A Fatal Drifting Apart

Westhoff, Laura M.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Westhoff, Laura M.
A Fatal Drifting Apart: Democratic Social Knowledge and Chicago Reform.
The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27968.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27968

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1149813
“He Who Merits Victory”

Liberal Republicanism and the Crisis of the 1890s

In the entire history of the world there is no clearer record of the fact that he who merits victory will win it than is found in the history of Chicago.¹

In 1881, David Ward Wood published a salute to Chicago. Written in the grandiose style of booster literature, Chicago and Its Distinguished Citizens celebrated the city’s vast economic growth and the entrepreneurial and civic leadership of its founders and early settlers. It narrated a story in which Chicago stood for all of nineteenth-century America. Within a generation, a western city grew where in 1818 only an abandoned fort and a few scattered trappers’ huts had evidenced white settlement. After long efforts to fight off and then live together with white settlers, the Potowatamis who had lived on this marshy land sold it to the United States government at a bargain price and moved farther west. Speculation drove land prices up, and eastern investors began pouring money into the region. Settlers from Massachusetts, Virginia, New York, and Vermont, who had little money to invest but an adventurous spirit, moved to the growing city. A striking number made fortunes. It seemed no exaggeration for booster Elmer Barton to claim that “Chicago is more distinctively than any other city the embodiment of all that is most characteristic of the American people—a people who have within the limits of a single century risen from poverty and obscurity to a foremost place among the nations.”²

The stories of Chicago’s spectacular rise and the “old settlers” who built the city were legendary. They testified to American myths of the self-made man. Drawing from classical liberal political economy and republican free labor ideology, such narratives constituted the social knowledge of the American north


in the antebellum decades, years that witnessed Chicago’s rise. Highlighting autonomous independence and economic opportunities, these narratives set the parameters of a liberal republican social knowledge, knowledge that shaped elites’ ideas about public responsibility, gave form to a conception of the universal (male) political actor, and set the boundaries of state action. But by the 1890s they were stretched thin. Newer residents—often workers and immigrants—experienced Chicago’s economic and civic life, not as a land of opportunity, but as an unkept promise or as hostile terrain; they understood the city quite differently from those earlier arrivals who had made fortunes.

This chapter outlines the liberal republican social knowledge that shaped Chicago, first in the broader American intellectual context and then within the city itself as it informed practices of local government and public relief. I argue that as liberal republicanism shaped civic elites’ understanding of their community and their place in it, and inscribed these lessons into public institutions, it functioned as a form of social knowledge, which, while not monolithic, set the boundaries of public debate and measured the legitimacy of political actors—and hence the democratic polity. The final section suggests that the depression of 1893 opened up an important moment when reformers sought new coalitions and new ways of understanding and solving their city’s problems. This moment reflected the possibilities for creating democratic social knowledge, that redefined the practice of American democracy.

**Liberal Republicanism and Chicago Civic Elites**

Founded in 1832, Chicago grew up in a climate dominated by classical liberalism and free labor republicanism. The political economy that shaped the institutional and cultural life of the young city defined human nature as primarily self-interested. Derived from eighteenth-century moral philosophy, the field of political economy defined “man” as given to a truck and bartering nature; self-interest drove economic exchange as well as political choice and social relationships. Attributing self-interest to a universal human motivation helped make sense of cultural confusion and economic hardships surrounding the spread of an ideology that prioritized modern market relations. According to early political economists, the cash nexus, not personal relationships or feudal loyalties, bound individuals and societies together. As business theorist Henry Wood wrote in his popular 1894 book, *The Political Economy of Natural Law*, “the predominant motive of social economy, on the present plane of human develop-

ment, is self-interest.” For Wood this meant that “any inversion of this natural order will retard the coming ideal,” whatever it may be. This view endowed economics with properties of natural law and provided justification for laissez-faire policies; theorists argued that the economy would function best if governments defended private property and refrained from interfering with the complex system of business exchange and rational self-interest that held society together.

In translating these abstract principles into a blueprint for their young nation, American theorists and politicians built upon ideas of self-interest and individualism. Pursuit of personal interest in economic life promised the quickest growth of the nation. Yet they expected to escape the problems wrought by excessive greed. Strong republican and evangelical Christian traditions upheld the importance of personal responsibility for the common good, expressed through public service and political participation. This liberal republicanism was supported by a judiciary friendly to individual property rights. Closely related to a legal discourse couched in terms of natural law, economic principles themselves came to appear as inherent and immutable laws.

Evolving alongside Calvinist traditions, this political economy complemented an American tendency to understand the course of the nation’s development in millennialist terms. Seeing their country as God’s chosen, Americans believed their history would unfold to produce the millennium. Enlightenment-inspired

5. Ibid., 14.

William Novak points out that the notion of laissez-faire was a fiction, for the state provided land, canals, and roads; passed laws that regulated exchange in the urban marketplace; required licenses; and so on. But my point here is a different one. While the reality belied the myth, most Americans believed in the notion of laissez-faire and the free market. Indeed, Novak shares my concern that the power of this narrative—what I frame here as liberal republican social knowledge—operated in the past (and continues in the present) to constrain ideas about the functions of the state. See William J. Novak, *The People’s Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 1–18, 83–114.

faith in rational progress and America’s own history seemed to reveal the inevitable advance of democracy in the new nation. As the professional social sciences developed in the Gilded Age of the 1870s and 1880s, political and economic theorists incorporated belief in America’s progress into their writings. These ideas all led to the conclusion that in a nation that enjoyed God’s blessing, little economic tinkering was necessary.9

Both building on and contributing to these foundations of American political economy, Chicago civic elites cast their city as the finest example of the American exceptionalism underpinning liberal republicanism. Like a Horatio Alger plot, the story of the city’s spectacular growth featured a combination of sound character, hard work, and good fortune—at least according to the boosters who wrote it.10 Chicago was a frontier town in the midst of vast forests and agricultural land situated on the Great Lakes with their access to waterways in the east.11 Its privileged position near to natural resources and rapid commercial and population growth seemed to bear out boosters’ claims that the city, like the United States itself, was divinely chosen. With population surging, from 350 in 1833 to 300,000 by the Great Fire in 1871, the city boasted over a million residents by the time of the World’s Fair.12 Much of this growth came from immigration; by 1893, three-quarters of Chicago residents were foreign-born or the children of immigrants. Development of transportation infrastructure, first a canal and then railroads, made Chicago’s growth as a market center possible. Exploiting its proximity to forests, the city became the largest lumber market center in the world by the 1850s. In that decade, Chicago also built the Board of Trade to regulate speculation and money use. By the Civil War, its financial strength attracted industrial ventures, particularly its famed meat-packing industry. These simultaneous developments of the spatial landscape, an industrial, time-ordered economy, and the Board of Trade which regulated market transactions, ensuring the value of money and commodities over long distances and periods of time, marked Chicago as an

10. Horatio Alger wrote more than 130 dime novels after the Civil War. His stories emphasized that the American dream could be attained by anyone who exercised strong determination and hard work.
11. This discussion of Chicago’s economic growth is drawn from William Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: Norton, 1991), 97–262. Cronon chronicles Chicago’s economic rise in terms of its relationship to rural lands and resources as far west as Denver and its commercial and cultural mediation between the East and West.
industrial, capitalist urban center.13

Chicago stood symbolically between the inhabited, civilized east and the wilderness of the west, and residents claimed the best of both worlds. As they encouraged the growth of the city, they looked to the west as an outlet for excess population and protection from the vices of urban luxury and indolence. Migrants from the hinterlands would reinvigorate the populace, as “physical development, power of endurance, indomitable courage, together with intellectual vigor, business instinct and inventive genius, gather into the great center from country homes.” As one booster explained, “poor indeed would be the mental and physical status of the urban population were it not for the constant influx of the agriculturalist class.”14 Chicagoans thus drew upon a Jeffersonian vision of an abundance of uncultivated land offering an escape from the crowding, decadence, and class conflict of overgrown eastern and European societies.15

Chicago’s civic elites made their fortunes from the opportunities the city offered. The earliest settlers laid the infrastructure that attracted a second generation of entrepreneurs in the 1850s. Most of these men were born into relatively modest circumstances in the Northeast, but made their fortunes in Chicago’s booming economy. The city produced over two hundred millionaires in the late nineteenth century.16 Marshall Field was the wealthiest of them all. Born on a farm in Massachusetts, he came to Chicago in search of economic opportunity. Working as a clerk, his employer noticed that he had a merchant’s instinct and a rigid frugality. Field practiced his own philosophy: “The five, ten, or fifteen cents a day that is squandered, while a mere trifle apparently, if saved, would in a few years amount to thousands of dollars and go far toward establishing the foundation of a future career.”17 By 1866, only ten years after arriving in the city, he owned his own store which transacted over $9,000,000 worth of business. Field died one of the wealthiest men in the United States.

Field was only one among many of Chicago’s newly wealthy who proudly told of their rise from poverty through hard work. In 1875, Philip Armour, a ditch-digger, arrived in the city. He rose to astounding fame and wealth by revolutionizing the meatpacking industry.18 Armour enjoyed telling stories of his

18. Quoted in Donald Miller, City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America
difficult youth. The son of a family farmer, he left home at age nineteen to make his fortune in the California gold rush. Managing to save $8,000 through panning and digging sluices, Armour gambled on the meat-packing industry, and made his first million at the close of the Civil War. He invested in Chicago's future as a meat-packing center, making millions of dollars from the company that bore his name. Believing in practical education, he established the Armour Mission and Institute to teach needy boys useful trades. When the Institute opened in 1893, it was celebrated as “a place for developing character.”

Armour frequently dispensed advice to students: “Let liquor alone, pay your bills, marry a good wife and pound away at whatever you want—and sooner or later you’ll make good.”

His success story, similar to those of Field’s partner, Potter Palmer, railroad car magnate George Pullman, and T. W. Harvey, head of Chicago’s most successful lumber firm, served as proof of the liberal republican myth that grew up around Chicago. Alluding to the mantra that came to define the new nation and its western frontier, Wood proclaimed, “Chicago is a self-made city, and those who have created it are self-made men.”

For Chicago’s elites there were important moral and economic lessons in these success stories, lessons that enforced a social narrative privileging hard work, as a means to unify the city’s diverse residents and to develop personal character. When asked about his success, Marshall Field explained simply, “I was determined not to remain poor.” He credited his individual drive as the source of his success. As historian Donald Miller observed about Field, “he had complete faith in the openness of the Chicago economy. In this city of boundless opportunity ‘merit did not have to wait for dead men’s shoes.’ If he, the son of a struggling hill farmer, could make it in Chicago, anyone could.” Reflecting this sentiment, a booster asserted that “the history of human success has shown that only in exceptional instances has natural ability, legitimately applied, failed of a legitimate measure of achievement.” Such belief underlined the place of individualism and market ideology in elites’ explanation of success. Chicago’s many millionaires and the city’s phenomenal economic growth testified that anyone who worked hard and exhibited personal initiative and ability was guaranteed success. Conversely, elites found it easy to blame the poor for their poverty.

---

23. Miller, 258.
A classical republican conception of labor and city-building also promised to mitigate the challenges presented by the city’s pluralism. Chicago stood as a universal home welcoming anyone of a liberal economic persuasion. The shared task of building the city promised unity of purpose that would tie its residents, even the city’s many ethnic groups, together: one businessman argued that “the enterprising man, no matter where he may be born, is naturally a citizen of Chicago.”

This vision emphasized the importance of labor “as a work of responsible, patriotic citizenship.” Such a vision shaped the optimistic responses to the Great Fire of 1871. As one historian put it, “in destroying the city physically, the Chicago Fire renewed it symbolically, for the experience of building the city that had united the early settlers was now to bind the next generation as well.”

Recreating the city had the moral effect of encouraging hard work and good character. “No longer was it necessary . . . to send America’s children off to new settlements in order to preserve the pioneer ideals. All the virtues of pioneer life that had seemed on the wane before the fire would be required again if Chicago were to rebuild.” As the city quickly recovered, ministers and businessmen cast the experience in exceptionalist terms, offering it as proof of divine favor. At the dedication of the new Chicago Board of Trade, a local minister offered prayers of thanksgiving: “We went through fire and water, but Thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.”

Glossing over deep ethnic and class divisions in the wake of the fire, such memories entrenched a narrative justifying the unifying tendencies of Chicago’s liberal republican social knowledge.

For businessmen, Chicago’s virtues were epitomized in the World’s Fair of 1893, which showcased Chicago’s physical growth, economic success, and cultural attainments. Tellingly for the way organizers conceived of success, the Manufactures Building was the site of President Grover Cleveland’s opening speech. It was the largest man-made structure on earth and was lit with over


26. Wood, Chicago and Its Distinguished Citizens, 360–61. This was a theme heard often among American workers over the course of the century, though with a slightly different accent. See, for example, Sean Wilentz, Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).


28. Ibid.

29. Dedication of the New Board of Trade Building . . . Dedicatory and Banquet Addresses (1885), 7, quoted in Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis, 348.

30. For discussion of division in the wake of the fire, see Karen Sawislak, Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871–1874 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), and Carl Smith, Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995).

127,000 lights, testament to American technological and economic success. The Fair’s Court of Honor and Midway Plaisance attracted over 12,000,000 visitors—with approximately 1 out of 4 Americans making the trip to the White City. Cleveland hailed the Fair, Chicago, and the nation as one of the “stupendous results of American enterprise . . . proud national destiny . . . and exalted mission.” The Fair celebrated the belief that abundant resources, free labor, liberty, assertiveness, and technological innovation came together to ensure unity and progress.

Thus through their experience of building the city, civic elites identified the common good with economic growth. The success stories of Chicago’s businessmen lent themselves to a social knowledge that emphasized economic rationality and hard work as its residents’ defining characteristics. This social knowledge wove together classical liberal and republican strands of thought in which the autonomous individual succeeded through honest effort, and personal success would directly benefit the community as a whole. The ties that held residents together operated through the market and through city building, arenas that were implicitly masculine and white. The lessons learned by Chicago’s economic growth functioned as a form of social knowledge—though elites did not use the term. Their social knowledge—the narrative they used to explain Chicago’s and their own successes—was visible in the city they built, structuring patterns of interaction, institutions, and politics. It was especially evident in their approach to public relief and private aid, and in their understanding of the proper role of the state.


33. Alan Trachtenberg discusses how the business elite captured free labor ideology, convincing the middle class that competitive business led to fulfillment. This ideology had significant implications for many laborers who frequently experienced bouts of unemployment. Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 87.

By the 1890s, Chicago's market was the largest in the world and was imbued with extensive social meaning—and conflict. Belief in equal opportunity and promises of success to the virtuous hard worker were critical to the new city’s and the new nation's economic and social narratives. They stood virtually as natural laws in mid-nineteenth century America, shaping ideas about the role of government in the economy and public responsibility for the poor and unemployed. Though Chicago's businessmen had benefited immensely from federal and state land grants, they did not recognize this as intervention. A laissez-faire framework shaped their worldview and structured their political policies. As one historian has explained, “unfettered capitalism was, [Chicago's business leaders] were absolutely certain, the underpinning of their city’s, their country’s, and their own well-being.”

And elites’ political ideas and local government practices emphasized individualism and laissez-faire. While the earliest settlers to Chicago depended on government aid and expected that city politicos would encourage development, by 1847 many Chicagoans no longer believed that municipal government should promote the city's growth. They “rejected both the redistribution of wealth through [public] improvements spending and the use of interest-group politics to make public works decisions.” Instead, through a program of special assessments which Robin Einhorn calls a “segmented system,” Chicagoans ensured that only property owners affected by special taxes participated in the decision to levy them for improvements, thus limiting the municipal government’s ability to create public works programs. This system prioritized the language of liberal property ownership, rejected an activist role for the state, and prevented discussion of the meaning of the public good. Indeed, Chicagoans privatized as many services as possible, such as police and fire protection, in the 1840s and 50s to remove “potentially divisive issues from the city council’s agenda.” Their program had a further advantage, they believed, because it “allowed Chicago’s city government to provide services to property owners without redistributing their wealth.” Chicago’s politicians built a system that upheld the primacy of private property, the autonomy of the individual political actor, and a limited role of the state.

The liberal republicanism that emphasized abundant opportunity and individual effort treated poverty and unemployment as temporary imbalances that the market would soon correct or as the result of laziness, mental dullness,

35. Miller, 121.
37. Ibid., 144–45.
intemperance, even ethnicity or race. Indeed, inspired by their predominantly New England Calvinist roots stressing individual salvation and viewing failure as a sign of weakness or sin, civic elites took a harsh view of the poor. Marshall Field captured this sentiment: “the man who is characterized by want of forethought, idleness, carelessness, or general shiftlessness cannot expect to succeed.” In such an economic and moral system, public social relationships entailed no further responsibility than those legally required in the liberal system of capitalism—fulfillment of economic contracts. Dominated by the upper and middle classes, private charity undercut serious attacks on systemic poverty, unbalanced income distribution, or exploitative working conditions. Public codes emphasized the responsibility of the individual for his own welfare and made beneficence a matter of personal conscience and private choice, not a matter of public intervention. William Graham Sumner articulated this view in the 1880s in his popular sociological book, *What the Social Classes Owe Each Other*, which maintained that “in a state based on contract sentiment is out of place in any public or common affairs. It is relegated to the sphere of private and personal relations, where it depends, not at all on class types, but on personal acquaintance and personal estimates.” Sumner’s code provided little room for state intervention in matters of charity and relief. Private religious sentiment and duty had provided the rationale and framework to ameliorate the needs of the poor. But philanthropists’ willingness to aid the poor was tempered by belief in the abundance of economic success for all hard workers. Charity too freely

---

42. David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic*, rev. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991); Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). In antebellum America, local and state governments supported public education, asylums for the mentally ill, or aid to orphans, widows, and abandoned women and children. Nonetheless, these institutions still focused on saving and reforming the individual; there was little belief that structural problems, as opposed to personal character flaws, were responsible for poverty.
given was seen to undermine the lessons of the liberal market, casting paupers outside the imagined political community since their poverty rendered them “unable to know and act for the common good.”

In this environment, Chicago’s local government and charities were very reluctant to provide relief to residents out of fear it would render them dependent. As Kathleen McCarthy observed in her study of Chicago philanthropy, “public resources for the care of the poor were limited and grudgingly rendered.” In the aftermath of the great fire, the privately run Relief and Aid Society (RAS), the largest institution devoted to charitable distributions, tried to prevent disbursements of the millions of dollars intended for fire victims to the “undeserving” poor. The RAS, with its board of prominent businessmen, feared that indiscriminate giving would foster laziness among Chicago’s ethnic working classes. Civic elites’ efforts to limit relief helped entrench their liberal republican vision of limited public responsibility for the poor and unemployed. Moreover, elites’ attempt to enact and enforce stricter fire codes to prevent future conflagrations further emphasized the limited role of the state solely as the protector of private property.

Similar views appeared in response to the depression of 1873. As working people sought public works programs, urban middle and upper classes responded with little sympathy. Instead they clung to a belief in opportunity and assumed that the market had separated out those who lacked character and drive. In Chicago, the superintendent of the Relief and Aid Society proclaimed that “most able-bodied men were ‘loafing around the streets’ and could find work ‘if they were not too lazy to look for it.’ He insisted: ‘If the manifest destiny of a man is the poor house, we must let him go there. To aid some men will do them no good.’” While Chicago socialists and unionists claimed a right to work, demanding government-sponsored public works, the Chicago Daily Tribune rejected them. It explained that Marx “foolishly rejected the classical economists” and denied that the “principles of current economic science” were “immutable,” “necessary,” and had “their roots in human nature.” Socialists were dangerous because “they refuse to accept our political economy any more than a Mohammedan accepts Christianity.” Historian Herbert Gutman observes that although urban residents across the nation were themselves affected by the severity of the 1873 depression, they were “blinded by abstract ideologies and a

44. Glenn, Unequal Freedom, 24.
45. McCarthy, Noblesse Oblige, 54.
46. Sawislak, Smoldering City, 69–106; Smith, Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief, part 1.
devotion to ‘natural’ economic laws” and thus unwilling to adopt workers’ calls for public works. Civic elites argued that the RAS was “able to take care of, to feed, to clothe . . . the wives and children of men who cannot work,” ignoring that it rejected nineteen out of twenty applicants.49

Reflecting a belief in the widespread availability and transformative power of labor in the liberal market, the Illinois legislature passed a vagrancy law making it illegal to beg or loiter on the streets. This act lead to thousands of arrests in Chicago, and those who could not pay the fine were sent into compulsory labor for several months. Such laws made it illegal to eke out a living outside the market. 50 Charity reformers, and the civic elites who sponsored their work, invoked natural laws of political economy, expecting that punitive vagrancy laws and tough relief policies would compel the unemployed to sell their labor in the open market. 51

Class conflict brought on by the Fire, the Panic of 1873, and the Great Uprising of 1877, in which the workers for the nation’s four largest railroads staged a strike that ended violently, belied the universal acceptance of liberal republicanism and civic harmony that elites claimed. In the face of these growing attacks, prominent businessmen founded men’s clubs to debate pressing urban problems. Representing the opinions and interests of a single class, elite clubs like the Citizens’ Association and the Commercial Club served to solidify their members’ explanations of social problems. Club members discussed topics such as “The Right of the State to interfere with vested and private rights” and “Unemployed laborers: What obligations rest upon the city or citizens for their support?” 52 As these discussions suggest, members were preoccupied with the role of the state as the defender of private property. Created in the wake of the general strike in 1877 to enforce this vision, the Commercial Club searched for ways to assert a stronger military presence in the city to prevent workers’ attacks on capital. During 1877–78, the Citizen’s Association spent $27,000 (nearly $500,000 today) on military expenses, financing the “equipment of Militia by purchase of arms, cavalry equipment, a battery, Gatling gun and ammunitions—supplying the police with arms and ammunition. The moral effect of this cannot be overestimated,” the Association wrote. 53 The Commercial Club debated the matter and in 1879

51. Ibid., 1277. Stanley argues that politicians and economic theorists viewed vagrancy laws, with their compulsion to work, as an important aspect of maintaining the discipline and natural laws of the liberal market. See pp. 1282–83.
52. Commercial Club of Chicago, Yearbook, 1908 (Chicago: Executive Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, 1908). This publication lists the topics of meetings up to the year of publication.
invited a speaker on “The Military, as protectors of property, local and National.” Shortly thereafter, it took steps to bring an army installation to Chicago. The opportunity to bring a permanent federal presence to the city came in the wake of the 1886 Haymarket Affair, when fears of disintegrating public order left many upper-class citizens demanding police protection. Fort Sheridan opened in 1887, and Chicago’s elites were relieved that the federal troops would “prevent a lot of riots occurring in Chicago because the soldiers could get there quickly.”

The discussion of public relief and the limited role of local government illustrates that Chicago’s political economy rested on an assumption of naturalized liberal economic codes and relationships, especially laissez-faire and freedom of contract. As such, it cast the liberal republican narrative as commonsense and rendered it immutable. As a form of social knowledge, it shaped the terms of debate, the boundaries of legitimacy, and was inscribed in political and social institutions. It was the social knowledge against which alternative economic, social, and political ideas were framed. Any significant social reform would entail changing the content of that narrative, as well as finding justification for challenging the “natural law” it embodied.

Of course, the liberal republican narrative was far from monolithic. In 1866, the state legislature enacted a voluntary eight-hour law. Workers welcomed state intervention to limit their workday. As one worker suggested, “the eight hour system will have a tendency to keep society more upon an equality. It will give the laboring classes more time for study and thinking, and thereby they will become more independent of professional men.” They pointed out the corrosive effects of excessive labor that undermined the workers’ independence and ability to contribute to democratic government. In the Panic of 1873, when local government refused to provide public relief, claiming its coffers were empty, workers demanded that a committee of ethnically diverse Chicagoans oversee the disbursement of RAS relief funds. Rather than leaving such efforts in private middle- and upper-class hands, as custom and classical liberalism dictated, workers argued that they had a vital role to play on such a committee.

54. Ibid., 38.
57. For the history of Chicago’s charity and relief efforts see McCarthy, Noblesse Oblige; John Albert Mayer, “Private Charity in Chicago from 1871 to 1915” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1978); Sawislak, Smoldering City. Amy Stanley (“Beggars Can’t Be Choosers”) illuminates the impact of free labor ideology on charity practices in the postbellum United States.
Contributing their labor to Chicago’s development, they staked their claim as important members of the polity.

Rejecting immutable natural economic law, workers sought government intervention to curb what they saw as economic injustice. Doing so would not encourage laziness, as elites feared or make workers weak and dependent, but rather recognized what they claimed as their right to work and the power of the community to reorganize its social and economic arrangements accordingly. Similarly, in the wake of the Great Fire, women’s organizations rejected the criteria and suspicion that greeted the needy when they sought help from the RAS. Women responded to the Fire by arguing that all were entitled to immediate help, not just those deemed “worthy” by the RAS. Their position recast public responsibility for relief as matters of debate, not questions answered by natural law.⁵⁸

As the 1890s approached, unionists and clubwomen sought alternative ways to explain and respond to Chicago’s problems. Their efforts suggest that Chicago’s liberal republicanism couched in terms of natural law was giving way to a different form of discourse. Indeed, historian Mary Furner describes that in the latter nineteenth century, economic and social theory were increasingly conceived of as provisional and “defined rights, law, and state forms as cultural creations, shaped by the conditions and needs of particular historical context and subject to experimentation, growth, and change.”⁵⁹ This historicism provided the intellectual backdrop for Chicagoans seeking new ways of explaining and shaping their society outside of the inherited assumptions of classical political economy.

“A Decade of Economic Discussion”

In May 1893, the stock market collapsed, triggering what was then the worst depression in American history. In Chicago, the depression, at first held at bay by the Columbian Exposition, set in quickly once the Fair closed at the end of October. As the immensity of social problems multiplied beyond the resources of private charity, the older conception of political economy seemed inadequate.⁶⁰

Chicago, like the nation, faced an economic and cultural crisis that plunged the city into what Jane Addams described as “a decade of economic discussion.”

While Chicagoleans had been wrestling with social problems attendant to industrial capitalism and urbanization long before 1893, this moment was critical in ongoing debates about the future of American democracy. The depression threw into relief the claims workers had been making for decades: industrial capitalism brought wage dependency, which in turn undermined democracy rooted in classical liberal autonomy. American democracy was predicated on this autonomy, and without it, workers argued, the national experiment was imperiled. Historians have interpreted this moment differently. For example, Jeffrey Sklansky, noting the ascendancy of the social self by the 1890s, laments the death of a vision of democracy predicated on proprietary capitalism, since it undermined an important basis of workers’ demands for economic justice. In contrast, James Livingston welcomed the rise of the social self and its economic trope, corporate capitalism, arguing that it opened up the possibilities for creating multiple gender, racial, and class identities and forming a diversity of collective relationships and political actions. These interpretations are important for our purposes here as they suggest the limits of what I have described as liberal republicanism and reinforce that moment as an opportunity to create a different social knowledge, one that was more inclusive than its predecessor. In forcing Americans to come to terms with the changing economy, it encouraged them to rethink the foundations of democracy, as well.

A public meeting on November 12, 1893 highlighted the possibilities of that moment. A spirited audience filled all 1500 seats of Central Music Hall and spilled into the downtown streets. Men and women, native-born and immigrants, workers, and civic elites packed the auditorium to hear English journalist and reformer William Stead, along with local reformers and union leaders, address what the *Chicago Tribune* parsimoniously labeled “Labor Topics.” Local reformer Graham Taylor recalled the audience was “such a grouping of people from the extremes of life as no one could have imagined to be possible.” He noted that “side by side sat leading businessmen and labor leaders, representatives of the city government and of its exclusive clubs, preachers and saloonkeepers, gamblers and theological professors, matrons of distinguished families and notorious ‘madams’ from houses of ill fame, judges of the courts and one of the men convicted in the Haymarket Riot trial who had recently been pardoned from the state prison by Governor Altgeld.”

---

61. Sklansky, *Soul’s Economy*.
As the meeting reveals, the severity of the depression as well as the optimism inspired by the World’s Fair, made possible new coalitions for forging alternative social knowledge. Stead had purposefully invited a broad cross-section of residents with the intention of opening dialogue among the many different groups of city residents. By bringing this cross-section of residents together, Stead elicited the perspectives of saloonkeepers and anarchists. He urged elites to listen to them before they passed judgments or made social improvements, admonishing that “before any one [sic] can speak with any right to be heard as to the condition of human beings he must do as Christ did and put himself in their place. You cannot live in velvet drawing-rooms and elegant boudoirs and philosophize about the subject.”

Taylor, who would soon open a settlement house in the city, cautioned that urban problems could “not be solved until men and women come down from the suburbs into the center of the cities and live there for Christ’s sake.”

Such arguments privileged a different epistemology than the naturalized assumptions of liberal republican social knowledge, one that posited knowledge as the product of collective experiences, mediated through social interaction and communal inquiry. As Taylor pointed out, the reconfiguration of the urban landscape along more socially and economically integrated lines demanded participatory inquiry rooted in shared experience. Indeed, John Dewey, who within the year would become the chair of both the departments of Philosophy and Pedagogy at the University of Chicago, explained, “social divisions as interfere with free and full intercourse react to make the intelligence and knowing of members of the separated classes one-sided.” This was problematic since “barriers to intercourse prevent the experience of one from being enriched and supplemented by that of others who are differently situated.” He argued instead that “since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another.” Dewey’s vision of democratic social knowledge encouraged the interaction Taylor described and included the experience (here he meant the experience of any group regardless of social position or education) as an important ingredient. The undercurrent of the meeting that day, then, suggested that different groups in the city offered a variety of perspectives on the city’s problems. It laid out what was an emerging vision of democratic social knowledge.

Though by several measures the meeting was remarkably inclusive for a city that experienced deep division—women, workers, anarchists, social scientists, Native Americans, businessmen all rose to speak to each other—there was a brief

64. Chicago Tribune, November 13, 1893.
65. Ibid.
but striking interaction that foreshadowed limits to the inclusiveness of democratic social knowledge. As the meeting drew to a close, an African American man gained the attention of the audience. He began his remarks begging “the gracious indulgence of the audience,” noting that “it has been asserted at this meeting that it is the first duty of a government to protect itself without regard to any poor and degraded class. As one of a down-trodden race . . .” He got no further as Stead interrupted him: “‘Sit down, sir,’ said the Chairman. ‘No one here has said anything like what you say and nobody here looks down upon your race. You have no right to introduce that subject.’”

Stead’s dismissive response may have reflected his outsider’s ignorance of the deepening problems of racial division in the city. Or it may indicate that he had been warned against permitting race to enter the public discussion. In either case, his reprimand was unwarranted in light of racial developments in the city throughout the early 1890s, when the possibility of social equality was increasingly decried in the city’s newspapers, when Southern African American strikebreakers antagonized union members, and when the growing migration of blacks into the city began to form faint outlines of what became the south-side ghetto. By refusing to allow the African American man to speak that day, when women, immigrants, and workers were all vocal participants, Stead highlighted the depth of resistance African Americans confronted in gaining access to and legitimacy for their experience.

As Chicago reformers confronted the crisis of the 1890s then, they found that liberal republican social knowledge was inadequate for explaining the acute problems the city faced or defining democratic meaning, practices, and polity in an increasingly pluralistic, corporate industrial society. Throughout a decade of economic discussion, city reformers struggled to enact a new conception of democracy, one that would unify city residents, not through the competitive market, but through cooperation and social solidarity. The key to preventing a fatal drifting apart, many would argue, would come, not from pursuit of self-interested, contractual relations, but from building a more interactive, participatory, and sympathetic community life. At the end of the meeting, Stead offered a resolution—that those interested in redressing the city’s problems create “a civic confederation” of various representatives to begin the tasks of social and political reform. The audience unanimously passed his resolution, and the Civic Federation of Chicago was launched. It offered a new arena in which to create democratic social knowledge.

67. Chicago Tribune, November 13, 1893.