

**Political Identities and Workplace Practices:  
Business Communities and Labor in the Early 20th Century**

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This paper has two stories to tell about politics and work. One concerns a surprising contrast in the civic ideologies of two business communities of similar economic character at the same time and in the same country: San Francisco and Cincinnati in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The men<sup>1</sup> of these communities had strikingly different ways of defining good government, understanding their own public roles, and drawing boundaries between the civic elect and unworthy. These differences, in turn, were closely tied to employers' treatment of labor. In explaining these differences, I tell a second story of more theoretical character. This second story begins with the multiple directions civic identities might have taken, and it then emphasizes the path dependent "locking in" of particular identities under local circumstances. I will begin by expanding on this second puzzle, and then return, theoretical checklist in hand, to the empirical cases of San Francisco and Cincinnati.

### Path Dependent Identities

In at least one respect, the white, privileged, and long-dead businessmen of San Francisco and Cincinnati are like the rest of us: they had a large and varied toolkit for

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<sup>1</sup>. I found no trace of female entrepreneurs in the archives, and the "manliness" of the businessmen I am studying was a point of pride for them. Thus it would be both inaccurate and anachronistic to use inclusive, gender neutral language when discussing them.

constructing identities and social boundaries. For us as for them, a number of sources keep the toolkit well stocked. One source is our multiple social relationships. Identities are constructed through our relations with others, and those ties are many and mutable (Hanagan 1994; Tilly 2005; Sen 2006). Another source is our participation in a variety of social institutions, each with its own cultural logic for allocating honor and stigma (Douglas 1986; Friedland and Alford 1991; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002). And to further complicate matters, each of our multiple identities -- as parents, spouses, religious believers, citizens -- may be defined in different ways. Not only are our potential identities varied; so are the meanings of any one of them. There are a wide array of models for the role of "father," for how being a father sets an individual apart from mothers and childless men, and for what relations between fathers and their children are appropriate. The cultural scripts characteristic of different social institutions, similarly, can be read in different ways. We might say, with Friedland and Alford (1991, 249), that the defining logic of the economy is one of commodification and accumulation. But this hardly dictates the specific characteristics of "capitalists" which individual businessmen might invoke to identify themselves and to draw contrasts with non-capitalists. The repertoire, to be sure, is not inexhaustible. At any historical moment, some ways of classifying enemies and characterizing "people like us" are readily available. Others may have dropped from the menu, their labels for stigma and honor no longer familiar. Employers in the early 20th century had many choices for drawing the line between virtuous businessmen and reprehensible unions. But other choices, common

enough in other eras, would have seemed fusty or meaningless (and thus useless for scoring points). In contrast to the early 19th century, for example, identifying unions as secret societies that threatened the republic was no longer a viable (or even well-known) rhetorical option. Still, the repertoire is extensive and forces the questions of why actors adopt the particular identities that they do, or why they choose some lines along which to draw social boundaries and not others.

In answering those questions, we might usefully invoke the metaphor of path dependency, in which multiple possibilities are winnowed down and one of those possibilities gets locked in over time (Arthur 1994; Haydu 1998; Mahoney 2000). Empirical examples from the study of ethnic identities include Brubaker [2005] and Ruane and Todd [2004]). The explanatory goal is to pinpoint mechanisms which select and reinforce particular identities from among wider discursive menus. These mechanisms will vary from case to case, but they are likely to include some mix of challenges to which particular frames are adapted, events which keynote specific identities, and collective organizations in which selected identities are embedded. For example, a path-dependent account of boundary work might begin by asking which inherited cultural tools from the past are effective in coping with current problems. Individuals, after all, do not so much have understandings of "us" and "them"; they use them to situate themselves in their social worlds and to make sense of those worlds. Depending on historical settings, some may be more effective than others in this work of diagnosing experiences and mapping social relations. For example, stereotypes of African

Americans as lazy and irresponsible as compared to whites are a persistent part of the American cultural repertoire. That way of drawing boundaries and framing differences, perhaps with some encouragement from political entrepreneurs, may be particularly favored among working-class whites when their local schools and neighborhoods are deteriorating. It provides an explanation (and scapegoat) for troubles and it justifies exclusionary practices. Under these conditions, from among the larger menu of identities and frames, racial boundaries and stereotypes "work." A second type of lock-in mechanism consists of those serendipitous events that defy conventional causal explanation. Events may crystallize some boundaries in a previously fluid situation. In Traugott's (1985, 15) account of the 1848 June Days in Paris, an accidental discharge of a rifle leads nervous soldiers to fire on the crowd, "suddenly transform[ing] reformist protest into hardened resistance." It did so, in part, by sharply defining the boundaries -- in this case, the literal battle lines -- between "the people" and the monarchy, and by reinforcing a particular interpretation of the regime's character. Here too, there is ample room for activists to put their own interpretive spins on events and to widely publicize that interpretation.

The organizations to which individuals belong further narrow and lock in choices from available repertoires of identities. For one thing, they bring people together in particular groupings. The non-obvious point here is that individuals may come to participate in voluntary associations (PTAs, unions, clubs, neighborhood groups) for all sorts of reasons, such as a desire to accompany friends, gain material advantages, assert

social status, or comply with occupational pressures. Involvement in these organizations, however, builds new social ties and new ways of identifying insiders and outsiders. This insight is familiar from institutionalist analysis: institutions constitute interests and identities as much as they reflect them (Skocpol 1992; Clemens 1997; Armstrong 2002). Studies of interlocking directorates, for example, argue that participation in multiple corporate boards and peak associations transforms businessmen's identities. By virtue of their contact with a wider range of executives and owners, individuals come to perceive class interests that transcend their own parochial concerns (Schwartz 1987; Useem 1987). Organizations also have their own standards of merit or rules of evaluation -- wealth, in some circles, but professionalism or cultural literacy or physical prowess in others. These rules divide people into categories of more or less worthy, privileging particular boundaries (from among many possibilities) between us and them (Friedland, et al. 1991; DiMaggio 1992; Lamont 1992). The manifest purposes and activities of specific organizations, finally, may serve as a model for participants' choice of identities. Unions, for example, organize employees to deal, in more or less adversarial ways, with employers. Homeowners' associations highlight property values and "law and order," interests ostensibly shared by neighborhood residents. Those organizational settings favor different ways of dividing up the social world and different selections from among potential identities, including, as Halle shows, boundary work that foregrounds class at work and race at home (Halle 1984). Clemens (1996) makes the related point that organizational forms may convey frames for understanding the social world and may

embody identities.

These selective mechanisms operate in conjunction and in cumulative fashion to steer boundary work into particular paths and keep it there. An analytical narrative of each road taken, accordingly, will combine long trajectories (such as inherited cultural repertoires), more immediate influences (a changing distribution of resources among different social actors, for example, or reliance on specific forms of collective organization), and serendipitous events. The upshot will be that particular identities and frames become more salient and enduring than others.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, were some of the paths turn-of-the-century San Francisco and Cincinnati businessmen might have followed in defining good government, constructing public identities, and drawing civic boundaries? Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era suggest at least three possibilities. The most familiar is that of the stereotypical robber baron, champion of an extreme economic liberalism. In this recipe for good government, the state's role is confined to preserving order and protecting property, allowing maximum freedom for the pursuit of individual self-interest. Gilded Age businessmen who embraced this view celebrated their heroic roles in the creation of wealth, not their leadership of political communities. And if they disdained politicians, they showed even greater contempt for labor unions, attacking them as impediments to the laws of supply and demand and as threats to the right of owners to exercise their

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<sup>2</sup>. And as in path dependency, initial moves can become self-reinforcing. For example, embracing a particular ethnic identity may lead an individual to make choices -- about where to shop and who to associate with -- which draw boundaries even more sharply

property rights as they pleased (Arnesen 1996, 49; Fraser and Gerstle 2005, 21).<sup>3</sup> This hard-nosed liberalism, historians often argue, represented a selective adaptation of older republican traditions. What had been the much-prized independence of the republican mechanic, merging economic sufficiency and political self-direction, was redefined as freedom of individual contract, unconstrained by governments or unions. And as against the subversive uses of republicanism by labor politicians, business leaders offered little praise for political participation, social equality, or the prerogatives of the community over selfish individuals (Wilentz 1984; Furner 1993; Montgomery 1993; Friedman 1998; Foner 1998). Perhaps because they focus on municipal politics, historical studies of Gilded Age businessmen and urban reform point to a different pattern. In local battles for civil service reform, more efficient delivery of city services, or an end to machine politics, business leaders are commonly found in the vanguard. Their professed commitment to public service, moreover, hardly fits the image of privatized individualism. And these men were at most selective proponents of laissez-faire. Even if lured by the prospect of higher property values, they actively supported local government initiatives to clean streets, extend sewer systems, and build parks. Accompanying this version of good government is a different way of drawing social boundaries, pitting "the best men" -- well-educated and well-established local notables -- against a rabble of new immigrants and their political bosses (Sproat 1968; Hoffecker 1974; Schneirov 1999;

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along ethnic lines.

<sup>3</sup>. Comparative treatments of U.S. businessmen, too, often depict them as especially hostile to political meddling in their affairs, disdainful of politicians, and insistent on



Beckert 2001; Isaac 2002). As against this "mugwump" adaptation of republicanism, some scholars of Progressive Era reform trace a third path. Amid the transition from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism, some businessmen found a role for reform mandated by the state and social responsibility exercised by large firms (Thimm 1976; Watts 1991; Nasaw 2005). The most enlightened of them would even profess support for labor unions as responsible representatives of worker interests. In this view, the most important civic divide separated organized from unorganized social interests (Weinstein 1968; Lustig 1982; Sklar 1988; Ernst 1995).

Neither Cincinnati nor San Francisco businessmen fully embraced any one of these public ideologies. In constructing their own civic roles and stigmatizing lesser citizens, they instead drew on themes that appear in republican, liberal, and progressive discourse. More strikingly, they made entirely different choices from this varied cultural menu. In the next section, I describe these contrasting sets of civic identities and social boundaries, noting the implications for employer views of labor. I then turn to the more analytical story of the local circumstances that locked in these two paths.

### Contrasting Civic Ideologies

#### Cincinnati

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market solutions for public problem. See Shafer 1991; Dobbin 1994; Dawley 2005.

Cincinnati businessmen set high standards for good citizenship, and few individuals outside the business community met them. Three themes figure prominently in their discussions of the virtuous citizen: the need to rise above partisanship, the obligation to serve the community, and the identity of business and public interest.

Local business discourse celebrated "nonpartisanship" -- the ability to set aside personal and class interests for some greater good. Businessmen won praise for their selflessness by giving to charity, by contributing money or time to cultural organizations, or even by running their own enterprises with an eye to the good of the firm and its customers. But the most common sense of nonpartisanship concerned politics, where local businessmen regularly inveighed against the corrosive effects of self-interest. "The great danger that threatens us as a people," a business leader told the Committee of 100 in 1886, "is the existence of that class among us [whose] meat and drink is corruption in politics" (Committee of One Hundred 1886c, 16–17). For members of the Business Men's Club, similarly, "interest and zeal in municipal office is not politics." Leadership should instead be in the hands of men like the club's members, "active, patriotic, unselfish business men, of unquestioned social and commercial standing" (Business Men's Club, Annual Report 1904–05, 13, and 1907–08, 19). Nonpartisanship in politics meant rising above class as well as above party and personal profit. Understood as the pursuit of sectional advantage at the expense of the larger commonwealth, "class" was held responsible for all manner of urban ills. In this view, class was an artful fiction of demagogues and agitators, one which divided harmonious communities, stirred up

conflict, and poisoned politics. Local railroad manager Melville Ingalls made the usual contrast when he indicted "the froth of our friend Gompers" and celebrated the victory of Taft in 1908. The election, he crowed, demonstrated "that the attempt to place class issues above the good of the nation is to no avail" (Commercial Club of Cincinnati, Box 3, Minutes, November 5, 1908).

Local businessmen, many of them belonging to civic organizations like the Business Men's Club (1600 strong in 1912 [Business Men's Club Records, Committee Minutes, February 10, 1912]), also claimed both the responsibility and the qualifications to take the lead in public life. Active participation in civic affairs, they argued, was an essential antidote to corruption and unchecked power in municipal government. And businessmen, by virtue of their prominence, their resources, and their "business like" non-partisanship, had a special obligation to serve the public good in this way. "Every business man in Cincinnati," the Business Men's Club admonished its members, "owes it to himself, his family and to his city to devote a reasonable portion of his time to public affairs. Good citizenship demands this sacrifice on the part of every man. . . . Republics require such service from their citizens in order to exist and our municipalities are but miniature republics made possible by law-abiding and liberty-loving people" (Business Men's Club, 1904–1905 Annual Report, 13). It was through his civic, charitable, and political contributions that the businessman, in another favored turn of phrase, lived a "life of usefulness."

A third theme followed from the first two: the interests of businessmen and of

Cincinnati as a whole were identical. Businessmen linked their investments -- in energy and intelligence as well as money -- in the "home economy" to a more general local patriotism, and that "identity" aligned their own opinions with those of all sensible Cincinnatians. The chief virtue of organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, its secretary claimed, was that it "furnishes a means of giving expression to the average business sentiment of the community," and "that, in general terms, is the average common sense of the population" (Maxwell Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, April 6, 1891 letter from Maxwell to J.H. Fisher). They further identified personal and community interests through their dual roles as leading businessmen and leading citizens. One's status as a prominent business figure warranted a privileged role in community life. It did so, in part, because the same qualities that defined the successful businessman -- his manly command of economic affairs, his business-like efficiency, his steady judgment -- also defined the virtuous political leader.

To these civic ideals there corresponded a demonology of bad citizens. Members of Cincinnati's business clubs regularly contrasted men like themselves, willing to subordinate their own interests to the greater good, with those who advanced only their own narrow interests. Self-serving partisanship, in this view, led straight to misgovernment. City politics was corrupt and inefficient because most politicians, many lower class voters, and even some craven businessmen were unable or unwilling to put self-interest aside and pursue the good of Cincinnati. Partisanship might mean thinking only of one's party rather than the commonweal. According to one member of the

Committee of 100, "no one has any capacity to judge public questions, who argues them from the party stand-point. He must rise or sink in your estimation just according to the degree to which he rises to the highest ideals of true citizenship, or sinks to the cess-pools of partisanship." Selfishness also had the more familiar meaning of thinking first of one's personal or business interests, as when utility companies in search of favors "corrupt men who are in office" (Committee of One Hundred 1886b, 4, 16).

The educated, self-controlled, and refined business leader also had an evil twin: the irrational, impulsive, and uncultured member of the rabble. In major cities across the U.S., the 1877 railway strike, the 1886 Haymarket bombing, and the 1894 Pullman boycott greatly amplified the venerable rhetoric of brutish mobs threatening law, order, and decency (Slotkin 1985; Leach 1994). These disturbances received ample attention in Cincinnati, but they provided less of a focal point for elite anxieties than the 1884 Court House riot. The riot followed an egregiously light sentence handed out, perhaps as a political favor, to two convicted murderers. Cincinnati's business leaders were indignant at this corruption of justice. But they were far more appalled by the popular riot that followed for the next two days, leaving 54 dead, hundreds injured, and the Court House in ashes. For years, businessmen would recall 1884 as the time when "the mob [ran] riot, with torch and bloody hand triumphant" (Committee of One Hundred 1886d, 19). And that memory confirmed their fears that normally decent working men were easily swept away, both by their own inner passions and by the contagious influence of mobs. Without suitable reforms, the *Commercial Gazette* (April 1, 1884) warned, the judicial system

could once more fail and decent men's "impulse may be again unloosed and passions again rage." Over against this rabble stood the respectable community leader, who retained calm judgment, steady nerves, and a willingness to use them in a public crisis.

A similar if less alarmist contrast appears in business commentaries on the irrational voter. The same men who could be swept up in a mob could be gulled by political demagogues. The main difference was in the risk of property damage. Local bookstore owner Davis James made the link between gullibility and class in his attack on the 1896 Democratic presidential campaign. "The worst and most unruly element has been arrayed against the law abiding by the [William Jennings] Bryan demagogues. . . Should Bryan and his anarchistic friends come into power . . . it will be a crushing blow to business." It followed that those who combined high rank and higher faculties had the highest obligations. Commercial Club members applauded a visiting cleric's dinner speech on "The Responsibility of the Upper Half." After dividing the body politic into reason (located in the head), brave energies (heart and lungs), and those appetites "which by their lower position confess their natural servitude and liability to shame," Bishop Greer urged the head to "govern and control" the rest. "That I take it is the 'upper half' in our American society" (Commercial Club Collection, Box 3, Minutes, October 15, 1910).

Selfless businessman vs. partisan, rational civic leader vs. irrational voter, steady citizen vs. the rabble, these contrasts largely pitted property owners against an immigrant working class and its party hacks, but without using the language of class. Sidney Maxwell, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, was more direct than most. In his

reports on Cincinnati's suburbs, Maxwell praised "the intelligent and refined" men and women who lived there, giving them credit for promoting "such objects as promote the public good," including "excellent schools" and "wholesome government." Unwholesome government, by contrast, he attributed to the masses: "the increase in the density of population brings with it . . . a growing inability or indisposition to suitably manage public affairs" (Maxwell 1974 [1870], 99; letter to the Columbus Board of Trade, printed in Cincinnati Enquirer, November 22, 1890). The link drawn by men like Maxwell between civic competence, class, and municipal governance was not lost on labor politicians. Where reformers saw civil service rules as protecting office holders from partisanship and corruption, Cincinnati's 1883 labor candidate for mayor saw "the first step towards establishing an aristocracy." Such rules "virtually shut . . . out all laboring men too poor to obtain [anything] better than a common school education from obtaining an office of any consequence" (Cincinnati Enquirer, March 26, 1883).

Labor leaders had more to worry about than losing out on civil service jobs. As in many other industrial cities, Cincinnati employers turned against unions in an increasingly unified and uncompromising way after 1900. The movement to impose open shops had many sources (Bonnett 1922; Fine 1995; Harris 2000). But in mounting their offensive, employers made extensive use of a specific language of anti-unionism. They did not, for example, attack unions as the enemies of Christianity, a common charge 60 years earlier, nor as the enemies of managerial efficiency, as would become increasingly common in the 20th century. Instead, they stigmatized unions as mobs, as tyrants, and as

purveyors of class feeling. Each of these indictments echoed the identities and social boundaries businessmen constructed in the civic arena. The identification of strikes with mob terror was most common during strikes, and it corresponded to businessmen's celebration of the rational man, sound in character and steady in judgment. Employers sharply distinguished such good citizens from strikers, with their lesser skill, intelligence, and character -- "the poorer element among workmen," in Baldwin Piano president Lucien Wulsin's 1902 summation (Wulsin Family Papers, Box 184, Folder 8, March 25, 1902 letter to Congressman J. H. Bromwell). The poorer element, regrettably, could infect the better. Strikers had the character of a mob because they overwhelmed the sober judgment of good employees who would otherwise remain on the job. Most construction workers, members of the Builders Exchange charged during an 1882 dispute, "do not want to strike, but have been overridden by a party of men who do not deserve the name of mechanics" (Ohio Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1882 Report, 36). Whether in industrial peace or war, Cincinnati businessmen also associated unions with tyranny. The preferred term was union "dictation," victimizing both employers and employees. In the case of employers, union interference with management prompted the greatest outrage.<sup>4</sup> Proprietors generally did not charge that union recognition and work rules jeopardized efficiency. Their complaints, instead, involved a testy insistence on running their own businesses. These were enterprises they often claimed to have built from scratch and with which they personally identified. To this strong sense of ownership they added the

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<sup>4</sup>. This was the most common objection to trade unions in an 1889 survey of Ohio



business citizen's concern for proper governance. A rolling-mill owner, speaking in 1882 after a meeting of employers, issued a characteristic declaration of independence from unions. We "will not be hampered and oppressed by the [union's] tyrannical usurpation and flagrant inroads upon natural rights of self-control of property" (Cincinnati Enquirer, April 10, 1882).

Cincinnati employers summoned up similar indignation at union tyranny over their employees. The good employee resembled the good citizen in his independence. He had the ability and character to exercise his own judgment at work. By virtue of his skillful and loyal service, moreover, he had regular employment and thus a measure of economic independence. Unions tyrannized employees in both respects. They forced workers to strike against their own will and good sense, and in so doing they undermined their self-reliance. In fighting unions, businessmen thus claimed to be defending their employees' manhood and economic independence. Finally, businessmen charged that unions promoted class division. Individual workers, both by right and in fact, could "better themselves" by improving their skills and redoubling their efforts. Good employees would certainly strive to do so, and their employer should reward them accordingly. Unions, however, sought to impose a uniform rate of wages and output. If they succeeded, the brighter and more ambitious workman would be denied the opportunity to demonstrate his superiority and move ahead. The attack on unions as agents of class conflict also mirrored the business citizen's contempt for "partisanship,"

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manufacturers (Ohio BLS, 1889, 75).

itself a legacy of republican abhorrence for putting class ahead of the commonweal. The Metal Trades Association secretary embellished this basic charge with other rhetorical flourishes, framing unions as outsiders and leeches on productive citizens as well as class mongers. Surveying a year's worth of strikes, he blamed "the activities of thirty-five well paid non-residents of Cincinnati who were sent here to preach the doctrine of class hatred and to promote every known species of discontent in the hope that a steady stream from the pockets of the great army of workers in this city might be diverted to channels which are controlled by them." His report goes on to make the link to unworthy politicians, who similarly promoted "class legislation" and played up class jealousies for partisan gain (Cincinnati Metal Trades Association, March 5, 1914). Whether in politics or industrial relations, such appeals to sectional and selfish interests were entirely illegitimate.

Business organizations had no such failings. The Chamber of Commerce, calling on all members to help end strikes in sympathy with Pullman employees in 1894, emphasized that "the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, politically considered, is strictly non-partisan. It is an organization for the promotion of business interests irrespective of classes or sections" (Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce, June 29, July 13, 1894).

## San Francisco

A majority of San Francisco businessmen in the 1890s and 1900s allocated civic virtue along different social lines and defined it in different ways. I say "a majority"

because San Francisco were more divided than their Cincinnati counterparts (Haydu 2005). In their views of how best to deal with Chinese immigrants or with labor, a relatively small number of large corporations stood apart from local firms of modest size and proprietary character. But it was the latter who set the tone for business discourse in San Francisco, both in the political arena and in labor relations. And far from claiming exclusive civic virtue and community leadership for business, most San Francisco manufacturers and small merchants placed themselves in a great middle class of productive citizens, distinct from both "coolies" and "monopolies."

Historians have documented how American workers of varied national backgrounds "became white" in common opposition to racialized minorities -- African Americans above all others, but also Asian immigrants (Roediger 1991; Jacobson 1998). Prominent San Francisco businessmen constructed boundaries along similar lines. Andrea Sbarboro, president of the Manufacturers' and Producers' Association, extended the city's glad hand to all immigrants except those from Asia. In remarks to the California Chinese Exclusion Convention in 1901, Sbarboro opened San Francisco's gates to "the industrious and thrifty Italian, who cultivates the fruit, olives, and vines," and even to "the Irish, who build and populate our cities (laughter)." Groups such as these contributed to San Francisco's economic growth and thus deserved welcome and honor. "Coolies" had no such virtues. Individually, they lacked "thrift and industry" and failed to "improve . . . [their] condition." Collectively, they were "a detriment to every country they invade" (California Chinese Exclusion Convention 1901, 37–38).

The most common charge leveled against the Chinese, by businessmen and union leaders alike, was that they lowered labor standards in the city. The "Chinaman" undermined wages and consumption levels because, in the well-worn stereotype, he had no family to feed and his stomach required no more than a little rice to fill. He would work at wages that could not support the basic living standards to which all real Americans were entitled, much less allow the accumulation of capital to start a business and move up in the world. Opening addresses at the Mechanics' Institute's industrial fairs, for example, ritually invoked the threat posed by this "constantly increasing foreign horde. [It is] rapidly monopolizing all departments of labor. Our young and active boys [may] be driven from their employment by a race with whom they cannot compete on any narrow ground in a struggle for existence" (Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco, 16th (1881) Report, 36). According to business critics, the Chinese undermined political as well as economic standards. Cincinnati businessmen often contrasted the "best men," non-partisan and civic minded, with the rabble; in San Francisco, the corresponding boundary between good citizenship and bad divided whites, whether old immigrants or new, from the Chinese. Real estate agent Wendell Easton, for example, warned in 1891 against the Chinese "scourge" on the grounds that these foreigners might, through sheer numbers, gain political influence. For Easton, as for Roediger's white workers, conjuring the common enemy of the Chinese leads to an accommodation with some of the less desirable white immigrants. "We have many disagreeable traits to contend with in the Irishman," Easton complained, "but I would

sooner have him with all his bad points than over run this city with Chinese. . . . We have got to look at this from a national and not a selfish point of view" (Bancroft 1891–1892, Wendell Easton file, 109). These racialized boundaries between good and bad citizens put many businessmen and wage earners on the same side. White businessmen, especially small proprietors, participated in the anti-coolie neighborhood associations that proliferated between 1873 and 1876; they lent support to the virulently anti-Chinese Workingman's Party in the late 1870s; and they joined the city's League of Deliverance in the early 1880s (Bristol-Kagan 1982, 32–34; Chiu 1960, 92; Saxton 1971, 118). The 1901 California Chinese Exclusion Convention reaffirmed this class alignment, giving formal representation to both business and labor organizations alike.

The Chinese were not, however, the only threat to the city's civic fortunes: so was "monopoly power," with the Southern Pacific Railroad as the chief villain. Its sins were many. For those dependent on the railroad to ship goods into the city or to reach national markets, the Southern Pacific's high shipping rates seemed to be strangling the local economy. Because the SP made extensive use of Chinese labor, it was regarded as partly responsible for the city's "coolie hordes." Because the company blocked efforts by business and union leaders to curb immigration and lower shipping rates, it also earned censure for thwarting the democratic voice of the people. Finally, the SP gained a reputation for achieving its political ends through back-door influence and bribery, making it the main exhibit in indictments of government corruption and inefficiency.

These criticisms came together in the long campaign for a new city charter in the

late 1890s. Advocates of charter reform sounded much like Cincinnati's "best men." The city's government, according to critics like James Phelan, was one of "extravagance and corruption" (San Francisco Examiner, August 13, 1896), in which officials wasted taxpayers' money and betrayed voters' trust. But much more than in Cincinnati, businessmen here frequently used this discourse of civic virtue against some of their own. They attributed San Francisco's ills not only to chaotic government and sinister bosses but to "unjust discrimination in favor of the corporations" (San Francisco Examiner, October 22, 1896, quoting James Phelan). In the campaign for charter reform, accordingly, advocates held up "corporations" as the main enemies of progress, defying the people's will in order to preserve their economic interests and political clout. These were the corrupting forces behind opposition to the charter, rather than generic partisanship, and although corrupt politicians came in for plenty of criticism, "the men chosen by the . . . machine will represent the worst of corporate interests" (San Francisco Examiner, October 20, 1897).

Prominent businessmen like Andrew Hallidie and James Phelan saw the problems of corporate power and Chinese immigration as closely linked. On one side, the Southern Pacific stoutly opposed Chinese exclusion; on the other, the presence of what Phelan called a "bondsman" class, unable to stand up for democratic principles, fueled the growth of unaccountable monopolies (Hennings 1961, 8–9). And the dual threats posed by Chinese hordes below and monopoly power above encouraged smaller merchants and manufacturers to think of themselves as part of a virtuous and expansive middle class.

Hallidie placed himself in "the great middle," and he identified that broad strata with the interests of the community as a whole. As against either corporate tyrants or coolie labor, skilled white labor and small proprietors were the sources of economic growth, public morality, and good government (Hallidie papers, Folder 6, address to the Manufacturers' Association, c. 1895, and Folder 7, "A Study of Skilled Occupations").

Having written off the Chinese and the monopolies as bad citizens, how did San Francisco businessmen define the virtues of good ones? Here too, the differences from Cincinnati are striking. First, "good citizens" included collective actors as well as virtuous individuals. In Cincinnati, of course, public decision-making routinely involved organizations like the Business Men's Club along with individual "leading men" whose prominence and probity entitled them to be heard. But these business organizations claimed to speak for the community, not for the collective interests of functional groups. In San Francisco, by contrast, it seems to have been taken for granted in the early 20th century that individuals in different social categories (finance, shipping, manufacturing; professions; neighborhoods; ethnic groups) had distinct interests and deserved a corporate voice. This shift towards groups as the basic units of liberal politics is a major theme in the rise of Progressivism (Ethington 1994; Furner 1993; Clemens 1997). In a second contrast to Cincinnati, however, San Francisco adds to Progressivism an unusual twist: local civic ideology had a clear class agenda. Most Progressives (along with Cincinnati's business citizens) expressed strong reservations about class as a basis for public action. In this view, "class feeling" was artificial, conducive to irreconcilable social conflict, and

incompatible with the public interest. A majority of San Francisco businessmen, by contrast, took classes for granted as legitimate collective citizens and as a natural (if at times disruptive) basis for social conflict. This acknowledgement of class actors and action applied both to work and to politics. At work, employers neither liked unions nor regarded them as having some fundamental right to exist. Nevertheless, most employers viewed them as natural expressions of worker interests and as organizations with whom they had to do business. In politics, similarly, it was taken for granted that working-class interests deserved representation. That might take the form of parties or caucuses in electoral politics, or it might take the form of union representation on public boards and committees.

A third assumption followed: given that unions had to be admitted as public actors, the public interest could not be defined as a classless general interest -- much less as the "above class" interests of the business community. Instead, a typical view was that of members of the Commonwealth Club, that on a range of civic issues there would be "three parties to the problem: The Unions, the Employers, and the Public" (Commonwealth Club of California, April 1910, 16). What served the public interest, in turn, was balanced class organization and peaceful negotiation of the class conflicts that would inevitably arise. Some San Francisco employers certainly took a hard line and engaged in bitter disputes with unions, challenging their very right to exist. But others denounced this fight-to-the-finish mentality on either side. Particularly between the late 1890s and the early 1910s, most recognized that capital and labor would inevitably clash.



Responsible public action meant working out conflicts peacefully rather than letting them disrupt city life and business. Claiming to represent "a large proportion of the conservative and intelligent business interests of San Francisco," members of the Wholesale and Retail Merchants cheered Mayor Schmitz for his work in mediating disputes between unions and employers. The city's industrial prosperity required that he continue to foster "peaceful and friendly relations . . . between capital and labor" (San Francisco Examiner, September 28, 1905).

This pragmatic acceptance of class representation in civic life provided a highly favorable ideological framework for union recognition and collective bargaining.<sup>5</sup> And despite temporary reversals, the general trend from the rise of manufacturing in the 1870s was indeed towards union recognition. But the civic model of class representation behind responsible leaders supported something even more unusual in the U.S. context. In construction, brewing, metal working, boots and shoes, and the waterfront trades, employers came to accept industry-wide collective bargaining as the normal method of managing labor relations. Where employers elsewhere might sign union agreements covering their own workers, it became common practice in San Francisco for organized employers and unions to negotiate terms governing all members of the industry. At a minimum, these terms included wage scales and hours of labor. They often added grievance procedures, so that disputes arising during the life of the contract could be

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<sup>5</sup>There were, of course, other reasons why unions won widespread recognition in San Francisco, including the relative insulation of local industry from national markets and the solidarity and compact organization of skilled white labor in the city.

handled without a strike. Typically, the procedures called for unions and employer association officials to intervene if a disagreement could not be resolved on the spot.

On the employers' side, what went along with these practices was the same pragmatic orientation to industrial relations that we saw in civic life. Unions, in this view, had their advantages and disadvantages. They could make unreasonable demands, such as calling for wage increases out of line with economic realities or insisting on the closed shop. But they also simplified the task of dealing with labor and could help bring stability to the trade. Consider the metal trades. In Cincinnati, as in most of the country, employers in this trade turned forcefully to the open shop after an industry-wide strike in 1901. In San Francisco that same year, smaller firms and at least one large one (Fulton Iron Works) conceded union demands for the nine-hour day (San Francisco Examiner, September and November 1901). Most other local firms followed suit after a strike in 1903. The bigger breakthrough came in 1907, when employers formed the California Metal Trades Association and began to bargain collectively with the Iron Trades Council -- centralized organizations for both sides. The outcome was a three-year trade agreement covering the entire industry, providing for the eight-hour day and regular grievance procedures. When efforts to renew that agreement threatened to break down in 1910, employers went a step further, agreeing to outside arbitration by a committee of prominent local citizens -- a procedure both sides agreed to incorporate into the new contract (Cross 1918, 283–284). CMTA president Sam Eva praised the pact. It enabled employers to standardize wages and hours, and it promised to "make the unions more

responsible"(San Francisco Examiner, January 26, 1911, February 12, 1911). The contrast to Cincinnati is especially sharp. That city's Metal Trades Association was a remarkably civic-minded body, led by men active in local philanthropy, arts, and education reform. But they were also adamantly opposed to unions. Their San Francisco counterparts displayed much less civic virtue, keeping a tight focus on industrial relations to the exclusion of most other issues. Yet out of a pragmatic appreciation of their own interests and of the balance of power locally, they embraced a corporatist approach to the rights and role of labor unions.

San Francisco businessmen's civic ideology appears in another facet of local labor relations, the use of third-party arbitration in labor disputes. Amid the labor turmoil of the late 1870s and 1880s, political leaders and some businessmen nation-wide had championed arbitration as a solution for industrial conflict. Having a neutral intermediary, it was argued, would help calm both sides and identify reasonable compromises (Furness 1990; Friedman 1998). By the 1890s, however, few employers were willing to accept any such intervention or to concede any such legitimacy to unions. By contrast, arbitration became increasingly common in San Francisco after 1900, with employers and unions alike accepting a mediating role for one third party or another -- sometimes the city's Labor Council, sometimes a civic association, sometimes a representative from the mayor's office.

Arbitration showcases San Francisco businessmen's distinctive assumptions about class and citizenship. Where Cincinnati employers treated unions as illegitimate

outsiders, arbitration constructed labor relations around the principle of mutual organization and representation. The goal was not to purge one party to industrial relations but to balance one against the other. Each stage of arbitration, whether it involved meetings between officials of unions and employers' associations outside the firm or third-party mediation between the two, enacted this model of balanced representation. Particularly when arbitration involved ostensibly neutral third parties, it also revealed a different view of the relationship between class and the public interest. In contrast to Cincinnati, here the public good was neither monopolized by business nor subverted by unions. Both parties to arbitration put their more or less self-interested claims on the table for steadier hands to sort out. Neither side's uncontested sway was deemed beneficial to the community. "Industrial peace in itself does not always mean true welfare for the community," according to a joint statement from labor and business leaders at the 1907 Industrial Peace Conference. Mere peace "may go hand in hand with an abject status of labor, or with economic conditions prohibitive to capital. This committee seeks an industrial peace founded upon just and stable relations between capital and labor" (San Francisco Examiner, June 26, 1907). Arbitration, finally, offered hope that practical corporatism's ideal of good citizenship could be achieved. Labor and capital could best serve the public good, not by renouncing self-interest, but by settling their conflicts peacefully. Advocates saw the "public interest" as jeopardized by uncompromising industrial warfare waged by either side. In 1907, the Civic League and labor leaders alike denounced "the sentiment of 'fight to a finish' . . . shared equally by

the agitators in the ranks of labor and capital" (quoted by Knight 1960, 188). Responsible leaders of labor and capital should condemn these agitators, and they did. "There [are] two elements in this city that wanted to fight," according to one business speaker at the Industrial Peace Conference, "one element at the top of the social column, the other at the bottom of the social column. . . . Between the anarchist at the top . . . and the anarchist at the bottom . . . [stand] the great body of the better element" (San Francisco Examiner, July 25, 1907). On this point the premises of arbitration come together. The public interest is distinct from any one class, and it is best served when both sides are well organized, hold their less responsible members in check, and use mechanisms for resolving disputes without disrupting the city's affairs. And in recommending arbitration, the Industrial Peace Conference's praise of "the great body of the better element" standing between high and low class anarchists echoes businessmen's celebration of a virtuous middle squeezed by the immoral corporations and uncivilized Chinese.

#### Explaining the Differences: Republican Repertoire, Path Dependent Selection

The civic ideals and boundary work of Cincinnati and San Francisco businessmen drew on some themes from laissez-faire liberalism and progressivism. Cincinnati businessmen stressed the political rights and duties of individual citizens, for example, and in this respect were moving in the direction of liberalism; their San Francisco counterparts' tripartite recipe for industrial peace (organized labor, organized capital, and

"the public") was a common recommendation of progressives. But the two civic ideologies owe more to republican traditions, with the two bourgeoisies selecting from and modifying those traditions in very different ways. In Cincinnati, as in many other industrial cities (e.g., Eggert, 1993 on Harrisburg, Gilkeson, 1986 on Providence, Isaac, 2002 on Cleveland), businessmen continued to preach the duty of civic participation, the need to elevate public over private interest, and the importance of good government for a healthy community. They put these standards of good citizenship to work as they stigmatized corrupt office holders, political demagogues, and the rabble that backed them both. And they claimed for themselves the corresponding virtues, assuming responsibility for promoting good government and the public interest against corruption and class partisanship -- with the public's and business community's interests being identical, and class partisanship being the mischief of labor. San Francisco's business community had no such consensus. But a substantial faction, at times dominant politically, took republicanism in a different direction. No less concerned with good citizenship, this faction instead stigmatized the Chinese as servile and degraded labor, unworthy as either producers or voters. Political virtue lay with a great middle class of white craftsmen and proprietors. And unlike their Cincinnati counterparts, they saw monopolies as well as unfit citizens as looming threats to republican virtue. San Francisco and Cincinnati businessmen also departed from Gilded Age stereotypes in placing the public good above selfish interests. They defined the public good in different ways, however. In Cincinnati, it proved identical with the needs of the business community and incompatible with any

voicing of class interests. In San Francisco, a majority of proprietors before 1911 distinguished the public good from the interests of either labor or capital. More, they saw it as best served when both classes were well organized and regularly involved in governing industrial and political affairs.

Identifying a common repertoire from which businessmen in the two cities drew is a first step in tracking path dependent identities. On the one hand, it reminds us that these identities are not freely constructed; actors are limited in the tools at hand. On the other hand, it forces attention to factors that steered those actors in different directions and reinforced paths over time. Without claiming to offer an exhaustive list of such factors, the main lockins in these cases were salient problems, keynoting events, and organizational contexts for action. These influences, operating in different historical rhythms, winnowed out some republican themes and reinforced others, tracing a path from wide repertoire to specific cultural performance.

Consider, first, the challenges faced by local businessmen. In Cincinnati, the key issues were economic decline and "boss rule." The city had enjoyed rapid economic growth before the Civil War, based on its position as a hub for river transport. Growth slowed in the last decades of the 19th century as railroads replaced river transportation and leadership in key industries passed to other cities. This slow but inexorable fading of Cincinnati's regional preeminence, overtaken by upstarts like Chicago, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis, was hard for even the biggest city boosters to ignore (Ross 1985). The second salient challenge was Cincinnati's political corruption, egregious enough even in an era of

unsavory municipal politics to earn a prominent place in Lincoln Steffen's exposé of "bossism" (Miller 1968). The "labor problem," by contrast, was less acute in Cincinnati (Morris 1969). The city's labor movement followed the same basic trajectory as was seen in the nation as a whole. But it did so at lower levels of organization, particularly in politics, and the major flashpoints -- 1877, 1886, 1893 -- caused considerably less alarm in Cincinnati (Morris 1969; Musselman 1975). The relative prominence of these different challenges encouraged local businessmen to define social problems in terms of good and bad citizenship, not capital and labor -- and to organize for civic improvement.

San Francisco businessmen had a different agenda. Their boom years mostly came in the last three decades of the century. And while municipal government was hardly pristine, the city was too young to have an old monied gentry offended by this stain on San Francisco's reputation (Barth 1975; Decker 1978). Businessmen had other problems to worry about. In key industries, the 1870s saw small proprietors losing ground to large factories manned by cheap Chinese labor, on one side, and Chinese-owned sweatshops on the other (Bristol-Kagan 1982; Chen 2000). In contrast to Cincinnati, middling businessmen also coexisted with a handful of hulking corporations. Those corporations used their formidable power to set rates (for shipping into and out of the city, for example) and policies (to allow continued Chinese immigration) which antagonized a broad range of city business. And above all, businessmen in many trades confronted an exceptionally powerful labor movement, with high union density and effective coordination of industrial action across trades (Knight 1960; Kazin 1987).



Labor, moreover, was a potent force in municipal politics as well as the workplace, even controlling city government through the Union Labor Party between 1903 and 1911.

Class conflict, in short, was inescapably on the agenda, and it was primarily to deal with labor in particular trades that local manufacturers organized, rather than in high-minded business clubs for civic improvement.<sup>6</sup>

Critical events confirmed these challenges and reinforced early moves towards civic- versus trade-based organization. The Court House riot of 1884 traumatized Cincinnati elites, underscoring their sense that political corruption and mob violence were the dangers to be confronted. The riot provided a persistent frame through which they later interpreted new events (e.g., was this or that disturbance a Court House riot-in-the-making?). Two events around the turn of the century played a similar role in San Francisco. In 1896, voters repudiated business-led efforts to reform the city charter, largely because reformers had failed to address the demands of organized labor (Issel and Cherny 1986). Five years later, a handful of the city's largest firms organized in the Employers Association and orchestrated lockouts in several industries to win the open shop. That effort, too, fell victim to union power and to labor's political influence with city and state politicians (Knight 1960). Those twin defeats, electoral and industrial, powerfully underscored the importance of class divisions in San Francisco civic life, and

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<sup>6</sup>. Out of a cumulative list of 137 members of Cincinnati's Commercial Club, 1880-1907 (Commercial Club Papers, Box 42), 75 can be identified as manufacturers. The 332 members of the Merchants' Association in 1896 (Merchants' Association, Official List of Members, 1896; San Francisco Chamber of Commerce Records, Box 6, Folder 69), by contrast, included only 45 manufacturers.

they helped persuade most local businessmen that class compromise was the wiser course in municipal politics and at work. And in both cities, critical events helped channel business organization -- into civic clubs to improve municipal government in Cincinnati, into trade associations to deal with labor in San Francisco.

Those organizations, finally, made independent contributions to locking in different civic discourses. They did so in several ways: in their manner of grouping individuals, in their explicit agenda, and in their institutional routines. Cincinnati's business clubs brought manufacturers and merchants from varied backgrounds together, setting sectional economic identities (as machine tool men or bankers) aside. San Francisco manufacturers, mobilized primarily to deal with labor, grouped themselves instead along the lines of trade. Within Cincinnati business clubs there was a nearly exclusive focus on doing good works for the city -- revising its charter, improving its public education, expanding its musical festivals. San Francisco trade associations, by contrast, focused members' attentions squarely on the practicalities of freight rates and collective bargaining. These different preoccupations, finally, were embedded in organizational routines. Business Men Club members sat on specialized committees for dealing with city problems; their counterparts in the California Metal Trades Association might instead be assigned the task of monitoring compliance with trade agreements. And much as it may become increasingly costly to reverse earlier economic choices, organizational "investments" in these identities and goals discouraged backsliding. The status honor that came to active members of Cincinnati's business clubs, for example,

stigmatized overt displays of narrow self-interest. Industry-wide agreements with unions in San Francisco, similarly, would reinforce a commitment to effective organization on both sides in order to enforce its terms.

### Conclusion

A disclaimer is in order. Market pressures, workplace technologies, legal constraints and opportunities, the balance of power between management and unions, these are surely the more powerful influences on an employer's treatment of labor. I have argued, however, that we should also pay attention to employers as members of business communities -- the usual sociological move from individual interests to social ties -- and those communities' standards of good government and civic worthiness -- a move from economy to politics. The case studies suggest that these standards may vary dramatically from one community to another, and that differing local standards, in turn, line up with different views of labor. Cincinnati businessmen celebrated individual citizens actively engaged in city affairs, putting the public good ahead of partisan interest. They contrasted those citizens with the selfish, the irrational, and the unrefined, a distinction that ran largely along class lines. And they reserved particular venom for class demagogues. This civic script, I argued, reappears in the particular ways they demonized unions. San Francisco businessmen were more likely to praise the independent and productive citizen in contrast to servile Chinese and parasitical monopolies, a dichotomy that placed small businessmen and white labor on the same side. And they identified the public good, not

with classless civic uplift, but with orderly negotiation of differences between organized class actors. That civic script, too, parallels employer practices in industrial relations. Both of these scripts, I further argued, are best viewed as local adaptations of common republican traditions.

Thinking in terms of path dependent identities offers a useful guide for explaining these divergent local adaptations. Out of a wide repertoire of identities and interpretive frames, some may be selected and locked in over time. The selective influences will vary from one case to another, but for the Cincinnati and San Francisco bourgeoisies, I emphasized the role of salient problems, keynoting events, and organizational contexts for action. The relative prominence of economic decline and "boss rule" as compared with powerful unions and despotic monopolies meant that Cincinnati and San Francisco businessmen had quite different problems on their plates. These were not the inventions of cultural discourse. Instead, they both shaped understandings of what needed to be done and steered businessmen into civic or industrial organization. Early moves in each direction were reinforced by critical events. The Court House riot of 1884 traumatized Cincinnati elites, underscoring their sense that political corruption and mob violence were the dangers to be confronted. The failure of San Francisco's 1896 Charter Reform campaign and the 1901 Employers' Association lockout -- each defeated by organized labor -- similarly locked in an understanding that working-class power was the key challenge for business leaders, and one not to be solved by either ignoring or trying to defeat unions. Institutional settings reinforced these divergent paths. The most important

sites for collective organization among Cincinnati businessmen were associations that privileged general civic issues and actively engaged members in those matters, even if they had initially come for the wine, cigars, and good company. San Francisco businessmen, and especially the city's manufacturers, were of necessity more involved in trade-based organizations dedicated to labor relations. Civic organizations and industrial associations connected businessmen in particular ways (across sectors or to fellow brewers or shoe manufacturers); defined particular agenda (cultural uplift or collective bargaining); and supported particular definitions of a worthy member (the engaged citizen or the responsible employer). In these ways, they helped lock in different public identities.

The factors narrowing the choices from wider discursive menus do not necessarily fall into neat temporal sequences -- salient problems coming before keynoting events, events before organization, and so forth. Nor is it possible to measure the relative causal weights of what is present (or lacking) in the cultural toolkit, of events that keynote particular problems, and of the organizational settings in which actors tackle those problems. But it is possible to construct an analytical narrative of cumulative causation which is consistent both with differences between cases and the sequence of business mobilization over time within each case.

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