

The Spirit of 1848

*German Immigrants,
Labor Conflict, and the Coming of
the Civil War*

Bruce Levine

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The Spirit of 1848

To Seymour and Harriet Levine
with love and gratitude

Preface

This study of immigration, class formation, and politics in the Civil War era reflects three general interests that have engaged me since my undergraduate and graduate studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s—the transition from precapitalist to capitalist forms of social organization; the multiclass democratic revolutions that have often accompanied this transition; and the relationship between class and ethnicity. I have thus lived with this subject for quite a while, so any acknowledgment of the debts accumulated along the way tends to shade into autobiography.

I first grappled with many of the historical issues involved in industrialization in an undergraduate honors course at the University of Michigan led by Frederick D. Marquardt. About ten years later I was fortunate to reestablish contact with Fred (now at Syracuse University), and he has since then generously shared with me his knowledge and insight regarding pre-1848 (*Vormärz*) German social history. In graduate school at the University of Rochester, an extremely intensive and intellectually exhilarating seminar on “The Rise and Development of World Capitalism” led by Eugene D. Genovese, Harry Harootunian, and the late Sanford Elwitt deeply influenced the way I have come to view many of the large themes broached in the present work.

These themes inspired my doctoral work, which was supervised by the late Herbert G. Gutman. When Herb moved to the City University of New York, Professor Stanley Engerman supervised the dissertation’s completion; Marvin Becker and Mary Young prodded me to make a number of signal improvements. Stan Engerman is in many

ways a model of what we all aspire to be—a learned, hard-working, committed, scrupulously honest scholar who generously aids colleagues regardless of his intellectual differences with them. Over the course of many years he has meticulously scrutinized successive drafts of this manuscript, guided me to valuable data, gently pointed out errors of commission and omission, and shrewdly counseled me about how best to present views that often diverged from his own.

In 1981 Herb Gutman brought me onto the American Social History Project as its director of research and writing. Then based at the Graduate Center of CUNY, the project set itself a major task—re-synthesizing the history of American working people and presenting it in a popularly accessible form. One fruit of that effort is *Who Built America?: Working People in the Nation's Politics, Economy, Culture and Society*, the first volume of which appeared in 1990. My long and intensive involvement with that project and book necessarily protracted preparation of the present work. But it also substantially broadened my knowledge of the monographic and journal literature in American social history generally and deepened my understanding of the specific era in which the present study is set. At the same time, it put me into a close, day-to-day working relationship with a wonderful team of colleagues and friends. Especially supportive were Joshua Brown, Stephen Brier, Kate Pfordresher, and Michael Hyman, who encouraged me to find time for my own research and patiently read and criticized numberless drafts of research papers, articles, and manuscript chapters. Of course, working closely with Herb Gutman again between 1981 until his premature death four years later was the greatest gift of all. He was my teacher, collaborator, friend, and godfather. I owe him so much, and I still miss him terribly.

Since the fall of 1986 I have been teaching at the University of Cincinnati. Members and successive heads of the history department have been unfailingly supportive of my research and writing, as has the college administration. I have also been fortunate in working with a group of bright and talented German-born graduate students (Sigrid Adickes, Nina Mijagkij, Mathias Dreissig, Thomas Winter, and Michael Blum) who checked—and often corrected—my translations of nineteenth-century German-language materials. In 1988 a grant from the University Research Council supported a summer spent commuting back and forth from word processor to library. Subventions from the university's Charles Phelps Taft Memorial Fund, the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences, and the Division of Graduate Studies and Research facilitated publication of the final manuscript.

In addition to those already mentioned, a number of colleagues have generously read all or part of the present manuscript: David Montgomery, Sean Wilentz, Eric Foner, Fernando Fasce, Matteo Sanfilippo, Geoffrey Eley, Jean Quataert, Frederick C. Luebke, James M. Bergquist, Walter Kamphoefner, Roger Daniels, Jonathan Sperber, Nora Faires, Ira Katznelson, Jörg Nagler, Michael F. Holt, and Roger Ransom. Each has offered thoughtful suggestions for improvement. I have incorporated as many of them as I could without turning this book into even more of a life's work than it has already become. Still others (such as Horst Groschopp, Dieter Langewiesche, Hans-Arthur Marsiske, and Dieter Plehwe) have helped me obtain materials from Germany or (such as Hartmut Keil, Iver Bernstein, John Jentz, David W. Galenson, Jörg Nagler, and Nora Faires) allowed me to read their unpublished article and book manuscripts. Wolfgang Köllmann, Peter Marschalck, and Harvard University's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History graciously granted permission to reproduce a map that originally appeared in the 1973 issue of *Perspectives in American History*.

The staffs of numerous libraries have contributed greatly to this book, including the New York Public Library (both the research branch at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street and the Annex), the Tamiment Institute, the Columbia University Library, the library at the CUNY Graduate Center, the Newark Public Library, the State Library of Pennsylvania, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, the National Archives (Legislative Division), the University of Chicago Library, the Chicago Historical Society, the Illinois State Archives, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the Iowa State Historical Department, the State Library of Ohio, the Ohio Historical Society, the Cincinnati Historical Society, and the Cincinnati Public Library. I have incurred my greatest such debts at the University of Cincinnati library system—notably to its superb and endlessly helpful bibliographer Sally Moffitt; to the German-American collection and its organizer and curator Don Heinrich Tolzmann (a historian in his own right); and especially to the good-humored, tireless, indefatigable, but too often anonymous staff of its interlibrary loan department—department head Dan Gottlieb as well as Michael Bramel, Christine Brunkala, Linda Gromen, Elizabeth Hamilton, Carole Mosher, Iqbal Nahwaz, Kathy Scardina, Diana Schmidt, and Tom White. I have wondered more than once whether their names belonged on the title page of this book rather than in the acknowledgments.

My relationship with the University of Illinois Press has been a pleasure. Over the many years since we first signed our contract, Richard Wentworth, director of the press and my editor, has managed to remain both patient and encouraging. Karen Hewitt and Theresa L. Sears have cheerfully and deftly piloted both manuscript and author through many twists and turns in the publication procedure and past numerous potential hazards that lurked along the way. The diligence, patience, and good humor of my copy editor, Beth Bower, has been a blessing.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Seymour and Harriet Levine, in partial compensation for so many years of moral and material support.

Though none of the individuals named above bears any responsibility for what follows, all deserve a share of the credit for whatever is of value here. To them—and to the many other friends and colleagues whose names I have failed to mention here—my deepest thanks.

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Introduction

“Either Social or Political Refugees”

The present work explores relationships among international migration and class formation during a crucial phase in the economic and political development of Europe and North America. It integrates historical themes that have commonly been treated in relative isolation from one another. Studies of immigration or ethnicity, for example, have tended to focus rather tightly on the special problems and achievements of subgroups within society—or on those moving from one society to another. That preoccupation is both understandable and useful; it directs our attention toward a significant aspect of historical experience, one that is especially important in the United States. Oscar Handlin told us forty years ago, indeed, that “the immigrants *were* American history.” And British historian M. A. Jones added almost a decade later that “immigration, which was America’s historic *raison d’être*, has been the most persistent and the most pervasive influence in her development.”¹

But a focus on the immigrants alone is too narrow. It obscures the larger historical processes that uprooted them and helped decide their destination, that shaped the ways in which they affected, and were affected by, life in their new homeland. Broadening the inquiry to include these processes helps clarify the nature and significance of the immigrants’ experience. Thus Jones emphasized “that immigrants were an integral part of an organic whole. Nothing they did in America had any meaning save in the larger context of the life of the nation.” John Higham, too, urged us to reexamine immigration in the context of the evolving “structure of American society,” specifying the need

“to work out . . . the interrelationships between classes and ethnic groups.”²

These strictures are particularly relevant to the study of immigrants in the antebellum United States. National development reached a decisive turning point during the two decades between 1840 and 1860 in economic, demographic, and political terms.

First, commercial and industrial development accelerated sharply. This was a pivotal period in the processes of industrialization and working-class formation. According to one rough estimate, fewer than a fifth of the nation's free labor force in Thomas Jefferson's day worked for wages, but by the time of Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, more than one-half did.³

Second, immigration rose to unprecedented levels. Between 1840 and 1860, more than four million people entered the United States. This official statistic (which likely understates the reality) was equal to about 30 percent of the total free population of the nation in 1840. In proportional terms, this influx of immigrants was the largest in the nation's entire history. Almost three-quarters of the newcomers came from Ireland or the German states, and most settled in the nation's towns and cities. By 1860 the foreign-born accounted for upwards of half the population of Chicago, St. Louis, Milwaukee, and San Francisco; at least 40 percent of the residents of New York, Cincinnati, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit; and imposing minorities in nearly all other major population centers. (These calculations, moreover, still exclude native Americans born of immigrant parents.)⁴

Third, the antebellum period's mounting struggle over the future of slavery was central to the reorganization of political life that destroyed the Whigs, split the Democrats, and spawned the Republicans. This struggle ultimately exploded in a civil war widely considered then, and later, to be a second American Revolution.

These three developments have often been examined individually, but their interconnections have received less attention. As a result, the momentous political issues of the Civil War era have often appeared unrelated to the most important economic and social changes that were reshaping antebellum society, and with it the lives of America's common people, native-born and immigrant alike. In fact, however, these processes—industrialization, urbanization, and the formation of a class of industrial wage earners; growing and changing immigration; and the deepening conflict over the slave labor system—were tightly interwoven.

The great transatlantic migrations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were in no small measure the result of commercial and

industrial changes in Europe and North America. Together (as Rowland Berthoff notes) these phenomena set the "radically altered context of the nineteenth-century economic revolution." They also gave rise to a new class structure characterized by "enormously greater distinctions between rich and poor than the aristocratic society of colonial America had ever known." This, in turn, formed the economic setting in which migration and its attendant social and cultural changes occurred.⁵

Immigration provided much of the human material with which the classes of industrializing America were built. Some new arrivals entered the ranks of the nation's economic elite, and many more found positions in the professions. Most impressive of all, however, was the central place that immigrants came to occupy within the nation's developing working class. This became especially pronounced during the economic expansion following the crisis years of 1837–43. A report to the British Parliament in 1854 on the state of American manufactures noted that "German workmen are largely employed in many departments of industry." Indeed, they already composed a significant part of the work force here in some of the occupations most affected by early industrialization. Uprooted Irish cotters, meanwhile, streamed disproportionately into the swelling ranks of unskilled labor. By the end of the next decade a British consular official here was reaching more sweeping conclusions about immigration and work in North America. Mr. Francis Clay Ford noticed a "decided disinclination" among the native-born "to share in the rough toil of purely muscular labor in which the newly arrived foreigner is readier to engage." The effect on the composition of the country's labor force was already striking, and not only in the unskilled occupations. "Foreign is every day replacing native skilled labor," too, Ford reported. The U.S. affiliates of the First International returned to this pattern repeatedly, and Protestant minister Samuel Lane Loomis observed late in the 1880s that while "not every foreigner is a workingman," still, "in the cities at least, it may almost be said that every workingman is a foreigner." The international recruitment of the American wage labor force had thus reinforced class divisions with ethnic ones. Rev. Loomis worried that "our own working people are even more widely separated from the rest of society than those in England, France, and Germany, because the differences in occupation and wealth which are becoming nearly as great here as there are emphasized here as they are not there, by still greater differences in race, language, and religion."⁶

Recent scholarship confirms some of these impressions. Poring over manuscript census returns, Herbert Gutman and Ira Berlin discovered

a “radical alteration [in] the composition of the American working class between 1840 and 1880.” “In fact,” they reported, “with a few important exceptions, after 1840 most American workers were immigrants or the children of immigrants. In every American city and in almost every American craft, the disproportionate and generally the overwhelming majority of workers had been born outside the United States or were the children of men and women who were.” The implications of these facts are profound: plainly, “it is impossible to examine American working-class development between 1840 and 1880 by focusing on native white male laborers and factory workers, as so many historians have tried to do.” The same strictures apply to the study of working-class ideals and values. The “roots and traditions” of immigrant-stock wage earners “did not reach back in time to John Winthrop and his Puritan City on a Hill,” Gutman and Berlin noted. They led, instead, back “to the peasant and commercial farms and especially to [the] capitalist labor gangs, workshops, and factories of Europe.”⁷

What specific effects did this ethnic recomposition have on the organizational and ideological development of the nation’s growing wage labor force? What impact, moreover, did it have on the nation’s other social classes? “What did it mean to live in new and rapidly growing urban settings in which the vast majority of wage earners were not products of the [old] mainstream culture?”⁸ This book offers some answers to these important questions.

Advent of the Germans

Germans were the largest single group to enter nineteenth-century America. During the 1850s, when the antebellum German immigration reached its peak, nine out of every ten continental European immigrants hailed from the states of the later German Empire.⁹ The influence and impact of German workers went far beyond their numbers as they took the initiative in the economic and political activities of the working class.

Testimony to this effect was abundant. Reporting in 1850 that “the organization of the Trades into Protective Associations proceeds unabated,” Horace Greeley’s *New York Daily Tribune* added, “No class of our population goes more effectively to work than our German artisans, who have held meetings nearly every evening during the past week, and have succeeded in uniting many of these trades into Unions.” “In general,” summed up the German-American socialist Friedrich