Nineteenth-Century Individualism and the Market Economy

Individualist Themes in Emerson, Thoreau, & Sumner

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For Stefanie
and the beings whom we love
and have loved
in our first life
and our second

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction—A Nation of Individuals and Markets

In America, and an ever-growing portion of the world, individuals and markets are commonly and closely associated. More precisely, the constellation of concepts, values, and practices collected under terms like "the individual" and "individualism" are commonly associated with the constellation of concepts, values, practices, and institutional arrangements variously collected under terms like "capitalism" and "the (free) market."[1] Such association is pervasive in public culture, something often assumed or believed unreflectively, and reiterated by media and public officials. Yet the tendency also has a substantial scholarly pedigree. The linkages between individualism and market systems are analyzed, elaborated, criticized, and defended by a diverse array of modern thinkers—from historians and sociologists like Lorenzo Infantino, Charles Sellers, and Max Weber to classical liberals and libertarians like Friedrich von Hayek, Tibor Machan, Robert Nozick, Adam Smith, and Herbert Spencer, socialists and social democrats like Karl Marx, Henri de Saint-Simon, and C.B. MacPherson, liberals like John Stuart Mill and John Rawls, communitarians and conservatives like Robert Bellah and Leo Strauss, feminists like Nancy Fraser and Eva Feder Kittay, to postmodernists like Michel Foucault, and critical theorists like Herbert Marcuse. Though diverse in their methods, assumptions, and aims, the works of such diverse scholars cluster around the common notion that individualism and the market are fated to one another—if we would have one, we must have the other. Some, like Hayek or Mill, claim a positive relationship between the two, maintaining that individuals

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flourish most under market systems; others, like Bellah or Marx, claim a negative relationship, and maintain that human personality and flourishing are deformed by the market and its attendant individualism. Whether because of shared values, mentality, or practices, the consensus view is that individualism and the market are, so to speak, siblings.

This widely held notion is not without some basis. The two have, as a rule, developed together. What we commonly refer to as "the individual" was temporally and practically co-emergent with complex market economies, each conditioning and conditioned by the other (Oakeshott 1991, 363–83). The two have also been joined rhetorically and ideologically in political, legal, and cultural struggles, such as in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century battles over the genesis of the regulatory state in America, and in the opposition invoked on nearly all sides during the Cold War between individualism and capitalism on the one hand, and collectivism and communism on the other. Through both choice and chance, the conceptual and practical connections between individualism and the market have become so entrenched in the modern imagination that few seriously entertain the possibility that one could exist without, or could stand in real tension with, the other.

The central purpose of this book is to complicate the often assumed and rarely questioned partnership between the individual and the market by examining the intertwined history of these two figures as their concepts and practices developed in nineteenth-century America. That time and place provide especially fertile ground for such a study. As historian Daniel Walker Howe has observed, Americans in that century widely "cherished the ideal of self-making" as the common yet personal vocation of all (2007, 656). Characterizing the prevailing spirit of the time, in 1827, Ralph Waldo Emerson described this transformative century as "the age of the first person singular" (1963, 70). While it would be an overstatement to say that nineteenth-century America was a nation of *individualists* (in a philosophical sense), it is no exaggeration to say that Americans in that century came to understand themselves ever more fully *as individuals*, and to embrace ideals of individuality and individualism out of practical opportunity and necessity if not systematic ideology. Individualism was on the march, even in the words and deeds of those who did not intend to advance it. Yet, "the meaning of 'individualism' depends on the historical setting" and in America, both during and since the nineteenth century, the emergence and maturation of a market economy have been a central, inescapable feature of that setting

(Riesman 1954, 26). Historians now widely agree that antebellum America was the scene of a "market revolution," a profound economic transformation that ramified throughout most every aspect of life.[2] The nation's lingering resemblances to the Jeffersonian ideals of independent, largely self-sufficient yeoman farmers and artisans gave way to a new age of individual striving and new ideals of self-improvement. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the market "came of age and entrepreneurship became the primary model of American identity," with "individualism" becoming "a grandiloquent name for the go-ahead creed" of this new market culture (Sandage 2005, 3; 94). By the end of the century, industrialization and further integration of domestic and international markets brought to fruition what Karl Polanyi called "the Great Transformation," further affecting how individuals lived and understood themselves and their world (1944/2001). Individualism and the market thus underwent their maturation together, and to understand either one we must be attentive to their historical imbrications.

This study is animated and guided by an overarching question: how did individualism take shape in nineteenth-century America, and how was its articulation prompted, conditioned, and constrained by the rise of the market? Providing even a partial answer to this question entails tracing some of the most important interconnections between two of nineteenth-century America's most prominent and powerful ideas. I approach answering this question partly by way of a synthetic historical survey meant to explore the interwoven developmental trajectories of individualism and the market, and partly by way of analytical, exegetical, and conceptual study of three iconic nineteenth-century American individualists: Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and William Graham Sumner (1840–1910). These thinkers articulate three distinct conceptions of individualism by way of distinct accounts of how the individual and the market are related, for better or for worse. My aim is neither to attack nor to defend individualism or any of the representative thinkers herein discussed, but to explore their respective doctrines. If there is an agenda behind this work, it is to show that there is more than one kind of individualism, more than one aspect of life in a market society, and more than one way to understand how the individual stands to the market, even just within the scope of nineteenth-century American political and social thought. These various strands of individualism developed in the context of an ascendant market order, but, I argue, they do not all indifferently mirror, justify, or serve

the market. The existence of such diverse and robust visions of individualism, and of how individuals relate to markets and to one another through them, betokens the simplicity of prevailing notions that individualist doctrines are at bottom theories of the ideal market participant.

My choice of Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner is calculated to illustrate this plurality of individualisms. Each of them developed their ideas in a critical engagement with the transformations of their day, and their thought "cannot be separated from market practices and institutions in their own time" (Teichgraeber 1995, 267). Each confronts conditions at the heart of American economic, social, and political life, and each presents a "heroic ideal of the self-constructed individual" (Howe 1997, 109). Yet they arrive at interestingly different understandings of the relationship between the individual and the market: Emerson believes that the self-reliant individual might avail herself of the opportunities furnished by a market economy; Thoreau repudiates the market as the antagonist of the deliberate life of individuality; and Sumner wholeheartedly embraces the market as the social stage upon which the natural struggle between individuals plays out. Each thus renders an account of individualism that is addressed to the palpable realities of the rise and maturation of the market system in nineteenth-century America, though they each depict different points along a notional continuum.

While there exist numerous works devoted in significant measure to the economic thought of Emerson, Thoreau, and, to a lesser extent, Sumner, many of which I draw upon and respond to in what follows, few extant works study these thinkers' respective doctrines of individualism as attempts to navigate the conditions of life in a market society, and none substantially address all three along any common theme whatsoever. Yet Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner present a valuable array of ideas regarding how the individual can properly flourish as an individual under the sorts of economic conditions that are all but ubiquitous in the world as we know it today. Thus, I do not merely hope to close an alleged gap in the literature, I hope to better illustrate the continuing relevance of these thinkers and to provoke more adequate appreciation and understanding of the depth and diversity of individualism by way of their examples. What is more, they provide glimpses of the development of individualism and the market across the bulk of a century. Their works illustrate how the maturation of the American market system prompted changed understandings of the individual and individualism, making some views seem more or less plausible than others (though I shall suggest that all

three remain compelling, even if they have not all remained fashionable). Arranging the study that follows in roughly chronological order—moving from Emerson to Thoreau to Sumner—allows their respective doctrines to index economic and cultural change, highlighting the historical accounts contained in their works in addition to their philosophical, literary, and critical content. I hope thereby to present related images comprising an intellectual triptych, rather than disconnected snapshots in the history of ideas. However, the main concepts I shall employ throughout this study warrant some contextualization and elaboration at the outset.

1.1 Individuals, Individuality, Individualism

Individualism and individuality are ideas premised upon a distinctly modern (and, in its origins, Western) conception what it means to be a person and a self. According to this modern conception, "[w]e think of ourselves as people with frontiers, our personalities divided from each other as our bodies visibly are. Whatever ties of love or loyalty may bind us to other people, we are aware that there is an inner being of our own; that we are individuals" (Morris 1972, 1). Our lives and identities are fundamentally organized around schemes of separation, of inner and outer, of mine and thine, of private and public which delineate between oneself and the rest of the world, however, intensely we may feel ourselves attached to other persons and portions of that world. As I shall use the term, *individual* refers to this notion that in addition to being separately embodied, each human being exists separately in psychological, agentic, and ethical senses, as a being with thoughts, feelings, purposes, a story, and a personality or character all one's own. The world in which we live reflects this conception of the individual self in many ways. From language and literature to law and the built environment, our lives, concepts, practices, and institutions commonly reflect the predominant sense that we are each individual centers of (self-)awareness and (self-)experience, capable of acting for and as ourselves, pursuing our own personal hopes and wants, and finding meaning and satisfaction in these endeavors of self-enactment (Oakeshott 1991, 364–70). That is, we live in a world whose human-made features are typically fitted to the contours of the individual.

Yet it was not always so. Intellectual historians have long suggested that this conception of persons as individuals originated in Western culture during the past millennium. In the nineteenth century, Jacob

Burckhardt popularized the view that "the individual" emerged from the culture of Renaissance humanism, out of the ashes of the static, hierarchical communities of European feudalism (1860/1945).[3] More recent accounts look farther back and find the first signs of "the individual" in medieval European culture (e.g., Braunstein 1988; Duby 1988; Morris 1972) or farther still, to the deepest roots of Western culture, often emphasizing the influence of Christianity (Siedentop 2014; Taylor 1989). The common thread running throughout all such accounts is that in the not too distant past "the 'individual' became the organizing social role in the West," a way of understanding ourselves that we have, however insensibly, invented for ourselves (Siedentop 2014, 2). This transformation transpired gradually, and in distinct ways in different times and places. In America, the pivotal chapter of the story of the individual was the nineteenth century, an era marked by an "inward turning" and "deepened sense of individual autonomy" manifest in nearly all parts of society and all dimensions of life, fundamentally altering how persons understood themselves, one another, and the terms and prospects of their shared existence (Turner 1985, 208).

The ascendancy of the individual was accompanied by new ideals of the potentialities of personhood or selfhood, of what the individual is capable of doing and becoming. In societies organized around groups rather than individuals, much of a person's identity and path in life are determined by shared customs, institutions, and hierarchies, leaving few genuine alternatives to choose between (Oakeshott 1991, 365). Though such generalizations are easily exaggerated, it is clear that a major cultural shift took place between the pre-modern and modern West, and with it came a new understanding of the individual person, including the capacity for *individuality*. As an empirical phenomenon, individuality is typically characterized as the condition an individual attains through self-directed activities of personal development or self-cultivation (E.g., Humboldt 1792/1993, Chap. II; Channing 1838/1969; Emerson 1983, 259–82; Mill 1989, 56–74). The condition thereby achieved is unique to each individual insofar as it is the collected outcome of that person's experiences, choices, and actions, a composite that shall ineluctably differ in non-trivial ways from the condition enjoyed by any other individual. As a normative ideal, individuality counsels the individual to deliberately pursue self-development after one's own distinctive desires, ideas, and capacities. Rather than merely conforming to the customs of one's society or the expectations of others, one should intentionally

strive toward a personal conception (however varied or imprecise) of who one wishes to become, a personal vision of flourishing. The boundaries and background conditions of flourishing might be beyond the control of the individual, but one's proper path within that landscape is, as a rule, for oneself to decide. Despite the apparent affinities between the two, the emergence of the individual as a way of understanding human beings has not been always and equally accompanied by the phenomenon or ideal of individuality. Indeed, according to Emerson and Thoreau, nineteenth-century America arguably illustrates how a society that was in many ways individualistic could nonetheless be characterized by a high degree of conformity.

Finally, whereas I shall use *the individual* to identify a way of understanding what it means to be a person, and *individuality* to identify a way of understanding and valuing the potential or achieved character of individuals, I shall use *individualism* to refer to a family of doctrines about how society is composed and ought to be organized and evaluated that are premised upon the worth and primacy of the individual.[4] Although individualism can take many forms, at its core is some inflection of the idea that individuals are meaningfully self-sufficient as thinkers, believers, and agents, that each person, as an individual, is equipped to think and act for herself, for her own reasons, according to her own plans, with her own skills and talents. While such equipment includes various "arts of agency" that must be learned through interactions with other persons (such as language), individuals are the fundamental reality and society is "but the relations of individuals to one another in this form or that" (Oakeshott 1975, 59; Dewey 1930/1999, 42). As individualism is essentially a way of understanding life *inter homines*, nearly any domain of life—e.g., family, religion, politics, economics—can be interpreted through its lens.

Individualism is necessarily committed to the individual as its conceptual basis, yet individualist doctrines and thinkers are not always or necessarily committed to individuality as a phenomenon or normative ideal. As Alex Zakaras notes, some varieties of individualism (namely extreme economic or political forms) may actually stand in tension with robust individual self-development (2009, 25). More often than not, individualism and individuality are posited and embraced together (for instance in the thought of John Stuart Mill, George Kateb, and Michael Oakeshott), but the exceptions are notable (for instance Friedrich Nietzsche and Richard Flathman both celebrate individuality but decline the label of

"individualist", whereas Robert Nozick openly embraces individualism but remains silent on individuality). My own account will demonstrate that Emerson and Thoreau embrace both individualism and individuality, while Sumner champions the former but scarcely acknowledges the latter.

Like the individual and individuality, individualism has a distinctly modern provenance. The term itself is a coinage of the nineteenth century, originating in Europe among utopian socialists, and later adopted by traditionalists and conservatives, as an epithet for the apparent erosion of organic social order and atomization of society into what Émile Durkheim would call a "disorganized dust of individuals."[5] It entered the American lexicon in 1840 with the first English translation of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville likewise used the term to identify a negative phenomenon, but one that he believed was distinctly democratic and American, an isolating retreat into the satisfactions of private life that enervates public spiritedness and civic virtue (1835/1969, 506). Yet from the first reviews of the work in 1841, prominent American writers reclaimed individualism, embracing it as another name for the basis of American political and moral order, "the liberation of individuality" from the chains of Old World customs and institutions (Arieli 1966, 196).[6] Within only a few years, it was firmly entrenched as an essentially contested term, used to both criticize and defend aspects of American society (ibid., 324–9; Lukes 1973, 26–31).

Antebellum America was especially fertile ground for doctrines and rhetoric of individualism. Compared to earlier generations and to contemporary European societies, America in the first half of the nineteenth century lacked deeply entrenched institutional and intellectual boundaries and hierarchies (Anderson 1971, 14). The "unexampled mobilization of human effort" through individual undertakings and decentralized voluntarism that so impressed Tocqueville signaled a breaking apart of collective bonds and an unprecedented loosing of individual agency in all domains of life (Sellers 1991, 242). Facing open horizons, without many of the limits and supports that had been familiar to their forebears, Americans (though especially white men) widely acted as individualists—approaching one another as individuals and viewing society in increasingly individualistic terms—even if explicit doctrines of individualism remained unfamiliar or unappealing to them. In the chapters to come, I shall examine how such doctrines and patterns of life were manifest throughout the nineteenth century, and how Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner strove to understand and direct the spirit of their times.

1.2 Markets, Market Economy, Market Society

Like individualism, *the market* admits of many uses and senses, "variously denoting a place, an economic system, an ethos, [and] a form of human relationship" (Stanley 1996, 75). Given its open-texture, the term is used to characterize both concrete and abstract things and often quite different things from one work to another. Especially relevant here, few studies of the market revolution that transformed nineteenth-century America rest upon explicit or systematic accounts of what exactly the market is, what portion of life and conduct is covered by the concept. There are exceptions, such as Winifred Barr Rothenberg's study of economic change in antebellum Massachusetts, which uses the term to denote a specific pattern of price-responsive economic activity (Rothenberg 1992). But perhaps most invocations of the market revolution follow the example of historian Charles Sellers, allowing the market to stand for virtually any and every aspect of modern capitalism. Such occasional lack of precision may offend the academic sensibilities of some, but it also avoids subservience to what may turn out to be an overly narrow conceptual frame. Working with a capacious and fluid conception might allow for better appreciation of how diverse, shifting, and ambiguous a figure the market is in actual life and experience. Hoping to capture at least some of the advantages of both precision and flexibility, I follow Lisa Herzog's description of the market as "the complex system in which people buy and sell, offering money, goods, labour, time, and abilities" (2014, 1). The market, as I shall discuss it, is a distinctive kind of pattern manifest in various human activities of production, exchange, and consumption. Depending on how we view this pattern, and what kinds of activities and characteristics we highlight, it can indeed appear as a place, or an economic system, or an ethos, or a form of relationship between persons.

Two distinctive and important features of a market pattern, though certainly not the only ones, are that goods and services are exchanged in terms denominated by prices and that the price of a good or service reflects relationships between its supply and its demand (Lindblom 2001, 4–6; Polanyi 1944/2001, 70–1; Rothenberg 1992, 20–2; Smith 1776/1994, 62–72). Whatever the medium of exchange (e.g., money or barter), such prices serve as the basic metric of value and exchange, rather than some other index of their value to human beings (such as an intrinsic use-value or some traditional criterion of worth). Prices thus

summarize available information regarding supply and demand, as well as the background costs of production and distribution, and serve as reference points for many subsequent forms of activity. In light of prices, individuals and firms not only choose what to produce and how much, they adjust expectations of realistic future returns on their activities; they not only choose with whom to exchange and on what terms, they adjust their senses of value; they not only choose what to purchase and from whom, they adjust their own understandings and expectations of fulfillment and felicity. My own concern with the market reflects this entire spectrum—the primary effects of market activities (such as the concrete patterns of production, exchange, and consumption they generate), as well as secondary effects on individual's self-understandings, senses of opportunity and necessity, expectations of satisfaction and frustration, and modes of relationship to others. These diverse effects, taken together, are the lived substance of the market.

Yet, in all of its iterations, the idea of a market *revolution* highlights a process of change, the rise of a market system out of something prior and distinct. At the heart of the market revolution stands a pattern of conduct that is perhaps as old as organized human societies. Marketplaces, understood as spaces (actual or notional) where exchanges of goods and services take place, bring together persons with diverse talents, needs, and offerings in terms of transactions aimed at mutual satisfaction. Although such transactions can be constrained, prompted, or guided by any number of factors beyond strictly economic concerns (e.g., laws, religious doctrines, communal norms), some form of this pattern of exchange has prominently characterized human conduct for millennia (Polanyi 1944/2001, 45; Rothenberg 1992, 5–7).[7] Thus, the market revolution signifies not so much the advent of a new form of activity as the refinement, amplification, and spread of something already familiar.

This fact is particularly salient in the American context, as it stands in tension with a popular view of the early republic as composed primarily of yeoman farmers and their households, practicing forms of subsistence agriculture, satisfying their needs through the exercise of their virtue, and remaining untainted by commerce and manufacturing.[8] Recent historical scholarship has seriously challenged this characterization, noting that all but the most remote reaches of the frontier routinely participated in not only local but also national and international markets[9] (Breen 2004). The developments of domestic manufacturing and commerce around the War of 1812, the greater openness of international

markets to American trade in its wake and a subsequent wave of internal improvements (namely turnpikes, canals, and early railroads) intensified this pattern and encouraged a marked increase in composite agriculture in even the most rural areas (Feller 1995, 14–25; Howe 2007, 33–5; 117–8; Larkin 1988, 36). Farmers who once cultivated small surpluses as insurance against hard times, and small quantities of cash crops to pay taxes and trade for a handful of luxury commodities, increasingly turned to the marketplace to satisfy ordinary needs and pursue greater measures of prosperity (Friend 1997; Sellers 1991, 13). In hindsight, it is easy to behold a rapid, revolutionary transformation (especially if one also has in view developments, such as industrialization, that did not mature until after the Civil War). However, markets extended their reach and market participation became fundamental to American society unevenly, at different speeds in different places and with respect to different goods and services. The market revolution, in its own time, was thus a process rather than a discrete event (Rothenberg 1992, 3–4). What is more, the factors contributing to this gradual change were diverse, not all of them overtly economic. As I consider in the next chapter, many aspects of American social life were changing, becoming more individualistic and more amenable to market participation, and the proliferation of its modes.

Yet the market revolution signifies more than just a proliferation of marketplaces and market participation; it denotes the emergence of a *market economy*. According to Christopher Clark, the market revolution "transformed American economic life, linking farmers, planters, and merchants to national and international patterns of production and trade, laying the robust foundations of industrial power and creating commercial and financial institutions essential to a dynamic capitalist society" that would ultimately blossom in the Gilded Age (1996, 23). In order for such an economy to develop, the logic and values of the marketplace had to transcend many of their traditional limits. In the words of Rothenberg, herself employing terms indebted to Karl Polanyi,

> [t]he market economy "happened" when the economic system became "disembedded" from the political, cultural, and social systems constraining it, becoming itself a homeostatic system and an autonomous agent of change. In penetrating local markets, the market economy became a *vehicle*, carrying what might be called *the culture of capitalism* deep into all but the most stagnant layers of a social structure hitherto resistant to it (1992, 242).

A market economy is an interconnected patchwork that exists when diverse local and specialized markets not only come into regular contact with one another, but also come to function according to sufficiently shared logics and values that they speak a common language, not only of prices but also of principles such as efficiency, ownership, and self-interest. The economy, in other words, becomes "One Big Market," a great scene of trade in which any commodity is, in principle, translatable into any other, and in which commodities, transactions, and the economic forces they generate travel easily across the boundaries of discrete markets (Polanyi 1944/2001, 75).

In addition to its scale, scope, and integration, the ultimate distinction of a market economy from other forms of economic organization is its substantial autonomy. According to Polanyi, for much of human history market transactions have been "submerged" in other "social relationships," keeping the value of goods and services, as well as practices of production, trade, and consumption, under the governance of norms and institutions exogenous to the marketplace. A market economy, however, operates according to norms derived more or less directly from market transactions themselves. The "laws" of a market economy are not norms imposed upon it from without (such as religious prohibitions of trade in certain kinds of goods), but norms emergent in market transactions or thought to be presupposed by them. Supply and demand, the price mechanism, efficiency, and economic rationality are recognized as the "invisible hand[s]" that internally guide and govern the market (Smith 1776/1994, 485). Historically, the emergence of market economies has meant the liberation of economic activities from many if not most of the constraints that had kept them within the scope of some other normative frame. This understanding of a market economy, incomplete as it may be, conveys the sense with which I shall use the term.

The last term of art, I will address here is *market society*. Whereas a market economy is an integrated economic system substantially liberated from external constraints and norms, a market society exists when the logics and values of the liberated market economy function as norms and constraints upon the larger society. In Polanyi's words, "[i]nstead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system" (1944/2001, 60).[10] One might say that in such a society the economy's gains in terms of autonomy come at the cost of the autonomy once enjoyed by other relationships and institutions. Market patterns and the forces manifest in them attain

a preeminent, if not dominant, role in the organization of other parts of society such that the prevailing social order is generated and maintained, in large measure, by the aggregation of market transactions (Lindblom 2001, 4–10; Hayek 1979).

Precisely because of the work that the concepts of a market economy and a market society will perform throughout this study, I would add several important qualifications. First, though I shall frequently speak of "the market" and its cognates, I do not wish to reify the concept (though this is easier said than done). The market is not so much a thing as a way of imagining and understanding complex patterns of ideas, choices, and actions; it is a concept which facilitates the collection of countless individuals, their decisions and actions, and how these hang together to form an intelligible, potent, yet largely notional and unintended assemblage. As it is not a self-standing entity, the market is not something a society can simply enjoy or lack, like a society might enjoy or lack paper currency or public roads. There is no uncontroversial threshold at which a collection of markets, transactions, and facilitating instruments (like credit or legal enforcement of contracts) coalesce to form a market economy. While it is possible to identify the emergence of the market in terms of evolution and process, it is difficult (and for my purposes ultimately unnecessary) to identify the precise moment or point at which diverse marketplaces became a market economy.

Second, as the market is not a fixed and static thing, but a pattern more or less manifest in human conduct, what it *is* and how we *think* about it are never entirely separable. Like the individual, the market is an emergent, evolving concept deeply interwoven with the vicissitudes of life. Its history is thus the tale of a feedback process in which understandings of economic activities shape those activities, and how those activities are performed shape how the activities themselves are understood. What is more, lines drawn between economic and non-economic activities and beliefs are always artificial and porous. The activities and beliefs that constitute market patterns are never entirely prior to, subsequent to, or separable from other activities and beliefs (be these moral, religious, or political) (Henretta 1998). Consequently, individualism can't simply be treated (following the methodological spirit of Max Weber) as the cause of the rise of the market, nor can individualism be characterized (following the methodological spirit of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx) as simply an ideological product of the material conditions of an ontologically prior market economy (Weber 1905/1958; Engels and Marx

1845/1978). Again, my aim is to investigate the coincidence and interconnection of individualism and the market without embracing a simple narrative whereby one predated and caused the other.[11]

Third, just as I do not wish to reify the market, I do not wish to strictly follow Polanyi, Sellers, and others who equate the market with capitalism. The two undoubtedly fit together, but it is not obvious or uncontroversial that they are identical. Rather than choosing which horn of the causal dilemma upon which to impale this study, I simply acknowledge that significant scholarly opinion suggests that the nascent antebellum market economy did not reach maturity as a modern capitalist economic system until after the Civil War. Beyond this, somewhat more evasively, I will as much as possible eschew the language of capitalism in favor of that of the market.

1.3 Ideas in Their Times and Places

In order to explore the depth and diversity of individualism in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner, and how their respective views were continuously engaged with the role of the market in nineteenth-century America, my approach is partly synthetic and historical, and partly analytic and conceptual. Three of the following chapters are devoted, one each, to the thinkers around whom this book is oriented. The remaining two are historical glosses on the development of individualism and the market during the antebellum period and the industrial boom that followed the Civil War and continued to the end of the century. The purpose of the historical chapters are twofold: First, to contextualize the thinkers, I examine by roughly sketching American society as they encountered it, and second, to highlight the development and ascendancy of both individualism and the market during the respective periods. Thus, while the historical accounts do not contain new historical evidence, they marshal existing accounts to advance constructive claims about the actual development of, and relationship between, these two prominent aspects of nineteenth-century American society.

In Chap. 1, I offer an account of the contemporaneous rise of individualism and an integrated market economy in antebellum America. Drawing upon social, economic, cultural, and political history, I sketch a pattern of individuation at work in American society during the first half of the nineteenth century.[12] The era was marked by an individualistic spirit manifest in nearly every aspect of life: in the ways that people

spoke and dressed, in their religious ideals and practices, in the political system and the popular political imagination, in the rise of voluntarism and the greater faith in individual agency, in reform movements and the new idea of self-culture, and in the ways that people worked, traded, and consumed. Emerson and Thoreau thus lived in an age that was newly and acutely receptive to their respective ideals of "self-reliance" and "minding one's own business." The initial development of a market economy populated by individual market participants was perhaps one feature of this period of individuation in America, but by the dawn of the Civil War, the market had come to have an outsized influence upon daily life and how it was understood. I suggest that the so-called "market revolution" went hand in hand with the transformation of America into a nation of striving individuals, with individualism fueling the expansion of the market, and market practices training persons to act as individuals. Yet, as Emerson and Thoreau acutely perceived, the integration of ever greater aspects of life into a market system had the ironic effect of making individuals who were charged with making their own way in the world ever more dependent upon one another and upon titanic economic forces beyond their control. Individuals were in many ways freer than ever before to act as and for themselves, but were also tethered to one another and to the circumstance in unprecedented and often unforeseen and unchosen ways.

Chapter 2 is a study of Emerson's individualism, both in itself and as he addressed it to the realities of the market revolution. Throughout his long career as an essayist and lecturer, he developed a doctrine of what he called self-reliance, meant to marry inner self-knowledge and self-trust with pursuits of self-culture. Troubled by what he perceived as the sacrifice of individuality upon the altar of conformity, in "Self-Reliance" he exhorted his audience each to follow her own genius and "kee[p] with perfect sweetness of the independence of solitude" even in the midst of "the crowd" (Emerson 1983, 263). To the very end, he accorded supreme value to the individual, with all else being secondary and derivative. Emerson was also keenly interested in the development of a market economy in America, though his thought on this subject appears to have undergone notable changes over time. In his early works, written in the throes of the Panic of 1837, he pens scathing criticism of both the culture and material realities of the market, directing his individualism against the ascendant economic order (from its materialism to its profiting from chattel slavery). Yet by the time he published *The Conduct*

of Life in 1860, it appears that his critique of the market softened into an intellectualized and even spiritualized affirmation of the opportunities and raw materials it furnishes to the seeker of self-reliance. Reading across the decades of his work, I argue that Emerson struggled to make a home for self-reliance in the world as he found it, first condemning the market revolution as an impediment to self-culture but later finding ways in which his individualism could find imperfect but needful expression in a market society. Thus, while he is not the unmitigated champion of the market that some critics (e.g., Sellers 1991) regard him, he is loath to see individuals squander the opportunities for their own improvement, including in the marketplace.

Chapter 3 turns from Emerson to his protégé Thoreau, who arrives at a starkly different conclusion despite beginning from many shared concepts and values. Like his elder, Thoreau embraced an individualistic ideal of self-cultivation built upon a foundation of personal conscience. However, the developmental trajectory of Thoreau's views on the individual and the market are comparatively unambiguous. From early essays in the 1830s and 1840s to his major works such as *Walden* (1854) and "Life Without Principle" (1854/1863), he articulates a doctrine of deliberate living against the mentality, values, and practices of the market. All around him he believed he saw individuals ravaging nature and instrumentalizing one another, devoting their best hours and energies to getting a mere livelihood, left with little or nothing for the truly needful and valuable enterprise of self-cultivation. Unlike Emerson, Thoreau sees no way to outsmart the market, to use it without coming to serve it. Striving to exemplify his convictions that "[a]ll great enterprises are self-supporting" he counsels simplicity and practices of self-accounting as the path to practical, and not merely intellectual, self-reliance (Thoreau 2001, 352). His individualism is ultimately styled to be as antagonistic to the market as he believed the market was antithetical to individuality.

Thoreau died before America's adolescent market economy reached maturity in the wake of the Civil War, and Emerson's individualism was likewise a creature of antebellum conditions. However, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed social, economic, and political change as profound as those of the first half. Chapter 4 continues the central themes of Chap. 1 and surveys the ways in which the situation of the individual changed amid the development of a nascent market economy into a dynamic industrial landscape. Whereas the antebellum economy was populated primarily by individual workers and small firms, by late in the century, large corporations became increasingly prominent and

powerful. Still expected to secure a livelihood by their own effort and initiative, individuals now had to negotiate a predominately wage economy that was ever more complex, competitive, volatile, and institutionally dense. The dramatic expansion of cities, of the population and its diversity, of industrial capacity, of transportation and communication infrastructure, and of commercial networks all served to multiply the mobility and opportunities of individual market participants, but also made economic fortunes more precarious and changeable. Rather than discarding antebellum ideals of individual striving, self-making, and success, Americans merely adjusted the old individualism at the margins, retraining old notions of responsibility, agency, success, and failure. By the height of the so-called Gilded Age, individuals were fully exposed to boom and bust economic cycles, typically dependent upon an employer for the wages that sustained them and their families and were expected to fend for themselves in an increasingly cutthroat market.

Chapter 5 turns to the work of Sumner, which is addressed to the conditions of the Gilded Age and is in many ways an apologia for its public ethic of competitive striving. Whereas Emerson struggled to reconcile his individualism with the market, and Thoreau turned his individualism against the economic order of his day, Sumner's doctrine is in many ways a normative affirmation of the empirical conditions of an industrial market economy. Influenced by the evolutionary theories of Spencer and Darwin, and the classical political economy of Malthus and Smith, he came to see individualism as the order of nature, reflected in the workings of an unregulated economic competition. Responding to the early attempts to systematically regulate the economy in the name and interests of the working class, he offers the essentially middle-class figure of the "Forgotten Man (or Woman)." This is the individual who diligently strives to earn sustenance through the market, saves what he or she can, and asks no favors of his or her neighbors or (above all) of the state. Such are the individuals who deserve what they have, and upon whose many shoulders the prosperity of society depends. Those who seek the regulation of business for the sake of their interests, or the redistribution of wealth through taxation and social programs, are anathema to Sumner, as they abdicate their own agency and responsibility and would live off the honest, noble labor of others. Hence, these persons are his counterpart to Emerson's conformist and Thoreau's market slave, though without the modicum of pity (however condescending) that Emerson and Thoreau expressed for those who fell short of individuality.

Though my purpose is not to advocate individualism generally, or the doctrines of Emerson, Thoreau, or Sumner in particular, it is reasonable to ask which vision of the three has fared best since its own day. In the brief conclusion of this book, I suggest that while all three have their twentieth- and twenty-first-century echoes, common contemporary notions about the individual and the market tend most closely to resemble Sumner's views. My hope is that studying Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner within a common conceptual and historical frame will illustrate how each of them continues to speak to us, offering genuine and viable tools for understanding and coping with life in market societies.

As a final word of qualification, I do not wish to elide, though I cannot do full justice to, the fact that "[i]ndividualism, inventiveness, mobility, freedom, and entrepreneurialism were not the conditions under which most nineteenth-century people lived" (Clark 1996, 38). Over the course of the century, women gained meaningfully greater shares of economic and political agency, and the Reconstruction Amendments promised new degrees of liberty and equality regardless of race, yet women, immigrants, and native-born persons of color routinely faced obstacles that all but the poorest or most outcast white man did not—from social norms of servility and deference to assumptions of emotional instability and intellectual inferiority. In undeniably important respects, market culture and its attendant individualism were a predominantly Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, male culture, premised upon qualities of character and faculties of agency (self-)attributed to a rigidly defined portion of nineteenth-century Americans. The historical patterns and individualistic doctrines that are the subject of this book often traded heavily upon such assumptions, and even though my aim is not primarily to unmask or inveigh against these notions, I nonetheless acknowledge their influence and frequent inaccuracy. In the chapters devoted to individualism and the market in the antebellum period and the Gilded Age, I attempt to present an account of economic and social change that sees beyond some of the contemporary prejudices and preconceptions, recognizing the very real limitations faced by marginalized persons and important contributions they made despite their relative disadvantages. In the chapters devoted to the doctrines of Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner, I present their ideas in terms faithful to their original expressions yet aware of their omissions and suggestive of ways in which (perhaps despite themselves) all three proffered ideals applicable more broadly than they themselves may have imagined.

Notes

1. "The individual" and "individualism" have been similarly associated with "humanism" and "liberalism," though these connections shall not be explored here. On individualism and humanism, see Morris 1972; on individualism and liberalism, see MacPherson (1962) and Rothenberg (1992, 15–7).
2. Though not the origin of the term, the idea of a "market revolution" was popularized among historians of America by Charles Sellers (1991).
3. Oakeshott's account clearly echoes Burckhardt's (Oakeshott 1975, 1991).
4. Steven Lukes provides a useful overview of the origins of individualism and "the basic or germinal ideas" that form the basis of the family resemblances between otherwise diverse views (1973, quotation at 44).
5. On the European origins of the term, see Arieli 1966, 207–12 and Lukes 1973, 1–22; Emile Durkheim, quoted in Fromm 1955, 151.
6. For a classic, yet contested, treatment of the American political tradition that emphasizes the place of individualism, see Hartz (1955).
7. Smith accounted for the imponderable history of market exchange by positing a natural "propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another" (1776/1994, 14).
8. Sellers, for instance, implicitly offers such a characterization of premarket life (1991, Chap. 1 generally; see also Jefferson (1785/1955), Query XIX). For a thoughtful sketch of this ideal, tracing most notably to Jefferson, and of how it became a victim of economic change see Perkins (1991).
9. As Daniel Walker Howe notes, the antebellum "frontier" was not so much a fixed place as "any area where it was hard to get produce to market" (2007, 41).
10. Though I use Polanyi's description of market society, I do not mean to import the criticism he had of such an arrangement. Likewise, I remain agnostic regarding whether he is correct in his claim that "a market economy can only function in a market society."
11. Apart from being unnecessary for my present purposes, picking a definite causal story is a dubious prospect given the lack of scholarly consensus and the continuing appeal of numerous incomplete options. See, for instance, Henretta (1991, 43–8) and Stokes (1996, 1–15).
12. My approach is thus intentionally ecumenical regarding the historiography of American history. Rather than attempting to parse and qualify various historiographic approaches throughout my own study—an undertaking that would be both tangential to my own claims and contentious in itself—I shall take the work of historians at face value.

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CHAPTER 2

The Rise of the Market: Individuation and Integration in Antebellum America

During the first half of the nineteenth century, American society underwent profound transformations that touched nearly every domain of life. A once "insignificant nation on the European periphery" emerged as a consequential participant on the world stage (McPherson 1988, 9). Thirteen loosely federated states, each with distinct local conditions, institutions, and cultures, coalesced around shared interests and identities, political as well as economic, sectional as well as national. The lives of ordinary persons were touched in countless ways by new technologies, opportunities, risks, freedoms, and imperatives, transforming American society so dramatically that Washington Irving's allegorical tale of Rip Van Winkle is understated in comparison.

Seeking a common denominator to comprehend these profound changes, many historians have embraced the language of revolution. Some have posited unprecedented advances in transportation or communication as explanatory keys or unifying factors.[1] However, perhaps the strongest scholarly consensus has formed around the so-called market revolution, a term popularized by Charles Sellers (Sellers 1991). According to the widely shared thesis, between roughly 1800 and 1860, the "largely subsistence economy of small farms and tiny workshops, satisfying mostly local needs through barter and exchange, gave place to" a simultaneously diversified and integrated economy "in which farmers and manufacturers produced food and goods for the cash rewards of an often distant marketplace" (Stokes 1996, 1). Though this revolution played out according to different scales, rates, and patterns both between

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and within the North and South, the concept provides a useful heuristic because it comprehends technological as well as social, economic, and political change, and thus it has become the dominant stock in trade for historical understanding of the antebellum period (e.g., Clark 1996; Watson 1996).

My approach, in this chapter and for the remainder of this book, is not to collect or interpret new historical facts, but to assemble the more or less familiar and view it from a slightly different angle. My immediate aim is to construct a sketch of the social and economic context within and against which Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau articulated their respective forms of individualism. The market revolution is a central feature of this context, as I hope to show. However, that transformation was itself inseparable from a burgeoning, contemporaneous culture of individualism in nineteenth-century America.[2] The emergence of an integrated, national market economy was facilitated by (and itself served to facilitate) numerous individualistic and individualizing developments, reaching from family life and informal social norms, to religion, law, and politics.

Yet I suggest that there is no simple, linear causal story at work. The rise of the market was neither the efficient cause nor the strict consequence of a larger culture of individualism. Rather, the two developed together, like interdependent species evolving through interactions with one another in a common environment. Economic change was facilitated and intensified by new, more individualistic ways of life, and economic changes of many kinds served to further partition already individualizing social space. Thus, while it would be too simple to say that one caused the other, it is impossible to account adequately for either development without its counterpart, as it is impossible to account for the evolution of the bee without the flower, or the flower without the bee.

By way of exploring the relationship between antebellum individualism and the rise of the market, I shall also contend that individualism and the market are not interchangeable, coextensive, or conceptually interdependent terms. Though it has long been orthodoxy to explain the origins and operations of market systems in terms of individualistic ideologies and practices,[3] there is no genuine necessity at work. As this and subsequent chapters shall illustrate, though often indirectly, robust individualism does not entail a commitment to the acquisitive pursuit of self-interest so often attributed to individuals in market societies. Strong commitments to individual autonomy, self-development, and

self-enactment can be articulated and lived in terms skeptical of and even hostile to market participation. Likewise, the patterns of activity characteristic of a market do not logically presuppose individual persons as the atomic particles of which an economy or society is composed. It is possible, if not prevalent, for market economies to exist in which households, communities, and firms of many different descriptions are the principal participants. Individualism may figure prominently in the histories of most market economies, but it is no more "necessary" than it was that persons named Ford and Taylor should figure prominently in the history of modern mass production and corporate organization. Hence, what follows is the elucidation of fortuitous, contingent, and sometimes tense and tenuous connections, not inevitable necessities or iron laws.

In the first section, I characterize antebellum individualism by assembling a number of salient aspects of American life that individuated social space and elevated the individual to a new privilege and prominence. The second examines the imbrications of individualism and the rise of the market, their mutual dependence and articulation in the context of the first half of the nineteenth century.

2.1 The Era of the Individual

> It is the age of the first person singular.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal* (1827)

The first half of the nineteenth century, during which the market revolution occurred, was characterized by palpable, energetic individualism in thought as well as in practice. Emerson was not alone in recognizing the privileged status of the individual in antebellum American society. Religious sermons, literary works, political and moral ideals, social reforms, economic transformations, and the textures of ordinary life all testified to the prominence of the individual person. Yet the individualism characteristic of the period was often less ideological than it was dispositional and practical. It was manifest in ways of life and often born of necessity, as Americans strove for greater prosperity, and was only later refined and elevated to an intellectualized ideal. Furthermore, like the market, individualism was a complex, evolving phenomenon comprising many distinct components, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes hindering one another. Intersubjective bonds and affections of community and family remained deeply important for many, and a new sense

of shared nationality took shape, but forces of individualization were apparent everywhere (Kohl 1989, 8–10). No catalog or sketch of these developments could express fully their complexity or interconnection, but the rise of the market and the contemporaneous articulation of individualist philosophies cannot be adequately appreciated or understood without a sense of how varied and profound were the individualistic dimensions of early nineteenth-century life.

2.1.1 Tocqueville's Shadow

The most encompassing and systematic contemporary reflection upon antebellum society was Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, a work which has left a lasting imprint upon subsequent understanding of the period. In Tocqueville's comprehensive estimate:

> No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the immense influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society. It gives a particular turn to public opinion and a particular twist to the laws, new maxims to those who govern and particular habits to the governed[. I]t creates opinions, gives birth to feelings, suggests customs, and modifies whatever it does not create. (1835/1969, 9)

Though his extensive discussion of American society often remains vague about precisely which conditions were more equal in America than in Europe and often neglects the remaining inequalities (economic, political, gender, racial, ethnic, and religious) that partitioned American society, his penetrating observation and analysis repeatedly begins from and returns to this sweeping egalitarian premise.

As Emerson remarked toward the end of his life: "America was opened after the feudal mischief was spent, and so the people made a good start. We began well. No inquisition here, no kings, no nobles, no dominant church" (1909, 410–1). Compared to the social conditions of European societies, the lives of free white men in antebellum America were certainly more egalitarian in principle as well as practice (2006, 79). Tocqueville believed that democracy (namely in the form of expanded white male suffrage) was the most notable face of this distinctly American egalitarianism[4] (2007, 304; Pessen 1978, 150–60; Van Deusen 1959, 10–11, 2009, 21–3). The ascendancy of democratic culture had both a leveling and an individualizing effect, "loosen[ing] social ties"

which had typically relied upon distinctions of rank, and "separat[ing] citizens" as it placed them on an equal, undifferentiated footing[5] (Tocqueville 1835/1969, 589). Complementing these political conditions was the availability of seemingly endless tracts of inexpensive land, which promised measures of both social and economic equality unimaginable in Europe.[6] The presence of fewer entrenched impediments to, and more plentiful opportunities for, personal advancement cultivated an enterprising, go-ahead spirit and a "yeoman's worldview" that was suspicious of authority and the hindrances it imposed upon individuals (Howe 2007, 37; see also Hofstadter 1989, 72–86). Indeed, equality of conditions might best be understood to refer to this sense of openness to rise by personal ambition and effort. This understanding of American equality also suggests at least a partial explanation for why "an individualistic social order" developed rather than a more integral, communal social order (Kohl 1989, 5). The country was physically capacious enough, and its population was diverse, independent, and mobile enough, to encourage a centrifugal rather than centripetal expression of egalitarianism—equality pushed away from social holism and toward individualism.

Tocqueville explicitly identified a form of intellectual individualism that equality of conditions encouraged. Americans, he declared, "have a philosophical method shared by all." Freed from "imposed systems, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices, and to a certain extent national prejudices as well[,] in most mental operations each American relies on individual effort and judgments" (Tocqueville 1835/1969, 429). Americans were unwitting yet adept Cartesians—each sweeping aside prejudice and receiving ideas in order to work out a personal worldview from scratch. While there is certainly some exaggeration in this description (as Emerson's and Thoreau's critiques of conformity suggest), it identifies something fundamental to antebellum social conditions.[7] The prevailing atmosphere of opportunity, coupled with weaker or altogether absent institutions of intellectual authority (such as an established church or entrenched aristocracy), left individuals to think and judge for themselves, and thus brought about at least an approximate realization of the Enlightenment ideals of intellectual freedom. Each person was free, and often required, to make use of his own intellect without direction from another (Kant 1784/1996). Equality of conditions thus dovetailed with an untutored intellectual individualism. Tocqueville reserved as much criticism for this development as he did praise (suggesting, for instance, that it encourages deference to mass

opinion and paves the way to the tyranny of the majority), but he was emphatic about its prevalence and potency.

Yet Tocqueville did not refer to this intellectual independence or the separating effects of political democracy as "individualism," instead of reserving the name for a distinctive disposition fostered by America's egalitarian culture.

> Our fathers knew only egoism[,] a passionate and exaggerated love of self which leads a man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all.
>
> Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. (1835/1969, 506)

Whereas egoism is a perennial human characteristic, what Tocqueville calls individualism is a distinctly modern phenomenon accompanying the equality of conditions Americans experienced. Egoism signifies an exaggerated sense of self, which modern philosophers from Thomas Hobbes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau recognized as natural (or nearly so) yet prone to lead individuals to immoral or antisocial conduct. Tocqueville's egoist sees the world as a banquet either available or denied to himself. Individualism, however, signifies a careful partitioning of the world into spheres of life that is only feasible in an environment that presents opportunity and counsels confidence in individual efforts. That is, individualism is a distinctly modern view of mine and thine, and of private and public, that gets traction precisely because the average (white, male) person can choose if and when to cross the line between spheres (Siedentop 2014, 18). Rather than an egoistic craving to have it all, such individualism entails a willingness to leave much of the world to others and to content oneself with the care and enjoyment of one's own little corner.[8]

While perceptive in its analysis of the American ways of delineating public and private spheres of life, Tocqueville's discussion of individualism is myopic. He was so deeply impressed by equality of conditions that he only saw individualism as an egalitarian reinterpretation of a timeless vice, a troubling quirk occasioned by his real object of fascination. One might then say that he did not recognize the full scope of American individualism because he was not looking for it, and when he encountered it he interpreted it through a narrowly circumscribed conceptual lens.

Many of the remarkable individualistic tendencies of antebellum America escaped his attention or figured only marginally. However, scholarship since *Democracy in America* has provided a much richer sense of the distinctively individualistic character of antebellum society, correcting and supplementing Tocqueville's account without abandoning its valuable insights.

2.1.2 Patterns of Individuation and Individualism

Both contemporary observers and later historians have characterized early nineteenth-century Americans as "a busy, bustling, industrious population, hacking and hewing their way" toward an eagerly anticipated yet unrealized future.[9] The roots of this disposition ran deep. According to historian John Lauritz Larson, "the [American] Revolution, with its promises of liberty and equality, had planted in free people's souls a restless sense of entitlement that tended to accelerate habits of mobility and innovation, habits that, in colonial days, often seemed to contradict good order and tradition" (2010, 14). Tocqueville vividly recorded this spirit of restlessness. "No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult […] All around you everything is on the move […] a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere" (1835/1969, 242, 244). It was a common perception in the nineteenth century, and not always a welcome one, that the pace of life was accelerating. As one contemporary American observer tepidly remarked, "[e]verything goes fast now-a-days; the winds, even begin to improve upon the speed which they have hitherto maintained; everything goes ahead but good manners and sound principles."[10] Individual expectation and striving rent much of the social fabric inherited from the previous century, setting individuals loose from their traditional roles, trades, locales, and communities, eager to realize for themselves the promise of the revolution.

The spirit of restlessness and industry paralleled improvements in transportation technology and infrastructure that gave outlet to "a nationwide surge of energy," "[q]uickening the flow of people, goods, and ideas throughout the country[,] collapsing distances and widening horizons" (Feller 1995, 22; see also Fishlow 1996 and Larkin 1988, 204–5). The individualizing effects of such mobility were most powerful upon the younger generation. Thanks in part to new employment opportunities across the expanding country, and new means of learning

of and traveling to them, the gravity of traditional, communal life weakened. Young women as well as young men embraced new opportunities to make a life in a place and manner of their own choosing, beyond the reach of the expectations and constraints of family, church, and community (Halttunen 1982, 1; Boorstin 1965, 90–1; Howe 2007, 242). The "pioneering spirit" that had led the expansion of original colonies was finding new expressions as individuals struck out to make their respective ways in the world (Boorstin 1965, 51). Even the instruments of travel had individuating effects. New modes of transportation (such as stagecoaches, steamboats, and trains) were typically open to all who could afford them, and thus traveling itself eroded lingering European-styled class distinctions, further sifting society into individual particles in motion[11] (Ibid., 107–8; Larkin 1988, 222).

Mobility and restlessness nurtured "a new competitive age" (Licht 1995, 78). The time was ripe for individual striving for land, for employment, for self-improvement, for social, economic, and even political advancement. One of the marks of transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century in America—from lingering colonial sensibilities to a new individualistic ethos—was the legitimization of ambition and its pursuits. According to Gordon Wood,

> Americans were in fact using competition to democratize ambition and make it the basis for a new kind of middling society […] Americans celebrated the "ambition and fire of youth" and allowed genius to express itself. Many cultures feared the expression of ambition because it was an aristocratic passion that belonged to the Macbeths of the world—great-souled individuals who were apt to be dangerous. Americans, however, need not have this fear, at least not to the same extent. In a republic ambition should belong to everyone[.] (2009, 325)

In a country of plentiful land, few and sparse laws and institutions, and widespread egalitarian sentiments, relying on one's own grit and drive was often a matter of pragmatic prudence, if not outright necessity. Individuals had to solve more of their own problems than in European societies with entrenched remnants of feudal privilege and obligation, contributing to a "fascination with things new and better" and an "urge to tinker and invent" that turned restlessness toward improvement (Feller 1995, 27; see also Tocqueville 1835/1969, 419–20). This practical ethos and the lack of rigid social hierarchies allowed personal

ambition to carry a resourceful and fortunate individual farther than most of his or her Old World counterparts.

The new respectability and fecundity of ambition were readily apparent in changing relationships to one's work. Rather than an inheritance or a destiny, occupation became a matter of personal aspiration and initiative, serving as a flexible means adapted to the end of self-advancement and satisfaction (Wood 2009, 325; Howe 2007, 131). This openness to individual choice reflected the relative underdevelopment and rapid growth of the American economy, as well as the erosion of traditional practices of regulation within and across professions (which, in the colonies, were already weak by European standards) (Boorstin 1965, 22–6, 34; Larson 2010, 104). Employment relationships subsequently took on new, individualized forms, as farmhands, "[a]pprentices and journeymen were turning into employees," farmers and master artisans into employers, and all enterprises experienced greater measures of "turnover, turmoil and uncertainty" (Larkin 1988, 59; see also Larson 2010, 114; Sellers 1991, 25). Hence, the age saw the emergence of what Polanyi called "that most potent of all modern institutions, the labor market" (1944/2001, 87). Liberated from communal claims, labor took on the character of individual property—free men owned their energies and skills and were entitled to take them and use them where and how they saw fit. At the same time that the view of "property as a commodity," as an article of acquisition and exchange, achieved dominance, so did labor increasingly take on the aspect of a commodity to be bargained and exchanged between individuals (Wood 2009, 19). The activities of producing and reproducing biological and social existence lost the appearance of fate and took on that of voluntary undertaking, cut loose from cultural and communal moorings.

The individuation of work and occupation was most apparent and most dramatic where wage labor prevailed. Cities and new factory towns, primarily in the North, were first to be shaped by the agitations of a mobile, voluntary labor force. Yet the individualizing effects of new economic patterns reached into rural communities as well. Near urban and manufacturing centers, the "putting-out" system employed men, children, and especially women to perform simplified steps in a larger chain of production (Kessler-Harris 2003, 28–30, 46–8; Larkin 1988, 58; Sellers 1991, 24–5). Farther from cities and nascent manufacturing, more farms turned to composite agriculture, crossing the already "porous boundary between household production and market

production" (Bushman 1998, 364; Larkin 1988, 36). Farming increasingly shifted from an inward-looking activity of sustaining the household and family life to an outward-looking activity of commodity production. Technological advance and westward movement to more fertile land improved agricultural productivity, encouraging and sometimes forcing hired farmhands and children without land of their own to seek employment in towns and cities, further breaking down the bonds that had kept individuals and their labor tied to family and community settings (Meyer 2003, 11; Howe 2007, 525–6; McPherson 1988, 13). Even when the household retained its traditional integrity as a productive unit, it came to act more like an individual firm in a competitive marketplace, initially by choice and ultimately of necessity in a changing economic landscape.

The transformation of individual labor was institutionalized through the law, especially the law regarding contracts, which provided a new conceptual and normative vocabulary for employment relationships. According to Daniel Walker Howe,

> [i]n the eighteenth century the essence of a contract had been the concept of *consideration*—that is, the contract as a promise made in return for money or some other advantage. Judges felt free to invalidate contracts in cases where the consideration seemed inadequate. The nineteenth century saw judges becoming more concerned with the concept of *free will*—that is, the contract as an agreement freely entered into by both sides, with the implication that if one chose to make a promise one should keep it. (2007, 559; see also Feller 1995, 33–6; Larson 2010, 23–5; Sellers 1991, 47–57)

Mirroring changing views of agency and freedom in theology and moral thought, evaluative criteria of contractual validity and obligation generally discarded substantive considerations, including matters of justice and contingent outcome that were often beyond the control of individuals, in favor of procedural considerations emphasizing nominally equal footing in negotiation and free agreement to the ultimate terms, whatever they may be. The law thus underscored what was already apparent elsewhere—individuals had to make their own way, by their own wits and efforts, at their own risk. Monetary developments supplemented the new contractual mindset. Although the antebellum economy was still, at bottom, premised upon gold and silver, and although both specie and paper money were chronically scarce, cash was nonetheless gradually displacing barter and informal credit as the choice medium of exchange in ordinary life (Henretta 1998, 297; Larkin 1988, 53; Larson 2010, 25–8). On the

one hand, reliance upon money as the "great instrument" of modern market transactions entailed new dependence upon its sources (both the institutions that controlled its circulation, and employers and customers from whom it could be gotten through transactions) (Lindblom 2001, 198). Yet, on the other hand, it also urged equalizing and individualizing patterns of life. The "cash-nexus" of exchange freed the individual to negotiate, buy, and sell on impersonal, quantitative terms, complementing the changing views of labor and property (Herzog 2014, 70; see also Gilmore 1985, 4). Personal relationships no doubt continued to facilitate or hinder economic transactions, but their salience was waning as that of "the almighty dollar" was waxing.[12] The instruments of economic exchange and advancement were becoming as mobile and restless as the persons who used them.

Ambition, mobility, and economic change had profound effects upon the fundamental building-blocks of society. As Clark notes, "[t]he central social institution in eighteenth-century America was the family household. Households were the primary, and almost universal, agents of social and economic organization, and it was under their auspices that most productive activity took place" (2006, 3). Economic production centered upon the farm or shop as a "functional unity" in which men, women, children, apprentices, hired hands, servants, and slaves all contributed—indeed "family" had been understood broadly, to include all persons joined in the operation and maintenance of a single household and its economic life (Larkin 1988, 10). Custom and limited horizons of ambition and opportunity had kept the family integral and central. When they came of age, men and women typically left one household to join or found another of the same basic kind. Yet expanding opportunities for land and other employment, as well as the necessities imposed by new modes of market participation, shook the foundations of family life, and not simply by encouraging or requiring individuals to become wage laborers. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, "traditional subordinations were challenged and undermined," including those within the household (Wood 2009, 342). The "stem family" that encompassed the full productive household and connected it to a larger community gave way to the externally and internally individualized "nuclear family" comprising the married couple and immediate offspring[13] (Sellers 1991, 241–2; see also Trachtenberg 2007, 150). As the archetypal family changed, especially for the middling sorts, so did marriage and the economic roles of women. The authority of fathers over their children

weakened, and emotional fulfillment came to rival community ties and economic productivity as the proper basis of a good marriage (Howe 2007, 36, 44; Larkin 1988, 14). And despite the laws of coverture (which placed a wife's body and property under control of her husband), many wives gained greater legal and social recognition, in part through liberalizing divorce and inheritance laws (Wood 2009, 495–8). Intimate relationships thus came to share at least somewhat the new character of employment relationships: Contractual agreements freely entered into independent individuals, instruments to personal fulfillment.

Living spaces and customs of habitation evolved to reflect both the internal and external individuation of the household. Whereas the dwellings of the middling and poor had long been essentially open, communal spaces, in which several generations might sleep in the same bed, dress and wash in front of one another, and eat from shared bowls with shared utensils, nineteenth-century dwellings bore the mark of new ideas of prosperity and propriety. Sleeping spaces became more individualized; kitchens, workspaces, and privies were separated from common quarters, not only for comfort but also out of a sense of privacy and decency; and family meals incorporated separate place settings, individualizing even the shared enjoyment of basic sustenance (Larkin 1988, 116–27, 138, 160, 180). For those with the requisite resources, the partitioning of physical space within the household made the separateness and independence of the individual tangible in even the most mundane aspects of daily life.

Outside the home, in the hustle and bustle of antebellum society, social customs paid homage to the individual's new standing. "Shaking hands became the accustomed American greeting between men, a gesture whose symmetry and mutuality signified equality" and a greater sense of individual pride and worth (Ibid., 155; Howe 2007, 37; Pessen 1978, 79). Such a shift was likewise evident in nomenclature and modes of address. "Middling men began asserting themselves as never before," bringing the formerly genteel appellation "Mister" into currency between free men and using given names rather than family names as the public markers of identity (Wood 2009, 320; Boorstin 1965, 91). The language of the age turned sharply inward, focusing on the self, its identity and character. "Individual" came to serve as a noun signifying a distinct person rather than a mere unit of counting, and "personality" came to refer to individual character rather than a generic status of personhood (Cayton 1989, 223). Drawing upon this new linguistic richness,

common practices of keeping diaries and journals joined fascination with individual personality to anxious moral and psychological self-auditing. Visual culture, too, rode the rising tide of individualism. With the introduction of the daguerreotype in the 1840s, a new form of self-artistry was born. Whereas portraiture had been a process of creative interpretation of the typically wealthy subject by the artist, photography reflected self-styling in the more affordable and replicable mirror of technology (Jaffee 2010, 275–325; Masur 1991, 208–11). Everywhere one looked and listened, persons of all classes and occupations put the self on display.

This recognition of individual dignity was one aspect of a deeper set of beliefs about the potential of each human being. The nineteenth century was not only the age of the individual as a brute fact, but the age of self-culture, the belief that "character could be improved, that people [women as well as men] could elevate themselves by concerted effort" (Feller 1995, 143; see also Richardson 1986, 54–7). Resurgent doctrines of free will in liberal Protestantism, lingering Enlightenment ideals of progress and perfection, diversifying economic opportunities, and the revolution's still echoing promises of liberty and equality all lent their support to a faith in "agency" understood as a person's "ability to act purposefully in the service of goals" of one's own deliberate choosing (Howe 2007, 40, 44). For some, the ideal of agency promised access to the highest economic, social, and political strata of society, but for most, the ideal promised the nonetheless remarkable achievement of "competence" understood as material sufficiency won through self-employment. (Even though wage laborers depended on another for wages, they could still aspire to material security and comfort through their own free labor.) Such agency entailed correlative responsibility. Widespread was the belief that worldly fortunes, both favorable and unfavorable, reflected the character of the person who bore them. A natural consequence of the ideal of agency, which would evolve throughout the nineteenth century, was belief in the "self-made man," whatever his station may be (Cawelti 1965; Sellers 1991, 238).

An overtly social manifestation of agency was "a greatly expanded associational life within formally organized, specialized, voluntary institutions whose multiplication within [the antebellum] era was indeed one of its outstanding characteristics" (Blumin 1989, 192). Impressed by this voluntarism, Tocqueville remarked that "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations […] of a thousand different types" (1835/1969, 513). This phenomenon

cut across many long-standing social divisions, especially those between men and women, as many of the new associations (especially those oriented around reform agendas) afforded women hitherto unprecedented public presence and leverage.[14] Yet the fevered pitch of organizing and joining retained a doubly individualistic character. On the one hand, the very existence of voluntary associations testified to the ideal of purposive individual action. Whereas Old World institutions were frequently inherited from time out of mind and seen as emanations of the super-individual social body, American institutions were often manifestly the artifice of collected individual choice and will. On the other hand, the purposes animating these associations testified to the ideal of both individual and social improvement. The antebellum institutional landscape was awash in a spirit of reform, as the optimistic, pragmatic mentality that established colonial settlement and had stretched its boundaries westward now looked inward, to the care and cultivation of individuals and the society they formed (Boorstin 1965, 43–8; Rose 1981, ix).

Reform movements are particularly illustrative of American individualism in (collective) action. By 1840, America enjoyed an adult literacy rate of roughly 91% (at least among free persons), which was comparable to the most advanced countries in Europe (Howe 2007, 455; Larkin 1988, 35). In a democratic society, especially one in which the printed word (carried by newspapers, pamphlets, and books) circulated ever more cheaply and widely, literacy was an essential tool of individual empowerment and self-direction (McPherson 1988, 12–3). Through the first decades of the nineteenth century, home schooling and local churches still performed crucial educational functions, especially in teaching basic reading, but publicly funded common schools were coming to rival and eventually to replace them (Howe 2007, 449–54). The new schools brought with them a new pedagogy suited to a belief in individual agency. Rather than mere disciplining or training (e.g., for a trade), education was reimagined as "a process of development" that works upon "the character as a whole, not just the intellect," thus serving as "the great lever of upward mobility" (Ibid., 617; Howe 1997, 127; McPherson 1988, 29; see also Feller 1995, 150–2). Ambition and competition were encouraged, rather than repressed, inculcating in the young (women as well as men, albeit in different ways) the belief in deliberate self-advancement (Wood 2009, 326; Kessler-Harris 2003, 56–7). The lyceum movement did for adults what the common school movement did for youth. Beginning in New England in the 1820s, by

the middle of the 1840s, local lyceums and other societies for the public diffusion of knowledge formed the backbone of a professional lecture circuit that stretched throughout the USA (Bode 1956; Feller 1995, 146–7; Howe 1997, 125; Scott 1980, 795–7). Traveling speakers brought knowledge on subjects from poetry and physics to natural history and phrenology, delivered in lectures intended to equip their audience to use their agency more completely and resolutely, regardless of gender or occupation.

The same basic spirit that animated education reform led to changes in practices of punishment. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, visionaries such as Benjamin Rush worked to replace long-standing practices of brutal and often public punishment meant to extract penance with gentler techniques aimed at individuating and reforming criminals, carried out in the seclusion of specialized correctional institutions[15] (Feller 1995, 138–42; Rothman 1977). What were once little more than "holding pens" for social refuse were redesigned to be disciplinary as well as educational institutions, serving as "one of the most daring facets of the national experiment: the attempt to forge in this new country a new and improved character" (Feller 1995, 139). Again, the ideal of agency was at work, ascribing to the criminal both responsibility for his or her wrongs and a potential for self-improvement that should be cultivated for the sake of both individual and society.

However, the reform movement that perhaps best illustrates the spirit of improvement is the anti-slavery movement. Comprising many different associations acting upon often divergent understandings of how best to address the institution of chattel slavery, all iterations of abolitionism extended the ideals of agency and self-improvement to persons long denied them.[16] In contesting the practice of human bondage, abolitionists asserted (however, implicitly) an essentially egalitarian understanding of the human capacity for self-development. Even those who assailed slavery's evils without believing in the possibility or desirability of full racial equality acted upon the idea that all persons are capable of living a meaningfully self-directed life and could ascend from a state of forced intellectual and practical subjection to the station of responsible individuals. Like education and penal reform movements, the anti-slavery movement was a testament to the age's faith that through opportunity and effort, each individual could attain a more perfect condition. As with other voluntary associations, abolitionism demonstrated the popular belief that "a gathering of individuals" could willfully and fruitfully work

toward the improvements of themselves, other individuals, and the entire society (Cumbler 2008, 3). Deeply entrenched social institutions were ultimately human artifacts and were thus amenable to purposive, transformative action, individual as well as collective.

The era of the individual was also marked by a widespread surge of religious interest and energy quickly termed the Second Great Awakening that was "more evangelical, more ecstatic, more personal, and more optimistic" than the eighteenth-century Awakening that preceded it (Wood 2009, 582; see also Feller 1995, 95–117; Howe 2007, 164–202, 285–327). Americans embraced numerous (though primarily Protestant) denominations, some of Old World provenance and others newly minted or modified to suit the character of a restless and striving people, many of which were characterized by heightened millennial expectations and utopian projects. In nearly all denominations, "[d]octrines of divine omnipotence and original sin sank from view as confidence in human efficacy grew," singing Pelagian refrains of "individual empowerment" in temporal as well as spiritual matters (Feller 1995, 99; see also Howe 2007, 179; Sellers 1991, 31). The pluralistic, frenetic religious landscape again illustrates many connected dimensions of antebellum individualism. Even among denominations that did not soften old Calvinist doctrines, religion was widely recognized as a matter of individual choice rather than birth (Howe 2007, 165–6; Wood 2009, 576, 579). In keeping with the egalitarian, democratic culture of the day, churches thus assumed the status of voluntary organizations of willing individuals (Hatch 1989; see also Wood 2009, 588). Such voluntarism and innovation were facilitated by the abolition of established churches during the first decades of the century (Hatch 1989, 59–62; Howe 2007, 164). As the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening spread throughout much of American society, traditional religious institutions fragmented or dissolved, leaving space for sectarian entrepreneurialism and inviting if not demanding independence of individual thought and belief (Howe 1997, 111–2; Rose 1981, 45).

Insofar as religion supplied an encompassing view of the world and a basic psychological and moral vocabulary, it was interwoven with nearly every other aspect of private and public life. The rise of the market was sometimes hindered and sometimes aided by religious doctrines regarding idleness, work, and reward. Religious belief was the animus behind many antebellum projects of reform, including abolitionism, educational and penal reform, and the nascent temperance movement—all variously

espousing the notion that individuals can improve their own character, and by both direct action and indirect example can elevate those around them (Howe 2007, 187–8). Religious life furthermore provided a palpable experience of equality and agency for those elsewhere denied their full measure. Despite the continuing use of religion to justify slavery,[17] African American and white abolitionist churches provided spaces in which both free and enslaved could enjoy the status of personal dignity and independence routinely afforded to free whites. Similarly, religious congregations often provided "the one public arena in which women could play a substantial part" in antebellum society (Wood 2009, 598; see also Wayne 2007, 49–67). Though the age belonged primarily to white males, egalitarian and individualistic forces were slowly working away at such privilege.

Antebellum politics (still entirely the domain of white men) likewise bore the impress of the individuation and individualism of American society. The contours of democratic contestation traced the public manifestations of the restlessness, ambition, mobility, and agency of ordinary persons. Again, the roots of this political individualism are to be found prior to the nineteenth century. As Daniel Boorstin put it,

> [b]y the early 19th century, in crowded, pre-empted Europe, "No Trespassing" signs were everywhere; control by government covered the map. America offered a sharp contrast. From the beginning, *communities* existed here before there were governments to care for public needs or to enforce public duties […] There was seldom any hint of doubt that final control on all matters rested with the majority[.] (1965, 65, 67)

Beginning with the initial colonial settlement and continuing through the settlement of the continental interior, society and economy were typically a step ahead of government in all but the most abstract matters. Along the shifting frontier, settlers and speculators frequently squatted on land, whether it was already owned or not, publicly or privately, in the hopes that habitation and improving labors would grant them a lasting claim (Ibid., 241–8; Murtazashvili 2013). Rather than government and law providing the frame for living, the tangible facts of life would provide the frame for government and law. Tocqueville suggested that the American phenomenon of living just beyond the horizons of government was a powerful force behind individualism (in the broad rather than narrow sense): "One of the happiest consequences of the absence of government

(when a people is happy enough to be able to do without it, a rare event) is the ripening of individual strength which never fails to follow from it. Each man learns to think and act for himself without counting on the support of any outside power which, however, watchful it be, can never answer all the needs of man in society" (1832/1971, 38–9). The relative lack of government instilled a sense of practical and dispositional individualism in ordinary life, which could not but manifest in the politics of the day. Even the rise of mass democracy and organized political parties was of a piece with individualism—ways to draw together the energies of an independently minded, mobile, and literate electorate; to wage and win the "battle over public opinion" (Howe 2007, 237, 488–98).

The Second Party System furnishes an especially salient example of the political manifestations of antebellum individualism and can be understood as a prolonged battle for its soul (Cawelti 1965, 40; Kohl 1989, 13–20). The Democratic Party of Andrew Jackson (which carried the banner of the so–called Democratic or Old School Republicans of the First Party System) and the Whig Party (which rose from the ashes of the Federalists and National Republicans in opposition to Jackson's energetic executive power) each articulated a distinct political expression of individualism. According to Lawrence Kohl, "Jacksonian America demanded, and the values of the age extolled, personal independence" (1989, 28). The Democratic vision presented a jealous, anxious individualism, committed to the agency of the individual, yet suspicious of the elites, institutions, and corrupt interests it saw as constant threats to that agency[18] (Ibid., 21–62). It was a mindset indebted to the revolutionary rejection of European aristocratic control, which saw first the Federalists and later the Whigs as American imitations of this tainted past. Yet it also bores the impress of frontier experience, and the mixed invitation to individualism and pressure to conform that was characteristic of frontier life (Becker 1910). Individuals ought to be left to govern themselves locally (which presumably meant to be governed less), untrammeled by the distant government and the self-interested elites that control it. In contrast, Whig individualism was optimistic and confident where the Democratic vision was nervous and suspicious (Kohl 1989, 63–99; see also Howe 1997, 264; Watson 1990, 231–53). Its confidence rested, first and last, upon the individual's capacity for self-discipline and deliberate self-improvement. Whereas Democrats sought to liberate the individual from the chains of corrupt institutions and interests and were committed to rear-guard actions against their return, Whigs sought to augment the powers of the individual wherever possible.

The national government, in particular, was to provide a framework of opportunity, both directly (e.g., internal improvements) and indirectly (e.g., protectionist tariffs and central banking). Government, sufficiently enlightened, could help the individual strive toward good character and earned competence. The Democratic worldview was, both in its day and with hindsight, a sort of counter-modern individualism, watchful against new conspiracies against equality and independence. The Whig worldview, on the contrary, was deliberately and thoroughly modern, articulating individualism at home in a new world of large, complex, and interconnected institutions.

The common choice in antebellum politics was thus not between individualism and some collectivist opposite, but between competing political interpretations of a growing cultural individualism and the various policies instrumental to their realization. This is neither to suggest that political doctrines or practices of governance afforded the individual supremacy or sovereignty in all, or even most matters, nor to deny the substantial exercises of police powers by state and local governments in the first half of the nineteenth century, which included substantial regulations dealing with public health, spaces, and morals as well as individual property, trades, and economic transactions.[19] Rather, what this characterization suggests is that the political ideas, identities, and institutions inherited from the first few decades of the nation's existence were being upset by larger social and economic changes. The growing prominence of individuals in the smaller details of daily life and experience sought, and found, reflection in antebellum politics.

Politics also gave to the age a representative figure. Andrew Jackson, who stood at the center of the contest between competing political visions of individualism, embodied "aspirations that were widely shared by American men of his time," namely that "if people were left to themselves they could improve their lot by their own efforts" (Howe 2007, 330, 381; Hofstadter 1989, 86; Wood 2009, 714–5). His rise from humble, frontier beginnings to fame as a hero in the War of 1812, a successful politician, and ultimately a president whose name became synonymous with the middle decades of the antebellum period, all testified to the ideal of the self-made individual. Even more than Benjamin Franklin's had for the revolutionary generation, Jackson's life and the lore surrounding it confirmed America as a country of tremendous opportunities for ordinary persons, regardless of religious or political leanings, offering respectable and virtuous outlets for personal ambition.

In an age of realignment, wherein the large and small details of life reflected the waxing gravity of the individual, Jackson gave a name to the promise of American culture.

2.2 Individualism and the Market

Though not identical or interchangeable, the progress of individualism and of the market form of economic and social organization in antebellum America is practically and ideologically coincident phenomena. One can scarcely make sense of what it meant to be an individual in the nineteenth century—early, middle, or late—without drawing upon ideas and practices at least indirectly connected to the emergent rhythms of a market economy and its penetration into other domains of life. Even without attempting to settle ultimate causal questions, examination of the interaction between individualism and the market sheds substantial light on the personal experiences and social life that were the occasion and context for the individualistic thought of Emerson, Thoreau, and which also laid the foundations of the Gilded Age that was Sumner's milieu. What happened to the American economy and what happened to the American individual are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Distinguishable, they inform and complement one another.

2.2.1 From Markets to the Market

The market revolution cannot be reduced to a single event or turning point, though the Panic of 1837 is a punctual illustration of its progress and consequence. Between 1835 and 1836, the national economy experienced unprecedented growth. Land sales and commodity prices soared, credit flowed freely and cheaply, new fortunes were made and old fortunes augmented, and prospering Americans purchased ever greater quantities of European goods. In March 1837, Andrew Jackson's successor Martin Van Buren unknowingly inherited the last days of a period of hitherto unrivaled American prosperity that would lay in tatters within months. Although there is significant dispute about the role of President Jackson's policies in generating the Panic, his repayment in specie of the nation's foreign debt had depleted hard currency reserves while his Specie Circular tightened money supplies, his successful campaign against the Second Bank of the USA prevented a calculated and central response to economic instability, and his shift of federal

government reserves to politically favored state banks placed American individuals, businesses, and financial institutions under significant economic constraints at a time of debt–supported speculative activity that had been encouraged by Jackson's earlier land policies. In the twenty-first-century parlance, an economic bubble was forming. A combination of domestic and foreign events pushed a tenuous situation over the edge. The unfortunate coincidence of falling commodity prices (especially for America's largest export, cotton), slowing land sales, as well as a tight money supply and high interest rates (at home and abroad) threw the money-starved, debt-laden economy into decline, bringing waves of bank and business failures, dramatic contraction of credit, further declines in prices, and substantial unemployment (Howe 2007, 503–4; Larson 2010, 92–6; Pessen 1978, 146–8; Roberts 2012; Schlesinger 1953, 217–26; Watson 1990, 205–7). Followed by another sharp economic downturn in 1839, the closing years of the 1830s proved to be "America's First Great Depression," rooted in market volatility.[20]

The Panic would not have been possible a mere three decades earlier. Before the 1814 Treaty of Ghent freed the USA from the vestiges of colonial-era mercantilism, the country had limited and sporadic access to the most lucrative international commodity and credit markets, and thus American producers and merchants had limited opportunities for profit and limited exposure to risk beyond domestic markets (Howe 2007, 70–3). Furthermore, prior to the 1820s, those domestic markets were often geographically isolated. Composite agriculture and domestic manufactures were typically limited by the technological and institutional capacities available to connect producers and consumers and to facilitate their transactions. Between 1815 and 1836, a crucial, complex change had taken place. An economy comprising countless "locally oriented, regionally self-sufficient rural economies" was replaced by "a national market network" (Clark 1996, 25; see also Blumin 1996, 853; Howe 2007, 118; Wood 2009, 703, 706). Not only did farmers and artisans enjoy greater opportunities to sell surpluses for cash, and to consume goods once both financially and physically unattainable, but new modes of market participation quickly became "regular enterprise without which [farms and shops] would fail" (Larson 2010, 64). Thus, a patchwork of marketplaces evolved into a nascent, national market economy. The two most immediately salient aspects of this process of expansion and integration were the profusion of outlets for individual ambition (however, modest) and the interconnection it created between individual

market participants. The horizons of each market participant expanded dramatically at the very same time that each individual's fortunes were linked to those of others. Market integration brought conspicuous liberty and opportunity along with often imperceptible interdependence—and this tightening of connections between participants prepared the way for the Panic. A downturn that decades earlier would have thrown farmers, artisans, and merchants back upon subsistence practices, local markets, and personal favors instead traveled rapidly and devastatingly throughout an interconnected economic system.

It is clear that a dramatic shift in ideas and practices had taken place. The basic language and logic of production and commerce had changed, installing the market as the hegemonic pattern of economic activity. The process had been gradual and often short-sighted or unintended. Throughout the nineteenth century, individuals looking for advantage or improvement stretched the boundaries of markets, a phenomenon that intensified with the "lure of cash" in a modernizing economy (Wood 2009, 355). The forces, values, and rationality of the market reached deeper into the daily lives of ordinary persons, as the persons wittingly or not "assemble[d] themselves in a giant, interlocking network of institutions, expectations, and behaviors that all found their coordination in market forces" (Larson 2010, 3, 91). A market economy, and its attendant business cycles, had arrived.

The dawn of a new economic system entails the twilight of its predecessor. Yet just as the complex realities of a market economy are distorted when overly simplified, the American predecessor to the market defies easy, categorical characterization. Recent historical scholarship suggests that the American economy, even in its earliest colonial, mercantilist days, was never truly a subsistence economy. The market revolution was carried along by intensification of manufacturing and composite agriculture, but these activities were already visible features of economic life in all but the remotest settlements. Similarly, the degree of integration of local markets into a national market economy illustrated by the Panic is better understood as a change of degree than one of kind. Relationships of credit and debt, profit and loss, risk and reward that were familiar elements of local and regional economies were reproduced and integrated at national and international levels. And even the hegemony of market values and rationality were intensifications of already existing patterns (Ibid., 3–4; Rothenberg 1992, 33–7). Nonetheless, the collected intensifications and extensions of the familiar effected a dramatic

transformation—the rise of a market economy set Americans down the path to a market society. Perhaps the single most telling development was the shift from diverse markets "embedded within and constrained by values antithetical to them within the culture to the 'disembedded' market whose values penetrated and reinvented that culture" (Rothenberg 1992, 3). This is the primary insight of the so-called moral economists: prior to the rise of an integrated market economy, the various domains of economic life had been substantially "submerged in general social relations," rendering markets "an accessory feature of an institutional setting controlled and regulated" by exogenous norms and authority (Polanyi 1944/2001, 70; see also Thompson 1971, 79). That is, premarket economies reflected a society's deeper moral, political, and religious norms. From this starting point, the market revolution signified not just a practical shift in who participated in the market and how, but a deeper normative shift in how economic activity and its place in both individual and social life was understood. The imperatives of the market overstepped traditional boundaries, as common images of ambition, opportunity, prudence, and prosperity took on the hues imparted by more frequent market participation. Though the market never became absolutely autonomous, the antebellum economy underwent a dramatic and reverberating normative realignment that serves as the backdrop of this book. The concepts of liberty and equality became more closely associated with their economic manifestations, and individualism began its complex yet enduring marriage to the market (Larson 2010, 23).

2.2.2 Individuals and the Antebellum Market

The individualism of the antebellum period was, as I have suggested, not merely a consequence of economic developments. For instance, religious doctrines, modes of speech, and ideals of self-improvement led the progress of the market as often as they followed it, and such aspects of American life were at times in marked tension with the demands of the new economy. It is therefore important to avoid overstating the coincidence or complementarity of individualism and the market, casting the age of the first-person singular as little more than the age of economic self-interest, and individualism as another name for market culture.[21] Nonetheless, individualism and the market evolved together, however, sporadically and unevenly. The rhythms, practices, and ideals of life in the new market economy variously inspired, informed, and contradicted the

rising culture of the individual. This complex, evolving relationship provided the context for antebellum individualist thought, especially that of Emerson and Thoreau.

Integration of local and regional markets into a national market economy wrought profound changes in the economic activities and opportunities of individuals, subtly redefining the lived conditions of dependence and independence. As agriculture (which was still the largest sector of the economy) shifted toward market-oriented commodity production, the pseudo-aristocratic practices of the indenture and tenant farming gave way to a relatively free market in agricultural wage labor outside of the plantation areas of the South (Howe 2007, 552). However, the free flows of labor were balanced against the new imperatives of market production. Even at the smallest scales of composite agriculture, commodity crops claimed greater proportions of arable land and available labor, marginalizing diversified production for household consumption. Simultaneously, farmers reprioritized the distribution of their produce. Whereas the best crops would have once directly supplied the household while the surplus supplied the market, it became common for the market to receive the first and best, with the household consuming the surplus and whatever the cash earned in the market could buy. This example of how market participation brought "new values and attitudes" also illustrates a subtle redefinition of the yeoman's worldview of individual independence (Clark 1996, 26). Agrarian ideals of self-sufficiency and self-employment, and the visions of prosperity they informed, frequently gave way to commercial ideals of shrewdness and acquisitive acumen. As farms were reorganizing around the individuated nuclear family and ancillary wage labor, the archetype of the successful, self-improving farmer was likewise falling in line with the pace and direction of larger economic change.

Even starker were the transformations in trades and manufactures, which were to define the new market economy. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the scale and variety of domestic production exploded. Americans had long shown a remarkable facility for commodifying nature, but the market revolution was accompanied by hitherto unprecedented creativity and energy.[22] Simultaneous expansion and integration of markets gave both incentive and outlet to the pragmatic, tinkering spirit, spurring individuals to seek their self-improvement not only through solving their own problems but also through devising and selling solutions to the problems of others. Technological advances

that typically originated as novel solutions to immediate, local difficulties quickly became articles of commerce and intellectual property, enabling inventors, consumers, and merchants to claim a greater share of prosperity through market transactions (Howe 2007, 535; Larkin 1988, 47–53). Again, as in agriculture, the market redefined the terms of individual opportunity and success. Furthermore, technological advance and gains in agricultural productivity depressed the price of farm labor, fueling a century-long exodus from the countryside and small towns to the growing manufacturing centers.

Work itself also changed in ways that had complex, individualizing effects. Market participation had a solvent effect upon the traditional integrity of trades, devoted to a particular, more or less self-complete, production process. The status of an artisan went hand in hand with the integrity of the trade. Since the earliest colonial days, artisans—men in shops as well as women in the home—had enjoyed a dignity and standing akin to that of the yeoman farmer. Personal independence was bound up in control over an entire productive process. The market, however, thrived on efficiencies and economies of scale, and one of its signal imperatives was the division of labor. The putting-out system was perhaps the first step in the atomization of productive processes, breaking manufacturing into steps that could be contracted out as piecework to individuals (often women and children). The practice not only simplified and cheapened labor, but it also converted the work of an artisan into discrete steps, performed by distinct persons, overseen by a management structure, however rudimentary (Clark 2006, 163–4; Larkin 1988, 58; Sellers 1991, 25–6). It opened opportunities for market participation and wages to many persons, but only by carving households into laborers, and crafts into discrete tasks that need not be housed within an independent workshop.

Yet the putting-out system was only the intimation of what was to come. Antebellum Americans sowed the seeds of industrialization that would bear fruit after the Civil War. In addition to the division of labor into individuated tasks performed by separate laborers, great innovations in mechanization, standardization, and interchangeability of parts ushered in the so-called American system of manufactures that animated the booming manufacturing sector (Howe 2007, 532–8; McPherson 1988, 13–6). The age witnessed the birth of mills and factories, and at all scales, more Americans "were becoming full-time producers of objects" (Larkin 1988, 58). New manufacturing operations furthered

the atomization of traditional crafts into steps performed by low-skilled wage laborers, beginning with hand manufactures performed by women and later spreading to trades primarily worked by men (Kessler-Harris 2003, 29). The artisanal shops that were once the backbone of early American manufacturing, in which masters, journeymen, and apprentices performed highly skilled crafts in their entirety, slowly withered in the shadows of new factories that could produce more commodities more efficiently and cheaply (Margo 1996, 232–5). The decline of the traditional workshop also meant the disembedding of labor and trades from professional norms that had both constrained and protected individual artisans. While some early experiments in mechanized manufacturing, especially the planned mill towns of New England, enforced fairly traditional moral norms upon novel industrial arrangements (e.g., the domestic and sexual virtues expected of "mill girls"), the market ultimately proved stronger than traditional morality and consigned these experiments to the status of idealistic interludes (Feller 1995, 119–21; Kessler-Harris 2003, 33–5; Larkin 1988, 54–8; Larson 2010, 112–6; Wayne 2007, 34–6). Businesses of all sorts became larger and more dependent upon the new economy, outgrowing the normative frames of traditional workplaces and adopting market values in their stead.

What is more, the new modes of industrial labor were socially as well as functionally divided (Larkin 1988, 60). Even under the early arrangements of the putting-out system, a laborer could sustain a variety of social relationships during working hours. Women spinning and sewing at home could, like artisans in a small shop, interact with others in a variety of capacities throughout the course of a workday. Work life and home life could fruitfully coexist, as they ostensibly had for countless generations. New modes of manufacturing, however, clearly partitioned time and space into work and leisure, on the clock and off the clock (McPherson 1988, 24). Before Taylorism turned the late nineteenth-century workplace into the site of precise measurement and management, antebellum mills and factories began arranging individual laborers as if parts in a machine, each performing a distinct, repetitive function, in relative physical and social isolation, moving to the rhythms of clock-time.

Taking place in an age of ambition and striving, wherein the decline of traditional trades contributed to the effective deregulation of the post-mercantilist economy, the advent of modern industry and wage labor reinforced the egalitarian ideal of individual self-making. The reserve

of seemingly limitless, cheap frontier lands and proliferating examples of market success at all levels of society underscored the binary of opportunity and responsibility. The popular attitudes of the day, apparent in both the Democratic and Whig outlooks, demonstrated unwavering faith in the individual. So long he was not stymied by conspiracy and corruption (according to the Democrats) or the lack of a developed setting in which to strive (according to the Whigs), each earns and deserves what he or she makes for himself or herself. As a greater proportion of economic activity took the form of wage labor, the path to self-employment had to be reinterpreted, but the end itself remained largely the same[23] (Wood 2009, 349). Whether it meant saving the cash to start one's own business or to buy land in the expanding frontier, the age promised opportunity for self-advancement. The realities of the new economy, in which labor was less skilled and the labor market more fluid, were sometimes in tension with practical realization of this dream. De-skilling, for instance, both equalized prospects for advancement, because the average worker could realistically perform a greater range of jobs, yet it also made individual workers largely interchangeable, as fewer jobs required uncommon skills (Howe 2007, 537–8; Rose 1981, 110). Thus, in the land of opportunity, individuals were on their own in the market, especially the labor market, as autonomous, responsible economic atoms—rising and falling, it was commonly believed, according to their own lights and efforts. Ironically, however, individuals in the market tended to look like and be treated as indistinguishable, interchangeable components of an economic machine. Economic individuation thus looked quite different depending upon where one stood in the marketplace.

It was also during the antebellum period that "[e]xchange, divorced from manufacture or shipping, emerged as a distinct and often lucrative calling" (Feller 1995, 124). Country shopkeepers and city merchants had been familiar characters in American commercial life since colonial times, but the expansion and integration of markets, coupled with internal improvements and technological advance, created new opportunities for the aspiring middle-men of the market (Ibid.; Larkin 1988, 38; McPherson 1988, 14). Itinerant peddlers and specialized vendors were among the most effective market vectors, bringing the new economy and its distinctive culture into nearly every home (Feller 1995, 124–5; Howe 2007, 45–7; Jaffee 1991; Larkin 1988, 208). They also exemplified a new vocation of self-making uniquely suited to the dynamics of a market economy. Only a few generations earlier, the merchant trade was the reserve of the wealthy

and the well-connected; ordinary individuals were fated to remain suppliers and customers of merchants. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, an individual with a small amount of capital could try his hand at the calling of commerce, making a living off of market transactions in goods that he did not personally create. Perhaps more than other market participants, the canny, striving merchant embodied the dynamism and inner tensions of antebellum individualism. On the one hand, self-making through commerce often required reinvention of oneself and one's business, riding the waves of supply and demand, and responding to trends of production and consumption. Success stories vindicated the ideals of agency and equal opportunity. On the other hand, commercial vocations entailed a special subjection to the market. A merchant's prosperity was ultimately dependent upon needs, tastes, technologies, and economic forces far beyond his control. The same could be said of the wage laborer and commodity farmer. All found themselves in a "leveled society, more horizontal than hierarchical," reaching for the fruits of agency seemingly within the reach of each and all, but mired in an interdependent economic order that made grasping and holding those fruits all the more challenging (Feller 1995, 123).

The market revolution thus transformed the ways in which individuals related to their own work and to one another through their work. For nearly all occupations—agricultural, manufacturing, and commercial—work became more productive, but less collaborative; more mobile, but less social; and more open to personal ambition, but less secure. The human scale of the premarket economy gave way to a new, superhuman or inhuman scale of integrated markets and aggregated business firms. Nothing embodied this simultaneous individuation and integration more tangibly than the nineteenth-century city. Throughout the century, urban centers were fed by migration from rural areas and immigration from European countries and colonies (Howe 2007, 526–7; McPherson 1988, 9–10). Whereas the location and layout of European cities were typically the results of centuries of organic growth representing far more than just economic considerations, American cities were typically recent outgrowths of primarily economic considerations, especially once railroads blazed the trail of westward expansion (Howe 2007, 526–7; Trachtenberg 2007, 115–6). Even cities that were not planned from the ground up by businesses effectively became auxiliaries of the market. Cities based around a single industry, such as textile hubs of Waltham and Lowell, Massachusetts, furnish the clearest examples, but

the organization of all modern cities reflected the realities of a market economy premised upon an individuated, fluid labor force. According to Alan Trachtenberg, "[a]s the domestic making of goods receded, city dwellers became more and more enmeshed in the market, more and more dependent on buying and selling, selling their labor in order to buy their sustenance; the network of personal relations, of family, friends, neighbors, comes to count for less in the maintenance of life than the impersonal transactions and abstract structures of the marketplace" (2007, 121). The city was becoming a microcosm of the market, a nexus of modern agriculture, industry, and commerce. Of course communal ties remained, but their nature changed. Cities were a subtle element of the broader reimagination of community as a voluntaristic association of individuals. Even neighborhoods structured along the seemingly unchosen or fixed lines of class or ethnicity ultimately reflected (or were interpreted to reflect) personal choices and fortunes in one way or another, mediated by market activities and values. For a rapidly growing number of adults in the highly mobile, volatile antebellum society, one's physical dwelling was the result not of ancestry or unalterable identity but of one's achieved standing in the market, with wealth, success, and class variously stemming from deliberate self-making. One's place, literal or figurative, was the result of responsible agency.

2.2.3 Individuals and Antebellum Culture

Under the egalitarian and individualistic conditions of antebellum society, in which attachments and purposes were chosen, and sustenance and self-improvement were increasingly mediated by the market, the bases of personal identity and social standing were rendered tenuous. Both within cities and without, "the density and stability of the social medium" inherited from the eighteenth century were eroding (Anderson 1971, 4). Premarket society was, by most historical accounts, characterized by moral economies and "patterns of reciprocal obligation" that blurred the lines between economic, religious, and other domains of life (Larkin 1988, 37; see also Stokes 1996, 4). Individual horizons of opportunity were oriented and constrained, and the textures of community and identity were supplied, by typically unchosen and seemingly unalterable contingencies—family, religion, ethnicity, locale, and class. Work or profession was by no means unimportant elements of life and identity prior to the rise of the market, but their salience waxed as other elements were

marginalized. The egalitarian culture and ideals of the early nineteenth century undermined traditional divisions of society into hierarchical ranks (natural or otherwise), leaving individual striving and the fortunes won thereby as the primary determinants of social standing.[24] Market participation became the common denominator of a voluntaristic society, with profession signaling one's relative place in society and, because it could be read as the outcome of individual choice and effort, often serving as a proxy for one's character (Bledstein 2001, 7). As Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in 1842, Americans seemed to credit "the State Street proverb that nobody fails who ought not to fail. There is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money" (1970, 295). Though he might not have fully believed it himself, many people apparently embraced the notion that worldly success was a sign of individual character.

The promise of equal opportunity for self-making through the market created a sense of anxiety about identity and social standing, and the market itself furnished new means of addressing this unease. Changing clothing fashions, especially for men, reflected the high valuation of pragmatic striving and furnished a text from which elements of identity could be read. As Jack Larkin has noted, "[m]en's shorter coats and longer pants were in reality an embellished version of the working costume of sailors and laborers. As a whole society donned working dress, the new men's fashion defined a transition into commercial and industrial ways" (1988, 182–3). Hair and dress were worn not to indicate one's fixed station in a social hierarchy, but one's chosen ways of getting a living and making a self in a market society (even if occupations were interpreted hierarchically). Because of the common faith that fortunes followed character, the distinctions of dress between a banker and a dock worker could be read not simply as markers of taste and disposable wealth, but as markers of personality, communicating something meaningful if partial about the life and character of the wearer.

Fashion was only the most publicly visible face of the new material culture of a market society. Over the span of little more than a generation, the household had changed from the primary site of social and economic production to "the place of consumption" (Trachtenberg 2007, 129). "[R]ising personal incomes," typically earned outside the home, enabled indulgence in an "expanding array of consumer goods" that were the products of new market-oriented domestic and foreign manufactories (Blumin 1989, 138; see also Larkin 1988, 53). As the center of life

shifted away from community and family toward the more individualistic and voluntaristic market, home life, and the values and identities it inculcated and sustained, became defined less by what one did (in the encompassing, largely noneconomic sense) than by what one had and how one displayed it. The same sense of individual potential and its responsiveness to environment illustrated by the reform movements of the period is subtly displayed in a contemporaneous "ideal of domestic comfort and decency" that was not confined to persons of wealth[25] (Larkin 1988, 133). The circulation of goods in the market provided a world of consumer opportunity and "promoted a more commodified type of social awareness, one more nearly derived from styles of living than from personal and particular hierarchical relations" (Blumin 1996, 830). Much like how one's contributions to the market were understood to give a glimpse of the soul, what one took from it likewise bespoke one's character. Consuming too little, or too much, or things of the wrong kind or in the wrong combination suggested inadequate or excessive ambition, or a confused sense of value or priority. Modern advertising, which began in earnest during the first half of the nineteenth century and matured by its end, was premised upon this widely appreciated connection between product and consumer, using idealized identities to appeal to a target audience (Trachtenberg 2007, 137). The identity-consumption nexus was also apparent at the aggregate level of class, especially as changing practices and scales of production diverted more and more workers into wage labor. Disparities in wealth and status resulting from market participation were to be addressed not by deliberately "reordering social relations," but by "providing more opportunities for the lower classes to consume a greater variety of goods" (Ibid., 151). Thus, the market offered a pervasive frame for prospects of individual status and identity—production and consumption, work and home, fell under the hegemony of its values. Deficiencies in one dimension of economic life ought to find their remedy in another dimension. Antebellum judges and politicians institutionalized this rising faith in the market as the primary locus of both individual and collective self-improvement by placing many economic matters beyond the reach of law and politics[26] (Clark 1996, 37; Feller 1995, 175; Sellers 1991, 34–69).

Despite the vague and malleable egalitarianism that often stood behind them, the cultural transformations wrought by the market bore upon men and women in markedly different ways. Even though women

were entering the wage-earning workforce in greater numbers, in an increasing range of trades, ideals of "true womanhood" (that often provided a degree of moral standing in the context of voluntary associations) stigmatized women's participation in the market.[27] As men were drawn into the cold, competitive domain of the market, women, especially of the middle and upper classes, were expected to "preserve the home as a sanctuary," and "to serve as the repository of the higher moral and ethical values" that market participation compromised, carefully cultivating and displaying their own "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Kessler-Harris 2003, 49–50; Welter 1976, 21). The antebellum "domestic ideology" dictated a gendered division of labor between earning wages and tending to the home. Women were thus often caught between countervailing forces. As historian Alice Kessler-Harris has noted, "[i]n return for an ideology that glorified their roles and perhaps offered some power within the family, women were denied a broad range of social and economic options" enjoyed by even the poorest of free men (Kessler-Harris 2003, 50; see also Lerner 1969). Notwithstanding the disadvantages they faced, women were not merely "cloistered away from competitive economic relations"; they participated in the market in myriad ways, often effacing the tenets of the prevailing domestic ideology (Stanley 1996, 79; see also Cogan 1989, 3–26, 199–255; Margo 1996, 207–43). Many young and unmarried women performed given-out piecework at home, or worked as domestic servants or "mill girls," if only until marriage, and financial straits compelled many to work for wages their entire lives. Those who remained in the home nonetheless continued to perform substantial work that brought them in touch with the market, producing goods for supplemental income, taking in boarders, and tending the day-to-day life and consumptive practices of the household, though this work became largely hidden and, compared to the work of wage-earning men, devalued. Thus women were denied the full opportunities of the market economy even as they were, directly or indirectly, exposed to its forces and risks. Whereas men were expected to earn a livelihood and forge an identity in the bustle of the marketplace, women were expected, at some point in their lives, to tend the hearth and craft an identity within the confines of the nuclear family home. All, however, were now ineluctably subject to the new economic order and its distinctive culture.

As Emerson and Thoreau were keenly and critically aware, work and consumption were tenuous bases of identity, especially in the face

of the looming, dynamic, impersonal forces of the market. It is easy to romanticize or exaggerate premarket social life as a panacea of human scale, "face-to-face" life, economic, and otherwise, but there is no question that the market revolution profoundly changed how people lived (Blumin 1989, 26; Schlesinger 1953, 334–5). In the old economy, farmers and artisans most commonly "rendered their services […] to meet immediate needs of lifelong neighbors, who usually furnished the raw materials and made return in farm produce or labor" (Sellers 1991, 13). Economic activity, even outside of the home, was oriented primarily by personal, familial, or communal needs and relationships. One could say that for most Americans the very notion of "economic" activity clung to its ancient meaning, connected to management and flourishing of a household (especially in the extended sense of a stem family). With the ascendancy of the market came a new, depersonalized economic order, in which individual economic agents dealt with one another through instrumental transactions. "The producer no longer personally delivered his product to market, exchanging words with the buyer as well as title to the product and thus no longer conveyed and individualized identity" unique to both product and producer (Atack et al. 1996, 257). In part, depersonalization of economic life was necessitated by the sheer scale of a market economy, which in some ways reflected the scale of American society, in terms of both geography and population. Whether they took advantage of their mobility or stayed near their birthplace, ordinary individuals "did business far more frequently with total strangers" and between strangers only the impersonal medium of money supplied the assurance that once derived from established relationships (Larson 2010, 28). One mode of depersonalization fed others, as "everything about the cash nexus emphasized fleeting, anonymous transactions, in private life as in business" (Ibid., 127). The cumulative effect of such transactions was the creation of an economy driven by the invisible, superhuman hands of market forces. In the old economy, a substantial proportion of transactions were negotiated in terms that reflected unique constellations of custom, personality, relationship, and circumstance. In the new order, market prices, the universal units of exchange-value, were the result of "[c]utthroat competition" between scores of instrumentally-minded individuals who probably never met and never would—productive though the antebellum period was, it was an age of "heartless markets and heartless men" (Ibid., 74, 98; see also Trachtenberg 2007, 82).

Though the market consisted of a "nearly infinite number of individual choices," and thus was the fruit of a distinctive kind of individualism, it only rarely and fleetingly wore a human face (Lepler 2013, 8).

Identity and authenticity were fundamental personal as well as social problems in antebellum America (Halttunen 1982, xv, 33–55). As suggested above, one's profession and location in the "great chain of acquisition" provided some footing upon which to base a sense of self (Breen 2004, 140). But these were themselves precarious and even destabilizing accomplishments for many antebellum Americans. The market's simultaneous liberation and domestication of ambition encouraged even common folk to reach beyond the usual horizon of the "decent competency" of an unadorned yet relatively self-sustaining life (Blumin 1989, 38). As Sellers put it, "[t]he market fostered individualism and competitive pursuit of wealth by open-ended production of commodity values that could be accumulated as money" (Sellers 1991, 5). That is, market participation entailed at least provisional endorsement of a striving ideal of economic self-improvement. As the ways of the market increasingly became *the* ways of securing a living, economic success and failure underwent both conceptual and normative redefinition. The State Street proverb that the reason for success is "in the man" reflects the promotion of economic success to the status of a verdict on an individual's life and character more generally. Yet two terms denoting economic failure crossed paths as their meanings also changed. Debt lost "the stigma that for generations had made it shameful," while "poverty, long thought of as misfortune, started to *acquire* a stigma as evidence of weakness or vice, a refusal to scramble for wages in the new free-market economy"[28] (Larson 2010, 137). Apart from instances of consumption beyond one's means, debt signified striving to improve oneself, and the common belief was that in seeking diligently his own uplift, the individual would enhance the commonweal along the way even if doing so "was no part of his intention" (Smith 1776/1994, 485; see also Cawelti 1965, 42). In the "go ahead" age of striving, poverty signified a lack of self-control, an unwillingness to avail oneself of opportunities for self-improvement, or both (Lepler 2013, 8). This conceptual shift announced an eager optimism but it also papered over a persistent anxiety. As Weber famously noted almost a century later, antebellum Americans were caught in a feedback effect whereby the desire to have worldly proof of one's worth (which, though Weber did not use the term, was inseparable from one's sense of personal identity) pushes the individual into the very modes

of economic striving and acquisition that only partly deliver and continually risk worldly ruin. Or, in the contemporary, moralizing words of Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing,

> Anxiety grows with possession. Riches become dearer by time […] He who has more than he can use or manage, grows more and more eager and restless for new gains, muses by day and dreams by night of wealth; and in this way the whole vigor of his soul, of intellect and affection, shoots up into an intense, unconquerable, and almost infinite passion for accumulation[.][29]

Economic success and failure acquired the status of windows onto the soul, keys to personal identity and worth, however, the interdependence and fickleness of the market left the individual in a difficult situation: Striving by himself to climb a ladder whose constantly changing structure and stability was mostly out of his hands.

The inexorable volatility of the market, which made it both friend and foe of self-making, came to define antebellum life, and most palpably so for those who made up the middle and lower parts of society. A common experience of the various "middling sorts" in the early nineteenth century

> was a shaky independence in the precarious marketplace. Life was a 'business' to them, with specific goals to achieve: the accumulation of sufficient property to support a family, a competence in old age, reasonable health and longevity […] Caught in the middle, between great and small, the powerful and the anonymous, the dissolute above and the wretched below—the middling sorts tossed around on a sea of risk. (Bledstein 2001, 5)

Absent the premarket norms and institutions that both constrained ambition and provided an informal safety net, middling folk were haunted by the kindred specters of success and failure. An ever greater part of one's identity became tied-up in the contingencies of the most dynamic and volatile economic system human beings had hitherto experienced. Consequently, for those in the precarious middle "the smallest economic misfortunes—a deal gone bad, an extended illness, or a general economic crisis—threatened not only a specific business venture, but the whole social status of a person" (Beckert 2001, 288). In the new market economy, the line between debt and poverty was fine and easily crossed;

middling opportunities for self-making held out tantalizing promise, yet their fruits could quickly turn to dust. Despite the growth of the middling sorts as a proportion of antebellum society, the majority still consisted of those at the relative bottom, laboring for wages, owning little if any real property, and these multitudes were also profoundly vulnerable to the very market that promised their improvement. Poverty was often their daily reality rather than a dreaded condition whose taste they hoped skillfully to avoid, and both agricultural and artisanal wage laborers were acutely vulnerable to unemployment, even short bouts of which could be ruinous (Pessen 1978, 84). The rise of the market thus left all—the high, the middling, and the low—in a situation formally, if not materially, akin to holding a wolf by the ears. Deriving a livelihood and a significant aspect of identity from market participation was risky and potentially disastrous, but few could afford to let go.

The Panic of 1837 again illustrates the complex realities of life in the new market economy, and the situation of the individual within it. The boom that preceded the Panic seemed to confirm popular notions of self-making that the reason for success or failure is "in the man." But as a sharp economic contraction rippled through local, national, and international markets, "Americans who had prided themselves on their self-made success [or the future promise thereof] began to doubt their faith in individual economic agency" (Lepler 2013, 3). Diligent striving in the market did not, it turned out, guarantee economic self-improvement anymore surely than planting extra acreage had guaranteed a bumper crop for premarket farmers. Personal fortunes, no matter how wisely or resolutely pursued, were still dependent upon many things beyond any individual's control. However, rather than disproving the premises and values of the market culture that produced it, the Panic ultimately fostered even deeper commitment to them. There is perhaps no better example of this doubling-down on both the market and a broader individualism than the advent of credit agencies.

New York businessman and abolitionist Lewis Tappan pioneered this novel venture, which uniquely reflected the promise and problems of the new economy. The Panic was at least partly the result of an unfortunate constellation of speculative, credit-driven transactions between and among strangers. According to historian Scott Sandage,

> [t]ransportation and communication linked regions into a national market, yet technology outpaced economic, legal, and social infrastructures.

> Trading beyond the horizon precluded looking another man in the eye. Confidence men now moved faster than their reputations, and even if the man was good, his money might not be. (Sandage 2005, 99–128; quote from 101)

Individuals frequently had little to inform and guide their economic transactions other than raw numbers, rumors, and (if they were lucky) second- or third-hand reports about the reputations of others. Tappan, whose earlier commercial ventures had failed in the Panic, was impressed and disturbed by how readily imprudent or dishonest economic actors could move to a new locale and reinvent themselves, leaving their failures, debts, and misdeeds behind. Sensing that the impersonality of the new economy was a source of both the boom and the bust, Tappan established his Mercantile Agency in 1841 as a means to "manag[e] risk by managing identity" (Ibid., 100). This innovative enterprise offered private files to its paid subscribers, compiled and updated by ever-growing networks of local informants, supplying a market-oriented substitute for personal acquaintance and confidence: the credit report. With its advent,

> [t]he market now had a memory, an archive for permanent records of entire careers […] More than a bank balance or a character reference, a credit report folded morals, talents, finances, past performance, and future potential into one summary judgment. As a credential of such broad scope, it resembled the modern concept of identity. (Ibid., 101–3)

A firm believer in the ideal of the self-made individual, Tappan put the State Street proverb into diligent, calculated practice, commodifying knowledge of the "reason in the man" that stood behind his worldly success or failure (Lepler 2013, 224–5). This ingenious response to the hard lessons of the Panic illustrates how individualism and the market were at once intertwined and in tension with one another. On the one hand, credit reporting was a solution to a problem antebellum individualism had introduced into the new economy—the risky, protean character of striving, mobile, and self-improving agents. Tappan's venture, and others that followed its example, produced badges of relatively fixed and stable identity that would follow even the most ambitiously self-making persons. On the other hand, the personalized profiles supplied by such reporting also equipped individuals to move more fluidly through an atomized, disembedded economic system. The assurances of character

that would have once been supplied by personal experience were supplied by a new kind of impersonal economic transaction, thereby facilitating profitable markets in credit that would have once been supplied by family and community. Credit reporting was, as it were, a scar indicating where two titanic forces had collided, a reminder that one way of life had ended and another had begun.

2.2.4 Pervasive, Ambiguous Individualism

After the Panic of 1837 and the years of painful recovery that followed it, few could deny that the market was an entrenched feature of American life, however, dimly its nature was understood. Opposition to the market lost its early tones of defiance and resistance and took on those of nostalgia and resignation. Democrats and Whigs differed deeply over how, but not whether, the market would serve to bind the nation together. Religious congregations and denominations offered alternative views of how individuals should conduct themselves in market life, and what success or failure indicated, but very few seriously counseled or attempted withdrawal or resistance. The material as well as intellectual aftermath of the crisis put on subtle display what one might call the cunning of the market, its "power to bend oppositional forces to its ends" (Sellers 1991, 208). Struggling to make sense of their world and to pick up the pieces, most looked to the very economic system that had crumbled.

The upheavals that tested and entrenched the market likewise tested and entrenched the pragmatic and dispositional individualism interwoven with it. The Panic inspired a modest wave of communitarian and utopian experiments (such as Fruitlands, Brook Farm, and a number of Fourierist phalanxes), as well as labor protests and attempts at organization by both male artisans and female factory workers, but these proved to be exceptions rather than the rule.[30] Despite its occasionally bitter wages, individualism would remain a dominant, animating ethos not only of antebellum society but of the entire nineteenth century, and "[t]he self-made man was individualism's favorite son" (Sandage 2005, 94). But what "individualism" meant, who exactly "the self-made man (or woman)" was, remained persistently indeterminate—the words on everyone's lips were, to no great surprise, subject to many different, imprecise interpretations. The pervasive yet ambiguous spirit of antebellum individualism was in need of thoughtful articulation and self-conscious exemplification.

Few heard the call more clearly, or answered it more resolutely, than Emerson and Thoreau. Although these two Harvard-educated, radical New England Transcendentalists can scarcely be taken as representative of the breadth of individualistic spirit in antebellum America, they remain to this day two of its most careful expositors. As Quentin Anderson suggested, Emerson (and, I would add, his protégé Thoreau) must "be looked at squarely if we are to understand how the process of shaking off our ties to others was first imagined" (1971, 5). An inchoate individualism was in the air, and these two strove to give it refined, robust expression. Yet these expressions were not identical. Indebted as they were to a common spiritual and intellectual vocabulary and recoil as they did at what they took to be betrayals or perversions of individuality all around them, they offer markedly different postures toward society writ large and toward other individuals. The two chapters that follow are attempts to make good on this appraisal and explore its contours.

Emerson and Thoreau were astute observers of antebellum society, its economics and politics, as well as its religion and arts, and they recognized that the age of the first-person singular was, for better or worse, the age of the market. Each sought to understand how the individual could properly attend to his or her own vocation of self-making in a society whose rhythms were increasingly accommodated to, if not dictated by, a new economic order. Was the market the friend or the foe of self-improvement? How ought the self-making individual to navigate economic life and how might economic activity serve or endanger other worthy undertakings? Here again, these kindred thinkers, undoubted champions of the individual, arrived at different assessments. Emerson, the elder and more economically successful of the two, struggled for decades to reconcile the promise and peril of the market to the stringent demands of his individualistic philosophy. This negotiation was on public display throughout his long career as an essayist and lecturer, whereas Thoreau, the more practically eccentric of the two, arrived early in his short life at an antagonistic understanding of the individual vis-à-vis the market. Through experiments in principled living, and the writings arrayed around them, he articulated an importantly different individualistic ideal that was inseparable from a scathing critique of the market. These two friends thus offer unique, intricate perspectives upon related phenomena that unfolded throughout the nineteenth century:

the individuation of American society and the rise of the market as an encompassing pattern of social integration and coordination. That one conditionally accepted the new economic order, while the other literally embodied a repudiation of it demonstrates all the more vividly the fecundity and ambiguity of antebellum individualism.

Notes

1. On the "transportation revolution" see Taylor (1951); on the 'communication revolution' see Howe 2007.
2. In treating the rise of individualism in America as a nineteenth phenomenon, my account takes its bearings from revisionist historical works that have challenged the once dominant view of eighteenth-century America as a land of liberal individualism (e.g., Pocock 2003; Shain 1994; Wood 1998).
3. Such strong connections have been made by scholars on both sides of a normative and descriptive debate. Critics of individualism and the market that see them as inextricably linked include MacPherson (1962) and Sellers (1991) and to a lesser extent Polanyi (1944–2001), whereas defenders of individualism and the market who likewise treat them as necessary companions include Friedman (1962), von Hayek (1948), and Nozick (1974). The same basic notion is evident in the somewhat more neutral work of Robertson (1933–1973) and Weber (1905–1958).
4. Yet this egalitarianism must not be overstated, as between two and three million persons were held as chattel slaves during the era about which Tocqueville wrote (e.g., Watson 1990, 13).
5. Rephrasing Rousseau, one might say that in being made equally connected to all as citizens, one is deeply connected to few if any as persons.
6. Although Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that both the idea and the reality of the frontier deeply shaped antebellum culture has been challenged by subsequent historians, the age was undoubtedly moved by the promise that America possessed adequate land for a thousand generations (Turner 1920; Jefferson 1801).
7. The exaggeration is also illustrated by American attitudes toward race, in the North as well as in the South, throughout the nineteenth century. See, for instance, Turner (2012).
8. Yet Tocqueville worried that such a disposition "isolates [individuals] from their contemporaries," leaving each "forever thrown back on himself alone," in "danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart" (1835–1969, 508). Understood thus, individualism is a kind of social and political vice, the opposite of social cohesion

and fellow-feeling, and foreshadowing the atomization and *anomie* that Emile Durkheim attributed to late nineteenth-century industrial societies. Admittedly, the Americans had unwittingly invented a novel doctrine of enlightened self-interest to restrain some of the excesses of individualism, but for Tocqueville individualism remained an interesting if unfortunate adjunct of equality and democracy (ibid., 525–8).

9. Frances Trollope (1832) quoted in Larkin (1988), 1.
10. Philip Hone, quoted in Howe (2007), 835.
11. Yet nineteenth-century Americans would invent new distinctions of their own, primarily on bases of wealth and race.
12. The phrase was the coinage of Washington Irving in the 1837 short story "The Creole Village" (Irving 1998, 654–60).
13. In Howe's characterization, somewhat to the contrary, American farms were nearly always "economically individualistic, operated by a single nuclear family, not an extended kin-group or communal enterprise" (2007, 34).
14. This theme is plentifully exemplified in Wayne (2007).
15. For a more general view incorporating the American context, see Foucault (1977), especially 135–228.
16. For studies showing the intellectual and practical diversity of the movement, as well as their shared commitment to individual agency and its necessary social and political supports, see Blue (2005) and Cumbler (2008). See also Howe (2007), 643–56.
17. Such views are exemplified by Richard Furman's 1823 "Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population of the United States in Communication to the Governor of South Carolina" (Furman 1985, 274–86).
18. President Andrew Jackson's Bank War and the legacy of localism it left behind can be understood as a crusade not so much against national power (as Jackson repeatedly insisted upon the supremacy of federal power, such as during the Nullification Crisis of 1832–1833) as against a corrupt elite, a "moneyed power" that conspired to undermine the independence of the ordinary individual (Howe 2007, 373–95; Sellers 1991, 301–63).
19. As will be discussed further in Chap. 4, the *laissez-faire* economic and political doctrines that were so influential in the Gilded Age were substantial and deliberate departures from earlier notions of police powers and their proper use for the public welfare going back to the common law traditions inherited from Great Britain (Fine 1956; Gilman 1993; Novak 1996).
20. Sellers suggests that the Panic of 1819 was the country's "traumatic awakening to the capitalist reality of boom and bust," but scholarly consensus has since converged on the notion that the more extended and profound

Panic of 1837 better captures the realities of market economy business cycles (Sellers 1991, 137; Larson 2010, 44–5; Roberts 2012).

21. Sellers falls squarely into this intellectual groove, though most scholars of the period have since offered more moderate, measured views.
22. Boorstin discusses the trade in ice and granite as examples of the American knack for turning natural processes and objects toward economic gain (1965, 10–20).
23. However, for much of the antebellum period, wage labor was primarily the province of men and boys, with "housework" (itself a new concept, differentiated from work for the market) receding into the obscurity of private life (Larson 2010, 119).
24. On the evolution of the notion of rank into the notion of class, see Blumin (1989), 17–137.
25. Though the new material culture of consumerism bores a normative weight upon all Americans, the middling and upper classes were most deeply enmeshed in "the codified parlor vocabulary that signified taste and refinement" (Jaffee 2010, xiii).
26. Even the tariff could be (and by the Whigs often was) construed as a way of sheltering the new economy, enabling it to grow, spreading its influence and benefits.
27. As Gerda Lerner notes, in a sense women in the antebellum period lost ground compared to women of the colonial period, during which it was both more necessary and more accepted for women to work outside of the home (1969, 5–7).
28. On the changing views of success and failure in nineteenth-century America, see also Sandage (2005).
29. Quoted in Masur (1991, 200–1).
30. On labor unrest and organization, (see Kessler-Harris 2003, 75–83; Licht 1995, 48–63; Wilentz 2004, 299–362.)

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CHAPTER 3

Emerson and Self-Reliance: Individualism Amidst the Market

Ralph Waldo Emerson lived from 1803 to 1882, witnessing the majority of the nineteenth century and coming of intellectual age during the transformative antebellum period. Educated at Harvard to serve in the Unitarian clergy, but quickly chafed by even its more liberal institutions, he found his ultimate vocation as a public intellectual striving to depict the potency and dignity of the individual, and to diagnose the perils, he faced in American society.[1] What is more, Emerson's essays and lectures record a lifelong engagement with the complex, emergent imbrications of individualism and the rising market. The market presents a problem for Emerson's later interpreters, as it did for Emerson himself. While his engagement with the market as an intellectual, practical, and moral phenomenon is often explicit and robust, his reflections are fraught with tensions and apparent contradictions, both among his various characterizations of the market itself, and between these characterizations and his other abiding concerns, including the doctrine of self-reliance for which he is most widely remembered. Market principles and practices—trade, wealth, competition, compensation, property, labor, and vocation—resound throughout all periods of Emerson's public and private writings.[2] Yet his most strident criticism of the market in his works of the 1830s and 1840s gradually softens into an apparent accommodation of his individualism to the realities and aspirations of a maturing market system. By the 1860s and 1870s, Emerson regularly "invok[es] images of enterprise in order to locate a distinctive moral heroism in the everyday life of market culture" (Augst 1999, 93). Scholars have found various ways of dealing

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with these tensions, though the most common approach has been to resolve the tension into a developmental narrative whereby Emerson eventually made peace with the market.

The argument I wish to advance in this chapter is that the tensions in Emerson's stance toward the market cannot be eliminated, and furthermore, his doctrine of self-reliance must be implausibly softened and domesticated in order to mitigate or resolve those tensions. My guiding premise is that Emerson was genuinely torn between opposed aspects of life in market society, and his vacillation between praise and criticism of the market (both within and across his lectures and essays) manifests his continuous struggle to reconcile individualism with the realities of modern economic life. I shall argue that self-reliance is a doctrine of individual self-culture and self-assertion for which the market simultaneously furnishes opportunities to exploit and stands as an adversary with which to contend. The resources, practices, and institutions of a market economy are materials upon which the individual can exert his creative potential and, in the process, elevate and enrich both himself and others. Yet Emerson realized that the market is neither an inert nor a morally indifferent institution. In it, the individual is beset by complex and dynamic forces that would both tempt and compel him to serve shallow and even wicked ends. Rather than arriving at a series of clear-cut maxims, Emerson leaves us with a form of what Stanley Cavell has described as "perfectionism," a principled conviction that "the human self—confined by itself, aspiring toward itself—is always becoming, as on a journey […] described as education or cultivation" (2004, 26; see also Cavell 1990, 1–32). Much as Emerson's life was framed by the rise of a market society, his individualism developed in ongoing conversation with the conditions of that society, its aspirations and antagonisms, its demands and rewards. In what follows I attempt to trace the lineaments of the difficult—neither impossible nor guaranteed—coexistence of Emerson's self-reliant individual and the market.

In substantiating this argument I engage critically, though often only obliquely, with a rich and complex secondary literature that addresses the relationship between the individual and the market in Emerson's works in many voices and from many perspectives. While nearly all of Emerson's commentators have taken note of his reservations and criticisms for the tenor and quality of life in market society, especially in his Panic-era writings of the late 1830s and early 1840s, many hasten to explain them away or mitigate their significance. One body of scholarship

treats Emerson's moments of inner conflict over the market as growing pains on his way to what Sacvan Bercovitch calls an "unabashed endorsement [of] free market ideology" that "reaffirmed the basic tenets of [acquisitive market] culture" (1990, 645; 1978, 184). Christopher Newfield similarly characterizes self-reliance as "corporate individualism" that isolates the individual from his social bases, subjects him to the impersonal authority of market forces, and undermines genuine democratic political agency (1996, especially Chaps. 1–3). And Charles Sellers dismisses Emerson as a "paid lecturer to bourgeois/middle-class self-improvers" whose heralded "new order was untrammeled capitalism" dressed up as spiritual elevation (1991, 378, 380). Common to such assessments is the sense that Emerson packages market values (e.g., self-interest, ambition, diligent labor, and the sanctity of property and profit) into a self-congratulatory individualistic cant meant for middle- and upper-class consumption. Talk of self-culture and inner peace through one's principles amounts to little more than a bourgeois coping strategy in a market society obsessed with success and appearance[3] (Masur 1991, 203–4). Another body of scholarship, exemplified by George Kateb, Alex Zakaras, and John Dewey, minimizes Emerson's praise of the market, and casts him as a critic of "economic self-centeredness" who instead advocates a doctrine of democratic individuality that equips the individual to (at least partly and episodically) rise above the materialism and drudgery that characterizes so much of modern economic life[4] (Kateb 2002, 18, 152; see also Dewey 1903 and Zakaras 2009). While not denying that self-reliance may have meaningful economic expressions or implications, these commentators emphasize its power to transcend and even transform the market. As Mark Button has expressed this line of commentary, Emerson's aim "was to generate forms of social and political relation that would make room for and value the fullest possible unfolding of individuality—in oneself and others" (2015, 316). Emerson's vision thus transcends the market and outwits its conspiracies. Still others, such as Neal Dolan and Richard Teichgraeber, seek a middle ground that nonetheless minimizes the tensions between self-reliance and the market. Dolan identifies a "two-sided outlook on commerce and property" that plays out over the course of Emerson's long career, and situates this tension within a larger continuity of Emerson's "liberalism," thus resolving the tension into a more basic unifying Whiggish worldview (2011, 352; see also Dolan 2009). Similarly, Teichgraeber suggests that "[n]o one simple practical conclusion" follows from Emerson's

engagement with the market; while his "purpose is by no means to provide an unabashed endorsement of free enterprise ideology," his favorable use of the language of commerce is not merely metaphorical, but reflects a genuine commitment to the market as a site of self-improvement (1995, 37). Finally, the growing body of scholarship on Emerson's abolitionism incidentally explores his conflicting views of the market.[5] Here again, however, the apparent tension is resolved in favor of an unambiguous commitment to principles of individual rights and democratic equality in a morally wayward market society. Emerson's positive assessments of the market are seen to buckle under the moral weight of his condemnation of slavery. While these varied and influential readings provide coherent and insightful narratives to Emerson's occasionally self-contradictory work, they also tend to elide the palpable friction and agonism within his own thinking and characterize his shifting attitudes and tropes as corrections to keep a true course in a world of ever-changing circumstance. Though my own reading is often informed by these bodies of literature, my aim is to illustrate and explore the intractability of the tensions in Emerson's thought about individualism and the market.

3.1 Emerson's Individualism: Self-Reliance as Self-Culture

> In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, 1838–1842*

Although it is distinctive in its style and vivacity, Emerson's thought is a creature of its time and place, developing in an age characterized both by the fact of individualism and by the ideal of self-culture. In antebellum America, a "combination of weak institutional constraints and the market revolution, which multiplied occupational and consumer options, provided favorable conditions for […] widespread personal autonomy" (Howe 1997, 107). Free persons of all descriptions—though, women and persons of color to a lesser extent than white men—faced great opportunities for personal choice as well as heightened expectations of personal responsibility. "Man was told that he was, by nature, good, and that self-help was the great thing in his improvement of his station; that the sum total of the efforts of individuals in their own interest would

be the maximum social good" (Van Deusen 1959, 13). In this "age of the first person singular," as Emerson called it, all domains of life bore the impress of the "heroic ideal of the self-constructed individual" whose infinitude Emerson, Thoreau, and others celebrated (Emerson 1963, 70; Howe 1997, 109). Emerson's friend and elder, William Ellery Channing, extoled this ideal, declaring that

> self-culture [is] the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature […S]elf-culture is possible, not only because we can enter into and search ourselves. We have a still nobler power, that of acting on, determining and forming ourselves. This is a fearful as well as glorious endowment, for it is the ground of human responsibility. We have the power not only of tracing our powers, but of guiding and impelling them, not only of watching our passions, but of controlling them, not only of seeing our faculties grow, but of applying to them the means and influences to aid their growth […] Of all the discoveries which men need to make, the most important at the present moment, is that of the self-forming power treasured up in themselves. (1838/1969, 11, 13–4)

It is instructive that the terms self-culture and self-improvement are both drawn from agriculture, and depict the individual as a manifold resource to be worked upon so as to enrich it and enhance what it yields (Howe 1997, 122–3, 132–3). The individual's native faculties can be honed and set upon the self, turned inward and made to produce elevating effects, forming a character out of habits and action out of the behavior. Channing's mixture of urgency and optimism echoes the senses of hunger and promise for societal improvement that dominated the antebellum period. Much as the human touch was nearly everywhere in the nineteenth century bringing progress and riches forth from unimproved nature, it was widely believed that through deliberate activities, the individual could similarly bring forth progress and riches from within his own self. This sensibility was especially acute among the milieu of New England Transcendentalists, reformers and intellectuals who emerged from the most liberal edges of Unitarianism. Liberal Unitarians like Channing and Transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and George Ripley variously "urged Americans to introspection and integrity, to the exercise of independent judgment, to rejection of competitive display, to the realization of their full human potential, to lives in harmony with nature [and] saw themselves as liberating individuals from convention, conformity, and unexamined habit"

(Howe 2007, 625; see also Rose 1981, Chaps. 2 and 3). Nor was the ideal of self-culture the preserve of men, despite the gendering of the language in which it was extolled. Its advocates, including Emerson and Margaret Fuller, were among the most progressive reformers of their time and place regarding the dignity and agency of all persons (Cole 1999; Rose 1981; Wayne 2005). In the fertile soil of antebellum egalitarianism and individualism, these luminaries sought to establish a popular culture of self-culture.

According to Quentin Anderson, "Emerson became 'Emerson' in a period in which there was an acute and widely diffused emotional demand for a new mode of self-validation" (1971, 236). Intellectual ideals were desired as complements and guides to the raw energies and practical possibilities of the moment. Emerson's life and character were shaped by this longing, and from his early turn away from the orthodoxies of New England Protestantism to his last essays and lectures of the 1870s, he strove to articulate his own vision of self-culture. Much like Channing (who "pitched his lecture on *Self-Culture* […] directly to the working and laboring classes of Boston") Emerson championed a broadly addressed ideal of self-making, declaring in "The American Scholar" (1837) that the "main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man"[6] (Masur 1991, 204; Emerson 1983, 67). Also like Channing, Emerson understands the individual as possessed of powers of introspection and a protean capacity for endless self-making. The infinitude that Emerson preaches consists in the fact that there is always more to oneself than at once appears, always more to inspect, and always more to become. He shares the sense that self-culture consists in the use of one's inner powers so as to cultivate a genuine and worthy character. In the doctrine of self-reliance that was his life's work, Emerson gives a distinctive voice to the powers of the individual and the ideal of self-culture they make possible. Perhaps more than any other antebellum exponent of self-improvement, Emerson sought to reconcile the inner and outer dimensions of the individual's potencies as both thinker and agent, finding in each the necessary and ultimate realization of the other.

At its core, self-reliance is a doctrine of principle and power. In order to improve oneself, one must first apprehend what is true and valuable in oneself and for oneself. Only upon this firm basis can the individual cultivate his own life and character. The motto of principle that Emerson exclaims in "Self-Reliance" (1841) and that echoes throughout his articulations of individualism is *trust thyself*.

> A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he […] What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness […] It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (Emerson 1983, 262–3)

The language of opposition between self and society highlights the agonistic character of Emerson's individualism. In the words of his contemporary and sometimes admirer, Walt Whitman, the question "Who wants to be any man's mere follower? lurks behind every page" of Emerson's writings (1982, 1055). Yet though self-reliance is rooted in the intellectual attitude of self-trust ("believ[ing] that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men") it is realized in the practical repudiation of conformity to the ways and customs of others (Emerson 1983, 259). Emerson's invocations of "self" thus entail "as opposed to others," not merely "as distinct from others." As the above passage underscores, self-trust is most fully realized in contexts where the individual is at risk of being coopted by "large societies and dead institutions" according to whose norms, one is admonished to live (Ibid., 262). This is because self-trust is not simply a matter of knowledge, of knowing what is true for oneself (which one could still betray or abandon in one's actions). Rather, it is a matter of conviction, of both potency and tenacity in the face of countervailing forces that demand or reward conformity. While Emerson does not valorize this agonistic dimension as fully as Friedrich Nietzsche later would (i.e., he does not *only* value the person who overcomes others), he comparatively devalues the easy task of living according to one's own opinion in solitude and reserves greatness for self-trust that is born of arduous striving.

Self-trust, in which "all the virtues are comprehended," is the bedrock of principle upon which self-reliance rests (Ibid., 65). One cannot cultivate oneself without first discerning the voice of "genius" that grasps and articulates what is true and valuable. Yet Emersonian self-culture is, first and last, an active doctrine and an expression of power. As Michael Lopez has noted, Emerson's essays "rehearse […] an abiding drama of empowerment—which means antagonism" between "human power and recalcitrant fate, human identity and tough circumstances" (1996, 91). In his

understanding of power, Emerson is an especially brilliant and original expositor of a widely shared nineteenth-century sensibility. The power he invokes, analyzes, and praises is a materialistic notion of force best captured by organic processes of growth, though he also trades in mechanistic images of linear, efficient causation (Milder 1999, 54; Emerson 1983, 1095). Power is a capacity to change or transform or become; it "ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state" (Emerson 1983, 271). In *The Conduct of Life* (1860), a work that impressed and influenced Nietzsche, Emerson situates power at an ontological level, as a fundamental principle of existence, pervading and uniting the human and the non-human.[7]

> Life is a search after power; and this is an element with which the world is so saturated,—there is no chink or crevice in which it is not lodged,—that no honest seeking goes unrewarded. […] All power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world […] Success goes thus invariably with a certain *plus* or positive power: an ounce of power must balance an ounce of weight. (Emerson 1983, 971–2; 981)

More than a basic fact of the natural world, power is the key to human self-culture and the emblem of self-reliance. Just as trusting oneself entails inner conviction strong enough to overcome the countervailing opinions and customs of others, to absolve oneself in the face of one's society, cultivating oneself entails its own kinds of powerful overcoming (Bell 2007, 235). Inwardly, it demands the sort of self-control praised by Channing, whereas outwardly, it demands resolute self-assertion of a kind that is distinctly Emersonian.

Emerson recognized that the infinite interiority of the self is not an unmitigated blessing; elevation of character is not automatic, otherwise, conformity and mediocrity would be the exception rather than the rule. Endeavoring self-culture means, in part, endeavoring self-possession, claiming oneself from society by living according to one's genius. Self-reliance is thus, internally, an overcoming of self-doubt, empowerment in the form of a roughly Stoic sense of controlling one's inner discourse (Hadot 1998, 50). As George Kateb suggests, outward expressions of self-reliance are derivative of inner self-possession in thought (2002, 31). Yet self-reliance never finds ultimate repose in thought; thinking the principle of a great deed is only a necessary step toward performing it. Self-culture requires full expression of the "self-forming power treasured up"

in the individual. Such outward expression brings the individual face to face with his great and constant adversary (and sometimes enemy), society. In perhaps his most famous account of society and the conformity it embodies and demands, delivered in "Self-Reliance," Emerson describes the force of inner self-trust dissipating in its encounter with society.

> There are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. (1983, 261)

Talk of manhood and manliness suggests a narrow gendering of the Emersonian ideal, yet what he describes is, perhaps despite himself, unflinchingly universal in cast and aspiration—we all encounter it and all have both the tools and the obligation to overcome it. The conformity that Emerson decries stems not so much from an inability to live one's life on one's own terms as from "refusal to be self-directed [and] uncritical deference to exterior authorities, to fads and customs and popular pressure" (Zakaras 2009, 44). Thus his characterization of conformity is the shadow of individual choice and empowerment. He criticizes his contemporaries for "hav[ing] bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves" to ready-made identities and ways of life (Emerson 1983, 264; see also Buell 2003, 77). It is the conformist, in the final analysis, who binds himself to the ways of society—others merely tempt or demand such conformity. Likewise, the metaphor of a joint-stock company foregrounds choice. Self-loss stems not from a lack of individual agency, but from the choice to exercise that agency in a narrow, timid, and self-abandoning way, just as investment in a joint-stock company is not an instance of poverty, but a particular way of using one's wealth. However, choices produce habits, and habits shape character: "conforming […] scatters your force," disempowers oneself and makes genuine self-culture ever more elusive and difficult (Emerson 1983, 263; see also Zakaras 2009, 46). Admittedly, it mitigates Emerson's ideal that he does not distinguish between the various social positions of free persons (e.g., those of men and of women or of rich and of poor, or of whites and free blacks) and thus somewhat naïvely

treats all individuals as equally liable to both conformity and its transcendence in self-culture. Yet what his vision lacked in sensitivity to the cultural, economic, political, and legal obstacles facing many persons in antebellum America, it at least partly made up for in its bold assertion of a universal human capacity that was radical even in the age of the first person singular.

The self-reliance to which all are equally beckoned is, as Kateb observes, "a process, not a state in which one can rest" (2002, 21). The empowerment through which it is realized comprises transitions and moments of opposition and overcoming. While in "Politics" (1844) Emerson praises the "[w]ild liberty [that] develops iron conscience" and laments the loss of liberty that accompanies conformity, he clearly does not understand liberty in the merely "negative" sense of the absence of obstacles to one's actions (1983, 565, 977). Both the inward endeavors of trusting oneself and the outward endeavors of following the voice of one's genius to completion in action thrive upon friction and thereby cultivate "new powers" available to the individual (Ibid., 275). Self-assertion against opposition begets greater empowerment—"strength is born" "in the rugged battle" of "positive power [against] the negative power [of] circumstance" (Ibid., 949; see also Emerson 1964, 114). Emerson thus presents an active, striving image of "self-authorship [achieved] when we fashion our own lives, lives that reflect our values and aspirations, culled from our own experience of the world" (Zakaras 2009, 26). Although Channing and other devotees of the culture of self-culture embraced similar images of deliberate self-making, Emerson is distinctive in his glorification of the opposition and overcoming he thought inherent in self-authorship (Lopez 1999, 249). Indeed, it is difficult to say which Emerson prefers, the victory or the struggle through which it is won.

> Nature is upheld by antagonism. Passions, resistance, danger, are educators. We acquire the strength we have overcome […T]he glory of character is in affronting the horrors of depravity, to draw thence new nobilities of power[.] (Emerson 1983, 1084)

Emerson's individualism is thus in substantial part a perfectionist ideal of empowerment, of coming to be oneself more fully, by trusting oneself more completely and asserting oneself more potently. Though each is fated to strive for an ultimately unattainable perfection of the self, as "life

perpetually promises us a glory we will never realize," meaning and virtue reside in the attempt (Whicher 1971, 109). These agonistic dimensions of self-reliance are, I believe, essential to understanding Emerson's ambivalent stance toward the market.

3.2 Emerson Goes to Market: Reconciling "Self-Reliance" and "Power" with "Wealth" and "Success"

> Build, therefore, your own world.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836)

> This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" (1837)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the antebellum period was an age of restlessness and striving, and this cultural phenomenon was inextricably linked with the rise of the market. According to historian Scott Sandage, across regions and classes "[a]mbition was the holy ghost in the religion of American enterprise[.] Nineteenth-century Americans […] adopt[ed] the striver's ethic as the best of all possible freedoms" (2005, 14). Emerson understood this well. His years of extensive lecturing brought him into "vital contact" with a wide variety of people and places, supplying him with a better vantage on antebellum society than is often appreciated, even by his admirers (Field 2001, 470). The above pair of epigrams capture the optimism with which he approaches his audience and the individualism that he addressed to them. Ultimately, his own views gave sophisticated expression to a common sentiment. Emerson's ethic of self-culture is, among other things, an ethic of ambition, signifying a perfectionist striving toward a more satisfactory future. Writing during the onset of the Panic of 1837, he characteristically maintains in "The American Scholar" that rough circumstances are always amenable to the improving touch of individual power.

> The world,—this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around […] I run eagerly into the resounding tumult […] It is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds its splendid products. (Emerson 1983, 60)

Even (or perhaps especially) tumultuous times furnish opportunities for making one's mark upon oneself and upon the world. Yet despite his abiding faith in self-culture, Emerson, like many Transcendentalists, was ambivalent toward the pursuit of worldly improvement that market society invites and rewards (Rose 1981, 135). He understands the market in fraught terms, "on one side as the economic manifestation of contemporary individualism and on the other as the gravest threat to individualism" (Milder 1999, 55). Near the beginning of "The Method of Nature" (1841), Emerson runs the gamut of admiration and dismay.

> We hear something too much of the results of machinery, commerce, and the useful arts. We are a puny and a fickle folk. Avarice, hesitation, and following, are our diseases. The rapid wealth which hundreds in the community acquire in trade, or by the incessant expansions of our population and arts, enchants the eyes of all of the rest [and impoverishes] the very body and feature of man.
>
> I do not wish to look with sour aspect at the industrious manufacturing village, or the mart of commerce. I love the music of the water-wheel; I value the railway; I feel the pride which the sight of a ship inspires. I look on trade and every mechanical craft as education also. But let me discriminate what is precious herein. (1983, 115)

Put in terms of power and self-reliance, Emerson finds valuable in modern transportation, industry, and commerce the fruits of self-trust and self-assertion through which trees and stones are fashioned into a mill, and through which a stream is made to serve the ends of individual genius (Howe 2007, 853; Larkin 1988, 219). However, his praise fades when the singular, powerful act of creation gives way to servile, repetitive seeking after "the material interest" that he found so pervasive, seductive, and corrupting in antebellum America (Emerson 1983, 115).

The cultural context of Emerson's individualism was Janus-faced, placing the individual in a simultaneously promising and compromising situation. Undoubtedly, the expansion of market relations as the basis of economic life afforded growing opportunities for self-determination and self-making (Howe 1997, 110–1). Yet in a society structured according to market relations, apparent self-determination is tempered and mitigated by relationships of dependence. "In market societies, people need to enter into exchange relationships with others. They have to offer goods, money, and their labour, which means, in a sense, that they have

to sell themselves" (Herzog 2014, 62). Thus, "while the greater division of labor characteristic of modern life separates the individual from the community [and its dictates of how, and for what, to live] industrial-commercial society also generates a greater interdependency" between individuals as market participants (Dolan 2011, 365–6). Even in his writings of the 1870s, in the wake of emancipation and the maturation of an industrialized market society, Emerson weighs the benefits of the market revolution against its costs.

> Here in America are all the wealth of soil, of timber, of mines, and of the sea, put into the possession of a people who wield all these wonderful machines, have the secret of steam, of electricity; and have the power and habit of invention in their brain […] Here is man in the Garden of Eden […] America is such a garden of plenty, such a magazine of power, that at her shores all the common rules of political economy utterly fail. (Emerson 1909b, 137–8)

Against this lofty assessment of the power and prosperity manifest in market society, he juxtaposes a critical description of the spread of market culture.

> See how nations of customers are formed. The disgust of California has not been able to drive nor kick the Chinaman back to his home; and now it turns out that he has sent home to China American foods and tools and luxuries, until he has taught his people to use them, and a new market has grown up for our commerce. The emancipation has brought a whole nation of negroes as customers to buy all the articles which once their few masters bought, and every manufacturer and producer in the North has an interest in protecting the negro as the consumer of his wares. (Ibid., 138–9)

Such lines echo Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx's characterization of the dialectical process by which capitalism "creates a world after its own image" (1848/1978, 477). In this latter-day Eden, strangers, and the oppressed are welcomed into the hurly-burly of industry and commerce. Yet there is a biting irony at work: Individuals serve the market as they serve their own interests, and through the exercise of economic freedom they extend the reach and reinforce the impersonal power of the market. Such pragmatics of economic freedom and power need not be understood in Marxist terms in order to be understood critically, and

while Emerson never developed an ideological critique of market society, he was nonetheless aware of its trade-offs. Even the moral triumph represented by the abolition of slavery was no match for the dynamic, coopting forces of the market, giving evidence to Emerson's belief that "[s]ociety never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other" (1983, 279; see also, e.g., Foner 2014).

This uneasy view of the market is characteristic of Emerson's lifelong commitment to individualism. Throughout his works, across half a century of good times and bad, both for the national economy and his own personal economy, Emerson's attitude toward the market is laden with this sense of conflict between self-culture and self-loss. Even as he valorizes asserting oneself through the market, he worries about being coopted by its subtle yet potent forces. As I hope to show, this tension is innate in his thought *tout court* and is never altogether resolved. The agonistic, perfectionist dimensions of self-reliance leave such peaceful settlement forever beyond our reach.

3.2.1 The Market as Opportunity

> We are magnets in an iron globe. We have keys to all doors
>
> […] The world is all gates, all opportunities[.]
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Resources" (1875)

It is commonly noted that Emerson's thinking about the market evolved over time, with the sharp criticism of his early works giving way to support and even enchantment in his late works[8] (Birch 1995, 394–5; Dolan 2011, 352–3; Gilmore 1985, 8, 18–34). While this assessment tracks undeniable shifts in his rhetoric, it also tends to obscure the fact that the market was always a source of fascination for Emerson. Even in his most overtly spiritual, Transcendentalist works economic life consistently appears as a field of opportunity upon which a principled individual might strive virtuously for self-improvement, for each possesses within himself the keys needed to unlock countless possibilities. This persistent hope is anchored by his appropriation and liberalization of the "Puritan idea of the calling" that was still common in nineteenth-century American Protestantism despite declining in "personal and cultural relevance" (Hedges 1993, 42; Neufeldt 1989, 53; see also Dolan 2011,

345–7; Michaelsen 1953; Robertson 1933/1973, 1–32; Smith 1973). Like Channing, Emerson interpreted the idea of one's calling through the lens of protean self-culture and thus both individualized and pluralized its character. However, his notion of one's calling or one's work serves essentially the same practical and normative role as its Puritan predecessor, giving the individual a personal orientation toward the world. Two passages, from "Spiritual Laws" (1841) and "Success" (1870), sound the same note.

> Each man has his own vocation. The talent is the call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him. He has faculties silently inviting him thither to endless exertion […] He inclines to do something which is easy to him, and good when it is done, but which no other man can do. (Emerson 1983, 310)

> Each man has an aptitude born with him. Do your work. I have to say this often, but nature says it oftener. (Emerson 1909a, 274)

Both of these passages contain lingering traces of the original sense of vocation as "a divine summons" to "perform a special work" (Neufeldt 1989, 67n2). Yet in harmony with the individualism of his age, Emerson elevates the ethical imperative of following one's unique abilities according to one's inclinations over the traditional sense of spiritual destiny and thus reimagines calling as an immanent, worldly capacity evoked by a dispensation to assert oneself. In the words of Emerson's contemporary and fellow Harvard-educated Unitarian Minister James Freeman Clarke, "[e]very man has his own organic gift, his own gift of disposition, faculty, ability" (1894, 418). Partial as Emerson was to viewing the world in terms of agonistic forces, one's vocation essentially consists in the exercise and cultivation of a well-placed potency. "To the endless variety of substances is a match in the endless variety of faculty. To each man is his calling foreordained in his faculty" (Emerson 1964, 113). The articulations of this power of becoming and overcoming vary according to how the source of friction and resistance against which it is exercised is framed, most commonly under the headings of Nature, Fate, and Society. Each individual is called to do work that comes easily and happily precisely because one is suited to that work like no other. He is the magnetic force to which some corner of the world bends, the key uniquely fitted to a door that stands before her. Where one's power is well expressed, one is absolved to express it.

Emerson's ethic of self-culture requires trusting in one's aptitude and pursuing one's work in light of this self-affirmation. As he says in "Self-Reliance," "do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself" (Emerson 1983, 264). These claims immediately follow the diagnosis of conformity as a scattering of one's force, a squandering of one's potency and potential. Doing one's work is the antithesis of conformity as it consists in following one's own genius and asserting oneself in the way uniquely suited to one's genius. What is more, by following his calling, the individual improves himself, and reinforces himself against inner self-doubt as well as against the countervailing outer forces that limit him. Whatever else it may be, doing one's work is a practice of self-making (Kateb 2002, 168, 171). Although Emerson believes that one becomes more capable and energetic through all forms of self-assertion, he suggests that such personal development is most perfect when it is pursued in that single direction that is uniquely suited to the individual. He writes in "Power" that "[t]he one prudence in life is concentration; the one evil is dissipation: and it makes no difference whether our dissipations are coarse or fine; property and its cares, friends, and a social habit, or politics, or music or feasting. Everything is good which takes away one plaything and delusion more, and drives us home to add one stroke of faithful work," adding in "Wealth" that "good luck is another name for tenacity of purpose" (Emerson 1983, 982, 997). While this ideal inclines toward practical myopia and obsessive specialization in one avenue of the agency, Emerson qualifies his praise of single-mindedness with caution about becoming "victims of adaptation," unable to successfully pursue any but one path of self-making (Ibid., 1019). One's calling is a unique path, yet finding and pursuing it does not silence the broader imperatives of self-culture pursued along many fronts. Thus, Emerson's notion of one's work must be understood as a component of, and not a limit or boundary to, his underlying principle that "[e]very true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time to accomplish his design" (Ibid., 267). This formulation displays the Romantic sensibility upon which self-reliance rests. Emerson could readily assent to John Stuart Mill's claim that each person is like "a tree, which requires to grow and develope itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" [9] (1989, 60). Whereas the traditional Puritan idea of calling situated the individual within a divine order beyond his influence, and in respect of which only a fixed and narrow range of choices were permissible, Emerson's idea

of calling elevates the individual as thinker and agent, whose inner infinitude takes the place of an external divinity. "Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" (Emerson 1983, 261).

This revaluation of the individual—fairly common among liberal New England Protestants, but sounded to its highest registers by Emerson—stands behind the heroism of doing one's work. "The hero," says Emerson, "is suffered to be himself. A person of strong mind comes to perceive that for him an immunity is secured so long as he renders to society that service which is native and proper to him,—an immunity from all the observance, yea, and duties, which society so tyrannically imposes on the rank and file of its members" (Ibid., 1046). Like his friend Carlyle, Emerson believed the world was ultimately clay to be sculpted by great individuals, and the consequences of genuine individuality need never be lamented. The author of *The Conduct of Life* could have easily penned Blake's maxim "[t]he cut worm forgives the plough;" (Blake 1996, 76) society's norms and customs rightly yield before the higher laws of genius and individuality. However, Emerson is ultimately closer to Mill than to Carlyle when it comes to the authority that the self-reliant individual can claim vis-à-vis other individuals. For Carlyle, the hero is the "Able-man" whose highest realization comes in the form of command over ordinary, lesser men and women (1841/1935, 257). Emerson similarly praises the great-souled individual moved by "a self-trust which slights the restraints of prudence, in the plentitude of its energy and power" (1983, 374). Yet he casts the heroism of self-reliance in exemplary rather than domineering terms, opting for the language of "representative" persons who "are not authority figures but images of human potential"[10] (Buell 2003, 82). In Millian terms, self-reliant individuals should enjoy "freedom to point out the way" toward the realization of self-culture for each, but can claim no status higher than that of "*provocateurs*" who might "awaken individuals to a firmer conviction of their own worth and possibility" (Mill 1989, 67; Zakaras 2009, 117; see also Kateb 2002, 138–9).

Emerson's reflections on self-culture were consistently (though sometimes unwittingly) set against the cultural backdrop of the market revolution and its consequences, and he could not help but see the imbrications of economy and character, opportunity and calling. In a society structured ever more fully by market relations of production, exchange, and consumption, doing the work at which one excels shall likely find compensation. While I believe it is too simplistic to attribute to Emerson

"rugged individualism" whose ideal is bootstrapping one's way to bourgeois comfort and respectability, he embraces the fullest range of self-culture, which includes exertion of one's power through participation in the market. As he says in "American Civilization" (1862), "a man coins himself into his labor; turns his day, his strength, his thought, his affection into some product which remains as the visible sign of his power"[11] (Emerson 1909c, 278). In terms that again echo Marx, he describes labor as an essential direction of self-assertion and self-improvement. Through his labors, the individual gives his power material and lasting expression, and in a market society, the reifications of an individual's power often command a price. Emerson's declaration that "Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself" is certainly not merely an economic slogan, but his valuation of "the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul" has an irresistible economic valence (1983, 272). In the context of a modern commercial society, wherein the division of labor and erosion of communal living create unprecedented interdependency mediated by exchange, doing one's work and taking care of oneself can only occasionally and artificially be separated from the market participation of one sort or another. "By doing his work, he makes the need felt which he can supply, and creates the taste by which he is enjoyed. By doing his own work, he unfolds himself" (Ibid., 310). Through the individual's pursuit of his calling, he not only cultivates himself, he makes his genius manifest for others, creating a magnetism between himself and others, mediated by his labors and what they produce. In a modern social setting, self-culture persistently draws individuals toward economic relationships, and the cultivation of character finds compensation partly in pecuniary reward. What Thoreau laments and strives to evade, Emerson embraces and extols. Rather than undermining the dignity of pursuing one's vocation, economic reward tends to reinforce it. As Thoreau agreed, it would be perverse to follow one's calling only in those hours and with that energy remaining after one has secured one's livelihood in some base, impersonal activity. Far better to earn one's bread under the tutelage of one's genius. There is, then, for Emerson a register of life at which individual character and economic participation are contingently yet unavoidably connected. One's calling is never merely "to get a living," but in doing one's work excellently one can also "earn a blameless livelihood" (Ibid., 989).

Emerson's discussions of economic activity in later essays such as "Wealth" (1860) and "Success" (1870) provide ample bases for his

characterization as a champion of bourgeois society and values by critics such as Anderson, Bercovitch, and Sellers. In particular, it is in these later works that the practices and outcomes of market participation are portrayed as the externalization of inner laws, and thus economic success appears as one of the fruits of self-culture. Emerson's later writings on economic activity are animated most explicitly by his understanding of power. In "Power" (1860) Emerson declares that "[a]ll successful men have agreed in one thing,—they were *causationists*. They believed that things went not by luck, but by law" (Ibid., 971). This principle, which rests at the heart of his individualism, provides an interpretive key to his claim in "Wealth" that "[m]an was born to be rich, or, inevitably grows rich by the use of his faculties; by the union of thought with nature," the application of "organic power" to circumstance (Ibid., 996, 956). The passage from "Wealth" merely exemplifies that from "Power." Success, of any description, is only won through self-trust and self-assertion. Amid the contingencies of life, the successful individual is he who recognizes necessity as the cloak worn by opportunity, and who embraces the call of his genius, doing his work and expressing his latent potency "in sympathy with the course of things" (Ibid., 972).

Although self-culture is the intrinsic good in the scheme of Emersonian individualism and needs no material ornamentation to justify it, there are often material compensations. Learning and living "the lesson of self-help" frequently brings the individual to the market. Though specific market relations, of buying and selling, production and consumption, are contingent, for Emerson they follow from an ineluctable condition: "Nature […] requires that each man should feed himself […] he must go to work […s]he gives him no rest until this is done" (Ibid., 990). Under the imperatives of hunger, thirst, and cold, the individual is driven to find "his well-being in the use of his planet," wresting subsistence from nature through individual intelligence and power (Ibid., 991; see also ibid., 989–90). The well-being won through self-help is general and inclusive of many avenues of development beyond the satisfaction of the minimum necessities of life or indulgence in bodily comforts. This is perhaps the most important and telling qualification of Emerson's praise of market participation—that whatever good may be said of materially gainful activity, it is but one aspect of a rich life. "In every variety of human employment" there are "those who love work, and love to see it rightly done, who finish the task for its own sake[.] The world will always do justice at last to such finishers: it cannot otherwise"

(Ibid., 1068). The more fundamental and heroic aspect is the work itself, done for itself.

However, in a market society, doing one's work in order to support oneself is rarely detached from the work of others similarly engaged. As discussed in the previous chapter, the rise of the market in antebellum America mapped a double-movement: the individuation of society into voluntaristic economic agents, while at the same time integrating these individuals into impersonal networks of dependence. Well-aware of this complex development, Emerson at times sought to turn it to the advantage of self-culture. Although the self-reliant individual "lives wholly from within," external nature furnishes herself as "tool-chest" to be employed for self-improvement, and the greatest measure of self-culture is won by the person who

> can avail himself of all men's faculties. He is the richest man who knows how to draw a benefit from the labors of the greatest numbers of men, of men in distant countries, and in past times. The same correspondence that is between thirst in the stomach, and water in the spring, exists between the whole of man and the whole of nature. (Whicher 1971, 50; Emerson 1983, 991)

Self-culture is an improvement using the available means furnished not only by nature but also by the genius and labors of others. The ideal image of "the all-sufficiency of the individual" is thus not Thoreau, seeking to cultivate himself in isolation and seclusion, neither benefitting nor benefitting from others, but the worldly character doing one's work for its own sake, fashioning a rich life out of anything available to oneself (Emerson 1964, 179). Impressed by the rise of technologies and economic practices that made available to each and all a wealth of resources for self-improvement, Emerson reconciles self-reliance to the market and praises the person who avails himself of the diverse goods at his fingertips. If someone else makes the discovery or invention, let him take it up and "put [it] to better use" (Emerson 1983, 989). If one does well his work, let him benefit himself and others by bringing the fruits "to where they are wanted" (Ibid.). The rise of the market in the antebellum period (especially before corporations came to dominate American economic life during the Gilded Age) thus furnished greater opportunities for individual genius and power to imprint themselves upon the world and contribute to the welfare of all.

Given this favorable assessment of the market as a way of bringing the genius and work of individuals into mutual relations, Emerson unsurprisingly writes that "Political Economy is as good a book wherein to read the life of man, and the ascendancy of laws over all private and hostile influences, as any Bible which has come down to us" (Ibid., 997). Insofar as it studies the labors and transactions of individuals, political economy maps the progress and character of one of the major domains of modern life. This statement has been read as Emerson's masterstroke of "spiritualizing the market," amplifying with a soaring individualism the well-worn doctrine that self-interested economic success is proof of virtue or election[12] (Sellers 1991, 378; see also Gimore 1985, 25).

> Property keeps the accounts of the world, and is always moral. The property will be found where the labor, the wisdom, and the virtue have been in nations, in classes, and (the whole life-time considered, with compensations) in the individual also. (Emerson 1983, 578)

> Money is representative, and follows the nature and fortunes of the owner […] The farmer is covetous of his dollar, and with reason […] He knows how many strokes of labor it represents. His bones ache with the day's labor that earned it […] Try to lift his dollar; you must lift all that weight. (Ibid., 997)

In both of these passages, Emerson appears to express the view that economic fortune follows and thus reflects character, such that the wealthy are proven by their wealth to be good. The salient interpretive question, I suggest, is what fundamental commitment these claims underscore. While it may be tempting to reduce Emerson to the status of a minor prophet of the Protestant work ethic (a description that is not entirely groundless), his descriptions of the relationship between individual character and market participation should, I believe, be read carefully against the background furnished by his fundamental intellectual and moral commitment: not *capitalism*, but *self-culture*. The former concerns him only insofar as it serves or illustrates the latter.

Economic institutions and practices cannot but reflect the character of the individuals who have created them. There is, again, a dignified and even heroic quality to doing one's work, the recognition of which colors Emerson's economic thought. The well-employed individual whose livelihood (however mean or rich) is earned through self-trust and self-assertion is a subject of admiration. The work that brings services

and goods to market can be an ennobling education[13] (Ibid., 140). The farmer knows what time and power go into his subsistence and ours; the horseman knows somewhat of nature and of himself that the passenger in the carriage does not; the person who fashions the world according to her genius stands taller than the person who lives in a world created by others. In observing and analyzing the market, we are observing and analyzing the lives and labors of individuals, collectedly but not in complete abstraction from individuality. Great inventions are evidence of great inventors; bustling commerce is evidence of skillful laborers and merchants. Even in the impersonal domain of the market, Emerson maintained faith that we could perceive, appreciate, and achieve self-culture. It is thus perhaps somewhat perplexing that he condemns antebellum society as conformist while at the same time frequently praising the spirit, if not always the substance, of its economic life. Of course, one aspect of a society can be decent while others are corrupt, much as an individual can progress while the community stagnates. Yet Emerson speaks so approvingly and confidently of the invention, work, and commerce that the benefits they yield cannot be mere chance, as if in the market individuals were lucky enough to escape the grip of the customs and self-deception that ensnare them elsewhere in society. Aware of the negative aspects of the American economy—not only chattel slavery but also servitude to avarice and drudgery—he nonetheless believed that the market afforded individuals substantial opportunities to achieve self-reliance in the broadest (not merely economic) sense. "There are geniuses in trade, as well as in war, or the state, or letters; and the reason why this or that man is fortunate […] lies in the man" (Ibid., 496). This is Emerson's selective inflection of the State Street proverb—success accompanies self-reliance, and the market furnishes new outlets for individuals to express their genius and power. However, it is this expressive notion of individuality, rather than a self-congratulatory bourgeois ethic, that he ultimately esteems.

As one of the most promising domains in which self-reliance may be sought and won, the market affords us a glimpse of the more fundamental truths of individual genius and power. The five principles of economy that Emerson expounds at the end of "Wealth" are not just maxims for the would-be capitalist, but explications of deep principles of self-culture which transcend the confines of economic activity (Ibid., 1002–11; cf. Franklin 1791/1996, 64–5). "Do your work, respecting the excellence of the work, and not its acceptableness." "Spend after your genius,

and by system. Nature goes by rule, and not by sallies and salutations." "[L]earn practically the secret spoken from all nature, that things themselves refuse to be mismanaged, and will show to the watchful their own law." "[L]ook for the seed of the same kind as you sow: and not hope to buy one kind with another kind […] Friendship buys friendship; justice, justice[.]" "[W]hatever we do must always have a higher aim." Here Emerson display's his penchant for using "the market's language to illustrate and embody the values he cherished" (Teichgraeber 1995, 22). Where these maxims not offered as part of a discussion of economic life, they would scarcely be distinguishable from the most spiritual, moral, and esthetic passages of "The American Scholar" or "Self-Reliance." Their application to market participation reflects a purported truth that they do not themselves establish, that each "man's fortunes are the fruit of his character" (Emerson 1983, 963). Emerson's claim that "[t]he merchant's economy is a coarse symbol of the soul's economy" neither sanctifies the market nor exalts economic success as a sign of moral or spiritual election (Ibid., 1010; cf. Gilmore 1985, 31). The market is an approximate and imperfect symbol of the soul, a mirror that distorts even as it reflects. "Wealth" reflects Emerson's thought during a period when he wrote and lectured extensively on abolition and the moral evil of "the greatest calamity in the Universe, negro slavery."[14] He knew well that not all wealth was earned, or earned blamelessly, and that the advance of the market was fueled by the expansion of slavery and the removal of Native Americans (Cawelti 1965, 87; Takaki 2000, 78). His endorsement of the market is thus qualified, contingent upon the character that it reflects. If every individual in America were impoverished and miserable and deserved to be so on account of base individual character, Emerson could still offer these maxims as truths applicable to economic life. That is, the principles of character that market participation can make manifest may be valid even if all individuals fail to attain them, and the actual workings of the market can be justly criticized while nonetheless vindicating perfectionist ideals toward which its participants might strive. Emerson's praise of the market is instrumental to the end of self-culture. The former is cut to the measure of the latter, not the reverse.

Thoughtful commentators have arrived at different assessments. Neal Dolan, for one, has forcefully argued that Emerson's economic thought is situated within a liberal tradition of Lockean possessive individualism and Scottish Enlightenment political economy. Though I shall suggest that this is an incomplete characterization, it nonetheless provides

a fruitful interpretive context for some of Emerson's most ambitious economic principles and illustrates his optimistic view of the market as a domain of opportunity for both individual self-improvement and the improvement of society more broadly. According to Dolan, "Emerson never ceased to marvel approvingly at how in free-market societies, to use Mandeville's famous phrase, 'private vices make public virtue.'" (2009, 49) In "Wealth" Emerson indeed appears to endorse a classical liberal belief in the self-correction of voluntary economic endeavors.

> Wealth brings with it its own checks and balances. The basis of political economy is non-interference. The only safe rule is found in the self-adjusting meter of demand and supply. Do not legislate. Meddle, and you snap the sinews with your sumptuary laws. Give no bounties: make equal laws: secure life and property, and you need not give alms […] The laws of nature play through trade[.][15] (Emerson 1983, 999–1000; see also Gerber 1949, 340–1)

The drama of a modern economy plays according to a natural logic of balance and adjustment. Individuals doing their work and seeking their own improvement bring to market goods and services that others need (thus ideally enabling the consumers to benefit and improve themselves) and are willing to pay for (thus ideally enabling the self-improvement of the producer or seller). Much like the market transposes natural self-assertion into an economic idiom, redefining and redirecting competition and power; it also subtly bends the pursuit of self-culture toward progressive, mutually beneficial ends (Dolan 2011, 353–8). Each individual must "dare to do what he can do best; not help others as they would direct him, but as he knows his helpful power to be. To do otherwise is to neutralize all those extraordinary special talents distributed among men" (Emerson 1909a, 275). Following one's calling consists in developing and employing one's unique talents to the fullest, which in a market society includes getting one's living by way of the very activities of self-cultivation.

This image of self-correction depicts an impersonal "cunning of nature" (Herzog 2014, 24–8). Echoing the political economists that influenced his view of the market—namely Adam Smith, Francis Wayland, and Henry Carey (see Birch 1995 and Kern 1940)—Emerson teaches that "Nature knows how to convert evil to good; Nature utilizes misers, fanatics, show-men, egotists, to accomplish her ends" (1909a, 273).

He praises trade for "bring[ing] every kind of faculty of every individual that can in any manner serve any person, *on sale*," placing the abilities of genius at the disposal of others, even though each individual seeks above all the improvement of his own position[16] (Emerson 1983, 221). This accidental altruism is not simply a happy fact, it attains the normative force of an imperfect duty. Each individual "fails to make his place good in the world, unless he not only pays his debt, but also adds something to the common wealth" (Ibid., 989). Thus self-reliance, in the broadest sense, entails not merely *self*-sufficiency and *self*-culture but contributing effectively to the sustenance and improvement of other individuals (Blau 1977, 81; Kateb 2002, 136). Though Emerson was perhaps the most widely heard mouthpiece of the spirit of reform that inspired intentional, utopian communities such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands (endeavors in which he took substantial interest, but which he ultimately declined to join), over time he looked increasingly if cautiously to the market as a domain in which individuals could contribute to the betterment of others (Gura 2007, 211, 213; Milder 1999, 61; Rose 1981, 106, 117; Stoehr 1979, 74–101). Furthermore, this peculiar altruism dovetails with Emerson's criticism of bourgeois philanthropy and state intervention in the economy.[17]

Addressing audiences drawn from the self-improving middle and upper classes of New England, many of whom embraced the culture of self-culture's call to poor relief, Emerson famously scoffed at common forms of charity. Rather than giving alms to the unfortunate, which "degrades the recipient" and recognizes her as a dependent, he advocates "[i]ndirect service" that recognizes the other's as yet unrealized potential for self-reliance (Kateb 2002, 137; Emerson 1983, 618). At both moral and economic levels, doing one's work is better than giving one's dollar. One thereby provides the educating example of self-reliance while at the same time contributing one's best fruits to the commonweal. A generation before William Graham Sumner, Emerson foreshadowed his view that honest, diligent labor benefits society by contributing to its collected capital, whereas almsgiving squanders both resources and opportunity (Sumner 1992, 209–10).

Emerson's kindred disdain for state interference in the market reflects his Romanticism and critique of conformity as well as his liberal economic views. On the one hand, interference with the market disrupts the workings of natural laws through individual actions and thus attempts to lead what it should in fact follow. "In a free and just commonwealth, property rushes

from the idle and imbecile, to the industrious, brave and persevering" [18] (Emerson 1983, 1000; see also 578). That is, in a suitably unfettered market, Emerson believes that wealth naturally tends to follow the progress of self-culture, at least roughly. Success gravitates toward self-reliant individuals. Accordingly, the heavy hand of the state diverts the proper, self-adjusting flows of goods and wealth between individuals, impeding the workings both of society's "petty economy" and humanity's "great economy" (Ibid., 1000). On the other hand, state regulation of the market means external interference with "the growth of the Individual" through the pursuit of his calling (Ibid., 567). Insofar as genius plays out in the market, the regulation sets limits to the pursuits of individuality. Not only does this impede the individual's cultivation of himself, it likewise mitigates the contributions he makes to the good of other individuals. This assessment does not suppose that all individual labors stand on an equal footing (e.g., free labor and slave labor, or the innovation of the inventor and the labor of the factory hand who mass produces the invention), or that all market participation is equally beneficial to the commonweal of a society (e.g., the productivity of the farmer and the gambling of the land speculator). Yet Emerson maintains that whatever genuine good is wrought in the world is the work of individual genius, rather than social policy. Both individual and social improvement are possible in all areas of life, yet "the State must follow, and not lead the character and progress of the citizen;" its interference tends overwhelmingly to impede such progress, in the market and elsewhere (Ibid., 559).

Emerson's liberal faith in progress and his Romantic faith in individuality mesh to create an endorsement of market participation that appears to echo the optimistic, striving individualism of his age. The challenges and opportunities of the market provide spurs to creativity and exceptional exertion, by which the individual elevates himself. Looking to the most potent technological advance of his lifetime, Emerson writes in "Wealth:"

> Steam is no stronger now, than it was a hundred years ago; but is put to better use. A clever fellow was acquainted with the expansive force of steam; he also saw the wealth of wheat and grass rotting in Michigan. Then he cunningly screws on the steam-pipe to the wheat crop. Puff now, O Steam! The steam puffs and expands as before, but this time it is dragging all Michigan at its back to hungry New York and hungry England. (Ibid., 989)

The story is much the same for all great developments: Individual genius and power overcoming and transforming nature in order to satisfy human needs and wants.[19] Although the advent of the market did not inaugurate this perennial tale of striving, it opens natural opportunity more broadly; bringing countless individuals into relations of supply and demand, buying and selling, and necessity and invention. (The abolition of slavery would also broaden such opportunities and their benefits.) Each of these countless relations is an invitation for self-development through commerce and industry, as the market best rewards diligence, shrewdness, vision, and energy. Ever a believer in great individuals whose works "make the earth wholesome," "forced onward by the ideas and necessities of [their] contemporaries," Emerson did not maintain a boundary between greatness and the market (Ibid., 615, 710). Those finishers who succeed in commerce and industry may be forgiven their vices in proportion to what they have added to the progress of humanity and the commonweal of society. The late essay "Greatness" may be read as a companion to "Wealth," a reflection upon the drive behind one's calling and the end to which it leads—both of which are a superlative achievement (Emerson 1909b, 283–303). Emerson sees the market as but one domain of life in which an individual may attain greatness, and for most, it will at best serve as a school of character in the course of earning one's bread, but the striving concentrates and elevates, and it is so much the better that the individual's achievements might raise the fortunes of others.

Where a study of Emerson's economic thought to stop here, he would appear perhaps somewhat more nuanced and moralistic in his views than is often appreciated, but he would not appear terribly conflicted. His criticisms of chattel slavery, drudgery, and materialism withstanding, he nonetheless maintains faith in the "wise contrivance of the Author of nature" whereby pursuing one's calling is the supreme way in which to both improve oneself and benefit others (Smith 1759/1976, 298). His liberalism and Romanticism find their marriage in the marketplace, a thinly "public" space in which robustly "private" endeavors may be unapologetically pursued. Yet the understandable conclusion that Emerson is a bourgeois liberal pining after a perfectionist ideal of self-culture risks neglecting or mitigating an intractable and productive tension at the heart of his individualism. The market is not simply a battlefield whereupon heroic individuality is enacted, it is a hazard with which the individual must continually contend. Even though he took

economic life as an inevitable domain in which to pursue self-culture, his criticisms are not mere admonitions or maxims about how to succeed while keeping clean hands. His account of the individual and the market ultimately depicts a restless struggle along multiple dimensions, none of which can be conquered altogether.

3.2.2 The Market as Adversary

Perhaps despite himself, Emerson bequeaths a doctrine of individualism that suggests the victories won in the marketplace shall always, from the standpoint of self-culture, be pyrrhic and their fruits bittersweet. Despite his high hopes for the individual, he writes in "Experience" that "[a] man is a golden impossibility. The line he must walk is a hair's breadth. The wise through excess of wisdom is made a fool" (Emerson 1983, 482). It is not enough to say that the market presents obstacles to the pursuit and realization of Emersonian self-culture and self-reliance. Obstacles are inert and static, whereas the market that emerged as the center of nineteenth-century American society was energetic and dynamic. Even the immutable "laws" of the market (e.g., supply and demand; the triumph of power and genius over fate) manifest in the shifting contingencies of commerce and industry, which are themselves the results of countless individual ideas, choices, and actions. What is more, from the standpoint of the individual agent, obstacles are also generally external. The individual is obstructed when his chosen action is thwarted by something beyond him. However, the market is not simply external to its participants. Commerce and industry were becoming common denominators of the American experience throughout the antebellum period. Ordinary life came more and more to depend upon market participation, and the modes of such participation became more deeply and thoroughly internalized. It was, for instance, during Emerson's lifetime that the rhythms of daily life were subjected to the regulation, segmentation, and standardization of clock time while geological discovery expanded the sense of temporal scale (Allen 2008, especially Chap. 5; Bartky 2000). If one includes revolutions in transportation, communication, and patterns of production and consumption, it is clear that the nineteenth century witnessed the transformation of the market from a discrete place or occasional undertaking that an individual might choose to an omnipresent institution and a way of life that could scarcely be avoided.

For Emerson, the pervasiveness of the market made it an adversary as well as a field of opportunity. The "infinite productiveness" of genius and self-culture cannot be reduced to a single direction of growth or a single mode of activity, and insofar as the spread and intensification of market relations came to dominate society and set the terms and rhythms of individual life, the market came to impede and narrow the individual's self-cultivation and compromise her integrity (Emerson 1983, 311). This assessment is easily visible in Emerson's early works, culminating in *Essays: First Series* (1841). Today his later works are commonly read as enacting a reversal, spiritualizing economic life, and accommodating the aspirations of self-reliance to the realities of the market.[20] (Sellers 1991, 375–8) Always interested in "how individuals may most fully realize the unprecedented opportunities for personal flourishing newly opened to them by the emancipating institutional arrangements of a liberal polity," some of his later critics suggest that Emerson roundly embraced the materialistic spirit of the times (Dolan 2009, 284). Unlike his friend Thoreau, who insisted upon swimming against the economic current, Emerson is said to have finally accepted and even embraced the market as an (if not the) privileged locus of self-reliance, recognizing the economic giants of his day as "poets who chose to write their epics in cash" (Packer 1982, 96).

Contrary to this image of resignation or endorsement, I wish to suggest that throughout his life and work Emerson—at times despite himself, and some of his undeniably bourgeois sensibilities—remained cautious and conflicted with regard to the market. He was aware that ordinary life in market society typically fell short of his ideal of self-culture, and that his high hopes for what a market economy could be and could do often did not pan out in practice (e.g., Kern 1940, 693). Though he believed that the (good) market could serve as an incomplete yet non-intrusive framework for a community of self-reliant equals, he also recognized dimensions of modern economic life, and its side effects, that distracted, coopted, and frustrated strivings for individuality. Thus, he understood that the self-reliant individual must not simply give himself over to the market, doing and pursuing only what is in most economic demand, or rewarded with the highest wage or the quickest profit. Above all, his understanding of self-culture as empowerment and overcoming is too ambitious and fundamentally agonistic to admit of a happy marriage to liberal, bourgeois economic, and social ideals. Economic life is not merely a "game of skill" to be played well during business hours in order that one might retire comfortably in the evening.

Emerson was acutely aware of the darker sides of the market, especially the various forms of servitude upon which it thrived and conformity that it rewarded. Hence, the market must be grasped firmly and decisively, like a nettle, if the individual is to enjoy its use while avoiding its sting. It is one such domain of life in which the individual must tread a thin line between virtue and vice, elevation, and debasement, not merely of himself but of others as well.

Slavery provides an instructive vantage from which to consider Emerson's unease toward the market. Thanks substantially to the work of Len Gougeon, the complexity of Emerson's relationship to slavery (as a social, political, and economic institution) is now widely recognized. "[V]irtually from the very beginning of his recorded intellectual life he wrestled with the moral problem of American slavery," and his stance toward both chattel slavery and abolitionism evolved with the life and times of the country (Gougeon 1995, xii). Slavery was, to him, always a moral evil to be eradicated, yet the degree and form of his intellectual and practical mobilization against it evolved with the institution's role in American life.[21]

In his perhaps most famous lecture on the subject of slavery, he offers a keen analysis and searing indictment of the evil that circulated in the antebellum American economy.

> Our civility […] is that of a trading nation; it is a shopkeeping civility […] We peddle, we truck, we sail, we row, we ride in cars, we creep in teams, we go in canals,—to market, and for the sale of goods. The national aim and employment streams into our ways of thinking, our laws, our habits and our manners. The customer is the immediate jewel of our souls. Him we flatter, him we feast, compliment, vote for, and will not contradict. It was, or it seemed the dictate of trade, to keep the negro down […] We found it very convenient to keep them at work, since, by the aid of a little whipping, we could get their work for nothing but their board and the cost of whips. What if it cost a few unpleasant scenes on the coast of Africa? That was a great way off; and the scenes could be endured by some sturdy, unscrupulous fellows, who could go, for high wages, and bring us the men, and need not trouble our ears with the disagreeable particulars. […] The sugar [the enslaved] raised was excellent: nobody tasted blood in it. The coffee was fragrant; the tobacco was incense; the brandy made nations happy; the cotton clothed the world. What! all raised by these men, and no wages? Excellent! What a convenience! They seemed created by Providence to bear the heat and the whipping, and make these fine articles. (Emerson 1909c, 153–4)

Here Emerson traces the complex and disturbing progress of slavery and its fruits through the market. The American practice of chattel slavery furnished a sort of economic miracle—labor without wages, and thus productivity and profit without the overhead costs of dignified, humane existence. However, what is meant to provoke a sense of shame, horror, and outrage in this passage is not the evil of human bondage (which is taken as undeniable) but the sanitizing and anesthetizing effect the market works upon this moral enormity. First, the laws of supply and demand reward "unscrupulous fellows" for the work of reducing human beings to beasts of burden,[22] as well as enable slaveholders to profit from labor that is not their own and that comes at the expense of another's humanity. In the marketplace, wickedness is thus indifferently repaid, so long as it answers the demands of the moment. Second, the market repackages the fruits of slavery, removing the obvious signs of their brutal and dehumanizing origins, as well as the sustenance their sale and consumption provides to the practices that produced them. Emerson saw that the sugar, or tobacco, or cotton circulating in the marketplace was not mere commodities or articles of commerce, but "fuel for the Southern slave economy. In fact," as Zakaras explains, "Emerson came to see the practice of commerce as a substantial obstacle" to the moral and political cause of abolition (2009, 62). Well-meaning Northerners could cry with rage at abolitionist meetings, and yet easily forget that they wore on their backs and took into their bodies the fruits of slavery, or that the profits earned by their investments were generated by an economic engine fed by both slave labor and free. The economic genius of a market system, the ways in which it efficiently and often anonymously connects producers and consumers across vast distances by way of impersonal transactions, goods, and services, is at the same time the root of its moral apathy and blindness. Goods can travel far enough and change hands enough times that the blood that stains them eventually fades.[23]

This assessment complicates the view of Emerson as an apologist for liberal, bourgeois society (or as a mere antinomian[24]). He offers a critique of the very logic and pragmatics of the market, how labor feeds it and goods move through it. As a practical nexus, the market is as morally compromised as are the activities and goods circulating through it. It is complicit in slavery and its evils, precisely because it trades and profits upon the institution. Yet the market disguises its own complicity and facilitates denial on the part of those who participate in it, those who believe (or wish to believe) that they are merely buying sugar. Emerson's

scathing analysis suggests two provisional conclusions. First, his personal attitude toward the market is fraught with moral tension. Where the market for him merely a liberal engine of private profit and public weal, he would have been able to ignore or accept the taste of blood, as so many of his contemporaries had. In later abolitionist speeches, he shames convenient forgetting or denial of complicity, of the very sort that most Northerners were able to indulge at least until the Fugitive Slave Law raised the issue to a new level of public awareness (Emerson 1909c 2006–7). The maturation of his thought demonstrates growing opposition to slavery and deepening appreciation of the moral ambiguities and trade-offs of economic life. There is, then, a limit to the "wise contrivance" of economic laws; they do not work moral alchemy upon industry and commerce. Second, the moral blindness he diagnoses is not unique to an economy fed by slave labor. Even after abolition, or even in a society that had never known slavery, the market remains essentially indifferent to the practices of production and consumption it comprises. As American history since the abolition of slavery has demonstrated, commerce and industry flow like water, naturally seeking the path of least resistance downward. Slavery gave way to sharecropping and greater exploitation of child labor; women were admitted to the workforce with limited opportunities and inferior wages; the "liberty of contract" and the "right to work" were guaranteed to all, but on terms that only the few could use to their real advantage. Although Emerson wrote and spoke with slavery in mind, his diagnosis maps onto the market *as such.* It weighs, unspoken, upon congratulatory essays like "Wealth" and "Success"—the first written prior to the Civil War and Emancipation, the latter afterward. For all his late praise of the market, Emerson never repudiated the insight contained in his analysis of slavery in the antebellum economy. This assessment alone demonstrates the deep tension in his views.

Related to his treatment of the economy of slavery is Emerson's general recognition of the stultifying and instrumentalizing effects of market participation upon those who toil at its mundane and easily forgotten functions. Both before and after his travels to England, during which he witnessed the industrialization in which America was destined to follow, he was aware of and disturbed by what he regarded as the "all-devouring materialism in antebellum American life" (Dolan 2009, 117; see also Diggins 1984, 199). Describing the industrial destiny of the American worker, he darkly remarks

> the machines require punctual service, and as they never tire, they prove too much for their tenders. Mines, forges, mills, breweries, railroads, steam-pump, steam-plough, drill of regiments, drill of police, rule of court and shop-rule have operated to give a mechanical regularity to all the habit and action of men. A terrible machine has possessed itself of the ground, the air, the men and women, and hardly even thought is free. (Emerson 1983, 822)

Eager as he was to praise ingenuity and productivity, his approbation was grounded in a more fundamental commitment to the dignity of work and each person's calling to self-cultivation. In "The Method of Nature," immediately after expressing admiration for "the industrious manufacturing village" and "the mart of commerce" he adds a potent qualification that does not fade in his later works.

> I would not have the laborer sacrificed to the result,—I would not have the laborer sacrificed to my convenience and pride, nor to that of a great class of such as me. Let there be worse cotton and better men. The weaver should not be bereaved of his superiority to his work, and his knowledge that the product or the skill is of no value, except so far as it embodies his spiritual prerogatives. If I see nothing to admire in the unit, shall I admire a million units? (Ibid., 115–6)

Emerson sternly reserves the priority of doing one's work, holding individual fruits of self-making above the contingent economic benefits it produces. He understands that "the larger economic world is an inescapable medium of human conduct," and acknowledges the tremendous potency of industrial production and commercial transaction, but he insists upon a proper reckoning of value (Robinson 1993, 141). Work is valuable insofar as it is work for and upon oneself, the work of self-cultivation. Emerson, like Thoreau and like Marx, believes that "[o]ne's work becomes one's self" (Kateb 2002, 166). Hence the individual cannot stand detached from the work that he does or be insulated from its constitutive effects—it is partly, and ineluctably, through his labors that the individual becomes who he is. Accordingly, one's work (in the broadest sense of the term, inclusive of the economic but not exhausted by it) must be chosen carefully and followed diligently.

Lest one suppose that this early view is replaced by a subsequent conversion to unapologetic bourgeois liberalism, the same attitude permeates later works, including *The Conduct of Life*. In perhaps the soberest

of his later essays, "Considerations by the Way," Emerson returns to the centrality of work as the path to self-culture.

> Life brings to each his task, and, whatever art you select, algebra, planting, architecture, poems, commerce, politics,—all are attainable, even to the miraculous triumphs, on the same terms, of selecting that for which you are apt […] Sanity consists in not being subdued by your means. Fancy prices are paid for position, and for the culture of talent, but to the grand interests, superficial success is of no account. The man,—it is his attitude,—not feats, but forces,—not on set days and public occasions, but, at all hours, and in repose alike as in energy, still formidable, and not to be disposed of. (Emerson 1983, 1095–6)

In the same volume wherein he describes economic laws as reflecting those of the soul and warns the state not to interfere with the market, he remains anchored in his commitment to individuality and self-cultivation. It is through work that one elevates oneself and contributes one's best abilities to a larger society. But, again, this work is understood as the pursuit of one's calling, and not merely playing a useful or profitable role in a system of industry and commerce. One could labor hard and profitably and still remain alienated from the vocation of self-culture. As he says in the early "Trades and Professions," "[t]he real price of labor is knowledge and virtue, of which wealth and credit are signs; but these signs like paper money may be counterfeited, may be stolen while that which they represent, knowledge and virtue, cannot be counterfeited or stolen" (Emerson 1964, 127). At the end of "Wealth" he similarly declares, "[n]or is the man enriched, in repeating the old experiments of animal sensation, nor unless through new powers and ascending pleasures, he knows himself by the actual experience of higher good, to be already on the way to the highest" (Emerson 1983, 1011). These descriptions of the often elusive discrepancies between apparent and actual success seem to stand in tension with Emerson's defense of the self-correcting market, in which property follows after virtue. Yet it appears that he is committed to both. On the one hand, the individual should always work toward self-improvement, rising above the dull routines of market participation. Labor, no matter how profitable, is squandered life if it results in stagnation or self-loss. On the other hand, he promises that following one's genius and pursuing one's calling brings a blameless livelihood, be it rich or not. It appears, then, that eschewing the corrupting pursuit of wealth in favor of one's calling nonetheless leads to the uncorrupting enjoyment

of wealth. This doctrine might appear so open and malleable as to justify any profitable occupation as a calling (as if every calling was in practice the same: to become rich), and any worldly success as a sign of self-culture. Bercovitch and Sellers arrive at such conclusions, painting Emerson as advocating a doctrine of individuality that is, in the end, indistinguishable from bourgeois prosperity. However, I believe that this conclusion reductively dismisses the friction in Emerson's thought that he never entirely resolved, and likely never could.

More than any economic system before it, such as European feudalism or the colonial American hybrid of agrarian subsistence and imperial mercantilism, the conditions of nineteenth-century market society enabled the individual to earn a livelihood in pursuit of his calling. Emerson's faith in the market rests, first and last, upon this fact. Yet his claims that wealth naturally gravitates toward the virtuous are not, strictly speaking, empirical statements. Rather than reports of fact, they are aspirational claims about the superiority of self-culture to mere production and consumption. Emerson does not, for instance, offer such claims as justification for the huge fortunes of the economic elite of his day, to whom he is ultimately silent.[25] The resemblances he traces between the merchant's and the soul's economy are merely part of a discussion of the dignity and virtue of doing one's work.[26] Though his critical evaluation of the conformist aspects of market participation pales in comparison to Thoreau's, he is visibly anxious to find a way to walk the hair's-breadth path between self-loss in drudgery for a wage and self-loss in the shallow pursuit and enjoyment of wealth for its own sake.

This difficult negotiation is further illustrated by Emerson's views of modern materialism. It is undeniable that between his essays of the 1830s and 1840s and those of the 1850s and onwards, he significantly softened his criticisms of the market system. In "Man the Reformer" (1841) he describes "the general system of our trade [as] a system of selfishness[,] of taking advantage," whereas by 1860 he declares that "[w]ealth brings its own checks and balances" (Ibid., 137–8, 999). However, even his accommodation to the realities of the market system is tempered by his evolving but unrelenting devotion to individuality understood as self-cultivation.

Like the world in which it is situated, Emerson understands the market in terms of the underlying, opposed, and inexorable forces. As he writes in the 1837 lecture "Trades and Professions,"

> Want and Have: make in their contest all the action of the world. Want is a growing giant whom the coat of Have was never large enough to cover […] What is labor but the act of the individual man going out to take possession of the world[?] (Emerson 1964, 114–5)

By the time he published *The Conduct of Life*, his understanding of this fundamental principle was significantly refined, but by no means abandoned. Unlike Thoreau's struggle to repudiate the acquisitive impulse, Emerson's reflections on the market and individuality integrate "limited acceptance of humanity's economic drives" across all periods of his writing (Robinson 1993, 141; e.g., Emerson 1983, 994). He accepts that self-trust and self-assertion require occasions in which and matter upon which to be pursued. Even the more narrowly focused acts of self-cultivation are enacted with respect to a person who is a part of the world. The poet may write to express himself, but though his work is self-justifying, its full meaning and value are realized in its being addressed to others. Pursuing one's calling in the market simply expresses more robustly and less subtly what all action likewise expresses: The exertion of individual power upon the world, a *social* world, which is itself the struggle between Want and Have under a different description.

The fact that economic activity in a market society tends toward grasping did not seem to trouble Emerson, at least not in itself. Ever believing that "action is the perfection and publication of thought," and that strength and character are born in "the rugged battle of fate," he accepts the striving quality of market participation as an expression or trial of a most fundamental truth of embodied agency—becoming oneself (Emerson 1983, 30, 275). Especially when one labor in pursuit of one's calling, commerce and industry can be elevating, improving activities for both the individual and, less directly, for others. However, much like the market has a disconcerting capacity to obscure or distort the moral character of its own operations, patterns of market participation exert a kind of gravity on the individual actions out of which the market is composed, often with less than salutary effects. The individual is "born to be rich" and, *contra* Thoreau and Emerson's own thought in essays of the 1830s, it "is of no use to argue the wants down" (Emerson 1983, 990–1). This would be the negation of self-culture and individual potency, the abdication of self-reliance through self-denial. The individual ought to realize that "[t]he world is his tool-chest, and he is successful, or his education is carried out just so far, as

is the marriage of his faculties with nature, or, the degree in which he takes up things into himself" (Ibid., 991). The riches Emerson affirms are not strictly economic, and above all, they are premised upon and practically tied to the pursuit of one's calling. Self-culture can only be achieved through self-trust and self-assertion *in the world*, insofar as it is the world not just of ideas and meanings but also things and forces. The market presents golden opportunities for projects of self-improvement, but in respect of its inevitable materialism, Emerson recognizes at least two forms of danger.

First, the market is not a static medium or inert framework. It has an impersonal cunning that typically exceeds the intentions, foresight, and powers of the individual. Even in his early works, where he is most critical of the market, Emerson notes his admiration for "that friendly Power which works for us in our own despite" (Ibid., 221). Yet he is an individualist; his view of society is neither organic nor collective. "The order of things is as good as the character of the population permits" (Ibid., 182). Which is to say that the invisible hand of Providence (if that Smithian metaphor is not out of place) at work in the market follows the progress of collected individual character rather than leads it. The benevolence and wisdom of the market consist in putting the fruits of private genius to work for public good, as it put the power of steam to work for society. As the above discussions of the moral taint of slavery also illustrate, the market does not elevate character; at best, it compensates elevated character. Second, the market does not only, always, or equally "reward the primary Emersonian virtues" (Teichgraeber 1995, 24). On the one hand, the rising market economy was a composite of functions, not personalities, in which "a job was a job, a product was a product, and it mattered little what kind of person did the work" (Larson 2010, 120). As the institution of slavery and the average consumer's convenient forgetting of it demonstrated, commerce and industry disconnected work and consumption from the character. On the other hand, where there was demand, the market conjured supply. "This is the good and this is the evil of trade, that it would put everything into market, talent, beauty, virtue, and man himself" (Emerson 1983, 221). Market participation can be the practice of self-help and self-improvement, when the individual attends to his calling and puts its fruits at the disposal of others willing to pay for them. However, the workings of a modern economy are not strictly attuned to the higher needs and callings of individuals, but instead to the average demands of the masses. The price of bread or the

going hourly wage, for instance, is not indexed to the virtue or culture of individuals. Economic growth is not a measure of aggregate self-culture, as the economics of slavery again demonstrate. Following one's genius might meet with economic success, but economic success is not a sure sign of self-reliance. Rather, such success is often served well (and sometimes served best) by selling oneself as little more than a resource to feed the economic engine. As Kateb rightly suggests, for Emerson self-reliance means not being used, not being made an instrument to the purposes and projects of others (2002, 192). Before the rise of the market as both an economic and social system, the individual knew for whom and for what he labored. The local farmer whose produce rarely traveled beyond the town limits knew that he fed his family and his neighbors, and to that extent worked for them. A money economy of wage labor and fluid commodity markets in one sense liberates the individual from such communal bonds, giving him a greater degree of autonomy in choosing an occupation, but it delivers him to the service of strangers and impersonal economic forces while sustaining the illusion that he nonetheless works only for himself, free to bring his labor to where it earns him the most. Emerson was uneasy in his recognition that the promise of self-help held open by the market tempted the individual to a new kind of dependency and subservience. As he writes in "Culture," the essay immediately following "Wealth," "[a] man is a beggar who only lives to the useful, and, however he may serve as a pin or rivet in the social machine, cannot be said to have arrived at self-possession" (Emerson 1983, 1030). Not only can earning a living often entail drudgery (in the field, the factory, or the counting room), the tasks most useful and profitable in the marketplace often cut deeply against the proper vocations of self-culture. Emerson recognizes that economic success can never be the lone or truly accurate metric for individual character, and market participation is not only an imperfect ally of self-culture, it is often a potent antagonist.

The market thus reenacts the basic social problematic of conformity and self-loss. What successful market participation gives with one hand, it threatens to take with the other. In Emerson's poetic phrasing:

> The horseman serves the horse,
>
> The neat-herd serves the neat,
>
> The merchant serves the purse,

The eater serves his meat;
'Tis the day of the chattel,
Web to weave, and corn to grind,
Things are in the saddle,
And ride mankind.
There are two laws discrete,
Not reconciled,—
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.(2001, 444–5)

This captures the essence of Emerson's criticism of the materialism of market society, which echoes through essays such as "Wealth" and "Success." He anticipates Thoreau's declaration that "men have become tools of their tools,"[27] and reprises his own refrain in "Self-Reliance" that in the course of securing her bread the individual risks losing her liberty and culture as an eater, that "reliance on Property, including reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance" (Thoreau 1992, 25; Emerson 1983, 281). Michael Gilmore suggests that "Emerson regarded conformity […] as a problem not of Society in the abstract but of the particular social environment emerging under capitalism [which] placed so much importance on how one appeared to others" (1985, 6). In his poetic rendering, the market organizes human society according to the law of things. Furthermore, the rise of a market society (in which new modes of individualism were often offset by new modes of conformity) made it possible for materialism to become the practical creed of a larger proportion of antebellum America. Whereas the feudal serf had no prospects of amassing wealth or expanding the variety of his consumption, regardless of how hard he worked, a comparably poor laborer in nineteenth-century America could potentially profit from his hard work, shrewdness, and self-control. All free persons could, in principle, aspire to the emergent middling ideals of consumption and domestic decency. Yet the egalitarian spirit of opportunity engendered a crisis of individual identity. "For many Americans the ability to make and display

money now became the only proper democratic means for distinguishing one man from another" (Wood 2009, 715). Finding one's place in society became a matter of getting and enjoying an ample living by whatever means the ostensibly egalitarian market furnished. Even before his poetic proclamation that mankind was being ridden by its possessions; Emerson decried the consumerism of antebellum culture.

> We spend our incomes for paint and paper, for a hundred trifles, I know not what, and not for the things of a man. Our expense is almost all for conformity. It is for cake that we run in debt; 't is not the intellect, not the heart, not beauty, not worship, that costs so much […] We shall be rich to great purposes; poor only for selfish ones. (Emerson 1983, 143–4; see also 281)

In consumption, as in the work that provides for it, self-culture, not popular culture, is the only worthy aim.

Yet for all of this Emerson is not Thoreau, and while he understood both the elevation and the corruption to which the spirit of the times was liable "his root quarrel was not with entrepreneurialism per se but with the groveling materialism that accompanied it" (Milder 1999, 55). Indeed, as I have discussed above, he champions the entrepreneurial impulse, which is for him merely one of the more worldly vectors of self-trust and self-assertion. As he writes in "Wealth," praising the collected fruits of individual enterprise, "[a]n infinite number of shrewd men, in infinite years, have arrived at certain best and shortest ways of doing, and this accumulated skill in arts, cultures, harvestings, curings, manufactures, navigations, exchanges, constitutes the worth of our world to-day" (Emerson 1983, 996; see also Emerson 1909a, 270). Political economy is, in its way, a study of individual and social culture insofar as it deals *en masse* with the collected achievements of genius. However, in Emerson's view, such notable and beneficial advances are the result of doing one's work, of exerting oneself in that unique direction where one's power is irrepressible. Not all riches flow from such activities, and a society fixated on wealth and consumption is easily (and perhaps inevitably) diverted from the most honorable and elevating pursuits. As he writes in "The Conservative," caricaturing the acquisitive impulse of the antebellum era:

> I know the symptoms of the disease […] Your want is a gulf which the possession of the broad earth would not fill […] What you do not want for use, you crave for ornament, and what your convenience could spare, your pride cannot. (Emerson 1983, 180)

This passage elucidates the contemporaneous statement in "Self-Reliance" that "a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property" (Ibid., 281). Self-culture may eventuate in wealth, as a great thinker or artist or craftswoman devises an answer to some question of the age. But a self-reliant individual knows, Emerson assures us, that the true and primary value of his work is its effect upon himself, how it expresses his genius and power and lifts him up. Even in "Success," he offers a biting reminder of the materialism that is prompted and fed even by great minds and great acts.

> [T]he public values the invention more than the inventor does. The inventor knows there is much more and better where this came from. The public sees in it a lucrative secret […] And we Americans are tainted with this insanity, as our bankruptcies and our reckless politics may show. We are great by exclusion, grasping, and egotism. One success takes from all what it gives to one. Tis a haggard, malignant, careworn running for luck. (Emerson 1909a, 272)

These are the words of the elder, allegedly bourgeois Emerson, who had spent a life supporting himself by selling "his ideas […] in the open marketplace" (Howe 2007, 619). In them, one hears a sober diagnosis of the avarice and superficiality characteristic of maturing market society, especially (though not exclusively) among the middling sorts. "I hate this shallow Americanism which hopes to get rich by credit, to get knowledge by raps on midnight tables, to learn the economy of the mind by phrenology, or skill without study […] or power through making believe you are powerful […] or wealth by fraud" (Emerson 1909a, 273-4). Writing at the dawn of the Gilded Age, Emerson recoiled at the drive toward wealth, consumption, and ultimately conformity in words that echoed his early published view that "[a] man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work" (Emerson 1983, 13). Success and its fruits are means to further self-culture, not ends in themselves. Yet Emerson believed this point often lost on his contemporaries. Rather than doing honestly the work that is one's vocation and a study of nature, bringing to market the fruits of one's genius, multitudes were striving to profit quickly from the exploitation of nature and of the vicissitudes of supply and demand.

Again, we find Emerson genuinely torn with regard to the market. While the market offers fertile soil in which the "extraordinary special

talents" of individuals might take root and be further cultivated, it is also strewn with shallow, distracting, and even corrupting rewards (Emerson 1909a, 275). Economic success, even when honestly earned in pursuit of one's calling, easily becomes an end in itself. Indeed, the market often rewards the purveyor of great and needful things more handsomely than the producer or inventor of those things, the speculator who gambles with land more than the farmer who works it, and the investor who contributes dollars to the building of a railroad more than the laborers who carve it into the earth. Emerson's age was one of upward mobility, real as well as illusory. The aspiration to economic gain was interwoven with countless other notions of self-improvement. Though his early warmth toward the idea of socialism cooled over the course of his life,[28] and though his accounts of the market in his later writings sometimes seem well disposed toward great economic success, he never lost his suspicion of riches and his disdain for avarice. Both tend to distract us from our proper callings, and to instill in us ill-proportioned respect for shallow things.

> 'Tis the fine souls who serve us, and not what is called fine society. Fine society […] has neither ideas nor aims. It renders the service of a perfumery or a laundry, not of a farm or factory […] Society wishes to be amused. I do not wish to be amused. I wish that life should not be cheap, but sacred […] Now we reckon [the days] as bank-days, by some debt which is to be paid us, or which we are to pay, or some pleasure we are to taste. Is all we have to do to draw the breath in, and blow it out again? (Emerson 1983, 1080)

One might reasonably question Emerson's right to criticize "fine society," so nearly belonging to it himself, or one might grant him a certain authority to pronounce on the character failures of the parts of society he knew very well. Either way, a significant portion of his criticism of the market falls upon the materialism it entices, rewards, and places on conspicuous display. In *Representative Men,* he quotes Napoleon as saying "[t]he market-place […] is the Louvre of the common people" (Ibid., 736). In his own place and time, Emerson worried that the marketplace was becoming the cultural center for an entire society, rich, poor, and middling. Like Henry Carey, whose views he shaped, he believed that "[t]he gaining of wealth could become a single-minded pursuit, an end in itself, whereas correctly conceived wealth was a necessary means to other humane goals" (Conkin 1980, 286). The very entrepreneurial

ethos that animated the market and fed America's economic progress was becoming trapped within an edifice of its own creation, an iron cage of avarice and materialism. American society was becoming the victim of its own success.

The particular bent of Emerson's ambivalently critical stance against the market and the broader society in which it arose meaningfully distinguished him from many of his intellectual kin. While most of the major Transcendentalists were individualistic in some substantial way, advocating self-culture under a number of descriptions, they also generally gravitated toward active projects of social reform—from utopian communities at Brook Farm or Fruitland, to the operation of schools and societies to elevate both children and adults (Gura 2007, Chap. 8; Rose 1981). As remarked above, Emerson, like his friend Thoreau, kept a deliberate and at times critical distance from such endeavors. He memorably excoriates the "foolish philanthropist" and "the thousandfold Relief Societies" who would enlist his money in the service of social palliation and reform (Emerson 1983, 262–3; see also Gura 2007, 210–4). Yet what at times appears as a doctrine of non-intervention that leaves the market as the proper arbiter of social order also appears as a doctrine critical of the market itself. The common error of social reform was, in essence, the same as that of celebratory views of the market. Both sought to improve aggregate conditions without first improving the individual. Emerson was convinced that "a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men" (Emerson 1983, 275; see also Rose 1981, 115). Self-culture is the key to improving society as well as to improving the market. Neither will wash itself clean if its component materials remain base; both require the tonic of proper individualism (Emerson 1983, 597–601). Thus the trope with which Emerson ostensibly defends the market against the state returns to chasten both. As he puts it in the closing lines of "Self-Reliance:"

> A political victory [or] a rise of rents […] raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles. (Ibid., 282)

The same fundamental truth is lost on those who look to the market or to the state for the improvement of their lot—all truly valuable things are the fruit of individual genius and character.

The criticism of travel offered in the same essay supplies a macrocosmic vantage upon these themes of self-culture, vocation, and their seduction by the wages and culture of the market. Indeed, Emerson identified "the rage of travelling" that took hold among the antebellum middle and upper classes as "a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole intellectual action" upon which self-culture relies[29] (Ibid., 278). The middle- and upper-class fashion of travel (which Emerson tasted deeply enough to understand, and perhaps too deeply to criticize without blemishing himself) was an act of abdication by imitation, a search for culture outside of the self. Emerson laments that "[o]ur houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant" (Ibid., 278). Yet the past and the distant need not be the exotic locales and cultures accessible only to the wealthy, but any external compass by which the individual might orient her life, at any moment and in any place. Whether fleeing to Italy or sojourning in the bustle of ordinary life in the marketplace, Emerson insists the individual shall find "the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical" from which she fled (Ibid.). Rather, "[i]nsist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession" (Ibid., 278–9). Here he speaks not only to the well bred, not even to rebuke them all the more but also to all individuals. Not only can no ornamentation, no tradition, no ready-made culture substitute for the needful work of self-cultivation, they all tend to enervate and distract from it. Those who are capable of properly appreciating the achievements wrought by the genius of others ultimately do not need them, and those who avail themselves most fully of the same can gain nothing truly valuable thereby.

3.3 An Ambivalent Individualism

> To me […] the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?
>
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate" (1860)

Emerson understood well that the answer to this question is framed by the conditions within and against which one chooses a life and crafts a

self. The dramatic transformations and markedly individualizing conditions of antebellum America prompted a wealth of intellectual responses, some reasserting collective life and communal attachments, others embracing and elucidating the individualistic potential of the times. All were compelled to come to terms with the rise of the market and its central place in American life. Individualistic accounts of the new conditions of life under the sway of the new economy generally fell at some point along a spectrum between wholesale repudiation and wholesale embrace. Thoreau exemplifies the former of these stances, whereas Sumner exemplifies the latter. For Thoreau, market participation was always and everywhere corrosive upon individuality and a life according to principle; for Sumner, market participation was the necessary and often the sufficient condition of individual character and virtue. Emerson's thought is properly situated somewhere between these two extremes.

However, his call is not for a tepid moderation, devoting oneself neither too much nor too little to pursuits of wealth and the affairs of the marketplace. As he characteristically declared in "Self-Reliance," "Your goodness must have some edge to it,—else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines" (Ibid., 262). This agonistic sentiment, the heart of his individualism, likewise instructs his view of the market. As Emerson was apt to remind his readers and audiences, his chief concern was to fathom and articulate a doctrine of individualism, of which self-reliance, self-culture, self-improvement, self-trust, and self-possession are titles or component ideas. Individuality, as he frames it, partakes of the character of existence itself, which he understood in terms of forces, struggle, and overcoming.[30] Self-reliance is not an end state to be finally accomplished but a restless, perfectionist striving toward an inexhaustible ideal. Thus, "for Emerson the struggle within the self [i]s never finished," but always admits another trial, another achievement, which "be it never so wise and brave, is but initial, is only the first gropings of the giant that shall be" (Anderson 1971, 21; Emerson 1964, 185).

Emerson must come to terms with the rise of the market because, as Sumner would later emphasize, in it, the two most fundamental and inexorable of the individual's outward struggles are bound together: her struggle against Fate or Nature and her struggle against others in the form of Society. As George Stack put it, "[a]lthough Emerson sometimes expresses admiration for the energy of the creators of new enterprises, he more typically condemns the relentless pursuit of money […]

Success in life is defined in terms of excellence of character, not in terms of accumulation of capital" (1992, 55). His stance toward the market cannot accurately be described as one of mere moderation because of how he understands individuality. Economic success sometimes indicates or accompanies elevation of character, but not necessarily and perhaps not often. What matters, above all, is self-culture. All of the other goods of life are rightly subordinated to its cause and pursuit. The market is one of the contexts in which self-culture may be won, and under some circumstances, it is perhaps the most welcoming and promising. Yet participation in the market entails compromise, even in its moments of triumph. The skilled entrepreneur succeeds by accommodating himself, however, slightly, to the market's imperatives and values, which means accommodating himself to the tastes, needs, and practices of others. The great inventor might see beyond the common horizon and thus attain a measure of greatness, but the market rewards his for service to something other and lower than self-culture (e.g., the vanity and consumerism of a paying public). Every individual has a calling to discover and perform, but the market only occasionally and instrumentally encourages or rewards this pursuit. Too often, it debases a life's vocation in genius to a mere occupation for pecuniary gain. Thus, individuals might cultivate their powers and character by way of commerce and industry, but they do so *in spite* of the prevailing conditions and practices of economic life. Every victory is a close call, instructive both as an illustration of self-trust and self-assertion and as a fortuitous avoidance of decline.

Committed as he was to individuality, and critical as he was of institutions and conformity, Emerson clung to "the possibility that the market could play an important role[…]if only enough people would see it as means to [the] higher end" of self-culture (Teichgraeber 1995, 5). Every moment furnishes an opportunity for self-improvement, and scorning the market altogether would deny the individual the full use of her powers and demonstrate a lack of faith in her genius. Yet Emerson could not simply accept the market as he found it. He was, for instance, well aware that the market, as it existed during his life, was a place of privileges and obstacles, in which white men enjoyed disproportionate opportunities for economic self-help. To the extent that self-reliance is, for him, a universal calling the market is an incomplete and imperfect context for its realization. Displaying, however unwittingly, an uneasy blend of Whig confidence in disciplined self-advancement and Democrat suspicion of conspiracies, he struggles to find a way to sustain self-reliance amid the

marketplace, rather than rejecting it and withdraw from it (as Thoreau counseled), or cut his individualism to fit its strictures (as Sumner did). Yet what distinguishes Emerson from the enlightened bourgeoisie to which he is often assimilated by his critics and commentators is precisely the restless striving for self-culture that he depicts, carried out within an institutional, practical context that is both opportunity and adversary, and that cannot realistically be avoided. Thus, he leaves his reader in a sometimes frustrating position, in turn praising and criticizing the market, urging us sometimes to heed and sometimes to refuse its call. My suggestion has been that this tension is not a limitation or failure of his thinking, but its essential lesson. As he counsels his reader in "Fate," "[w]e are incompetent to solve the times […] We can only obey our own polarity" (Emerson 1983, 943).

Notes

1. Although Emerson was progressive by the standards of his time regarding the capacities and roles of women, his thought reflected many of the prevailing assumptions about the priority of masculinity in social and economic life. Accordingly, I generally follow his own usage of masculine pronouns, with the qualification that time has shown women to be capable of (if not always invited to embrace) the full measure of individual agency he depicts.
2. My concern is with Emerson's public face, rather than with his private views—though with respect to the market there seems to be little gap between the two.
3. Even his protégé and longtime friend, Henry David Thoreau, at times suspected this. See Sattelmeyer 1995, 35.
4. Kateb's elevation of the intellectual expressions of self-reliance over its practical expressions seems most deliberately intended to inoculate Emerson from close association with economic individualism.
5. Notable works include Gougeon 1990, Gougeon 1995, Turner 2012, and numerous essays contained in Levine and Malachuk 2011.
6. In the same year, in a lecture titled "The Individual," Emerson added the distinction that "[p]rogress is not for society. Progress belongs to the Individual" (1964, 176).
7. To call this an ontological claim is, in part, to distinguish it from a psychological or practical claim. Unlike Hobbes, who described human life as striving "for power after power, that ceaseth only in death," Emerson describes existence as such in terms of potency and its expression, thereby coming somewhat closer to the view of Spinoza (Hobbes 1651/1994, 58; Spinoza 1677/1992).

8. For a critique of the distinction between an "'early' antimarket" and a "'late' promarket" Emerson, see Teichgraeber 1995 generally; quotations from p. 4.
9. In "Circles" (1841) Emerson says much the same by way of a different metaphor: "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end" (1983, 404).
10. Yet, as Buell aptly discusses, even these representations of self-culture fall short of full perfection and realization of individual potential (2003, 79).
11. Much the same view is apparent in "Trades and Professions." For further commentary, Diggins 1999, 233–40.
12. Anderson, Bercovitch, and Newfield arrive at similar critical assessments.
13. See also Emerson 1964, 114–5: "The various trades and employments of men are the primary Science upon which indeed all formal science is built […] Every trade and occupation of men if nearly examined proves to be through all its processes a study of nature."
14. Emerson quoted in Kateb 2002, 187.
15. Decades earlier, on the eve of the Panic of 1837, Emerson expressed a similar faith that "the individual in a free society tends ever to find and embrace that employment for which he has a natural gift" (1964, 127).
16. This view echoes Adam Smith's claim that "[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest" (1776/1994, 15; see also Dolan 2009, 49).
17. On philanthropy and state intervention see Emerson 1983, 262–263 and 559, 999–1000 respectively.
18. In such claims, Emerson was also favorably contrasting free labor with slave labor and the idleness of the master class.
19. This theme ramifies throughout Emerson's essay "Resources" (1909b, 131–48).
20. Dolan suggests that even his early essays and lectures are essentially "promarket," differing in circumstance and rhetoric from his later works, yet not in the liberal worldview they articulate (2011, 360–71).
21. Emerson's reservations about the intellectual character and political tropes of the abolitionist movement gave way to full-throated support as the issue of slavery divided the country more deeply and as the institution gained political ground in the late 1840s and throughout the 1850s (Gougeon 1995, xxx–l).
22. Gougeon notes that as Emerson's views of slavery and abolition evolved, so did his views about the "racial inferiority" and potential "social equality" of slaves (1994, xix; see also Dolan 2009, 265–7).

23. Yet Emerson's criticism is not limited to the moral taint of slavery. He says much the same about "the general system of our trade" and the "perjury and fraud" it obscures in "Man the Reformer" (1840) (Emerson 1983, 137).
24. For example Anderson 1971, Chap. 1.
25. He never, for instance, places any economic figure on a level plane with Goethe, Montaigne, Napoleon, Plato, Shakespeare, or Swedenborg. These representative figures were examples of self-culture, whose lives transcended economic success or failure.
26. As Robinson aptly notes, "[t]he title 'Wealth' might indeed have been 'Work[.]'" (1993, 144) "Wealth" is primarily an essay about following one's calling, and only secondarily about the fortunate political economy of a market society.
27. Compare Emerson's lines in "The American Scholar:" "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things […] The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book, the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship" (1983, 54).
28. See Bercovitch 1990 and Milder 1999.
29. On the rising frequency and declining costs of travel, see Larkin 1988, 221–3 and Taylor 1951, 141–8.
30. He even characterizes conversation and friendship in terms of potency and challenge (Emerson 1983, 1092–3).

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CHAPTER 4

Thoreau and Deliberate Living: Individualism Against the Market

Emerson is rightly remembered as a fount of nineteenth-century individualism, the public intellectual who bequeathed to American culture the enduring language and ideal of self-reliance. Though for all the grandeur of his reputation and influence, to the outward observer, the sage of Concord lived a life of fairly ordinary, New England, middle-class prosperity and respectability. He achieved great renown and influence as an essayist and lecturer, but his conspicuous and copious intellectual self-reliance was balanced by comparatively scant and subtly practical self-reliance. The more complete realization of Emerson's own ideals arguably fell to his chosen protégé, who proved to be "gifted at living out what others only speculated about" (Richardson 1986, 191).

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was born to a Concord family living in the lower reaches of the middle class, and the life of his family exemplified the precariousness and pressures of life under the expanding empire of the market. His father operated a small pencil manufactory in which Henry occasionally worked, and which frequently teetered on the edge of insolvency, whereas financial pressure led his mother to take in boarders. Thus, from a young age, he lived amid the striving demanded by the market and saw honest and relatively independent labor met with meager compensation and ongoing uncertainty. His mother's participation in the Underground Railroad likewise furnished elements of a moral education, of principle in action, contrary to law if necessary (Harding 1995, 3). Yet viewed from the standpoint of the full flower of his life and work, the most formative influence upon Thoreau's personal

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development and mature views on his abiding concerns—nature, the self, the market, the state, and slavery—was undoubtedly Emerson. Despite the import and extensive documentation of a relationship spanning two and a half decades, we know fairly little about the circumstances of their first acquaintance (Richardson 1986, 18–24). By the time of Thoreau's 1837 graduation from Harvard College, Emerson was well on his way to public notoriety and had taken both Concord and its native son as his own. Thenceforth Thoreau lived in a social and intellectual milieu dominated by Emerson, and his reputation, work, and influence have ever since remained closely associated with the figure of his mentor. Mainly, since the mid-twentieth century has commentators cultivated a deeper appreciation of the ways and extent to which Thoreau found or made his own way, undoubtedly indebted to Emerson, but not to be judged merely by the latter's standards (Cain 2000; Sattelmeyer 1995).

By chance and by choice, Thoreau never became as settled as Emerson, nor did he achieve as much admiration and respect during his own life. His inclinations and choices situated him at the margins of society. In the eulogy that deeply shaped Thoreau's posthumous reception, Emerson emphasized his young friend's agonistic disposition.

> [F]ew lives contain so many renunciations[…]There was somewhat military in his nature not to be subdued, always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. He wanted a fallacy to expose, a blunder to pillory, I may say, required a little sense of victory, a roll of the drum, to call his powers into full exercise. It cost him nothing to say No; indeed he found it much easier than to say Yes. (1862/1992, 321–2; see also Rosenblum 1981, 1987, Chaps. 5 and 6)

Casting the same qualities of character in terms somewhat more generous, constructive, and representative of the range of Thoreau's life and works (published and unpublished), Walt Whitman expressed admiration for "his lawlessness—his dissent—his going his absolute own road let hell blaze all it chooses."[1] In a life perennially characterized by struggle and striving—to find a literary voice (and livelihood) of his own, to satisfactorily articulate his uncompromising principles, and to live so as to satisfy them—Thoreau embodied, perhaps better than Emerson himself, the core ideals of Emersonian individualism: self-knowledge, self-trust, and perfectionist self-cultivation. Along the way, he found his own distinctive voice and crafted a life best understood as a series of experiments in

self-making, as well as writings that furnish a rich documentary account of that ongoing enterprise.

The eccentricity of Thoreau's intellectual and practical life has garnered him a plentiful and mixed reputation. "He has been termed a stoic, a contentious moralizer, a parasite, an arsonist, a misanthrope, a supreme egoist, a father-hater who projected his animus on the state, a banal writer[,] a philosophical anarchist and small-town failure, as well as an intellectual aristocrat [and] a failed scientist who did not comprehend the scientific method"; to others he is "an extreme individualist, an unyielding critic of Christianity, a brilliant self-educated naturalist, a radical abolitionist, [a] democratic individualist, [a] romantic liberal[,] the forerunner of both literary modernism and contemporary 'deep ecological' thinking" and, perhaps above all, a magnificent polemicist (Eiseley 1987, 52; Teichgraeber 1995, 44; see also Hyman 1962, 24). Some have found his unabashed, self-narrated project of individuality antinomian, ineffectual, and even laughable, whereas others have found it courageous, profound, and edifying. However, no serious reader or commentator can avoid reckoning with some aspect of Thoreau's abiding individualistic ethos.

Along with the individual's relationship to the state and the moral issue of slavery, the market figures prominently in Thoreau's articulation and enactment of individualism. One needs to look no farther than the first chapter of *Walden* (1854) or the essay "Life without Principle" (1854/1863) to see how deeply Thoreau feels the impress of the market, how much it motivates and informs his experiments in living. Thus far he is, indeed Emerson's protégé, aware of the ineluctable ways in which institutions threaten, prompt, and provide context for self-reliance. Yet Thoreau went farther than Emerson. Whereas the latter struggled to understand, master, and benefit properly from the often ambiguous relations between the individual and the market, the former saw matters in starker terms. Thoreau's individualism builds from admittedly Emersonian foundations toward a more militant, less accommodating stance. Self-cultivation and principled living in a market society entail self-conscious economic practices, including practices of self-accounting, discipline, and simplicity. Whereas Emerson believed the individual might live "in the midst" of the market and yet keep "with perfect sweetness the independence" of self-reliance, Thoreau believed that market participation could not but compromise individual integrity, authenticity, and autonomy (Emerson 1983, 263). Having learnt well the Emersonian

lesson of self-trust, Thoreau was willing to go where his friend would not: out of the marketplace, both to rise above what he perceived was its enervating and corrupting influence, and, from a morally and practically superior vantage to war against it.

This last claim requires careful qualification, as it raises a problem common to Thoreau scholarship, and one with which I must presently grapple. Apart from his most radical moments of withdrawal from ordinary society, Thoreau was a participant in the market, albeit of an unusually self-conscious, limited, and selective sort. He did, after all, support himself through various forms of market-oriented activity, including making pencils, teaching, surveying land, and, of course, writing for a public audience. (He also readily abandoned these undertakings when he found them disagreeable.) Thus, to say that he self-consciously positioned himself *against* the market invites two charges, one addressed to Thoreau and the other addressed to his reader. Toward Thoreau is the all-too-familiar charge that he lived a performative contradiction, attributable to anything from immaturity of thought to self-deceptive mania (Bercovitch 1978, 185–90; Buranelli 1957; Hochfield 1988; Lowell 1865/1992; Schulz 2015). That is, he railed against the wickedness of institutions of which he routinely availed himself. Toward his reader is the more academic charge of oversimplifying or selectively reading Thoreau's work, muting or eliding the ways in which he accommodated himself to the realities of the market and occasionally even embraced it.[2] The first dismisses Thoreau altogether, whereas the second interprets him as a minor prophet of the Emersonian faith, who (as I suggested of Emerson) had "deep misgivings about the market" but nonetheless "argu[ed] that Americans could find ways to rule their wealth for higher purposes," turning the market from the adversary of self-culture into an opportunity and resource (Teichgraeber 1995, 65).

Thoreau's relationship to the market is inescapably complex, yet I believe that the Gordian knot it presents to contemporary interpreters can be cut. He did often live at least on the margins of the market, but he had far more than misgivings about it. Like his critical stances toward the state and institutionalized religion, his critical stance toward the market is informed by experience, even familiarity. His acquaintance with the working of the market challenges both those who have dismissed him as a naïve critic of things he did not really understand and a hypocrite who attacks the very institutions from which he benefits. Thoreau lived close enough to the market to see it clearly, yet not so close as to make

him a robust participant. Few would suggest that Thoreau's attitude toward the state or organized religion embodies "a readiness to compromise," and I would claim that neither was he ready to compromise with the market, not even in the qualified fashion of Emerson[3] (Ibid., 71). Rather, his project writ large is to expose and transcend the limitations, trade-offs, and vices of institutions, elevating in their stead the principled individual who used to dwell in their shadows. What follows is an attempt to make good on this characterization of Thoreau vis-à-vis the market.

4.1 Thoreau's Individualism: Self-Cultivation as Deliberate Living

> It is for want of a man that there are so many men. It is individuals that populate the world.
>
> Henry David Thoreau, "Life without Principle" (1854/1863)

As historian Daniel Walker Howe has aptly put it, "[t]he essence of Thoreau's message in all his writings is the same: the necessity for individual self-realization" (1997, 247). Behind their literary value, his journals, published works, and public lectures are, above all, tracts and acts of self-reflection, self-exposition, and self-making. Exploring his own "higher latitudes" through deliberate enterprises of self-cultivation, he addresses his audience in the self-appointed capacity of chanticleer, bragging lustily of his own realizations and accomplishments, so as to awaken them to both their shortcomings and their potential (Thoreau 1854/1992, 214, 1). Along the way, he has much to say about society and community, and sometimes appreciates the company of others and the accomplishments of collective actions,[4] but he is, first and last, an individualist. The individual is the indisputable center of Thoreau's world; agency, intelligence, creativity, and moral status belong only to her, not to societies, communities, or institutions. Characteristically stated in his journal: "I love mankind[;] I hate the institutions of their forefathers" (1984, 262). One might restate the point thus, in terms drawn from the above passage from "Life without Principle": Thoreau loves individuals, but deplores the faceless masses of men. Exemplifying the same sensibility that animates his critiques of the state and organized religion, he believed that closeness to and association with others

typically compromises the individual and must be approached skeptically at best, antagonistically at worst. While this individualism took root in Emersonian soil, it grew into a distinctive vision.

4.1.1 An Emersonian Education

Thoreau's life is effectively bookended by the figure of Emerson, who "not only called Thoreau into being as a writer but also launched him toward posterity with the first extended account of his life and career," delivered in the eulogy that fastened to Thoreau terms like "hermit and stoic" (Sattelmeyer 1995, 25; Emerson 1862/1992, 322). Thanks in part to this eulogy, it has long been familiar and tempting to interpret Thoreau as "a specific Emerson" who embraced the unmodified ideal of self-reliance and simply went to greater lengths to investigate and realize its practical implications.[5] In recent scholarship, the attention given to Thoreau's originality of thought has begun to approach that given to his eccentricity of action, and it is to this more balanced perspective that I wish to contribute (e.g., Bennett 2002; Mariotti 2010; McKenzie 2011; Neufeldt 1989; Rosenblum 2009; Taylor 1996; Turner 2005; Walker 1998). Thoreau's relation to Emerson not only informs a proper understanding of the former's individualism, it also partly illustrates the extent to which Thoreau lived up to his own principles (meaning both that he achieved the sort of life he thought valuable and that his vision of such a life was truly his own).

As Transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau worked at problems and possibilities situated at the intersection of two of the most important intellectual and cultural traditions of their day. "Protestantism taught that the natural self was corrupt and in need of redemption; the Enlightenment taught that human beings were capable of self-direction and self-definition" (Howe 1997, 260). Through their higher education at Harvard, the two were steeped in the Unitarian negotiation of this apparent paradox, though they each found the college's intellectual environment and theological conventions "rigid and uninspired"[6] (Frost 2005, 287). Transcendentalism—which Emerson did much to inaugurate, and both he and Thoreau later influenced—simultaneously gave articulation to this discontentment and promised means of overcoming it. Drawing lessons from Unitarian thinkers such as William Ellery Channing, both held the conviction that "individuals are valuable in their own right and that they should develop their full potential while exercising self-control," postulating "not only the existence

of a self as the consequence of an individual's personal and social history, but also the capacity of the individual for critical reflection upon that self, with the power to modify it through conscious effort" (Howe 1997, 4). Whereas mainline Unitarians clung to the idea of an organized church congregation as a context and guide for self-culture, Emerson and Thoreau joined (and ultimately surpassed) other Transcendentalists in substituting "*personal* discipline for *community* discipline" in nearly all of its forms (Ibid., 109). Thoreau thus learned from Emerson an intellectual justification for what was likely a congenital personal disposition toward aloofness, independence, and self-trust. Yet the optimism of their ideals was balanced by the sober diagnosis that "few were really free" in antebellum America (Rose 1981, 222). Thoreau heartily embraced Emerson's assessment in "Self-Reliance" that "[s]ociety everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" (1983, 261). Beyond those subjected to chattel slavery (which both regarded as a supreme moral and political evil), these two kindred thinkers saw degrees of conformity, distraction, desperation, resignation, and servitude in all corners of society—among women, Native Americans, and so-called free white men. Their works were meant to serve at once to diagnose and to treat this condition, sounding a call to awaken those who spent their days in such half-slumber.

Emerson clearly regarded his young friend as a literary and intellectual project of sorts. It was he, for instance, who prompted Thoreau to begin the journal that was the wellspring and testing ground of all of his published works. We would likely not have *Walden* or "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) were it not for Emerson, but his influence was not always or only salutary, and at times perhaps hindered Thoreau's early development as a thinker and a writer. For instance, the poor reception of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) was arguably due in part to Emerson's encouragement and help in arranging its premature publication (a lesson not lost on Thoreau, who took far longer to revise *Walden* before sending it to press). Furthermore, their relationship was often fraught with unfulfilled expectations on both sides.[7] Emerson ultimately had the last word, and in his eulogy, he simultaneously praised his departed friend's capacities and virtues and criticized what he did (and did not do) with them.

> [W]ith his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command: and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of

> action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days, but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans! (Emerson 1862/1992, 332)

This public statement is representative of much of Emerson's private journal entries and correspondence regarding his friend. While he clearly bores care and admiration for Thoreau, Emerson's tone toward him was often tinged with paternal admonition and disappointment, the tone of one who believes he knows another somewhat better than that other knows himself.

Thoreau nonetheless found his own voice, gaining distance from mainstream Transcendentalism (to the extent there was such a thing) as well as from Emerson's formative influence. Their respective attitudes toward the planned communities at Brook Farm and Fruitlands illustrate the drift from Transcendentalism. Emerson found George Ripley's Brook Farm particularly "congenial" to his own vision of self-culture, and only after "much hesitation and soul-searching" did he demur and keep the life of a lone intellectual reformer (Richardson 1986, 101). Despite being the more practically-minded, Thoreau entertained no such interest.

> As for these communities—I think I had rather keep a bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven[…]The boarder has no home. In heaven I hope to bake my own bread and clean my own linen.— The tomb is the only boarding house in which a hundred are served at once—in the catacomb we may dwell together and prop one another without loss. (Thoreau 1981, 277–8)

The Transcendentalist program, such as it was, did not suit Thoreau's individual character or suitably realize his personal principles. He would maintain to the last that collaborative endeavors tend to be "exceedingly partial and superficial" and that nothing truly valuable "can be effected but by one man" (Thoreau 2001, 133). Despite continuing, occasionally, to refer to himself as a Transcendentalist into the 1850s, his effectual break with the movement came much earlier.

Achieving distance from Emerson was a slower process, which advanced along several fronts. Philosophically, their views of nature

ultimately diverged. For Emerson, nature is the "background for human life," the canvas of the active mind, which furnishes resources and occasions for the exertions of self-reliance (Porte 1965, 13; see also Lopez 1996, 79–86; Richardson 1999). In his works of the 1830s and 1840s, he admonishes his audience to remember that "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit," for "it is the eye which makes the horizon" (Emerson 1983, 11, 487). *The Conduct of Life* (1860) merely gives the same notions a more tangible inflection, casting the natural world as the "Fate" against which individual "Power" is asserted. Thoreau's individualism was anchored in a different vision of nature, receptive to a "universe [that] is wider than our views of it" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 213). He came to understand and appreciate nature as "the foreground of personal experience," an "infinite" world "other than me," and "not a chamber of mirrors which reflect me" (Porte 1965, 13, 117 [quoting Thoreau]; see also Bennett 2002, 61). This represents not only a different *view* of nature but a fundamentally different *stance* toward nature, a different way of understanding and living a relationship to the natural world.

Thoreau also differentiated himself through his more active interpretation of self-culture, despite a significant agreement with Emerson about general ideals. Both loathed conformity, championed individual agency (intellectual as well as practical), and interpreted the social world in terms derivative of and instrumental to the moral status of the individual self. Nonetheless, Thoreau unquestionably carried these ideals farther into practice than did his mentor, becoming an "*example*" of that which his mentor remained largely a "proponent" (Richardson 1986, 191; see also Cafaro 2004, 21–5). For instance, Emerson's doubts about utopian communities led him to eschew such endeavors and remain a respectable and famed citizen of Concord,[8] whereas Thoreau's disdain for such collective projects bolstered his commitment to pursue his own project after his own fashion. For all his praise of agonistic self-assertion, Emerson remained committed above all to intellectual self-reliance, a freedom of mind no less real for being enjoyed in outwardly conventional circumstances (e.g., Kateb 2002, 1–36). Thoreau, however, approached life as "an experiment" in self-cultivation (1854/1992, 5). Freeing oneself from conventional ways of thought, as Emersonian self-reliance demands, is an indispensable first step for experimental living—but *thinking* freely is not yet *acting* freely. This too reflects a fundamental difference between Emerson's and Thoreau's respective

worldviews. The former never altogether abandoned the idealism expressed in his 1836 book, *Nature*. Over time the latter's thought, in both his views of nature and of the self, developed a "hard materialist edge" (Taylor 1996, 86; see also Porte 1965, 122–3). Like John Stuart Mill, Thoreau maintained that "the worth of different modes of life," and thus also the ideas that underlie them, "should be proved practically" [9] (Mill 1989, 57). Convinced that nature, and thus the world in which human beings dwell, has a "solid bottom" that does not simply mirror the human intellect, he remained committed to the superiority, or at least greater completeness or perfection, of action to thought (Thoreau 1854/1992, 220). As he writes in *A Week*, "[t]he word which is best said came nearest to not being spoken at all, for it is cousin to a deed which the speaker could have better done" (1849/1998, 85). This privileging of thoughtful conduct over mere thoughtfulness is, I believe, the key to understanding the basic difference between the individualism of Emerson and that of Thoreau, and how their different views of individual self-cultivation lead them to substantially different views of the market, politics, and social reform. Though Emerson's later works turned squarely to consider the conduct of life, to the end his highest faith remained vested in "*Man Thinking*" (Emerson 1983, 54)—Thoreau's highest faith was vested, first and last, in the person of action, engaged diligently in his or her own deliberate experiments. This is, admittedly, a difference of inflection, as both always maintained that the intellectual and practical dimensions of self-culture are necessarily connected. Yet a slight divergence of course can create substantial distance over time, and I suggest that this seemingly academic distinction between Emerson and Thoreau helped to lay the rails for what proved to be meaningfully different paths of thought and of life.

4.1.2 Minding One's Own Business

Thoreau's works depict an idealized individualism by way of an image of the self-reliant character. While this idealized image is significantly literary and hortative, it is not merely so. Perhaps no one of his era "set the private man first" as resolutely as did Thoreau, above and ultimately against society and its institutions, striving to embody his ideal, in action as well as in thought, in the minutiae of life as well as in its more auspicious moments (Emerson 1909, 244). True to his Transcendentalist education, he was "ever disposed to interpret life

ethically, to subordinate the aesthetic, intellectual, and even political and economic aspects of human nature to [the individual's] significance as a moral agent" (Bowers 1973, 11). The ethical disposition that shapes his life and work is most succinctly articulated in *Walden*, where he proclaims that "our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 146). Here Thoreau expresses the double sensibility that informs his critical stance (toward, e.g., religion, politics, and the market) and that gives his individualism its distinct practical cast.

First, Thoreau understands human conduct as exhaustively colonized by ethics, down to its finest, seemingly inconsequential details. Every deed bears an ethical import, both for the doer and for that portion of the world he touches. However, the highest end of ethics is the cultivation of individual character according to the dictates of one's inner light, be or seem the worldly consequences what they may. In "Resistance to Civil Government," he declares that he "came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad" (Thoreau 1849/1992, 234). Rather than repudiating the claims of ethics upon him (for he says this in an essay proclaiming the superiority of ethics to politics), Thoreau prioritizes the cultivation of individual character (which he only half ironically admits is "very selfish") over "Doing-good" in the conventional, social sense (1854/1992, 49). As early as his rejection of Brook Farm and Fruitlands, we see his conviction that "action-in concert, even on behalf of the public good, was a crucible of normalization" (Bennett 2002, 86). What matters first and most, and which is a necessary condition for truly benefitting others, is improving oneself (e.g., Thoreau 2001, 131–2, 135–6). Like Emerson, Thoreau stands his individualism upon the twin pillars of self-knowledge and self-trust, as *Walden* and his critical essays famously chronicled. Far from mere moral solipsism or relativism, Thoreau shares Emerson's sense of moral realism and believes ethical values to be the "highest reality"[10] (1854/1992, 145). Yet Thoreau does not follow Emerson's example of interpreting moral intuition as mere "instinct"—rather, he is deeply committed to discursively articulable and defensible principles, despite his reputation as a would-be mystic (Carpenter 1973, 25; Fergenson 1982, 105). For him, there is no mystery or whimsy to the right or the good (Cf. Emerson 1983, 262). His commitment to self-culture is not merely about cultivating one's experiences or faculties, but also one's virtues of character.[11] Despite clearly favoring virtuous character over conformity

to rules, he holds tightly to the palpably (yet perhaps unwittingly) Kantian notion that a good or right action is drained of its ethical content when dictated or compelled by something outside the agent who performs it. Such an action can only attain the form of ethical obligation but not the substance of ethical worth, it can only be the shadow but not what casts it. For this reason, he dismisses religious and political institutions as mere organs of policy and expediency; through their coercive operations, a person might be induced to do what is outwardly good or right without becoming a good person or living rightly, for these require that she attends to and realizes her innate faculties for moral agency.[12] In Thoreau's case, it is difficult to say which comes first, his ethics or his individualism, but the two are undoubtedly complementary in their effects.

Second, Thoreau's individualism is surpassingly agonistic and practical. He understands life as a struggle of self-cultivation, striving to do and become, to both master and develop oneself, and to maintain one's integrity in the face of the conspiracies and compromises of life *inter homines*. The ethical individual crafts an integral self according to the dictates of his conscience, whereas in society all are variously "hidden behind custom's masks"[13] (Larkin 1988, 149). Sometimes these masks are tangible, such as the fashions with which individuals are clothed, made all the more pervasive and imperious by the rise of mass production and consumption during the nineteenth century.[14] Still more threatening, according to Thoreau's ethical worldview, was that "social encounters [are] hopelessly mediated by social convention and repetition," and thus inevitably exert the force of expectation and conformity against the individual character (Frank 2011, 169). Every moment of life bears ethical consequence, and thus every social encounter and every private moment entail and display an ethical practice, and with it a way of being toward oneself and toward (or against) others. Thoreau's individualistic ideal is meant to make such practices, such ways of being, *deliberate* in the fullest sense of the term—self-aware, thoughtful, considered, unhurried, intentional, and purposive.

In his characterization of the deliberate life, we find the most lucid exposition of his individualism. Thoreau often refers to such living as *minding one's own business*. The expression is rooted in the liberal Protestant intellectual milieu that he and Emerson inhabited, wherein the concept of vocation (in both its spiritual and material sense) was central to that of self-culture. Self-improvement and self-realization are

ultimately inseparable from doing the work that is one's portion. As he writes at the close of *Walden,* "[d]rive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction,—a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse[…]Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the work" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 221; Neufeldt 1989, 54). Whereas Emerson's inflection of vocation privileged the substance of one's calling, the kind of work one undertakes, Thoreau privileges the adverbial character of one's work. The former maintains that, say, a carpenter follows his vocation in that he does precisely the work through which nature yields to his power; the latter maintains that the same follows his vocation in that he does deliberately and resolutely whatever work he considers to be his own. However, meager the task before the individual, or, however, slight his talents, he should tackle his work with a measure of heroism.[15] Even the most ordinary occupations, diligently pursued, fasten virtues to individual character, elevating it little by little. This valorization of what is too often overlooked or dismissed as mundane resounds throughout Thoreau's works. As Howe puts it, Thoreau's "genius lay in reflecting upon relatively modest experiences [such as any individual could have] and turning them into great writing" about achievements to which any individual could aspire (2007, 623). His individualism is in this way eminently egalitarian, rather than aristocratic. He praises the individual who does his work well and happily as much, if not more, than the "great souls" who are so often regarded as the benefactors of humanity. Perhaps *contra* Emerson, the ordinary person who minds his own business is as much a representative figure as a Shakespeare or a Montaigne, for what made the latter great was not that they accomplished great things *simpliciter*, but that they tended excellently well their own enterprises.

Yet how is the individual to know what work is properly his own? Thoreau's notion of "principle" provides the answer and serves to unite the intellectual and practical aspects of his individualism. Principle signifies articulation of higher law via the dictates of individual conscience, understanding of which is a necessary condition of self-knowledge, and fidelity to which is a sufficient condition of self-trust (Neufeldt 1989, 90). One might say that while principles convey higher laws, they speak to and through individuals. Praising "the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor," Thoreau "wants to make each individual the judge of what kind of character he wishes to pursue"

(Thoreau 1854/1992, 61; Howe 1997, 267). Principles serve as indispensable guides to such pursuits, though they do not dictate them. As with Emerson, the latitude given to individual agency liberalizes the classical notion of vocation. Thoreau muses that "[i]f a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away" (1854/1992, 217). Though the basic imperatives of self-culture speak indifferently to all (e.g., regardless of race, sex, or class), heeding them remains an individual task. Following one's vocation, minding one's own business, is not therefore a matter of occupying a station assigned by one's birth, talents, or the expectations of one's society. (Thoreau thus removes the concept of vocation even farther from its Protestant origin than Emerson did.) Each individual must, rather, follow his principles as they announce themselves through his conscience. A principled life is an active, indeed willful, life characterized more by perceiving and grasping opportunities than by learning and obeying rules. As with Emersonian self-reliance, Thoreauvian principled living is offered as a universal human ideal, toward which every person is called to strive, regardless of race, gender, or class. As with his mentor's, Thoreau's ideal is of course mitigated by the conventions and social conditions of his day, which included chattel slavery, the subordination of women, and the disenfranchisement of the poorest. Nonetheless, he articulates his ideal of principled living, as Emerson did that of self-reliance, in terms of an agonistic aversion to the shackles of custom, embracing unconditionally the Romantic notion that a human being "is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" (Mill 1989, 60). Despite its recourse to the language of manliness, I suggest that, in hindsight, Thoreau's doctrine of individualism is not merely or narrowly masculine, for in his day it was the chains of custom that subordinated women and persons of color, not anything that Thoreau believed was essential in a person's sex or race. His exhortations to individuality are genuinely addressed to all, as all are in some way equipped to heed them. Individual personality must be understood as the result of organic self-development, expressive of the unique character, and perspective of the individual himself. Neither mere unconventionality, nor a fixed identity, however unique, it is the authentic expression of oneself, of a personality that is always becoming, regardless of where it began.

Thoreau presents his slightly more than two years at Walden Pond as an experiment in self-cultivation, so conceived.

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life[.] (Thoreau 1854/1992, 61)

It is easy to interpret Thoreau's life as one of pure negation, but as Philip Cafaro has noted, a fundamental affirmation of life is at the heart of his life and works (2004, 17–8). Withdrawing from conventional society afforded him unmitigated opportunity to do what he believes, we all should to—embrace our existence, mind our business, and explore our higher latitudes. Earlier in *Walden*, he asserts that the "mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," caught in a waking slumber, leading half-lives, squandering their best hours and energies, toiling to satisfy superficial needs and serve designs not their own, and distracting themselves with petty, mocking amusements (Thoreau 1854/1992, 5). It is to this desperate, conventional life that a deliberate life of individuality is opposed. In addition to the commercial image of minding one's own business, Thoreau commonly characterizes deliberate living in terms of the agricultural imagery of self-cultivation. Indeed, *Walden* trades extensively upon the parallel images of economic self-sufficiency through cultivating the means to satisfy one's true needs and the achievement of individuality through practices of self-cultivation, tending to one's personal growth and development as the farmer tends to the growth and development of her crops. As Mill would later do in *On Liberty*, Thoreau juxtaposes the vital, dynamic, authentic image of "cultivat[ing] a few cubic feet of flesh," to the static, desperate, conformist image of existing as a mere machine (Ibid., 3; see also 148).

Thoreau's doctrine is thus both individualistic and pluralistic. The contours of the deliberate life are (and indeed must be) as distinct and varied as the individuals who heed the call of conscience. Accordingly, Thoreau declares:

> I would not have any adopt *my* mode of living on any account […] I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but

> I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead […] I would not stand between any man and his genius; and to him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely they will. (Ibid., 48–9)

This conveys both the aspirational core and the critical edge to his individualism. Minding one's business means discerning one's proper endeavors from the enterprises, expectations, inducements, conventions, and conformities of others. As the passage above indicates, and true to Emerson's characterization of his agonistic disposition, Thoreau's articulation of his ideal is intertwined with his diagnosis of its abasement in the society he inhabits. Not only do few persons pursue their own vocations, their individual paths to self-improvement and self-realization, but those who do are often made objects of scorn in the eyes of those who do not. It is no wonder, perhaps, that so many are driven to resignation and desperation; the deliberate life of self-cultivation requires self-affirmation.

At another level, however, minding one's business entails practices of nay-saying. A deliberate life is necessarily directed toward a determinate and uncompromising end; it is principled and disciplined; though its principles are internal, it is not spontaneous in the sense of whimsical or unpredictable. While the common labeling of Thoreau as a self-denying Stoic is simplistic and easily exaggerated, deliberate living is very much a practice of husbanding one's will, in Montaigne's neo-Stoic phrase (Montaigne 1965, 766–83). Minding one's own business means knowing what are properly one's own concerns and devoting oneself to just those matters, bringing them to fruition through restrained, narrowly focused efforts that require single-mindedness and the foreclosure of alternatives. Thoreau, of course, recognizes that one's business might change—he did, after all, leave his experiment at Walden Pond to begin the next life he had yet to lead. Ever the experimentalist, he believes that the individual's "capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 6). However, the essence of the deliberate life is purity of purpose and pursuit, whose proper sentiment often appears to be "not joy but zeal" (Bridgman 1982, 83). Thus, the self that Thoreau champions is both capable of protean self-transformation and bounded at any given moment—minding one's business means minding these

boundaries, not being tempted to concern oneself with what is beyond one's principled horizons or short of them. Thoreau explicitly recognizes the detachment or even impersonality this requires. As he says in *Walden*, in the chapter titled "Solitude," "I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator[.]" (1854/1992, 91).

Beyond the palpable echoes of both classical Stoics (say, Marcus Aurelius) and neo-Stoics (say, Montaigne), there is an instructive affinity between Thoreau's account of the individual's capacity to regard himself as an object of cultivation and philosopher Harry Frankfurt's conception of a person possessed of free will. Describing such a person, Frankfurt claims that "[b]esides wanting and choosing and being moved *to do* this or that, men may also want to have (or not to have) certain desires and motives. They are capable of wanting to be different, in their preferences and purposes, from what they are" (1988, 12). A self-determining agent is thus distinguished from a mere plaything of passions and environmental stimuli by his capacity to adopt a stance toward himself. He is capable of critically regarding his past experiences as well as his present desires and projects, and intentionally shaping who he shall become. The perspective on oneself that Frankfurt describes as essential to freedom of the will illuminates the essence of Thoreau's doubleness. Individuality is the product of deliberate self-cultivation, which entails the practice of standing aloof from oneself, if only metaphorically, and choosing not just what one does but subtly working upon the desires and dispositions that occasion and inform one's choices and actions. Foreclosure is thus an ineluctable element of Thoreau's conception; the happiness that attends individuality is measured self-adequacy rather than ecstasy.[16] There may indeed be a lighter side to individuality, but this is ultimately a secondary consideration. Such satisfaction must be earned, and even once enjoyed it must not tempt one away from the course of deliberate self-cultivation that brought it about. Though one may always have other lives yet to lead, these do not constitute a limitless set, for they must be properly one's own; knowing and pursuing what is properly one's own mean saying no to countless other possibilities, some of which may nonetheless seem appealing at the moment, and some of which remain viable options for the future while others may not, such as one's principles dictate.

If minding one's own business by living a deliberate life according to one's principles is the highest calling and truest realization of an individual's existence, then life among others presents a predicament: The potential self-adequacy of the individual is antagonized from all sides in society. As Jane Bennett succinctly puts it, Thoreau's work is animated by "a fear of suffocation: social life seems excessively regulated, privacy too easily invaded, individuality too readily normalized, the world overpopulated" (2002, xxviii). Individuality is, in the end, a solitary achievement, manifest as a repudiation of conformity, deliberately turning away from the ways of others to build and inhabit one's own "temple," one's own "inner citadel" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 148; Hadot 1998, especially Chaps. 5 to 7). The deliberate, principled life is necessarily individualistic because both its inner logic and its outer embodiment defy and ultimately refute collectivities and institutions that pretend to a stature equal to or greater than the individual.

On account of its moralism, unconventionality, and occasional rhetorical excesses, Thoreau's ideal has met with a range of mordant criticisms. Some have found in his purported individualism

> an egotism so intense as to render him virtually incapable of comprehending, much less tolerating, the ordinary affairs of life as they are carried on by ordinary people […] a certainty about his own moral instincts and intuitions and his right to pass judgment on all others, an indifference to the ordinary moral dilemmas of ordinary men and women in their social lives, a contempt, in fact, for what he calls "the mass of men." [I]t is a signal of his detachment from mankind and his appropriation of a unique moral status. (Hochfield 1988, 435–6)

Interpreted thus, Thoreau's works present not the edifying example of self-culture he proclaims but the "hoary abomination of the antinomian who anathematizes the law as he finds it, and then lays down his own law and expects other people to obey it" (Buranelli 1957, 263). Scorning the ways, accomplishments, wisdom, and expectations of others, he appears to project the stunted contours and peculiar fixations of his own personality onto the human world. As James Russell Lowell wrote in 1865, initiating the anti-Thoreau brand of Thoreau criticism, he presents "his defects and weaknesses of character as virtues and powers peculiar to himself."

> Was he indolent, he finds none of the activities which attract or employ the rest of mankind worthy of him. Was he wanting in the qualities that make success, it is success that is contemptible, and not himself that lacks persistency and purpose[…]He condemns a world, the hollowness of whose satisfactions he never had the means of testing[.] (1865/1992, 335)

On this reckoning, echoed by twentieth-century antagonists, Thoreau's "individualism" is the deluded, self-justifying fiction of a man unable to cope with his own limits and the realities of modern life. He moralizes against that to which he cannot relate and heroizes that which comes most easily to him.[17] Caught up in his own fixations and frustrations, he is insensitive to the complexity and ambiguity of ordinary life. In short, more Emersonian than Emerson, when Thoreau gazes upon the world, he sees only the contours of his own mind.

The occasional immodesty, immaturity, and excess of Thoreau's works that have encouraged such assessments are not just figments of the critical imagination, but they are also not exhaustive of his life and thought. His most vitriolic critics tend to deny or discount the possibility that he actually meant what he said and intended to render the best service he could to his audience, his edifying "example of a courageously lived life" (Lane 2005, 302). That his example may have been most edifying and appeared most courageous to himself might counsel his reader to take his words with a grain of salt, as one should take any advice about how to live, but it need not distort or undermine the ideal he depicts. What is more, readings of Thoreau as an arrogant crank tend to neglect, or to disregard as disingenuous posturing, his many moments of self-criticism and self-doubt.[18] In *A Week,* he proclaims "I do not mean to imply that I am any better than my neighbors; for alas! I know that I am only as good" (and thus, by implication, as bad) (Thoreau 1849/1998, 58). Later, in *Walden*, the tone of disappointment becomes more overtly self-abasing when he passes the judgment "I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 53). It is perhaps understandable that a reader might take such a self-effacing claim as merely rhetorical, given that it comes from the mouth of a self-appointed representative person. Yet taking these self-assessments seriously is amply warranted and perhaps more so than the alternatives. If one reads them in the context in which they are offered—the exposition and defense of a rigorous ideal of individual self-culture—then his self-congratulation and self-criticism appear as neither instruments nor masks. Rather they

are practices of honest self-accounting, part and parcel of the endeavor to improve oneself, the endeavor in respect of which he took himself to be a representative figure, an exemplar of someone genuinely struggling to climb "the narrow, thorny path where Integrity leads."[19] One may criticize or reject Thoreau's ideal, as well as his approximate realization of it, but dismissing that ideal as containing nothing but the odd personality and prejudices of Thoreau himself is infelicitous at best.

The perfectionism of Thoreau's individualistic ideal exists at the intersection of two of that ideal's most fundamental and recurrent elements. First, like Emerson, Thoreau embraces the Romantic notion that "an infinite striving [is] the essential nature of human being" (Bates 2012, 18). Deliberate living is such striving made self-aware, principled, self-critical, and through it the striving is made more fruitful if not necessarily easier (e.g., Thoreau 1854/1992, 216). Second, while he scorns the title "philosopher" as that term was used at Harvard College, he nonetheless participates in an ancient tradition of thought according to which philosophy, properly understood, is "an art, style, or way of life" (Hadot 1995, 206, also 33; see also Bates 2012, 15). The following passage from *Walden* unifies both attitudes:

> There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."[20] (Thoreau 1854/1992, 9)

Valuing self-cultivation above all else, the noblest ends of reflection are self-understanding and self-direction. Wisdom, ultimately, is practical insofar as all knowledge worth having ought to inform and elevate the life of striving. However, Thoreau's individualism, like Emerson's, is a perfectionist in that one can never more than approximate its ideals. There can be no completely cultivated individual, for that would entail a self all of whose potentialities are simultaneously realized and exhausted, and thus a self that is incapable of further development. Thoreau insists that one's proper business can change, meaning that no pursuit is final, and he is well aware that even modest undertakings meet with frustrations and failures, persistent as well as fleeting. There would be nothing

heroic about self-cultivation if the human condition was otherwise. A life of striving to develop oneself according to one's principles is a continuous series of mortal endeavors which, though they should be guided by the highest ideals, shall never entirely achieve them. Even though, or perhaps *because*, many of an individual's endeavors might fall short of their end, one nonetheless "had better aim at something high" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 18).

The perfectionist ethos of Thoreau's doctrine of deliberate living suggests the genuineness and exemplarity of his self-praise and self-criticism and holds a lesson regarding his critiques of his society and its institutions. When he rails against the failings of his neighbors and his society, he is not dismissing them as beyond redemption, nor is he absolving himself entirely of their failings. The kernel of truth in his claim to know no person worse than himself is his recognition of the contingency and fragility of his own cultivation—that it is a lifelong endeavor, that the path is always thorny and steep, and that no height is so lofty that one may not yet fall from it. While many "will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up," Thoreau insists on being upright, which is not the same as being perfect (Thoreau 2001, 352). His ideal is to become better and more integral than one is, to deliberately strive toward one's principles, recognizing one's failures and maintaining a critical stance toward all that hinders self-cultivation. Though this doctrine may be embraced by any and all, it is necessarily individual in its realizations and shall ineluctably if not constantly manifest as antagonism toward its opposites.

4.2 Thoreau Against the Market

> As the time is short, I will leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism. Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives.
>
> Henry David Thoreau, "Life Without Principle" (1854/1863)

Thoreau, like Emerson, "belonged to an age of burgeoning industrialism" and was "among the first Americans to see that this new social fact cast a problematic and threatening light on the hope" for individual and social progress (Hochfield 1973, 48). The spirit of economic individualism abounded, yet both Emerson and Thoreau believed the individual was fated to greater things than the market promised or delivered.

However, the lines from "Life Without Principle" taken above as an epigram aptly summarize Thoreau's difference on this theme from his friend. Emerson both flattered and criticized, he praised the market for its innovation and elevation (including the superiority of free labor to slavery) at the same time that he criticized it for its base materialism and tendency to induce and reward conformity. Thoreau's critical view of the market cuts deeper still. Whereas Emerson struggled to preserve the market's advantages and turn them toward higher ends, Thoreau inveighed against the market's full spectrum of manifestations and wanted a life as untouched by it as possible. It is partly for this reason that, like Channing's "Self-Culture," Emerson's essays might deservedly be reckoned "minor classic[s] of American culture and the Protestant ethic," whereas Thoreau's works do not (Howe 1997, 135; see also Neufeldt 1989, 37–8).

Yet even more than the author of "Self-Reliance," "Wealth," and "Success," Thoreau is concerned with economic themes. As Leonard Neufeldt suggests, "[i]t is not at all surprising that Thoreau titled his first chapter of *Walden* 'Economy,' or that the persona presented therein assumes the role of economist" (1989, 16–7). Even before his experiment at Walden Pond, Thoreau was keenly aware of the rising public discourse of enterprise, wherein the vocabulary of commerce and industry penetrated into the vernacular of everyday life. He adopted some of this language himself—such as "business" and "enterprise"—though turned it to his own uses and ends, often against those of the prevailing market culture. *Walden* and "Life Without Principle" extensively record and explore Thoreau's "concern with enterprise, economy, and the art of life" and reflect his predominately negative view of modern economic life and culture, his conviction that American society was increasingly governed by the market and populated by *homo economicus* (Ibid., 28–31, 70–1; Taylor 1996, 75–6).

4.2.1 The Culture of Materialism

The year 1837 was significant for both Emerson and Thoreau. Thoreau graduated from Harvard and began keeping the journal that remained central to his intellectual and literary endeavors for the rest of his life. Emerson delivered "The American Scholar" at Thoreau's commencement, a significant milestone along his road to prominence as a public intellectual.[21] In addition to these personal events, much of the year

was overshadowed by the Panic of 1837, a wake-up call to the realities of a market economy (Richardson 1986, 17–8). As Emerson delivered "The American Scholar," the Panic was already spreading, beginning the roughly 6-year period during which he penned his most robust criticisms of the market. For Thoreau, it brought to his lasting intellectual attention the "commercial spirit of modern times,"[22] inaugurating what became a lifelong, antagonistic interest in the practices and effects of a modern economy (Thoreau 1975, 115–8). The former retreated somewhat from his early critique of the market, especially in better economic times (though, as I have suggested, he never completely abandoned it). Yet once the latter's critical acumen was roused and trained on the market, it did not subside; it remained a lifelong adversary, even as his energies found other outlets from time to time. Many of Thoreau's best-known works present an evolving critique of life in a market society that became more normatively robust and empirically insightful over his lifetime.

Thoreau's accounts of self-cultivation simultaneously resound with criticism of market culture, the dispositions, aspirations, and values that he believed pervaded American society in the mid-nineteenth century. The exhortations to self-improvement in works such as *Walden*, "Life Without Principle," and "Walking" are set against the backdrop of diagnoses and scathing indictments of banal materialism. Along with his valuation of the individual, this antagonistic stance is informed by Thoreau's equally lofty appreciation of nature. Indeed, page for page, arguably more of his published work is devoted to the study of nature than to the study of himself. His views of nature are sometimes fraught with internal tensions and many contain assumptions and claims since disproved by science (while some of his observations and explanations have aged well enough) (Buell 1995; Eiseley 1987). Yet more important than the scientific accuracy of Thoreau's account of the natural world is the existential and ethical disposition it embodies. Like other Transcendentalists, he idealized nature, and despite his acceptance of a necessarily finite, human perspective on nature he aspired to "defin[e] nature's structure, both material and spiritual, for its own sake, as against how nature might subserve humanity, which was Emerson's primary consideration"[23] (Buell 1995, 172). Often ill-disposed toward other persons, and especially toward religious institutions, Thoreau variously found companionship, renewal, beauty, and sublimity in the natural world. For him, nature is (the basis of) health, "for all nature is doing her best each moment to make us well" (Thoreau 2001, 501). Above all, he prizes the "absolute freedom and

wildness" of nature which, if we attend to it, will "direct us aright," steering us clear of the iniquities of society[24] (Thoreau 2001, 233).

> Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours. Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection for her children […] and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man,—a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility, a civilization destined to have a speedy limit. (Ibid., 248)

Though the individual is "a part and parcel of Nature," he is too easily and too often estranged from his proper home and source of well-being (Ibid., 225).

Thoreau, as an especially keen observer of the market, was among the first to diagnose its insidiously detrimental effects upon the natural world. Even in Thoreau's lifetime, before the industrial boom that followed the Civil War, the rise of the antebellum market initiated "a massive conversion of nature into the means and ends of industrial production" (Trachtenberg 2007, 22). Apart from transforming human life and relationships (a theme to which I shall turn shortly), the emergent "factory system" of production and its attendant modes of commerce and consumption were dramatically transforming the human relationship to nature (Stoller 1966, 5). The wildness of nature was being tamed, converted into what Martin Heidegger later called a "standing-reserve," a collection of resources to be harvested and exploited for human purposes (1954/1993). Ironically, perhaps no one described this transformation more succinctly and poetically than Emerson. Lauding antebellum technical ingenuity in his 1860 essay "Wealth," Emerson declared:

> Steam is no stronger now, than it was a hundred years ago; but is put to better use. A clever fellow was acquainted with the expansive force of steam; he also saw the wealth of wheat and grass rotting in Michigan. Then he cunningly screws on the steam-pipe to the wheat crop. Puff now, O Steam! The steam puffs and expands as before, but this time it is dragging all Michigan at its back to hungry New York and hungry England.[25] (1983, 989)

For Emerson, this chain of production, commerce, and consumption is evidence of how individuals might avail themselves, and serve others, by way of the economic opportunities of a market system. Fallow land can

be transformed into fields yielding grain, wrung from the soil and sped to its destination by man's technological mastery, to feed scores of people, hundreds if not thousands of miles away. That one might profit from such clever and useful industry seems largely unproblematic.

Thoreau was not just abstractly aware of the effects of the new economy on his beloved Nature; he saw what Emerson saw and came to a fundamentally different assessment of the situation and its implications. Thoreau perceived acutely the commodification of nature afoot under the regime of the market. Once noble vocations, more or less harmonious with the natural world, become extractive enterprises. Too often the farmer, or woodsman, or herder, or quarrier, or fisherman who works to feed the demands of the market "knows Nature but as a robber" (1854/1992, 111). Even Walden Pond, ensconced in the annual ice, was not safe. Thoreau ironically describes the teams of men who intruded upon his solitude in the winter of 1846–1847 to harvest ice from the pond as if "they had come to sow a crop of winter rye" or were "cutting peat in a bog" (Ibid., 196–7). Driven by the mindset of the new, integrated economy, these fellows regarded and treated Walden Pond as a seasonal ice machine, allowing the raw forces of nature to prepare articles of commerce. Yet Thoreau does not inveigh against laboring to gain sustenance and comfort from nature's offerings—humanity has always done so and he deliberately followed in this tradition. Instead, he is critical of how we come to understand and relate to nature through the mediation of the market, which "empt[ies] the world of its concrete reality[,] not only converting objects into dollars but causing their 'it-ness' or being to disappear" (Gilmore 1985, 38). When the Pond becomes ice to sell, a stock of commodities, it becomes somewhat less than what it really is. A complex ecosystem is reduced to a warehouse of goods, some instrumentally valuable and the rest effectively worthless. There is a fateful and ironic evanescence at work. Thoreau maintains that to own a thing as a piece of property "is commonly to exclude yourself from the true enjoyment of it," intimating that what is owned, bought, and sold is never the natural object to which we were first attracted (Thoreau 2001, 233). The market, so to speak, makes all it touches artificial, indeed counterfeit. The progress of the market is one aspect of the progress of the disenchantment of the world, both natural and human. As Thoreau hauntingly characterizes the progress of the European, market-minded way of living in the so-called New World: "The white man […] buys the Indian's moccasins and baskets, then buys his hunting-grounds,

and at length forgets where he is buried and ploughs up his bones" (1849/1998, 43). This may be regarded as a sketch of the market ethos at work, grasping at both nature and culture with a heavy hand. As he says in "Huckleberries:"

> Thus we behave like oxen in a flower garden. The true fruit of Nature can only be plucked with a fluttering heart and a delicate hand, not bribed by any earthly reward. No hired man can help us gather that crop. (Thoreau 2001, 495)

The materialism of the market is not merely banal, it is a "war with the wilderness,—breaking nature, taming the soil."[26] "All our improvements, so called, tend to convert the country into the town," and thus convert nature from an enveloping world to be experienced and inhabited into a stock of things to be owned, traded, and consumed (Thoreau 2001, 495). Hence, moved by a sensibility that is at once quasi-pantheist and proto-conservationist, Thoreau presents economic man as a latter-day Midas, who turns all he touches to commodities and who shall never find true satisfaction in what he grasps.

Beyond motivating and rewarding the pillage of nature, Thoreau describes the market as debasing culture and stunting self-cultivation. The early lines of "Life Without Principle" set this assessment in sharp relief.

> This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. (Thoreau 2001, 348–9; see also Thoreau 1854/1992, 78–80)

Fueled in part by new technologies of production, communication, and transportation, the market accelerated the pace of life and encouraged a "uniform, standardized life of acquisitive materialism" (Diggins 1984, 209). "Individualism" was in the air, but not of a variety, Thoreau could countenance. What he saw was an age characterized by a grasping, scrambling, gambling ideal of pecuniary gain—"[t]he hog that gets his living by rooting, stirring up the soil, would be ashamed of such company" (Thoreau 2001, 354). The undeniable productivity and efficiency of the market promised (though frequently did not deliver) to all

a chance of prosperity and even luxury that had for much of human history been the preserve of the privileged few. Yet what many regarded as progress, he regarded as distraction, conformity, and decay. Economic change was diffusing more widely a taste for luxuries, a middling ideal of respectability and fashion, and Thoreau was "determined to dispossess America of its material demons" (Teichgraeber 1995, 46). With his characteristic allegorical flair, he declares in *Walden*:

> While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them […] Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul […] Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. (Thoreau 1854/1992, 23, 220–1)

Of course, not everyone in antebellum America aspired to or achieved luxury, and some remained unfashionable by choice or by necessity (or, in Thoreau's case, both). Nonetheless, the new economy and its attendant materialism taught all "new notions of economy and ingenuity in business," a new ethic that furnished all-purpose means for getting ahead in a market society.[27] As I discussed in Chap. 1, the market revolution set individuals in motion as independent market participants, whose work was valued, reckoned, and rewarded in the currencies of monetary exchange, linking nearly every aspect of life to economic activity in some way, directly or indirectly. Thoreau was among the first wave of American thinkers to perceive how this new economic culture came to surmount and displace other systems of order and value, and he believed it stood as an implacable adversary of deliberate living.

Despite what some of his most trenchant critics have said about his alternative ideal, Thoreau is not naïve about the market. He sees its advantages as clearly as does Emerson. According to Bob Pepperman Taylor, Thoreau knows that market practices "generate increasing material wealth," but also knows that "it takes a certain moral obtuseness to think that this fact settles the issue of whether nor not these economic developments are desirable" (1996, 82–3). Emerson struggles with the same knowledge and seeks to reconcile successful market participation with self-reliance. Thoreau does not hold out this hope, but rather maintains that "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which

he can afford to let alone" (1854/1992, 55). For him, materialism is an impoverished ethos, as it makes a precondition and means of life the end of living. Instead,

> [w]hen he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced. The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence. (Ibid., 10)

The calling of self-cultivation is premised upon the satisfaction of minimum material conditions, whether these be supplied through the market or (ideally) not, but once these are met further pursuit of material gain can only distract from and distort the proper care for oneself.

4.2.2 Becoming Tools of Our Tools

Thoreau was especially disturbed by how market culture affected the rhythms and activities of daily life, as he felt this most acutely. He was, by his own admission, largely immune to the influences of antebellum materialism; he simply did not aspire to what his society commonly regarded as prosperity or success and so was generally untempted and unmoved by the enticements of things. Yet he found it more difficult to avoid (and took still greater umbrage at) the intrusion of market practices into his ordinary affairs.

Division of labor, one of the most prevalent and powerful elements of a market economy, was especially suspect to him, in two senses. Thoreau was well aware of how complete processes and skilled trades were being broken down into partial and comparatively unskilled tasks performed by both men and women in the new economy. As his experiment at Walden Pond illustrates, he wanted to unify the undertakings of life that the market was dividing, from building his own house to providing his daily sustenance.[28] This experiment was inspired in no small part by his perception that economic practices, including the division of labor, were reducing individuals to standardized, interchangeable parts in a great economic machine. Thoreau was not, in principle, opposed to technological innovation (indeed, he had a certain knack for it), but he was dismayed by how technological and organizational innovations that were meant to "save and lighten labor" ultimately sunk the individual deeper

into one-dimensional undertakings[29] (Larkin 1988, 48). He was particularly disturbed by the effects of the division of labor upon self-culture.

> But alas! we do live like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built […] We belong to the community. It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a man; it is as much the preacher, and the merchant, and the farmer. Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another *may* also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself. (Thoreau 1854/1992, 31)

Contrasted with the ideal of deliberate self-cultivation, which is an encompassing endeavor carried on in all one's actions, division of labor effectively means dis-integrating the tasks of self-making and sub-contracting them to others. Subsequently, the individual is, in Wendell Berry's words, left with "only two concerns: making money and entertaining himself" (though the latter was also fated to become an item of mass production and consumption by the end of the nineteenth century) (1977, 20). The tailor clothes us, the farmer feeds us, the merchant trades for us, the preacher prays for us, so that we may focus on those few tasks from which we draw an income with which to pay those who feed us, clothe us, and so on, and to distract ourselves sufficiently from the deadening effects of these narrow labors. The individuation and integration of the antebellum economy multiplied its productivity, but made for greater dependency upon others, and brought habits of consumption and deference which Thoreau regarded "a shirking of the real business of life," the business of deliberate self-making (Thoreau 2001, 353). The rising tide of the market was thus eroding the terrain of individuality, putting the individual more fully in the custody of others. The individual was a "free" economic agent, but to support himself through market participation, he had to leave much of his own support to the work of others who, as Adam Smith observed, provided for his needs out of their own self-interested expectations of profiting from the transaction (1776/1994, 15). Convinced that the market took with one hand what it gave with the other, Thoreau sought to demonstrate how one could "live simply and wisely" so as to avoid its compromises (Thoreau 1854/1992, 48). The key is greater self-reliance in a sense far more literal than Emerson's use of that term: tending for oneself to the true necessities of life.

As with most of his ideals, Thoreau was convinced that most people fell short, and rather than finding their work to be a pastime found it to be toilsome, consuming hardship. In the "Economy" chapter of *Walden,* he writes of his native Concord (meant as a fair representative of most American towns):

> [E]very where, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways […] The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor. (Ibid., 2)

Thus begins Thoreau's exploration in *Walden* of the character of life in a market society, in which the market mediates not only "economic" life but, by subtle ramification, all of life. Antebellum America had become a great place of business, as market practices penetrated more deeply into daily life, while simultaneously integrating most endeavors into complex, extensive networks of production, exchange, and consumption. What many of his contemporaries regarded as a land of opportunity, Thoreau regarded as a land of "incessant business" regulated by "the police of meaningless labor" (Thoreau 2001, 349). These toils degrade the individual and tempt him away from his true vocation of self-cultivation. In service to the market, the "better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 3). Setting a familiar biblical passage (Matthew 6:19) against the background of his preferred agricultural imagery, Thoreau postures himself against perhaps the most bewitching notions of antebellum American market ideology: The individual is bound by necessity to labor for his sustenance, yet he enjoys the "liberty" to apply himself to this task as he chooses. Whereas many of his day, including his once mentor, saw the new economic order as marrying liberty (for Emerson, "Power") and necessity (for Emerson, "Fate"), Thoreau saw new and more imperious constraints dressed in a thin gilt of liberty.

The frenetic busyness of antebellum life, even so-called free labor, suggested an analogy to servitude.[30] Under an economic system in which each individual is an entrepreneur and every moment holds the promise

of productivity, the individual faces a perpetual choice between leisure (i.e., time spent upon and for oneself) and activity oriented toward pecuniary gain. "To those who would not know what to do with more leisure than they now enjoy," Thoreau says, "I might advise to work twice as hard as they do,—work till they pay for themselves, and get their free papers" (Ibid., 48). Economic activity comes to possess the individual, his time and energies, and their fruits. Whether a day laborer toiling to bring home a wage, or a speculator or entrepreneur trying to navigate economic fluctuations profitably, the individual internalizes the practices and values of the market and becomes the "overseer" or "slave-driver" of himself (Ibid., 4). As the pursuit of a calling, of one's own business, gives way to mere scrambling for income even what is good in the work becomes tainted. Thus the farmer who raises commodity crops for market "is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself" (Ibid., 22). The same can be said of other vocations-turned toil. Work valuable in itself becomes a mere means, and not simply to honest self-sufficiency but to participate in the culture of materialism through which both human and non-human nature are treated as standing-reserves to be exploited for economic ends. Thoreau maintains that a person "may be very industrious and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living" (Thoreau 2001, 352). Given each individual's capacity for self-development and elevation, such a life is ineluctably disfiguring.

Squandering their best hours and mortgaging their better selves, "men have become tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 25). Uncommonly, perceptive of how material culture works upon the individuals who live it, Thoreau despaired that even the most ingenious and useful tools and inventions were apt to bend their inventors and users to the role of servants. Much as the shepherd becomes a servant of his flock and the merchant a servant of his wares, the entrepreneur who employs a steam engine to power a textile mill or drive a train becomes a servant of the engine, as his enterprise starts and stops at the behest of the machinery that drives it. This subjection to our tools is of a piece with technological acceleration of life and comes to appear as the necessary march of material and cultural progress. Antebellum America was, in his estimate,

> an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim […] It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride at thirty miles an hour […] If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad, it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. (ibid., 62)

As critics of modernity from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Hannah Arendt have suggested, material conditions to which we become accustomed tend to take on the psychological and practical status of necessities; we build our lives around them, however, insensibly. Thoreau witnessed new inventions, as well as patterns of production and consumption, become the unquestioned ground of human life and conduct. His critical ideal of deliberate living—minding one's own business—is meant to pierce the veneer of market culture and expose its hollowness and false necessity.

Technological and economic changes are thus not matters of inherent interest for Thoreau, but only insofar as they affect the experiences and enterprises of the individual. Railroads and telegraphs, for instance, concern him in respect of how their uses shape the life and character of the individual, especially himself. An innovation of antebellum culture whose impress he felt most acutely, and which technologies such as trains and telegraphs served, was the standardization and mechanization of time. Thoreau held to a pre-modern or anti-modern notion of time as inseparable from nature (O'Malley 1990, 9). In *Walden,* he invokes the familiar naturalistic image of temporality as a fluid medium on which experience floats, remarking that "[t]ime is but the stream I go a-fishing in," a feature of the natural world with which he interacts, availing himself of it as he can (Thoreau 1854/1992, 66; also 58). So understood, time is integral to the enterprise of deliberate living. His ideal life is one of time well-spent, that is, of time properly valued and utilized to the fullest realization of the highest purposes. Elsewhere in *Walden,* this view of time stands behind his claim that "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (Ibid., 21; see also Allen 2008, 140–2 and Rose 2016,

39–65). The natural flow of time may be understood, from the perspective of the individual agent, as an intangible resource necessary for the pursuits of life. Hence time, rather than money or skill or even effort, is the true measure of the cost and value of things and experiences. What demands a great deal of time costs dearly, as it displaces many other endeavors, and the cost of what leaves one with time yet to spend is by comparison modest. As mentioned earlier, he states that the toils of market life are worse than the labors of Hercules because at least those mythic labors were temporally finite, they ended, whereas the market's demands upon the individual and her time struck Thoreau as boundless. In antebellum America, economic activity seemed to colonize time ever more completely, leaving the individual impoverished. Speaking for himself, yet also on behalf of his toiling neighbors, he declares in "Life Without Principle," "[i]f I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that, for me, there would be nothing left worth living for" (Thoreau 2001, 352). That is, if his capital of time was to be exhausted, he would have nothing left to invest in himself, in his own improvement and cultivation, his own service to the higher ends of life. "As if you could kill time without injuring eternity" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 4).

While new practices and patterns of production, commerce, and consumption made greater demands on the individual's time, occupying a growing share of one's waking hours, new technology facilitated rationalization of fluid, experiential time as mechanized, partitioned clock-time. Since Connecticut artisan Eli Terry pioneered the mass production of affordable clocks in 1807, "mechanical time was closely associated with the activities of the market," which were themselves emerging simultaneously (Allen 2008, 59; see also Jaffee 2010, 147–52, 172–87). Even before formal, national standardization of time by railroads in the late nineteenth century, clock-time became a fundamental element of daily life, an "object of consumption [that] makes it possible to internalize the abstract logic of the market itself" (Allen 2008, 14). Charles Sellers notes that in antebellum America "[s]elf-exploiting calculation of labor-time became habitual and unconscious. By the 1820s public clocks—adding a pointer to measure minutes as well as hours—were spreading to inland centers of trade"[31] (1991, 154). Mechanical, public time set the cadence of a new social order in which days were "minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock," not just for purposes of production and commerce, but for all purposes (Thoreau 1854/1992, 76). Market

practices and values promoted new understandings of the experience and duration of time, just as new musical instruments and styles train (or retrain) the ear of the listener. Believing that the individual's proper work was being displaced by toil, set to the metronome of the ticking clock, Thoreau lamented that *homo economicus* (be this person man or woman) "has no time to be anything but a machine" (Ibid., 3).

Technological change and new modes of time-keeping and time-consciousness index a larger shift in mentality and sensibility. Practices of production oriented toward use, enjoyment, and subsistence gave way before an integrated market system of exchange, trade, and profit, and this displacement left its impress upon antebellum culture. With dismay, Thoreau observes that "[i]f a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen" (2001, 349). Despite his own characterizations of time as a resource to be husbanded and utilized wisely or foolishly, he rejected the market notion that "time is money" and ought to be used in ways that satisfy economic demand. Thoreau was among the first to perceive that in an economic system premised upon the conversion of labor into commodities valued as objects of exchange "work nearly always expands to fill the time available"—like labor-saving devices, time-saving devices and strategies of efficiency tend to "raise our expectations about what we can get done" rather than deliver us into leisure (O'Malley 1990, viii). Surrounded by tools and techniques that promise greater productivity and thus greater material prosperity, we come to understand success and failure (at least partly) in terms of availing ourselves of opportunities for economic advancement, if only that we may then be able to afford respite from labor. That is, we work harder and longer that we might be able to finally enjoy leisure. This is one more way in which we internalize the logic of the market, even in those moments when we consciously struggle against it.

Thoreau believes that the proliferation of this mentality marks a profound loss for the individual, an abdication of the enterprise of self-culture. In "Walking," he remarks that when he is reminded of those "mechanics and shopkeepers" who live at the beck and call of the market's clock, he believes "they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago" (Thoreau 2001, 227). Rhetorical excesses aside, this captures his valuation of time well-spent and his reckoning of

the cost of time misspent. Bereft of time for one's proper business, one is left in the company of pale replacements and mocking reminders of a truly valuable capital squandered. If the temporal character of antebellum (and thus modern) life is even roughly as he describes it, then the market stands as an abiding antagonist of individuality, demanding regular sacrifice of the time (and more) without which self-cultivation is hindered if not impossible. Against the encroachment of the market upon the life of the individual, deliberate living embodies thus the counter-tactic of taking one's time, reversing the ratio of toil to leisure, elevating self-culture above the many faces of materialism (Thoreau 1854/1992, 53; Thoreau 1975, 117).

4.3 The Economics and Politics of Ordinary Actions

> Nothing can be effected but by one man […] We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy success together.
>
> Henry David Thoreau, "Paradise (To Be) Regained" (1843)

> The thoughtful man becomes a hermit in the thoroughfares of the marketplace.
>
> Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1859)

Thoreau shared the Emersonian belief that each individual faces the unrelenting question: "how shall I live?" His generic answer to this question, appropriate to all persons regardless of circumstance, is to live deliberately, minding one's business and following one's principles into action. The increasingly ubiquitous market prompted Thoreau to a special inflection of this ideal, which he thought was likewise generally applicable, akin to the injunction to follow one's conscience insofar as each person's adherence to that injunction will be unique to herself. In order to live with integrity—in any form of society, though the conditions of market society make integrity especially elusive and needful—one must practice a form of self-accounting, critical self-awareness that is essential to cultivating individuality in the midst of pervasive, compromising institutions. Furthermore, these practices are the points where Thoreau believes economics and politics meet in the life and conduct of the self-cultivating individual.

4.3.1 Self-Accounting

The idea that principled economic practices (e.g., how one works and consumes) contribute to the formation of good character was by no means original to the nineteenth century. There already existed a rich and long history of ideals counseling personal discipline in work and austerity in consumption, rooted in diverse philosophical, religious, and political traditions (the market-oriented Protestant ethic being just one). The economic dimensions of Thoreau's individualism can be understood as a variation on these venerable themes. His works depict his own ways of negotiating the relationship and boundaries between private economy (i.e., the activities and practices by which the individual supplies material conditions for both her survival and her flourishing) and public economy (i.e., the customs, practices, and institutions through which the endeavors of private economy are collected and regulated as a fundamental, shared social framework). "Life Without Principle," "Walking," and above all *Walden* provide experiments and articulations of a practice of self-accounting situated at the nexus of private and public economies, so construed (Cafaro 2004, 76–105; Drake 1962, 76–8). Thoreau was convinced that living deliberately meant living not just *intentionally* but *precisely*, tending carefully and exactly to the details of one's life, including its inputs and outputs, both necessary and gratuitous or superfluous.

A primary and recurrent theme of *Walden* and related essays is "that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy" (which, again, Thoreau understands in the classical sense of a love of wisdom that manifests as a way of life) (Thoreau 1854/1992, 35). Exploration of this theme is split between critical assessment of life in market society (its culture of materialism, its mechanical toil) and equally critical self-assessment in the form of self-accounting. Thoreau not only evaluates what his society widely regards as needful, useful, and valuable, but what is truly needful, useful, and valuable for his own enterprise of self-cultivation. Sometimes this accounting is quite literal, reckoning the expenses and revenues of his time at Walden Pond down to the three cents he spent on salt for his cooking, and may even be taken as a parody of the business-fixation of his day.[32] (Ibid., 40–1) Yet above all Thoreau depicts and embraces self-accounting as "an exercise in practical morality" that is essential to deliberate living (Diggins 1984, 207). This exercise entails reclaiming the vocabulary and tools of "economy" from their uses in the marketplace. Though often outwardly mundane, it is an insurgent practice of subverting accepted norms of work and life, reckoning the expenses and profits

of one's life with an eye toward self-culture rather than pecuniary success (Neufeldt 1989, 3809; Walker 1998). One cannot take back from the market what one is unaware one has given to it. The fundamental reckoning of what one has, allocates, and spends is the necessary first step toward deliberate husbanding of oneself, one's energies, and above all one's time. Throughout his writings, Thoreau raises the questions of how one's time is spent, and whether it is spent well or misspent. Do we spend our time on what is essential, on our own business, or do we spend our time on what is extraneous or worse—on distraction, dissipation, and desperation? An unflinching account of one's life is required if these questions are to meet with honest, serviceable answers, upon which a more deliberate life can be built.

However, even though Thoreau's first concern is his own individuality, his self-accounting is not merely self-regarding. Like Emerson—though perhaps more acutely—he can taste the blood of slavery on the sugar and feel it on the cotton; he hears the desperate hours minced and fretted by the clock and sees the pale fruits of resignation changing hands through commerce. Self-accounting is necessary if he is not to "lose his innocence in the process of getting his bread" (Thoreau 2001, 357). Taking account of his life entails reaching an honest assessment of his own complicity in the "alienation of man from himself," whatever form such estrangement takes, for oneself or for another, in the marketplace or beyond it (Gilmore 1985, 39).

Whatever value may inhere in self-accounting, such practices are ultimately preparatory for further endeavors of self-making. Reckoning what one needs and what one produces and consumes furnishes the basis upon which to answer the supreme question of how one should live. Thoreau's own self-accounting yielded a famous and often dismissed or ridiculed answer to this question: *simply*. His doctrine of simplicity is often criticized because it appears to be little more than an extension of Thoreau's own peculiar personality. Indeed, he invites this very charge. In *Walden,* he proudly remarks that his "greatest skill in life was to want but little," and exclaims in his journals that he had "thriven on solitude and poverty" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 47; Thoreau quoted in Neufeldt 1989, 70). It has been easy to treat these as the words of a rare fanatic and to dismiss Thoreau's vision of simplicity as a personal quirk unsuited to generalization. As with all elements of his thought, one cannot altogether separate his personality from his ideas. Yet if one takes seriously his ideal of deliberate living and how he believed self-accounting served it, his doctrine of simplicity appears perhaps to be generalizable after all.

Simplicity is a more prevalent theme in Thoreau's work than is often appreciated, as "getting down to essentials" and "know[ing] what we do not need" are among his commonest tropes (Richardson 1986, 153; Diggins 1972, 571). *Walden* may be read as a grand documentary experiment in precisely these matters, and many of his essays provide further elaboration. The central doctrine is itself aptly simple: "to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 48). Like principled living, this is a profoundly egalitarian ideal, accessible to all in all circumstances.[33] Throughout Thoreau's writings, one finds manifest his concern to enjoy "freedom from care," and this would be mere asceticism, mere renunciation of worldliness, were this doctrine and its wisdom not means to the more fundamental end of self-cultivation (Thoreau 1984, 203). "Every man is tasked to make his life" through a process that Thoreau sometimes likens to sculpture (Thoreau 1854/1992, 61, 148). As Pierre Hadot notes, the classical Greek and Roman views of art (with which Thoreau was familiar) held that the sculptor removes what is inessential, working toward an ideal minimum point at which nothing extraneous remains to obscure the form and nothing more can be taken away without loss or deformity (1995, 102). Perhaps no other metaphor better captures Thoreau's doctrine of simplicity and its place within his individualism and critique of the market. Exhorting his reader to "let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand," he elevates self-culture over and against market culture (Thoreau 1854/1992, 62). The life of antebellum society was marked by "infinite bustle" in service to banal materialism, as individuals strove to get ahead or to hold their ground in the marketplace. Through their seemingly endless labors, Thoreau believed his neighbors "succeeded" only in adorning themselves with unnecessary encumbrances, frittering away their time away from work on "idle amusement," and deepening their dependence upon things, institutions, and other persons (Thoreau 2001, 360). Self-accounting serves to illuminate and map this dire landscape, and simplicity provides a tool with which to work against it. Thoreau perceived well that nothing is more directly inimical to a market economy than an individual who contributes little or nothing to it and needs and wants little or nothing from it.

The ultimate aim of self-accounting and simplicity is to take (or re-take) one's time, to reclaim from market enterprises what is necessary for the enterprise of self-culture (McKenzie 2011, 425–6). Along with

sculpture, Thoreau likens self-cultivation to building, fashioning one's own dwelling, one's own temple. His alternative economics is meant to teach that "[t]he first step in building our dwelling is to recognize that we have already built one," to realize and own our roles in crafting our society (Cavell 1992, 82). Self-accounting will show us that "[w]hat at first seems like a deliberate choice [e.g., to pursue success as promised and denominated in the market] turns out to be a choice all right […] but not a deliberate one, not one weighed and found good, but one taken without pondering, or lightly" (Ibid., 73). We are shaped, in part, by our practices of production and consumption, by how we fit into market society. He offers simplicity as a counter-tactic, prodding us to act upon the realization of what we truly need and truly want and cut the rest loose. Perhaps his highest ideal was a life of absolute self-sufficiency, one that would excel even his days at Walden Pond, but the practices of self-accounting and simplicity he exemplifies and recommends are meant for all, even if one would not go to his lengths. Ever a perfectionist, he hopes always that he and we might live *more* deliberately, achieve greater self-cultivation and greater freedom from the temptations and imperatives of the market.[34]

4.3.2 An Ethic of Responsible Individualism

Living as they did, in a complex and dynamic period of American history, Emerson and Thoreau "were among the first to confront the world as we know it—a world of *too much*, in which too many possibilities offer themselves, too many careers, too many possessions and pleasures, too much complexity and ramification," all of which have tended to produce crises of selfhood (Stoehr 1979, 155). Thoreau resolved to grasp the nettles of modern life firmly, to knowingly and deliberately fashion himself and his own place in a world that was developing new and subtle ways to do this for and despite him. Given his eccentricity and individualism, it has become easy and common to regard his example (whatever its merits may be) as irresponsible, an evasion of the burdens of citizenship, maturity, and even agency.[35] Yet I suggest that there is a better reason to regard his individualism as wedded to a robust sense of responsibility. Despite being labeled a loafer or idler by many, his critical stance toward the economics and politics of his day is palpably active and practical, taking aim at the complacency and self-deception that he saw in his neighbors and contemporaries (Sellers 1991, 381; Taylor 1996, 119–20). He scorns

the everyday activities and habits through which the individual is made a "thoroughfare," indifferently traversed by the transactions and practices of others, the market, the state, and the like (Thoreau 2001, 361).

It is clear that Thoreau believes each individual is tasked with self-making and thus bears personal responsibility for what one becomes, but it is more controversial to suggest that he likewise embraced a notion of social responsibility. To see the sense in which I am suggesting that he did, we must distinguish between responsibility *to* one's society (i.e., accountability to others, entailing obligation to society's rules, conventions, and judgments) and responsibility *for* one's society (i.e., a relationship of personal causal and/or moral implication in an intersubjective condition).[36] Thoreau blatantly rejects of the former (e.g., "Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely they will") and equally clearly embraces the latter. As he writes in "Resistance to Civil Government," "I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot one with,—the dollar is innocent,—but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance" (Thoreau 1849/1992, 241). Although he refused to bend or answer to the standards of the society he criticized, he was acutely aware that the individual is part of nature and enmeshed in human society, and thus the reverberations of her actions travel far. It is at least partly for this reason that Thoreau claimed that "[w]e are double-edged blades, and every time we whet our virtue the return stroke straps our vice" (1849/1998, 179). Not only do institutions come to find the individual, demanding overt allegiance in the form of money, votes, and legal obedience, but lesser, private actions often enact more subtly allegiance to the same arrangements (Thoreau 2001, 345). Hence, even as the individual is responsible *to* only himself and his own principles, he is ineluctably responsible *for* the part he plays in crafting and sustaining his society and its vices.

This notion of responsibility is also manifest in Thoreau's self-appointed role as writer and social critic, as illustrated by the epigram he offers readers of *Walden*. "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (1854/1992, 1; also 57). As discussed above, Thoreau regarded the greater part of his neighbors to be caught in a "waking sleep" (Thoreau 1849/1998, 174; see also Thoreau 1854/1992, 36). The demands and rewards of antebellum market society left the individual simultaneously frantic and exhausted, driven and

desperate. His life is the scene of such compromise between worldly price and personal value that somnambulism is a tactic bred of necessity, a way of desperately abiding conditions at odds with one's conscience and constitution. Market society depends upon "deeds of petty violence every day"—against oneself, against others, and against nature—of which individuals are insensibly made the instruments (Thoreau 2001, 413). The moral slumber that Thoreau describes both facilitates and obscures the practices by which individuals take the arrangements of society upon their shoulders, becoming tools of their tools, "doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways" yet never succeeding in washing themselves clean (Thoreau 1854/1992, 2).

Like self-accounting, awakening to how everyday actions preserve or disrupt the manners and sympathies of one's society is a step toward deliberately cultivating new ways of living, economic, social, and political. Speaking to his audience, of his audience, he writes "I do not wish to flatter my townsmen, nor to be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us. We need to be provoked,—goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 73). Read in the context of his vocation of waking his neighbors from their slumber, his social, economic, and political "critiques represent an attempt to perform a service to other people," conspicuously "following his own path" in the hopes of "spurring other people to follow theirs" (Marshall 2005, 408–9). Ever the individualist, he believes that "man's only safe way to help others is to give them his example of a courageously lived life, for anything else intrudes upon their individuality" (Lane 2005, 302). He self-consciously toes the line between awakening sleepers and inducing a new slumber: "Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example which leaves them far behind" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 51). Living deliberately and courageously is a political as well as economic practice whereby one simultaneously takes responsibility for one's actions and the arrangements they affirm, as well as responsibility for the society one shares with others, not to please them or serve them, but to elevate them. In respect of their tropes of exemplarity, Thoreau's life and writings illustrate better than Emerson one of Emerson's own convictions: "Your genuine action will explain itself, and will explain your other genuine actions" (Emerson 1983, 266). He seeks to rouse his neighbors from their slumber not with arguments or rhetoric about the superiority of awakening but with his example of a waking life. Words articulate principles, whereas actions embody them.

Institutionalized politics meet with criticisms akin to those he levels against the market, as both elevate spectacle and gilded baubles above substance.[37] Inveighing against the high-minded abolitionists of New England who proclaimed a principled cause, he writes: "There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the [Mexican] war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them[.] There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man" (Thoreau 1849/1992, 230). Those who profess principles vastly outnumber those who live them, and electoral politics under the second- and third-party systems provided conspicuous outlet for declarations of unlived principles. Hence Thoreau characterizes voting as "a sort of gaming, like chequers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong" because (at best) it leaves to the actions of others the performance of one's own principles (Ibid.). His admiration of John Brown was due in no small measure to Brown's embodiment of what so many avowed with their words and votes yet betrayed through their daily actions. Thoreau regards voting a feeble expression of principle not because it is altogether inconsequential, but because it institutes a moral division of labor. Democracy risks substituting largely symbolic acts of episodic citizenship for the tangible, daily task of living deliberatively (Thoreau 2001, 399; see also McKenzie 2011, 425–6).

Feeling intolerably compromised by American politics, Thoreau faced a choice analogous to that he faced with regards to the market, between gritting his teeth and playing through the compromise, on the one hand—voting for the best candidate, or writing and lecturing to rally support for the right partisan cause—and depriving the system that defended slavery and compromised his integrity of his willing if subtle support, on the other. In Thoreau's own characterization, withdrawal is an act of war upon iniquitous institutions rather than a pacifist refusal to join the fray. When the game is fixed, when one's mere participation endorses existing practices and structures, withdrawal from play is a critical intervention into the game itself.

> It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. (Thoreau 1849/1992, 231–2)

Here one might detect echoes of Seneca's "On the Private Life," advocating withdrawal when society is beyond redemption through any individual's actions (Seneca 1995, 165–80). Yet Thoreau's withdrawal is not passive or escapist; it is a principled, active doctrine. As institutions (economic, social, and political) depend upon the participation and allegiance of individuals, washing one's hands and turning away is an action upon and against those institutions. If Thoreau's dollar is sustenance for the State, then withholding that dollar is a quiet act of war. Thoreau was likewise sensitive to how his participation in the economy delivered his support to a host of social arrangements that he could not abide.[38] When he exhorts his audience to a life a simplicity, he advocates a responsible technique apt for a complex market society. Individuals have become tools of their tools, living lives of penitent labor, devoting their best hours and energies to the market, compromising themselves daily to better fit the institutions that use them. In unabashed recognition of how normal participation in society serves to preserve its arrangements at the expense of the individual, Thoreau proclaims: "[l]et your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" (1849/1992, 233). His critical writings are extended reflections upon one's responsibility for the world. How one labors, consumes, and abides by the ways of one's neighbors all variously tend to the arrangements of one's society, as the labors of the gardener tend to the condition of the garden. Thoreau's demand to change how one lives, from the coarsest to the finest details, expresses not irresponsibility (political or otherwise) but "a desire to make action significant" at every moment and at every level (Nagley 1954, 308). Speaking about the whole of life, from politics to economics, he admonishes his audience to "[c]ast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence" (Thoreau 1849/1992, 235). From casting ballots to casting dollars, ordinary actions subtly transmit and inculcate values, they build and sustain institutions, they shape oneself and others as well. The deliberate life of self-cultivation and individuality is thus not merely a matter of personal taste, but of principled responsibility.

Despite his indisputable penchant for solitude and abiding desire to "maximize[e] the vital value of private life," Thoreau was acutely sensitive to the context of his life and thought (McKenzie 2016, 5). His individualism is articulated through ongoing critical engagements with the social, political, and economic conditions of antebellum America.

The realities of the nascent market order, which ramified beyond the traditional boundaries of the farm, workshop, or marketplace, compounded both the problems and the potencies of responsible agency. While he remained fundamentally opposed to the market, he adopted this stance knowingly, even optimistically, advocating to the end an ideal of protean individuality meant to weather the forces of economic and social change.

Notes

1. Quoted in Richardson 1986, 349.
2. Two works that explicitly treat Thoreau's engagement with the market as an author yet do not necessarily advance the charge I have sketched are Gilmore 1985, especially 1–17 and 35–51, and Fink 1992. A third, which inclines toward this charge but self-consciously seeks to complicate it, is Teichgraeber 1995, especially 44–74, 155–74, and 222–74.
3. Making this claim does not, however, require a strained or selective reading of Thoreau. He recognized his own implication in the market without resigning himself to the compromise of depending upon it, let alone seeking self-culture through it. In the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, for instance, he describes his residual market participation as "his guilt" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 40). As in all matters, he maintained that guilt must be expiated and its sources overcome, accepting neither as inevitable. That would be, in his words, "confirmed desperation" (Ibid., 5).
4. Yet what Thoreau values in the company of others is ultimately their individuality. See, for instance, the "Visitors" chapter of *Walden* (Thoreau 1845/1992, 94–104).
5. Mark Van Doren, quoted in Porte 1965, 4.
6. This is yet another example of how Emerson and Thoreau were often critical of institutions they knew well and from which they had benefitted.
7. This tension is explored at both intellectual and affective levels in Buell 2003, 297–312, Porte 1965, and Sattelmeyer 1995.
8. Thoreau was at times critical of Emerson's apparent unwillingness to live out his own ideals, beyond the boundaries of the life with which he was comfortable, which he believed showed a lack of "a comprehensive character" (Thoreau 1992, 304 [entry dated January 30, 1852]).
9. Thoreau expresses the same notion in *Walden* (Thoreau 1854/1992, 48).
10. The treatment of ethical values in the chapter of *Walden* titled "Higher Laws" complements those in the essays "Life Without Principle," "Resistance to Civil Government," and Thoreau's several essays on John Brown and the Fugitive Slave Law.
11. The role of virtue in Thoreau's ethics is extensively examined in Cafaro 2004.

12. I have in mind Charles Taylor's characterization in "Kant's Theory of Freedom" (Taylor 1985, 318–37).
13. Such conformity is a primary theme not only of *Walden,* but also of his critical essays.
14. Thoreau's scathing critique of fashion in the first chapter of *Walden* exemplifies the sensibility later articulated by William Graham Sumner that while fashion is often a matter of trifles, it "is by no means trivial. It is a form of the dominance of the group over the individual" the apparent authority of which "is imperative as to everything it touches" (1906, 194).
15. For more detailed discussion of Thoreau's "heroism," see Rosenblum 1987, 103–24.
16. Though not in a dispassionate or dissipating sense (e.g., Furtak 2003).
17. One might consider his moral and aesthetic praise of "simplicity" coupled with his observation that his "greatest skill in life was to want but little" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 62, 47).
18. Such attitudes are explored at length in Bridgeman 1982, e.g., 4. See also Gilmore 1985, 35.
19. The phrase comes from Thoreau's friend and contemporary Margaret Fuller, quoted in Diggins 1984, 193.
20. The last line bears a striking resemblance to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach (written in 1845, during Thoreau's time at Walden Pond): "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (Marx 1845/1978, 145). Both of which aspire to bring thought back into touch with life. Yet Thoreau prioritizes individual transformation (which could then lead to social transformation), whereas Marx prioritizes social transformation (in the wake of which individuals would transformed as well).
21. Ironically, it is possible that Thoreau was not present when Emerson delivered the address, having likely left to return home the previous day after delivering his own address on "the commercial spirit of modern times" (Cafaro 2004, 9).
22. For a sense of reference, American banks began suspending specie payments in May 1837 and Thoreau's speech was delivered in late August.
23. As Cafaro suggests, Thoreau "was one of the earliest and remains one of the strongest critics of anthropocentrism" and was concerned with "how to lead flourishing lives while still treating nature with respect"(2004, 139).
24. This formulation (from the essay "Walking") develops Thoreau's famous proclamation in *Walden*: "I love the wild not less than the good" (Thoreau 1854/1992, 140–1).
25. Cf. Heidegger 1954/1993, 320–1: "Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry [and] the river is dammed up into the power plant [as] a water-power supplier[.]".

26. Thoreau, quoted in Neufeldt 1989, 39.
27. Thomas Ford, Governor of Illinois from 1842 to 1846, quoted in Sellers 1991, 155.
28. While he temporarily depended upon the help of others to raise the initial frame of his cabin, he was nonetheless constantly involved in the process of construction, most often working entirely alone (e.g., Richardson 1986, 151).
29. In practice, labor-saving devices typically enabled one person to do the work of several, making one person work perhaps harder than before while putting several others out of work. On Thoreau's penchant for innovation and his reservations about the "effects of technological change on everyday life," see Richardson 1986, 227–30.
30. Here Thoreau's thought resembles that of his acquaintance and one time Transcendentalist Orestes A. Brownson, especially the latter's analysis of the hollow freedom of wage labor in "The Laboring Classes" (Brownson 1840).
31. On the technical innovation and dissemination of standardized time during Thoreau's lifetime, see Bartky 2000, 7–89.
32. On self-accounting as a critical parody, see Teichgraeber 1995, 60–2.
33. Indeed, aspects of the sort of simplicity that Thoreau preaches were likely already familiar to women, persons of color, and those of modest means in the antebellum period. Whether stretching the resources of the household, coping with inferior goods, or living with less than others, many persons were practically experienced, however, unhappily, with the rudiments of what Thoreau valorizes and advocates as a tactic of liberation from the materialism and drudgery of the market.
34. Hence charges that Thoreau contradicts himself through his lingering modes of market participation largely miss his point.
35. This theme resounds throughout the critical assessments of Arendt (Arendt 1972, 49–101), Buranelli, Hochfield, Lowell, and Schulz and figures noticeably in Emerson's eulogy.
36. Discussions of responsibility approximating or suggesting this distinction include Lavin 2008, 3–59; May 1992, 15–70; McKenna 2012, 6–30; Raffoul 2010, 1–20, 80–120; Young 2011, 95–122.
37. For a more expansive discussion of Thoreau's anti-political stance and his critique of American democracy, see Plotica 2016.
38. At Walden, he did, for instance, sell some of the beans he grew in order to purchase rice. This is no doubt an aspect of the guilt that he claims to publish in his extensive personal accounting in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*.

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CHAPTER 5

The Maturation of the Market: Industrial Society in the Gilded Age

Thoreau died in 1862, roughly a year into the Civil War that would realize his abolitionist aspirations and yet usher America into a new era of industrialization, urbanization, massive institutions, and consumer culture that would have deeply dismayed him. The postbellum decades of the nineteenth century, often called the Gilded Age, witnessed the maturation of a market economy that began in earnest in the antebellum decades. This period of American history is unique in that, in both ordinary and scholarly discourse, it bears a name coined in a work of contemporary satire. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's 1873 novel also bequeathed to posterity an enduring characterization of the era as bearing a veneer of opportunity, achievement, and prosperity overtop of a rotten underlying structure of "hypocrisy[,] greed[,] corruption[,] obsession with quick money" and inequalities that were both stark and growing (Lears 2009, 32).

Recovering and rebuilding from the trauma and destruction of the war, Gilded Age America imbibed the tonic of economic improvement, becoming a single nation "dedicated to productivity, profit, and private property" dominated by a "culture of individualism and competition" (Trachtenberg 2007, 37, 93). Yet, ironically, it was an age that celebrated the individual (e.g., the great captain of industry, the great inventor, or the fresh young man or woman on the make) even as the scale and complexity of social order and institutions rendered the ordinary individual increasingly impotent. Individualism was in the air, but it was of new and different kinds, oriented increasingly around economic

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life, for in postbellum America "business came to dominate every aspect of American life" and as business became "the dominant force in American culture," "business logic" became "a general social logic" (Klein 2007, 1; Zakim and Kornblith 2012, 5). As the market revolution of the first half of the nineteenth century gave way to the full flowering of the industrial revolution, in the second half, the terms, promise, and problems of individualism were ever more deeply intertwined with the activities and values of buying and selling, producing and consuming. Amid the dramatic change and chronic instability of the Gilded Age, the radical individualism of Emerson and Thoreau was tamed and given a more subdued and conservative cast by the likes of William Graham Sumner. The image of the protean self-cultivating individual gave way to that of the striving economic competitor, a figure whose virtues and character were uniquely attuned to the rhythms of life in the industrialized marketplace that paved the road to the twentieth century.

5.1 From Civil War to a Gilded Age

The four years of destruction and upheaval during the Civil War, and the further twelve years and three constitutional amendments of Reconstruction that followed, wrought political and legal changes so profound that many some have suggested that these events marked a "constitutional moment," a kind of second founding in which a new political community was inaugurated, organized around new principles (e.g., national rather than state citizenship and sovereignty), and governed by "the modern American state" (Ackerman 1991; Ackerman 2000; Foner 2014, 23). Yet America had undergone equally profound and lasting economic and cultural change. Although the war was undeniably about the fate of slavery and union, it may also be understood as a proxy conflict over visions of economic life and development—slave v. free labor, the plantation v. the city, commodity agriculture v. industrial production, and national v. state and local control (Larson 2010, 154). Northern victory not only brought about *de jure* abolition and national reunification, it also entrenched a model of economic development and set loose a scarred and wearied population to seek unprecedented opportunities for individual advancement through participation in an integrated national marketplace. It remains an open question among historians whether the war was a unique causal juncture in American history, or whether it merely accelerated developments that likely would

have come about in any case (McPherson 452; cf. Adams 2012, 250). What is beyond dispute is that the contours of Gilded Age "mass consumption, mass production, and capital-intensive agriculture" were largely refinements or intensifications of patterns recognizable at the outset of the conflict (McPherson 1988, 14–5).

The distinctive character of the emergent Gilded Age was both institutional and cultural. According to historian Jackson Lears,

> [t]he decades after the Civil War saw the emergence of a freewheeling entrepreneurial society, where capital was unregulated by government and government was manipulated by business to serve their own ends […] Concentrated capital was responsible only to itself, a raw power that profoundly shaped public policy, influencing every branch of government at every level. Money talked—not for the first time in American politics, but more authoritatively than ever before. (2009, 49–50)

This was the era in which railroads, often with the active support of government, both annihilated space and conquered time, profoundly shaping not only where many Americans lived but also how they understood and experienced the urgency and rhythms of day-to-day life (McPherson 1988, 450–1; White 2011). Connected by new transportation and communication infrastructure, and propelled by a generation for whom "success and failure—not slavery and freedom—became the quintessential [cultural] axis," American enterprise industrialized and adopted the modern corporate form in ways and to degrees never before seen (Sandage 2005, 251). The war had also changed the demography of the American workplace. The human demands of wartime production brought nearly two million women into the workforce, while the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments brought still more millions of freed persons into the labor market, all of whom struggled under formal and informal conditions prejudicial to them[1] (Foner 2014, 124–75; McPherson 1988, 449; Sutherland 2000, 163). Joined by waves of new immigrants, these once marginalized or excluded individuals joined in the Gilded Age race to get ahead (or to maintain one's place) in an economy that would be dominated for decades by a professed Republican "ideology of competitive, egalitarian, free-labor capitalism" (McPherson 1988, 861). Much as the image of Jackson had both fueled and validated the ambitions of ordinary antebellum folk, Abraham Lincoln served as a new "exemplar of the self-made man" for countless postbellum Americans, feeding the

ambitious competitive spirit in economic as well as political domains (Hofstadter 1989, 122; see also Howe 1997, 136–56). The new economy in which all now competed was at the forefront of innovative processes which would leave their imprint on the character of individuals as well as the character of the nation (Licht 1995, 96–133). Striving to keep up with economic change, if not quite to manage it, the national government assumed new and enduring roles: "[t]he old federal republic in which the national government rarely touched the average citizens except through the post-office gave way to a more centralized polity that taxed the people directly and created an internal revenue bureau to collect these taxes, drafted men into the army, expanded the jurisdiction of federal courts, created a national currency and a national banking system, and established the first national agency for social welfare—the Freedmen's bureau" (McPherson 1988, 859). These wartime developments arguably set in motion the essential dynamics of Gilded Age life: industrialization and economic growth, corporate capitalism and political corruption, inequality and class strife, mass consumer culture, and the privileging of economic individualism above its other inflections. However unwittingly, postbellum Americans built upon the antebellum trends of economic and cultural individuation and integration, constructing a social field upon which individuals were expected to fend for themselves even though the forces and institutions against which they ultimately contended grew to dwarf the capacities of all but the wealthiest or most fortuitous individuals. Motivating and superintending these conditions was a sense, for some optimistic and for others desperate, that the industrializing market provided a way out of the ashes of war and toward a better future of "getting ahead in life" (Klein 2007, 14).

5.2 The Contours of Industrial Society

Yet characterizing any historical period is an exercise in selective emphasis, seeking coherence in the relations between contingent goings-on that, in their time and place, were plural, changing, and variously in or out of sorts with one another. The Gilded Age, like any other period of American history, was a dynamic amalgam of persons, institutions, ideas, and events fraught with tensions, though perhaps even more so than the antebellum era or the war years that followed. Victorian America was palpably, and sometimes awkwardly, struggling

to define itself: It was moralistic, yet increasingly scientific and secular; fascinated with the new, yet fixated on order and taxonomy; riven with widening class divisions, yet reluctant to confront issues in terms of class; a country of massive, impersonal institutions that clung to sentimentalized notions of home and family; intent on the pleasures of individual consumption yet preoccupied with societal progress; and obsessed by the exploits of politicians and entrepreneurs who were often neither trusted nor respected. The industrial society that took shape in the closing decades of the nineteenth century was pulled in many directions, continually being reshaped by dramatic technological, demographic, and organizational shifts that would have made ordinary life in 1910 (the year Sumner died) truly bewildering if compared to that of 1862 (the year Thoreau died). The aim of this chapter is to sketch several of the formative changes of the time, in terms of how the antebellum market revolution reached its maturity in Gilded Age industrial capitalism, and of how the situation of the individual and the culture of individualism were simultaneously changing.

5.2.1 Industrialization and Corporatization

America was on its path to industrialization well before the 1860s. The so-called American system of manufactures—the standardization and interchangeability of parts without which mechanized mass production would be impossible—was taking shape decades before the Civil War created new imperatives for industrial production. By the outbreak of the war, the basic technologies that would drive Gilded Age factories and commerce (e.g., steam engines, telegraphs, and advanced timepieces) were in widening use and advancing rapidly in their sophistication. The distinction of the Gilded Age from what came before is thus to be found in the unprecedented *scale* of industrial operations, enabled in part by a revolution in the organization of business enterprises, agricultural and commercial as well as industrial.

"Bigness was everywhere" in Gilded Age America, on display in ordinary life and entwined with the cultural imagination (Schlereth 1991, 301). The westward March of territorial expansion that (because of its inseparability from the question of slavery's expansion) dominated antebellum politics culminated during the postbellum decades in the realization of a continental nation of more than three million square miles. As this land was organized into territories and states, the way was cleared

for systematic and primarily white settlement, spreading both Anglo-American culture and business. Fed by relatively high birth rates and waves of immigration (drawn in large part by opportunities in the growing manufacturing sector), the population of the USA grew from just over 30 million in 1860 to 76 million in 1900, centrifugally peopling the vast expanses of land (much of which was opened by forcibly removing Native Americans) and centripetally peopling the rapidly developing urban areas across the country (Klein 2007, 136; Barrows 2007, 103). Historian Robert Wiebe has suggested that as both territory and population expanded in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the discrete "island communities" (whether small villages and towns, or religious and ethnic communities in cities) that had hitherto been the loci of everyday life steadily eroded, leaving American society in need of a new sense of order, identity, and purpose (Wiebe 1967). Of course, many new settlements were island communities in their own right, especially those created by immigrants or migrants with common occupations, backgrounds, and reasons for relocating. Yet the yawning expanses of space that encouraged and enabled the formation of such communities exerted persistent and often more powerful solvent forces, tempting the young and the down-on-their-luck to seek advancement elsewhere. Rapidly developing overland transportation infrastructure, most notably the railroads, provided the means and often the encouragement for restless mobility, making Gilded Age Americans even more transient than their antebellum counterparts had been. Indeed, the railroads present perhaps the single best example of the sort of bigness that marked the daily life and cultural imagination of Victorian America. John C. Calhoun's 1816 exhortation, "Let us conquer space," was not fully realized until the massive railroads—above all, the transcontinentals that cut from Chicago and New Orleans to the Pacific Coast—annihilated the distances that had once kept so much of the continent confined to the dreams of all but the bravest and toughest settlers (Quoted in Howe 2007, 87). Not only were the great railroads of the postwar years some of the largest civil enterprises that had ever been undertaken,[2] they palpably and deliberately stretched the boundaries of the country. The Gilded Age saw the rise of marketing and the careful cultivation of consumer markets, but the railroads quite literally "created the demand" for their presence and service (White 2011, xxiv). Even before track was laid, the announcement of a new line conjured speculative markets in real estate along the route, causing the development of balloon-frame houses and businesses

to follow in the wake of the railroads, rather than the reverse (Sutherland 2000, 43). Connection by immense rail networks likewise contributed to the decay of island communities, making "the people of the country homogeneous, breaking through the peculiarities and provincialisms which marked separate and unmingling sections."[3] Thus, massive enterprises and their touch upon daily life were contributing to the development of America's first truly national culture, despite the lingering sectional and partisan wounds and resentments of the Civil War.

The dramatic scale of Gilded Age society was ineluctably intertwined with the progress of industrialization. Industry drew immigrants to America, provided wages, and rising agricultural outputs that fed families, produced commodities and goods that were shipped to consumers in all corners of the country, and made both possible and desirable the construction of modern cityscapes of skyscrapers, suspension bridges, and apartment blocks. As historian Maury Klein put it, the revolutions in power, communications, transportation, and organization that transformed America in the late nineteenth century supplied the conditions for a "hothouse of economic growth" whose fundamental engine was industry (2007, 1–16). The most obvious faces of industry were the massive extractive, processing, and manufacturing operations that made household names of magnates like Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Gustavus Swift, and the railroads that transported the majority of commodities and goods produced by these enterprises. The rise of the great cities of the Gilded Age was inexorably intertwined with such industrial operations, which supplied the materials for their construction and day-to-day life, and often the underlying economic impetus for their growth or even their very existence.

Perhaps less visible, but equally significant, was the industrialization of agriculture. The effects of mechanization in agriculture were felt before the Civil War, but the demands of wartime production followed by the postwar expansion of population, available lands, infrastructure networks, and the general productive capacity of enterprise generated a surge in both the productivity and the industrialization of farming in the closing decades of the century (ibid., 44–9). Cyrus McCormick, for instance, made his first mechanical reaper in rural Virginia in 1831; by the 1870s, dozens of patents were being issued each year for mechanical reapers, not to mention other agricultural implements, and McCormick's Reaper Works in Chicago was a massive industrial operation at the forefront of factory mechanization and anti-union tactics (Ibid., 45–6; Lears

2009, 83). Beyond the per acre and per labor-unit gains in productivity for small farmers (yeoman as well as sharecroppers), the mechanization of agriculture also made possible massive bonanza farms that typically specialized in a single crop and utilized organizational schemes and discipline reminiscent of military and factory operations (Klein 2007, 52; Schlereth 1991, 43–5). Commercial operations likewise scaled up during the Gilded Age, fueled by technological advances, cultural shifts, and growing infrastructure and industrial capacities. The church spires that were frequently the most visible landmarks of the antebellum city gave way to the banks, department stores, theaters, and ballparks that were becoming both the new landmarks and the new temples of the Gilded Age metropolis. Thus, across all major economic sectors, the period was characterized by "a revolutionary rise in *productivity*," which itself was a major contributor to "the longest period of unbroken *deflation* in American history" between 1865 and 1897 (Trachtenberg 2007, 53; Klein 2007, 124). For the ordinary individual, the signs of the times were visible where one lived, shopped, worked, and took leisure, in the sheer bigness of the institutions, processes, and physical structures of industrial society. Whereas, the antebellum man or woman encountered a world populated first and foremost by other individuals and the human scale groupings of family, church, or club to which they belonged, the man or woman of the Gilded Age encountered world conspicuously populated by superindividual entities—corporations, unions, political parties and machines, national fraternal associations, and the increasingly palpable distinctions of class.

The advent of the modern corporation lay at the heart of many of the quantitative and qualitative leaps of scale in Gilded Age life, for it supplied organizational concepts useful to nearly any large undertaking, public as well as private. In hindsight, the USA may seem to have been fated to become "the world's first 'corporation nation,' the first country suffused with corporations," since the Anglophone colonies of North America began as "'[b]odies corporate' chartered by the British crown" (Wright 2012, 149; Beatty 2001, 3). Yet, despite the increasing number of corporations created between 1790 and 1830 and the gradual replacement of state laws and constitutional provisions requiring corporate charters to be granted through special legislative action by general laws of incorporation through the 1840s and 1850s, in 1860, most businesses were still small firms operated as sole proprietorships or partnerships (Wright 2012, 148–9; 165; Licht 1995, 133). Partly

because of the favorable conditions of the postwar economic hothouse and partly because of the work of skillful entrepreneurs and organizational visionaries, corporatization became a dominant phenomenon of the Gilded Age. The journalist Ambrose Bierce aptly captured the essential innovation of the modern corporation in defining it as an "ingenious device for obtaining individual profit without individual responsibility" (Bierce 1906/1999, 29). The kernel of truth in Bierce's description is that the corporate form provided a mode of organization that transcended limitations and liabilities of natural personhood, allowing many individuals to act together in a common pursuit without tying them personally and completely to the fate of the joint enterprise. Once chartered, the corporation

> had a clear legal status and a separate identity from its stockholders. Ownership could easily be transferred through a sale of shares without disturbing operations. As a legal entity, it outlived its creators and was unaffected by their demise or departure. Large amounts of capital could be raised by selling stock or issuing bonds, which gave it mechanisms for perpetual growth under favorable conditions. And it offered shareholders limited liability. The corporation alone was responsible for its debts; the stockholder could lose no more than his investment if the company went under[.] Taken together, these advantages made the corporate form a superb instrument for planned, rational business enterprise on a large scale [and] a general vehicle for private enterprises of many types. (Klein 2007, 107–8; see also Wright 2012, 155–6)

On the way to achieving its full scale and potential, the postbellum corporation revolutionized institutional management as well as institutional organization. As the proprietorships of the antebellum period waned and the joint-stock corporations of the Gilded Age waxed, "the management of the enterprise became separated from its ownership," with the day-to-day business of the firm being overseen by growing legions of salaried managers tied to functionally as well as geographically differentiated units of one enterprise (Chandler 1977, 9; see 1–14 more generally). This new organizational logic was pioneered by the railroads, as they struggled to devise ways to overcome the unique difficulties of conducting a complex and rapidly evolving business over vast distances (Ibid., 81–205; see also Porter 1992, 32–41; Schlereth 1991, 60). No single individual, however capable, could coordinate the construction, maintenance, scheduling,

capitalization, and accounting of even a modest-sized railroad. At its best, the managerial structures and techniques of the Gilded Age corporation allowed for enterprises of unprecedented scale to be conducted with remarkable efficiency, stability, and profitability. The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed almost every type of business adopt (and adapt) this organizational model, with nearly all of the industrial titans of the era sitting atop the edifice of such a corporation. Vertical and horizontal integration by some of the most successful firms amplified the magnitude of these innovations, and by the end of the century, America was the home of some of the largest as well as most intricately structured and managed industrial and commercial concerns in the world (Klein 2007, 125–8; Licht 1995, 135–51; see also Whitten 1983). The Gilded Age individual thus found herself living in shadows far longer than those cast by antebellum institutions. The ordinary person could not but be dwarfed by the dominant economic enterprises of industrial society, adrift in a marketplace where the most important participants and competitors were not natural, individual persons but artificial, corporate persons.

The maturation of the industry and the corporatization that accompanied and enabled it reflected a changing mentality. Gilded Age America, one could say, strove to realize, under seemingly improved conditions, the promise of individual opportunity and self-making intimated in the revolutionary and antebellum periods. Encumbered by "far less dead weight of the past" than in European societies, in a country where "resources for success were abundant, and the restraints on individual action were few," Victorian Americans were "a people going places in a hurry, [valuing] change more than stability, largely because they assumed that change would bring something better" (Klein 2007, 24). What is more, it was, in the words of Robert McCloskey, "an age of waning spiritual vitality," and "[w]hat remained, after the spiritual base had eroded, was a frankly materialist ethic, a transference of ideas of good and right to material things," for the men and women of the era "could not abandon the idea of an absolute morality; they could only transfigure it"[4] (1964, 37, 69). Within the frame of this transfigured, more secular worldview, the competitive "race of life" became a naturalistic organizing image for a public culture in which "effective exercise of will was the key to individual selfhood" as well as individual virtue and success (Lears 2009, 68). The shifting worldview was not an isolated American phenomenon, but a local expression of Western civilization's

yearning dissatisfaction with the lingering inheritances of the eighteenth century. In Europe, it was given expression in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of the will-to-power and by Henri Bergson's vitalism, while around the world it contributed to the various forms of nationalism that traded, however implicitly, upon the analogy between nation and individual. Though post-Reconstruction America ultimately went the route of belligerent nationalism in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the race of life was more commonly an individual ordeal, run in the economic sphere of industrial society. Their needs increasingly unmet by old moral, religious, and cosmological narratives, facing their anxieties and aspirations in the everyday hustle and bustle of the marketplace, Victorian Americans were rapidly laying the empirical and psychological foundations for President Calvin Coolidge's 1925 assertion that "the chief business of the American people is business."[5]

Enmeshed in this reorientation was a scientific mindset characteristic of the closing decades of the nineteenth century not only in the USA but throughout much of the West. The coalescence and rising authority of the modern social sciences reshaped how people understood themselves and their common existence (Breslau 2007, 44; Ross 1991, especially 53–97). The study of individual personality, public health, economy, politics, and the nature and internal relations of society itself came to bear the impress of quantitative and empirical methods often inspired by or adapted from the natural sciences. This mindset and its practical manifestations had far-reaching implications, especially in the USA. The federal census, which took its comprehensive form in 1850 but became more extensive and sophisticated in the last three decades of the century, provided immense bodies of data whose study reshaped perceptions of social class and social order as well as of the place of individuals within it[6] (Schlereth 1991, 27–9; Wiebe 1967, 111). Even more consequential for the experience of ordinary life was the standardization of time in 1883, when the rhythms of daily life came under the governance of a system devised by the railroads and only later codified in federal law (Bartky 2000, 127–55; O'Malley 1990, 99–144). The many local times set to natural diurnal patterns that had both reflected and shaped the ordinary sense of temporality for decades if not centuries were superseded by four bureaucratically devised and telegraphically synchronized time zones. The industrial marketplace now had a metronome whose uniform ticking could be heard and reliably followed in every corner of the nation, enabling if not demanding, as Thoreau presciently lamented

decades prior, the measurement and regulation of all of life's moments and pursuits according to the cadence of business. Signifying the social potential and tendencies of the new scientific mindset, standard time "dramatized industrial capitalism's acute awareness that time was money and its obsession with punctuality, order, and regularity. In brief, it typified the growing quantification, regimentation, homogeneity, and standardization that had crept into many aspects of everyday life" in Gilded Age America (Schlereth 1991, 31). As one historian sardonically put it, "[f]or lack of anything that made better sense of their world, people everywhere weighed, counted, and measured it" (Wiebe 1967, 42).

Such scientific progress went hand in hand with industrialization and corporatization. Throughout the nineteenth century, the natural sciences delivered technological advances that continually transformed how things were made, transported, and consumed. In another instance that would have likely horrified Thoreau, the first artificial ice plant opened in New Orleans in 1865 (Sutherland 2000, 41). What once only the slow force of the seasons could produce in any quantity, and which had to be laboriously harvested from its natural formations, could be quickly conjured through the mastery of natural laws by technology in service of human will. In the terminology of the German twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger, Gilded Age market-driven industry increasingly converted nature into a "standing-reserve" of resources to be put to use serving human wants and solving human problems (Heidegger 1954/1993). But it was not just the seemingly inert resources of nature that were harnessed in this calculated manner; human beings and the work they did became objects of scientific intervention.

The name most associated with the advent of so-called scientific management was Frederick Winslow Taylor, a one-time mechanical engineer who turned the era's fascination with measurement to the service of efficiency in business. In his decades of work, including his famous 1880s time and motion studies conducted in the steel industry, Taylor sought a natural law of the workplace that could be exploited to optimize both industrial output and the pay schemes for workers. His system "seemed a way of harnessing the excess energy that everyone knew was out there, of putting random force to productive use," measurably extracting more value from each unit of labor while offering clearer incentives to work harder and more efficiently, illustrating, as he believed, that "the true interests" of labor and management "are one and the same" (Lears 2009, 262; Taylor 1919, 10). Apart from justifying, indeed demanding,

a larger managerial structure to oversee and fine tune production, scientific management "imposed a machine logic on the workday" and "choreographed the human motions of hands, arms, backs, and legs to perform with clocklike regularity" (Schlereth 1991, 66; see also Licht 1995, 151–6). What was a boon to employers was less clearly so for employees, despite Taylor's egalitarian and meritocratic claims. Equipped with this new logic, whose application quickly spread from manual to clerical labor, the business enterprises that grew to dwarf the individual worker further colonized and scrutinized the details of the workday, increased target production rates and quotas, undermined existing workplace culture, and further reduced skilled crafts and trades to interchangeable modes of at best semi-skilled labor performed by deliberately interchangeable workers. As one machinist remarked, testifying before the House Labor Committee, Taylorism "tends to wipe out all the manhood and genius of the American workman and make him a mere machine, to be driven at high speed until he breaks down, and then to be thrown on the scrap heap," an observation that applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the millions of women and children employed in Gilded Age factories and mills.[7] Thoreau's claims that individuals were becoming "tools of their tools" may have struck his audience as hyperbole in the 1850s, but they were ringing truer and truer to many in the working and middle classes by the 1880s and 1890s (Thoreau 1854/1992, 25).

Yet perhaps no example of the Victorian scientific mindset seemed more apt in its own day, or has been so reviled since, than what came to be called "Social Darwinism." Despite the name (popularized largely by later critics), the characteristic views of Social Darwinism found their most complete expression in the work of the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, whose ideas were influenced by the earlier work of Thomas Robert Malthus on population and would influence the language in which Charles Darwin presented his later evolutionary theory (e.g., Spencer coined the phrase "survival of the fittest"). Spencer's popularity in America (and indeed in much of the Western world) during the second half of the nineteenth century may well have surpassed that of any other intellectual figure. As the historian Richard Hofstadter noted, "[t]he generation that acclaimed Grant as its hero took Spencer as its thinker" (1992, 34). The core principle of the Social Darwinist worldview was the continuity of social life with natural, biological existence—the conviction that "[t]he principles of social structure and change […] must be the same as those of the universe at large"[8] (Ibid., 38). Fusing

Malthusian theorems about the inexorable struggle for survival under conditions of scarcity with the *laissez-faire* doctrines of classical political economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Spencer offered a vision of individual and society that was optimistic and progressive despite its underlying conviction that society, like nature, is red in tooth and claw. Put comprehensively, in *Social Statics* (1851):

> the well-being of existing humanity, and the unfolding of it into [its] ultimate perfection, are both secured by that same beneficent, though severe discipline, to which the animate creation at large is subject: a discipline which is pitiless in the working out of good: a felicity-pursuing law which never swerves for the avoidance of partial and temporary suffering. The poverty of the incapable, the distresses that came upon the imprudent, the starvation of the idle, and those shoulderings aside of the weak by the strong, which leave so many 'in shallows and in miseries,' are the decrees of a large, far-seeing benevolence […] Misery inevitably results from incongruity between constitutions and conditions […] The process *must* be undergone, and the suffering *must* be endured. No power on earth, no cunningly-devised laws of statesmen […] can diminish them one jot. (Spencer 1851, 322–4)

The peculiar social and cultural conditions of Victorian America made this sort of naturalistic reinterpretation of a cosmos once viewed in terms of divine ordained morality and order both plausible and widely satisfying (though by no means universally so). "The belief that God was immanent in progress allowed Gilded Age intellectuals to continue" in their lingering commitments to the moral outlook of their predominantly "Protestant faith without having to worry about refuting Darwinism. The result was a blend of Calvinism and evolutionary thought, a new liberalism that accorded well with developing industrial capitalism" (Crocker 2007, 221). The thought of Spencer, as well as that of his American intellectual kin like William Graham Sumner and Lester Frank Ward, provided a principle of order amid the chaotic changes and conflicts of Gilded Age society. The often bewildering economic transformations and social dislocations that widened the gap between rich and poor and that raised the specter of class conflict were intelligible within a narrative that combined familiar notions of individual virtue, liberty, and responsibility with the cutting-edge theorems and discoveries of geological, biological, and social science. The core message was simultaneously

stern and reassuring: The social world operates according to the same laws as the natural world, which reward diligence and virtue while punishing indolence and vice, unless meddling social reformers interfere with this wise and "far-seeing benevolence." Under the economic and political conditions of the time, this meant that the competitive market was the social manifestation of natural struggle and morality, and absent the interference of schemers and sentimentalists, the market would never stray far from a just distribution of success and failure.

In part because of their repudiation since the progressive era, it has become easy to forget that by 1900, "Social Darwinist ideas of 'struggle,' 'fitness,' and 'survival,' […] individual, national, and species-centered, had become virtually omnipresent and definitive of one of the most important modern trends in European and American thought" (Claeys 2000, 226). What Taylorism promised for the workplace, Social Darwinism promised for industrial society at large—an explanatory, optimistic, and (above all) scientific account of order, whose practical application promised prosperity to those "self-improving[,] dynamic competitor[s]" who individually deserved it (Cawelti 1965, 172). Though not every Gilded Age American shared this worldview, in whole or in part, both its articulations and its nonetheless widespread embrace offer a glimpse of objective conditions and the subjective understandings woven around them. By and large, the age of industrialization and corporatization was optimistic, energetic, and ambitious, yet unstable, disorienting, and anxious. The undeniable advances of science and technology, and the "tough-minded," empirical mindset they signified, reassured and reoriented the perennial yearning for moral order, for a sense that we can know and achieve what is valuable in life (James 1907/1995, Lecture I). Decades after the Second Great Awakening had reinvigorated the spirituality and millennial expectations of countless antebellum Americans, the manifold achievements and promises of Gilded Age science planted their feet squarely back on the ground. For men and women of all ages, classes, races, and ethnicities, it was time to get back to work.

5.2.2 Economic Life and Individual Agency

> To the young American […] the paths to fortune are innumerable and all open; there is invitation in the air and success in all his wide horizon. He is embarrassed which to choose and is not unlikely to waste years in dallying

> with his chances, before giving himself to the serious tug and strain of a single object. He has no traditions to bind him or guide him, and his impulse is to […] make a new way for himself.
>
> Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age* (1873)

The Gilded Age was undoubtedly a time of ambition fueled by manifold changes that promised opportunity. The above character sketch that Twain and Warner gave of the average "man on the make" in the early years of the period, as well as the accomplishments of the great magnates and the popular success literature in the mold of Horatio Alger, variously encouraged the view that the period was one of general promise and prosperity in which some merely did better than others. Yet the age was in fact one of repeated, prolonged economic turmoil from 1873 to the end of the century. Though many fortunes were made and augmented, and the ranks of the middle class grew throughout, few escaped altogether paying the human toll exacted by the Gilded Age market. As the intensification of industrialization and corporatization rapidly transformed the economy, the general spirit and practices of individualism inherited from the antebellum decades were enlisted to make sense of the postbellum American society and its economic conditions. Antebellum valorizations of the individual were modified but not abandoned. Images of the individual agency were tailored to an increasingly materialistic and volatile society, simultaneously narrowing and focusing the individual's horizons of self-enactment and self-improvement upon the hustle and bustle of the market.

The reorientation of antebellum individualism played out upon a social stage haunted by economic crisis. Like the Panic of 1837, the Panics of 1873 and 1893, and the prolonged depressions they precipitated, were symptomatic of changing economic practices and conditions. Much as the crisis of 1837 reflected the promise and perils of the market revolution and the rise of an integrated national economy, the crisis of 1873 reflected the promise and perils of a dynamic industrializing, corporatizing economy. The start of the Panic is often dated to "unexpected and previously unthinkable failure of [Jay] Cooke and Company" which "suspended payments on its bonds" on September 18, 1873, and "ushered in sixty-five months of 'uninterrupted economic contraction,' the longest such period in U.S. history" (Currarino 2011, 17; see also Foner 2014, 512–24; Wells 1937). Yet, as with any systemic

downturn, the enabling conditions went much deeper than the collapse of a single business, however iconic. The industrial boom following the Civil War resulted in what even contemporary observers recognized as an overbuilding of railroads and a surge in fixed plant capital investments by the major industrial firms (whether in trackage, facilities, or machinery) rather than increases in wages. Thus, though the economy nominally grew between 1865 and 1873, flows of investment capital and revenues from rising productivity were quickly tied back down in illiquid assets whose productivity eventually outstripped the buying power of the public, despite the prevailing deflation of the postbellum decades. By the middle of 1873, the overstretched and insufficiently liquid industrial and financial sectors were operating on borrowed time. Once begun, the Panic was characterized by "quickly skyrocketing unemployment, plummeting wages, and widespread business failures," as well as by visible scenes of indigence as many of those displaced from the labor market were left dependent upon alms (Currarino 2011, 18; Stanley 1992, 1269). Although the human cost cannot be merely disregarded, the crisis is perhaps most significant as a symbol of (the birth of) a new economic order. Much as the Panic of 1837 had signaled the transition from a patchwork of regional and subsistence economies to an interconnected national market, 1873 signaled "the transition from proprietary to corporate capitalism[,] from a social and political order defined by small property holders to one defined by permanent wage workers" (Currarino 2011, 11). Americans in 1837 were awakened to their exposure to national and international economic forces, and after 1873, countless individuals "who had dreamed of becoming shop owners like their fathers now faced a life of endless wage work" (Ibid., 1).

The beginnings of the Panic of 1893 have been similarly traced to the auspicious failure of a single firm, the National Cordage Company (the so-called rope trust) on May 5th, which prompted "a frenzy of selling" on Wall Street (Lears 2009, 169). Like in 1873, the causes illustrate the continuing transformations of the American economy. In addition to industrial overproduction and both overbuilding and speculation linked in large part to the transcontinental railroads, changing monetary policies (such as the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890) as well as waves of business mergers and patterns of collusion created an economic house of cards awaiting a brisk wind to send it toppling[9] (Ibid., 174–5; Licht 1995, 159–60). Though shorter in duration, the Panic of 1893 was more severe in terms of its effects—in the first year, over fifteen thousand

businesses failed (not including banks or railroads) and more than four hundred banks suspended their payments and operations, while over the course of the four years of contraction, some seventy railroads went into receivership and hundreds of thousands of men and women were thrown into prolonged unemployment and the poverty almost inevitably incident to it (Lauck 1907, 105–7; Lears 2009, 169; Schlereth 1991, 174–5). All classes were affected, though the worst of the hard times were felt by those in the middle and bottom strata of society. Job losses and business failures reduced clerks as well as laborers to common levels of desperation, causing the "ranks of the tramp army" to swell as many unemployed persons were forced to roam in search of work, and generating "crowds of job seekers [in which] the educated, refined, and respectable [were] reduced to scuffling for survival along with working-class folk"[10] (Lears 2009, 170–1). In many locations, municipal governments, churches, and other private charities provided a minimum of aid to the destitute, yet even in the hardest of hard times, prevailing cultural ideals of masculinity and economic self-sufficiency attached a stigma to the acceptance of charity, reinforcing the deeply entrenched American reluctance "to accept what looked like a handout" (Ibid., 172). An economic downturn that was far beyond the control of the average person was nonetheless the individual's responsibility to weather more or less alone.

The cumulative indications and effects of these two catastrophic swings in the industrial business cycle sketch the changed situation of the ordinary individual in the Gilded Age economy, whatever his or her social class. The landscape was one dominated by immense firms and immensely complex and powerful aggregate economic forces. Face to face, personal transactions were already eroding by the 1850s, and by the 1880s, they had been substantially replaced by impersonal transactions mediated by financiers and middle men, and structured through the mediating instruments of stocks, bonds, and commercial paper. Gentlemen's agreements between captains of industry and the interactions with one's landlord or local grocer were now the anomalies in an economy where millions of individuals worked for firms controlled by unseen corporate boards in the interest of nameless and faceless stockholders, and spent their wages on goods and services that were often equally anonymous in their origin and provision. Neither those ostensibly most in control of their economic fate (such as the great business magnates) nor ostensibly most distant from the industrial marketplace (such as frontier farmers and ranchers) escaped this depersonalization of

economic life. Regardless of station or success, Gilded Age society was being sifted into individuals who were expected to operate in the new industrialized economy as individuals, fending for themselves, striving to elevate themselves and perhaps their families above the bustling crowds of similarly solitary strivers.

In the words of one contemporary observer, "[t]his wonderful spectacle of [postbellum] development was the result of INDIVIDUALISM; operating in an unbounded theater of action. Everyone was seeking to do all that he could for himself."[11] The spirit of individualism prominent in the Gilded Age was in many ways the developmental continuation of antebellum precursors and was variously interwoven with the intellectual and material conditions of the era. As in the antebellum decades, Americans in the postbellum years espoused a general ethic of self-improvement; for them "the active verb, to strive, and its synonyms of purposeful, didactic exertion—to contend, to struggle, to endeavor"—captured a common sensibility of the age (Schlereth 1991, 243). However, this culture of striving was notably more worldly than the culture of self-culture championed decades earlier by Transcendentalists like Emerson, Fuller, or Thoreau. Moved by the same ideals of bootstrapping novelized in Alger's stories, the Gilded Age middle and upper classes in particular could often indulge themselves "only if persuaded they were also improving themselves and not wasting time. Hence, their annual vacation often meant a stay at a chautauqua resort or a health spa" (Ibid., 209). What is more, the Victorian inflection of American individualism traded upon "a larger and more complex notion of the human psyche" than was common a generation or two prior (despite the best efforts of the Transcendentalists) (Lears 2009, 223). Partaking of the era's general fascination with energy, prevailing psychological views emphasized the proper utilization of one's vital and psychic forces[12] (Ibid., 239, 246). Self-improvement accordingly entailed wise husbanding of one's physical and psychological resources, cultivating oneself in ways that did not undermine the ability to perform the necessary activities of life, including participation in the industrializing market. The rapid expansion of public primary and secondary education in the postbellum America, as well as of colleges and universities, reinforced the worldly ethos of Gilded Age individualism, helping to restructure society around a "distinctly vertical vision" of career (Schlereth 1991, 244–53, quotation from 252; see also Sutherland 2000, 97). Though this vision was essentially masculine and middle class, women, racial and

ethnic minorities, the lowers classes, and even children typically understood prudent living in terms that reflected their own participation in the American dream of hoisting oneself (or one's family) up the economic ladder.

This increasingly materialistic inflection of individualism no doubt owed something to the influence of and its depiction of society as the extension of natural competition between striving individuals in which success goes to the fittest. In both thought and practice, this variety of individualism found a natural ally in the ascendant *laissez-faire* doctrine that "[f]ree individuals, left to their own devices, could solve the problems that confronted them without the aid of the state. The state might wage war, protect property, and administer justice, but in the everyday life of the people it was not to interfere" (Fine 1956, 3). Like Social Darwinism and notions of career-oriented self-improvement, the regnant Gilded Age ideals of government and economy were only foreshadowed in antebellum thought and practice. Rather than a mere rebranding of the Democratic-Republican creed of little government close to home (which had nonetheless justified ambitious regulation of social and economic life at state and local levels), *laissez-faire* reflected changing conditions as well as changing understandings of the individual and society[13] (Ibid., 1–25). Ambition, striving, and competition were reimagined as the essential engines of individual uplift and social progress, and the proper role of government was to ensure the individual fair opportunities to strive and compete (primarily by enforcing property rights and contracts, and otherwise staying out of the way). Hence, in Gilded Age culture, economic liberty took on an even greater significance than it had during the antebellum market revolution, when it was still nominally tethered to the remnants of moral economies and their lingering notions of public welfare and order that were not yet imagined as the long-term products of the market itself.

For perhaps the majority of Americans "economic freedom…assumed the status of [not just] *a* primary value [but] *the* primarily value," if only because it was perceived as a necessary condition for the pursuit and achievement of other values (McCloskey 1964, 15; see also Lears 2009, 65). This changed estimation of the freedom to accumulate and use property, to make contracts, and to compete in the market on formally equal terms was entangled with changed understandings of how individual identity was shaped and individual character improved. Even before the Civil War, the market revolution had familiarized growing

portions of American society with the protean power of money—its ability to multiply (e.g., via investments) and to work tangible wonders (e.g., financing the construction of railroads or factories) while remaining little more than numbers in a ledger. Yet decades of experience had also amply demonstrated that in addition to serving as a "universal standard of value, money was also a universal solvent of other standards of value" such as "[c]ustom, tradition, [or even] morality" (Lears 2009, 55). For many, "engagement with the market evoked dreams of sudden self-transformation" and heightened the sense of being "in constant transition from one identity to another" (Ibid., 52, 55). In industrial, market society, money and what one did to get it took on a yet unprecedented significance, psychologically as well as practically. Work and what it earned determined not merely what one had, but who one was and could become. The generic *telos* of Gilded Age individualism became not self-culture in the Emersonian or Thoreauvian sense but "competence"—understood not in the antebellum sense of "comfortable independence," but in the narrower sense of successful competition in the industrial marketplace, of making enough money to continue striving to make more (Vickers 1990, 3).

This individualism was well-adapted to the realities of life in industrial society, especially for the growing ranks of the middle and lower classes. Practices of wage labor that began with the market revolution reached unprecedented prevalence and scale in the Gilded Age. By 1870, two-thirds of gainfully employed individuals (totaling some eight to nine million persons) worked for someone else in exchange for wages, "which meant that their livelihood depended on people and forces entirely beyond their control" (Arnesen 2007, 55–6; Margo 1996, 232–5, 209; Klein 2007, 137). The predominance of wage labor also eroded the remaining contours of the pre-market "regime of mutuality," leaving an atomistic economic order populated by individual strivers who have "no personal ties to their employers" (Gilmore 1985, 134, 138; see also McPherson 1988, 24). Beyond the lack of viable alternatives for growing numbers of Americans, this shift was eased by the general rise in real wages (coupled with persistent price deflation) between 1870 and 1900 (Lears 2009, 248; Margo 1996, 222–3). Despite the major economic crises of the same period, the dream of getting ahead, however modestly, appeared within the reach of millions. All that was needed, in the popular imagination, was liberty, opportunity, and diligence matched to the conditions of the day. Yet the realities and ideology of free wage labor

also marked an ironic departure from earlier republican notions of independent labor. The liberty that accompanied economic independence grounded in freehold gave way to liberty of contract that could ostensibly be enjoyed simultaneously and equally by each and all, employee as well as employer. Thus, wage labor, which had been a badge of dependence in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was regarded as a badge of independence and even upward mobility by the eve of the Civil War[14] (McPherson 1988, 22–4). What is more, postbellum free labor ideology dovetailed with the eclipse of the artisan ideal under increasing mechanization, standardization, and deskilling[15] (Schlereth 1991, 56; Sutherland 2000, 161–3).

Developments in the labor market also provide glimpses into the changing economic opportunities and conditions experienced by women, persons of color, and immigrants. The entry of women into the workforce during the Civil War proved to be an enduring phenomenon, and by the end of the century, roughly one in seven women were gainfully employed. While most who worked outside the home during the Gilded Age were single, self-supporting, and typically of the lower classes, over time more middle-class women supplemented the incomes of their families (Cordery 2007, 121; see also Schlereth 1991, 67–9; Sutherland 2000, 163–4). However, even as women made inroads into the world of economic agency, they faced opportunities and received compensation inferior to that of men, with women of color experiencing especially difficult conditions (Cordery 2007, 123; Kessler-Harris 2003, 143; Lears 2009, 76). The Gilded Age economy was not only a decidedly masculine domain, it was but also decidedly the privileged domain of white, native-born men. Emancipation and the Reconstruction Amendments were of limited impact on the lives of many freed persons, especially those who remained (by choice or by necessity) in the postbellum South. Under the pressures of intimidation, discrimination, violence, and Black Codes designed to bind former slaves to their former agricultural and service occupations, nominally "free labor" often made little real difference (Engerman 1996, 353–4). Where possible those in rural areas joined the larger flows of migration to cities; but upon arrival, they commonly faced similar discrimination seemingly enforced by the impersonal market rather than by deliberately invidious laws (Fishel 2007, 144). Booker T. Washington's (1895) "Atlanta Exposition Address" simultaneously illustrates the conundrum in which African-Americans were mired and the economically inflected individualism of the Gilded

Age—promised political and economic freedom by the constitution yet often denied its substance in practice, he admonished them to "[c]ast down your bucket where you are" and work diligently to improve their lives to the greatest extent that their marginalized social status and constrained economic agency would allow (Washington 1895/2007, 189). Similar patterns of discrimination and mitigated opportunity were experienced by new immigrants (nearly thirteen million between 1870 and 1900), especially those of non-Protestant and/or non-European extraction, underscoring the prevailing religious, racial, and ethnic biases of the new industrial society[16] (Daniels 2007; Takaki 2000).

These patterns of inclusion and exclusion offer a partial explanation of the economic inequalities that are commonly and correctly associated with the Gilded Age, with the contingencies of industrialization, as well as of political action and inaction, more or less completing the account. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s, the absence of hereditary aristocracy in the USA made economic status and inequality all the more important, and by the postbellum decades, economic inequality had clearly surpassed antebellum levels (Pope 1996; McPherson 1988, 10, 24–5). The favorable trends of generally rising wages and deflating prices did not amount to an unmitigated boon for workers. Many wage laborers found themselves in impoverishing conditions—whether living in company towns or rapidly expanding cities—working long hours (often at dangerous jobs) with little job security, both because of repeated and prolonged economic downturns and because of the ease with which workers of nearly all skill levels could be replaced (Licht 1995, 183–5; Trachtenberg 2007, 90–1). Yet industrialization generated massive firms and unparalleled personal fortunes for successful entrepreneurs and many of their shareholders. Names like Carnegie, Morgan, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt personified the opportunities for advancement in the industrial economy, as well as the nearly unimaginable wealth that was accumulating in the hands of the few. Even more starkly than during the antebellum years, in both good times and hard times, those who possessed property and wealth got still more and got it more quickly than the comparative have-nots. As one historian has described the landscape of Gilded Age economic inequality, "[t]he age of enterprise gave birth to both a powerful new moneyed aristocracy and an army of the poor […] both pressing hard against a growing but bewildered middle class" (Klein 2007, 135). A substantial difference between this situation and the economic inequalities of the antebellum

period observed by Tocqueville was that the accumulated effects of the market and industrial revolutions upset many of the cultural restraints to the social and political force of wealth. Though antebellum social relations and politics are easily distorted by the idealizations and nostalgia of hindsight, especially the equality of conditions that Tocqueville ambiguously described and Jacksonians aspirationally touted, Gilded Age patterns of economic inequality and of the social and political power of wealth were of an order different from what preceded them. Never before in American history had such a gulf separated the various strata of society from one another, especially in terms of their relative control over their own lives. The upper echelons of society were achieving spectacular wealth, while the majority of society, including much of the middle class, "lived precariously close to poverty" (Arnesen 2007, 56–7). The volatility to which the average person was exposed in the antebellum period was amplified in the Gilded Age, such that even those who enjoyed middle-class comfort and respectability were often one bad deal or economic downturn away from the bread line, and the lower classes were even more acutely exposed to disaster. Whether explicitly or implicitly, with *élan* or in dejection, few postbellum Americans could dispute that theirs was becoming a "money culture" narrated by "the gospel of general prosperity" according to which an individual's worth was "measured by ability to hold one's own or get ahead in a competitive pecuniary race" (Dewey 1930/1999, 5, 23, 6). This was individualism, but of a distinctive variety that was taking shape along with industrial society itself. The self-culture championed by Emerson and Thoreau was fading before the appeal and apparent inevitability of the rugged individualism whose apotheosis was the ideal of "self-made men," such as Carnegie and Rockefeller.

5.2.3 Domestic Life and Consumerism

As in the antebellum period, the effects of economic change in the Gilded Age reached far beyond the workplace. Along with industrialization and its immediate effects on production, Victorian society (in the greater Anglophone world) was characterized by a culture of consumption and domesticity enabled by technological and organizational progress. The island communities that were still important (if waning) loci of identity and culture through the antebellum decades dissolved further in the postbellum decades, eroded by the potent forces of an

industrial market economy and its lived consequences. In their place arose America's first truly national culture, a mass culture of production and consumption within whose horizons the individual was expected to find self-improvement and satisfaction. For those who were gainfully employed (though especially for men), career became an essential aspect of personal identity—not just identification with a trade or occupation or even vocation, but with a trajectory of self-making through the bare exercise of economic agency (Klein 2007, 160; Schlereth 1991, 252). Family life remained significant for Victorian Americans, and indeed took on an idealized significance, but its traditional relationships to other parts of life were attenuated or severed. Work life and home life were increasingly separated, undoing the unity of production and consumption under the same roof that was common in early America and that continued in many antebellum households. First the market revolution and later the industrial revolution divided life into newly distinct spheres of work and leisure, the former the domain of ambition, production, and commerce, the latter the domain of enjoyment, consumption, and sentiment (Horowitz 1985, xxii; Trachtenberg 2007, 129). Yet a new and important link between the two was forged: leisure, once sought for its own sake, as the opposite of work, was reimagined as restorative adjunct of work, wherein one replenished the energies necessary for market participation. What was once understood as non-instrumental play "became 'recreation,' a means of returning more efficient workers to the factory or office on Monday morning," whether through healthful food and rest, edifying or informative reading, or athletics to train the body and discipline the mind (Lears 2009, 266, 270; see also Schlereth 1991, 214). As if deliberately responding to Thoreau's criticism of market culture as diminishing and devaluing the time when the individual is not working, Gilded Age culture reinvested leisure with value by treating it as a necessary ingredient for productive work.

Nonetheless, work was not the ultimate or only component of the good life in postbellum America. The prevailing culture of materialism was anchored on one end by an ideal of diligent labor and on the other end by an ideal of proper consumption. As Daniel Horowitz has suggested,

> [f]actories, machines, and corporations made it increasingly difficult to speak convincingly of the nobility of physical labor. With the questioning of the work ethic as the primary source of values, social thinkers looked for

> ways to make leisure a fulcrum for uplift. Influential observers shifted their attention from production to consumption […] Around the turn of the century the signs of an emerging consumer culture were visible in a shorter workweek, more elaborate advertising campaigns, the display of goods in department stores, and proliferation of institutions of commercial leisure, such as the amusement park. (1985, 30)

The erosion of traditional communities and the moral economies by which they lived, the alienation of Gilded Age workers (compared to the artisan culture of earlier generations), and the profusion of new, cheap, mass-produced goods all contributed to the elevation of consumption to a new status (Sutherland 2000, 159, 161–3; Trachtenberg 2007, 150). From ready-made food, medicines, and clothes to ready-made houses, furnishings, and luxury goods, the industrial market promised solutions to nearly all of the needs and wants of modern life. Yet, as Thoreau—and Rousseau before him—recognized, desire tends to beget desire, and the acquisition and possession of things often heighten the craving for more. "We want too much," remarked one contemporary observer of "the Victorian compulsion to purchase, accumulate, and display possessions," sensing that the "good life" was coming to mean "the 'goods life.'"[17] Though advertising often appealed to individual needs and wants, Gilded Age consumption was not indifferently individualistic, but was instead governed by evolving cultural standards of propriety in acquisition, display, and enjoyment (evidenced by the many popular publications dealing with home economics, etiquette, and furnishings) (Schlereth 1991, 131). Shaped in part by lingering, traditional norms regarding prosperity and conduct, and in part by new products and the advertising campaigns that connected them to idealized identities and lifestyles, practices and patterns of consumption took on significance comparable to and complementary of that of career (Ibid., 157–63; see also Lears 1994; Trachtenberg 2007, 137). Indeed, production and consumption were seen as two sides of the same coin, the two main aspects of lived economic agency. In accumulating wealth and consuming the goods and services it affords, the middle and upper classes doubly demonstrated their success and cultural elevation—whereas in earning and consuming comparatively little, the lower classes similarly underscored their subordinate cultural status. The achievement of success was one half of the story; the enjoyment of success was the other. Indeed, it was this linkage that inspired Twain and Warner to christen the postbellum decades the

Gilded Age. Everywhere, evidence of material prosperity was on new and bold display in patterns of conspicuous consumption.

As "the consumer economy moved to the center of the culture," it "creat[ed] the individual consumer as a creature of unfulfilled and endless desires" (Klein 2007, 183; Crocker 2007, 228). The spiraling, enervating demands of work life—more repetitive, tedious, and exhausting tasks, greater competition and job insecurity, and the multiplying stresses of the industrial marketplace—could be counterbalanced, in the short term at least, by purchases of goods and services. Yet consumption, like production, was a moving target—the ever-changing products of for sale in the marketplace promised endless self-transformation (Lears 2009, 7, 66). The Protestant preacher Josiah Strong captured the materialistic mentality of Gilded Age consumer culture by describing civilization as "the *creating of more and higher wants*" (Strong 1885, 14). Individual cultivation and collective progress were understood as inseparable from producing and consuming in new and better ways. The era saw the creation of new institutions adapted to this quest for elevation and identity. Department and chain stores not only served as public temples of individual consumption, along with national brands and mail-order catalogs; they sketched the lineaments of a national postbellum culture and salved the lingering wounds of sectionalism and war (Carlson 2007, 36–9; Klein 2007, 191; Schlereth 1991, 149–65). Especially, as the once seemingly limitless Western frontier was exhausted, the market became the new frontier where a better tomorrow could be sought.

The advent of postbellum consumer culture was also coincident with changing notions of domesticity and gender roles. As the household completed the transition from a unit of production to a unit of consumption that had begun with the market revolution, the roles of men and women became more similar in some ways and more differentiated in others. The prevalence of wage labor (including salaried middle-class occupations) made men more like women in terms of their economic dependence, a phenomenon amplified by the competition between the sexes for the same jobs in some industries (Stanley 1996, 84–5; see also Kessler-Harris 2003, Chaps 5 and 6). Similarly, incremental legal reforms afforded women (especially unmarried or widowed women) a greater degree of economic agency regarding property ownership and contracts (Stanley 1996, 81). Thus, women gained some economic ground in the Gilded Age, despite gaining little political ground (e.g., regarding suffrage). However, these changes did not release women from

norms and expectations regarding domestic life. The starker separation of work and home drew the boundaries between the proper spheres of men and women—the former bore (primary) responsibility for earning income and attending to public matters, while the latter bore (virtually exclusive) responsibility for maintaining the home as a well-appointed refuge from the relentless, heartless demands of the market[18] (Cordery 2007, 119–20; Lears 2009, 65; Sutherland 2000, 63). Ironically, even as women participated more consistently and variously in the market (both working and purchasing), the essentially masculine ideals of "laissez-faire individualism" in the Gilded Age notionally excluded women from their full achievement (Lears 2009, 101). This tension between masculine and feminine spheres and roles, in which women were gaining in real agency even as new norms denied its full exercise, is further borne out in the rising divorce rates throughout the postbellum decades (Schlereth 1991, 271, 280–1). Simultaneously, with the rise of central heating and lighting supplied by gas or electricity, domestic spaces became increasingly individuated, "dispers[ing] family circles" as "[c]entrifugal privacy replaced centripetal intimacy" (Ibid., 114). Thus, just as the industrial marketplace was exacting a greater physical and psychological toll on its participants, the domestic realm that was to be an escape from its demands proved to be isolating and draining in its own ways. Pinched between the demands of production and consumption, public life and domestic life, Gilded Age Americans found themselves striving as individuals to live up to ideals of success and failure that were frequently out of reach, and often proved evanescent even when achieved.

5.2.4 Law, Politics, and the Struggle for Order

> There is no rich class before the law, and there is no working class before the law […] We are all common citizens, having the same liberty as one another; and he who classifies men and seeks to antagonize them is an enemy of the country and of his kind […] God gave me my right to liberty when he gave me myself; and the business of government is to see that nobody takes it away from me unjustly—that is all.
>
> Henry Ward Beecher, "Plymouth Pulpit. The Strike and Its Lessons" (1877)

Beecher's words express a faith common in Gilded Age America, as well as a complex anxiety that continually threatened it. In respect

of its economic and social conditions, the Gilded Age was a paradoxical period for individualism. The modern corporate form enabled the creation of massive business firms across all sectors of the economy and the concentration of unprecedented amounts of capital and influence in the hands of a small elite. These enterprises were to the proprietary antebellum shop what the modern skyscraper was to Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond—transformations of long-familiar forms in terms of both logic and scale. At the same time, the inherited antebellum faith in individual agency and responsibility counseled that the reason for success or failure in the industrial marketplace was to be found (foremost, if not exclusively) in the character and choices of the individual. As postbellum culture became more materialistic and the rhythms and fortunes of life were influenced more deeply by the market, individuals found themselves living in a world of towering institutions and impersonal forces, yet were largely convinced that each person's fortunes were essentially self-made. Regardless of dramatic change, the individual was still responsible for navigating social and economic life on one's own, at one's own risk. At the same time, Gilded Age society was becoming more crowded, pluralistic, and disintegrated, depriving the individual of many of the familiar narratives and touchstones of identity and purpose that might have compensated for unsettling changes in other parts of life. The demographics, politics, and law of this period sketch a terrain that simultaneously invited individualism and made its full realization difficult if not impossible. Individualism was undeniably in the air, yet its complex and ambiguous promise seemed to be slipping beyond the reach of an ever larger portion of society, and the unrest and strife of the closing decades of the nineteenth century bore witness to the aspirations and frustrations of a growing share of American society that felt sacrificed for benefits and causes not their own.

The familiar foundations that anchored senses of self and of community were upset by many aspects of Gilded Age life, including the market and its promises of continual reinvention through career and consumption. Yet demographic shifts and urbanization provide especially salient illustrations of how the transformations undergone by the nation had equally, if not more, profound effects on the lives of individuals. By the eve of the Civil War, the USA was still a primarily white Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation in which minority groups (e.g., enslaved persons, free blacks, Native Americans, Francophones, Catholics, and insular religious communities such as the Amish) were more or less confined to particular

localities or sections of the country. Hence, while there were sizeable minority populations, few Americans would ever encounter the diversity that the census nominally recorded. In the postbellum decades, however, immigration and internal migration created a far more heterogeneous and comingled society. Between 1866 and 1900, over 13 million immigrants entered the USA, with almost half of that number entering the country in the decade between 1880 and 1890 (Daniels 2007, 76). Unlike antebellum immigration, which came mostly from northwestern Europe, postbellum immigration brought people from all parts Europe, and indeed all over the world, in substantial numbers, primarily for the purpose of seeking economic opportunity (Ibid., 78–81). The rapid infusion of ethnic and religious plurality unsettled many of the tacit assumptions about what it meant to be an American, and what it meant to be an individual capable of achieving self-reliance (in either the ordinary or Emersonian sense of the term).[19] Although new immigrants were often relegated to subordinate status by native-born Americans and immigrants of less recent vintage, the undeniable heterogeneity they introduced challenged the antebellum vision (epitomized by Indian removal and Manifest Destiny) of the USA as an empire of liberty for a select stock. Internal migration, from rural to urban areas and westward, compounded the destabilizing effects of plurality, leaving the market culture of work and consumption as the common denominator of an otherwise patchwork society (Klein 2007, 40).

Along with the pluralizing effects of immigration, the aggregating and concentrating effects of urbanization fundamentally transformed American society in the Gilded Age. Roughly 5% of Americans lived in cities in 1788, rising to about 20% at the outbreak of the Civil War, and by the end of the nineteenth century, nearly 40% (some thirty million people) lived in urban areas (Barrows 2007, 102–3). Progressing hand in hand with railroads and industrialization, urbanization was in some ways a process of connection. City dwellers found themselves sharing public as well as private spaces, developing their own fashions of speech and dress, their own (generally accelerating) paces of life, and new attractions and pastimes that rural life rarely offered (such as movie theaters, department stores, and professional sporting events) (Barth 1980, especially Chaps. 3–6). Recent immigrants and migrants often formed new island communities, and many neighborhoods were oriented around particular trades or industries, both of which forged bonds of commonality within a tempest of diversity and difference. Cities were also the domains of the new

political machines that traded electoral support for patronage and were often "the only effective social services agency" (especially for otherwise marginalized groups) in an era of generally limited or ineffective government (Klein 2007, 170). Urbanites thus found many ways to connect and collaborate in the bustling environs of Gilded Age cities.

Nonetheless, there were limits to the integrative functions of urbanization. The very dynamics of migration and economic change that fed the growth of cities also exerted a solvent force, making cities in many ways the apotheosis of dislocation and individualism, especially in its economic aspects (Schuyler 1986, 2; Wiebe 1967, 13). According to Alan Trachtenberg,

> [t]he great city was a marketplace, a site of trade and consumption. And its inhabitants engaged with each other on the basis of property, of what each 'possessed' […] As the domestic making of goods receded, city dwellers became more and more enmeshed in the market, more and more dependent on buying and selling, selling their labor in order to buy their sustenance; the network of personal relations, of family, friends, neighbors, comes to count for less in the maintenance of life than the impersonal transactions and abstract structures of the marketplace. (2007, 108, 121)

The bustling metropolis simultaneously realized the market and industrial revolutions. Its inhabitants lived and related to one another through the mediating, individuating influences of labor, consumption, and the impersonal medium of money through which the one was translated into the other. Atomized by the industrialized market, city dwellers easily fell into anonymity and isolation. Yet, as Gunter Barth has noted, these same urban arrangements

> generated a novel degree of personal freedom and allowed great numbers of people to live as individuals more fully than before. The chances for building a new life rested primarily on the possibility of responding immediately to the myriad opportunities to better one's lot. These openings in the loose fabric of society, which differed according to an individual's perception, ability, and luck, appeared seemingly everywhere […] Limited legal restraints left little too high to be aspired to, and little too low to be done. The urge to get ahead in life fostered an attitude that considered anything permissible that assured gain and regarded all activities that the law did not actually punish as acceptable. (1980, 16, 18)

Thus, while cities were in some respects the most regulated spaces of American life (by way of ordinances dealing with trades and employment as well as public health, safety, and morals), and governed by the most ambitious governments of the era, their unique conditions afforded expansive opportunities of individual self-direction and self-making. Despite the legal as well as informal expectations to "fit in" to the ways of city life, once basic fluencies of urban conduct were achieved, each individual was freer than perhaps anywhere else to do whatever one would (Lears 2009, 256). The atomization of city life made it easier for the individual to disappear into the bustling crowds, pursuing one's own ends to the utmost of one's own resources and abilities.

The self-conscious individualism of the Gilded Age, its striving ethic of individual opportunity and self-making, existed in marked tension with the realities of class. The ideal of a classless society, willfully opposed to the feudal history of Europe, can be found in all of the preceding periods of American history (Ibid., 78). One finds it in the dueling visions of antebellum Democrats and Whigs that both proclaimed self-improvement unrestrained by the contingencies of one's starting place in society, and "the ideology of upward mobility" through free labor that was a linchpin of the tenuous union coalition during the Civil War (McPherson 1988, 28, 170–201). Yet by the time that industrial capitalism's effects were being realized in the postbellum years, "loyalty to the classless republic was increasingly out of phase with common perceptions of social reality"—amid the bewildering changes felt in nearly every domain of life many looked, perhaps reluctantly, to the concept of class to make sense of society and their respective place within it (Blumin 1989, 286; Wiebe 1967, 111). Although the lines of class were being drawn all across society (e.g., in patterns of class-segregating suburbanization and the use of vagrancy laws to police the poor) and the lower class was becoming the largest portion thereof, class-consciousness arguably took deepest root in the emerging postbellum middle class (Blumin 1989, 275; Stanley 1992, 1266–7). Though the middling sorts remained nearly as diverse as they had been in the antebellum period, the awareness or self-identification of being middle class achieved a new and lasting potency (Wiebe 1967, 112–3). Economic change was generating a "dramatic expansion of the middle class" as new armies of clerks, technicians, foremen, and managers joined and bolstered the thinning ranks of self-employed artisans and shopkeepers (Klein 2007, 143). Those who found themselves in this expanding niche of industrial society likewise found themselves

at the epicenter of Gilded Age materialism and consumerism; possessed of the means to taste the finer fruits of mass production, they became the favored targets of advertising that sought to encourage, and a culture of etiquette and propriety aimed at disciplining, their expanding and imaginative appetites (e.g., Campbell 1987, 36–95). It was during the closing decades of the nineteenth century that such a middle-class existence became a central ideal of American life, something to which the vast majority aspired and which became the repository of common notions of decent, deserved prosperity.

Yet the middle-class ideal proved elusive for most Americans. Even as millions attained some share of the comfort and respectability it promised, a far greater number toiled well below it. The phenomenal growth in the postbellum economy was not only uneven in its distribution, in good times as well as hard times, it also generated structural conditions that weighed especially heavily upon wage laborers in the lower class. The era's optimistic individualism counseled uplift through self-denial and diligence, but, as Jackson Lears has suggested,

> for many working-class Americans during the 1870s and 1880s, stoical resignation became impossible. The Gilded Age saw a series of massive nationwide strikes that ended up as pitched battles between labor and capital […] Civil war gave way to class war. (2009, 79)

A potent feature of this situation was the rise of organized labor in the late nineteenth century to levels of scale and organization far beyond anything achieved by antebellum workingmen's parties. At the same time that the corporate form was enabling business firms to achieve unparalleled scale and power, labor attempted to harness the same organizational tools to protect workers against capital, seeking "security through solidarity" (Ibid., 73; Klein 2007, 137; Margo 1996, 235–8; Sutherland 2000, 183). The pitched and often bloody battles between organized capital and organized labor set the agenda for much Gilded Age law and politics, and it created a psychological need (especially in the middle and upper classes) for physical and intellectual defenses of the new industrial capitalist order. The expansion of the coercive apparatus of the modern American state was prompted in no small part by the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the Haymarket Riot of 1886, the Homestead Strike against Carnegie Steel in 1892, and the nationwide Pullman Strike of 1894, while public intellectuals such as Henry Ward Beecher and

William Graham Sumner offered imposing apologies for the industrial market order that state power was being mobilized to protect (Foner 2014, 583–5; Lears 2009, 80–5; Schlereth 1991, 59; Wiebe 1967, 79). The mobilization of organized labor, socialist political parties, and agrarian populism, as well the widespread hysteria over anarchism, inspired "apocalyptic visions" of the social fabric violently coming apart (Lears 2009, 79–80).

These anxieties were manifest in the politics and law of the Gilded Age, which generally reflected the conservative ideological commitments of *laissez-faire*, even as these proved inadequate to the growing problems of industrial society (Fine 1956, 24). Whether prompted by skepticism or by optimistic confidence, the economic and social policy of the period broke with "the public, local, and legal regulatory tradition" that had predominated in the USA throughout the first sixty years of the century, and which had set limits to economic agency for a variety of ostensibly public purposes (Novak 1996, 17; see also Fine 1956, 23). Despite this ready (if simple) ideological label, the politics of the period are commonly remembered for their self-serving ambition and intellectual vacuity. The Englishman James Bryce characterized Gilded Age politics as the most moribund in American history, and in doing so, he set the tone for how generations that followed would remember the era.

> Neither party has […] any clean-cut principles, any distinctive tenets. Both have traditions. Both claim to have tendencies. Both have certainly war cries, organizations, interests enlisted in their support. But those interests are in the main the interests of getting or keeping the patronage of the government. Distinctive tenets and policies, points of political doctrine and points of political practice, have all but vanished […] All has been lost, except office or the hope of it.[20] (Bryce 1888/1995, 699)

While many historians have since revised Bryce's dour assessment, it nonetheless identifies the strange combination of apparent ideological homogeneity and devout partisanship in postbellum politics. Notwithstanding their divergent views on tariff policy, both the Democratic and Republican parties were essentially conservative and probusiness, and in this, they tended to reflect the larger (yet still demographically narrow) electorate (Calhoun 2007, 242, 246; Santis 1963, 553–4). The craving for progress and stability transcended party lines, and in the age of Social Darwinism, bootstrapping individualism, and

corporate capitalism, it appeared intuitive to many Americans that the path to a better tomorrow led through the unregulated industrial marketplace (McCloskey 1964, 1–21; Santis 1963, 554). Whether in spite of this substantial consensus or because of it, postbellum politics were marked by "intense partisanship and massive political indifference"—party identification gave isolated economic agents a sense of commonality and orientation in a volatile society; yet outside of the patronage structures of local party machines, ordinary individuals had little involvement in politics other than episodic and typically straight-ticket voting (Wiebe 1967, 27).

Coupled with a nearly unbroken period of divided government between 1875 and 1897, the predominantly conservative, *laissez-faire* political climate produced few lasting responses to the real problems of industrial society. Apart from initial reforms of the civil service and mostly ineffective attempts to curb the influence of monopolies, both of which nominally spoke to worries over the growing power of money, Democrats and Republicans spent much of their time arguing over how best to stay out of the way of economic growth and the magnates who were ostensibly responsible for it (Calhoun 2007, 249; Lears 2009, 168). For this reason, Richard Hofstadter remarked that "[t]here is no other period in the nation's history when politics seems so completely dwarfed by economic changes, none in which the life of the country rests so completely in the hands of the industrial entrepreneur" (Hofstadter 1989, 213). Perhaps, the one undisputed point of intellectual agreement in politics (which often collapsed back into stalemate when it came to practice) was opposition to so-called class legislation or partial legislation, which stood for nearly any form of governmental intervention into the life of society that tried to improve the conditions or regulate the conduct of some particular group, occupation, or class (Gillman 1993, 7–15; McCloskey 1964, 22–3). "A fair field and no favor," as President Grover Cleveland once put it.[21] Imbibing the competitive, individualistic worldview of the era, most Americans, and certainly most of their elected representatives, believed that inequalities were the inevitable result of striving and that artificially lifting one person up meant artificially holding another down. Thus, while the Gilded Age was a period of state building (at the federal level) and not totally devoid of legislation aimed at the general welfare (e.g., workplace safety regulations or regulations of the rates charged by grain elevators), these were the anomalies achieved

by swimming against the prevailing intellectual current (e.g., Pearson 2015b; Skowronek 1982).

Furthermore, the regulatory achievements of politicians at national, state, and local levels were often undermined later by the courts, especially by the US Supreme Court from the 1880s to the 1910s, under the intellectual leadership of Justices Stephen J. Field and Rufus Peckham, and Chief Justice Melville Fuller (Gillman 1993, 61–85). The legal profession in the Gilded Age, both bench and bar, was arguably even more conservative than the electorate or the average politician, and this mentality bore fruit in a consistent valorization of state neutrality and market autonomy in the face of the initial cries for progressive, remedial social legislation (Fine 1956, 139). The momentous (and often lasting) decisions from this period regularly pushed back against innovative attempts to cope with the externalities of the postbellum economic and social order. Much of the constitutional jurisprudence revolved around the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses Fourteenth Amendment, and whether these authorized or prohibited state intervention on behalf of individual rights. In *The Civil Rights Cases* (1883) and again in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court denied the proposition that the Equal Protection Clause either permitted or required state action to remedy infringement of individual civil rights by private actors.[22] In *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad Co.* (1886), the reporter's syllabus of the case (which was cited in later cases as if it were part of the decision itself) declared that "corporations are persons within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment," and thus entitled to many of the rights of natural persons.[23] Finally, in *Allgeyer v. Louisiana* (1897) and *Lochner v. New York* (1905), the Court interpreted the Due Process Clause as a barrier to the traditional regulatory powers of the states and localities, using it to vindicate the so-called liberty of contract against attempts (however popular or empirically needful) to restrict the market for the sake of public welfare.[24] Though diverse in their factual details and legal arguments, these cases held a common implication. In their wake, the postbellum notion of equal rights and liberties under the law was interpreted to mean equal individual rights and liberties to seek economic self-improvement without governmental hindrance or benefit, with the fateful qualification that corporations (save unions, which were often treated as criminal conspiracies) enjoyed these constitutional blessings as well. Thus, the Gilded Age Supreme Court likewise waged war against anything that smacked of class legislation, defending a narrow

doctrine of individualism against the rising tide of conditions and policies that were too big to be either caused or addressed by discrete individual action.

5.3 Crises of Individualism and the Market

The undeniable success of the market in postbellum America ramified throughout the entire fabric of society. Industrialization and corporatization helped to transform an ascendant economic system into a truly ubiquitous and unavoidable feature of daily life and consciousness. Producing, trading, and consuming could scarcely escape its touch, while its imperatives and temptations defined the horizons of the new American dream of pecuniary success and the respectability it could bring. At the heart of this dream was an individualism that had been foreshadowed in antebellum culture, with its spirit of voluntarism and self-making, but that could only mature under Gilded Age social and economic conditions. Not until the market had industrialized, corporatized, and reached to the farthest frontiers of the continent and the most intimate spaces of the home, could the general ideal of self-culture be given an imperiously materialistic cast. Opportunities to enjoy at least part of this culture of individual self-advancement were also within the reach of millions for whom this had not been possible before the Civil War, including women, persons of color, and new immigrants. No wonder, then, that the boosters of industrial society promised a brighter future for all who earnestly pursued what the market made possible.

However, the conditions and the animating logics of the industrial market and the individualism adapted to it existed in tension with one another. Millions of diligent market participants struggled to keep their heads above water, assured that the new scale and scope of economic life did not change the immutable fact that each individual received according to his or her desert, so long as the natural workings of striving and competition were not subjected to tampering. The signs of distress were undeniable, and not merely during the protracted economic crises of 1873 and 1893. Yet the common faith in individual economic agency was still robust and viable. Even as organized labor struggled to win a greater share of economic prosperity, it traded, however implicitly, upon many of the underlying individualistic assumptions of Gilded Age culture: that individual liberty of contract was inviolable (but could only be safeguarded by collective action), that each person should be able to advance

by individual effort (without being obstructed by the entrenched interests of capital), and that consumption was an essential measure of one's well-being and one's standing as a member of industrial society. Thus, even as class war seemed nigh, both armies laid claim to a shared body of principles regarding individual economic self-improvement. This common ground did not, however, assuage the fears of those who had gained (or stood yet to gain) the most from the progress of economic growth. What the emergent order needed was capable apologists who could offer compelling justifications of industrial society and its economic foundations, articulated in terms that appealed to the sensibilities and aspirations common to most Gilded Age Americans. Though many politicians, academics, clerics, and popular writers took up this task, few were as prominent as William Graham Sumner.

Notes

1. On sharecropping, see Ransom and Sutch (1977); Winters 1988.
2. The typical middling railroad of the 1890s employed nearly as many persons as the entire federal government, including the armed forces (Klein 2007, 134).
3. Quote taken from an 1883 piece in the *Omaha Daily Republican*, quoted in Schlereth (1991), 22.
4. A more cautious and balanced estimate would be to say that it was an age in which religion was under increasing strain, in which traditional religious faith was losing ground on some fronts and gaining ground on others. Even as materialistic and secular worldviews rose to greater prominence, some religions or sects (e.g., Roman Catholics) were faring better than others (e.g., Protestants of British provenance) (See Carter 1971). Henry Ward Beecher, perhaps the most famous preacher of the late nineteenth century, exemplifies the attempts to adapt and accommodate the stern messages of the American Protestant tradition to the Gilded Age fixation upon economic opportunity and success (Lears 2009, 81).
5. The line is from Coolidge's "Address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors," quoted in Klein (2007), 193.
6. It was in 1850 that the census took up the ambitious task of recording every member of every household, including children and slaves.
7. James O'Connell, quoted in Lears (2009), 262.
8. This holds more or less true across all of the many social and political thinkers of the era that took up the basic premises of Social Darwinism, from individualistic liberals and eugenicists like Spencer and Francis

Galton to collectivist anarchists like Pyotr Kropotkin. See also Claeys (2000), 228–9; Hawkins (1997), 120–2.

9. For an extensive discussion that distinguishes the Panics of 1873 and 1893 in terms of their causes, and that attributes the Panic of 1893 (perhaps too simply) to unwise deviation from a tightly controlled gold standard, see Lauck (1907), especially 63–122.
10. In both the Panic of 1873 and of 1893, unemployment rates are estimated to have grown to more than sixteen percent (Arnesen 2007, 56).
11. John William Draper [c. 1868–70], quoted in Lukes (1973), 29.
12. The psychological ailment that haunted the period was "neurasthenia," a general disorder characterized by "anxiety, irritability, nameless fears, listlessness, loss of will" (Lears 2009, 68).
13. On the activities of antebellum federal, state, and local governments, see Gillman 1993, 22–60 and Novak 1996.
14. This was not merely the result of changing views of economic life, but was also substantially shaped by the Whig-Republican free labor ideology that developed in opposition to slavery and Southern attempts to expand its territorial scope.
15. Beyond the postbellum competition between white, black, and immigrant men for employment, this trend was further amplified by the growing employment of both women and children in industrial manufactures (e.g., textiles) at wages which men typically would not accept (Kessler-Harris 2003, 142–8; Pearson 2015a, 1148).
16. For an example of contemporary racial/civilizational rhetoric, see Strong 1885, especially 159–80.
17. Lears 2009, 68 (quoting a contributor to an 1886 issue of *Good Housekeeping*); Schlereth 1991, 121, 141.
18. This market/home distinction served to legitimize the amorality or immorality of the market by providing an apparent balance or corrective, assuaging fears that market participation would have a cumulative corrupting effect. Good homemakers were supposed to maintain the moral character of industrial society *and* train the next generation to participate in it, despite enjoying a largely second-class place within the social order.
19. Though not a Gilded Age invention, nativism was a common cultural and political stance throughout the closing decades of the nineteenth century, continuing until after World War I (Daniels 2007, 89–93).
20. For a similar, but somewhat more complex assessment, see Hofstadter 1989, 213–38.
21. Quoted in Hofstadter (1989), 235.
22. 109 U.S. 3 (1883); 163 U.S. 537.
23. 118 U.S. 394 (1886), 396.
24. 165 U.S. 578 (1897); 198 U.S. 45 (1905).

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CHAPTER 6

Sumner and Natural Struggle: Individualism Through the Market

The year 1882 may be used to mark the closing of one intellectual epoch in America and the opening of another. Emerson's death in that year underscored the waning of ideas born of antebellum conditions and aspirations, while Herbert Spencer's highly publicized trip to America signaled the waxing of ideas tailored to the conditions and sensibilities of the Gilded Age. Widely regarded by postbellum American intellectuals as "the most important living philosopher," Spencer's naturalistic, evolutionary social and political theory was "conceived in and dedicated to an age of steel and steam engines, competition, exploitation, and struggle" (Breslau 2007, 46; Hofstadter 1992, 35). It was on this trip that Spencer met one of his early and, in turn, most influential admirers, the Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910). The meeting may be fruitfully imagined as the anointing of a new exponent charged with articulating an individualism suited to the conditions of American industrial society.

The son of an immigrant mechanic from Lancashire, who had been displaced by the economic transformations of the early market and industrial revolutions in England, Sumner's own character, and intellectual trajectory were deeply shaped by his father's sober, diligent, self-supporting personal ethic (Curtis 1981, 13–4, 21). Indeed, Sumner spent much of his career valorizing the unwavering, uncomplaining "Forgotten Man" whose archetype his father arguably supplied. After inauspicious lower middle-class beginnings, in which the financial aid of family friends was required to pay for his education, the course of his life resembles

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Emerson's in several significant ways. Like Emerson, Sumner was educated for the Protestant clergy, though at Yale College, a deeply conservative institution in the 1850s and 1860s, followed by graduate study at Geneva, Göttingen, and Oxford. His service to the church was also brief. After only 3 years as an Episcopal minister, he returned to Yale in 1872 to assume the newly created chair of political and social science, where he remained until his death. In this post-clerical position, he rose to the prominence that defined his adult life, both as a forceful and revered educator on campus (whose fond students included William Howard Taft) and as a widely read public intellectual. All but forgotten today, Sumner became to Gilded Age America much what Emerson was to antebellum America—a nationally recognized proponent of an individualism that spoke squarely to the promise and anxieties of the times.[1]

As sketched in the previous chapter, postbellum America was the scene of transformations as dramatic as the Civil War itself, and out of the shadow of Appomattox, there emerged a new USA: conclusively forged into a single nation, yet peopled by an ever diversifying profusion of individual strivers seeking their own fortunes in an industrializing, urbanizing, and rapidly changing society. In nearly every corner of life in the still expanding country, Americans pushed the antebellum faith in self-improvement toward ever more material expressions. As Robert McCloskey put it, with only slight exaggeration, the gospel of the Gilded Age "needed its Saint Paul; it was not self-executing […] What was required was a man endowed by temperament and capacity to preach the new faith: one whose moral predispositions were soundly conservative, yet who disclaimed all moral predispositions; one who rightfully wore the mantle of the scholar, yet shared the simple materialism of his less-schooled contemporaries; one who would fight for what he believed like a religious zealot, yet not surrender to the sentimentality religion sometimes begets" (1964, 30). By constitution and cultivation, Sumner was ideally suited and inclined to fulfill this role. He was a one-time preacher turned career academic in an age in which the "scientific spirit" was displacing traditional intellectual authorities and "the pulpit was giving way to the lectern as a major forum for the discussion of public questions."[2] (Breslau 2007, 47; Curtis 1981, 41) His ideas were widely disseminated through lectures and, above all, published essays in newspapers and magazines in which he aimed at definitive answers to momentous questions of social order and individual ethics. Compared to Emerson and Thoreau, his writings are both more systematic and (perhaps as a

consequence) of scant literary value. He was a prolific and often repetitive writer, with many works substantially borrowing from and overlapping with one another, generally hammering away at a handful of central themes, such as the unavoidable striving of human existence, the complexity of society, and the importance of individual responsibility. A determined and at times visionary social scientist Sumner had a Burkean disdain for philosophical abstractions and did much to establish the discipline of sociology in America. Both in the classroom and in his published works, he was a skilled if not subtle polemicist—even essays purportedly meant to dispassionately define the matter and form of sociology brim with ethical, political, and economic criticisms and prescriptions, interventions into the great debates of the period.[3] (Curtis 1981, 48)

The course of his adult life traces a gradual conversion from a stern, moralistic Protestantism to naturalistic social science, both of which supplied him with elements of a strict and uncompromising frame for understanding human life and orienting human action. Ultimately, however, naturalism obscured all but the outlines of Christian doctrine, all but its craving for a stable center of moral certainty. In his mature works, we find a prophet of striving and cold, ineluctable laws rather than predestination or free will, of self-help rather than altruism, and of impersonal social organization and competition rather than mutuality and community. As the discussion that follows aims in part to show, Sumner attempts, perhaps despite himself, to derive a normative vision from what he took to be empirical fact and casts his positive doctrine of individualism in terms meant to fit individual character, aspiration, and action to the hard contours of modern life. Individualism, in short, becomes a doctrine of successfully coping with a given world more than a doctrine of protean self-making. Though the language of Emerson and Thoreau did not fade entirely in the Gilded Age, their ideals came to look idealistic and even trivial in Sumner's world.

Understanding of Sumner's individualism requires, first, an understanding of the naturalistic worldview that is the background for all he says about individuals and societies. What the human world is necessarily like and how individuals must necessarily get on in it are, for him, the unavoidable yet often neglected starting point of all genuine ethical, social, and political inquiry. In the following section, I sketch this worldview and how it reflects several intellectual themes common to the Victorian era. I then explore, in the subsequent section, Sumner's doctrine of individualism and its overt, abiding appeals to what he considers

to be the ineluctable facts of life in an industrial society. Unlike Emerson, who seeks to reconcile individuality with the rise of the market, and Thoreau, who would turn the potency of individual imagination and agency against it, Sumner presents economic self-help via market participation as the first and most valuable employment of individual agency. His avowed middle-class ethic of diligence and self-support robustly endorses the market system, purportedly harmonizing individual character and virtue with the ubiquitous impersonal economic and social forces that were in evidence throughout Gilded Age America.

6.1 "A Sound and Natural Social Order"

> Everything in nature has its laws […] All disobedience to these dictates, all transgression, produces its own punishment. Nature will be obeyed […] As with man individually, so with man socially.
>
> Herbert Spencer, *The Proper Sphere of Government* (1843)

Though Sumner rarely acknowledged intellectual debts or kinship in his writings, several are nonetheless readily apparent. Written when Sumner was only 3 years old, the above lines would be at home in most of the works he composed during his long tenure at Yale. Even more than the thought of Emerson or Thoreau reflected the intersection of liberal Protestantism and Romanticism, Sumner's thought reflected the intersection classical political economy and evolutionary science. Notwithstanding his fertility of mind, rhetorical skill, and important contributions to early sociology, he was not an especially original thinker. His systematic vision is "a reflection rather than [a] source of popular idea patterns," built largely of borrowed ideas, and he typically follows inherited premises to only marginally novel conclusions (McCloskey 1964, 68). What makes his ideas of lasting interest is that they are carefully tailored to the conditions, transformations, and dislocations of Gilded Age America and have nonetheless "become a standard feature of the folklore of individualism" in American culture (Hofstadter 1992, 50). In his own day and since he has commonly been labeled a "Social Darwinist," yet the label is somewhat misleading in its narrowest and most literal sense (Bannister 1979, 98–113). Apart from never embracing the term, the influence of the Darwinian theory of biological evolution upon his intellectual development merely adds ornamentation

to the earlier and deeper influence of Thomas Robert Malthus, David Ricardo, and Herbert Spencer (Curtis 1981, 72). Indeed, the above quoted words from Spencer echo throughout nearly all of Sumner's writings from the 1880s onward. These debts inform the naturalistic worldview within which his theory of society and doctrine of individualism are situated.

6.1.1 The Struggle for Existence

The cornerstone of Sumner's worldview is the proposition (which he believed to be abundantly validated both by history and by contemporary observation) that every living thing must strive to secure the means of its own continued existence. While he regarded this "law" or "fact" of nature to be binding upon all forms of life, his emphasis is upon what it portends for human beings. In the essay variously titled "Socialism" or "The Challenge of Facts" and dated to around 1880,[4] Sumner claims:

> Man is born under the necessity of sustaining the existence he has received by an onerous struggle against nature, both to win what is essential to his life and to ward off what is prejudicial to it. He is born under a burden and a necessity. Nature holds what is essential to him, but she offers nothing gratuitously. He may win for his use what she holds, if he can. Only the most meager and inadequate supply for human needs can be obtained directly from nature […] For any real satisfaction, labor is necessary to fit the products of nature for human use. In this struggle every individual is under the pressure of the necessities for food, clothing, shelter, fuel, and every individual brings with him more or less energy for the conflict necessary to supply his needs. The relation, therefore, between each man's needs and each man's energy, or "individualism," is the first fact of human life. (1992, 159)

There are several important aspects to this characterization of the basic lot of human beings, which illustrate both the character and the depth of Sumner's individualistic commitments.

First, Sumner understands human existence to be intractably agonistic.[5] The world contains the resources required to sustain ourselves, minimally and even in comfort or luxury, but the necessaries of life are not awaiting the effortless or limitless taking. Rather, the human condition is characterized by the unending struggle to meet the fixed requirements of our continued existence. In the first instance, this struggle is

against nature itself, from whom the individual must win the means of subsistence as if from another person. Sumner's repeated invocations and discussions of the struggle for existence reflect two different senses of scarcity long familiar to political economists. On the one hand, we must struggle for existence because the means of our continued survival are chronically scarce in the sense that we do not always and everywhere encounter ample amounts of things that satisfy our several needs. On the other hand, the struggle for existence is also framed by bouts of acute scarcity, caused by factors such as drought and relative overpopulation. Thus, nature keeps a variously miserly grip on the things needful for our survival. Earlier in his life, Sumner may have regarded these elements of our condition as divinely ordained, but by the 1880s he regarded them merely as "harsh facts" of the natural world which we must "face […] squarely" (Ibid., 159).

Second, this natural struggle is necessarily individual. Though he asserts that "women (mothers) and children have special disabilities" which require men to wage much of the struggle for them, he maintains throughout his diverse writings that each individual is charged with the natural obligation to satisfy their own needs by their own efforts.[6] (Ibid.) When one's efforts are inadequate to the task, nature withholds the resources one seeks. Sumner takes it as self-evident and uncontroversially true that apart from the special relations of the nuclear family, each must carry the burden of their own existence entirely by their own efforts and at their own risk. What is more he offers this as a simple observation of how things in fact are—he carefully avoids talk of natural law or natural rights (in the moralistic sense that one finds, say, in the works of Thomas Aquinas or John Locke) to frame this image of life. More in the spirit of Thomas Hobbes, he believes it to be a brute fact of the world that as it is my stomach that is empty it is my hand which must fill it. Such descriptive, methodological individualism is, in at least this minimal sense, as much a feature of the natural world as are gravity or mortality, and from this "first fact of human life" Sumner ultimately derives his normative doctrine.

Third, both momentary and (especially) continued successes in the struggle for existence depend upon the improving power of labor. All but the meanest fruits of nature require deliberate effort both to claim them (e.g., picking the apple) and to render them usable to satisfy our needs (e.g., fashioning the tree into a shelter). In the struggle for existence, each individual is under the impersonal and unyielding imperative

to live by the sweat of one's own brow, as if the scientific laws of nature echoed the biblical story of the Fall, with which Sumner was well familiar. Though Sumner later puts this notion to heroic service in his theory of society and normative doctrine of individualism, at bottom he regards labor as the common yet individual burden of humanity.

Sumner's rendering of these essential features of human existence, especially vis-à-vis nature, is in marked contrast to the ideas of both Emerson and Thoreau. All three of course understand individual agency and striving as elemental facts of our condition. Emerson, especially in the essays "Power" and "Fate," portrays the enactment of self-reliance in terms of mastery, of imposing oneself upon the world. Yet this is quite different from the idea of a desperate struggle to which we are, as it were, condemned. For Sumner, the struggle against nature is inevitable and intractable, and success in it merely wins the individual the opportunity to face down necessity another day, whereas Emerson's account of self-assertion over nature is an account of ennobling striving that is "a sharing of the nature of the world" rather than a struggle of life or death against it (Emerson 1983, 972). What he depicts throughout *The Conduct of Life*, for instance, is not the drudgery in which all are mired but the self-improvement to which all are beckoned by their own genius.

Even more starkly opposed, Thoreau would regard Sumner's ideas of natural struggle against nature and inevitably living by daily toil much as Rousseau regarded Hobbes's account of life in the state of nature—an attempt to pass off as natural and necessary a relationship that arises contingently under particular social conditions. Insisting that "to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely," Thoreau depicts the individual's relation to nature as one of respect and potential mutuality or even harmony rather than of desperate, diurnal robbery (Thoreau 1854/1992, 48). His admiration of wildness and his critiques of the grasping materialism of market culture illustrate a fundamentally different attitude toward both nature and survival, one that regards our encounters with nature as pastimes if we but know how to enjoy them as such. Similarly, Sumner's account of labor as an unyielding necessity rings hollow in comparison with Emerson and Thoreau's respective treatments of vocation, and Thoreau's further treatment of the profound satisfactions of minding one's business even if it be the business of hoeing beans or picking huckleberries. Seeing his neighbors desperately toiling just as Sumner says they must, Thoreau demurs: "The life which men praise and regard as success is but one kind.

Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of others?" (Ibid., 12) Thus, while all three start from the sense that we exist as individuals, and must strive as individuals, the character and conditions of that striving are quite different between them. What Emerson and Thoreau regard as the invitation to self-cultivation Sumner regards as a neutral imperative to labor against nature or perish.

Sumner's view hearkens most directly to his elder contemporary Spencer, who in *The Man versus The State* (1884) declared it a natural law "that a creature not energetic enough to maintain itself must die," its death being the fault of nothing but the inadequacy of its own constitution and action to the circumstances[7] (1994, 61–175, quote from 81). As individuals contending against a natural world that treats all with equal disregard, those who succeed in the struggle for existence prove themselves to be well suited to that struggle. Here is the first instance of a (weak) normative claim derived from an empirical claim—those who survive by their individual endeavors deserve to survive. What, if not success, proves both aptness to a task and entitlement to its fruits? Throughout much of the 1880s, Sumner adopted Spencerian language of "the survival of the fittest" to capture this sense of adequacy, later changing the idiom but not the content of his claims after being tarred with Spencerian and Social Darwinist brushes by progressive critics such as Henry Demarest Lloyd. Yet Sumner, like Spencer, is ultimately interested not in the isolated strivings of solitary individuals against impersonal nature, but in how individuals strive alongside and against one another in society; for him the individual struggle for existence is significant primarily as a basis for understanding and evaluating human conduct in society and the institutions that bear upon such conduct.

6.1.2 The Competition of Life

Under conditions of human plurality—that is, social conditions—struggle against nature becomes competition among strivers.[8] Though solitary individuals need only contend against nature for the means of survival, in even the most primitive social settings individuals must simultaneously contend against other persons who are themselves seeking the means of their survival. Sumner believes that this fact of the human condition is commonly the subject of misunderstanding and deliberate misrepresentation (e.g., by socialists and humanitarian reformers), and he believes it falls to the social scientist to set the matter straight. His characterization of what he

calls "the competition of life" is ultimately rooted in the ideas of Spencer, Malthus, and Darwin.

With Spencer, Sumner shares the faith that social phenomena are continuous with biological phenomena and that the "laws" governing both are equally objective and essentially related. As he writes in "Sociology" (1881):

> Life in society is the life of a human society on this earth. Its elementary conditions are set by the nature of human beings and the nature of the earth. We have already become familiar, in biology, with the transcendent importance of the fact that life on earth must be maintained by a struggle against nature, and also by a competition with other forms of life. In the latter fact biology and sociology touch. Sociology is a science which deals with one range of phenomena produced by the struggle for existence, while biology deals with another. The forces are the same, acting on different fields and under different conditions. The sciences are truly cognate. (Sumner 1992, 189; see also Spencer 1994, 157)

Both the struggle against nature and the competition against others are conducted under the same conditions and are subject to the same basic laws. Thus, Sumner, like Spencer, believes that the biological necessity of striving individually for survival carries over into society, and generates both the most basic fact and the inescapable normative frame of social life.

The laws that govern this competition illustrate Sumner's debts to Malthus. He concurs with Malthus that population naturally expands to the boundary set by the limitations of the food supply (the "law of population"), and that rates of population growth invariably outpace rates of food production because an increase in labor does not generate a proportionate increase in the food supply (the "law of diminishing returns") (Sumner 1992, 188). Human beings are fated to competition against one another because supplies of land and food are finite, and what we may extract from them is also finite. To survive, we must all strive to satisfy our needs from a limited, and at times inadequate, pool of resources. Thus, even in advanced and peaceful societies, we invariably meet one another as competitors.

This Malthusian notion becomes a doctrine of the survival of the fittest with the incorporation of the evolutionary theories Sumner took from Spencer and Darwin.[9] Like Spencer specifically, Sumner believes

that firm, scientifically ascertainable laws of nature govern both individual struggle and social competition. Again and again, throughout a wide range of works, he appeals to a natural law of equilibrium. In one of its more direct formulations, Sumner announces it thus: "There is no such thing on this earth as something for nothing […] The law of the conservation of energy is not simply a law of physics; it is a law of the whole moral universe," which is to say, a law always and everywhere applicable to biological organisms, including ourselves (Ibid., 206). This law of conservation is what steers natural agonism under conditions of scarcity toward the survival of the fittest as Spencer and Sumner understand it. If nature is a closed system containing finite resources and operating according to fixed laws, and if each individual is compelled by equally fixed laws to sustain herself through a struggle against nature and a competition with other persons, it follows, they believe, that those who most succeed are those with the attributes and actions best suited to the objective conditions of life in the time and place where they find themselves (Curtis 1981, 84). As a rule, the fittest survive, a view that reflected the Gilded Age shift in "[i]dioms of self-justification […] from moralism to meritocracy" (Lears 2009, 297). However, it is not yet clear exactly what this means for Sumner, especially how this empirical claim bears normatively upon society and how it shapes and orients his individualism.

Like many mid- and late nineteenth-century thinkers who sought to apply purportedly scientific methods and insights to human affairs (from Spencer and Darwin to Engels and Marx), Sumner views human conduct through the lens of "scientific laws" that purport to both explain and predict. He regards competition as a constant of human conduct, as well as the fundamental engine of human development and progress, both individual and social. "Competition develops all powers that exist according to their measure and degree. The more intense competition is, the more thoroughly are all the forces developed" (Sumner 1914a, 67). This may be regarded as a process of both testing and training. In principle, success in every contest goes to the fittest, the person objectively best suited to prevail, whose fitness is honed by the ordeal. (The same can be said of competition between groups, though even here the underlying reality is individual competition waged on a larger and more elaborate scale.) However, "fittest" and "fitness" are relative, historically situated terms and thus moving targets. As social organization becomes more advanced, and competition shifts from simple contests over things that directly satisfy needs (e.g., apples from the apple tree) to highly

structured and institutionally mediated contests over things valuable as indirect means to such satisfaction (e.g., land or wages), the characteristics that constitute fitness clearly change. The physically strongest may be best suited to a simple competition to claim subsistence from nature, but in the context of, say, a market economy, quite different qualities might equip one to prevail. Indeed, Sumner regarded it as one of the virtues of the modern market system that it typically renders the competition of life "so mild that men are hardly conscious of it."[10] (Ibid., 376) Yet even if competition had been comparatively tamed in Victorian America, the stakes, properly understood, were still life and death, and he believed that those who were objectively unsuited to success under modern conditions would ultimately get what they deserved. His watery faith in social progress (cast in essentially material, economic terms tempered by the more pessimistic views of Malthus and Ricardo) is underwritten by a firm naturalistic faith that "[v]ice is its own curse. If we let nature alone, she cures vice by the most frightful penalties [and] sets up her processes of dissolution to remove whatever is a failure in its line" (Sumner 1992, 211–2). At least, this is the natural course of things, according to the law of conservation he invokes. As I will explore in the next section, much of Sumner's social and political writings are devoted in some significant part to defending institutional arrangements that leave this competition unbiased by outside agendas and influences (such as state welfare programs or industrial strikes) and thus allow nature to reward the fit and work away at the unfit. I shall also leave it to that discussion to consider whether he, like Spencer, treats survival of the fittest as both an empirical and normative law of nature. Several commentators have suggested that, apart from overtly normative phraseology limited to writings between 1879 and 1884, Sumner's interpretation is primarily empirical (Bannister 1979, 104–13; Curtis 1981, 82–7). Even if that be so, his accounts of both the struggle for existence and the competition of life echo throughout all nearly all of his works after 1873.

6.1.3 The Social Organism

Sumner often invokes the idea of society as an organism with individuals (and perhaps associations, institutions, and classes) as its component organs. This is somewhat problematic, however, because he never quite explains what he means by this. As the foregoing makes clear, he ascribes existential priority to individuals; it is thus not out of place to ask in what

way these together form an organism. Organic theories of society were fairly common in the Anglophone Victorian world, especially among British Idealists such as F.H. Bradley (1876/2006, especially 160–206). Sumner considered himself a social scientist rather than a philosopher and had ample disdain for "metaphysicians" like Bradley, yet even if the Idealists traded in what Sumner often regarded as abstractions, they at least struggled to make clear how they believed society hung together. Interpreters of Sumner are left with much of that work.

With many other Victorian intellectuals, Sumner shared the Spencerian view that "society is an integrated whole that is naturally occurring, continuous with the natural world, and subject to transhistorical laws of evolution" of the same general form as those bearing upon the individuals it comprises (Breslau 2007, 40; e.g., Sumner 1992, 26–36, 183–200). Throughout his both polemical and sociological writings, he speaks of the social organism with its variously interconnected organs to emphasize its complexity and to distinguish it from the image of society as a complicated machine whose parts are arranged in exhaustively knowable causal patterns (and thus susceptible to deliberate rearrangement) (e.g., Sumner 1992, 172). In a sense reminiscent of Edmund Burke and anticipating Friedrich von Hayek, Sumner sees society as the unplanned and unplannable outgrowth of individual actions rather than the product of some deliberately enacted a priori design (Sumner 1883/1995, 138; 1914a, 244). Stated in terms of the biological-social continuity at the heart of his thought, the ongoing competition of life, carried on locally and short-sightedly by countless individuals, generates a social organism in which "everything […] displaces everything else" and the "bonds of connection" between the organs "are constantly becoming more delicate and subtle" (Sumner 1992, 137). It appears Sumner believes that increasing complexity and interconnection results from greater numbers of individuals interacting under greater numbers and varieties of institutional influences, forming greater numbers and varieties of relationships and associations, and undertaking greater varieties of activities that then feed back into the complex web of social relations. Individuals performing similar functions in society (e.g., laboring in factories or educating children) collectedly perform the function of a discrete organ, serving the social whole in a particular way, and such organs influence one another and the whole in manners both recognized and unrecognized, foreseen and unforeseen. To understand this organic complexity clearly, he

believed an objective science of society was needful, and it was precisely this he believed himself to be undertaking.

Sumner's largely implicit theory of society bears important implications for his individualism.[11] Even though the life of the social organism is the collection of individual endeavors in the competition of life, all individuals and their actions have impacts upon the social totality, however unwitting, unintended, or indirect these may be. Just as the struggle for existence against nature is governed by a law of conservation, so too are the organic, competitive relations that constitute society. Like nature, he envisions society as a closed system in which nothing comes from nothing, in which "[w]hatever we inherit of wealth, knowledge, or institutions from the past has been paid for by the labor and sacrifice of preceding generations" and require continued labor and sacrifice to be sustained and utilized (Ibid., 206). As an organ (or a part thereof) in the organism, each individual is simultaneously a beneficiary and custodian of the social welfare. The endeavors of individuals either productively contribute to the materials and energies that serve the health and growth of the social organism, or wastefully squander the materials and energies of society and undermine its progress. Accordingly, from the perspective of social life, individual actions are good or right insofar as they are valuable to society, by contributing to its general well-being in some way. His praise of those who save a portion of their wages, for instance, appeals to how their stored capital is then pooled with that of others and utilized in ways that are then "gratuitously enjoyed by the community" in the form of the material and cultural advances such capital makes possible (Ibid., 162). Thus, despite his individualistic foundations and aversion to metaphysics, progressivism, or socialism, he arrives at a notion akin to that of many Idealists, reformers, and socialists: "[e]very man in society is bound in nature and reason to contribute to the strength and welfare of society" (Ibid., 214). Although individuals are fated to strive individually, they strive best and succeed most who contribute reliably to the health of the social organism. Furthermore, he maintains that individual liberties must be balanced against corresponding social responsibilities. "True liberty lies in the equilibrium of rights and duties, producing peace, order, and harmony" in the social organism.[12] (Ibid., 207) This is another way of arriving at the conclusion that normative evaluations of the competition of life must be understood not only in terms of individual satisfactions but also in terms of social utility. In some instances, social utility is the desired result of individual

action, such as when one serves as a volunteer firefighter or enlists in the military during time of war. Yet Sumner puts most of his faith in the unintended beneficence of "antagonistic cooperation" through the market, believing like Adam Smith that in seeking simply to feed themselves and their families the butcher, baker, and brewer contribute most effectively to the welfare of society as a whole.[13] In a good society, liberty and responsibility are insensibly calibrated to the ends of facilitating such enterprises, encouraging individuals to strive for themselves in ways that also (perhaps unwittingly) benefit the whole.

It is important to note that, unlike some British Idealists and socialists, Sumner never quite suggests that the social organism is greater than the sum of its parts. Rather, he regards organism as a way of representing social complexity, on the one hand, and of envisioning the ways in which individuals contribute to and benefit from larger beneficent patterns, on the other. His theory does not invest society with a moral standing of its own, apart from its component individuals, such as would allow individual liberties (especially in the economic realm) to be dramatically curtailed for the sake of society as a whole.[14] Hence, even though he describes the individual as morally bound to do what is good for society, he nonetheless embraces *laissez-faire* social and economic policies as the way to facilitate the satisfaction of this duty and rails against the plans of socialists and progressive reformers for both misunderstanding social complexity and treading illegitimately upon the individual. Displaying the Burkean streak in his conservatism, Sumner routinely counsels that we ought not to tamper with arrangements whose complexity we can scarcely comprehend, or try to build what can only grow.

These basic foundations of Sumner's thought already amount to a rudimentary individualism. The natural world appears as a collection of striving individuals in which the fittest tend to survive, and even the social organism that evolves from and through this unceasing competition is ultimately analyzable into individuals and what they do. Yet his full doctrine only takes shape through his engagement with what nearly all Victorian Americans could recognize as major issues in the late nineteenth century. In his polemical and sociological analyses of the maturation of industrial capitalism, urbanization and immigration, class struggle, and agitation for politically enacted social reforms, an underlying methodological individualism slides into a normative doctrine of individualism that is expressly fitted to the conditions of the Gilded Age market economy. Where Emerson proceeded with hesitation, and Thoreau recoiled in protest, Sumner soberly charges ahead.

6.2 Sumner's Individualism: The Forgotten Man and Industrial Society

Every doctrine of individualism puts forth an ideal character, an aspirational rendering of what individuals could become. Though not always as obvious or robust, every such doctrine also puts forth an image of the good society, one that secures the conditions for the presence of such individuals and that is populated substantially by them. This latter element was mostly implicit in the thought of Emerson and Thoreau, who offered no overarching vision of political or social organization, devoting their energies instead to accounts of self-cultivation. When we turn to Sumner, however, the two are presented openly and together—the good individual and the good society, the organ and the organism—and this is partly due to the immediate orientation of his works. Rather than a visionary come to tell us about what we could achieve, he was a conservative in transformative times defending what he believed already valuable. Along with other early American sociologists (e.g., Franklin Giddings and Lester Ward), Sumner was "engaged in a struggle for authority regarding social problems and modes of intervention" appropriate to addressing them, and his doctrine was what he brought to this struggle (Breslau 2007, 43). He may have come on the scene well after individualism was an ingrained feature of American culture and tradition, but he rebranded it for an industrial age and sanctified it with the apparent detachment and objectivity of social science.

6.2.1 A Middle-Class Ethic

> Every man and woman in society has one big duty. That is, to take care of his or her own self. This is a social duty[. F]ortunately, the matter stands so that the duty of making the best of one's self individually is not a separate thing from the duty of filling one's place in society[.]
>
> William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883)

In these lines, Sumner condenses the normative content of his individualism, which is set against the backdrop of a volatile period in American history, a country caught in "the unrelenting conflict between the two colossal forces of […] capital and labor" (Trachtenberg 2007, 74). During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, "the shape

of the social order seemed very much up for grabs," and growing class conflict made the collapse of what order remained appear a real possibility (Lears 2009, 90). Sumner was prominent in the ranks of those who feared, if not collapse, some variety of unfavorable mutation of the social organism. He disdained the poor as vicious and parasitic, and opposed the demands and tactics of the working class as regressive and destructive, tending "all the time to go back from the industrial struggle to the military struggle" (Sumner 1992, 139). Yet, like many in the Gilded Age, he was also deeply worried about the self-serving machinations of the rich and the budding plutocracy he believed was already undermining what was best in the American political system. His individualism was, ultimately, a vindication of the middle class that he believed was caught between these forces and, in his view, all but forgotten. Not only were its interests drowned out in the cacophony of competing claims from the top and the bottom, it was shouldering new burdens imposed by the nascent regulatory welfare state, often for to benefit some other class. Sumner's self-appointed mission during his years at Yale was to use the tools and insights of social science to present the true situation of the middle class in Gilded Age America and to explain to the nation the heroic service this too often ignored and abused class rendered.

Among the most important insights, he believed social science provided regarded the lifeblood of society—capital—and how individuals created it, utilized it, benefitted from it, and squandered it. "Capital," he declared, "is labor raised to a higher power by being constantly multiplied into itself," labor through which something (e.g., materials, tools, or money) is produced that is useful to further production and set aside for that purpose.[15] (Ibid., 161; see also ibid., 54) In the long story of human struggle and competition, capital liberates labor from servility and furnishes the basis for all of the distinctive advances of civilization (e.g., "educational, scientific, and moral goods") (Ibid., 165, 145–6; Sumner 1883/1995, 67). The "great stream of capital" that flows through the market is the nutritive system of the social organism, the network through which the product of individual labor "finds its way into the hands of those who can use it for the benefit of society" (Sumner 1992, 176). As Sumner regards capital "the primary index of social development [and] aggregation of capital [as] the highest social good," he states that the "maxim, or injunction, to which a study of capital leads us is, Get capital" (McCloskey 1964, 48;

Sumner 1883/1995, 68). This explains why his embrace of the market is all but unqualified. From the standpoint of society, capital is both the fuel and index of progress, and from the standpoint of the individual, capital gives its possessor "a great advantage over the man who has no capital, in all the struggle for existence" (Sumner 1883/1995, 66). Capital is the tool of tools in both the struggle for existence and the competition of life, the thing most needful in Sumner's world. His doctrine of individualism is, first and last, his answer to the question: Who are the creators and accumulators of capital, the most successful of strivers, and what are their distinctive qualities of character and action?

In his telling, the rise of industrial society is a tale of two protagonists, or, one might say, of two different organs or systems within the social organism that contribute maximally to its well-being and evolution by amassing and deploying capital. The protagonist most associated with the rise of industrial society in the Gilded Age is the captain of industry. This is the great entrepreneur at home in the marketplace, the capitalist who, in an age of bigness, towers over society, embodying the era's "quest for control" by shaping society according to personal ambitions.[16] (Schlereth 1991, 299) Sumner saw these industrial titans as called upon to meet the "great demand for men capable of [creating and] managing great enterprises" (1992, 254). Tested and triumphant in the competition of life, these entrepreneurs "are a product of natural selection, acting on the whole body of men to pick out those who can meet the requirement of a certain work to be done" (Ibid., 155). From the standpoint of the social organism, they make the greatest contributions that individuals can make; deploying capital to do the most valuable works for society, they are like generals of the industrial army, marshaling and directing raw forces in great undertakings (Ibid., 155, 254; Sumner 1883/1995, 46). In perhaps his boldest equation of "is" and "ought," Sumner asserts that great capitalists and the concentrations of capital they control "ought to be because they are, and because nothing else would serve the interests of society" as they do (Sumner 1992, 154). Their indispensable contributions "to a joint enterprise which could not go on" otherwise makes the capitalist's disproportionate share of the social product "as legitimate as that of the hand-worker" (if not more so because mere laborers were, from the industrial standpoint, interchangeable) (Ibid., 175; see also ibid., 255).

Despite this categorical apology of the concentration of wealth in the hands of the capitalist elite, Sumner does not praise wealth as such, but is highly critical of luxury (which wastes capital and debases individual character) and differentiates between wealth that is earned through doing valuable work and wealth that is an unearned inheritance. Regardless of its origin, wealth "is only a chance; its moral character depends entirely upon the use which is made of it."[17] (ibid.) As a form of capital, wealth can be used productively, squandered on luxury, or depleted through incompetence (Ibid., 171–2). Just as those who squander the lifeblood of industrial society earn rightful disdain, those who, even out of selfish motives, advance the welfare and progress of the social organism through its use deserve admiration and privileged station. Nevertheless, a society needs more than captains of industry, just as an army needs more than generals. For all they do, the massive businesses they create and direct, they are still individuals. These instruments of progress and beneficence, led by the invisible hand of the market, set to work the capital amassed by others, and it is this multitude behind the capitalist whom Sumner's doctrine champions.

As with Emerson and Thoreau, Sumner's doctrine is not, in the end, about rare figures of greatness, but about what the ordinary person is capable of doing and becoming. Given the nearly transcendent valuation he affords capital, it is no surprise that his ideal is the *productive* individual. Though the character of the productive individual is not narrowly restricted to the middle class, what he offers is, in ways familiar to his age and ours, a middle-class ideal. The foundation of Sumner's ideal is the tough-minded naturalistic worldview sketched previously: individual struggle and social competition. As he put it in *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883),

> God and Nature have ordained the chances and conditions of life on earth once for all. The case cannot be reopened. We cannot get a revision of the laws of human life. We are absolutely shut up to the need and duty, if we would learn how to live happily, of investigating the laws of Nature, and deducing the rules of right living in the world as it is. (Sumner 1883/1995, 14)

Here, his naturalism and conservatism converge in what is perhaps the central normative claim of his doctrine: That the good individual studies and accepts the necessities of his context (part natural, part social)

and sets about to live in fruitful harmony with that context. In an industrial society with a mature, integrated market economy, the cardinal virtues of character are the essentially middle-class "industrial virtues" that equip one to participate effectively in the market, taking care of oneself and one's dependents while contributing effectively to the stream of capital that nourishes the social organism (Sumner 1992, 165; see also Hofstadter 1992, 12; McCloskey 1964, 36).

Although he offers no canonical list of such virtues, several appear repeatedly in his writings under various names. The virtue at the center of his value system is self-denial, which necessarily stands behind every act of capital creation or accumulation (Sumner 1883/1995, 67). In this, and his disdain for how the lower and upper classes squander capital through base amusement and status display, Sumner swims against the current of Victorian consumer culture. Reasserting the heart of the Protestant ethic, he devoutly maintains that without the willingness to postpone immediate gratification for the sake of future benefit, an industrial society would be impossible, and that when this willingness flags, the welfare of the social organism is endangered. The nearest auxiliaries to self-denial (or perhaps its essential components, depending on how one envisions the relationship) appear to be prudence—practical reason in the sense of knowing and choosing what is valuable—and discipline—"the determination to do just what lies next before us" (Sumner 1992, 70; see also 170, 243). In his account, these virtues are themselves sustained over time, and their fruits preserved and compounded, by temperance or frugality. Lastly, whether it be a virtue itself or the manifestation of other virtues, Sumner valorizes responsibility in the sense of acceptance in the face of one's natural and social context, the willingness to unflinchingly do what one's situation properly demands, from taking care of one's children to arriving at work on time. His repeated discussions of self-denial, prudence, discipline, temperance, and responsibility amply illustrate deep admiration for those who goes about their work, however dull, humble or meagerly compensated, without faltering and without complaint. This is what remains of the withering concept of vocation that was so robust and important in the thought of Emerson and Thoreau. What Sumner has in mind does not merit the name pride, as he puts diligent observance one's station above personal valuation of or cultivation through one's performance of it. "We want now a good supply of efficient workaday men, to stand in his place and do good work."[18] (Ibid., 70) If Sumner had a true kindred spirit in his own times,

it was Frederick Winslow Taylor, whose scientific quest for efficiency and discipline in the workplace can be seen as the practical manifestation of Sumner's individualistic, disciplinary ethic. Their respective valorizations of diligence and productivity were underwritten by "hatred of waste" and self-indulgence; rather than speak of the dignity of labor (which was in their day already a rallying cry of organized labor), they both praised the reliable and efficient laborer who aspires to little more than doing a job well and providing for his or her family without becoming "troublesome or burdensome" to others (Lears 2009, 258; Sumner 1992, 196). In short, Sumner champions the virtues of the modestly successful, socially useful competitor in the modern industrial order—the individual who is capable of routinely subordinating personal wants and aspirations that might detract from one's service to self, family, and society through industry and commerce. He ascribes causal significance to these virtues, treating them as the root of success in the competition of life and not merely signs coincident with such success. Conversely, he gave corresponding vices equal causal significance. With an unwavering faith in the neutrality and opportunity of a suitably unregulated economy, he "found the cause of failure in the weakness of the individual character," rather than in systemic features of the industrial market system (Cawelti 1965, 179). Though this account of the character of the good individual is not unique to the middle class, it is for Sumner an essentially middle-class ethic insofar as it outlines characteristics of middle-class respectability and competency that had been emerging since the antebellum period and sketches the path to success available to the middling sorts during the Gilded Age.

The unmitigated endorsement of the market that underlies Sumner's doctrine differs from the stances of Emerson and Thoreau in a profound way, but there is an equally striking distinction, which signals a change in the ways in which the individual was understood in Gilded Age culture more broadly. One searches in vain throughout Sumner's copious writings for an account of anything that deserves the title of individuality. He advocates the cause of the individual (especially legal equality and civil liberty), but does so in terms that emphasize a fairly generic sense of the good life, characterized by industrial virtues that make one useful, sober, and reliable—the typical "pieties in Victorian advice literature" (Lears 2009, 62). As one of his later commentators suggested, one *could* see this as a modest ideal of self-realization (Curtis 1981, 79). In an essay whose purpose is to dismantle the case for state intervention in the life

of society, above all in the economy, Sumner takes a step in this direction, remarking that "[t]he individual has an interest to develop all the personal elements there are in him. He wants to live himself out" (1919, 218). The Sumnerian individual, the hero of industrial society, no doubt makes something of himself or herself, realizing a capacity for economic self-help in the competition of life. However, further degrees of self-improvement appear to be irrelevant to his doctrine. Despite, or perhaps because of, his earnest praise of what he considers to be individual virtue Sumner is unconcerned with or even antagonistic toward what the high Victorian thinker Matthew Arnold called "culture:" "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock of notions, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically" (Arnold 1869/2006, 5). As a career academic and educator, Sumner surely valued some of the forms of self-cultivation that Arnold intimates, and that Emerson and Thoreau devoted so much energy to exploring and praising, but in light of the particular naturalistic worldview, he held such further development, if it does not serve the purpose of economic self-help, is the pursuit of merely subjective and often idle and undisciplined ends. What the diligent individual does at the end of the work day is for that person to choose, but such pursuits are unlikely to attain a status higher than that of recreation or hobby in Sumner's eyes. Thus, while his individualism leaves some room for individuality as understood by Emerson and Thoreau, his doctrine offers little encouragement for it. Too much self-indulgence threatens to squander capital, erode discipline, compromise long-term competency, and throw the direct or indirect costs of one's private lifestyle upon others.

These views were not anomalous. Sumner lived through a larger cultural shift which left postbellum Americans with a "tendency to translate dreams of self-realization […] into an Algeresque quest for material success," wherein money was regarded "a mechanism for reinventing the self" (Bannister 1979, 208; Lears 2009, 56). The ethic of self-culture that took root in the middle and upper classes during the late antebellum period gave way to an ethic of success and respectability, of production and consumption, in Victorian America (Cawleti 1965, 168–9, 172). Despite the popularization of the self-improving Chautauqua movement, success in and respectability through the new industrialized marketplace became the heart of the good life in which one labored diligently and

productively and consumed properly. Sumner's individualism embraces and celebrates this nascent spirit. It is a conservative, homogenizing individualism, wherein each is judged good or bad, a success or a failure, according to his or her fortunes in the integrated, national marketplace that sustains the social organism. It is an individualism that simultaneously champions the likes of Carnegie and Rockefeller for their superlative successes *and* the legions of managers and clerks who stand behind them, whose hopes for a better tomorrow keep capital flowing into the hands of these virtuosos of industry. It is, ironically, an individualism that takes little interest or pride in individuality, focusing more on participation in social classes and the functions they fulfill.

Yet Sumner's ideal is akin to those of Emerson and Thoreau in that his individualism is not so much about rare figures of greatness as about what the ordinary person is capable of doing and becoming. Captains of industry do incredible service to industrial society, but they are exceptional and walk a thin line between success and ruin, whether it comes from business failure or from decline into vice and luxury (Sumner 1992, 155). Sumner has far more faith in the ordinary "industrious and prudent man who takes the course of labor and self-denial to secure capital" without aiming so high that either dissipation or total ruin is likely to result (Ibid., 170). The hero of his vision is not the great-souled capitalist but the savings-bank depositor whose modest earnings are pooled with those of others to create the society's collected capital.[19] (Sumner 1914b, 348–9) Giving the Protestant ethic his own entirely secular inflection, Sumner maintains that the "acquisition of capital […] is the first and simplest proof that an individual possesses the industrial and civil virtues which make him a good citizen and a useful member of society" (1992, 178). As the competition of life is the social extension of law-bound natural conditions, success in it objectively indicates the possession of desirable traits of character, for nature rewards only virtue, if we do not get in the way. This is meant not so much as an apology for millionaires (though it partly is that) as a vindication of and exhortation to the growing middle classes upon whose shoulders the good of society ultimately rested. The achievements of these petit bourgeois Atlases, whose average annual savings rate reached as high as 20% during the Gilded Age, were far more valuable in Sumner's ever-pragmatic eyes than the works of a poet or artist, let alone of an eccentric who withdrew from the market for the sake of self-cultivation.[20] (Lears 2009, 88) The market's everyday heroes exemplify his injunction to "[m]ind your

own business," an injunction that meant for him something quite different from what it meant for Thoreau (Sumner 1883/1995, 104–5). What was for the latter a call to explore one's own "higher latitudes" according to the dictates of one's conscience was for the former a prudent policy for the competition of life (Thoreau 1854/1992, 214). One is a vision of living deliberately, beyond the routines and values of the market; the other is a vision of deliberately living according to the time-clock and in harmony with the ebb and flow of business. This stark juxtaposition does not show Sumner's doctrine to be less genuinely individualistic than either Thoreau's or Emerson's, but it aptly illustrates the open-texture and plurality of individualism in nineteenth-century America, as well as an important historical shift in individualist, thought as industrial capitalism took its place as an assumed feature of modern American life.

6.2.2 Defending Industrial Society

In the 1881 essay, "Sociology," Sumner struck perhaps his most overtly Spencerian note, confidently stating that "[t]he law of the survival of the fittest was not made by man and cannot be abrogated by man. We can only, by interfering with it, produce the survival of the unfittest [who] ought to be left to find out his error from hard experience" (1992, 189–90). In his 1889 essay, "The Gospel of Wealth," rags-to-riches steel magnate Andrew Carnegie offered an assessment of the practical and normative condition of American society in more soothing terms that nonetheless were inspired by the same problematic as were Sumner's. "The problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, so that the ties of brotherhood may still bind together the rich and poor in harmonious relationship" (Carnegie 1889/1906, 526). Persons from virtually all social strata agreed about this much, regardless of party, religion, or philosophy. The country was undergoing dramatic, though often unsteady and always uneven, economic growth which was interwoven with a host of other profound technological, social, and political changes. As America industrialized and the market became the nexus and archetype of most social relations, dislocation, discontent, and strife threatened to tear apart the social organism. In the air was the epochal question of how to effectively manage this situation, and Sumner grappled with it for decades.

His doctrine was as much a cautious vindication of the Gilded Age industrial order that afforded opportunities for self-help as it was an

account of the forms such self-help ought to take. The vindication was cautious because his individualism was essentially middle class at a time when this growing class was nonetheless being set upon by what he believed were dangerous influences. In his words, "*[i]t is the tendency of all social burden to crush out the middle class, and to force the society into an organization of only two classes, one at each social extreme*" (Sumner 1914a, 70 [emphasis in the original]). As one historian characterized Sumner's times,

> [t]he age of enterprise gave birth to both a new moneyed aristocracy and an army of the poor […] The stark contrast between the rich and the poor shattered the cherished myth of America as a classless society. It also raised the specter of a society divided between a ruling plutocracy at one extreme and a demoralized working class at the other, both pressing hard against a growing but bewildered middle class. (Klein 2007, 135)

Though a champion of the market, Sumner believed that it was a stern master for all involved. The same year that Carnegie wrote "The Gospel of Wealth," Sumner remarked that "[t]he man who has nothing is under the bondage of labor; the man who has property is under the bondage of care" (1914b, 150). Feeling a measure of both these burdens simultaneously, the middle class was caught in the midst of struggles between rich and poor that were reaching a fevered pitch.

Sumner believed the stakes to be higher than ever before, not just for the middling sorts but for the social organism as a whole. The swings of the business cycle (as evidenced by the Panics of 1873 and 1893) left all classes in palpably if unequally precarious positions at the same time that politics was becoming a more open and potent site of class conflict. A theme that appears repeatedly in his writings from the 1880s until his death in 1910 is the "antagonism of democracy and plutocracy," of "numbers against capital" (Sumner 1992, 380, 141). A defender of limited, republican government,[21] Sumner believed that American "democracy" was beginning to live up to the criticism, as old as Plato and Aristotle, that it is rule by the poor and unwise many over and against those with wealth and learning. Given his views of competition and ideal individual character, his antipathy toward the poor is unsurprising even if some of its expressions sound shockingly antiquated today (e.g., he believed that poverty should carry exclusion from voting).[22] (Sumner 1883/1995, 18–9) Democracy was dangerous, he thought,

because "[t]here is no alchemy in the ballot-box[, i]t gives out just what was put in," and in an age of record immigration, population growth, and economic inequality, democracy furnished ready weapons for class struggle (Sumner 1992, 87). Nonetheless, he believed that in its newest form plutocracy, "a political form in which the real controlling force is wealth," was even more "corrupting to all the institutions which ought to preserve and protect society" (Ibid., 143–4). To him, nothing was better evidence of the ills and follies of plutocracy than the Tariff, which he regarded as "an arrant piece of economic quackery" used to disguise and justify theft perpetrated by some wealthy, influential group or class upon the rest of society (Sumner 1918, 10). In the age of political machines, the spoils system, and the early stirrings of what we think of today as "money in politics," both democracy and plutocracy endangered the good of society because they signified the self-interested rule by one class over the others and because both abused the middle class.

The struggle between democracy and plutocracy is the setting for what is perhaps Sumner's greatest and most memorable bugbear: attempts to improve society or redress perceived injustice through governmental intervention. The Gilded Age was a battleground over the future of American government at both federal and state levels, whether it would remain an essentially "jural state" that disinterestedly protects rights and opportunities or would become a "paternal" state that manages the lives of its citizens according to a social blueprint (Sumner 1992, 240; 1883/1995, 26). Whether at the federal level (via the Fourteenth Amendment, the Commerce Clause, or the Taxing and Spending Clause) or at the state and local level (through the more expansive police power), the machinery of government was being used in new and ambitious ways to address the substantive grievances and aspirations of various constituencies. Though the modern regulatory welfare state would not conclusively take shape until the New Deal, the first stirrings in that direction were beginning in earnest, and even the modest beginning amounted to the assumption of new roles they appeared dramatic at the time. As Sumner saw it, social architects of all political and philosophical persuasions were meddling with the true foundations of freedom and progress, individual as well as social, according to the dictates of their naïve ideologies.

He regarded all such interventions as instances of class legislation, sharing the same essential logic.

> If anybody is to benefit from the action of the State it must be Some-of-us. If, then, the question is raised, What ought the State to do for labor, for trade, for manufactures, for the poor, for the learned professions? etc., etc.—that is, for a class or an interest—it is really the question, What ought All-of-us to do for Some-of-us? (Sumner 1883/1995, 11)

On its face, Sumner's analysis obeys no party or class lines. Regardless of who is to benefit, state intervention into the life of the social organism (beyond a necessary, neutral minimum discussed below) embodies "the doctrine that if a man wants anything which he has not got it is the fault of somebody else who ought to be found and compelled to give it to him" (Sumner 1992, 386; see also Sumner 1883/1995, 117). He believes that this doctrine can be found at work in every corner of society and is equally manifest in laws to protect the trade (and the proprietors and shareholders) of select industries, laws setting minimum wages or maximum hours for workers, and laws offering tax-funded relief to the poor. Each is an example of some class or group seeking a benefit to be paid from the collected capital of society. Sumner was not alone in his negative view of class legislation—drawing upon a Jacksonian inheritance most Gilded Age Americans, conservatives as well as reformers and populists, were nominally opposed to laws meant to benefit one part of society at the expense of another. Typically understanding their own side as the cause of a just equality of treatment, Americans reserved "class legislation" as an epithet for the alleged self-dealing of other groups or classes, the other side's politics. Yet there is perhaps no other topic in Sumner's works that appears so frequently and receives such vitriol.

His critique of class legislation deploys and unites all registers of his thought—economic, sociological, political, and ethical—and provides a negative image of the good society as he understands it. Informed by his organic social theory and its emphasis on interconnection and complexity, he claims that all sorts of meddlers and would-be reformers make two related mistakes that are rooted in faulty understanding of society. On the one hand, these "amateur social doctors […] always begin with the question of *remedies*, and they go at this without any diagnosis or any knowledge of the anatomy or physiology of society" (Sumner 1883/1995, 101). Whether the "remedy" is protectionism or labor regulations, advocates are often in search of problems to which their preferred remedy can be plausibly applied, thus leading to a mismatch between condition and treatment. On the other hand, schemes of state

intervention into the social organism suffer from the common congenital flaw that they believe they can change one aspect of society while keeping everything else the same (Sumner 1992, 139). Yet in an organic social order, every part of society is connected in numerous and often unrecognized ways to every other part, and so it is impossible to alter one part of the social body without causing unanticipated effects. Social science teaches that society is "so complex that it should frighten one inclined to interfere with it," a lesson that polemically echoes throughout Sumner's work (Fine 1956, 84).

In a more expansive and damning line of criticism, Sumner appeals to the laws that he believes inexorably govern the life of the social organism. First, he returns to the law of conservation. "Capital is force. If it goes one way it cannot go another" (Sumner 1992, 209–10). Though it potentially conflicts with his views about how economic growth and social progress occurs, Sumner believes that the capital of society at any given moment is a fixed quantity, and thus the allocation of capital for use is a zero-sum choice. Put in simple physical terms, "if we lift any man up we must have a fulcrum, or point of reaction. In society that means that to lift one man up we must push another man down" (Sumner 1883/1995, 111; see also Sumner 1992, 206–7). In a more concrete example, he proclaims that a dollar raised through taxes to enact a workplace safety regulation is a dollar taken out of the pocket of a worker, or out of the operating funds of a business. State intervention into the workings of the market in society redirects fixed quanta of force, which necessarily means promoting or requiring one endeavor or use of capital and discouraging or prohibiting another. Second, he again invokes the law of the survival of the fittest at work in natural struggle and social competition. Through unimpeded market competition individuals (and by extension the groups the collectedly form) possessed of industrial virtues will succeed, with their successes affirming and ideally refining their virtues over time. Class legislation of any kind is an interference with the free play of virtue and vice in the competition of life, stipulating the terms of competition in some way, whether in setting the terms of labor and production or in redirecting the flow of capital through taxation and redistribution (Sumner 1883/1995, 111). Even if such interventions should produce the desired effects (e.g., fewer poor families or safer workplaces), there would be ethical externalities, such as "flattering the vanity" of the meddlers and "demoralize[ing] and undermining the

self-respect" of the supposed beneficiaries who have been singled out for special favors at the hands of the state (Ibid.).

Yet he is convinced that the desired effects will never simply and unproblematically manifest—social tampering tends toward regressive outcomes. In a passage that echoes Spencer and helps to earn Sumner, the label of a Social Darwinist, he claims that

> [a]lmost all legislative effort to prevent vice [in private life or in commerce and industry] is really protective of vice, because all such legislation saves the vicious man from the penalty of his vice. Nature's remedies against vice are terrible. She removes the victims without pity. A drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be, according to the fitness and tendency of things […W]e can never annihilate a penalty. We can only divert it from the head of the man who has incurred it to the heads of others who have not incurred it.[23] (Ibid., 114)

Here, survival of the fittest meshes smoothly with the law of conservation. Positive laws meant to aid a member of society are inevitably attempts to compensate for some deficiency of individual ability or character. Just as a poor law that lifts the drunkard from the gutter furnishes him with a social outcome that he cannot achieve such as he is, labor regulations secure for the worker conditions of employment that she cannot negotiate for herself such as she is. Whether the issue is virtue or vice of character (as with the drunkard) or achieved social position and utility (as with the worker), state intervention obstructs the natural laws of social life that Sumner believes act justly and in the true and abiding interests of the social body. The unfit or vicious person is either deprived of the opportunity to learn from nature's punishments and become better, or nature's process of weeding out vice and weakness is interrupted to the detriment of the social organism that retains this diseased organ. What is more, Sumner insists that the "social injustice has a victim;" if a place in society "is filled by a person who is unfit for it, he always keeps out somebody somewhere who is fit for it"—it is, again, a zero-sum game (Ibid., 121). Whatever its form, state intervention does not eradicate vice, but merely shifts its costs from those who deserve them to those who do not, and thus subverts natural justice into artificial injustice. This view is anchored by a claim that is partly sociological and partly ethical, and whose strictness and simplicity was criticized in Sumner's day and has not aged well since—that the unfortunate persons

to be lifted by state intervention are nearly always to blame for their own situations (Ibid., 137). That this claim is meant to be coldly scientific is perhaps the only thing that mitigates its spiteful, moralistic conservatism. Nonetheless, it is the keystone to Sumner's edifice of natural laws, scientific observations, and moral certitudes. Grant him this much, and he believes the rest will follow.

Captains of industry like Carnegie likely agreed with much of what Sumner had to say about the natural justice and wisdom of competition, and the imprudence of state intervention (e.g., Carnegie 1889/1906, 527–8). Still, many Gilded Age moguls, including Carnegie himself, doubted the perfection of the market and turned portions of their vast fortunes to philanthropic concerns that would alleviate the lived costs of market failures.[24] Deferring to individual agency, Sumner concedes that each person ought to make their own judgment regarding charitable giving; certainly, such organic charity is better than that by grand design, carried out through state power and policy (Sumner 1883/1995, 137–8). Yet private charity differs from state charity in mechanism but not in moral import, and so he offers stern advice to the would-be philanthropist. Appealing once more to the law of conservation at work in the social organism, he admonishes his reader thus:

> There is an almost invincible prejudice that a man who gives a dollar to a beggar is generous and kind-hearted, but the man who refuses the beggar and puts the dollar in a savings-bank is stingy and mean. The former is putting capital where it is very sure to be wasted, and where it will be a kind of seed for a long succession of future dollars, which must be wasted to ward off a greater strain on the sympathies than would have been occasioned by a refusal in the first place. Inasmuch as the dollar might have been turned into capital and given to a laborer who, while earning it, would have reproduced it, it must be regarded as taken from the latter.[25] (Ibid., 109)

Thus does charity appear a mixture of sentimental waste and unknowing theft. To the successful striver tempted by sentimentality, Sumner offers the injunction: save rather than give.[26] (Sumner 1992, 208–10) Though it may occasion the immediate sting of conscience, it is better, morally and for the social organism, to let both nature and capital do their proper work of rewarding virtue and punishing vice.

These attitudes toward state intervention and voluntary philanthropy again signal a different kind of individualism. Emerson and Thoreau were each critical of the state and the philanthropists of their day, yet neither suggested that society would and should take of itself. Instead, they fell back on their faith in individual conscience and each person's capacity for self-culture. In what Sumner would regard as sociological naiveté, they did not see society as an evolving organism obeying objective natural laws, but as a contingent collection of individuals around institutions and customs, most of which were useless or rotten and bred conformity. Such a vision counsels (for Emerson) little or (for Thoreau) no faith in the wisdom or justice of the market or the state, only in the individual. Even when Emerson writes, in a strikingly Sumnerian tone, that "[a] person seldom falls sick, but the bystanders are animated with a faint hope that he will die:—quantities of poor lives; of distressing invalids; of cases for a gun" this is merely prologue to his aspiration to "break up" the masses and "draw individuals out of them" (1983, 1080–1). Similarly, Thoreau's mordant criticisms of the "lives of quiet desperation" he saw all around him were moralistic judgments about ways of life in service of market culture, not about the virtue or vice of those who lived them (1854/1992, 5). Even when they rail against humanity as they find it, Emerson and Thoreau hope to redeem it, even if only in the exemplar of their own selves. In Sumner's social organism this is absurd, like trying to save dead skin cells in the hopes of bringing them back to life. He is content and indeed encouraged to see the social body slough off its decaying, useless, and burdensome parts, for that is part and parcel of the processes by which individuals are rewarded according to their virtue and society advances toward higher levels of welfare and development.

Sumner's critical treatment of class legislation and voluntary philanthropy is part of his defense of industrial society and of the virtuous individuals upon whose shoulders he believes its weight primarily rests. Indeed, characterizing the folly of such "social doctoring" simultaneously sketches the good individual. The essential form of nearly all humanitarian interventions into the life of society arise when "A and B put their heads together and decide what C shall be made to do for D" (Sumner 1883/1995, 107; see also Sumner 1992, 202). For instance, patrician social reformers decide that the conditions of urban public health are intolerable, and so they push to enact governmental regulations and inspections to remedy this problem. Implementation of such interventions requires resources, which are precisely what those who

suffer most from urban squalor lack and what those at the top of society least care to part with. Thus, someone else must pay to remedy the condition of the poor. If the intervention is undertaken by the state, it is paid from general revenues raised through taxes on all parts of society, not just those who devised the scheme or those who shall benefit from it.

Sumner terms the individual who stands between the social doctors and their patients—C in the above description—and who is expected to share the burden of paying for a scheme chosen by others in order to benefit others the "Forgotten Man," though he notes that this forgotten individual "is not infrequently a woman."[27] (1883/1995, 126) This "victim of the reformer, social speculator, and philanthropist" is the person who lives up to Sumner's ideal of industrial virtue and who (he thinks) inevitably pays for idealistic remedies (1992, 202). Behind this depiction is the law of conservation, that "the State cannot get a cent for any man without taking it from some other man, and this latter must be a man who has produced and saved it."[28] (Sumner 1883/1995, 108) The Forgotten Man (or Woman) is the personification of Sumner's entire doctrine, his individualism as well as his organic theory of society—the minor capitalist who embodies the industrial virtues and contributes capital to society but without acting on such a scale as to become a danger to society, either through economic failure or through plutocracy. Ironically, the Forgotten Man or Woman is the hero of modern society because he or she acts on such a scale small enough as to be valuable only in combination with others and interchangeable with any other such individual. That is, Sumner's individualism mirrors what in the antebellum period was termed the "American system of manufactures." Virtuous members of the middle class are essentially standardized, interchangeable parts within the social organism. Each member of this petit bourgeoisie is exemplary of "what we all ought to be," someone who contributes to the stream of capital and takes care of himself or herself without complaint or assistance (Sumner 1992, 214). Yet each reliable worker who saves ten dollars a month is, from the standpoint for the social whole, the same as any other. The matters of self-culture that made the individual "a world, an infinity, a being who is irreplaceable" in the eyes of Emerson and Thoreau become inconsequential personal tastes and private pastimes in Sumner's world (Kateb 1992, 5). As his individualism is nested within an organic social theory, his ideal individual must be understood in terms of its place and function within the whole. Thus,

the growth in the scale and complexity of society could not but decrease the relative stature of the individual.

Though this view would certainly disturb and disappoint Emerson and Thoreau, there is a sense in which it is perhaps more optimistic than their own doctrines of individualism. It is clear from their sweeping indictments of the conformity, resignation, and materialism of market society that Emerson and Thoreau did not believe many persons achieved the potential their works depict. They wrote about what the ordinary person could become, but surely knew that few had lived up to this birthright. Sumner, however, depicts and praises a comparative commonplace. There were perhaps millions of Forgotten Men and Women in Gilded Age America, certainly far more than there were individuals who lived up to Emersonian or Thoreauvian ideals. Even if Sumner merely celebrates what he finds already at hand in industrial society, he celebrates it nonetheless. Also a New England intellectual, his individualism is nonetheless more egalitarian, more attuned to the common condition of his day, than that of Emerson and Thoreau. It is a vindication of the man or woman who aspires to be decent rather than great, competent rather than noble (though Sumner believes there is a measure of both greatness and nobility in his ideal). Furthermore, we can easily imagine a society in which most, and perhaps all, lived up to his ideal, while it is more difficult to take seriously the possibility of a society in which self-reliant geniuses or deliberate individuals minding their own business predominated. What Sumner's doctrine lacks in imagination and inspiration it might yet make up for in concreteness and practicability. This is in part because it is not a perfectionist ideal in the sense I have used that term for Emerson and Thoreau. They picture the self as on a path of endless development; each engagement of self-cultivation, each avenue of self-improvement, intimates and opens others. While it is always possible to try to be somewhat more industrious, or disciplined, or prudent, we can easily identify which individuals fulfill Sumner's ideal, since its achievement manifests in the successful day to day performance of a concrete socioeconomic role. This is individualism attuned to the (slightly above average) spirit of Victorian America—progressive yet realistic, moralistic yet worldly, open to individual success but only as this is consistent with the social good.

What, then, does this ideal require for its practical realization? We have seen what Sumner believes commonly stands in the way of honest and prudent striving, but what, if anything, may be done to encourage

or facilitate it? The simple answer is that the government should protect the minimal institutional conditions for market participation, of which there are essentially two. First, individuals must be treated equally under the law. Equality was a highly contested term in the Gilded Age, especially as the Reconstruction Amendments and subsequent legislation made questions of racial equality unavoidable and the labor movement likewise mobilized under the conceptual aegis of equality. Sumner was allergic to most such claims, though especially in the realm of economics. Indeed, the topic of equality of condition (rightly or wrongly characterized) occasions some of his most extreme rhetoric.

> The assertion that all men are equal is perhaps the purest falsehood in dogma that was ever put into human language […] There is no reason whatever why it should be expected that men should enjoy equally, for that means that all should have means of enjoyment equal to the greatest which any one has […] It is evident […] in this world in which we are, that God had not seen fit to provide for it at all. (Sumner 1914b, 88–9)

The only equality he recognizes (in fact, he insists upon it) is equality of legal standing and treatment.[29] Though he acknowledges that some persons (e.g., women and child laborers) and occupations (e.g., food processing) must be protected or regulated in unique ways, the rule must be that of like treatment for all under the law (Fine 1956, 89). Like many in his time, this notion was considered the opposite and corrective to class legislation.

> The object of equality before the law is to make the state entirely neutral […] It surrounds all, without distinction, with the same conditions and guarantees […] leav[ing] each man to run the race of life for himself as best he can. The state stands neutral but benevolent. It does not undertake to aid some and handicap others[.][30] (Sumner 1992, 177)

What the Forgotten Man or Woman needs is this neutral benevolence, the equal opportunity to strive without either hindrance or favor from the state and thus to cultivate virtue and earn one's place in society. Anything else is an affront to Sumner's doctrine, a failure to see persons as individual agents in a concrete market system, to acknowledge that

> [a] human being has a life to live, a career to run. He is a centre of powers to work, and of capacities to suffer. What his powers may be—whether they carry him far or not; what his chances may be, whether wide or restricted; what his fortune may be, whether to suffer much or little—are questions of his personal destiny which he must work out and endure as he can[.] (Sumner 1883/1995, 30–1)

Equality under positive law allows the laws of nature to play out through the competition of life, as individuals strive to make their way in an industrial society.

Second, closely connected but discussed at much greater length and in its own terms, individuals need civil liberty. The adjective is important—just as Sumner asserts that substantive equality is a perverse fantasy he maintains that absolute liberty (e.g., to do whatever one desires) is both impossible and incoherent (e.g., Sumner 1914b, 136–55). Properly understood, genuine *civil* liberty "means the security given to each man that, if he employs his energies to sustain the struggle on behalf of himself and those he cares for, he shall dispose of the product exclusively as he chooses."[31] (Sumner 1992, 163) He thus understands legal equality and civil liberty as complementary. The former keeps the social field clear of externally imposed obstacles and aids to competition, while the latter entitles the individual to hold and use all, but only, what he secures through that competition. He believed that civil liberty was also, though perhaps less directly, undermined by class legislation. Whether maximum hour laws or poor relief, the state looks to the forgotten middle class to supply the means of improving the situation of those less successful and (thus) less deserving. Even if the question of desert is bracketed, Sumner still maintains that state intervention picks favorites in the competition of life and pays for such favoritism by depriving productive members of society of some portion of what their efforts have produced. Civil liberty forbids such deprivation, whatever the cause it is meant to serve.[32] Though Sumner rejects social contract theory as an explanation of the origins and foundations of civil society, he views society as formed and held together by voluntary agreements or contracts between individuals made under neutral institutions, a view reflected in the substantive due process jurisprudence epitomized by the Supreme Court's decisions in *Allgeyer* and *Lochner*.[33] (Sumner 1883/1995, 23) What (indeed, *all*) the Forgotten Man or Woman needs is the "chance to fight the struggle of existence for oneself, to the best of one's will and ability, within the bounds of one's

personal circumstances," and that is what legal equality and civil liberty ostensibly afford (Sumner 1992, 247–8).

This vision rests upon Sumner's faith in the market as the ground of fair competition. In soaring terms, he declares:

> [i]f all privileges and servitudes are abolished, the individual finds that there are no prescriptions left either to lift him up or to hold him down. He simply has all his chances open that he may make out of himself all there is in him. This is individualism and atomism. There is absolutely no escape from it except back into the system of privileges and servitudes.[34] (Sumner 1914b, 127–8)

Hence, the state should adhere to a *laissez-faire* policy, which "is nothing but the doctrine of liberty" made the basis of laws and institutions (Sumner 1883/1995, 104). In Sumner's rendering, *laissez-faire* is the political consequence of true sociological insight. It says to the state (and to those who control it):

> Do not meddle; wait and observe. Do not regulate; study. Do not give orders; be teachable. Do not enter upon any rash experiments; be patient until you see how it will work out. (Sumner 1992, 230)

This maxim of policy rests upon Sumner's abiding faith in the market and in free trade, that "[s]society […] does not need any care or supervision," that if competition is given room "a sound and natural social order" will form on its own (1883/1995, 103). Yet this is an evolutionary view, rooted in struggle and competition, and accordingly, he believes in compensating rather than self-correcting economic forces (Sumner 1992, 167). The competition of life, if not biased by state intervention, rewards virtue and punishes vice, and in the social organism, the positive effects of virtue compensate for the negative effects of vice. This is not self-correction, which would entail that the failure and suffering that attends competition will somehow be turned into success and enjoyment. Rather, *laissez-faire* permits nature's rewards and penalties to run their course, until the prudent and disciplined succeed, and the foolish and lazy fail or even perish.

It is, of course, easy to see this as a heartless and perhaps shallow view, but in fairness to Sumner he did not think it so. Taking his works at face value (and we have little reason to do otherwise), he believes that

a proper appreciation of social complexity amply illustrates the risk and myopia of ambitious, ideological plans for social reform or social engineering. The same principles that make him an advocate of *laissez-faire* prevent him, for example, from being a racist or an imperialist. He does not believe that some people just are degenerate or inferior, but individuals can, by their actions, become degenerate and place themselves in deservedly inferior social positions. He believes that nature knows better than we do and will select the fit from the unfit in the competition of life if we merely stay out of the way. (Given his rhetorical style, he might have added that gravity does not need our encouragement or assistance either.) Prudent policies are those that let the successful succeed and the failures fail because he genuinely believes that, by hook or by crook, nature will have its way, its penalties will be felt, either by those whose actions have earned them or by those who have not. Attempting to redistribute such rewards and penalties, both risks the well-being of society and treats individuals as pawns, and whether the state sets one individual upon the shoulders of another or sets that other upon hers, it treats both of them as less than free, responsible agents. Worried about the corruption and social meddling to which he believed both democracy and plutocracy were prone, Sumner embraced *laissez-faire* as a republican middle ground, an institutional order that, as much as possible, kept individuals free and equal under law, and kept economics and politics separate (Ibid., 140, 81–92; Bannister 1979, 107).

As the above already intimates, the Forgotten Man or Woman plays important rhetorical and conceptual roles in Sumner's political and social thought and advocacy. The primary rhetorical function is, of course, as a vehicle for Sumner's polemics about Gilded Age society and politics as well as for his own vision of individual virtue and good social order. The Forgotten Man and Woman are ideal characters whom many actual persons may resemble, but none perfectly embody. He packs his entire moral, political, and social outlook into them, and offers them up as the lynchpin of modern industrial society. The vices of both rich and poor receive his attention, but the middle class is discussed nearly exclusively in terms of their virtues. His rhetoric also serves an obvious political aim. He depicts these industrial heroes in essays and lectures offered for public consumption, largely by members of the (voting) middle class. In praising the virtues of the middle class and cataloguing their abuse at the hands of the self-seeking rich and poor, he is, in a sense, calling that intermediate class into existence. Though a diverse economic and

social middle stratum was undoubtedly growing throughout the nineteenth century, it arguably lacked a coherent, widely shared class identity. Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century notions of "the middling sorts" were simply inadequate for describing the experiences of the mass of clerks, trained mechanics, university educated professionals, middle managers, bonanza farmers, and minor capitalists under conditions of industrialization. In the Forgotten Man and Woman, Sumner forcefully proffered a valued-laden identity, discursively constructing the middle class as forgotten, instrumentalized beasts of social burden. His polemics thus serve an unmasking function not unlike that of nineteenth-century accounts of proletarian exploitation. The subjects of address are to be roused from ignorance and apathy into action, though Sumner imagines (and only vaguely) action within established political institutions rather than through revolutionary upheaval. This sketch of middle-class character and virtue is also open-textured enough that aspirants to the middle class could readily identify with Sumner's account of the plight of the middle class and of what policies will free them of the burdens they are unjustly made to shoulder. Thus, turning his own words upon his own rhetoric, one could say that The Forgotten Man or Woman are terms "to conjure with" (Sumner 1992, 256).

These terms also perform important conceptual functions in Sumner's social and political thought. They personify abstract economic forces and relations such that industrial society can be simultaneously represented as having an intelligible inner logic of growth and yet be too complex to regulate. Genuinely averse to abstractions, and not yet equipped with the econometrics that would only emerge with the sprawling, bureaucratic regulatory state, he was not willing to tell the story of industrial society in either infrahuman or superhuman terms. The drama of human society still required a fully recognizable hero. What is more, it is through the figures of the Forgotten Man and Woman that Sumner articulates his (admittedly thin and often imprecise) doctrine of individual virtue and its social effects. Looking at his characterizations of the middle class, the rich, and the poor, one sees the basic outlines of a (simple) Aristotelian virtue ethic. The Forgotten Man and Woman most perfectly and purely embody the industrial virtues of discipline, prudence, frugality, and responsibility. While the wealthy often attain measures of these characteristics, they are often corrupted or counterbalanced by the ambition, pride, and avarice that were widely in evidence among the captains of industry and possessors of great inherited wealth. Sumner is less willing

to entertain the possibility that those at the bottom of society could possess any meaningful measure of the virtues he champions, for he believes that they are at the bottom for a reason, carried out by the operations of natural laws through competition in society. Thus, the Forgotten Man and Woman represent a sort of Aristotelian mean, while the rich and the poor represent two different ways in which virtue can be corrupted, through excess and through deficiency (Curtis 1981, 76; see Aristotle 2009, Books I and II). Finally, these idealized figures are his way of giving flesh to the otherwise arid, skeletal notion of a complex social order that is held together by cooperative antagonism. Without a character sketch of the good (and, in his account, middle class) citizen, the logic of natural competition would simply be too attenuated a basis for the evolutionary social organism he defends. He offers his rendition of the Protestant ethic to explain the cohesion of an otherwise dog-eat-dog capitalist order. The austere life, modest dreams, and firm backbone of The Forgotten Man and Woman explain—albeit minimally—how individual struggle and collective competition could yield aggregate, mutual benefit and advancement in a world devoid of Providence (in all but a watery, Deistic sense). The middle class literally holds society together, and Sumner's invocation of this class as the forgotten and abused hero of society situates his social and political ideals within a narrative that was deeply compelling in the Gilded Age.

His individualism is thus part and parcel of his sociodicy of industrial, Gilded Age America. The modern choice, as he saw it, was between "regulat[ing] things by a committee of control" and "let[ting] things regulate themselves by the conflict of interests between free men" (Sumner 1883/1995, 85–6). His ideas about organic social complexity, and about individual agency, virtue, and desert, make the first option intolerable. Even in the midst of the crippling depression of 1893 he wrote, in an essay polemically titled "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over," that "it is the greatest folly of which a man can be capable, to sit down with a slate and pencil to plan out a new social world" (Sumner 1992, 261). Rather, he believed that both scientific understanding and prudential judgment point toward giving free play to the antagonistic cooperation of market competition. Against this background his bootstrapping individualism is a character study of the successful striver, admonishing any who would succeed in industrial society to "cut your coat according to your cloth […] If a man is dissatisfied with his position, let him strive to better it in one way or another by such chances

as he can find or make, and let him inculcate in his children good habits and sound notions[.]" (Ibid., 131–2) This was the lesson he believed first learned from his father and later found affirmed by the new science of society.

6.3 At Home in the Marketplace

As with Emerson, there is a genuine and interesting tension at the heart of Sumner's thought. He spent decades defending an individualistic market ethic at the same time that the maturation of industrial society, and especially the corporation as an economic institution, was eroding the conditions that made individualism as he understood it viable. Historian Maury Klein has suggested that in the Gilded Age, the ideals of individualism and the free market together

> underwrote the American Dream, the holy grail of national myths that allowed and encouraged every man to go as far in life as his talents and energy took him. It was these beliefs writ into action that gave rise to the frenetic pace of industrialization.
>
> However, individualism as expressed in the ideal of the [free market] system had a dark side as well: It divorced economic power from social responsibility. The individual had few obligations to society beyond those imposed by his own conscience or the minimal and often ambiguous law […] If a person succeeded in life (and success was nearly always defined in material terms), well and good. If he failed, he had no one to blame but himself.
>
> […]
>
> Within this context the corporation evolved into the most powerful institution in the nation through a process steeped in irony. Created by individuals to serve their immediate needs, it outlasted them to become a creature in its own right. Born into a milieu that stressed the maximizing of individual freedom of action, it mutated into an entity that posed the greatest threat to individualism yet known. (2007, 132)

Individualism built the massive institutions of industrial society, which in turn dwarfed and sometimes devoured individuals. Sumner's naturalistic faith that free competition would reward individual virtue was not strong enough to dispel his sense of foreboding regarding the future prospects of

individualism. Yet he blamed the genuine ills of industrial society—from the squalor of urban poverty to the damaging effects of monopolies—on what made sense to him: individual vice and the corruption of the market system by political interference. He could not credit the notion, put forward by reformers of many persuasions, that the marriage of individualism and the market that he espoused could threaten to undermine itself, leaving the Forgotten Man or Woman pinned beneath the very ladder they were supposed to climb.

He was not alone in his struggle to make sense of the world that seemed to simultaneously revere and betray the individual. Americans of all social classes were trying to make sense of, and make their way in, an increasingly complex and impersonal market system. Sumner's substantial popularity during the closing decades of the nineteenth century was due at least in part to the fact that his repackaging of Malthus, Spencer, and (to a lesser extent) Darwin resonated with a variety of contemporary cultural phenomena. To an era in which the scientific mindset seriously challenged traditional faiths, he offered the objective findings of the science of society; to a nation committed to progress, he described the unalterable mechanics of human improvement; to an increasingly materialistic people, he preached competitive striving as the natural, compensating moral order; to a society bewildered by superindividual corporations and classes on the verge of "industrial war," he offered explanations in familiar terms of individual virtue and vice (Sumner 1919, 229–43). It is likely that few of Sumner's admirers were converts to his worldview, and that most were already inclined to some or all of his views (McCloskey 1964, 40). For instance, political machines and patronage notwithstanding, Sumner addressed his critique of state intervention to a public much of which "clung to the traditional notion that good government meant limited government [whose] main purpose was to maintain order and protect persons and property" rather than to address perceived systemic inequalities or injustices (Calhoun 2007, 241). Both his polemical and his social scientific writings spoke to a psychological need for reassurance that some order existed behind the change and strife and that there was something clear and certain that could be done to preserve and continue the material progress of the Gilded Age.

Like the later Stoics, Sumner invests the ordinary tasks and routines of life with an air of social and cosmic significance. Something as mundane as getting to work on time nourishes the social organism, however

miniscule the contribution may appear when viewed from the perspective of the whole. What Thoreau regarded as the drudgery of market life Sumner saw as participation in and validation of an impersonal, providential nature. His central message was of the dignity of honest striving, and his individualism was, ultimately, a doctrine of responsibility, first for oneself and one's dependents but also for the welfare of the social organism. The sensibility manifest in all of his various writings is disgust for whatever he regarded as irresponsibility. He reminds all that success goes to the fittest, while specifically assuring the middle class that, absent interference in the market for the sake of others, their virtues will both sustain society and lead to personal reward. Yet, for all his popularity, Sumner was to his time much what Emerson and Thoreau were one or two generations earlier: the unheeded prophet. As Robert Bannister notes, "[f]ar from being the Gilded Age's most influential theorist, Sumner watched as most of his generation, wherever positioned on the political spectrum, largely ignored his message, regardless of whether his message was a call for discipline and self-denial, a denunciation of luxury and the excesses of consumerism, or specific proposals for free trade and a government free of the influence of special interests" (1992, xxxv). Though he was continually frustrated by the scant impact of his secular sermons upon Gilded Age politics and policy, he was, like John Locke, championing a cause that had already won. Despite the threats he diagnosed—the rise of progressivism and socialism, the twin dangers of democracy and plutocracy, class conflict and the decline of the traditional nuclear family—Sumner's distinctly conservative individualism indeed proved prophetic, in a qualified sense. Simultaneously, defending individual agency and social integrity, the dignity of *homo economicus* and the justice of the superindividual social organism shaped by the market, his doctrine spoke to the condition in which most individuals found themselves in Gilded Age America, giving the tradition of economic individualism an expression for the industrial era.

Notes

1. The faded interest in Sumner is evident in the fact that the majority of his books and essays were out of print for close to a century and are only recently becoming generally available again.
2. Yet rather than displacing the pulpit altogether, the lectern merged with it, as the sermons and writings prominent Gilded Age clergy such as

Henry Ward Beecher and Josiah Strong adopted the language and concerns of the political economy and social science of the day.

3. For instance, in his 1873 "Introductory Lecture to Courses in Political and Social Science, "he stated: "I propose to give a course of lectures on the political and financial history of the United States, in which I shall try to set forth the mistakes of which we now see the fruits." (Sumner 1914a, 398)
4. Both the date and title of this essay are the subject of scholarly dispute. Sumner's student and literary executor, Albert Galloway Keller, gave the essay the title "The Challenge of Facts" in 1914 (Sumner 1914a, ix, 15–52) whereas Robert Bannister has more recently retitled the essay "Socialism," partly on the grounds that this captures both the first word and abiding polemical target of the essay. Whereas Galloway dated the essay to the entire decade of the 1880s, I adopt Bannister's dating of the essay to roughly 1880. (Sumner 1992, 159–82)
5. While Emerson likewise characterized human existence as essentially agonistic, his view differs substantially from Sumner's. The former understands agonism in aspirational terms inseparable from self-cultivation, whereas for the latter agonism is merely an unavoidable condition of human existence.
6. Though Sumner has a generally traditionalist and conservative view of the family, he elsewhere relaxes this qualification of individual struggle, recognizing as legitimate and valuable the growing role of women in the modern workforce.
7. This phrasing sounds not entirely unlike Emerson's language in the 1860 essay "Power" (quoted above) through the differences of worldview in whose service they are uttered are substantial.
8. "The struggle for existence is a process in which an individual and nature are the parties. The individual is engaged in a process by which he wins from his environment what he needs to support his existence. In the competition of life the parties are men and other organisms […] The competition of life is the rivalry, antagonism, and mutual displacement in which the individual is involved with other organisms by his efforts to carry on the struggle for existence for himself. It is, therefore, the competition of life which is the societal element, and which produces societal organization." (Sumner 1906, 16)
9. It is a matter of some debate how much Sumner's view of evolution owes to Darwin and to Spencer respectively, a question which applies to "social Darwinism" more broadly.
10. There is a telling irony in the fact that Sumner made this observation in 1901, amidst the most violent three decades of labor strife in American history.

11. One important matter that remains fundamentally undecided in Sumner's work is the nature and origins of the self. A self with an identity, history, and plans of its own seems to be implied in his descriptions of individual actions and their social function. Yet an organic theory of society pulls toward F.H. Bradley's conclusion that the self is more or less entirely socially constituted, and that viewed apart from a concrete station in an historical social order the individual is "some I know not what residuum, which has never existed by itself, and does not so exist." (Bradley 1876/2006, 166) Given the policies he supports and the character traits he regards as virtues, it seems reasonable to suppose that Sumner would not arrive at this conclusion, but I do not feel justified in insisting upon this point given the paucity of evidence in his writings.
12. Contrary to Spencer, in "Sociology," Sumner denies the existence of natural rights, instead suggests that we must use social science to "deriv[e] the rules of right social living from the facts and laws which prevail by nature in the constitution and functions of society." (Sumner 1992b, 184)
13. As Sumner puts it in *Folkways*, antagonistic cooperation "consists in the combination of two persons or groups to satisfy a great common interest while minor antagonisms of interest which exist between them are suppressed" and is "the most productive form of combination in high civilization." (1906, 18) This represents the competition of life raised to its highest, most productive, most humane register.
14. Without ever admitting fault, in his later works, Sumner repudiated several early remarks he made about society or the state possessing a kind of personhood. (See, e.g., 1992, 234–6)
15. Here and elsewhere, Sumner conflates physical and financial capital and fails to recognize human capital in its own right.
16. Apart from the implicit sense in which Sumner believed the capitalist to (properly) operate through the market rather than through the apparatus of state, it is not clear why the "plans" or "designs" of the capitalist are any less suspect as a basis for social organization than those of reformers or socialists. Considering that he roundly criticized what later came to be widely called "rationalism" in matters of economic, social, and political order, it seems that his absolution of the captain of industry is either a flaw in his system of thought or an ideological commitment that he passes off as a matter of scientific observation.
17. As he eschews appeals to natural rights, Sumner regards the "right of bequest" as grounded on nothing but "expediency," namely as a way of encouraging the prudent accumulation and management of capital out of "love of children."
18. Sumner does not discourage ambition, but is sensitive to the risks that attend it and believes that society does better when many are complacent

that might rise above their station than when many who are unfit for anything better try (and fail) to climb higher.

19. This characterization further underscores the middle-class sensibility of his ideal. Under the prevailing economic conditions of the Gilded Age, even as wages and standards of living were rising and prices were falling; it was extremely difficult for members of the working class to save.
20. Apart from a personal affection for the novels of Émile Zola, Sumner generally questioned whether there was any reason to read the literature. (E.g., Curtis 1981, 91)
21. What exactly Sumner meant by "republican government," however, remains somewhat vague. (e.g., Sumner 1992, 81–92) Ever the polemicist he spilled far more ink excoriating what he thought to be the abuse of governmental power than he did in describing what he took to be good government. Sympathetic interpreters, such as Bannister, seem to triangulate Sumner's own position, using the positions he opposed and the positions of notable figures with policy leanings similar to his own as points of reference. Yet even these efforts fall short of a satisfyingly complete theory of government.
22. This view was not uncommon in the Gilded Age, especially in light of the fact that many of the supposedly unfit to vote were also racially or ethnically suspect in the eyes of old stock Anglo-Saxons, including not only African Americans but recent, predominantly Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.
23. Here, one finds traces of Sumner's debt to Malthus, who opposed the Poor Laws for similar reasons. (Malthus 1798/2004, 38–43)
24. Though Carnegie, for instance, was clear in his opposition to "indiscriminate charity." (Carnegie 1889/1906, 535)
25. As Sumner makes clear in his various commentaries on the foolishness of charity, apart from women and children in exceptional circumstances, he did not believe in the Victorian notion of the "deserving poor."
26. Sumner was by no means alone in this view, as during the closing decades of the century self-proclaimed philanthropists "distributed cards bearing the legend WHAT TO DO WITH BEGGARS that warned DO NOT GIVE." (Stanley 1992, 1293)
27. This statement must be carefully qualified. On face, Sumner's inclusion of women in his vision of middle-class virtue casts his individualism in terms more explicitly egalitarian than those of Emerson and Thoreau. Yet it is ultimately an admission of the undeniable: women's substantial participation in the industrial workforce, in the lower middle class as well as the working class. His admission of the place of women in the Gilded Age economy is counterbalanced by his assertions that women are at inherent disadvantages (biologically as well as socially determined) in

the struggle for survival and the competition of life, and are thus hedged in by limits to their ability to participate equally in the market. (Sumner 1992, 159–60) At some level, this is perhaps a more apt assessment of the real economic and social condition of women than one finds in Emerson and Thoreau's often willfully gender-blind doctrines. At a deeper level, however, Sumner's staunch, naturalistic defense of the patriarchal nuclear family casts women's market participation in a problematic light, for insofar as women approximated the economic agency and activity of men they deviated from their most needful and fundamental social roles. (See, for instance, Sumner 1992, 196; 1992, 133–6)

28. Roughly the same goes for philanthropy, in Sumner's view, as it diverts capital from productive uses (which would create products and jobs and wages for the Forgotten Men and Women).
29. Hence, he was not opposed to most claims regarding racial equality, as these were mostly about legal standing in the late nineteenth century.
30. As even a casual survey of Sumner's works and federal case law during the same period readily illustrates, nearly every attempt to regulate the economy was branded by its opponents as favoritism that undermined legal equality.
31. Sumner's inflection of civil liberty illustrates the gradual Gilded Age individualization of earlier notions that subordinated individual civil liberty "to the superior power of self-governing communities to legislate and regulate in the public interest." (Novak 1996, 11)
32. As with most strongly libertarian accounts of individual liberty, such as that of Robert Nozick, it becomes difficult to explain how any imposition on an individual's person or property could be justified. Sumner does not deny that the state has the *morally* and not just *constitutionally* legitimate power to tax individuals, but his account of civil liberty appears, on face, to rule this out. Matters become even more complicated and difficult to resolve when one considers how this account of civil liberty relates to his organic theory of society (i.e., how an organ can have such a claim against the organism of which it is a part). (Nozick 1974)
33. Consider the parallel view of Spencer in *The Man versus the State* (1994, 161–164). On the *Lochner*-era Court see Gillman (1993) and McCloskey (1964), 170–2.
34. Compare Sumner (1914a), 170: "In general, there is no man who is honest and industrious who cannot put himself in a way to maintain himself and his family, misfortune apart, in a condition of substantial comfort."

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Conclusion—Our Nineteenth-Century Inheritance

Since its inception as a collection of newly independent political communities, and arguably before, American society has been steeped in a culture and mythology of individualism. Much as the American Revolution threw off the chains of political dependency, establishing the new states as (individually or collectively) sovereign political entities, American culture promised that each individual might escape the contingencies of their initial circumstances and fashion an identity and a future of their own choosing. Long before the expansion of suffrage gave this promise room for expression in institutional politics, it was latent in everyday life. It has been the argument of this book that the promise of individualism became a stark and prevalent reality in nineteenth-century America, and that the rise of an integrated market economy across the antebellum and postbellum periods was an inexorable condition for this phenomenon. That is, the history of individualism in America has been inseparable from the history of the market, and in order to understand the development of a market economy and market society in the USA, we must understand how individualism served to encourage and enable such development.

What is more, it has been my aim to illustrate, however incompletely, that American individualism has always been a pluralistic phenomenon, in theory as well as in practice. Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner furnish illustrations of fundamentally distinct modes that a common intellectual orientation toward persons and society might assume. All three directly confronted the changing economic and social conditions that

L.P. Plotica, *Nineteenth-Century Individualism and the Market Economy*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62172-2

accompanied various stages of the market's ascension, and yet each offered an account of individualism that was characteristically their own, even as each participated in larger intellectual movements (such as Transcendentalism or Social Darwinism). One might reasonably suggest that their works present little more than time capsules, and that insofar as each offered a doctrine of individualism that was articulated in reference to a robust social, economic, and political context, their doctrines are akin to recollections of how units were arrayed around some Civil War battlefield. If this is merely conceded, then the ideas of Emerson, Thoreau, and Sumner hold primarily historical and conceptual interest for us, as evidence of what was once thought in a now-departed world. Some would say (and I am one of them) that this is reason enough to take their work seriously.

Yet I would go still farther and claim that as their doctrines of individualism were deliberately articulated in reference to the emergence and maturation of a market economy in the USA—the economic system whose descendant we live with today—their work presently holds intellectual as well as practical significance. Each struggled to make sense of what was possible and desirable under conditions of individuation, market mediation, and competition that promised to be chief legacies of the nineteenth century. That their works reflect many, though not all, of the assumptions regarding gender, race, and nationality common to their respective eras gives us reason to maintain a critical perspective upon their ideas, yet these same features preserve a kind of historical authenticity that reckons their works among the documentary evidence we enjoy about the world in which they lived and wrote. Their accounts may thus be read as records of what can be thought (and in some cases what can be done) in the wake of the Market Revolution or Great Transformation.

From this perspective, Emerson and Thoreau remind us of ways of thinking and living that continue to haunt us, if only by their ostensive absence. Rather than mere examples of premarket individualism, or of individualism dependent upon conditions that no longer obtain, they would continue to speak to us, as they did to their contemporary audiences, as voices in the wilderness calling us to caution or conversion. Little argument is required to suggest that Sumner continues to speak to us in what some have characterized as America's second Gilded Age, on account of contemporary America's similar levels of economic inequality (still, as in the nineteenth century, along lines of race and

gender as well as class), the entrenched political power of money, and ideals of prosperity dependent upon high rates of economic growth.[1] As I noted at the outset of this study, it also requires little argument to demonstrate that we have inherited a language of individualism in which Sumner was fluent. Since the 1980s, a brand of economic individualism that sounds distinctly Sumnerian has become orthodoxy among American conservatives and libertarians, even if the former clings to notions of the community (beyond the nuclear family) about which Sumner said little. Only more recently have these echoes of Sumner become more or less orthodox for the left and center-left in American politics as well. Despite the substantial distance between conservatives and liberals on matters of economic policy and regulation, both sides often trade upon common premises: that the science of economics defines the boundaries of the possible, that market participation is the ineluctable foundation of modern life, and that individual self-improvement is foremost an economic endeavor. Even if these propositions are given different inflections, they are cast in the same descriptive and normative language, one that Emerson found fascinating yet troubling, Thoreau found banal and disgusting, and Sumner found both convincing and inspiring.

This is not to say that the history of American social and political thought holds the keys to present electoral or policy debates, or that the above diagnosis entails any particular conclusions about the felicity of the individualisms examined in this study. Instead, I suggest that we are inheritors of a pluralistic tradition of individualisms, and that a perspicuous as well as critical understanding of American individualism must be attentive to this plurality. To the extent that Sumner's doctrine sounds most natural and familiar to us today, we have forgotten the doctrines of Emerson and Thoreau—and to the extent that we attend to the wealth of our own inheritance, we enrich our present possibilities for thought and action. This need not counsel anyone to embrace individualism generally, or any variety thereof explored here, but it should at very least disabuse us of the notion that individualism ever has been or is today a monolithic entity. A full appreciation of this plurality would, of course, require the inclusion of thinkers neglected here (such as Margaret Fuller, Lysander Spooner, or John Dewey). Yet even a project as modest as my own is enough to establish the internal diversity of a concept that we have become accustomed to think of, wrongly, as one dimensional.

Notes

1. Works that sustain such an assesszment, even if they do not utilize the language of a second Gilded Age, include, for instance, Bartels 2008; Krugman 2016; Piketty 2014; Sandel 2012; Stiglitz 2012.

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Index

L.P. Plotica, *Nineteenth-Century Individualism and the Market Economy*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62172-2