

***Emancipation in the West Indies and the Freedom to Toil:
Manual Labor and Moral Redemption in Transatlantic Antislavery Discourse***

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Based on the writing of two agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society, this study examines the place of manual labor in the discourse of certain evangelical abolitionists. James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball articulated a conception of the moral and redemptive value of hard physical work, organically linking it to the liberty they envisioned for former slaves. Traveling to the British West Indies in 1837, they sought to make the case for immediate emancipation in the United States by convincing southern slaveholders of the superiority of free labor. Their report, *Emancipation in the West Indies*, was heralded as marking an era in the antislavery cause and was circulated among politicians across the country. Examining the reception and impact of their report usefully highlights its contribution to the development of varied ideologies associated with the grand, yet ambiguous, concept of “free labor” in the United States. Advancing immediate emancipation in Antigua and the apprenticeship system in Jamaica as models for the transition from slavery to freedom in the U.S., these transatlantic abolitionists valorized manual labor as the key to freedom. Thome’s 1847 speech on “Liberty and Labor” asserts the connection even more strongly. At issue is the way in which certain conceptions of labor interacted with, and contributed to, other mechanisms of socialization in post-slavery society. To what extent did ostensibly humanitarian antislavery discourse provide the ideational context for the agricultural and industrial model of education prescribed for African Americans following the Civil War? Situated in the Atlantic World, this paper evaluates the connection forged between liberty and manual labor in seeking to answer this essential question.

In collecting “facts and testimony” in Antigua in 1837, Thome and Kimball sought to reconcile their own ideas about self-ownership, wage labor, industriousness, and the assumed innate human desire for material self-betterment with their observations and interviews. Their object was to counter pro-slavery arguments and convince southern slaveholders of the superiority of free labor not just practically and economically, but also ideologically. For certain evangelical abolitionists, emancipation would bring the freedom to labor; only moral redemption through hard physical work, however, would enable former slaves truly to attain their liberty. In organizing the ten major points established “beyond the shadow of doubt” in their report on the

transition from slavery to freedom in the British West Indies, James Thome and his editor, Theodore Dwight Weld, prioritized a clear concern for safety and labor productivity: “1. That the act of IMMEDIATE EMANCIPATION was not attended with any disorder whatsoever [and] 2. That the emancipated slaves have readily, faithfully, and efficiently worked for wages from the first.”¹ Obviously cognizant of the anxieties of their intended audience, they also seem attuned to broader discourses surrounding labor in the Anglo-American context. Underlying pro-slavery justifications was a theory of racial inferiority suggesting that Black people would not work unless compelled to do so. This argument was resilient; Thomas Carlyle, for example, would most famously articulate it in his “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question” in 1849, more than ten years after emancipation in the British West Indies. It was neither straightforward nor uncomplicated, however, as Carlyle affirmed the intrinsic moral worth and dignity of manual labor while maintaining that inferior races must be in a condition of legal servitude in order to reap its rewards. As will become clear, some antislavery reformers shared proverbial common ground with proslavery apologists in reifying the redemptive value of hard physical toil.

Indeed, Carlyle’s conception of labor may have captured the dominant view. Historian Jonathan Glickstein, for example, maintains that Carlyle’s argument was characteristic not only of proslavery thought, but possibly of nineteenth-century Anglo-American thought in general, at least “in its suggestion that the propriety and dignity of work could not be considered apart from the capacities and propensities of the particular social groups who performed it.”² In question, then, was not only the nature of work itself but also the nature of those engaged in it. With the publication of *Emancipation in the West Indies*, the American Anti-Slavery Society sought to disprove the claim that emancipated former slaves would not readily work. For some American abolitionists, like Thome, the project became one of unshackling labor more generally. The theme of disassociating labor from the degradation of social caste and slavery ran throughout his report on the British West Indies, but became even more pronounced in his later writing on the question of “liberty and labor.”

¹ James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies: A Six Months’ Tour in Antigua, Barbadoes, and Jamaica, in the Year 1837*, (New York: The American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), p.vi. J. Horace Kimball was ill and died shortly after their return from the West Indies leaving James Thome to finish the manuscript. Acting as editor for the American Anti-Slavery Society, Theodore Weld took charge of preparing it for publication.

² Jonathan A. Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p.15.

From the American perspective, what Thome and Kimball encountered on the island of Antigua in 1837 was *the* test-case for immediate emancipation, a grand experiment with the transition from slavery to freedom in the Atlantic World. For British policy makers and their operatives in the West Indies, as historian Thomas Holt demonstrates, the problem of abolition was, at its root, a labor problem: “how to safely transform a dependent laborer into a self-motivated free worker.”³ Drawing on the European canon of political economy, such as Adam Smith’s theory of innate desire for self-betterment, Holt points out that they created a materialist psychology enshrouded by a laissez-faire ideology.⁴ Indeed, put another way, the task was to make workers “want to do what the emerging economy required.”⁵ As Adam Smith famously observed in *The Wealth of Nations*, the natural order of things required nominal liberty in order that men might enter into contracts for their labor.⁶ Shifting from foremost proponent to foremost critic of capitalism, Karl Marx likewise gave liberty pride of place among the historical conditions that allowed bourgeois capital to flourish. In Marx’s argument, the emergence of capital required that the ideas of juridical and political freedom already exist in society. Like Smith, his theory was predicated on the Enlightenment doctrine of man’s irreducible freedom as a social right; to have it otherwise would not create the conditions for capital as such but rather its antecedent form of pre-capitalist modes of production.⁷ The concern for liberty and self-ownership were also hallmarks of antislavery thought and bore an intimate relationship to abolitionists’ thinking on labor throughout the Atlantic World.

In fact, Glickstein argues that British antislavery discourse provided the constituent elements for ideas about free labor tied to “possessive individualism” in the United States. “British abolitionism provided the most immediate, and perhaps the most prominent, influence upon the central tenet of American antebellum free labor: that the dignity of labor, irrespective of the laborer’s race, required as a minimal condition the laborer’s legal self-ownership and

³ Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp.33-4.

⁴ On the “natural effort of every individual to better his condition, will, if unrestrained, result in the prosperity of society,” see Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House Modern Library ed., 1937), p.508.

⁵ Ibid. See also, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p.242.

⁶ On “liberty, perfect, necessary for correspondence of market and natural price” see Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, p.56, 62; for “free exercise of industry ought to be extended to all” see Ibid., p.437; and “free exercise of industry ought to be extended to all” see Ibid., p.437.

⁷ See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, v.1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p.152.

autonomy.”⁸ This point was certainly not lost on the early agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society, men like James Thome, J. Horace Kimball, and Theodore Weld.

When interviewing former slaves in Antigua in 1837, Thome and Kimball repeatedly cut straight to this issue of self-ownership. At a Moravian “speaking” conducted by the Rev. Mr. Morrish, for example, they asked Black Antiguans if they would not be willing to sell themselves to a man who would treat them well.

They replied immediately that they would be very willing to *serve* such a man, but they would not *sell themselves* to the best person in the world! What fine logicians a slave’s experience had made these men! Without any effort they struck out a distinction, which has puzzled learned men in church and state, the difference between *serv*ing a man and *being his property*.⁹

In a narrative packed with testimony from prominent government officials, proprietors, managers, and missionaries all affirming the practical and economically profitable aspects of emancipation, the relatively rare instances in which the voice of former slaves themselves is made audible become especially striking. Given the parameters of mediation – limited interaction, selective choice of content inclusion, and editor’s additions/omissions, to name a few – it is telling not only that Thome and Kimball chose to ask about this question of liberty and self-ownership but also that it remained unedited.

On their way to Grace Bay, they inquired of field workers along the road if they “still liked” their liberty. “ ‘Yes, massa, we all quite *proud* to be free.’ The negroes use the word *proud* to express a strong feeling of delight.” Thome and Kimball sought to capture the former slaves’ understanding of their own liberty and self-ownership in their own words. Asking one man whether he would be willing to be a slave again “provided he was *sure* of having a kind master,” they reported a similar answer: “ ‘Heigh! Me massa,’ said he, ‘me neber slave no more. A good massa a very good ting, *but freedom till better*.’ ” The field laborers declared that they all worked a great deal better since emancipation, because they were paid, “repeating again and again that men could not be made to work well by *flogging* them, *it was no use to try it*.”¹⁰

While it may seem commonsensical that emancipated slaves would prefer liberty to captivity, Thome and Kimball apparently thought it necessary repeatedly to put the question to their interviewees. Demonstrating to pro-slavery advocates that these people were capable of understanding and appreciating their newly acquired self-ownership and that it was related to

⁸ Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America*, p.12.

⁹ Thome and Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies*, p.16.

¹⁰ Thome and Kimball, p.18.

their ability to work more productively was certainly one motivation. They also struggled, perhaps, to reconcile the tremendous change in the legal and ideological condition of the slave with the lack of change in material circumstance as many laborers continued to work the plantations in conditions of abject poverty. A British interviewee, Mr. Mohne, reiterated that although they received wages that could barely support life, he had never encountered a single individual who wished to return to the condition of a slave. In their “unforgettable” conversation with “Grandfather Jacob,” an aged Black Antiguan, Thome and Kimball again provided evidence to counter the paternalistic flourishes of slavery’s apologists.

We turned his attention to the temporal freedom he had received, he instantly caught the word FREE, and exclaimed vehemently, “O yes, me Massa – dat is anoder blessin from de Savior! He make we all *free*.” ... we then asked him whether it was not better to be a slave if he could get food and clothing, than to be free and not have enough. He darted his quick eye at us and said ‘rader be free *still*.’¹¹

In marshalling the evidence collected during their tour of Antigua in a concluding section entitled “Facts and Testimony,” Thome, Kimball, and Weld began with the following proposition: “The transition from slavery to freedom is represented as a great revolution by which a prodigious change was affected in the *condition of the negroes*.” The mass of testimony to support this, however, says little about the material conditions of the population of former slaves, focusing instead on the increased incentives to industry brought by their new condition of liberty.¹² “The negroes work *more cheerfully*, and *do their work better* than they did during slavery. Wages are found to be ample substitutes for the lash – they never fail to secure the amount of labor desired,” they reported. Ralph Higinbothom, the U.S. Consul and the only other American perspective quoted in the text, punctuated this proposition for the audience back home: “they are as a body *more industrious* than when slaves,” he concluded, “for the obvious reason that they are *working for themselves*.”¹³

With the publication of *Emancipation in the West Indies* in 1838, the American Anti-Slavery Society contributed an early and authoritative report on the transition from slavery to freedom in the British Caribbean. Together with its advocacy of immediate emancipation in the United States, it advanced distinct ideas regarding manual labor, self-ownership, and autonomy.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.34-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.40.

It was heralded by the Executive Committee of the Society as “marking a new era in the Anti-Slavery cause” by providing facts which proved the “safety and profitableness of *immediate emancipation*” which were opposed only by pro-slavery arguments described as “unsubstantiated hypotheses or the fantastical products of imagination.”¹⁴ As editor, Theodore Weld wrote to Thome that the Committee had resolved to “scatter the work broadcast over the land,” with a “view of publishing a hundred thousand copies if funds can be obtained.”¹⁵ In addition, Thome and Kimball’s writing was spread more informally, immediately being taken up and cited by prominent antislavery figures such as William Lloyd Garrison and James G. Birney and circulated to politicians and clergymen. In this way, it contributed to a growing torrent of discourses about “free labor” especially in the North, disseminating ideas about the moral redemptive value of hard physical work.

Speaking in New York City in 1839, for example, Garrison relied heavily on testimony provided in *Emancipation in the West Indies*, using the example of Antigua to counter pro-slavery accusations and defend immediatism.¹⁶ As it was a first-of-August anniversary sermon, he privileged descriptions of the peoples’ reception of their freedom. His vision of the coming of emancipation to America, however, was inflected with the language of political economy and bore clear implications for labor. “The slaveholders of the South have done us all a cruel injustice,” he proclaimed. “We will repay him,” Garrison continued, referring to the slaveholder, “with the rich blessings which abound in Antigua.”

We will remove from them all source of alarm, and the cause of all insurrection, increase the value of their estates ten fold, give an Eden-like fertility to their perishing soil, build up the old waste places, and repair all breaches, make their laborers contented, grateful and happy, wake up the entombed genius of invention, and the dormant spirit of enterprise, open to them new sources of affluence, multiply their branches of industry, erect manufactories, build railroads, dig canals, establish schools, academies, colleges, and all beneficent institutions, extend their commerce to the ends of the earth, and to an unimagined amount, turn the tide of western adventure and of northern capital into the southern channels.¹⁷

¹⁴ Anti-Slavery Society, *Fifth Annual Report of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society, with the Minutes of the Meetings of the Society for Business and the Speeches Delivered at the Anniversary Meeting on the 8th of May, 1838*, New York: Printed by William S. Dorr, 1838 (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1972), p.46.

¹⁵ Weld to Thome, April 5, 1838, in Barnes and Dumond, eds., *Weld-Grimke Letters*, v.II, p.621-23.

¹⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, *Address delivered at the Broadway Tabernacle, N.Y. August 1, 1839: by request of the people of color of that city, in commemoration of the complete emancipation of 600,000 slaves on that day, in the British West Indies*, (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1839).

¹⁷ Garrison, *Address delivered at the Broadway Tabernacle*, p.45-6.

Although Garrison is not usually cited as a main influence on the development of conceptions of free labor, he had incorporated the lessons reported from Antigua: making laborers free would spark the spirit of enterprise with the promise of extending commerce to the ends of the earth.

James G. Birney was particularly influential in distributing *Emancipation in the West Indies* among politicians. Having served in the Kentucky General Assembly and Alabama House of Representatives before converting to antislavery, he was well-acquainted with pro-slavery arguments regarding labor. Particularly through his connection with South Carolina Congressman Franklin H. Elmore, Birney sought to convince southern politicians of the safety and profitability of immediate emancipation. Some politicians, like James M. Buchanan, requested to see Thome in person while others were content to take Birney at his word and read the text.¹⁸ Writing to Elmore in 1838, he introduced Thome's work and included several copies.

After lecturing – long time – with signal success [Thome] visited the West Indies, eighteen months ago, to note the operation of the British emancipation act. [He] collected a mass of facts that will astonish, as it ought to delight, the whole south; for it shows, conclusively, that IMMEDIATE emancipation is the best, the safest; the most profitable, as it is the most just and honorable, of all emancipations.¹⁹

Birney widely recommended the text to his correspondents, declaring that “no man, without reading it, should undertake to pass judgment on emancipation.”²⁰ Perhaps heeding Birney's advice, Governor Everett of Massachusetts wrote to Edmund Quincy to thank him for sending a copy. The success of the British abolition measure, as reported by Thome and Kimball, would “seal the fate of slavery throughout the civilized world.” Referring directly to *Emancipation in the West Indies*, he wrote:

It appears to place beyond a doubt, that the experiment of immediate emancipation, adopted by the colonial Legislature of Antigua, has fully succeeded in that island; and the plan of apprenticeship in other portions of the West Indies, as well as could have been expected from the obvious inherent vices of that measure. It has given me new views of the practicability of emancipation. It has been effected in Antigua, as appears from unquestionable authorities contained in the work of Messrs. Thome and Kimball, not merely without danger to the master, but without any sacrifice of his interest.²¹

¹⁸ James M. Buchanan to Birney, Carlinville, Illinois, Aug. 18, 1837,” in Dwight L. Dumond, ed., *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938), p.416.

¹⁹ James G. Birney, *Correspondence, between the Hon. F. H. Elmore, one of the South Carolina delegation in Congress, and James G. Birney, one of the secretaries of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838), p.10.

²⁰ Birney, *Correspondence*, p.53.

²¹ Governor Everett to Edmund Quincy, Esq., Boston, April 29, 1838, quoted in, Birney, *Correspondence*, p.55.

For these men in politics, the task was to convince southerners of the superiority of free labor in terms of its practicability, economic expediency, and ideological superiority. As Connecticut Governor Ellsworth affirmed in writing to A. F. Williams, Esq., in May of 1838:

Let me assure you it is justly calculated to produce great effects, provided you can get it into the hands of the planters. *Convince them that their interests, as well as their security, will be advanced by employing free blacks, and emancipation will be accomplished without difficulty or delay.*²²

Having found the report on Antigua particularly impressive, Ellsworth commented explicitly on the “contentment, industry, and gratitude, seen in those who were slaves.”²³

If Antigua showed the benefits of immediate emancipation, the other islands revealed the failures of the apprenticeship. As Governor Everett put it, “the obvious inherent vices of the measure” were seen by many to be caused by the interposition of artificial restraints between the assumed harmony of interests regulated solely by market forces. The apprenticeship system in Jamaica and the other British colonies was absurd, according to Birney, because it “betrayed such ignorance in the principles of human nature.”²⁴ Like Thome, Kimball, and Weld, it is safe to say that he too considered the natural impetus to industriousness provided by free wage labor and unleashed by immediate emancipation as more perfectly suited to human nature. Indeed, James G. Birney was well acquainted with the free labor ideas of men like William Ellery Channing, the foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States. Before becoming the Liberty Party candidate for President in 1840 and 1844, Birney had sought to start an antislavery movement with Channing (whose writings on labor serve as the most oft-cited primary source for historian Jonathan Glickstein’s comprehensive work on concepts of free labor in antebellum America).²⁵

If British antislavery thought influenced the development of “free labor” ideologies in the United States by proclaiming the central tenet that the dignity of labor required the laborer’s self-ownership and autonomy as Glickstein maintains, then another possible source lay in “the effort of antebellum economists to reconcile belief in economic progress with the rise of large numbers

²² Governor Ellsworth to A.F. Williams, Esq., New Haven, May 19, 1838, quoted in Birney, *Correspondence*, p.55-56 (my italics).

²³ *Ibid.*, p.56.

²⁴ Birney, *Correspondence.*, p.54.

²⁵ William Ellery Channing’s writings may in fact be the singularly most frequently cited source. See Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor*. For Channing’s writing on labor, see most notably, *Lectures on the Elevation of the Labouring Portion of the Community* (Boston: William D. Ticknor, 1840).

of wage earners,” as Eric Foner suggests. These economists looked to Adam Smith and other proponents of nineteenth century liberalism who insisted that slavery was far more costly and inefficient means of obtaining labor than payment of wages, since it prevented self-interest from being harnessed.²⁶ Certainly, employers and factory owners in the North had an interest in affirming the harmony of interests of those engaged in productive enterprise. Yet, the institution of slavery’s overt denial of self-ownership may have presented a special ideological affront to evangelical abolitionists like Weld, Thome, and Birney.

Thome and Weld’s particular attachment to, and enthusiasm for manual labor helps to explain another constituent element of the “free labor” ideology, particularly their view of the moral redemptive qualities of hard physical toil and project to elevate labor’s social respectability.²⁷ Even after retiring from antislavery agitation and becoming a professor at Oberlin College, Thome continued his staunch advocacy for the moral redemptive value of manual labor. Published as a pamphlet in 1847, Thome’s address to the Oberlin Agricultural Society in Ohio outlined his almost millennial vision of comprehensive social and economic transformation achieved primarily through an ideational revolution: a shift in human consciousness uniting liberty and labor.²⁸ This intriguing variant of a free labor ideology usefully illustrates his sustained commitment to valorizing physical work; to his mind, emancipation would not only free the slaves but also unshackle labor itself. “Behold then the sole method of honoring labor,” he wrote, “*making it free.*”²⁹

Beginning with the oft-cited distinction between mental and physical labor, Thome made reference to the manual schooling doctrine of “learning and labor,” announcing that labor had taken a glorious step forward: “the worthiness of Labor to be elevated to so noble an alliance was triumphantly vindicated.”³⁰ To magnify labor and to make it honorable was his stated aim. Beyond learning and labor lay an even more natural and lofty association. “We simply assert for

²⁶ Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor*, p.12; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.xx.

²⁷ Weld had worked for the wealthy philanthropist Tappan brothers searching for a site for an agricultural seminary and lecturing on the benefits of manual labor. His time at the Oneida Institute may well have forged his deep commitment to the movement.

²⁸ James A. Thome, “Address at the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Oberlin Agricultural Society” (J.M. Fitch, 1847).

²⁹ Thome, “Address,” p.8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.4.

labor those connections which properly belong to it, but of which it has been denied. We stand up then to publish the banns of *Liberty and Labor!* LIBERTY AND LABOR!!”³¹ Employing various metaphors, this Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres juxtaposed liberty and labor as he maintained they were usually seen: “Labor is an old, stiff, brown faced, stoop shouldered, rough clad farmer – while Liberty is a young, fair, beautiful, bewitching creature, in the bloom of life, of high descent and princely fortune, worthy of a royal alliance.”³² Losing no time before bringing in both religion and slavery, Thome declared that the Devil had signaled his opposition to agricultural interests by destroying Job’s immense stock and his laborers. Labor had been horribly degraded by the institution of slavery and liberty had likewise been maligned by association with laziness.

Labor has been herded with ignorance, meanness, insignificance, obscurity, poverty, filth, vice, brutality, and to crown its infamy, it has been *married to Slavery!* Liberty, on the other hand, has been associated with wealth, idleness, loaferism, genteel dissipation, coffee-house caucuses, political partyism, street brawls, mobocracy, dueling, war, oppression: and to whom has liberty been wedded? (We speak now of American liberty). *To the slaveocracy!* Now we contend not only that this is the Devil’s work, but that it is his *masterpiece*.³³

Liberating labor and joining it to liberty, to Thome’s mind, would help redeem both slaveholder and slave. Furthermore, “it would be the glory of the hemisphere and highway to the commercial word.” Liberty and labor have a joint mission, he claimed, and their union should be paramount to all things. “Let it be the watch cry on every inch of American soil. Let its thunder-call roll over the slave cursed South, till labor there, crushed, degraded, manacled and brutalized, shall leap up unfettered, and claim its birth right, liberty.”³⁴

Thome’s speech was not all intricate metaphors. In seeking to define his terms, his rhetoric shifted to the language of political economy yet was still infused with evangelical zeal. The individual aims of liberty, Thome claimed, were simply the highest development of mind and body. Defined subjectively, then, liberty was “the free possession and exercise of our minds and bodies” and objectively, as “the power, the personified principle, the superintending presence by which man is *preserved* in the unmolested use of his natural and acquired possessions.” Seeking to clarify the “true interests” of mind and body, Thome continued by aligning “interests as the correlatives of wants.” Thus, mental and bodily interests are determined

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p.6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

by our wants. “The sphere of liberty then is clear – its province plain, namely, to protect man in the lawful acquisition of his wants.” As physical labor is the “grand agent” in the acquisition of all bodily and most mental wants, “the province of labor, then, is to acquire these wants. Liberty and Labor have a joint mission.”³⁵

Thome’s critique of the degradation of labor also extended to the idleness of the so-called “upper crust.” To his mind, because all classes of people were ultimately dependent upon the laboring classes for subsistence, the producers had the greatest claim to liberty. The very concept of liberty became almost synonymous with usefulness and industriousness. The problem with the South, then, was that liberty and labor had been disassociated and even while they tried to maintain the distinctions of caste – “liberty is white, while labor is black” – they still relied on Northern free labor for almost everything save their prized cotton and sugar. Punctuating his critique of the southern gentry, Thome cited the well-known aphorism “idle hands are in the devil’s workshop.” Conversely, “labor is the ally of religion. He who is slothful in business,” Thome continued, “cannot be fervent in spirit serving the Lord.” Positioning labor as the “primal law of human economy,” he placed industriousness next to godliness: “written with the finger of God in the sweat of the brow... Labor is the glory of man. It makes him a producer, a creator of wealth. Labor is the backbone of all true independence.”³⁶

Although Thome does not explicitly address it, Eric Foner has suggested that two definitions of free labor existed in uneasy tension in antebellum America, the laborer as small producer and the laborer as wage earner.³⁷ According to this last remark it would seem that Thome’s understanding of free labor is more aligned with the former. Yet the Jeffersonian ideal of an agrarian Republic was rapidly disappearing in the late 1840s, and Thome’s speech navigates the ambiguity between these competing definitions of free labor by likewise acknowledging the place of laborer as wage earner. Liberty is the requisite of labor, he maintained, for three primary reasons. First, because it is the essential condition of the will’s efficient action upon the body. Second, because it is the necessary protection of labor in its efforts and in its *enjoyment of the fruits of its efforts*. And third, it is requisite in order “to redeem

³⁵ Ibid., pp.9-11.

³⁶ Ibid., pp.12-15. This sentiment is almost precisely that articulated by Booker T. Washington and Samuel Chapman Armstrong in advocating for the Hampton-Tuskegee educational model.

³⁷ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p.xxv.

labor from degrading associations.”³⁸ Recognizing his penchant for abstraction, Thome then declared concretely that in order for labor to be emancipated, the laborer too must be free.

Anticipating counter arguments, he announced that labor is most devoted to its duties where it is free, where it is honored, not despised. Thome then tackled the hypothetical objection that there is no natural spur to industry and that liberty is rightly connected with leisure.

This objection originates in precisely the same stupid blunder with the objection often brought against the emancipation of the southern slaves, namely that they will refuse to work and be a burden upon the community. The objection in both cases is a pretended induction of facts. The facts are that in proportion as laborers or slaves have been allowed liberty and been noticed and made something of, they have manifested a disposition to get out of their places. But what has been the reason of this, so far as it is true? Why for example has there been a tendency to abandon the ranks of labor among those to whom wealth, or talent, or education has opened other pursuits, as the learned professions? The reason most obviously has been the want to respectability in the sphere of labor.³⁹

The solution: “make labor respectable, and you present a most powerful inducement to such minds to remain in that sphere.” Here is the axiomatic feature of Thome’s argument as it pertains to the transition from slavery to freedom, from slave to wage labor. Although he called for thorough-going upheaval, it remained primarily in the realm of ideas.

In a word there must be a total revolution in our views, habits, associations and treatment, as regards labor and the laborer. We must exchange for a better our standard of social respectability and moral worth. Dandies have had their day. Laziness has flourished long enough.⁴⁰

A shift in consciousness followed by the appropriate mechanisms of socialization, like schools, would transform the “Great Unwashed” into “dignified men” as if “by magic.” Although Thome’s remarks about keeping laborers in their sphere can be read as defining a specific and coercive vision of freedom for laborers, the union of liberty and labor contained an egalitarian promise in his mind. Labor would build the “people’s college,” and by introducing the manual labor system, plainness of dress and general economy on the part of all students, “a thorough education will be brought within the reach of all people.”⁴¹ That thorough education would consist of Mechanics Institutes, Agricultural and Horticultural Societies, and courses of scientific and practical lectures. Furthermore, “the industrial interests will demand and secure their establishment throughout the country.” Not losing sight of the example from the British West Indies, Thome concluded his speech by quoting Lionel Smith, the former Governor of Jamaica,

³⁸ Thome, “Address,” p.17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.22-3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

on the effects of “Labor fully emancipated.” Inflected throughout with references to westward expansion, commerce, and free trade, Thome’s speech predicted massive social and economic change: “all things conspire to usher in a new age.”⁴²

Thome and the other evangelicals who converted to immediatism through Finnyite revivalism, who remained deeply attached to the principles of the manual labor movement, and served as agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society, were certainly aware of the historical moment. Historian James Brewer Stewart writes that “the call for immediate emancipation reflected the fervent desire to extend the tenets of economic self-reliance which, especially in the North, were already transforming America into a nation devoted to individualistic capitalism.” Immediatism contained a vision of a competitive society, he maintains, and the “trumpet call of immediate emancipation thus portended the eventual emergence of America’s modern capitalist order. In this most fundamental sense,” he concludes, “abolitionists were indeed what they saw themselves to be – the prophets of a new age.”⁴³

How did ideas about the redemptive nature, dignity, and productivity of manual labor interact with other discourses, converging to produce a definition of freedom that supported laissez-faire values? Thomas Haskell has framed the question somewhat more theoretically by arguing that the market revolution caused a shift in “cognitive style,” changing the perception of causal relationships which in turn encouraged humanitarian sensibility by promoting a sense of individual agency over one’s own future and responsibility for others.⁴⁴ If Thome displayed a faith in the moral capacity of the individual, in what ways did this interact with a faith in economic individualism? If the abolitionists articulated some of capitalism’s defining values in their discourse, then ideas about manual labor overlapped with ideas about free labor as both extolled the virtues of industriousness, hard work, and valorized physical toil.

In a rare study of the impact of the manual labor movement on the origins of abolitionism, Paul Goodman suggests that manual labor provides one of the missing variables that “differentiate, contextualize, and historicize the culture and consciousness associated with

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁴³ James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors, The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Wang and Hill, 1976), pp.52-4.

⁴⁴ Thomas Haskell, “Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility,” *American Historical Review*, 90, 1985, pp.339-61, 547-66.

the spread of capitalism.”⁴⁵ Arguing that manual labor formed “an important bridge between Finneyite revivalism and the struggle for racial justice” he seeks to eschew the notion of an undifferentiated evangelical community by explaining why some, but not most, northern evangelicals embraced immediatism. Somewhat more ambitiously, he also argues that manual labor can help “remedy still another weakness in our understanding of the genesis of abolitionism: its relationship to the market revolution.”⁴⁶ Goodman usefully highlights what he terms the “moral anxieties” generated by the market revolution, specifically the “tendency, common throughout history but especially problematic in an egalitarian, republican political culture, to devalue manual labor in favor of mental labor.” Somewhat more problematic, however, is his conclusion that manual labor and abolition were “expressions of a communitarian egalitarian ethos *at odds* with the dominant strain of competitive individualism.” While acknowledging that the overthrow of slavery was critical in the development of industrial capitalism by strengthening and legitimizing the system of free labor, Goodman positions abolitionists like Weld as articulating “points of resistance that drew inspiration from a Christian republicanism that found in manual labor and then in abolitionism an antidote to moral anxieties generated by the market revolution.”⁴⁷ However, James Thome’s writing, at the very least, can be seen to converge with the doctrine of competitive individualism and hardly stands as a point of resistance.

Not only can certain evangelical abolitionists’ ideas about the redemptive moral value of labor be seen in the political rhetoric of the Liberty, Free Soil, and later, Republican parties, it is likewise employed by those individuals on the front lines of engineering the transition from slavery to freedom in the United States, namely the Freedmen’s Bureau operatives in the South. If, as some scholars have suggested, the critics of manual labor “better gauged bourgeois sensibility than Weld” and few middle class parents shared his belief in the benefits of hard physical toil, then how are we to understand the fact that it became the primary mode for educating former slaves? Manual labor schools had set out with an egalitarian ideal and project to elevate the moral respectability of work itself. Is it painfully ironic, then, that certain ideas

⁴⁵ Paul Goodman, “The Manual Labor Movement and the Origins of Abolitionism,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 13:3, Autumn 1993, 355-388, p.358.

⁴⁶ Goodman, “The Manual Labor Movement,” p.357.

⁴⁷ Goodman, p.361. My italics.

about agricultural and industrial education become used and appropriated as a way to keep laborers in the fields and maintain a plantation economy?

Indeed, the connections between antislavery discourse and the development of a free labor ideology that championed the organic union of liberty and wage labor are not solely born out in the realm of ideas. On the level of individual historical actors, figures like John W. Alvord help substantiate a much more direct progression and dissemination of concepts and attitudes toward manual labor, freedom, and Black education. Alvord had been converted to antislavery together with Thome in the Lane Debates led by Weld, and he had left Lane Seminary for Oberlin together with the “Lane Rebels” who formed the original band of antislavery agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society.⁴⁸ Although there is little in way of evidence from Alvord’s early career, he became the General Superintendent of Schools for the Freedman’s Bureau in 1865 and published numerous reports on Black education during Reconstruction.⁴⁹ As historian James D. Anderson has shown, Alvord was particularly struck by the “self-teaching” and “native schools” of the former slaves and in his capacity as superintendent did not necessarily articulate his own vision of manual training or industrial schooling.⁵⁰

The whole project of Black education as carried out by the Freedmen’s Bureau did, however, tend toward the “Hampton-Tuskegee Idea” of agricultural and industrial schooling. Anderson writes that it is ironic that Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the Yankee industrialist, and Booker T. Washington, the former slave, would work together on the Hampton model. Armstrong “represented a social class, ideology, and world outlook that was fundamentally different from and opposed to the interests of the freedmen,” Anderson explains. Furthermore, the Hampton-Tuskegee agricultural and industrial training institutes were the “ideological antithesis” of the educational and social movement begun by ex slaves.⁵¹ They were aligned with a manual labor routine and ideas about self-help as a practical and moral foundation for attaining

⁴⁸ See Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse 1830-1844* (New York: Harbinger Books, 1964); Lawrence Lesick, *The Lane Rebels: Evangelicalism and Antislavery in Antebellum America* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980). The best primary source evidence for this period of antislavery agitation is contained in the letter correspondences between Weld and the agents of the American Anti-Slavery Society. See Barnes and Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1934).

⁴⁹ See, for example, John W. Alvord, *Letters from the South, Relating to the Condition of the Freedmen, Addressed to Major General O.O. Howard, Commissioner Bureau R., F., and A., L.* (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1870).

⁵⁰ James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp.6-7, 9-15, 18-26.

⁵¹ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, p.33.

full liberty. To return to Eric Foner's suggestion that the competing definitions of free laborer as small producer and as wage earner existed in uneasy tension, here again a concerted effort to connect wage earning with freedom won out over the ideal of an agrarian Republic of family farms and small producers. What ever happened to "forty acres and a mule?"

Historians of the post-emancipation period both in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South often refer to the discourse of abolitionists, social reformers, and politicians. The emphasis, however, is typically on those who implemented post-emancipation policies and not on the ways in which antislavery literature informed their project. In various ways, the work of Thomas Holt, Rebecca Scott, Amy Dru Stanley, and Demetrius Eudell all illustrate how different visions of freedom came to define the approach to transitioning from slave societies. The question, with regard to the writings of Weld and Thome, is to what degree did ostensibly humanitarian antislavery discourse contribute to this process? "Abolitionists and [self-proclaimed] emancipators in the United States and the British Empire," writes Eudell, "could not undo the problem of racial hierarchy, for in a paradoxical manner the political languages espoused by these groups, occasionally beyond their conscious intentions, helped give rise to another form of it."⁵² Stanley treats contract as a form of worldview through which the meaning of slavery and emancipation were interpreted.⁵³ On the legal side, perhaps, was the freedom to enter into contracts for labor; on the moral side, men like Thome, Kimball, and Weld worked to forge a connection between freedom and manual labor. Holt and Eudell have examined the parallel functions of the British Special Magistrates in the West Indian colonies and the Freedmen's Bureau operatives in the U.S. South.⁵⁴ Surprisingly little scholarship, however, has developed the link between this and similar analyses of post-slavery social relations and the earlier discourses of the abolitionists. The way in which, as Stanley puts it, the "market was consecrated" in this later period was foreshadowed in the antislavery rhetoric of men like James Thome and Theodore Weld.

This is precisely what a critical study of Weld, Thome, and other evangelical abolitionists dedicated to manual labor works to rectify. Motivated by the insight that there are important

⁵² Demetrius L. Eudell, *Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p.20.

⁵³ Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract. Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵⁴ Thomas Holt, "'An Empire over the Mind': Emancipation, Race, and Ideology in the British West Indies and the American South"; Eudell, *Political Languages of Emancipation in the British Caribbean and the U.S. South*.

continuities between the abolition process and post-emancipation systems of social and economic organization, the analysis brings that earlier ideational context to the fore. Certain American abolitionists interpreted and represented emancipation in the British West Indies, and came to espouse a conception of freedom that championed the moral and redemptive values of manual labor. This helped to constitute a narrow and coercive vision of freedom: a conception that valorized physical toil and evinced distinct attitudes concerning proper labor relations and modes of behavior.

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