics, "the common social landscapes of industrial capitalism helped to knit its national strands together," Americans were similarly united by "deep, commonly shared anxieties" about industrial conflict and class divisions. The solution offered by a new generation of economists, eager

³ Samuel Gompers, "Organized Labor in the Campaign," *North American Review*, July 1892, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, vol. III, ed. Stuart B. Kaufman et al. (Urbana, 1989), 203; Samuel Gompers, "Speech Delivered by President Gompers before Meeting Civil Federation New York at the Banquet April 25th, 1905," *American Federationist*, 12 (Aug. 1905), 4.

to demonstrate that economics held the key to resolving social conflict and determined to shape the national response to the labor question, was remarkably similar to the AFL's: Wageworkers, they suggested, should demand more—more wages, more leisure, more consumption—both as vital economic actors and as members of American society. This essay connects the ideas of pure and simple unionism with those of the Young Turk economists, situating the call for more in a discussion that reconceptualized social power in late nineteenth-century industrial America. Understood as part of an emerging consumer-driven economy, demands for more took on meaning beyond wage raises and shorter hours. While economists and businessmen increasingly saw consumption as vital to the economic health of the nation, Americans came to understand consumption as central to cultural and social life. As historians of consumption have shown, participation in the growing consumer culture could be more than a private act for personal satisfaction. Consumption could also be political and transgressive, a site of struggle or of assimilation, and the source of social identities that might incorporate and move beyond narrowly defined juridical rights. In those contexts, more became an insistence, as Gompers explained to the banker August Belmont, that workers' indispensable rights included the freedom to demand "better lives," greater economic and social independence, and more opportunities in American society.⁴

The Economic Context of "More"

Historians have recently begun to argue that the pure and simple unionism of the AFL provided an adaptable language for working-class agendas in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, much as republicanism had presented a flexible and resilient vocabulary throughout the nineteenth century. In part, pure and simple unionism's elasticity came from its many and varied roots—in Marxism, the hostile courts, shop-floor realities, the constraints and possibilities of formal politics, and employer strength. In addition, as historians of consumer culture have pointed out, economic and cultural changes at the end of the century gave more particular resonance. In the context of mass production,

⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 50–59, esp. 59. On postbellum cultural and economic changes, see Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1994); M. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago, 1999); Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865–1914* (Chapel Hill, 2002); and Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York, 2003). On the emergence and significance of historical economics, see Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, esp. 76–111; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991); James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York, 1986), 199–266; Mary O. Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865–1905* (Lexington, Ky., 1975); Benjamin Rader, *The Academic Mind and Reform: The Influence of Richard T. Ely in American Life* (Lexington, Ky., 1966); and Joseph Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization*, vol. III: 1865–1918 (New York, 1949). On the cultural significance of consumption, see Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1999); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1987); Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York, 1990); Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, 1997); and Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York, 2000). Samuel Gompers, "Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, January 13–March 22, 1904 on a Bill to Limit Meaning of the Word Conspiracy," in *Labor and the Common Welfare*, ed. Robbins, 57; Gompers to August Belmont, July 6, 1918, *ibid.*, 78.

efficient national networks of distribution, corporate consolidation, and urbanization, more acted as a consumerist demand that, as Gary Cross has characterized consumerism more generally, "reflected real social needs" in "concrete" fashion. At the same time, the AFL used more to confront systemic social problems. By demanding an unspecified more rather than a finite amount, such demands addressed the paradox of a superabundance of goods and an increasingly uneven distribution of wealth, a paradox that has troubled critics and historians of consumer culture alike.⁵

That paradox was at the center of the social and economic climate of the Gilded Age, an era in which unprecedented economic growth coexisted with frequent business failures, unstable job markets, and cataclysmic depressions. The reality of rising real wages and increasing productivity, along with new explanations for industrial depressions, provided the AFL with the opportunity to enlarge the scope of labor's demands from the shop floor to workers' lives outside the workplace. As economic historians such as Jeffrey G. Williamson and Simon Smith Kuznets have shown, the period from 1873 to 1897 was characterized by general deflation and consistently rising real wages. From 1897 until 1929, deflation was replaced by inflation, but real wages continued to rise as well, increasing workers' potential consumer power throughout the period. Furthermore, the late nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented explosion of mass-produced consumer goods, from canned food to upholstered furniture, along with increasingly efficient distribution networks and national marketing efforts. As growing numbers of Americans purchased the new consumer goods, participation in the reality of plenty and the "aesthetic of abundance" physically and psychically changed the landscapes of daily lives. Involvement in consumer and popular culture took on greater social significance as party-centered electoral politics declined in importance throughout the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, to be replaced by a politics of interest groups and an ever-more-dis-

⁵ On the flexibility of the AFL's program, see, for instance, Stuart B. Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848–1896* (Westport, 1973); Christopher L. Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective," *Journal of American History*, 65 (March 1979), 1021–42; Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, 1987); Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864–92* (Urbana, 1998); Dorothy Sue Cobble, "American Labor Politics, AFL Style," *Labor History*, 40 (May 1999), 192–96; and Shelton Stromquist, "The Crisis of 1894 and the Legacies of Producerism," in *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics*, ed. Richard Schneirov et al. (Urbana, 1999), 179–203. On the history and uses of labor republicanism, see David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America, 1860–1920," *Le mouvement social* (Paris), 111 (April–June 1980), 201–15; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984); Richard Jules Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875–1900* (Urbana, 1986); and Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *Journal of American History*, 75 (June 1988), 115–36. On roots of pure and simple unionism, see, for instance, William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); Victoria C. Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton, 1993); and Jeffrey Haydu, *Between Craft and Class: Skilled Workers and Factory Politics in the United States and Britain, 1890–1922* (Berkeley, 1988). On the economic and cultural changes of the late nineteenth century, see, for instance, Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots: The Experience of Chicago Workers in the 1920s," *American Quarterly*, 41 (March 1989), 6–33. On the structural effects of corporate capitalism, see, for instance, Alfred Dupont Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); Kenneth Lipartito and David B. Sicilia, eds., *Constructing Corporate America: History, Politics, Culture* (New York, 2004); and Cross, *All-Consuming Century*. 2. On the paradox of abundance, see, for instance, Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (New York, 1976); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940* (Baltimore, 1985); and T. J. Jackson Lears, "Reconsidering Abundance: A Plea for Ambiguity" in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser et al. (Cambridge, Eng., 1994).

engaged electorate. Increasingly, consumer and leisure activities shaped public discourse as well as individuals' public and private lives.⁶

Rising real wages, growing production, and rising consumption, however, occurred during a prolonged period of economic retardation, lasting from 1873 until 1897, characterized by dropping costs of goods and a low rate of economic growth. The general downturn was itself punctuated by three extremely bitter depressions, one in each decade. In the 1880s, following the depression of 1873–1879, economists began to argue that increasing productive capacity and economic depressions were linked. Older explanations of market fluctuations, which assumed scarcity as a norm, no longer seemed to portray the large-scale industrial economy accurately. Instead, new discussions of market activity increasingly emphasized the need to stimulate aggregate consumption rather than to regulate production. Of course, some explanations of the 1873–1879 depression continued to echo antebellum beliefs that economic success or failure reflected productive capacity as well as individual moral virtue or lassitude. Staunch believers in laissez-faire economics, such as the Yale College economist William Graham Sumner, insisted that business failings, unemployment, and plummeting wages were due to unscrupulous, immoral, or foolish actions on the part of business owners—the railroads were particularly singled out. Before the depression, "everybody's confidence in the market was such that he did not want to pay his debt," explained Sumner to a committee of the House of Representatives in 1878. "Everybody wanted to renew his obligations, to extend his operations, because he expected a rise in the market still further." When the collapse of Jay Cooke's Philadelphia bank sparked the 1873 depression, speculators' groundless confidence in the market vanished, and the market contracted sharply. Investors' personal lack of thrift,

⁶ Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *The Age of Mass Migration: Causes and Economic Impact* (New York, 1998), 277; Simon Smith Kuznets, *Economic Growth and Structure: Selected Essays* (New York, 1965), table 1, 305; James Livingston, "The Social Analysis of Economic History and Theory: Conjectures on Late Nineteenth-Century American Development," *American Historical Review*, 92 (Feb. 1987), 69–95. For a contemporary assessment, see Edward Atkinson, "The Progress of the Nation," *Forum*, 7 (Oct. 1888), 128–29. On Progressive Era debates about the changing costs of living, see Eric Rauchway, "The High Cost of Living in the Progressives' Economy," *Journal of American History*, 88 (Dec. 2001), 898–924. Between 1900 and 1929, per capita personal consumption rose almost 30%. Stanley Lebergott, *Pursuing Happiness: American Consumers in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1993), 148–61. See also Richard Franklin Bensel, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877–1900* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 20. In 1869 agriculture generated 53% of national income and manufacturing 33%; by 1899 the growth of manufacturing had reversed the numbers: agriculture generated 33% of national income and manufacturing 53% (mining and construction generated 14%). Gary Walton and Hugh Rockoff, *History of the American Economy* (New York, 1990), 344. See also Chandler, *Visible Hand*, 207–83; Bensel, *Political Economy of American Industrialization*, 24–25. On the role of abundance in American life, see Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1989); Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*; and T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994). On the rise of a mass consumer culture in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, major works include T. J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wightman Fox, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York, 1983); Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York, 1995); Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000); and Lisa Jacobson, *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York, 2004). On the rise of consumer credit, which allowed people to purchase more expensive items, see Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton, 1998). For a recent assessment of the study of consumption, see Susan Strasser, "Making Consumption Conspicuous: Transgressive Topics Go Mainstream," *Technology and Culture*, 43 (Oct. 2002), 255–70. On the decline of electoral politics, see Richard L. McCormick, "The Discovery That Business Corrupts Politics: A Reappraisal of the Origins of Progressivism," *American Historical Review*, 86 (April 1981), 247–74. On the effects of consumer culture on politics, see Margaret Mary Finnegan, *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (New York, 1999); Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2005); and Liette Gidlow, *The Big Vote: Gender, Consumer Culture, and the Politics of Exclusion, 1890s–1920s* (Baltimore, 2004).

willingness to live on credit, and unfounded belief in eternal market growth, suggested Sumner, had doomed them to suffer extraordinarily during the depression. The only remedy was to let the market readjust gradually and naturally and to hope that men would be more prudent and virtuous investors in the future.⁷

Most economists, however, did not agree with their Yale colleague, rejecting almost every aspect of Sumner's analysis. In their accounts, individuals' personal decisions had been replaced by group actions; anxieties about maintaining consistent production levels had been replaced by anxieties about ensuring consistent demand; and fears of scarcity had been superseded by the perplexities of abundance. For George Basil Dixwell, for example, whose observations on trade and production were honed as a diplomatic and trade representative in China, the problem precipitating depressions was not decreased production, but a lack of effective demand. Without sufficient demand for products, he argued, manufacturers had decreased production below the level necessary for profit, thereby laying off workers and deepening the depression. Sustained production accompanied by lowered prices could have similar deleterious results, the government official and economic writer David A. Wells asserted. Heavy investment in fixed plant, he explained, compelled large-scale manufacturers to continue producing goods even as prices dropped, further flooding the market. As the railroads' experiments with such measures in the 1870s showed, lowered prices did little to increase consumption or lift the depression; instead price drops merely increased the rates of business failures and of unemployment.⁸

As Dixwell and Wells implied, the most troubling explanations of the depressions suggested that the very successes of the industrial economy were its undoing. Writing amid another depression in the 1890s, the reformer and economist Richard Theodore Ely glumly concluded that "the cause of hard times is prosperity." In earlier periods of American economic development, Ely explained, "Hard times meant privation, keenly felt wants for comforts." Now, however, "it is precisely in the period of most rapidly increasingly productivity that we have suffered most." Ely was not, of course, the only American to identify a connection between abundance and depression; Henry George's best-selling *Progress and Poverty* pointed to the same paradox of want in a land of plenty. But whereas George saw the root cause of the paradox in the increasingly unequal access to land, economists such as Ely declared depressions to be a defining characteristic of large-scale industrial production.⁹

⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Select Committee, *Investigation by a Select Committee of the House of Representatives Relative to the Causes of the General Depression in Labor and Business, etc.*, 45 Cong., 3 sess., Aug. 22, 1878, Misc. Doc. 29, pp. 193–94.

⁸ George Basil Dixwell, "Review of Bastiat's Sophism of Protection," 1881, quoted in Dorfman, *Economic Mind in American Civilization*, III, 133–34. For a more recent assessment of George Basil Dixwell, see George Babilio, "Dixwell: Animadversions of an Admiring Adversary," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 62 (Nov. 2003), 213–30. Dorfman, *Economic Mind in American Civilization*, III, 135. David A. Wells, "How Shall the Nation Regain Prosperity?," *North American Review*, 125 (July 1877), 129. On railroad rate wars, see Chandler, *Visible Hand*, 122–44.

⁹ Richard Theodore Ely, "Hard Times," handwritten manuscript, folder 3, box 5, ms 411, Richard Theodore Ely Papers (Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison). A note at the top of the first page says, "Appeared in *The Interior* Dec. 13, 1894." Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Causes of Industrial Depression*. . . . (San Francisco, 1879). For a revisionary analysis of *Progress and Poverty*, see Jeffrey P. Sklansky, *The Soul's Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 105–36. Sklansky argues that although Henry George traced poverty to unequal access to land, he advocated, not small proprietorships, but a "socialism of the psyche" determined by "participation in a mainstream of guiding desires and compelling social norms." *Ibid.*, 135. Contemporary critics held that George overemphasized the role of land and production. See, for instance, William P. Weeden, review of *Progress and Poverty* by Henry George, *Atlantic Monthly*, 46 (Dec. 1880), 847.

Without a doubt, concluded the Bureau of Labor Statistics commissioner Carroll Davidson Wright in an 1886 *Forum* article, the depression of 1873–1879 had been “a crisis in production,” the kind that “exists in each nation given to mechanical production.” Such countries, he explained, “have vast resources, vast territory, vast population. Nevertheless, they have a limited consuming power and a super-abundance of productive power.” Faced with the question of what “social conditions” were “necessary to make increasing returns . . . in production *economically* possible,” Wright argued that the solution to the linked problems of overproduction, cyclical depressions, and fluctuating wages had to be increased long-term consumption. Diminished production was impossible considering the high level of capital investment in fixed plant, which meant the capital could neither circulate nor be reinvested. For such capital investments to pay, production had to increase continually, but the increases could only return the investment and create profit if the products themselves were consumed consistently. For the economist, publisher, and AFL supporter George Gunton, this meant that “*all must be sold*” to ensure economic stability; for “wealth that is not consumed in the gratification of human wants is economically as if it had not been produced.”¹⁰

For consumption to increase, warned Ely, purchasing power must increase. “Wants are the motive power in industry,” he explained, “but if for some reason or another wants are not accompanied with purchasing power, consumption falls off and production exceeds what is called effective demand, that is, demand which is able to receive an equivalent in exchange.” Members of the labor movement, most notably Gunton’s mentor Ira Steward, had been arguing along similar lines since the 1860s. Gunton and Steward insisted vigorously that increased desire for goods would raise wages. Higher consumer demand, they claimed, would ignite a consumption-driven economy at the site of production. In meeting the demand for goods, workers could realize a higher standard of living, increasing their demand for consumer goods further. But while Steward had held that shorter hours and higher wages would eventually allow workers to accumulate sufficient capital to own their own cooperative enterprises, Gunton believed that consumption by itself could radically change the material and social lives of working men and women. The crisis of overproduction that characterized the late 1870s and 1880s provided such an opportunity. The crisis, Gunton argued, signaled that the “problem of production” had been solved: industry was now capable of producing commodities consistently and with economies of scale. He explained that “it is only as capital produces more than it consumes that the laborer is enabled to consume more than he produces, and social progress becomes possible.”¹¹

¹⁰ Carroll Davidson Wright, “Industrial Necessities,” *Forum*, 2 (March 1886), 310, 311. On the emergence of modern labor theory in the 1880s, see Clarence E. Wunderlin Jr., *Visions of a New Industrial Order: Social Science and Labor Theory in America’s Progressive Era* (New York, 1992), 1–26. On late nineteenth-century capitalists’ and economists’ concern about the difficulties of making capital investment in fixed plant pay, see Thomas R. Navin and Marian V. Sears, “The Rise of a Market for Industrial Securities,” *Business History Review*, 29 (June 1955), 105–38. George Gunton, *Wealth and Progress: A Critical Examination of the Wages Question and its Economic Relation to Social Reform* (New York, 1890), 27.

¹¹ Ely, “Hard Times.” See Lawrence Glickman, “Workers of the World, Consume: Ira Steward and the Origins of Labor Consumerism,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, 52 (Fall 1997), 72–86. Lawrence Glickman notes that Steward “understood consumerism less as the pursuit of amusement than as a potential locus of working-class power. . . . Steward advocated that workers gain power through an understanding of the crucial role that consumption played in economic and social life.” *Ibid.*, 75. Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor*, 177–78; Gunton, *Wealth and Progress*, 21–22.

worker's production, thereby necessitating higher levels of employment to maintain aggregate production. But the AFL argued, much as Wright had, that underconsumption was the root cause of depressions. So, instead of arguing for lower production per worker, Gompers insisted on shorter hours, higher wages, and steady (or even increasing) output. Shorter hours and higher wages were, he claimed, no oxymoron. If the economic disasters that plagued the United States were caused by underconsumption, two things were necessary to raise consumption levels: greater demand and higher levels of consumption. With more leisure, Gompers reasoned, workers would have more time to *want* more. Indeed, more leisure would not just provide workers with the opportunity to want; it would also compel workers to want more than they had. "A man who goes to his work before the dawn of day," explained Gompers, "requires no clean shirt; but a man who goes to work at 8 o'clock in the morning wants a clean shirt; he is afraid his friends will see him, so he does not want to be dirty. He also requires," continued Gompers, "a newspaper; while a man who goes to work early . . . and stays at it late at night does not need a newspaper, for he has no time to read."¹²

These new desires, argued Gompers, would create "large opportunities for the use and consumption of things which labor can produce," and "these wants and desires [would] finally become demands." Frank K. Foster, a former Boston printer and longtime advocate of the eight-hour day, explained in the *American Federationist* in 1900 that the push of workers' consumer demands and the subsequent manufacturers' response would ensure "a gigantic commercial stimulus" creating markets for "products of many kinds which under a system of long hours there is no demand for." This "vital economic side of the shorter hours movement" in turn would "cause such awakened aspirations and increased demands as to require additional employees." The increased consumption by workers would both level out the economy, by providing a consistent and perhaps even growing market, and necessitate increased employment to meet the new production demands. This argument nearly inverted Say's law—supply creates its own demand—much as economic writers such as Ely and Wright had insisted was necessary; now supply would follow demand. With increased consistent demand, the labor activists hoped to avoid future repetitions of the economic depressions and accompanying unemployment of their day. But, as labor activists knew all too well, consumer demand had to be backed up by higher wages. During the depression of the 1890s, when neither shorter hours nor higher wages seemed likely, Gompers worried in 1893 to his longtime correspondent, the French trade unionist Auguste Keufer, that "the ability, or better the opportunity, of the wage-workers to keep pace in their consumptive power to their productive capacity has failed, and as a consequence, thousands aye, hundreds of thousands have been thrown out of employment."¹³

More, however, not only offered a potential solution to the economic instability of the 1890s. It also represented a broader range of goals for the labor movement. The useful-

¹² *Report of Proceedings of Seventeenth Annual Convention of the AFL* (n.p., 1897), 19; U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations Between Capital and Labor* (5 vols., Washington, 1885), I, 294.

¹³ [Samuel Gompers], "Extempore Statement," *American Federationist*, 7 (June 1900), 166; Frank K. Foster, "Side-Lights on the Shorter Workday Demand," *ibid.* (Nov. 1900), 341. Say's law made sense only in an economy defined by potential scarcity; in one with large-scale, consistent, and increasing production, supply had to follow demand. See Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890–1916* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988), 54. On Say's law, see Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 358–59. For the observation that Say's law assumes that the market is part of a "natural order" that includes invention, division of labor, productivity, and population increase, see Mau-

ness of “More” as a slogan lay precisely in its flexibility; it could be a demand for greater working-class consumption, for material goods, or for greater participation in American society. In the short term, more time and more money translated to more comforts for the family of any given wageworker. Gompers, himself fond of fine overcoats and natty hats, enjoyed listing the material benefits that higher wages and shorter hours could confer. In a May 1890 speech in Louisville, Kentucky, Gompers explained that “the man who works eight hours a day has sixteen hours a day left. He must do something with them. . . . When his friend visits him he wants to have, probably, a pretty picture on the wall, or perhaps a piano or organ in his parlor; and he wishes everything about him to be bright and attractive.” In contrast, a man who works sixteen hours a day “has no necessity for decent clothes—nobody comes to see him.” Some contemporaries labeled parlor pianos and pretty pictures trivial, clear attempts by the AFL to placate wageworkers and turn them away from a more revolutionary course. One article in the New York socialist newspaper *People* snipped that “‘pure and simple’ imbecility” merely regurgitated “the old capitalistic sophism . . . that the American workman should be content to be less miserable than his foreign cousins.” For Gompers the answer to such criticisms was obvious: Why shouldn’t wageworkers have comfort in their lives? After all, their labor had produced the abundance of a consumer society; as both producers and consumers, they should enjoy the fruits of their labor in the here and now. Future revolutions could do little to improve today’s dinner table. “The workingman,” said Gompers in an 1895 newspaper interview, “is tired of mere rhetoric and theory. . . . the workingman . . . wants wages that will buy him a lot of the things he needs.”¹⁴

This demand for “a lot of the things he needs” was not simply a call for more material goods. In his insistence that workers deserved more comforts in their lives, Gompers had in mind a broader understanding of more. “I am in entire accord with [Heinrich] Heine,” he once explained, invoking the German romantic poet who insisted that “freedom is bread. Bread is freedom.” Heine, felt Gompers, “did not mean simply the pieces of bread . . . which one may eat, but all that the term implies,” for “liberty can be neither exercised nor enjoyed by those who are in poverty.” Indeed, more was, Gompers explained in an impromptu speech before the Boston Monday Evening Club in 1899, “a requirement for life.” Labor demanded, Gompers said, “more of the good things that go to make up life; better homes, better surroundings, higher education, higher aspirations, nobler thoughts, more human feelings, all the human instincts that go to make up a manhood that shall be free and independent and loving and noble and true and sympathetic. We want *more*.” Here, more moves beyond material goods and becomes a demand for intangibles, for social and cultural capital—such as “higher aspirations” and “nobler thoughts”—as well as for social opportunities such as education. In other speeches, he called for better houses, nicer playgrounds, “happier childhoods,” all appeals for greater social welfare, couched in the language of more. For Gompers, greater leisure time to read, attend lectures, play the piano, or otherwise pursue mental improvement was as integral to social welfare as clean-

rice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York, 1973), 257–58. Gompers to Auguste Keufer, Aug. 16, 1893, in *Samuel Gompers Papers*, III, ed. Kaufman et al., 368. See also Gompers’s interview with Arthur Brisbane, managing editor of the *New York World*: “Ducey and Gompers,” *New York World*, Aug. 28, 1893, *ibid.*, 387.

¹⁴ “President Gompers’ Address,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, May 2, 1890, in *The Samuel Gompers Papers*, vol. II, ed. Stuart B. Kaufman et al. (Urbana, 1987), 311; “Barnum Sammy,” *New York People*, Oct. 13, 1895, in *Samuel Gompers Papers*, IV, ed. Kaufman et al., 67; “Labor,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1895, *ibid.*, 71–72.

er streets, better homes, or safer jobs. They were all part of participating fully in American society, an outcome of economic liberty.¹⁵

All that liberty implied, both bread and roses, was explored in a 1901 story that appeared in the *American Federationist*. Fiction was not in the publication's usual purview, and the story does not encapsulate either Gompers's whole philosophy or the AFL's. But "Economy That Proved Disastrous" reveals some intricacies of Gompers's understanding of more. Written by Lizzie M. Holmes, a frequent contributor to the magazine who more commonly reported on union conventions than on fictional towns, the story tells of a "pleasant, busy little manufacturing town" brought to ruin by oversaving and under-consumption. In the past, the townspeople had been happy and well paid, living in comfortable houses with tidy gardens and ample furnishings. In their spare time, they had busied themselves with social activities—choirs, church groups, plays, lectures. This was a model industrial town with a contented and well-remunerated population, represented in the story by a young engaged couple, both wageworkers, portentously named Frank Towne and Ellen Worth. The town's idyllic existence is summarily ended, not by exploitative employers, but by the townspeople themselves. Under the influence of Mr. Blatchford, a major and benevolent employer in the town, the townspeople begin to hoard their money. Blatchford himself had risen from rags to riches by accumulating money through shrewd business deals and never "spend[ing] a cent that was unnecessary." The key to life, he preached, was "economy" and thrift. He bemoaned the townspeople's willingness to fritter away money on plays or a "pretty ribbon"; they must, he felt, "learn to deny themselves the many useless expenditures in which they were wont to indulge. After all," he reasoned, "Men needed very little to keep them healthy and in condition to work, so why spend money on other things?"¹⁶

Blatchford's philosophy is essentially David Ricardo's iron law of wages—the wage rate will always veer toward the cost of subsistence—applied to personal expenditure. According to Blatchford, only items necessary for survival are worth purchasing; expenditures for such frivolities as plays, ribbons, candy, and paper collars are merely a waste of money. Frank Towne, whose very name is synecdochic for the town, soon comes under Blatchford's influence. Although he and Ellen had been carefully buying furniture and other items for their new home with great pleasure ("each new acquirement [had been] made the occasion of a small festival"), he now began to insist that "to spend money was a crime." When Ellen tries to convince him to buy "a delightful little center table," he balks, and the townspeople soon follow suit, refusing to spend their money. When Ellen, who alone in the town resists Blatchford's economy, flees, Frank rushes to the train station to follow her. But when he reaches for money to pay for his ticket, he "gazed upon the little pile of gold and greenbacks and thought how very small it would look when he had taken what he needed to go away." In the end, Frank cannot bear to part with his precious money, even for food, and he and the remaining townspeople leave for the hills where they can live in caves and eat roots, no longer "obliged to spend any money whatsoever."¹⁷

¹⁵ Gompers, "Speech Delivered by President Gompers before Meeting Civil Federation New York at the Banquet April 25th, 1905," 4; "On the Attitude of Organized Labor Toward Organized Charity," *American Federationist*, 6 (March 1899), 82.

¹⁶ Lizzie M. Holmes, "Economy That Proved Disastrous," *American Federationist*, 8 (Oct. 1901), 471–72, esp. 471.

¹⁷ David Ricardo explained that "the natural price of labour is that price which is necessary to enable the labourers, one with another, to subsist and to perpetuate their race, without either increase or diminution." David Ricardo,

The refusal to spend money literally destroys the town, both socially and economically. The townspeople's rejection of such "useless" things as plays and lectures breaks the social bonds within the town and the town's ties with other places. Soon players and lecturers stop coming to the town, and the townspeople no longer gather together to sing or debate. Denying themselves such things as "pretty ribbon[s]" and lace curtains, they become "starved of [their] love of the beautiful." Quite quickly, their parsimony devastates the town's economy. First, saloons, candy stores, and ice cream parlors close. Then, as a similar "spasm of economy" spreads over the entire country, orders for "artistic cabinet ware" decline and the town's furniture mills close. Like their mentor, Blatchford, the townspeople believe in utility, not pleasure. Since, as Blatchford had explained, "men need very little to keep them in a condition to work," the townspeople curb any interest in items not essential to that goal. Only Ellen Worth resists this mentality, insisting that there is more to life than labor. Ellen's pursuit of pleasure is always prudent, the story makes clear—she does not spend beyond her means and she earns all she spends—but she celebrates rather than shuns what Blatchford labeled "useless expenditures." In the story, of course, Ellen's expenditures are not useless. Just as economists argued when looking at the depression of the 1870s, such spending had previously ensured the town's economic stability and social harmony, its worth, as Ellen's name suggests. In addition, the story suggests, Ellen's purchases bring her and, initially, Frank pleasure and happiness, both in the items they buy and the bright future home they imagine. Most important, though, Ellen has "economic liberty," the ability to participate in what Gompers liked to call "the promises of society," its material and intangible opportunities. Her discretionary income gives her the freedom to "aspire," practically and not theoretically, to a better life and to seek out great social and cultural capital.¹⁸

But the promises of society that Ellen pursues are radically different from those sought by the property-owning "heroic artisan" of the antebellum period, and the differences are marked most conspicuously by gender. The social standing of the heroic artisan had been assured by his self-employment, his ownership of property (whether in land or tools), and his control of domestic space and labor. In other words, his political and social participation had been predicated on his status as a proprietor, and his masculinity was an ensemble of those characteristics. But by the 1870s, as the minister D. O. Kellogg insisted in an address at the 1879 Philadelphia Social Science Association meeting, large-scale industrial production ensured that a workingman could "no longer hope to become a capitalist and employer himself. The little shop of his ancestors he could aspire to emulate, but the gigantic factory with its larger resources is beyond his hope." In place of the small employer or property-owning craftsman, there rose the wage earner, "a man," said the minister and social reformer Lyman Abbott, "who works . . . under the employment of another, on whom he is dependent, first, for the opportunity to work at all; second, for the compensation for his work; third, for the conditions under which that work can be carried on." According to producerite ideology, wage work emasculated workers, dividing them up into so many hands. In contrast, the very source of that emasculation—wage work—creates

The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation, 1817, in *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, ed. Piero Sraffa (11 vols., Cambridge, Eng., 1951–1973), I, 92. Holmes, "Economy That Proved Disastrous," 472. On fictional depictions of such hoarding as the fetishization of money, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley, 1987), 140–41.

¹⁸ Holmes, "Economy That Proved Disastrous," 471–72.

the possibility of Ellen's independence from Blatchford, from Frank, and from the censure of the townspeople. She can spend her money as she chooses on bonnet ribbons or tables, and she can leave the town (as she does) when she chooses, all because she has economic liberty. Her liberty depends on her ability to earn an income and to spend it.¹⁹

Certainly, Holmes's story was not alone in seeing wage work as liberating for women. Many advocates of women's rights argued that women's social, and consequently political, inferiority was the direct result of their exclusion from the work force. "There is no logical reason," the economist George Gunton insisted, "why a woman should not be permitted to vote on the same conditions as man." But she cannot be man's political—or social—equal, he explained, "not because she does not vote," but "because of her industrial and social inferiority," which excludes her from the franchise. "In a word," continued Gunton, her disfranchisement "is because she is poorer, and, consequently, less independent than man." Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a feminist economist, largely agreed. Earning freed women, she argued, from seeking economic and social security through "the power of sex attraction." Indeed, claimed Gilman, the "increasing army of women wage-earners . . . are changing the face of the world by their steady advance to economic independence." Ellen enjoys the benefits of a good wage, and her central position in the story suggests that economic liberty and autonomy are no longer exclusively masculine, as they had been under producerite ideology. Ellen's independence comes from her capacity to act autonomously within society at large. In contrast to Ellen stood workers such as those trapped in the "peonage" of scrip payments and commissary (or, as Gompers called them, "Pluck You") stores. Without payment in legal tender, such workers were unable to make choices about their expenditures or their movements. Scrip, Gompers argued, "practically bound them to the soil. Without wages in legal tender, they cannot move; can not quit."²⁰

But the use of a female hero in this story also points to lingering anxieties about wage work in general and its potentially feminizing effects in particular. Even as the *American Federationist* published "Economy That Proved Disastrous," the AFL assiduously patrolled the gender line, emphasizing male wage earning as a way to reinforce and reassert men's status as breadwinners and family heads. AFL rhetoric generally steered potential male consumption toward appropriately masculine goods such as newspapers, shirts, and collars and events such as lectures and concerts, and male consumption was always wrapped in the rhetoric of the family wage. Men's wages should be high enough, argued Gompers, for them to *provide* their families pleasant homes, complete with framed pictures and pianos. A workingman should be able to buy nice dresses for his wife or "best girl." The AFL equated wage earning with economic liberty for both men and women, but it

¹⁹ For the term "heroic artisan," see Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, 1996), 16–18, 25–33. D. O. Kellogg, "Some Thoughts on the Labor Question," in *Labor Politics: Collected Pamphlets*, ed. Leon Stein and Philip Taft (2 vols., New York, 1971), II, 8. Lyman Abbott is quoted, without further attribution, in William E. Barnes, ed., *The Labor Problem: Plain Questions and Practical Answers* (New York, 1886), 104n.

²⁰ Gunton, *Wealth and Progress*, 207. For similar views, see Carroll Davidson Wright, "Why Women are Paid Less than Men," *Forum*, 13 (March–Aug. 1898), 629. For an account of Samuel Gompers's version of this argument, see "Women Wage Earners," *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, May 23, 1895, in *Samuel Gompers Papers*, IV, ed. Kaufman et al., 32. If, as Joan Wallach Scott has suggested, women's lack of property in labor made them marginal figures in the workplace or elsewhere outside the home, then the removal of the ideal of women as outside the labor force might free them from confinement in the home. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 64. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898; Berkeley, 1998), 58, 120, 63. See also *ibid.*, 144, 215, 338. Samuel Gompers, "Testimony Before the Industrial Commission, Washington, DC, April 18, 1899," in *Labor and the Employer*, ed. Hayes Robbins (New York, 1920), 63.

simultaneously reinforced men's superior social and familial positions as family providers. Nevertheless, decoupling independence from property ownership, self-employment, and artisanal labor opened new possibilities for independence to male workers as well, an independence like Ellen's, enacted outside the workplace even as it was based on wages from work.²¹

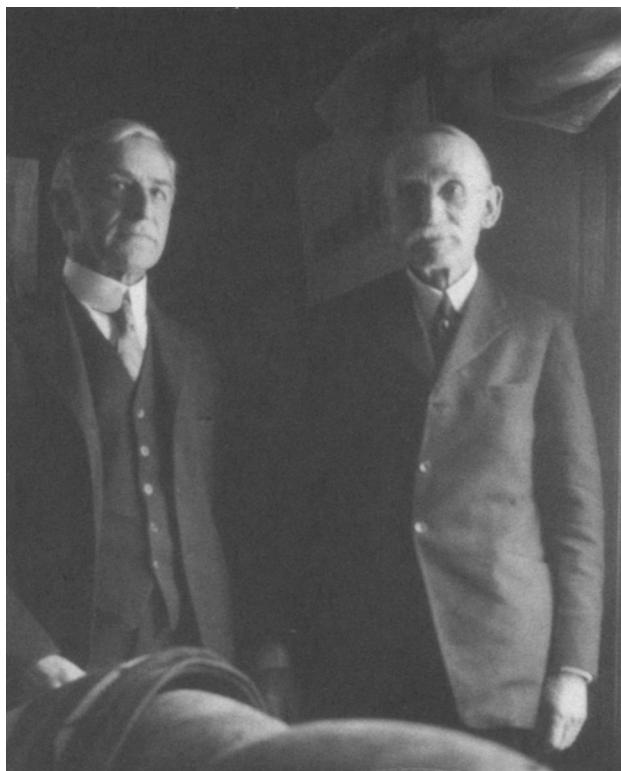
Marginalism and a Social Theory of Value

As the AFL articulated that new kind of independence in the demand for more, the emerging economic school of marginalism offered a theoretical basis for the larger political significance of such independence. Rejecting the labor theory of value as an inadequate measure of both commodity value and workers' social power, the marginalists, most notably the Columbia University professor John Bates Clark, insisted that commodity value was socially produced over time through desire and consumption. Clark, the American most closely associated with marginalism, was part of the new generation of economists who combined German historical economics with a religious reformatory zeal. Believing that "the conflict of labor and capital has brought into prominence a vast number of social problems," these men, including Clark, Edmund Janes James, Richard Theodore Ely, and Simon Nelson Patten, founded the American Economics Association in 1885 and set about reformulating economics as the best means of reforming society and solving the labor question. As Ely, then the lone professor of economics at Johns Hopkins University, argued in 1886, "It is doubtful if history records any more rapid social movement than this ominous separation of the American people into two nations. Already," he fretted, "they scarcely speak the same language." Without some amelioration, he continued, "our future downfall will be inevitable."²²

Like Gompers, Clark insisted that the first and central question the young economists must address was "Does labor get all it deserves?" "The welfare of the laboring classes," he explained, "depends on whether they get much or little; but their attitude toward other classes—and, therefore, the stability of the social state—depends chiefly on the question, whether the amount that they get, be it large or small, is what they produce." If they felt that they "produce an ample amount and get only a part of it, many would become revolutionists, and all would have the right to do so." But to know whether labor got all

²¹ The rhetoric of the family wage itself helped ensure that men remained "more autonomous" than wage-earning women through the interwar period, both as consumers and as social actors, according to Sue Porter Benson, "Gender, Generation, and Consumption in the United States: Working-Class Families in the Interwar Period," in *Getting and Spending*, ed. Strasser et al., 240. See also Gwendolyn Mink, "The Lady and the Tramp: Gender, Race, and the Origins of the American Welfare State," in *Women, the State, and Welfare*, ed. Linda Gordon (Madison, 1990), 99. For a perspective from Europe, see Leora Auslander, "The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley, 1996), 79–112. Nonetheless, the disassociation of property ownership, self-employment, and social independence permitted previously marginalized people to lay claim to "economic liberty." On the possibilities for new conceptions of independence for women in proletarianization, see Ellen DuBois, "Radicalism and the Women's Suffrage Movement" in *Feminism and Equality*, ed. Anne Phillips (New York, 1987), 127–38; Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 53–67; and James Livingston, *Pragmatism, Feminism, and Democracy: Rethinking the Politics of American History* (New York, 2001).

²² On the influence of German thought on American economics, see Ross, *Origins of American Social Science*, 172–218; and Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 76–111. On the religious roots of postbellum American economics, see Bradley W. Bateman and Ethan B. Kapstien, "Between God and the Market: The Religious Roots of the American Economic Association," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 13 (Autumn 1999), 249–57. Richard Theodore Ely, *The Labor Movement in America* (New York, 1886), 113.



John Bates Clark (right) stands with his fellow economist Frank Albert Fetter, c. 1930. Though the two men differed in their theoretical approaches, both called for economists to consider the role of desire in creating value. *Courtesy Warren J. Samuels Portrait Collection, Duke University.*

it deserved, the young economists first had to ask what labor *did* deserve. The solution gradually worked out by Henry Carter Adams and Clark became known as marginalism, and the “marginal utility theory” they articulated between 1881 and 1886 held that labor did not produce all wealth. Rather, the consumer, in conjunction with society, did. Henry Carter Adams’s first major work, the *Outline of Lectures Upon Political Economy*, embraced the British economist Stanley Jevons’s formulation of commodity value as changeable utility, rather than as a quality inherent in the commodity. Adams and Jevons both effectively jettisoned the labor theory of value; a commodity’s value, they argued, did not reflect the amount of labor power necessary to create it. Instead, explained Jevons, “I hold labour to be *essentially variable, so that its value must be determined by the value of the produce, not the value of the produce by that of the labour.*” Although Adams accepted Jevons’s formulation, he continued to believe that one man-hour of labor was the basic unit of value and to focus on the productive capacity of each worker. It fell to the marginal utility theory advanced by John Bates Clark to reject the labor theory of value explicitly.²³

²³ John Bates Clark, *The Distribution of Wealth: A Theory of Wages, Interest, and Profits* (New York, 1899), 4. Adams explained that “while labor is no measure of value for the exchange of goods once thrown upon the market, the value of that procured by exchange, expressed in labor expended to secure the power of purchase, is that which determines the limit of production for exchange, of any commodity. This is something of a guarantee that goods will exchange in proportion to the labor expended in production”; see Dorfman, *Economic Mind in American Civilization*.

Beginning in the 1870s, Clark began more systematically to refute the labor theory of value. By the time his essays from the 1870s and 1880s were published in the 1886 *Philosophy of Wealth*, he had replaced it with marginal utility theory. Marginal utility theory held that a commodity's value came, not from the cost of the labor time necessary to make it, but from the utility it offered consumers. But by "utility," Clark did not mean usefulness in most quantifiable or objective senses. He held that utility was subjective, dependent on the particular judgment or desire of the consumer. Utility, he argued, is what has the perceived "power to modify our subjective condition, under actual circumstances, and is mentally measured by supposing something which we possess to be annihilated, or something which we lack to be attained." This "effective" utility could be measured by tracking the rate of purchases over time: consumers were assumed to buy only what they needed or wanted so that their rate of purchase of a particular commodity would decrease over time. The marginal utility (or value) of the product is determined, however temporarily, by the price a consumer pays for the final purchase of the product before ceasing to purchase it.²⁴

Thirteen years later Clark expanded his understanding of the creation of value to include society as a whole. Production, he suggested, did contribute to commodity value, but it could not be understood as the labor of one or even several individuals. In an industrial society dominated by manufacturing corporations and widespread distribution systems, production had been socialized. "The passing of goods from man to man," he explained, "enables all society to make all goods; and the two expressions, 'division of labor,' on the one hand, and 'exchange,' on the other, merely describe in different ways the organized process of creating wealth." In contrast to older forms of production, in which "a thing stays in one man's hands until it is finished and in use," now "only society in its entirety is an all-around creator of goods." This statement—a social theory of value—inverted the labor theory of value as Clark understood it. "A commodity," Clark insisted, "is . . . actually measured for value on the basis of the social service that it renders." Consequently, he could abandon a man-hour of labor time as the standard unit of value and replace it with "the social service that is before us in the using" of the particular commodity. Value then comes "through the *product* of the labor, from the social effect that the product will produce."²⁵ By abandoning the labor theory of value, the traditional source

tion, III, 165. See also Henry Carter Adams, *Outline of Lectures Upon Political Economy* (Amherst, 1881), 16–18, 23–27, 37. W. Stanley Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy* (1911; Baltimore, 1970), 187. The first edition of Jevons's influential book was published in England in 1871.

²⁴ The labor necessary to produce an object need have no relation to its final value. For instance, argued Clark, the difference between iron and slag is not the amount of labor put into creating each, but their "utility." Slag now has no value, despite the labor put into creating it, but "a chance chemical discovery might reveal uses for the slags in their present forms, and they would then become wealth; but they would have been a product of labor before they became wealth as well as after." John Bates Clark, *The Philosophy of Wealth: Economic Principles Newly Formulated* (Boston, 1887), 24–25, 78. Maurice Dobb argued that this formulation of marginal utility theory "leaves the question: What fixes the position of the margin itself? To this the answer is," he continues, "that it is fixed by the available supply; which in turn raises the further question: What determines the limitation of supply?" For postbellum economists, the answer was socially constructed desire. If *value* is defined as the measure of utility, then market value for Clark "is a measure of utility made by society considered as one great isolated being." Price reflects the social estimate of that value. Maurice Dobb, *Political Economy and Capitalism: Some Essays in Economic Tradition* (New York, 1945), 159–60; Clark, *Philosophy of Wealth*, 82. See also Ronald L. Meek, *Studies in the Labour Theory of Value* (New York, 1956); Dorfman, *Economic Mind in American Civilization*, III, 160–284; Livingston, "Social Analysis of Economic History and Theory," 88; and Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity*, 187.

²⁵ Clark, *Distribution of Wealth*, 11. Emphasis added. Clark qualified this statement in a footnote: "An article is not finished, in the economic sense, till the retail merchant has found the customer whose needs it satisfies. The sale of completed articles is thus the terminal act of social production." *Ibid.*, 11, 397.

of workingmen's claims to social power, for a social theory of value, Clark not only jettisoned production as the basis of workers' social authority. He also provided a theory that could validate the AFL's demand for an unspecified, and ongoing, more. While the labor theory of value assumed a commodity had definite, quantifiable, and finite value, marginal utility theory did not. A commodity's value could and would change over time as social circumstances, needs, and desires changed. Value, like desire, proposed Clark, was not fixed, but fluid.

The Significance of "More"

For Gompers, the same fluidity was behind the regular, unrelenting demand for more, a repetition that was as important as any single measurement of material gain. The working classes, explained Gompers to anyone who would listen, could never be satisfied: If they were to claim economic emancipation and social enfranchisement as consumers more than as producers, their rallying cry had to remain "More! More today and more tomorrow; and then . . . more and more." As an ongoing demand, more represented a solid, concrete means of attacking the glaring inconsistency at the heart of nineteenth-century American liberalism. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments had seemingly made all male U.S. citizens, regardless of race or country of origin, legally and politically equal. But simultaneously, gaping disparities in income separated rich and poor into what the economist Arthur Twining Hadley identified as "more and more rigidly defined groups, different in industrial condition, distinct in ideals, and oftentimes antagonistic in their ambitions and sympathies." Such separation, insisted Hadley, "involves a contradiction between our political theories and the facts of industrial life." As Clarence Darrow, the activist lawyer and labor advocate, put it in a speech at the AFL's 1898 convention: "Theoretically, every man stands equal before the law. The working man has plenty of theoretical rights. He has, in the language of the day, theoretical rights 'to burn' . . . but when it comes to practical rights . . . the poor man has none." The quest for practical rights led Gompers to insist repeatedly that "political liberty" could exist only in conjunction with "economic liberty," for "a declaration of political liberty which does not involve an opportunity for economic independence is a delusion." The problem confronting the trade unionists, as they understood it, was finding a way to reconcile formal equality with practical equality.²⁶

For many Americans, particularly those who continued to valorize the producer, more goods or time or wages simply did not offer enough. S. M. Jelley, who edited the *Voice of Labor*, an 1885 volume of "plain talk . . . on labor's rights, wrongs, remedies, and prospects," insisted that "the wealth of the world would be no compensation to freemen for the degeneracy of their manhood and the debasement of the uplifting spirit that animates

²⁶ "On the Attitude of Organized Labor Toward Organized Charity," 82. For similar demands for more, see, for example, Samuel Gompers to Editor, *Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung*, May 4, 1896, in *Samuel Gompers Papers*, IV, ed. Kaufman et al., 162; and "The Trades Unions Conference," *Manchester Guardian*, Sept. 6, 1895, *ibid.*, 60. Arthur Twining Hadley, *Economics: An Account of the Relations between Private Property and Public Welfare* (New York, 1896), 371–72; Clarence Darrow, "The Workingman and the Courts," box 11, Clarence Darrow Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). See also "Is It Ever to Be Thus?" *American Federationist*, 3 (Oct. 1896), 160. Gompers, "Organized Labor in the Campaign," 203; "Statement of Mr. Samuel Gompers," in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Education and Labor, *Report of Hearing . . . relative to H.R. 7389. . . .*, 55 Cong., 3 sess., 1898, S. Doc. 127, in *Samuel Gompers Papers*, IV, ed. Kaufman et al., 497–98.

our glorious republican institutions." For Jelley, the high wages and shorter hours that allowed Ellen Worth to claim economic liberty were insufficient to return workers to their former social position. Wages could not reinstate producers' lost manhood nor confer republican independence on them: only reclaiming control of the means of production could accomplish such restorations. Demands for wages were short-term, and they represented no concrete, measurable goals. For members of the Socialist Labor party, those demands were also insufficient because they were not couched in formally political terms. But for Gompers and other AFL leaders, the practical was political; only through higher wages and shorter hours could workers achieve social enfranchisement. Like the International Cigar Maker's Union president Adolph Strasser, who in 1883 proudly insisted before a congressional committee that "we are all practical men," the United Brotherhood of Carpenters founder Gabriel Edmonston explained that trade unionists, "rejecting . . . impractical theories," instead "offered . . . a thoroughly practical foundation [the eight-hour day] upon which would be built many vital and necessary reforms."²⁷

Furthermore, the practical demand of more was useful because it both represented immediate concessions to workers' needs *and* remained purposely vague; it did not point to any specific, identifiable long-term objectives. Gompers illustrated those advantages of more in a parable about a donkey, the very embodiment of the equine working class. After a long day's work, the donkey was tethered on a short rope in his master's yard. Having eaten all the grass he could reach from his tether, the donkey asked his master for a slightly longer rope, so that he could reach more and nicer grass. His owner obliged him, and the donkey grazed happily. The next day the donkey asked for a still longer rope, in order to reach even more grass. The owner was deeply annoyed. "You ungrateful donkey, do you not know that your father was contented with a space half as large as that which you demand?" This allusion to his father caused the donkey," Gompers continued, "to hang his head in shame for a moment, but brightening up he said: 'Well, sir, but do you not know that my father was an ass?'"²⁸

Demands for more rope and more grass not only get the donkey more grazing room; more crucially, the demands establish a relationship between him and his master in which the master can expect further demands. Indeed, the demands themselves become the ordering principle of their relationship. There is no obvious limit to the amount of grass the donkey will want, or the length of rope he will need. The master, rather reluctantly, seems to accept the existence of this desire, even if he may not acquiesce in the donkey's demands. At the same time, the donkey accepts his relationship to his owner. He could, in theory, chew through his rope and escape. But where to? Donkeys have no home in the wild; indeed, the term "donkey" refers to a *domesticated*, not wild, ass. Instead, the donkey stays with his master but continues, we imagine, to insist on a longer and longer rope. Like the donkey, suggested Gompers, the working classes had few if any viable options besides wage work. Their problem was how to wrest concessions from employers without establishing a point at which concessions would stop. Just as the donkey wanted more

²⁷ S. M. Jelley, *The Voice of Labor: Plain Talk by Men of Intellect on Labor's Rights, Wrongs, Remedies and Prospects* (New York, 1888), 168; testimony of Adolph Strasser, in Committee on Education and Labor, *Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations Between Capital and Labor*, I, 460; Gabriel Edmonston, "When We Declared for Eight Hours," *American Federationist*, 8 (Oct. 1901), 406. On the Marxist sources of American unionists' emphasis on practical rather than political goals, see Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor*, 197; and John Turner, "A Peculiar Policy," *American Federationist*, 3 (July 1896), 81.

²⁸ "President Gompers' Address," 313–14.

room than his father had had and more grass than he himself had had yesterday, Gompers explained that the working classes would always “insist that we are entitled to more, and we shall never cease to demand it until we get it.”²⁹

Just as Clark had seen commodity value as fluid, reflecting changing social circumstances, so did Gompers see more shifting over time. More represented no fixed amount, no quantifiable end point, much to the dismay of employers who hoped to placate labor for once and for all and have done with strikes and unions. Nor did more represent a political revolution or a bid for control of the means of production. Yet asking for “more of the good things that go to make up life” was not a passive acquiescence in capital’s control over labor. As Gompers’s parable of the discontented donkey suggests, the demand for more assumed an employer-employee relationship of continuous, dialectical interaction, rather than domination and subordination. Indeed, the flexible and ongoing nature of more, its persistence and vagueness, put the demands of workers front and center in public debates about distribution and consumption of wealth into the twentieth century.

The language of the AFL leadership helped create the belief that workers were entitled to participate in the consumer marketplace not only because they had made America’s abundance of goods and not only because their consumption ensured economic stability and growth. Workers’ ability to participate itself sustained “an aspiration to a higher life,” an economic liberty based on ongoing demands, changing desires, and the possibility of fulfilling them. By the late 1920s, the AFL’s demand for more had been codified in advertisers’ assumptions that more represented, in the words of an article addressed to advertisers, “a new independence, a new democracy built on the permanent foundations of economic freedom.” And by the 1930s, the historian Gary Cross has explained, the connections that Samuel Gompers and George Gunton had drawn between high wages, increased consumption, and “social fairness” had become “permanent part[s] of public [political] discourse” as well as a central component of working-class culture. The AFL’s demands for more thus helped set the stage for the emergence of what the historian Lizabeth Cohen has identified as a “consumers’ republic,” “an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy and equality.” Unlike the “new independence” based on purchasing alone that advertisers touted, more emphasized the goals of economic liberty, social welfare, and better lives.³⁰

The consumers’ republic and the promises of mass consumption may have been, as many feared, a mixed blessing at best. In the postwar period, many observers saw those “idealistic goals of greater freedom” recede before the raw act of buying. Critics feared that

²⁹ “On the Attitude of Organized Labor Toward Organized Charity,” 82.

³⁰ Samuel Gompers, “Labor Standards after the War,” 1919, in *Labor and the Employer*, ed. Robbins, 31; Gompers to Belmont, July 6, 1918, *ibid.*, 78. N. W. Ayer & Son, *In Behalf of Advertising* (Philadelphia, 1927), 229–30, quoted in Charles McGovern, “Consumption and Citizenship in the United States, 1900–1940,” in *Getting and Spending*, ed. Strasser et al., 50; Cross, *All-Consuming Century*, 138. Cross pointed out that Gunton’s arguments were echoed by Sidney Hillman and even Walter Reuther, who increasingly emphasized the importance of consistently high production and consumption for both national and working-class prosperity, post–World War II. *Ibid.* On the relationship of class consciousness and mass culture in the twentieth century, see Cohen, “Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots”; Steven Fraser, “The ‘Labor Question,’” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, ed. Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, 1989), 55–57; Michael Paul Rogin, “How the Working Class Saved Capitalism: The New Labor History and *The Devil and Miss Jones*,” *Journal of American History*, 89 (June 2002), 87–114, esp. 88; and Shelley Nickles, “More Is Better: Mass Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America,” *American Quarterly*, 54 (Dec. 2002), 581–662. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003), 23, 112–65, 399–410, esp. 7.

consumption had become a private act with decreasing impact on civic life or action.³¹ Marketers and advertisers appeared to have ever greater control of consumer desire and behavior, limiting the public meanings of consumption. Perhaps, then, critics of the AFL are right: the demand for more had neither immediate impact on workers' lives nor any discernible long-term effect on workers' position in American society. But the history of unpredictable and sometimes surprising consumer action in the twentieth century suggests that the demand for more has had resonance. Consumer goods, even private, domestic products such as furniture, have shaped the state and public life, as well as private space. The "pocketbook politics" of individual consumers have provided a powerful organizational rationale for the welfare state and just as powerful a motivation for consumer protest against the state. Americans have used the idea of consumer entitlement to protest inadequate regulation, corporate greed, and segregation. The legacy of more, however, does not lie solely in those direct uses of consumer rights, for more also licensed people to demand greater comfort in their daily lives: public goods and services such as parks, housing, and schools; better workplace conditions; leisure time and higher wages. The AFL's demand for more sought to make such comforts part of Americans' "inalienable rights to a higher and better life."³²

³¹ George Lipsitz, "Consumer Spending as State Project: Yesterday's Solutions and Today's Problems," in *Getting and Spending*, ed. Strasser et al., 127–47; Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 291–397.

³² Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York, 1989); Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*; Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York, 1984); Leora Auslander, "Citizenship, Law, State Formation, and Everyday Aesthetics in Modern France and Germany, 1920–1940," in *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, ed. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (New York, 2001), 109–28; Meg Jacobs, "How About Some Meat?": The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up," *Journal of American History*, 84 (Dec. 1997), 911–12, 941; Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 166–91; Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830–1998* (Chapel Hill, 1999); Gompers, "Annual Report to A. F. of L. Convention, Kansas City, Mo., December 1898," 9.