Self-Reliance: The Role of Anti-Industrial Individualism in Abolitionism

Mid-nineteenth century America witnessed an explosion of civil unrest; changes in political rhetoric, religious revivals, economic revolutions, and unparalleled reforms combined to make the period one of the most volatile in U.S. history. Unmitigated industrialization left Americans confused and restless, and countless reform movements emerged as they attempted to control their surroundings. Many historians contribute these reforms to mass movements such as the Second Great Awakening and the homogenization of the middle class, arguing that large movements gave confused Americans a sense of community. However, in the wake of post-industrial confusion, Americans looked to *themselves* for security from their constantly changing world, and they saw the impact that they alone could make on society. Americans decried the state of society's forgotten- including slaves- and the individualism of the post-industrial U.S. inspired a militant abolitionism that led the nation into the bloodiest war in its history. The true source of nineteenth-century reforms thus lies not in mass movements but in a new birth of anti-industrial American individualism.

This 1839 engraving by W.H. Bartlett features a view of the Erie Canal as it passes through Lockport, New York (*Bartlett*). The Erie Canal was one of the numerous antebellum feats of engineering that revolutionized American transportation. It made commerce between the West and Northeast far easier, connecting the two regions through trade.

At the turn of the eighteenth century, America was relatively tranquil; picturesque yeoman farmers dominated the countryside, and self-employed artisans filled the cities. However, over the next fifty years, the northern economy underwent an incredible industrial transformation. Steamboats, canals, railways, and other new technologies halved overland shipping costs and connected previously remote areas through commerce (*McPherson,* p. 12).

Meanwhile, textile mills and factories spread into the cities of the Northeast and mass-produced goods once made by hand. Industry and transportation allowed the nation's gross domestic product to double every fifteen years, and as Americans flocked to cities to find work in factories, the urbanization rate reached its highest level in American history (*McPherson*, p. 8,9).
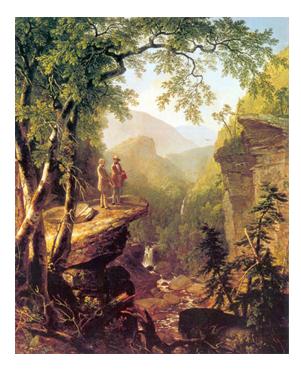
Although industrialism produced countless political and economic benefits, it also created a homogeneous and materialistic society that suppressed personal identity. The factory system efficiently mass-produced commodities once made by hand, creating a cheap supply of goods that average citizens could afford. Meanwhile, the growth of industrial jobs produced a new middle class of factory managers, rail overseers, and engineers. Eighteenth-century America was largely divided between extremely wealthy traders and poor farmers- poor farmers who were unable to afford unnecessary items. The new middle class, however, could afford superfluous goods, especially since they became cheaper through mass production. Middle class Americans were now able to purchase luxury items in an attempt to emulate the spending of the upper classes, and America began a descent into materialism. The transportation revolution also made society more homogeneous. Goods produced in one part of the country could be shipped anywhere, and regional cultural differences began to subside as nationwide consumption became more uniform. Magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Harper's Weekly* became national bestsellers, replacing the regional newspapers and magazines that had once dominated American media. This new mass communication spread one region's perspectives and ideals throughout the entire country, creating a society of conformity that convinced many Americans to pursue the media's image of perfection.

THE MONTEBELLO.

In the wake of the confusion left by these immense cultural and social changes, the well-established European philosophical movement of Romanticism was transported to America. Romanticism stressed the importance of individual passions and natural beauty in distinguishing truth and purpose (*Donald,* p. 689-696), and it found a large following in northern cities that squashed individual potential under the yoke of industrial conformity. Numerous American movements were fundamentally romantic, such as the Hudson River School, Transcendentalism, and the Second Great Awakening, and they represented a profound emotional and individualistic backlash to the homogenous and materialistic industrial world. Romanticism not only gave its adherents a sense of purpose and beauty but also of intuitive truth and justice. Hence, Romanticism inspired idealistic reform movements- temperance, education reform, abolitionism- as romantics imposed their intuitive vision of morality on society.

Asher B. Durand, a leading artist of the Hudson River School, painted *Kindred Spirits* in romantic defiance of cold and unemotional industrialism (*Durand*). The painting features a glorious image of the New York countryside that inspires an appreciation of divine nature. The two onlookers are small in comparison with the scene behind them, but they nonetheless discuss nature and attempt to gain truth and meaning from the landscape, conveying that even imperfect humans can attain beauty and truth through leaving the urban industrial world and individually contemplating nature. Thus, the painting implicitly denies the value of industrialism, illustrating that individuals can only find truth and beauty from a separation with urban materialism and a passionate embrace of glorious nature.

Springing from the preaching of an obscure New York minister, the Second Great Awakening forever transformed the spiritual landscape of the United States. With roots in European Romanticism and English Methodism (*Donald,* p. 696), the revival rejected Calvinist predestination in favor of individual free will and intuitive religion. The movement was popular precisely because it provided an outlet for the individual passions suppressed by industrialization. In "What a Revival of Religion Is," minister Charles G. Finney explained, "A revival breaks the power of the world and of sin over Christians. It brings them to such a vantage ground that they get a fresh impulse toward heaven. They have a new foretaste of heaven and new desires after union with God; and the charm of the world is broken (*Finney,* p. 203)." Finney emphasizes the power of revivalism in transcending the limits of the contemporary narrow and mechanical world. The materialism and homogeneity of industrialization dissatisfied Americans, and it left them receptive to movements that brought them to an individual "union with God" and broke "the charm of the [industrial] world." Thus, it is no surprise that the Second Great Awakening began in the "burned-over" district of New York, a region transformed by the building of the

Erie Canal; while the Awakening was a mass movement, it appealed to the individual and passionate side of Antebellum Americans, a side squashed under industrial blandness.

As Americans became religiously enlightened, they formed numerous reform movements to express their spirituality- the most prominent of which became abolitionism. At impassioned camp meetings, itinerant ministers preached the doctrine of "perfectionism"- the ability of *all* human beings, no matter how lowly, to receive perfect salvation (*Mahoney,* p. 40). Preacher Charles Finney emphasized the power of Christianity to change society's forgotten: "When the churches are thus awakened and reformed, the reformation and salvation of sinners will follow… very often the most abandoned profligates are among the subjects. Harlots, drunkards, infidels, and all sorts of abandoned characters, are awakened and converted. The worst part of human society is softened and reclaimed, and made to appear as a lovely specimen of beauty and holiness (*Finney,* p. 203)." The Awakening taught that those left out by industrialism could be improved, could be saved, and could be brought to a new union with God. Protestants organized reform movements to bring the unfortunate to salvation. Eventually, evangelicals looked to the most forgotten group of industrialization- the individuals most deprived of their God-given liberty and salvation- slaves- and created the abolitionist movement that would tear the nation apart.

Abolitionist rhetoric was dominated by Evangelical doctrines of perfectionism and human salvation- beliefs dripping in individualism. In the anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, author Harriet Beecher Stowe observed, "From the mother's breast the colored child feels and sees that there are none but underhand ways open to it… Cunning and deception become necessary, inevitable habits… The fact is, that the whole race are pretty generally understood to be turned over to the devil, for our benefit, in this world (*Stowe*, p. 214)." Protestantism taught that free will- the individual's ability to choose salvation- was the most essential human liberty. Stowe and other abolitionists asserted that the sinful conditions of slavery imposed damnation on slaves, depriving them of their right to choose salvation, and they created a northern movement to bring slaves to God through freedom.

Born from the pens of lofty Massachusetts philosophers, Transcendentalism was a second expression of romantic American individualism. The movement sharply disapproved of contemporary society, arguing that urban industrialism bent men into conforming and materialistic drudges. Transcendentalists instead supported the discovery of one's own thoughts through self-reflection in nature (*Goodman*); Henry David Thoreau, a leading Transcendentalist, wrote "Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure (*Thoreau Walking*)," expressing his attraction to nature unobstructed by industry, where one could reach the pinnacle of human intellect. Transcendentalists especially asserted that individual reflection allowed one to "transcend" the limits of industrial society and enter a state of communication with the divine. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "I thought that every time a man goes back to his own thoughts, these angels receive him, talk with him, and that, in the best of hours, he is uplifted in virtue of this essence, into a peace and power the material world cannot give… I thought it was this fair mystery, whose foundations are hidden in eternity, which made the basis of human society, and of law; and that to pretend anything else, as that the acquisition of property was the end of living, was to… make the world a greasy hotel, and instead of a heaven of companions of hosts and angels around and before us, to leave us in a grimacing menagerie of monkeys and idiots (*Emerson*)." Emerson explicitly denounces the "material" industrial world where "the acquisition of property [is] the end of living." He instead urges his contemporaries to reflect, to talk with "companions of hosts and angels," and grasp the beauty absent in industrial society.

By teaching that personal reflection was the only method of realizing truth, Transcendentalists minimized the importance of religious and political doctrine- doctrine which often condoned slavery- in favor of individual morality. They believed that government and civil laws should reflect the laws of nature, and that "a person ought not to obey such commands as are evidently contrary to the laws of God (*Emerson*)." American laws supported slavery, and the contemporary profit-driven culture accepted it. However, through their independent union with nature, Transcendentalists concluded that "slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually, to charm the senses of men, for they have no

real life: they are merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils (*Thoreau Slavery*)." Transcendentalists rejected laws and customs supporting slavery, and through their writings, they spread their anti-slavery beliefs throughout the Northeast.

As part of the Compromise of 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, a law that sent abolitionist and individualistic shockwaves throughout the North. The act required northern governments and citizens to return runaway slaves to their owners, and as northerners saw their governments rounding up innocent slaves and throwing them back into oppression, they witnessed the brutality of slavery for the first time. Perhaps most infuriating, northerners were bound to assist southerners in catching runaways, even if it went against their moral judgment. As a Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau reminded his fellow northerners that "The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. They are the lovers of the law and order who observe the law when government breaks it (*Thoreau Slavery*)." Before the Fugitive Slave Act, no northern laws explicitly supported slavery, and northerners who deemed slavery wrong had no legislation to reject. With its passage, however, Transcendentalists and average northerners alike became convinced that the pro-slavery government was abridging their liberty to oppose the southern institution, and thousands converted to the anti-slavery cause. In his "Address to the Citizens of Concord," Emerson reflected on the irony of the "Compromise" of 1850- the "compromise" that ignited northern abolitionist tension to an unprecedented height: "'A measure of pacification and union.' What is its effect? To make one sole subject for conversation and painful thought throughout the continent, namely, slavery. Mr. Webster [the author of the compromise] can judge whether this sort of solar microscope brought to bear on his law is likely to make opposition less." As abolitionism grew in the north, southern planters defended slavery, and sectionalism ballooned into a national crisis. The compromise was intended to reduce sectionalism, but it in fact heightened division, as Transcendentalists convinced northerners that the supposedly pro-south U.S. government was trampling over their anti-slavery consciences (*Gura*). Thus, the individualistic and anti-industrial Transcendentalist

movement caused an immense growth of American abolitionism and sectionalism in response to the Fugitive Slave Act.

When studying Transcendentalism alone, it appears as if the movement was confined to a lofty group of northern thinkers; however, Transcendentalist and Great Awakening individualism pervaded abolitionist rhetoric. Most anti-slavery arguments revolved around the liberties central to American politics- the liberties, evident to abolitionists, of which slaves were deprived. In the "Manifesto of the Anti-Slavery Society," abolitionists asserted, "The right to liberty is inalienable. To invade it is to usurp the prerogative of Jehovah. Every man has a right to his own body- to the products of his own labor- to the protection of law- and the common advantages of society (*Manifesto*)." The writers' argument that abridging slaves' liberties "is to usurp the prerogative of Jehovah [Jesus]" exactly mirrors the Second Great Awakening principle of God-given liberty and salvation. Transcendentalist individualism also pervades the document, which often references slaves' "right[s]." Another Transcendentalist doctrine common among abolitionist writers was the concept of blacks' capacity for intellect and moral reasoning. In his article "Truisms," abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison ironically states "The color of the skin determines whether a man has a soul or not. If white, he has an immortal essence; if black, he is altogether beastly… Blacks have intellect. The laws, at the south, which forbid their instruction, were not enacted because it was supposed these brutes had brains, or for the sake of compliment, but are owing simply to an itch for superfluous legislation." Through these obviously illogical statements, Garrison conveys that the color of a person's skin does NOT determine whether he has a soul and deserves education. He highlights the contradiction in the South's assertion that blacks are unintelligent while fastidiously ensuring they lack education. Transcendentalists placed enormous value on human reason, and as abolitionists proved blacks' intellectual capacity, northerners realized the injustice of suppressing their moral judgment and subjecting them to the arbitrary power of their masters (*Walters*). These arguments on the rights and reason of slaves allowed abolitionists to make huge advances in a North influenced by the individualistic arguments of Transcendentalists and Evangelical Protestants.

The effects of anti-commercial individualism, as manifested in Transcendentalism and the Second Great Awakening, cannot be overstated. Individualism led northerners to assert the humanity of slaves and the injustice of squashing their rights, and the North became increasingly hostile to slavery. The South, conversely, ardently defended their institution, protecting slavery behind idealistic veils of "states' rights" and "southern liberty." Sectionalism ballooned, and after the election of northern President Abraham Lincoln, the U.S. burst. Believing Lincoln represented an anti-southern majority in the North, southerners began to secede from the Union. They defended their position by arguing, "Those states [the North] have assumed the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions… They have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery; they have permitted the open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the peace… of the citizens of other states (*South Carolina*)." Southerners seceded because they were terrified of abolitionists denouncing "as sinful the institution of slavery," a direct result of Evangelical beliefs in individual free will and salvation, and they were suspicious of northern "societies'" preaching the injustices of slavery through individualistic rhetoric. The Civil War, the bloodiest event in American history, was thus fundamentally rooted not in any sensational political or military upheaval but in an American reaction to industrialization rooted in individualism.

Clearly, while many historians contribute the growth of northern abolitionism to mass social and political movements, the anti-slavery movement is truly rooted in an individualistic backlash to increasing industrialization. Seemingly small reactions to the market revolution, reactions initially on the periphery of society, led the nation into one of the most decisive and dramatic events in its history. The sources of abolitionism illuminate the personal basis of all historical upheavals: while large movements, such as Fascism, Humanism, and the Second Great Awakening, appear to drive social and political change, without the decisions of individual adherents, these groups would not exist. Only movements that galvanize the support of many people change society, and through appealing to personal passion, restlessness, and resentment, effective groups gather a diverse and organized following capable of

transforming the world. It does not take money, or power, or glory to revolutionize society; it only takes that spark that ignites the hopes of individuals- a spark like the writings of Emerson or the preaching of Charles G. Finney- that makes each person listening "resolve… that [his] nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom (*Lincoln*)"- of *individual* freedom.

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