

Abraham Lincoln's Republic of Rules: The Logic of Labor, the Labor of Logic

OWEN CANTRELL

"Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."

—Abraham Lincoln, 1861¹

During the presidential campaign of 1860, John Hanks, Lincoln's mother's first cousin, sold what he claimed were rails Lincoln had split 30 years before, in 1829–1830.² Future Illinois governor Richard Oglesby, an advocate for Lincoln during his U.S. Senate and presidential campaigns, came up with Lincoln's rail-splitting image on his own. For the most part, Lincoln rejected his humble origins, especially as a manual laborer. Nevertheless, Oglesby allegedly accompanied Hanks to find old split rails at Thomas Lincoln's former farm in Macon County, Illinois.³ Lincoln's humble origins became an asset; rural and agricultural roots for political leaders were ever more important in an increasingly urban nation. Walt Whitman in his 1856 political screed "The Eighteenth Presidency!" argued that the next president should be "some heroic, shrewd, full-informed, healthy-bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American blacksmith or boatman come down from the West across the Alleghenies." This man could "walk into the Presidency, dressed in a clean suit of working attire with the tan all over

1. "Annual Message to Congress," December 3, 1861, Roy P. Basler, et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press for the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953–55), 5:52.

2. Allen C. Guelzo, "The Unlikely Intellectual Biography of Abraham Lincoln," in *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 26.

3. Mark A. Plummer, *Lincoln's Rail-Splitter: Governor Richard J. Oglesby* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 40, 46.

his face, breast, and arms."⁴ Lincoln's split rails, then, were a complex artifact that, as Olivier Frayssé argued, "symbolized manual labor, free labor, [and] agricultural labor" that made Lincoln into "the model of the self-made man, the incarnation of the American Dream of a classless society."⁵ Lincoln's split rails, alongside his fervent defense of free labor over and against slave labor, helped make him into the newly formed Republican Party's unlikely 1860 presidential candidate.

Four years later in November 1864, writing on behalf of the First International, Karl Marx congratulated Lincoln on his reelection. The letter characterized Lincoln as a "single-minded son of the working class" who was destined to free "an enchained race" and reconstruct the "social world" for the betterment of the laboring classes. The First International also professed their hope that the "American Antislavery War," as Marx called it in his letter, would uplift the working class, as the War for Independence had done for the bourgeoisie. Marx lauded Lincoln as working class, which was a designation that made him heroic in the United States and politically viable for Marx and the First International.⁶

Lincoln's split rails in 1860 and Marx's letter in 1864 tell us that Lincoln's working-class legacy is, at the very least, complicated. While Lincoln's personal history as a "son of the working class" was touted throughout his political career, his actual thoughts on labor are often discounted in favor of the political viability of this history for different movements, from the Republican Party to Karl Marx.

An examination of Lincoln's thoughts on labor as they evolved from his adolescence when working on his father's farm, to his political beginnings as a member of the Whig Party, and finally to the existential challenges presented by the Civil War, reveals that, while he remained relatively consistent in his allegiance to "free labor" throughout his political career, the continually changing labor market in the United States made this allegiance less actionable by the time of the Civil War. For example, while Lincoln and Marx agreed that labor, and its economic manifestation in the labor theory of value, was essential for their politics, they reached vastly different conclusions about what should be done to protect labor and guarantee that workers benefit

4. Walt Whitman, "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in *Poetry and Prose*, edited by Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1,332.

5. Olivier Frayssé, *Lincoln, Land, and Labor, 1809–1860*. Translated by Sylvia Neely. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 158.

6. Karl Marx, "Address of the International Workingmen's Association to Abraham Lincoln" in *The Civil War in the U.S.*, edited by Richard Enmale (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 280.

from their own production. Marx insisted that the conflict over labor-power between the working class and capitalists was inescapable within the capitalist system, and that working-class labor could only be protected through a socialist revolution. Lincoln saw no inevitable conflict between labor and capital; the capitalist economy and wage labor allowed workers to move up the economic ladder and become capitalists themselves. In Lincoln's vision, there was no permanent working class, only employees on their way to becoming employers. This vision, however, was increasingly unrealistic by the 1860s, when a majority of workers had become wage earners rather than independent producers or employers.⁷ The rising death toll at the end of the Civil War presented an existential crisis for Lincoln, who attempted to address the philosophical question of fatalism in "The Second Inaugural," which proposed potential limits for man's self-creation.

This essay is in four sections. The first explores the different stories about labor told by Marx and Lincoln, who were both steeped in versions of the labor theory of value.⁸ While Marx's was grounded in more classical economic theory, Lincoln's labor theory of value was based in his understanding of labor as central to human thriving and social mobility in the United States. The second section deals with Lincoln's engagement with manual labor during his rural upbringing and the influence of the "cash economy" on his thinking. The third section explores Marx's interpretation of the Civil War (his "American Antislavery War") as a conflict over labor that would plant the seeds of an eventual socialist republic. The fourth section discusses Lincoln's theory of governance based on his legal background, which was challenged by the Civil War. The alleged turn to fatalism in the Second Inaugural Address was Lincoln's attempt to reestablish a rational foundation for the war and, in turn, for his thoughts on the autonomy of men to create themselves.

This essay, along with the different logic employed to understand the importance of labor within the capitalist system, also addresses philosophical questions about the nature of historical and logical

7. Eric Foner, in a classic study, cites David Montgomery's estimate that "almost 60 per cent of the American labor force was employed in some way, not economically independent, in 1860." Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (1970; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 31.

8. Recent studies have mined this important connection between Marx and Lincoln, including Robin Blackburn's *An Unfinished Revolution: Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln* (London: Verso, 2011) and Allan Kulikoff's *Abraham Lincoln and Karl Marx in Dialogue*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). These studies are important in viewing the two figures in relation to one another. However, much remains to be mined of this connection beyond its existence.

contradiction that lay at the heart of Lincoln's (and Marx's) theories of labor. Marx believed that contradiction was necessary for historical progress; thus, the contradiction between labor and capital could only be resolved through a socialist society. Lincoln, on the other hand, held to a rationalist tradition based on English common law and Aristotelian logic. The law of non-contradiction was essential to Lincoln's political beliefs regarding labor. Capital and labor were never in contradiction, otherwise this continual state of tension would have to be resolved. The struggle with fatalism towards the end of Lincoln's life signals the difficulties (and ideological impasses) the Market Revolution presented to antebellum theorists of labor.

I. Labor Theory of Value in Marx and Lincoln

In volume one, chapter one of *Capital*, Marx exhibited his labor theory of value by discussing the commodity-form. When two commodities were exchanged, they must be "reducible to this third thing," which is not a "natural property of commodities," in order to be exchanged.⁹ In a capitalist system, labor must create surplus value, or capital, produced by the "third thing": the labor power of workers. Thus, labor was central to Marx's understanding of capitalism, as it also was for classical economists, such as David Ricardo and Adam Smith, who focused on the centrality of labor in production. For these thinkers, the basis of this *labor theory of value* was that production was, at bottom, based in human exertion, which created the value inherent in commodities. While Marx's understanding of the labor theory of value differed in its consequences from the classical economic view, most theorists of capitalist economy would have similarly started from the basis of labor during the mid-19th century.

Abraham Lincoln, while not widely read in classical economics, found the study of political economy essential to his self-education. William Herndon, Lincoln's longtime law partner in Springfield, wrote "nothing, however, captured Lincoln's intellectual fancy more than 'political economy, the study of it.'"¹⁰ In fact, in his 1858 lecture on "Discoveries and Inventions," Lincoln proposed his own descent of man as the laboring animal. Lincoln began by stating "all creation is a mine, and every man, a miner." Man's goal was to "dig out his destiny" from the mine of all creation, which he does through laboring in the

9. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 125–28. Published in German in 1867, the book appeared in a 42-page English extract in 1875 but was not fully available in English until 1886.

10. Quoted in Guelzo, "Unlikely Intellectual Biography," 20

world. In contrast to the laboring animals of the Earth, humanity could improve its “workmanship” by acquiring specialized knowledge.¹¹ Through discovery and the creation of practical inventions, Lincoln argued, man was able to improve the quality and quantity of his labor on Earth. Man, as a laboring animal, was also a self-improving animal, but this labor was a curse if not wedded to knowledge. Lincoln argued in his 1847 “Fragments of a Tariff Discussion” that “useless labor” was equivalent to “idleness.” Also in “Fragments,” he proposed his own creation story of labor: In the early days of the world, the Almighty said to the first of our race, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread”; and since then, if we except the *light* and the *air* of heaven, no good thing has been, or can be enjoyed by us, without having first cost labour.” Lincoln continued, explaining that as “most good things are produced by labour, it follows that [all] such things of right belong to those whose labour has produced them.” However, Lincoln argued that this is not always the case: “it has so happened in all ages of the world, that *some* have laboured, and *others* have, without labour, enjoyed a large proportion of the fruits.” He argued that it should be “a most worthy object of any good government” to secure “each labourer the whole product of his labour, or as nearly as possible.”¹² The productive results of man’s labor should not be taken from him, since they were the fruit of his efforts and ability to apply knowledge to his lot as a laboring animal.

That Lincoln believed man owned his own labor does not mean he agreed with Marx’s argument from *The Communist Manifesto* that “modern bourgeois private property is . . . based on class antagonisms, on the exploitation of the many by the few.”¹³ In fact, Lincoln thought private property, defined as the “fruits of labor” in an 1864 speech to the New York Workingmen’s Association, should be protected. He asserted the fact of labor that unites “all working people” should not lead to a “war upon property, or the owners of property.” Instead, property was a “positive good in the world” and the fact “that some should be rich, shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to industry and enterprize.”¹⁴ Furthermore, speaking

11. “First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” April 6, 1858, Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:437.

12. “Fragments of a Tariff Discussion,” December 1, 1847, Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:413–20.

13. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988), 223. The Manifesto had first appeared in 1848 in German; fully in English in 1883.

14. “Reply to New York Workingmen’s Democratic Republican Association,” March 21, 1864, Basler, *Collected Works*, 7:259.

at New Haven, Connecticut, regarding an 1860 shoemaker's strike in Lynn, Massachusetts, Lincoln argued that "I take it that it is best for all to leave each man free to acquire property as fast as he can. . . . So while we do not propose any war upon capital, we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everyone else."¹⁵ Speaking to the German Club of Cincinnati in 1861, Lincoln argued for a labor philosophy that acts to "give the greatest good to the greatest number," which he stated was best accomplished through the use of free labor to acquire property and its attendant social advancement.¹⁶ Property was just proof of the promise of labor and a monument to achievement—a positive "good" grounded in Lincoln's belief in the potential for advancement for laborers and wage earners. Thus, his belief that a major function of government was securing property earned justly by the sweat of the laborer's brow.

Additionally, Lincoln asserted that social advancement for laborers was not only possible, but necessary for the political stability of the United States. This was in keeping with his Whig roots. Historian Daniel Walker Howe argued that "of all the items in the Whig program, internal improvements held the greatest appeal for the young Lincoln. He shared the typical Whig aspiration for humanity to triumph over its physical environment."¹⁷ In his 1859 address to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Lincoln distinguished the "*mud-sill*" and "Free Labor" theories of labor. The *mud-sill* theory, Lincoln stated, argued "that nobody labors, unless somebody else, owning capital, somehow, by the use of that capital, induces him to do it." Because of their low opinion of labor, the *mud-sill* theorists "assume that whoever is once a *hired* laborer, is fatally fixed in that condition for life." The "Free Labor" theorists, on the other hand, believed that "there is no *such* relation between capital and labor, as assumed; and that there is no such thing as a freeman being fatally fixed for life, in the condition of a hired laborer." For Lincoln, who counted himself among the "Free Labor" theorists, the relationship between labor and capital was not one of capital driving labor. In fact, "labor is prior to, and independent of, capital; that, in fact, capital is the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not *first* existed—that labor can exist without capital, but that capital could never have existed

15. "Speech at New Haven, Connecticut," March 6, 1860, Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:24.

16. "Speech to Germans at Cincinnati, Ohio," February 12, 1861, Basler, *Collected Works*, 4:202.

17. Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the Whigs* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 264.

without labor."¹⁸ Labor not only does not require capital to set it in motion (what Marx calls *productive* labor), but it also was the origin of capital, an opinion shared by Marx.¹⁹ The mud-sills theorists did not believe in the dignity of labor and thought of labor only as a requirement for capital. For them, the laborer was just a cog that keeps the machinery of capitalism running smoothly, rather than the supplier of surplus value for capitalists. For Lincoln, the mud-sill theorists were fundamentally anti-democratic in their evaluation of laborers. He believed it was within the ability of all laborers to improve their station in life, as he had. Additionally, it was essential for Lincoln and his belief in a democratic republic that no class of citizens be permanently stuck in their position without the ability to improve their lot. By placing labor at the heart of his political philosophy, Lincoln argued the continual self-improvement and gathering of knowledge that characterized useful labor was the best way to maintain and advance a prosperous Union.

While Lincoln and Marx held similar beliefs about the importance of labor in the capitalist economy, Lincoln's rural background shaped how he thought of the relationship between labor and capital. Marx argued that labor and capital had always been in conflict, whereas Lincoln believed they could comfortably coexist. His own experiences as a laborer left him with a dim opinion of how much cultivation lower forms of manual labor alone could offer. However, Lincoln believed that labor, when joined with knowledge, could increase man's productive capacities. Additionally, he thought that the "cash economy" of bartering and selling offered a path of social mobility for those of lower-class status.

II. "You are not *lazy*, and still you *are an idler*": Lincoln and Labor before the Civil War

Labor historian Herbert Gutman argued that there were three periods in 19th-century American labor: 1815–1843, 1843–1893, and 1893–1919. During the second of these, Gutman argued,

industrial development radically transformed the earlier American social structure, and during this Middle Period (an era framed around the coming and aftermath of the Civil War) a profound tension existed between the American preindustrial structure and

18. "Address Before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin," September 30, 1859, Basler, *Collected Works*, 3:477–78.

19. Marx, *Capital*, 45.

the modernizing institutions that accompanied the development of industrial capitalism. After 1893 the United States ranked as a mature industrial society.²⁰

Lincoln grew up during this period, in which republican ideas about the dignity of free labor were clashing with the emerging market and wage economy. Paying close attention to those experiences is essential to understanding how Lincoln thought about labor and its relationship to capital.

Lincoln's belief in the primacy of labor was shaped by his familial experiences in artisanal production and what Sean Wilentz has called "artisanal republicanism."²¹ This belief emphasized skills required in the production process and the desire of the artisan to move from apprentice to master. Through the acquisition of skills, these citizens could advance socially and form the foundation of popular sovereignty for the government. By the 1820s, this process was becoming increasingly difficult, as artisanal production was replaced by manual labor, focusing on mass production rather than quality craftsmanship. Lincoln's belief in the "free labor, free soil, free men" platform of the emerging Republican Party in the 1850s was supported by his conviction that there was no necessary contradiction between labor and capital, as each man would only be an employee until he could become a boss and hire laborers of his own. Lincoln's own experiences with the cash economy and wage labor had lifted him from the poverty of a rural cabin in Kentucky to a successful lawyer and candidate for president. However, by the late 1850s, it was increasingly clear that permanent wage labor—instead of each man's becoming his own boss—would be the predominant model of employment in the United States. Lincoln's political attempt to reconcile this economic fact had its foundation in his childhood experience of the changing labor market.

Born in 1809, Lincoln was privy to the first-hand effects of the Market Revolution in the wildernesses of Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. Oliver Frayssé summarizes Lincoln's early life as "grandfather killed by Indians, a father wandering in search of work, failing in his efforts to establish himself as an independent farmer in the hostile

20. Herbert Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919," in *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1975), 13. The work of James L. Huston, particularly *Calculating the Value of the Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), is also useful for understanding the transformation of labor in this period.

21. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 63.

atmosphere of a slave society because he lacked sure land titles." Lincoln's grandfather, also named Abraham, lived near Louisville. According to family legend, he was shot and killed by an "Indian" waiting in ambush while building a fence made of railroad ties in 1785. Thomas Lincoln, the youngest son, stood frozen in terror while the eldest son, Mordecai Lincoln, shot the assailant dead in his tracks.²² Abraham's death was a family tragedy, but it also prevented Thomas Lincoln from getting any portion of the family farm, due to inheritance laws. He would have to make it on his own even earlier in life. Thomas worked several odd jobs, including building a mill alongside slaves for Samuel Haycraft in 1796–1797. His position as a free laborer was tenuous, since the slave population in Kentucky kept increasing, which made it difficult for a migrant laborer to find steady work. Thomas, after marrying his first wife Nancy Hanks, left Elizabethtown in December 1808 to settle at Sinking Spring Farm. His son Abraham was born shortly afterwards.

Thomas, a carpenter-cabinetmaker by trade, found that his artisanal skills soon won him high esteem in his community. In the difficult environment of the frontier, neighbors relied upon him for his woodworking ability, and this improved his reputation. While Lincoln never learned such developed artisanal trades from his father, he did learn the backbreaking labor of work on the farm. Thomas, in search of land free from slave labor and speculators, moved across the Ohio River into Indiana in 1816. The family, including seven-year-old Abraham, had to build a homestead from the ground up. As Frayssé argued, it was common on the frontier that "children (young men or young women) owed their labor to their father, and if he had none for them—or if the work did not suit them—other fathers would provide employment."²³ Abraham, who eventually grew to six feet four inches, was a strong, wiry boy whom Thomas often rented out to fellow farmers. Despite the emphasis on origins during his presidential campaign, Lincoln was never particularly proud of his rural and agricultural past, largely because they seemed at odds with the professional, middle-class goals to which he attributed his success.²⁴ In his 1859 speech in Wisconsin, Lincoln's focus was not on the democratic nature or worth of agricultural labor, but rather how "no other human occupation opens so wide a field for the profitable

22. Frayssé, *Lincoln*, 3. Frayssé got the year (1786), and action wrong (the victim was plowing), and dismissed the fact as family 'legend.' Eight-year-old Thomas was being abducted when the Shawnee was shot.

23. Frayssé, *Lincoln*, 25.

24. Frayssé, *Lincoln*, 35.

and agreeable combination of labor with cultivated thought, as agriculture." He went on to emphasize that "education—cultivated thought—can best be combined with agricultural labor, or any labor, on the principle of *thorough* work—that careless, half performed, slovenly work, makes no place for such combination."²⁵ His only real interest in agricultural labor was how it can be thought and planned better through careful study. While working on the farm for his father, Lincoln rarely owned his own labor, but instead worked for others for his father's (and thus the family's) benefit. This experience would become an essential ingredient of Lincoln's political positions on labor once he was on a national stage.

Lincoln moved away from his father's farm near Decatur, Illinois, at the age of 22, about a year after he was no longer expected to work for his father, to make his own way.²⁶ Pointedly, Lincoln tried his hand at everything except farming. Eventually landing as a merchant in New Salem, he acted as the intermediary between the various social groups in town with bartering and selling as his central mode of exchange. In opposition to agrarian labor, Lincoln preferred the cash economy. He found that wages and commercial exchange were liberating in his quest for self-improvement, education, and a desire to break free of his father's influence.²⁷ It was his time at New Salem from 1831 to 1837 (despite his failing business) that eventually led Lincoln into politics, which, in turn, brought him into a law partnership with John T. Stuart in Springfield.

Lincoln attributed this opportunity to the cash economy, which led him to believe that wage labor could be a path for others as well. Richard Hofstadter argued that Lincoln's self-made man status "has come to have a hold on the American imagination that defies comparison with anything else in political mythology." However, the emphasis on self-making was central to Lincoln's personal beliefs *as well as* his political philosophy.²⁸ After all, as biographer Stephen B. Oates stated about Lincoln's youth, "he came to manhood in a rural backwoods where people accepted the most excruciating hardships

25. "Address Before the Wisconsin Agricultural Society," Basler, *Collected Works*, 480–81.

26. Guelzo, "Unlikely Intellectual Biography," 17.

27. Allen C. Guelzo, "Come-Outers and Community-Men: Abraham Lincoln and the Idea of Community in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas*, 59, 53.

28. Richard Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," in *The American Political Tradition and The Men Who Made It* (1948; New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 121.

as commonplace.²⁹ Lincoln believed the path out of hardship was through opportunities the cash economy and wage labor provided.

In 1851, Lincoln's stepbrother John D. Johnston wrote to ask for \$80, stating that he would "rother live in bread and wotter than to have men allways dunning me."³⁰ Lincoln, who had given him money before, bristled at the request. Each time he had previously loaned Johnston money, his stepbrother always found himself in the "same difficulty again." In 1848 Lincoln argued that Johnston's "defect" was that "you are not *lazy*, and still you *are* an *idler*. I doubt whether since I saw you, you have done a good whole day's work, in any one day." While Johnston was willing to labor, he was stuck in the belief that it was impossible to "get much for it." Instead, Johnston cultivated the habit of "uselessly wasting time" which prevented him from ever getting ahead. Lincoln proposed that Johnston go to work as heartily as he could on nearby farms to earn money for himself. Furthermore, Lincoln promised that he would *give* his stepbrother the equivalent of any money Johnston would earn, which would help him out of debt and provide a "habit that will keep you from getting in debt again."³¹ In essence, Lincoln was encouraging Johnston to abandon subsistence farming and get into the cash exchange of commercial farming.³² Johnston's insistence upon not doing additional work since he could not "get anything for it" was part of the subsistence farmer's inability to improve their condition, as Lincoln saw it, due to their desire to only provide enough instead of creating a surplus on which to build.³³ The cash economy, in Lincoln's opinion, held better options for men to improve beyond their station. Agricultural subsistence farming consigned men like his stepbrother to continual dependence.

Lincoln learned his labor theory of value on his father's farm and in the new "cash economy." Despite his checkered job history and lack of success as a merchant in New Salem, he held true to these ideals into his political career, beginning with his election to the Illinois

29. Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (1977; New York: Harper, 2011), 11.

30. Quoted in Richard Lawrence Miller, *Lincoln and His World, Volume Three: The Rise to National Prominence, 1843–1853* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2011), 219.

31. Abraham Lincoln to Thomas Lincoln and John D. Johnston, December 24, 1848, Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:16.

32. Guelzo, "Come-Outers and Community-Men," 53.

33. By subsistence farming, Lincoln meant farming that did not create a large surplus. While Thomas Lincoln, and Johnston, were not subsistence farmers in the sense of only growing enough to sustain their own needs, Lincoln's point in this letter is that Johnston's unwillingness to work significantly beyond subsistence to create a large surplus was what kept him continually in financial difficulty.

House of Representatives in 1834. However, his faith in man's ability for self-improvement would be tested to the utmost by the greatest calamity of his age, the Civil War. The specter of slave labor, which was so important to the white working class's understanding of their own labor, haunted Lincoln's doctrine of self-improvement.

III. Karl Marx and the Civil War: A Marxist Interpretation of the "American Antislavery War"

Marx spent the first half of the 1860s heavily embroiled in newspaper work in London and laying the foundation for the 1864 founding of the First International. Among his other newspaper commitments, Marx covered England and Europe for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, on the invitation of managing editor Charles Dana, whom Marx met in Cologne in 1848. During his tenure, Marx wrote nearly 400 articles. At the onset of the Civil War, Greeley eliminated Marx's column, since increasingly more space was devoted to domestic affairs. Marx went to work for the Vienna newspaper *Die Presse*, where he would write about, among other things, the American Civil War.

In his coverage of the Civil War, Marx sided unequivocally with the Union, which often put him in opposition to other European political radicals. Historian Robin Blackburn stated that the "cause of the South had definite appeal" for radicals as long as the focus was on the "cause of small nations to self-determine and distrust of strong states."³⁴ In this light, as many Southerners argued at the time, the North was attempting to impede on the sovereignty of a foreign nation, the Confederate States, by enforcing tyrannical measures that stood in the way of Southern autonomy. Marx rejected this position wholeheartedly. In a column written in 1861 for *Die Presse*, he argued "the South . . . is neither a territory strictly detached from the North geographically, nor a moral unity. It is not a country at all, but a battle slogan." Marx's argument was that the extension of slavery would lead to "not a dissolution of the Union, but a reorganization of it, reorganization based on slavery, under the recognized control of the slaveholding oligarchy." He even suggested "in the Northern states, where Negro slavery is in practice unworkable, the white working class would gradually be forced down to the level of helotry. This would accord with the loudly proclaimed principle that only certain races are capable of freedom." In the South, "actual labor is the lot

34. Blackburn, *Karl Marx and Abraham Lincoln*, 2-5.

of the Negro," whereas Northern labor would become linked to the "German and the Irishman, or their direct descendants."³⁵

Walt Whitman, writing nearly 20 years earlier, in 1847, argued that extending slavery to the West would "bring the dignity of labor down to the level of slavery." The battle lines, then, were "the grand body of white workingmen, the millions of mechanics, farmers, and operatives of our country, with their interests, on the one side—and the interests of a few thousand rich, 'polished,' and aristocratic owners of slaves at the south on the other side."³⁶ Therefore, as Lincoln argued in 1858 in his famous "House Divided" speech, the Union would eventually have to become "all one thing, or all the other."³⁷ There could be no middle ground as Western expansion threatened the future of free and slave labor. For Marx, the American Civil War was a "struggle between two social systems . . . the system of slavery and the system of free labor." Ultimately, this struggle could only be resolved "by the victory of one system or the other."³⁸ The war, as Lincoln suggested in his Second Inaugural Address, came regardless of protestations of peace and desire to avoid war. The conflict between the Northern free labor and Southern slave labor seemed inevitable.

Marx believed that slavery in the South stood in the way of the expansion of capitalism. In the American Civil War, Marx argued that the "first act," or the "constitutional waging of the war" was the abolishment of slave labor in the United States.³⁹ The "second act, the revolutionary waging of war" was what could lead to socialism; it was not until the United States was fully capitalist in its organization of labor and mode of production that socialism was possible. Marx was in favor of aggressive expansion of capitalism throughout the country, North and South, insofar as it would lead to the development of socialism in the former colonies. Though Marx was wrong in his prediction of pending socialism—and to some extent in his assessment of Southern society as not being fully capitalist—his assessment of conflicting labor systems leading to national conflict aligned with Lincoln's. For both men, a society where men owned the fruits of their own labor was a central tenet of how this conflict must mete out.

35. Karl Marx, "The Civil War in the United States," in Richard Enmale, ed., *The Civil War in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1937), 72–81.

36. Walt Whitman, "American Workingmen, versus Slavery" in Herbert Bergman et al., eds., Whitman, *The Journalism, Volume Two: 1846–1848* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 319.

37. "A House Divided": Speech at Springfield, Illinois," June 16, 1858, Basler, *Collected Works*, 2:461.

38. Marx, "The Civil War," 81.

39. Marx, "A Criticism of American Affairs" in *The Civil War in the United States*, 200.

The Civil War resulted in a massive reorganization of labor in the United States. The most obvious change was the destruction of slave-based economies in the South. However, increasing westward expansion, led and fueled by the completion of the transcontinental railroad, expanded industrial capitalism out of the North until it encompassed the entire continent. The social, political, and economic upheavals of the war led many intellectuals to rethink basic assumptions. The war also challenged and deeply unsettled the dominant logics of Union—and labor—to which Lincoln ascribed. The Civil War led Lincoln to struggle with fatalism as a mode of philosophical and logical thought, as opposed to his earlier progressive individualism. However, before noting Lincoln's struggle to reconcile the events of the war with his vision of Union, it is first necessary to detail how he thought Union could be maintained in the years leading up to the Civil War.

IV. Logics of Labor: Abraham Lincoln's Legal Republic

For many in the antebellum era, the threat of the dissolution of Union over slavery was an ongoing concern. Lincoln believed the legal structures of government would prevent this calamity. In 1838, a 28-year-old Lincoln, recently arrived in Springfield, gave a speech on the "Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions" to the Young Men's Lyceum. The speech was his response, according to Herndon, to mob violence in St. Louis that resulted in the death of a young black man.⁴⁰ Lincoln described the difficulties, common in the post-Revolutionary generation, of inheriting the "fundamental blessings" of a country they did not earn through revolutionary sacrifice. The question for Lincoln was how to best uphold the "legacy bequeathed us, by a *once* hardy, brave, and patriotic, but *now* lamented and departed race of ancestors." The current danger was a lack of respect for the rule of law that he considered pervasive in the country. Lincoln ominously warned that "if destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide." As a lawyer, Lincoln believed that obedience to the rule of law was essential for the union of any political body. Without the blessing of a nation of freemen (at least white freemen), it was impossible for anything but internal conflict and disobedience of law to tear apart the Union. Lincoln's solution to prevent death by "suicide" was to "let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his

40. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln*, edited by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 126.

posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others." Reverence for the laws, through remembrance of the founding sacrifice of the Revolution, should "become the *political religion* of the nation." The founding fathers, then, acted as the "pillars of the temple of liberty" in the courts of law, where the nation could worship the rule of law that held them together.⁴¹

Lincoln's devotion to the temples of the law shaped his understanding of secession following his 1860 election. Allen Grossman argued, "Lincoln's strategy of order was an amplification of a legal grammar (Blackstonian) adapted to political use, the structure of which was based in the Aristotelian laws of thought—identity, non-contradiction, the excluded middle." Thus, Lincoln "judged that world that he constructed by a hermeneutic criterion of intelligibility, modeled in Euclid."⁴²

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle defined the law of non-contradiction by stating that "it is impossible for anything at the same time to be and not to be, and by this means have shown that this is the most indisputable of all principles."⁴³ As an epistemological observation, the law of non-contradiction was able to discern known from unknown and clearly delineate the subject at hand. Without the ability to distinguish between subjects, while asserting what was known and what was not, reasoning would fall apart. When posited historically, the law of non-contradiction dictated that when two contradictory states (labor v. capital, slave labor v. free labor, confederacy v. union) encountered one another, one or the other must cease to exist. Lincoln was not slavishly devoted to this logical and historical principle, but non-contradiction did shape his pre-war political thought. On labor, he believed capital and labor would not come into conflict as a necessity (as Marx did); otherwise, he would have felt the relationship was unsustainable. On slavery, Lincoln believed the Union could not exist half-slave and half-free. The legal logic—and religion—that he proposed in his speech to the Young Men's Lyceum was the foundation upon which the Republic could rest—and continue to live into the future.

41. "Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois," January 27, 1838, Basler, *Collected Works*, 1:108–15. Herndon had titled the talk "Perpetuation of our Free Institutions," but in Basler it is "Political."

42. Allen Grossman, "The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln: An Inquiry Toward the Relationship of Art and Policy," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, edited by Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 186–87.

43. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin, 2004), 61.

During his first Annual Message to Congress in 1861, Lincoln directly quoted from his 1859 speech to the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, stating again that “labor is prior to, and independent of, capital.” However, the context of this speech was very different. Lincoln described the ideal free labor system in stating that “the prudent, penniless beginner in the world, labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself; then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him.” This system was “just, and generous, and prosperous” and “gives hope to all, and consequent energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all.” His final warning was that the Confederacy threatened this system: “Let them beware of surrendering a political power which they already possess, and which, if surrendered, will surely be used to close the door of advancement against such as they, and to fix new disabilities and burdens upon them, till all of liberty shall be lost.” This warning brought together his fears over the “perpetuation of our political institutions” and the threats to free labor. For Lincoln, both were threats in which “all liberty shall be lost.”⁴⁴

If labor was largely absent from Lincoln’s speeches during the Civil War, that was primarily because discussions of labor were subsumed into discussion of slavery—which was of course the dominant system of labor in the antebellum era. Ronald White, Jr., in his excellent study, *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*, argued that “if after 1854 slavery became the central subject in Lincoln’s speeches, we should not miss the economic component in his thought. Lincoln’s economic purpose for America was the right of every person to rise. Slavery threatened this American dream.”⁴⁵ The Second Inaugural brought together his thoughts on labor with the systematic legal logic that he found increasingly incompatible with the human misery and rising death toll of the Civil War. The Second Inaugural was a strange speech, especially from a man estranged from institutional Christianity for most of his life. In one of its most famous passages, Lincoln argued that despite the expectations of both sides that the war would be something “less fundamental and astounding” to the lives of citizens, the war came with its own purposes and destruction.⁴⁶

Furthermore, Lincoln pointed out that both sides prayed to the same God, but conceded that “the prayer of both could not be answered,” as both the South’s desire for disunion and the North’s desire to maintain

44. “Annual Message to Congress,” December 3, 1861, Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:52–53.

45. Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 89.

46. “Second Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1865, Basler, *Collected Works*, 8:333.

the Union, as well as the correspondent issue of slavery, could not both be reconciled by prayer. Since God could not possibly answer both prayers, Lincoln asserted that "The Almighty has His own purposes," which we can only judge to be "true and righteous altogether," even if that means, in retribution for the scourge of slavery, "every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword."⁴⁷ Instead of either side having the agency to end the war, Lincoln committed to the fatalistic view that it was in God's hands. The purposes of God were not even fathomable, but humanity must still abide by the dictates of the Almighty. War weary, Lincoln spoke less like a man certain that a contradictory state of affairs could not last, but rather more like a man who had seen the four turbulent years of a bloody war and a supposedly just God in continual contradiction, with no sign of reconciliation of these material facts.

Lincoln's supposed fatalism in this speech has often been regarded as a type of resignation in his later years. Fatalism is a philosophical belief that laws of causation govern all things and they are bound to happen regardless of man's actions in the world. Many authors, including Allen Guelzo, attribute Lincoln's fatalism to the nascent Calvinism in his childhood.⁴⁸ White argued instead that "the logic and language of fatalism . . . did not exhaust his thinking about historical causation. Under the enormous weight of war, Lincoln was forced to think more deeply about the historical basis of the war."⁴⁹ While he was often attracted to fatalistic thinking, Lincoln was also a continual proponent of individual uplift. If certain things are simply "bound to happen," then fate, not effort nor hard work, was the cause of individual success or failure. In the face of ultimate failure, Lincoln was attempting to address this problem in his Second Inaugural.

Lincoln had begun thinking about the divine's relationship with humanity earlier in the war. In an unpublished fragment, "Meditation on the Divine Will" from 1862, Lincoln wrote a draft of the idea that God was on both sides of the conflict, but neither side appeared to be prevailing. This presented the ultimate contradiction: "God can not be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time." Lincoln posited instead that "God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party" since "God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet," though He could have "either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest." Even as the contest raged on and the body count rose, Lincoln argued, "He could give the final victory to either

47. Ibid.

48. Guelzo, "Unlikely Intellectual Biography," 20.

49. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 149.

side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."⁵⁰ Lincoln entertained a series of logical impossibilities that came about through holding a belief in a Divine Will and a witnessing of the bloody Civil War.

Lincoln also began working out these problems in church. Phineas D. Gurley was the minister at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington. He and Lincoln were on friendly terms, with Lincoln reportedly stating of Gurley that "He don't preach politics. I get enough of that through the week, and when I go to church, I like to hear the gospel."⁵¹ One of Gurley's sermons, "Man's Projects and God's Results," called attention to the problem that Lincoln was dealing with. Gurley gave the sermon on August 6, 1863, and it was later published as a pamphlet. During this summer, the Civil War was in its bloodiest days between Gettysburg in July and Chickamauga in September, which would bring over 40,000 casualties for the Union alone.⁵²

Gurley began his sermon by stating that it will illustrate the "standpoint from which I have been accustomed to look at our national troubles, and what I have believed, and still believe, will be the final outcome and issue of those troubles." He stated that "I believe this Triune God is in history; I believe He is in all history: I believe His hand and His mercy are exceedingly conspicuous in our own national history; and never more so than in the present eventful and perilous crisis." Gurley set up the central tension of the sermon by stating, "Man is a rational, a free, and, therefore, an accountable moral agent" but "it is also true that God governs the world: by which we mean that He governs not merely the world of matter, but the world of mind." God's purposes, Gurley argued, are mysterious to man but they are there nevertheless. Since God has been "manifestly and marvellously the Guardian-God of this Republic," Gurley argued that "He may chastise, but He will not destroy us; He may purify, but He will not consume us." Instead, Gurley argued it was possible "that the very efforts which have been made to divide us, should lead to 'a more perfect union'; that the very scheme which was formed to perpetuate and extend slavery, should issue in its overthrow." The ultimate purpose of the war could be to put the country "upon a foundation so broad, and deep, and sure, that it never again can be imperiled or impaired."⁵³

This suggestion mirrored Lincoln's own in the Second Inaugural. His reference to the "unrequited toil" of the slave and the "wealth piled by the bondsman" recast the Civil War as an argument for free

50. "Meditation on the Divine Will," September 2, 1862, Basler, *Collected Works*, 5:404.

51. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 138–39.

52. Phineas D. Gurley, *Man's Projects and God's Results* (Washington, D.C.: William Ballantyne, 1863), 7–8.

53. *Ibid.*, 8

labor. In other words, God's "true and righteous" judgement was that the misery of the war was retribution for the scourge of slavery. Through this understanding of the purposes of God as being wrathful payback for slavery, Lincoln was able to recast labor, and the failure of non-contradiction, within a scheme that permits a world beyond the bloody remains of the Civil War.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Lincoln never fully resolved the contradiction between "man's projects" and "God's purposes." Even if the war was retribution for stolen labor, then "God's purposes" robbed man of the autonomous self-creation that Lincoln held dear. Allen Guelzo described the impact of Lincoln's supposed fatalism on his historical legacy: "To see the man who urged 'work, work, work' as the formula for professional success . . . to see this man turn and disavow any belief in the individual's freedom to choose, or create alternatives of choice, creates at best an image of a mind divided within itself, and at worst, whispers of an underlying moral cynicism about the meaning of Lincoln's most important deeds."⁵⁵

Guelzo may have overstated this point, but it is clear the full autonomy granted to free-laboring men by Lincoln in his speeches prior to the war diminished. While Lincoln's theory of labor, in which our self-improvement contends with the constrictions of an increasingly oppressive capitalism, had not yet become the glaring incongruity it would by the Gilded Age, his grappling with fatalism points to the difficulties of fully autonomous self-creation. For Lincoln, a contradictory state of affairs was one in which only freedom or slavery, union or disunion, could be true. During the war, Lincoln's rationalism was no longer adequate to deal with the contradiction of a just God who allowed a horrific war.

The coming of the new economic world after the Civil War was something Lincoln would never see. Richard Hofstadter, in writing about Lincoln's economic legacy, proposed the fortunate nature of Lincoln's early death for his own mythic status as self-made man:

Had he lived to seventy, he would have seen the generation brought up on self-help come into its own, build oppressive business corporations, and begin to close off those treasured opportunities for the little man. Further, he would have seen his own party become the jackal of the vested interests, placing the dollar far, far ahead of the man. . . Booth's bullet, indeed, saved him from something worse than embroilment with the radicals over

54. "Second Inaugural," 33.

55. Guelzo, "Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity," in *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas*, 29.

Reconstruction. It confined his life to the happier age that Lincoln understood—which unwittingly he helped to destroy—the age that gave sanction to the honest compromises of his thought.⁵⁶

Lincoln was thus able to remain a martyr and the prototypical self-made man. If he had witnessed the capitalist excesses of the Gilded Age, it would have proved the lie to his conception of capital and labor in the starkest possible way. However, Lincoln's later fatalism became a path to avoid the historical dilemma of explaining the Civil War. The limits to Lincoln's logic of labor become obvious when the economic concerns that dominated the latter half of the 19th century challenge the republican citizenship offered to free laboring white Americans.

Conclusion

Charles Francis Adams, the U.S. minister to London, responded to Marx's congratulatory letter to Lincoln on behalf of the First International in January 1865, less than two months after the reelection. While most of the letter was diplomatically worded to avoid appearing too friendly with the organization, Adams ended his letter by writing

nations do not exist for themselves alone, but to promote the welfare and happiness of mankind by benevolent intercourse and example. It was in this relation that the United States regard their cause in the present conflict with slavery, maintaining insurgence as the cause of human nature, and they derive new encouragements to persevere from the testimony of the workingmen of Europe that the national attitude is favored with their enlightened approval and earnest sympathies.⁵⁷

This letter reminds us that the Civil War was, fundamentally, a war over labor, and that observers, such as the First International, saw it thus. For Lincoln and other republican labor theorists, the ability of men to freely labor was central to their role as socially mobile citizens. For Marx, the "American Antislavery War" was the first step toward a truly equal socialist state. While both men found labor to be at the foundation of man's capacity to act on the world, Lincoln found no real contradiction between labor and capital, since laborers were simply on their way to becoming capitalists, rather than living in a continually subservient state to capital, whereas Marx believed that capital and

56. Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln," *American Political Tradition*, 138.

57. Charles Francis Adams, "The American Ambassador's [sic] Reply to the Address of the International Workingmen's Association," in Enmale, ed., *The Civil War in the United States*, 282.

labor were forever at war, since capitalists had to squeeze profit out of the worker's labor power.

Labor was also central to Lincoln's thinking coming into the Civil War. The Republican Party was founded on the platform of "free soil, free labor, and free men." One of the tragedies of slavery for Lincoln was that it robbed black Americans of their labor power. While Lincoln's thoughts on slavery changed over the course of the war, his conclusions regarding slavery that resulted in the Emancipation Proclamation were based on his philosophy of labor. However, the Civil War also challenged the logic underpinning that same philosophy. Aristotelian logic, and English common law, indicated that contradiction meant that one state of affairs or the other must cease to exist. As Lincoln stated in his "House Divided" speech, "I do not expect the Union to be *dissolved*—I do not expect the house to *fall*—but I *do* expect it will cease to be divided. It will become *all* one thing, or *all* the other."⁵⁸ In the carnage of the Civil War, Lincoln met the limits of non-contradiction in his questioning of Divine Will perpetuating the Civil War. If both sides wished for the war to end, but it did not, then God's judgment must be something else entirely. While his Second Inaugural Address pointed towards the Civil War's becoming God's judgment on slavery, and for the "unrequited toil" of black Americans, this judgment was not one of strict non-contradiction. Instead, it stemmed from a more dialectical understanding of history as working through contradiction. The fatalism seen in the Second Inaugural, therefore, became a path towards an acceptance of limits on the human capacity for self-creation.

Considering Lincoln's thoughts on labor as central to his political philosophy allows us to note common ground with contemporaries such as Marx, which is useful for viewing Lincoln beyond his popular canonization. Furthermore, understanding his later fatalistic tendencies as working through a contradiction, rather than a failure to reconcile a contradiction, helps us note the ways in which his logic could fail to accommodate the world as it was. While the contradiction between labor and capital was obvious by the end of the 19th century, Lincoln's struggle with that contradiction during the Civil War demonstrates the ways in which this seed was planted, and cultivated, in the struggle over labor power in the Civil War as well. Fundamentally, Lincoln's self-made-man philosophy met its limits during the Civil War. He had to recognize that history—and contingencies beyond the control of the individual—had their own designs and purposes beyond what he, or anyone, could fully control or contain.

58. "A House Divided," 461.