THOMAS BROTHERS, ANTI-CAPITALIST EMPLOYER

By Edward Pessen

THOMAS BROTHERS was a radical leader of the American labor movement which flourished briefly in the decade that ended with the Panic of 1837. He was also a hat manufacturer, an anti-democrat, and an anti-Semite. In other words, he exemplified the contradictions of human nature and the social conditions of his times. More particularly, Brothers was an example of the varied social types who played active, leading parts in the early American labor movement.

In that era when workingmen sought not only higher wages and shorter hours, but the democratization of a society which imprisoned debtors and denied schooling to the poor, and when social and economic conditions were sufficiently fluid to enable journeymen workers to dream of becoming master employers, labor organizations accepted the leadership of middle or even upper class reformers, humanitarians, orators, journalists, pamphleteers, as well as workers. In both his background and his thinking, Brothers was among the most uncommon of an unusual group of labor leaders.

Born in a small village in Warwick County at the close of the eighteenth century, by the time he left England for this country, in 1824, he already had become a manufacturer. Emigration to the United States had been his dream since boyhood, when an enthusiastic reading of Paine’s Rights of Man had convinced him

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1 For a recent evaluation of the social backgrounds of the labor leaders of the era 1827 to 1837, see Edward Pessen, “The Social Philosophies of Early American Leaders of Labor” (Columbia University Doctoral Dissertation 1954), 14-75.

2 Thomas Brothers to William Greaheed Lewis, Esq., July 8, 1839, in Thomas Brothers, The United States of North America as They Really Are: not as they are generally described: being a cure for radicalism (London 1840), I.
that an aristocratic system of government and society was responsible for the grinding poverty that was increasingly prevalent in his native land. By the time he departed for America he had come to regard the capitalistic system's financial operations, in addition to aristocracy, as the root causes of social misery. In the "far-famed republic" he sought not only to make his fortune, but to find the embodiment of his political and social ideals.

Somewhat startled by the disparity between actual conditions in America and what he had been led to expect, he settled down in Philadelphia to the business of advancing his personal fortune. During these first years here he gave little time to anything but business. He founded a hatmaking establishment which employed journeymen workmen, and only dabbled in reform activities. With the passage of time, however, he became more active in outside affairs, until in the late spring of 1835, when against a background of a resurgent labor movement he began to publish a weekly pro-labor journal, the Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate.

By that time Brothers was a confirmed champion of working-men and their interests. In the midst of the struggle then being waged by Philadelphia workers for the establishment of the ten-hour day, Brothers played a leading part at a large public meet-

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5 Ibid., 3-4.
4 Ibid., 11.
5 Ibid., 1.
6 Later when he founded a labor journal, the last page of almost every issue contained the announcement:

Thomas Brothers
HAT MANUFACTORY
No. 124 South Front Street
Philadelphia

7 See the New York Working Man's Advocate, February 1, 1834, for an account of a town meeting held in Independence Square, December 31, 1833, at which Brothers delivered a long address attacking the second United States Bank.
8 The first issue appeared on June 13, 1835.
9 See the Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate, 1835, passim.
10 For the details of the successful campaign waged by the "Trades' Union of the City and County of Philadelphia," see The Man, the Pennsylvanian, the National Laborer, for June and July, 1835; John R. Commons and Associates, History of Labour in the United States (New York 1926), I, 390-393; Commons and Associates, A Documentary History of American Industrial Society (Cleveland 1910), VI, passim.
ing called to support the striking workingmen. His journal dur-
ing its brief career vigorously supported trades' unions, strikes, and every workingmen's cause. But its publisher was an employer and perhaps inevitably was attacked as a false friend of labor.

Some critics questioned Brothers' benevolence, and even suggested that his great concern for the working class in general was not evidenced for that small portion of it employed by him. Brothers retaliated bitterly to such canards. He saw no irony in the advice he continually offered workingmen, that to secure their objectives they should depend on their own efforts alone and reject the aid proffered by well-meaning employers. To himself, obviously, Brothers was not an ordinary employer, nor did he come under the ban that he urged be placed on others.

Though he held no posts in any labor organization, his journal during its brief existence served more or less as the unofficial mouthpiece of the Philadelphia trades' union movement. Besides Brothers' own contributions to it, it carried stories and articles of interest to labor, excerpts from the fiery William Cobbett's *Penny Register*, and the speeches and articles of such prominent Philadelphia labor leaders as William English and John Ferral. In fact, Ferral, who was a leader of the Hand Loom Weavers, the Philadelphia Trades' Union, and the National Trades' Union, was an agent for the *Radical Reformer's* distribution. And as a personal organ whose columns were dominated

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11 *Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate*, June 13, 1835, 6-7, 9-10. According to his account, some old-time "office-holders and office seekers" present, objected to his chairing the meeting. He gave in to them only on the advice of his friend William English, the secretary of the Philadelphia Union.

12 In the second issue of his journal he found it necessary to write, under the heading, "aspersions answered," "I have just been informed that some place-hunting fellow, with a view, no doubt, to injure this paper, has asserted that I do not give to my journeymen the best prices. I deny this. . . . I have actually been giving more than double the price of napping the same kind of hats than has been given by the big manufacturers. All of which I can, and will prove, if necessary, *ibid.*, June 20, 1835, 31; cf. Joseph Dorfman, "The Jackson Wage-Earner Thesis," *American Historical Review*, LIV (January 1949), 298.

13 The paper failed in October, 1835. Its relationship to the labor movement of its time was somewhat analogous to that of the *Mechanics Free Press* to the Philadelphia workingmen's political movement several years earlier.

14 An advertisement listing Ferral's home as a center for the *Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate's* distribution, appeared regularly in its issues.
by its publisher, the paper affords us a full picture of Thomas Brothers' thinking on the great issues of the day.

Now it is the ideology rather than the actual labor activity of this man which is most interesting and significant. It is not that his thinking was original, for it was not. Yet it was vehemently, in some cases, strikingly, expressed, and it offers an important clue to the social mentality not of Brothers alone but of the movement with which he sympathized and was briefly identified.

In reading Brothers' diatribes against the existing order we are somewhat in the position of Monday-morning quarterbacks. We know the final score, in this case that the radical arguments of 1833-1836 were replaced after he left this country by the antidemocratic arguments of 1839-1842. Superficially, it would seem that his intellectual history is but another illustration of the classic biographical cycle: youthful radicalism, mature conservatism. But the changes in his thought were actually much more complicated and subtle than that, and are not reducible to so convenient a formula. For actually his earlier radical thinking contains the germ of his later conservatism.

In common with many other labor leaders of his day he believed American society to be dominated by a small class of rich men, and that national boasting about our booming prosperity only camouflaged the actual steady deterioration of the workers' lot.

"Ask yourselves," he urged mechanics, "what good this boasted prosperity does you; is it as easy for you to obtain bread as it was twenty years back...?" His gloomy conclusion that "the condition of the working people gets worse every day," was fortified by his belief, shared by many nineteenth century reformers, that the recent marked increase in the number of...
prisons—the workhouses of the poor—was further testimony to society's harsh class structure.  

He blamed the banking system for most of society's ills. Through the issuing of paper money by these parasitic institutions, labor was defrauded of its proper return. Not only was paper money "the true cause of the working man's difficulties," its manipulations also ground down some employers, who were "nearly as bad off as the employed, and . . . dropping every day into the ranks of the employed." His point of view is anticapitalistic or at the least shows no sympathy for the dynamic financial operations characteristic of a developing capitalistic economy. Although his opposition to the banking system was rationalized primarily in terms of sympathy for the workingmen who suffered under its operations, Brothers' position was also that of the small independent entrepreneur who desired stability in commercial relations, fearing the coercion and dislocations brought on by irresponsible agents, themselves withdrawn from any direct part in the productive process.

The way he saw it, so long as society was dominated by a few who controlled its economic life, it was idle to think that such things as internal improvements or advances in machinery, benefited the entire community. The English worker in the face of these "improvements" had become "degraded by the name of pauper; an appellation applicable only to those base wretches who gave it," while his American counterpart was suffering similarly. In his signed editorials Brothers heaped abuse on Malthusianism, poor laws, and other theories or devices which falsely criticized working people for causing a plight actually not of their own making, or hypocritically feigned sympathy for them.

His greatest scorn was reserved for the major political parties. According to him they both co-operated in the plunder of working-

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20 Ibid., August 29, 1835; cf. Seth Luther, An Address on the Origin and Progress of Avarice (Boston 1834), 30; George Henry Evans, in the Working Man's Advocate, June 14, 1834; Levi Slamm, in the Daily Plebeian, March 6, 1884, February 6, 17, 1845. The belief that prisons were the workhouses of the poor, expressed by such labor leaders as Brothers, Luther, Evans and Slamm, was popularized, of course, by Dickens in such novels as Hard Times and Great Expectations. For scholarly analysis and modified support of this thesis see Harry Elmer Barnes and Negley K. Teeters, New Horizons in Criminology (New York 1951), 177.

21 Radical Reformer, July 18, 1835, 83, passim.

22 Ibid., July 4, 11, 1835, 50-51, 52, 65.

23 Ibid.
men by rich monopolists, "and strange to tell, those that called
themselves democrats and were elected by democrats, took the lead
and shared most fully in the plunder." Sarcastically he wrote, "as
to the Whig members [of the government], I find no fault with
them; they were sent to make the rich richer and the poor poorer,
and they obeyed the will of their constituents. But the democrats,
what shall we say of them?"23 At this point he was criticizing
not democracy but what he believed to be its violation in practice.
"Oh, Democracy; how art thou mocked, insulted, and betrayed! !"
he wrote in characteristic prose.24

Workingmen must not look, then, to the leading political parties
for reform. Nor should they expect any sympathy from the wealthy
or their employers, since all groups looked after their own self
interests, and it was in the interests of capitalists to keep wages
low. Workingmen must band together in a trades' union, rejecting
all such pious would-be friends as Matthew Carey, who were not
themselves workers, and wage a kind of warfare to maintain and
improve their conditions.25 This was the only way in which they
could advance themselves—rather than by believing in such snares
and delusions as that offered them by false philanthropic friends;
he completely rejected the theory that the way to amelioration
lay in escaping to virgin western lands.26

23 Ibid., June 13, 27, 1835, 5, 35.
24 Ibid. Brothers' criticism of the major parties was also expressive of the
attitudes of others in the labor movement. Cf. Thomas Skidmore, "Report
of the Committee of Fifty" of the New York Workingmen, Working Man's
Advocate, October 31, 1829; Seth Luther, On the Origins of Avarice, 16;
Evans, in the Working Man's Advocate, November 21, 1829, March 27,
May 1, 8, 1830; Theophilus Fisk, The Banking Bubble Burst (Charleston
1837), 7, and "Capital Against Labor," in the Working Man's Advocate,
1831), 20; Charles Douglas, in the New England Artisan, June 21, August
16, 1834; John Commerford, in The Union, May 21, 1836; John Ferral to
Seth Luther, in The Man, June 29, 1835; Ely Moore, Speech in Reply to
the Honorable Waddy Thompson and others in the House of Representa-
tives, May 5, 1836 (Washington 1836), 4; William English, "Oration
Delivered at the Trades' Union Celebration of the 4th of July, 1835," in the
Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate, August 1, 1835, 123.
25 Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate, July 18, 1835, 81-82.
26 Brothers wrote a scathing critique of the safety-valve doctrine that is
of special interest to anyone familiar with this variation of the Turner
thesis: "You emigration men always begin at the wrong end," he wrote.
"If you had a farm, and had more horses than the farm would support, you
would not surely get rid of the workers and keep the racers. But to make
short... all the pure philanthropists in the country may heap project upon
project, and not one jot the better [off] will the poor be for all your
kindness"; ibid., 86-87.
Brothers was not a consistent theorist; his views were not part of a logical system into which cause and effect, diagnosis and prognosis, fitted neatly. Rather he was a highly emotional man, to whom the times were out of joint, wicked men and institutions responsible, and almost any means to which the poor and the workers resorted to ameliorate their conditions, justifiable. He came close to sanctioning revolution when he wrote, "what moral principle will be subverted if the oppressed poor should rise in their might and majesty, and forcibly take their own, which their oppressors refuse to give up?"21

Brothers' emotionalism, his hatred for those allegedly responsible for society's dehumanization, much of the intellectual content of his thought, are reminiscent of William Cobbett, his admitted idol.28 Like Cobbett, too, Brothers indulged in anti-Semitism. It was almost fashionable among some radicals of the time to engage in Jew-baiting, seemingly on the theory that the sharp commercial practices they abhorred were Jewish in origin, that many bankers and wealthy merchants were Jews, and in general the Jews were among the non-productive classes in society. Such epithets as "host of Shylocks," or "stock-jobbing Jews," were a standard part of the anti-monopoly vocabulary of Brothers and other reformers.29

Unlike Cobbett, however, who had moved from early conservatism to radicalism in later life, Brothers' intellectual transition was in the opposite direction. At least he became a critic of democracy. After the Panic of 1837 had almost ruined him financially, he returned to England in 1838, now "most reluctantly obliged to acknowledge the fallacy of self-government, believing that it . . . [had] no existence in the nature of things."30 His American experience had completely undermined a belief in political reform that had been frail to begin with, though, interestingly

21Ibid., 81-82. Shortly afterwards he asks, "how is the poor . . . man to recruit his exhausted strength, and to satisfy the hunger of his wife and children, if his all be thus taken from him, and there be no law to redress his grievances? . . . is it to be wondered at if he takes it (food) where he can find it? When he reflects that he has been a hard working, honest man, and that his earnings have been filched from him by a base rogue . . . is it to be wondered at that he becomes outrageous?" ibid., August 29, 1835, 178.


30 Brothers to Lewis, op. cit., 2.
enough, it left unshattered his sympathy for the underprivileged and for social reform. Disillusion transformed the agitator for the rights of workers into a supporter of reform through aristocratic benevolence. The change was punctuated in 1840 with the publication of his *The United States of North America as They Really Are*, a work which mingled bitter comment on social inequality with abject subservience to political toryism. It was primarily a source book of glaring social evils in the United States, for with much zeal Brothers had collected and collated materials on cruelty in the prisons, atrocities against slaves and abolitionists, the general deterioration of manners in society, the duplicity of politicians, and the suffering of the poor, to document his new thesis that democracy was inevitably a failure.

According to his own explanation of it, he had renounced democracy because its chief spokesmen and adherents were themselves largely responsible for the misery current in 1837.\(^{31}\) Democrats and democracy in this view were identified not only with the loathed paper money system but with practically every important social abuse. “Under what is called self-governments,” he wrote, “there may be as much oppression, poverty and wretchedness, as under any other kind of government.”\(^{32}\)

Another reason democracy could not succeed, he now wrote, was that people were too easily duped, since in the mass they “are, and ever have been too ignorant and unsuspecting to take care of themselves . . . they become the prey of the worst of all mankind.”\(^{33}\) In the United States a representative system existed in name only, the leading officers representing not the people, but corrupt selfish interests whose mere creatures they were.\(^{34}\) Annual elections, he assured the Chartists, will avail nothing; “democratic” opportunists, promising all things “will tell you as many flattering tales as a simpering bawd would: their motive, like hers, would be to plunder you to the utmost extent.”\(^{35}\) This argument is only an extension of a theme he had suggested in his Philadelphia days, that politics in a democracy is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing important to the laboring poor.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{32}\) Brothers to the Chartists, II, September 5, 1839; Brothers to his sons; *ibid.*, 245, 121.
\(^{33}\) Brothers to Thomas P. Cope, June 1, 1839, *ibid.*, 81.
\(^{34}\) Brothers to William Williams, February 10, 1838, *ibid.*, 94.
\(^{35}\) Brothers to the Chartists, I, August 9, 1839, *ibid.*, 224.
Rather than depend on themselves or on hypocritical politicians, Brothers' new advice to workers was that they place their faith in the ancient class of aristocrats and in God. At least in those days, prior to "reform," when that class was powerful, no man in need was allowed to suffer without community support, nor was poverty considered a disgrace. The new progress meant technological unemployment, callous Poor Laws, haunting insecurity. Reforms such as these he "should be very happy to see the end of; and, if it could be effected, instead of marching forward, to march backward, until we had passed the boundaries of the 'new era' and were once more safe in 'Old England.' "

What is the explanation for Brothers' reversion to a form of infantilism, a going back to the womb, intellectually, wherein he would place responsibility for society's welfare in the hands of the strong men or the Fathers? Certainly he had known earlier, even before he came to this country, that in this bucolic society he now professed to admire, social abuses were rampant. Yet an unhappy personal experience in America, his hatred for financiers and monopolists, to him "the vilest race that ever infested the world," and his inability to adjust his thinking to the economic development of either country, combined to transform his political philosophy. Like other radicals who followed him, he no longer believed that political action through reforming parties was the path to reform, but unlike them, neither did he counsel independent workingmen's action.

Yet in a sense he had not strayed far from the promise he had made in his original prospectus for the Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate. Then he had said, "for my own part, no exertion of mine shall be wanting to protect the defenceless in all cases, against the powerful and the guilty. . . ." But where he earlier had urged the poor and the workers to fight for themselves, he now advised them to rely on the conservative well-meaning. He had replaced "class struggle" with "noblesse oblige," ostensibly to achieve the same ends.

30 Brothers to Thomas Atwood, July 15, 1839, ibid., 52-53; Brothers, Rights and Wrongs of the Poor.
31 Brothers to Chartists, II, op. cit., 245.
32 The English Poor Law "Reform" of 1834 established a hard system of "outdoor relief" or labor workhouses that came to be called "bastilles."
33 Brothers to Chartists, II, op. cit., 260.
34 Brothers to Atwood, ibid., 52-53.
35 Radical Reformer and Working Man's Advocate, June 13, 1835, 1-2.
Unable to reconcile himself to an expanding commercial society with its shattering effect on all things traditional, Brothers at first engaged in a movement with and in behalf of those whom he conceived to be its main victims. When this proved unavailing, he turned his back on all its works and attempted to restore a romantic past of his own creation. His intellectual history is striking testimony to the dangers inherent in an undisciplined, emotional identification with a high social ideal. Thus, to him, if democracy was imperfect, as it admittedly was and often is, it must be abandoned. To our modern era which knows of many men ready to abandon freedom because their stomachs are not full, there is something instructive in the pathetic career of that strange labor reformer, Thomas Brothers.