Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850

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Jacksonian Philadelphia had grown accustomed to fluctuations in trade. Periodic downturns, such as that which occurred in the spring of 1837 following the bank failures and suspensions of specie payments, were endemic to an age of reckless acquisitiveness, and many Philadelphians expected to be back at counting houses and workshops by summer. The Board of Trade and Commercial List, a leading businessmen's sheet which closely monitored the fitful economy, predicted a bright future, which seemed confirmed by the upturn the summer months ushered in. But the banks commenced another round of defaults and suspensions by the end of the year and once again plunged the economy into the doldrums—this time for six long years.

No one knows precisely how many wage earners lost their jobs, but sources convey a picture of widespread and prolonged distress. Conservative diarist Sidney George Fisher found little cause for hope as late as the summer of 1842. "The streets seem deserted," he wrote, "the largest houses are shut up and to rent, there is no business . . . no money, no confidence." The busiest man in town was the sheriff, who "every day" auctioned off property "at a 4th of the estimated value a few years ago." The Public Ledger's economic survey in 1842 was equally bleak. It could "not mention a mechanic
trade or branch of commerce which was not crowded in 1835 and 1837 and which is not completely desolate now."3

While Fisher’s wealthy friends watched their investments depreciate, wage earners struggled to feed their families. They adopted several time-worn strategies. The usual safety-valve of tramping, which sent a steady stream of workers ebbing and flowing between urban centers, assumed new popularity in the crisis. Perhaps as many as a third to a fourth of the working class left the city to forage for work elsewhere.4 Those who weathered hard times in Philadelphia worked part-time at their trades, occasionally doing repairs, or shifted into casual labor of one sort or another. They also cut back on consumption, and many shared costs through cooperative living. Some, for example, “broke up house keeping” and boarded with friends and family, which allowed the pooling of resources but at the expense of crowding four and five families in single-unit dwellings.5

Such survival tactics were essentially defensive and probably cut across worker subcultures. No group necessarily left Philadelphia, searched for work in the Quaker City, or combined meager resources with greater frequency than another. But the uniformity of short-term tactics broke down when workers looked to long-term solutions to the lean years. There were, in fact, three responses to the depression—one by the radicals, another by the revivalists, and a third by the traditionalists—that derived from the ideological content implicit in each culture.

Radicals

Radical perspectives on the 1837 crisis flowed from the assumptions of rationalism and the producer ideology. The rationalist side of radicalism, which linked socio-economic affairs to human action and natural phenomena to natural laws, pointed to the behavior of groups and classes. Aggregates of human beings, not an avenging deity or immoral individuals, brought on hard times (just as natural laws and not an angry God explained the causes behind the cholera epidemic of 1832). This analysis prevented individuals from blaming themselves for their plight at the end of the thirties, but offered no guidelines as to who was responsible for the panic and ensuing depression. Here radicals turned to the producer ideology. Just which group caused the privation was no mystery to them. The labor theory
of value, the first axiom of radical ideology, provided the answer or at least offered a clue. This theory imparted a pre-Marxian notion of class and inequality. Instead of bifurcating society into classes of workers and employers, and locating exploitation exclusively in production, it loosely distinguished producers from accumulators, and emphasized the exploitation in exchange. This formulation all but absolved employers of responsibility, and focused attention on accumulators or bankers and merchants. Such financiers, reasoned John Ferral, alternatively provoked booms and busts, periods of "wreckless expansion" and "cruel contraction," by manipulating the money supply. They were directly at fault for the latest downturn.

Radicals also believed that economic issues were inherently political. They established an intimate relationship between the economic and political spheres in which decisions fashioned by legislators determined material arrangements. Legislation, in turn, usually worked to the disadvantage of producers because financiers controlled the machinery of state and thereby could legitimize all manner of injustice, the most egregious of which were banking charters and general incorporation laws.

The lesson of this was clear. The struggle for social justice would fall short if confined to trade unionism and cooperation. Neither activity, it was thought, addressed the twin needs of countering laws of privilege and enacting legislation that reflected the true interests of producers. This perspective made some form of political activity inevitable; and the depression raised the political dimension of radicalism to the forefront.

Mass action was the immediate tactic radicals adopted following the suspension of specie payments in the spring of 1837. They called a series of massive rallies and demonstrations designed to denounce "shin plaster" Philadelphia and map remedial action. Committees appointed at these gatherings drafted resolutions demanding state suppression of small notes and a moratorium on bank charters, served local bankers with petitions bearing thousands of signatures and insisting on a return to specie, and, demanding action on the national level, endorsed President Van Buren's sub-treasury plan.

Nonpartisanship was the common denominator of these demonstrations, quite apart from the antibank feeling. Speakers routinely expressed "no confidence" in either party as "presently constituted,"

"The Uses of Adversity"
even while they praised Van Buren.\textsuperscript{8} They drew attention to issues and accentuated the Union's political neutrality. A hostile critic who tried tarring the G.T.U. with the brush of partisanship was told that it "spoke independently of all parties and owed allegiance to none."\textsuperscript{9}\textsuperscript{9} "A judicious selection of law makers," said John Ferral, guided its politics.\textsuperscript{10}

Ferral aptly captured the formal policy of the G.T.U. Outside the halls of the Union, however, he and other radicals were partisan Democrats thickly involved in the party. At least thirteen of the G.T.U.'s executive officers and numerous leaders of its affiliates served the Democracy in one capacity or another during the thirties. (One was a Whig and the remaining ten ignored political activism altogether or were so marginally involved in party life that their names do not appear on conventional party rosters.)\textsuperscript{11}

Radical affinity for the Democracy is easily explained. It derived in part from the rough correspondence between party policy and radical views on culture, on the one hand, and political economy, on the other. Most Democrats endorsed cultural pluralism and were seen as the sentinels of religious freedom and toleration. As the champions of "freedom of conscience," they resolutely opposed prohibition, Sabbatarianism, and other reformist impulses that grew out of evangelicalism and found political expression in Whiggery. They thought of their party as a refuge for antievangelicals and anti-Presbyterian Protestants of all sects, which endeared them to the Free Thinkers and Universalists (as well as to some Methodists, who saw the Whigs as the representatives of the haughty Presbyterians).\textsuperscript{12}

Democratic policy on economic and social issues was another matter. Party loyalists who agreed on freedom of conscience were of mixed minds on noncultural issues. Two factions, radicals and regulars, emerged in the course of the thirties, and carried on an intraparty feud that occasionally flared into open combat and split the Democracy in two. Party regulars were a diffuse group popular in the city of Philadelphia and in rural counties outside of the southeast. They opposed or paid lip service to debtor relief, mechanics' lien laws, and other reforms raised by workingmen, and took moderate to conservative positions on the major economic issues. While some even favored Biddle's Bank of the United States, the typical party regular promoted state banks and easy credit in order to spur
growth. Their views put off the self-styled radicals, whose electoral base lay in the southeastern region and in suburban Philadelphia, with its teeming population of Trades' Unionists. Radicals were the progenitors of the meliorative measures for the popular classes and enthusiastic champions of free public education, but it was their stand on the controversial economic affairs of the day that really distinguished them from regulars. They took to the hustings in the name of the producing classes: yeoman farmers, master mechanics, and journeymen—and, in the language of radical republicanism, decried the hydra-headed monster of banking, corporate charters, and easy credit.

Radicals in office were not always loyal to their creed; they often compromised their principles in the give and take of legislative bargaining. Radical legislator Samuel Stevenson, to cite one of many examples, traded off the struggle to abolish banks for an effort to regulate banking abuses, as did radical representatives to the state constitutional convention in 1838. Such compromises disappointed constituents outside the State House, but the coinciding interests and rhetoric of both groups produced a loose alliance.

What cemented the bond between the Democracy and radical workingmen was the posture of the party at the local level. In suburban Philadelphia, birthplace of the workingmen's movement, master mechanics Lemuel Paynter and Thomas Grover, lawyer William F. Small, and other radical Democrats of middle-class status eagerly courted working-class voters. They gave their blessing to the ten-hour day, public ownership of granaries and coal yards, and other popular measures, and carved out a niche for radicals in their party. Working-class leaders, in turn, took advantage of the party's openness. Joshua Fletcher, William Thompson, Israel Young, and John Ferral, for instance, headed ward committees and canvassed voters in elections; Young and Ferral ran successfully for borough offices in Moyamensing and Southwark; William English, Edward Penniman, and leaders of local unions entered the state legislature in the late 1830s.

This axis of middling and working-class radicals evolved into a potent political force in some suburban districts. Southwark radicals, their growth enmeshed with that of the Trades' Union, pressured the district Commissioners into passing a ten-hour law in the summer of
1835. They gradually amassed enough support within the party to challenge the rule of the boss Joel Sutherland, a regular Democrat and Congressman who had run the party uncontested since the late 1820s. Radicals jostled with Sutherland’s men over ideology and broke with them in the 1835 gubernatorial race, when each wing endorsed rival candidates. They bolted again in the spring, following Sutherland’s ringing endorsement of state Senator Jesse Burden, who voted to recharter Biddle’s Bank of the United States. Radicals ran a slate of “Antibank” office seekers and deftly exploited popular antipathy toward financiers, sweeping every ward and placing such trusted allies as Thomas Grover on the borough Commission. This stunning victory was the prelude to a weightier battle against the real radical targets—Sutherland and Burden, whose renomination for Congress and the state Assembly, respectively, were pending at the upcoming county convention. Radicals husbanded their forces through the summer with mass meetings and engineered a supportive delegation which dumped Burden and replaced Sutherland with Lemuel Paynter. The incorrigible Sutherland refused to concede defeat and sought his office as a Whig, but Paynter capped the radical insurrection with a sound victory.¹⁸

Radical Trades’ Unionists thus operated on two fronts in the thirties—one foot in the labor movement, the other in the Democracy’s radical wing. Maintaining a delicate balance between the two, they managed to keep their political and union commitments separate. In this sense the labor movement governed the political practice of the radicals. As long as the Trades’ Union continued to be a vital force with a heterogeneous constituency, the leadership was deterred from mixing partisanship with unionism or giving disproportionate attention to the political realm.

The G.T.U.’s collapse and its leadership’s romance with the Democratic party combined to tilt the balance. Divested of their trade-union functions by the panic and depression, the leaders could turn only to politics and, in the late 1830s, they pitched into party work. Ferral, for one, struck up a correspondence with the future Democratic leader, James Buchanan, and in a revealing letter written in the cold winter of 1838, confessed that he measured the political health of wage earners in terms of their party loyalties. He told Buchanan of a meeting chaired by party regulars who rejected
President Van Buren's sub-treasury plan over the shouting objections of workingmen in the audience. But when another "shin plaster" (probank and soft money) Democrat rose to censure the President himself, the workers reacted with such anger that regulars adjourned the meeting. Such "spontaneous effusion" on behalf of radical Democracy convinced Ferral that "all is well with the bone and sinew" and marked a shift in the political tide that party "schemers will not be able to turn aside [. . .] and for every shin plaster Democrat we lose, we shall gain ten honest workingmen who now keep aloof by reason of their knowing the baseness of those whilst pretending democracy only used the power obtained by duplicity to fasten upon the people a deeply demoralizing rag aristocracy." 19 Such reasoning was also manifested in the Trades' Union rallies during the closing years of the decade. Union leaders gave up all pretense to political neutrality and invited radical Democrats to share their speaking platforms at antibank gatherings. 20 Radical unionism and the Democracy were joined together more closely than ever.

A further step in the politicization of labor took place at the 1839 Workingmen's Convention. Composed of dispirited Trades' Unionists who gathered to appraise the condition of the labor movement, the Assembly consisted of thirty delegates representing skilled and unskilled workers. 21 Seven of the most active participants were former Trades' Union officials and loyal Democrats, and their intention of fusing the shattered G.T.U. with the Democracy was apparent from the beginning. 22 They invited "Persons not delegates from Societies or Associations, but who are favorably disposed to the advancement and interest" of working people. 23 This thinly veiled appeal to middle-class radicals violated a basic Union tenet that restricted formal Trades' Union assemblies to bona fide wage earners, and a majority of the delegates rejected it, voting to limit admission to workers. Thomas Fitnam, a former Trades' Union member turned master craftsman and Democratic politician, protested to Convention president Henry Scott. He questioned the "logic advanced by your erudite spouters, [that] no workingman can, the moment he betters his condition by applying to himself the fruits of his own toil, be any longer a friend to those he happened to leave behind." 24 The missive failed to alter Fitnam's status as persona non grata, but he nevertheless offered advice. He recommended
converting the depleted G.T.U. into a "Trades' Political Union"—advice which accorded with the Democratic standard bearers but which the majority scrapped upon banning the likes of Fitnam.

Though thwarted, the Democratic workingmen still left a mark on the proceedings. The final report summed up the essence of working-class radicalism. It called for a "more equitable distribution of wealth" and for the intellectual advancement of workingmen and their children through autonomous education institutions and a Democratic "Republican" system of public instruction that supplied "food and clothing" to the needy. There was no disagreement with those noble planks or with the assessment that the G.T.U. was beyond resuscitation—that sad conclusion was hardly new. The innovation cropped up in the political proposals and here the influence of the radicals was unmistakable. They bowed to the majority will and arraigned both parties, but underscored the primacy of politics by counseling workers to "participate in the active business of party if you expect any benefit therefrom" and by urging the "pursuit of the honours of government."25

These political prescriptions were as portentous as they were autobiographical. During the depression Philadelphia's radical workingmen doggedly pursued public office, both elective and appointive, on the Democratic ticket; and, in these years, growing numbers of them attended party conventions where their names were placed in nomination for local and state-wide positions. Suggesting their obsession with party affairs in 1838, Edward Penniman withdrew from the race for Assemblyman at the insistence of the regulars, explaining that the "good of the party" was his "primary concern."26 John Ferral regularly sought the nomination for Assemblyman and Senator and even publicized his candidacy with advertisements in the local press. Samuel Thompson did better, capturing the nomination for Assemblyman on a number of occasions. But he had the misfortune of running in a Whig district and never won an election. Even more successful was Penniman, who, undaunted by the rebuff in 1838, was nominated in 1839, and would serve four terms in the Assembly. Much like William English and other victorious candidates, Penniman made a career out of politics and never returned to his former trade of coach making after being elected. Shoemaker William Gilmore followed a slightly different route out of the working class. A party functionary in Southwark.
from the mid-thirties, Gilmore was rewarded for his efforts with the patronage position of Clerk of the County Commission, a job that also lifted him out of the artisan ranks. 27

It is ironic that while the Democracy drained off the cream of radical working-class leadership, it resisted their ideas. Radicals always constituted a small minority of the party and made little impact on policy. Nor did they arouse much enthusiasm among rank and file for radical solutions to the depression. Antibank meetings attracted thousands of disgruntled workingmen in the late 1830s, but scarcely deserved newspaper attention by the early 1840s.

Not all radicals found the Democracy as compatible or accessible as Penniman and Gilmore. A large group, frustrated with indifference to their program and with party rules that protected functionaries from insurgents, agitated for internal reform. In 1842 they organized an Equal Rights rump and campaigned for greater party democracy and against party inertia in the face of continued unemployment. But they were no more successful in sustaining mass protest than those who had captained the antibank movement. Equal Rights demonstrations were hardly worthy of the name and voters ignored Equal Rights candidates at the polls in the winter of 1842. 28 Radicalism lost whatever grip it had on the imagination of working-class Philadelphia, at least for the moment; the day belonged to the revivalists.

Revivalists
Alexander Fulton was among those wage earners who brushed aside radicalism in the midst of the Great Depression. Born in (northern?) Ireland around 1805, Fulton arrived in Philadelphia in the mid-thirties and took his place among his countrymen tending weaving frames in the traditionalist district of Moyamensing. There he shared a house with other families also headed by Irish hand loom weavers. Fulton's average earnings of from $4.00 to $5.00 a week in good times fell short of supporting his family; and it compelled his wife and daughter to wind yarn, and his two sons to work at an early age. 29 But even with the entire family as wage earners, the Fultons lived in the chronic poverty of hand loom weavers. The depression made a desperate situation even worse, but it drove Fulton into the church rather than into radical action.
Fulton’s arrival coincided with the return of Reverend William Ramsey, the young Presbyterian minister who had spent the early thirties in India, after a year or two at Southwark’s First Presbyterian Church. Anxious to pick up where he had left off, Ramsey took on the difficult task of revitalizing the Twelfth Church, a once-prosperous congregation whose members had lost enthusiasm and drifted apart in the early years of the depression. Ramsey warmed to the challenge with the single-minded zeal that had distinguished his earlier endeavors in Southwark and India, and shook the neighborhood with a spate of revivals in the late thirties. His message reached the beleaguered Fulton, who experienced a quickening of faith, confessed his sins, and was enrolled on the books of the revived Cedar Street Church, as the old Twelfth was renamed under Ramsey’s tutelage.30

Ramsey’s India travels obviously did nothing to dampen his evangelical flame. “We are a temperance church,” he wrote. “And although no one is required formally to sign a temperance pledge . . . the distinct understanding is, that every person who unites with the church . . . shall abstain from intoxicating drinks as a beverage,” as well as from dancing, using profanity, and other revivalist taboos.31 He continued to force these injunctions with the aid of communicants who reported cases of backsliding and sat in judgment of the accused. Transgressors were usually suspended and those wishing to rejoin the church had to confess before the session and show evidence of regeneration.32

As in the past, converts usually found adherence to this moral code difficult. It was singularly so for workers like Fulton, because of the rigid standards of behavior, the surveillance of minister and congregation, and the cultural milieu and work setting of handloom weaving. Fulton’s was a quantum leap from the culture of traditionalism, with its lax work ethic and closely knit, reinforcing fraternal groups, to the world of revivalism. The difficulty of negotiating this wrenching change—of severing friendships developed in bars and on street corners—must not be underestimated. Community networks discouraged Fulton’s new life, as did his work experience. The poverty and irregular work routine of outwork impeded the self-discipline and steadiness of purpose that meshed with and fostered the morality of revivalism. Frequent unemploy-
ment, as observers of working-class communities have pointed out, had a way of encouraging reliance on drink.\textsuperscript{33}

These circumstances and the untimely death of his young wife, weakened the resolve of the struggling hand loom weaver. Fulton lapsed shortly after conversion and was suspended; but he showed remarkable tenacity. Readmitted to the church after vowing to mend his ways, he succumbed to drink on three separate occasions between 1845 and 1855, but each time mustered the determination to swear off and was again inducted.\textsuperscript{34}

Fulton represented a new evangelical constituency. He was one of thousands of wage earners who converged on Protestant pews during the depression; their turning to revivalism made the evangelical tide of the period qualitatively different from the Finneyite wave of the late twenties. The working classes of poorer suburban districts displaced the middle and upper classes of the old port as the chief evangelical legion; relatively anonymous ministers such as Ramsey, Robert Adair, William Elliott, and Pennell Coombe succeeded the established Presbyterians who had stood out in the earlier revivals; and the popular sects, peripherally involved in the previous surge of evangelicalism, now assumed the lead.\textsuperscript{35} Reverend Pennell Coombe of Southwark’s Ebenezer Methodist Church conducted such electrifying prayer meetings that a veteran class leader wrote in amazement to a relative, “I have never heard such a revival.”\textsuperscript{36} Coombe converted over a thousand souls in just two years, and swelled the membership beyond the capacity of the fifty year old church.

The reborn Methodists without pews organized their own congregation at Wharton Street and staffed a mission at Bedford Street. William Elliott took charge of the Wharton Street pulpit and matched Coombe’s achievement, “quickening” five hundred Southwarkians in 1842 alone.\textsuperscript{37} Their endeavors and those of fellow ministers throughout the county fired unprecedented growth in Methodist membership. Nearly 540 Philadelphians a year entered the Methodist church between 1837 and 1843, or double the yearly increment of the previous two decades.\textsuperscript{38} The increase of New School Presbyterians was even more striking. Their congregations admitted nearly 900 converts each year in the depression, compared with a paltry 240 per year between 1815 and 1836.\textsuperscript{39} Untold numbers of both sects were redeemed, it should be added, but did not enroll in
churches. (And when prosperity returned in 1844 revivals flared for a brief time, but failed to have much impact and the annual increases of both sects fell to predepression rates.)

The Great Depression was the source of this renewed religious awakening. No single force, apart from the advent of industrial capitalism, did so much to break down the resistance to the new Protestantism and diffuse it among the clergy and laity. As we have seen, prior to the downturn, ministers were of different minds on the efficacy of revivals and the value of industrial morality. Methodist proponents of Finneyite measures, for example, were a minority of their church and at loggerheads with those who appealed to the emotions without resorting to formal revivals and who saw nothing wrong with drinking in moderation or even selling liquor. But the perspective of "new wave" Methodists was confirmed by the economic collapse. Such ministers (as well as those of other denominations) interpreted hard times as divine retribution for man's depravity and they proved to be remarkably persuasive. More and more fellow divines joined together with them in a frenetic movement of atonement that took the form of a rash of revivals and temperance meetings, many of which united Methodist with Presbyterian in a burst of ecumenicalism. Their forces strengthened, the Methodist reformers won a key battle against their "old guard" at the annual meeting of the Philadelphia Conference in 1841. Under their influence, the Conference suspended a rule permitting the consumption of spirits for medicinal purposes and passed a resolution recommending "total abstinence from all intoxicating liquors." Seven years later they would finally restore John Wesley's stronger language.

These clergymen, in turn, effectively exploited the psychic torment imposed on working people by the depression. Few contemporaries had a keener appreciation for the vulnerability of wage earners in periods of stress. Witness, for example, an intriguing primer on evangelical methods written by Reverend James Porter, a Methodist who journeyed through the East during the decade. Porter posited a causal link between personal and collective distress of workers and their propensity to religion. He saw hard times as especially opportune in this respect because extended unemployment evoked solemnity and introspection, the precursors to conversion. Porter
challenged the ministry to make the most of such “providential occasions which seem to compel them to be serious and to regard religion as the paramount interest.” “The most buoyant and reckless spirits,” he stressed, “have times of depression, and solemn review.”

The city’s leading newspaper, elated by the recent upsurge in church membership, endorsed this point. “The most valuable result of the calamities of the times,” the Public Ledger editorialized in 1843, “is . . . to be found in its moral influences.” “Sweet are the uses of adversity . . . ,” it added and continued:

That the zeal of the ministry and efforts of the pious have effected much cannot be doubted; nor is there doubt that the depression of the times, the anxiety and affliction which have prevailed, and which have induced reflection . . . and self-reproach, have tended in a great degree to direct serious attention of the mass to their religious interests.43

Workingmen were not simply pushed into the church by the destitution accompanying hard times; they were also pulled there by the polemics of pastors. In attributing the depression to moral depravity, the clergy apparently put forward a more compelling argument than the radicals. The radical formulation, which traced the depression to the machinations of bankers, left workers relatively powerless to effect much change. Legislators in far-off Harrisburg and Washington made the decisions, but their remedies, radical or not, brought no relief. Clergymen singled out the behavior of individuals and, in so doing, offered an easier solution, or at least one that left room for individual effort. They maintained that he who came to Christ on their terms not only appeased the Lord but also regenerated himself and gained the moral fortitude to weather perilous conditions.

It comes as no surprise that a refurbished temperance movement swept Philadelphia. Like the revivalist upsurge, this crusade differed from its predecessor with regard to leadership, methods of operation, and constituency. The pioneer temperance leaders, as we have seen, were interchangeable with early revivalist ministers. They gave the movement an elitist coloration and, with a few exceptions, kept it distant from the popular classes. Rarely, if ever, having contact with
the masses, they restricted their activities to collecting signatures on temperance pledges, distributing literature, and lecturing on the evils of drink and the glories of abstinence. They seemed to be preoccupied with raising funds ear-marked to defray the costs of the endless polemics and tracts that were churned out; and their societies were loosely organized affairs that held infrequent meetings. Some workingmen, it is true, had joined local organizations aligned with churches, but it is difficult to conceive of this earlier temperance crusade as a movement. Instead, it was more comparable to a highly energetic bureaucracy.

The new movement was very different from its predecessor. On the one hand, its leadership was drawn from the ranks of petty professionals, small shopkeepers, independent producers, and skilled workers, and, on the other, from the ministry of these groups. Men like Lewis Levin, an ambitious small-time lawyer outside the city's legal establishment, and ministers like Ramsey and Coombe supplied the leadership. Such guiding lights ignored the established societies allied with the American Temperance Union and put together separate organizations that were temperance-beneficial lodges and were tailored to the needs and interests of common folk. Their press, in fact, criticized the orthodox groups for neglecting the economic interest of their followers and for lacking the provisions "by which all the members may be brought together at short intervals" so as to exert their "united influence." Temperance-beneficial societies remedied both flaws by combining welfare with reformist functions, so critical in the depression, and by holding frequent meetings. Their gatherings might take place on consecutive evenings when interest ran high, as it often did during the late thirties, and they were convened in the streets as well as in churches and meeting halls. Leaders anticipated the Washingtonians by seeking out hardened drinkers and congenital drunkards, those whom older societies had neglected and who would become featured speakers at meetings, testimonies to the possibility of self-reform under the encouragement of peers. Such tactics yielded striking results. Together with the goadings of the depression, they accomplished what elite temperance advocates had failed to do: bring total abstinence to the status of a mass movement.

Temperance-beneficial societies with billowing memberships shot
up between 1837 and 1841. One observer placed the number of temperance advocates in the county at 17,000 in 1841, a four-fold increase since the middle of the thirties, and noted that in the first two months of 1841 alone, 4,300 Philadelphians enlisted in the crusade.  

Most of these acolytes were in temperance-beneficial societies and an analysis of the membership of two lodges—Southwark Branch No. 1 and Western Branch No. 2 of Moyamensing—underscores the class nature of the new movement. Both societies consisted of a minority of small shopkeepers and ministers and a majority of wage earners, both skilled and unskilled. (See Table 10.)

### Table 10

**Occupations of the Members of Temperance-Beneficial Associations, Southwark Branch No. 1 and Western Branch No. 2, 1837-1838**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Southwark</th>
<th></th>
<th>Western</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gentleman</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Journeymen</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unskilled laborer and street trade</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24.2</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>117</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
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</tr>
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</table>

*See Table 5.

†The original Southwark list contained 148 names along with the addresses and occupations of most of the members; the original Western list contained the names and addresses of 64 members. One-hundred-seventeen of the former, or 74.3 percent of names listed, were located in the directories or their occupations were recorded as they appear on the membership roll. Thirty-three, or 51.6 percent of the latter, were located in the directories.

Source: *Charter and By-Laws of the Temperance Beneficial Association Western Branch No. 2* (Philadelphia: T. K. and P. G. Collins, 1837); city directories, 1837-1838. The pamphlet lists the members of both organizations.
Careful scrutiny of temperance-beneficial society rosters indicates that the movement (as well as renewed evangelicalism) cut across cultural lines within the working class. The coachmaker Joshua Fletcher, the tanner Benjamin Sewell, the cordwainer Joseph Hollingsworth, and other former leaders of the Trades' Union and of union locals in the mid-thirties were drawn into the temperance movement, the evangelical crusade, or both in the late thirties and early forties. And they joined former traditionalists like Alexander Fulton in one or both of these. This amalgamation suggests why it was that workers of all cultures lost interest in antibank rallies and spurned the Equal Rights party in the closing years of the depression. Radicalism, at the end of the decade, simply lost out to evangelicalism for the minds of wage earners. Fletcher, Sewell, Hollingsworth, and thousands of other workers who swung to radicalism under their influence during the thirties turned inward upon being evangelized; they pursued self-perfection rather than collective protest against the wealthy. In addition, the resurgence of temperance and revivalism severed whatever ties remained between radical workingmen and traditionalists and revivalists. While the radicals lambasted banks and ran for public office, their former followers gradually fell into line behind middle-class laymen and the suburban ministry. These leaders, consumed as they were with cultural issues, took their evangelized minions down the road to harmony with employers and discord with nonevangelicals.

The leading exponent of this course was Lewis Levin, a South Carolina-born lawyer who tramped the southern back country teaching and practicing law before settling in Philadelphia in the late 1830s. Although admitted to the bar, Levin could not penetrate the polite society of Philadelphia's legal profession. Nor was he temperamentally fit for it. Crude, vulgar, and something of a charlatan with flair for demagoguery and a hunger for political office, he mixed more easily with his social inferiors than with gentlemen attorneys. He never established much of a legal practice and, in the early 1840s, devoted himself to the quest for public office and the cause of temperance, both as lecturer and editor of the Temperance Advocate and Literary Repository.47

To some extent Levin reflected the apprehensions and anxieties of Philadelphia's Protestant middle class at the end of the 1830s. They
had been chastened by the depression and the social disorganization that came in its wake, and could not help but look back to the 1830s with some trepidation. Deeply troubled by the 1830s’ class warfare and ideological ferment, they sought a moral equivalent for radicalism that both uplifted their own spirits, as well as those of workingmen, and restored social harmony between the classes. Temperance was a key to this strategy, and Levin's followers packaged total abstinence as a restorative force for both the individual and society. Temperance advocates, boasted a lieutenant in the new cold water army, actuated a revolution in public and private morality that enabled individuals to “maintain their glorious independence, which has contributed so essentially to their health, happiness, respectability and worldly prosperity.”

Knelt and thanked God for the Teetotal Mill,
The poor were made rich, and the weak made strong,
The shot was made short, and the purse was made long.

Those who worshipped at the shrine of the “Teetotal Mill,” combated familial decline and personal hardship, for they transformed themselves into responsible parents and reliable workers. Their honest toil was rewarded with wages sufficient to support dependents in comfort even in the worst downturn in memory. They also partook of the tonic of social cohesion. Or as Levin put it, such workers tracked “evil to its legitimate source—the Rum Shop,” and no longer “considered themselves cast off from the sympathies of the upper classes, regarded as tools and machines.” Thus the communalism of the temperance cause was the “most effectual means of closing [the] fatal chasm in our social system, of knitting up [the] sympathies again; of reviving between the middle and working classes those healthful and fraternal feelings which the spirit of intemperance has done so much to destroy.”

The cultural issues that produced this alliance of middle and working-class evangelicals drove a wedge within the working class itself. Nativist tendencies inhered in the temperance and evangelical crusade from the very beginning. They now became more articulate in the hands of temperance zealots, who directed this heightened
sense of Protestant identity against traditionalists. Catholics were especially vulnerable targets for these enthusiasts, not only because of their religion but also because they were easily identified with the liquor interests and had a reputation as a cheap labor pool. All of these issues were charged with emotion, but the labor question was positively explosive during a depression—when the unemployed were not above unleashing their frustrations on scapegoats.

**Traditionalists**

Traditionalist workers who resisted the radicalism of the thirties and the evangelicalism of the depression were pulled in two directions. The hand-to-mouth existence of hard times, exacerbated by the treatment meted out by loom bosses, drove Irish Protestant and Irish Catholic wage earners together against their own middle-class and against Black workers, while the cultural chauvinism of evangelicals drew Catholic workers together with their own middle-class leaders, who built political careers out of defending their cultural integrity from bigoted Protestants. Both courses occurred simultaneously; both were marred by violence; and both strained relations with evangelicals to the breaking point.

No group of white workers bore a heavier burden than Irish hand loom weavers and unskilled laborers. The oversupply of weavers kept wages low and employment irregular, so much so that frame tenders lived at subsistence levels and routinely shifted into casual labor when work was lacking. The protracted depression and continued immigration multiplied the number of hand loom weavers searching for unskilled jobs; and the exodus from weaving to the docks and construction sites irritated racial antagonisms and touched off another round of rioting between the hungry Irish and hungry but employed Black dockers. Sporadic scuffles between the groups burst into a melee on August 1, 1842, when Blacks in the southern ghetto massed at their temperance hall for a parade in commemoration of Jamaican Emancipation Day. The iconography of the procession, which included a flag depicting a slave breaking his chains against the rising sun of freedom, caused a stir among Irish onlookers. Tempers were simmering by the time the marchers reached the public market at Plum and Fourth Streets, in the heart of Irish Southwark. Market vendors and aroused spectators, provoked partly by the flag and
partly by the spectacle itself, first hurled insults and then paving stones, disrupting the parade and pursuing the Blacks into the ghetto. Blacks defended themselves against prowling mobs, and some retreated to a house on Bradford's Alley, where they held off their assailants with musket fire and inadvertently incurred more severe treatment. Torches replaced missiles and by nightfall Smith's Hall, an abolitionist meeting place, as well as St. Mary's Church, were reduced to ashes.

Renewed fighting broke out the next morning at the Schuylkill docks, the exposed nerve center of unemployed Irishmen. Club-wielding Irishmen assaulted Blacks reporting for work and, as in other such episodes, then turned against the sheriff's posse sent to quell the trouble. They easily routed the authorities and resumed bludgeoning the Blacks, which inspired the mayor to call out seven militia companies. Composed of over a thousand volunteers, it was the largest peace-keeping force ever assembled and a sufficient show of strength to dampen Irish courage, momentarily at least.

Hand loom weavers also fought running battles with their employers over wages during the next few years. Loom bosses in both districts incited their workers by repeatedly shaving the rates. They slashed the scale on the standard five-shuttle gingham from five to three cents a yard by 1841, but the journeymen were in no position to offer much resistance through most of the depression. Their own poverty and massive unemployment deterred effective action. They were also disarmed by the death of their unions and by the disruption of communal solidarity issuing from the social disorganization of hard times and from the continuous arrival of new immigrants. In August of 1842, however, the weavers took a stand against yet another wage reduction and held out for six long months before returning to work with a compromise settlement. The following spring and summer they staged brief strikes that boosted the rates to predepression levels. But the loom bosses, who had been at one another's throats, finally pulled together and resisted weaver demands for another increase in January of 1844. They stood firm for five months and, on top of this, dealt the weavers a devastating wage cut. In May the defeated frame tenders returned to their looms, weaving cloth for 3½c a yard.

Working conditions and the character of the labor force combined
to make these strikes as violent as they were lengthy. Scabbing was common because of the oversupply of workers and because weavers like Alexander Fulton were more concerned with the salvation of their own souls than with deprivation. Such workers, as well as recent arrivals who, Michael Feldberg observes, were not yet integrated into the tight-knit weavers’ communities, became the most likely strike-breakers.\textsuperscript{53} Policing them and enforcing solidarity proved to be arduous. The decentralization of the industry and nature of the work setting obliged vigilance committees, in order to ferret out scabs, to comb the districts and even enter homes. Such painstaking efforts and the frustrations built up in the course of the long standouts put vigilantes in an ugly mood, and they went about their work accordingly. Timid weavers found at work were beaten mercilessly, chains were ripped from frames and destroyed in the streets, wives and children were sometimes intimidated and threatened; resisting employers had property destroyed and their homes sprayed with musket fire.\textsuperscript{54}

The rash of violence set the embattled weavers against local authorities. One of many clashes with the police took place in Kensington in January of 1843 when two Alderman in hot pursuit of a vigilance committee were themselves apprehended by the weavers. One fought his way to freedom, the other suffered a severe beating, but managed to seize Thomas Lynch, a strike leader and popular figure in the cottager community. News of Lynch’s arrest spread rapidly through Kensington’s pubs and fire houses, and it led to a spontaneous rally of weavers and sympathizers at the Nanny Goat Market. Lynch’s partisans vowed reprisals against the police, but the meeting was disrupted by Sheriff John Porter, who braved the angry Kensingtonians and, mounting a soap box, ordered the crowd to disperse, but drew the predictable insults and cat-calls. Left without options, he went to raise a posse. Meanwhile the weavers and their partisans armed themselves and greeted Porter’s force with a hail of fire, which put most to flight. A handful, the sheriff among them, were stranded and bore the onslaught of the furious weavers. Porter’s deputy ordered several militia units into the area and pacified it, while local constables rounded up eight ring leaders.\textsuperscript{55}

Ironically, Hugh Clark, the chief arresting officer, was in the middle of the class and ethnic struggles that disturbed the Kensington
peace. A loom boss and shrewd land speculator, Clark was busy accumulating a modest fortune (value at $30,000 in land alone by 1850) and becoming one of the wealthiest residents of that poor district. He had counterparts in the south, the most important of whom were Joseph Diamond, liquor dealer and land speculator, and Judge Joseph Doran. Clark, Diamond, and Doran, and other Catholic parvenues represented a breed of ethnic politician and community leader that, together with the Catholic clergy, was displacing class-conscious stalwarts like John Ferral in Kensington and Moyamensing during the depression years. They parlayed the growing ethnic strife into political prominence, exacerbating it in the process, and, at the same time, ignored the economic grievances of their traditionalist constituents. Or, in the case of Clark and Bernard Sherry, they drove their own employees to the wall on wage matters, but staunchly defended Irish Catholic cultural interests. Sherry, for example, tenaciously resisted the wage demands of his journeymen weavers, yet primed them for a battle with nativist mobs by distributing arms.

The Moyamensing Commission, a stronghold of Irish power in the forties, played a similar role. In June 1842, the John Hancock Temperance-Beneficial Society petitioned local officials for the use of the district hall. Such requests by community groups were routinely granted, but the Commissioners, protecting Catholics from nativistic temperance enthusiasts, turned down the petitioners. A few months later the Commission had occasion to enhance this image. Residents living near a Black temperance hall feared that the building would be fired by the mob and thereby endanger their property. They demanded that the Commissioners destroy the hall and the officers complied, sending the case to a friendly judge. The judge then appointed a rigged panel which ordered the building demolished.

The conduct of these Irish politicians produced indignation in temperance circles and in the press, and arrayed popular feeling against Irish Philadelphia. The members of the John Hancock Temperance-Beneficial Society, lodging a complaint that would become the nativist battle cry, bristled at being excluded from their own halls of government and charged the Moyamensing Commission with placing "civil and religious rights in jeopardy." Bushrod W. Knight, a Hancock leader and Commission member, was so em-
barrassed by the patent illegality of razing the temperance hall that he felt the need to disassociate himself from his fellow Commissioners. In an advertisement in the *Public Ledger* he claimed to have been absent during the vote and roundly condemned the decision.\(^6^1\) The *Ledger* itself joined the opposition, observing that the brick building hardly constituted a fire hazard and even if it did, its destruction was illegal since there had not been a jury trial.\(^6^2\) But it was Clark who, wittingly or not, brought down Protestant Philadelphia against the Irish.

Philadelphia's participation in the state common school system began in 1834. Discord over its administration was inevitable, given Protestant domination of classrooms in a city with a growing Catholic minority. The school day opened with teachers reading passages from the *King James Bible* and using it as a text to drill children in morality.\(^6^3\) Catholics, however, recognized the Douay Bible as their scripture, and canon law prohibited their taking communion or engaging in worship, bible reading included, with other sects. School practice obviously violated rules of Catholic conduct and of local prelates, who brought this to the attention of the Controllers of the Public Schools shortly after the inauguration of free public instruction in 1834. They apparently won their point, for the Board forbade "any form of religious or sectarian instruction."\(^6^4\) The ruling, however, did not pertain to bible reading, which was a convenient escape for teachers, and was impossible to enforce in any case.

Protestant control of the schools disturbed Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick, but there was no easy remedy at hand. The Catholic church had not yet constructed its own schools; and the Bishop, cautious and mild-mannered in temperament, held his peace for fear of creating a backlash. He tried to buy time until the diocese built a haven for Catholic children in the form of a parochial school network, but as the city's Roman Catholic spokesman he had to protect his flock from Protestant insults. Southwark's Public School Directors forced his hand in the spring of 1842 by summarily firing a Catholic teacher for refusing to open the school day with readings from the *King James Bible*. Kenrick protested the dismissal in the diocesan newspaper, the *Catholic Herald*, but did not raise so much as a whimper among the laity. Many Catholics were preoccupied with the
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weavers' strike, but most were not yet incorporated into the institutional life of the church, and their indifference forced Kenrick to change his strategy. He took to the pen and in a letter to the county School Board, set forth a litany of grievances but emphasized the bible reading issue. He proposed a compromise that involved excusing Catholic children from the opening exercises and allowing them to conduct separate services with their own bible.

Kenrick’s plan put the School Board in a delicate position. Its members could not help but consider Protestant reaction to the prospect of introducing the Douay Bible into their schools, but neither could they ignore the legitimate complaints of the Bishop. Caught between these constraints, they hewed the line of least resistance and agreed to excuse from the bible reading “children whose parents are conscientiously opposed thereto” but refused to sanction the use of the Douay edition. This ruling disappointed Kenrick, but at least it spared Catholic children the indignity of sitting through the reading of the King James Bible. He therefore pressed the issue no further.

Evangelical and orthodox Philadelphia, already troubled by Catholic political power, took a less balanced view than Kenrick or the School Board. They interpreted his letter as further confirmation of a Catholic conspiracy to infiltrate the schools and then deliver the republic into the hands of the diabolical pope. Ministers hysterically “exposed” Kenrick’s scheme to “kick the bible” from classrooms and in the fall of 1842, over ninety clerical representatives of nearly every Protestant church and sect—Arminian and orthodox, evangelical and otherwise—coalesced in the American Protestant Association, which blanketed the city with foreboding comments on Catholic designs. Its representatives distributed copies of anti-Catholic literature, hawked Protestant propaganda pretending to uncover the resurgent Catholicism predicted by the prophet Daniel, and, on the lecture circuit, exhorted responsible Protestants to rally in defense of God, country, and republican virtue.

Such feverish rhetoric from the clergy spilled into the political arena and revitalized an anti-immigrant movement which had been operating without much success since 1837. American Republican Associations, the political analogue of the American Protestant Association, awakened new interest in the winter and spring of 1843.
They promoted a measure that would deny suffrage to the immigrants for twenty-one years after arrival in the United States and would also bar them from public office. Their program took on new relevance in the heat of the school controversy and American Republican clubs, heretofore paper organizations, spread throughout the country.\(^68\)

Clark fanned these nativist flames. A member of the Kensington School Board, he was inspecting district classrooms in February of 1844 (and perhaps looking to promote his own political fortunes), when a teacher complained of disruptions that occurred as Catholic children departed prior to the bible reading. Clark might have disregarded the observation, but instead, took it upon himself to order an immediate suspension of the bible reading until the School Board worked out another arrangement. Sensible Philadelphians did not take kindly to Clark’s measure. Even the *Spirit of the Times*, a radical Democratic organ that never suffered evangelical excess, scored his “intolerant zeal... lamentable fanaticism.”\(^69\)

More than any previous event, Clark’s ill-timed intervention into the school controversy galvanized Protestant groups among the clergy, the temperance movement, and the larger society into a coherent movement. His action became grist for the mill of demagogues, like Levin, who merged their temperance forces with those of the American Republicans, forming a nativist phalanx that exploited the event in the March elections. American Republican candidates crying “Save the Bible!” and demanding Clark’s dismissal made strong showings in select wards.\(^70\) Emboldened by their success and spurred into provocative acts by their histrionic leaders, American Republicans resolved to test the mettle of their adversaries on Clark’s home ground and scheduled party rallies in Kensington.

With these meetings, class and cultural currents of the depression years converged. On one side was Clark, surrogate for Irish Catholicism and the Irish Catholic community, whose weavers were in the midst of a bitter strike against Clark himself; on the other was Levin, Clark’s counterpart among evangelical and nonevangelical Protestants, whose own followers had closed ranks behind striking Irish frame tenders a scant seven years ago. In the end, Kensington class cleavages dissipated, as weavers perceived an even greater threat in nativism and sided with Clark.
Angry Irish weavers twice disrupted small American Republican gatherings in mid-April, but failed to discourage nativist chieftains. On the first Friday in May, S. R. Cramer, a rising nativist star who combined house carpentry with publication of the Native American, addressed still another meeting. He, too, was driven from the platform by Catholic hecklers and spent the remainder of the weekend strategizing with party leaders. He returned to Kensington the following Monday, accompanied by Levin, who mounted a soap box across the street from the Nanny Goat Market. A cloudburst sent Levin's listeners scurrying for cover in the market where Levin himself put together a makeshift stump and launched into a tirade against "Popery." His provocations were answered with a barrage of rotten vegetables and rocks. Matters took a more serious turn when nativist crowds, allegedly excited by musket fire, stormed the Hibernia Hose house and nearby weavers' cottages suspected of harboring armed assailants. Both sides opened fire, and when the shooting stopped, eleven nativists lay on the ground, wounded or beaten, and George Shiffler, a morocco dresser's apprentice, was dead.

The initial volley and Shiffler's death turned Kensington into a magnet for avenging nativist mobs. They converged on the area and spent the next two days laying waste to buildings, looting, and exchanging gunfire and fistcuffs with its besieged immigrants. Upward of 3,000 troops were called in on Wednesday morning, and took up positions near Catholic churches, the anticipated nativist targets, but they could not (or refused to) block bands of young toughs, who burned two churches and occasionally roughed up residents. By Thursday morning the worst was over. Nativists retreated across Kensington's borders, leaving behind the charred ruins of thirty buildings, and at least sixteen dead.

Nativism surged through the summer and American Republican helmsmen adroitly steered it into displays of political might. The traditional Independence Day parade became a nativist spectacle of at least 5,000 marchers wafting banners with party slogans and promises of electoral victory. Widows of riot victims and their orphaned children marched, as well, evoking special compassion from the estimated 100,000 spectators who lined the streets for the occasion.
Prophesies of political ascendance announced by the parade banners came to pass in the fall elections. American Republicans swept the entire county and old port city, sending Levin to Congress, a delegation of Senators and Assemblymen to Harrisburg, and seating numerous Commissioners in the chambers of local government. A year later the Whigs regained control of the city, the Democrats recaptured the county delegation of Senators and Assemblymen, but American Republicans retained a firm grip on local government in Southwark, the Northern Liberties, Spring Garden, and portions of Kensington throughout the 1840s.73

The great depression thus marks a watershed in the making of working-class culture. The prolonged unemployment that destroyed the institutional base of radicalism—unions, cooperatives, debating clubs, and reading rooms—also altered the strategies and cultural commitments of those who had used these organizations as instruments of material improvement and intellectual uplift. Some radicals turned to political activism with renewed vigor. They directed popular discontent against the bankers at a series of massive rallies in 1837–1838. But the antibank sentiments of rank and fileers waned and radical rallies became pale replicas of their former selves by the winter of 1838–1839. Radical leaders, having been deserted by their followers, passed the remainder of the depression bearing the standard of the Democrats or assembling an Equal Rights party. Revivalists, traditionalists, and even some radicals—veterans of radical campaigns, as well as the newly converted during the thirties—were more attentive to middle-class temperance advocates and evangelical ministers who trumpeted self-discipline, sobriety, and other facets of the new morality both as the remedy for unemployment and as the road to a competency.

These newly enlisted evangelicals and temperance crusaders fulfilled the worst fears of radicals. Ever since William Heighton had codified radicalism in the twenties, they understood revivalist ministers to be their chief competitors for working-class loyalties. They lived in apprehension of the church, but had the advantage in the thirties. Evangelicalism did not reach very deeply into the social structure and, when touching the labor force, it claimed a small minority only—mostly upwardly mobile craftsmen and workers engaged in the most modern pursuits. It made little sense to the vast
majority of workingmen until the depression years. Hard times violated this rough equation between career trajectories or work experiences and revivalist inclinations. Evangelicalism crossed work environments and cultural lines alike, and turned revivalism into a mass movement with a strong working-class base.

Yet, as the return of prosperity would show, evangelicalism did not transform all wage earners into deferential employees or rigid nativists jealously protecting their jobs from the immigrant hordes. Some workers accepted it selectively: they endorsed revivalistic morality but repudiated its conservative political economy.