

worthy of our consideration, and we would call upon every operative in our city, aye, throughout the length and breadth of the land, to awake from the lethargy which has fallen upon them, and assert and maintain their rights. We call upon you for action—*united and immediate action*. But, says one, let us wait till we are stronger. In the language of one of old, we ask, when shall we be stronger? Will it be the next week, or the next year? Will it be when we are reduced to the service conditions of the poor operatives of England? for verily we shall be and that right soon, if matters be suffered to remain as they are. Says another, how shall we act? we are but one amongst a thousand, what shall we do that our influence may be felt in this vast multitude? We answer there is in this city an Association called the Female Labor Reform Association, having for its professed object, the amelioration of the condition of the operative. Enrolled upon its records are the names of five hundred members—come then, and add thereto five hundred or rather five thousand more, and in the strength of our united influence we will soon show these *drivelling* cotton lords, this mushroom aristocracy of New England, who so arrogantly aspire to lord it over God's heritage, that our rights cannot be trampled upon with impunity; that we will no longer submit to that arbitrary power which has for the last ten years been so abundantly exercised over us.

One word ere we close, to the hardy independent yeomanry and mechanics, among the Granite Hills of New Hampshire, the woody forests of Maine, the cloud capped mountains of Vermont, and the busy, bustling towns of the old Bay State—ye! who have daughters and sisters toiling in these sickly prison-houses which are scattered far and wide over each of these States, we appeal to you for aid in this matter. Do you ask how that aid can be administered? We answer through the Ballot Box. Yes! if you have one spark of sympathy for our condition, carry it there, and see to it that you send to preside in the Councils of each Commonwealth, men who have hearts as well as heads, souls as well as bodies; men who will watch zealously over the interests of the laborer in every department; who will protect him by the strong arm of the law from the encroachments of arbitrary power; who will see that he is not deprived of those rights and privileges which God and Nature have bestowed upon him—yes,

From every rolling river,
From mountain, vale and plain,
We call on you to deliver
Us, from the tyrant's chain:
And shall we call in vain? We trust not. More anon.

VIEWPOINT 3

"If the slave has never been a free man, we think, . . . his sufferings are less than those of the free laborer at wages."

Industrial Workers Are Worse Off than Black Slaves

Orestes A. Brownson (1803–1876)

The development of the factory system of wage labor in early nineteenth-century America, especially in New England, coincided with the rise of the movement to abolish slavery. Both critics and defenders of slavery compared the wage system to the slavery system of labor; both systems were contrasted with the American ideal of a nation of self-employed farmers and artisans. Some argued that the system of slavery in the South was actually more humane and just than the wage labor system of the North.

The following viewpoint is by Orestes A. Brownson, a New England writer and religious leader and one-time associate of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. At the time the viewpoint was written, Brownson was a Unitarian minister and an activist in the Democratic Party. In the essay, which is taken from an 1840 issue of the *Boston Quarterly Review*, a journal Brownson founded in 1838, he asserts that wage laborers, such as the women who work in the textile factories in Lowell, Massachusetts, experience greater hardship than black slaves. Although he condemns slavery, he argues that slaves are at least provided food and shelter by their masters and are spared the constant worry of starvation due to unemployment or low wages. Contrary to the impressions provided by "distinguished visitors"

to Lowell and other factories, he maintains, the factory system of labor causes most workers to "wear out their health, spirits, and morals." Unlike fifty years ago, he writes, workers no longer have the option of moving to new lands and becoming farmers. He contends that owners of factories who decry slavery in the South are hypocrites who are exploiting the labor of others.

In regard to labor two systems obtain, one that of slave labor, the other that of free labor. Of the two, the first is, in our judgment, except so far as the feelings are concerned, decidedly the least oppressive. If the slave has never been a free man, we think as a general rule, his sufferings are less than those of the free laborer at wages. As to actual freedom one has just about as much as the other. The laborer at wages has all the disadvantages of freedom and none of its blessings, while the slave, if denied the blessings, is freed from the disadvantages. We are no advocates of slavery; we are as heartily opposed to it as any modern abolitionist can be; but we say frankly that, if there must always be a laboring population distinct from proprietors and employers, we regard the slave system as decidedly preferable to the system at wages. It is no pleasant thing to go days without food, to lie idle for weeks, seeking work and finding none, to rise in the morning with a wife and children you love, and know not where to procure them a breakfast, and to see constantly before you no brighter prospect than the almshouse. Yet these are no unfrequent incidents in the lives of our laboring population. Even in seasons of general prosperity, when there was only the ordinary cry of "hard times," we have seen hundreds of people in a not very populous village, in a wealthy portion of our common country, suffering for the want of the necessities of life, willing to work, and yet finding no work to do. Many and many is the application of a poor man for work, merely for his food, we have seen rejected. These things are little thought of, for the applicants are poor; they fill no conspicuous place in society, and they have no biographers. But their wrongs are chronicled in heaven. It is said there is no want in this country. There may be less than in some other countries. But death by actual starvation in this country is, we apprehend, no uncommon occurrence. The sufferings of a quiet, unassuming, but useful class of females in our cities, in general sempstresses, too proud to get or to apply to the almshouse, are not easily told. They are industrious; they do all that they can find to do; but yet the little there is for them to do, and

the miserable pittance they receive for it, is hardly sufficient to keep soul and body together. And yet there is a man who employs them to make shirts, trousers, &c., and grows rich on their labors. He is one of our respectable citizens, perhaps is praised in the newspapers for his liberal donations to some charitable institution. He passes among us as a pattern of morality, and is honored as a worthy Christian. And why should he not be, since our *Christian* community is made up of such as he, and since our clergy would not dare question his piety, lest they should incur the reproach of infidelity, and lose their standing, and their salaries? Nay, since our clergy are raised up, educated, fashioned, and sustained by such as he? Not a few of our churches rest on Mammon for their foundation. The basement is a trader's shop.

Factory Workers

We pass through our manufacturing villages, most of them appear neat and flourishing. The operatives are well dressed, and we are told, well paid. They are said to be healthy, contented, and happy. This is the fair side of the picture; the side exhibited to distinguished visitors. There is a dark side, moral as well as physical. Of the common operatives, few, if any, by their wages, acquire a competence. A few of what Carlyle terms not inaptly the *body-servants* are well paid, and now and then an agent or an overseer rides in his coach. But the great mass wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor. The bills of mortality in these factory villages are not striking, we admit, for the poor girls when they can toil no longer go home to die. The average life, working life we mean, of the girls that come to [work in the factories at] Lowell, for instance, from Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, we have been assured, is only about three years. What becomes of them then? Few of them ever marry; fewer still ever return to their native places with reputations unimpaired. "She has worked in a Factory," is almost enough to damn to infamy the most worthy and virtuous girl. We know no sadder sight on earth than one of our factory villages presents, when the bell at break of day, or at the hour of breakfast, or dinner, calls out its hundreds or thousands of operatives. We stand and look at these hard working men and women hurrying in all directions, and ask ourselves, where go the proceeds of their labors? The man who employs them, and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs, revelling in luxury; or he is a member of our legislature, enacting laws to put money in his own pocket; or he is a member of Congress, contending for a high Tariff to tax the poor for the benefit of the rich; or in these times he is shedding crocodile tears over the deplorable condition of the poor la-

borer, while he docks his wages twenty-five per cent. . . . And this man too would fain pass for a Christian and a republican. He shouts for liberty, stickles for equality, and is horrified at a Southern planter who keeps slaves.

One thing is certain; that of the amount actually produced by the operative, he retains a less proportion than it costs the master to feed, clothe, and lodge his slave. Wages is a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences, who would retain all the advantages of the slave system, without the expense, trouble, and odium of being slave-holders.

Slavery Is More Humane

George Fitzhugh, a Virginia lawyer, was one of the most outspoken defenders of slavery. He argued that slaves were better off than workers in New England, England, and France. The following passage is taken from an 1851 pamphlet that was reprinted in his 1854 book Sociology for the South.

Slavery is too costly, too humane and merciful an institution for France, England or New England. The free competition of labor and capital in those countries where labor is redundant, is certain to bring the wages of labor down to the minimum amount that will support human life. The employers of free laborers, like the riders of support horses, try to get the most possible work out of them, for the hired horses, they boast of the low rates at which they procure labor, and still hold up their heads in society uncensured and unimproved. No slaveholder was ever so brutal as to boast of the low wages he paid his slaves, to pride himself on feeding and clothing them badly—neglecting the young, the aged, the sick and infirm, such a man would be hooted from society as a monster. Society hardly tolerates inhumanity to horses, much less to slaves. But disguise the process a little, and it is a popular virtue to oppress free white poor people. Get the labor of the able-bodied husband as cheap as you can, and leave his wife, children and aged parents to starve, and you are the beau ideal of a man in England and New England. Public opinion, as well as natural feeling, requires a man to pay his slave high wages; the same public opinion commends your cleverness in paying low wages to free laborers, and nature and conscience oppose no obstacles to the screwing process.

Messrs. Thome and Kimball, in their account of emancipation of the West Indies, [James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1838)] establish the fact that the employer may have the same amount of labor done, twenty-five percent, cheaper than the master. What does this fact prove, if not that wages is a more suc-

cessful method of taxing labor than slavery? We really believe our Northern system of labor is more oppressive, and even more mischievous to morals, than the Southern. We, however, war against both. We have no toleration for either system. We would see the slave a man, but a free man, not a mere operative at wages. This he would not be were he now emancipated. Could the abolitionists effect all they propose, they would do the slave no service. Should emancipation work as well as they say, still it would do the slave no good. He would be a slave still, although with the title and cares of a freeman. If then we had no constitutional objections to abolitionism, we could not, for the reason here implied, be abolitionists.

The slave system, however, in name and form, is gradually disappearing from Christendom. It will not subsist much longer. But its place is taken by the system of labor at wages, and this system, we hold, is no improvement upon the one it supplants. Nevertheless the system of wages will triumph. It is the system which in name sounds honestest than slavery, and in substance is more profitable to the master. It yields the wages of iniquity, without its opprobrium. It will therefore supplant slavery, and be sustained—for a time.

Now, what is the prospect of those who fall under the operation of this system? We ask, is there a reasonable chance that any considerable portion of the present generation of laborers, shall ever become owners of a sufficient portion of the funds of production, to be able to sustain themselves by laboring on their own capital, that is, as independent laborers? We need not ask this question, for everybody knows there is not. Well, is the condition of a laborer at wages the best that the great mass of the working people ought to be able to aspire to? Is it a condition,—nay can it be made a condition,—with which a man should be satisfied, in which he should be contented to live and die?

Worsening Conditions

In our own country this condition has existed under its most favorable aspects, and has been made as good as it can be. It has reached all the excellence of which it is susceptible. It is now not improving but growing worse. The actual condition of the workman to-day, viewed in all its bearings, is not so good as it was fifty years ago. If we have not been altogether misinformed, fifty years ago, health and industrious habits, constituted no mean stock in trade, and with them almost any man might aspire to competence and independence. But it is so no longer. The wilderness has receded, and already the new lands are beyond the reach of the mere laborer, and the employer has him at his mercy. If the present relation subsist, we see nothing better for him in reserve

than what he now possesses, but something altogether worse.

We are not ignorant of the fact that men born poor become wealthy, and that men born to wealth become poor; but this fact does not necessarily diminish the numbers of the poor, nor augment the numbers of the rich. The relative numbers of the two classes remain, or may remain, the same. But be this as it may, one fact is certain, no man born poor has ever, by his wages, as a simple operative, risen to the class of the wealthy. Rich he may have become, but it has not been by his own manual labor. He has in some way contrived to tax for his benefit the labor of others. He may have accumulated a few dollars which he has placed at usury, or invested in trade; or he may, as a master workman, obtain a premium on his journeymen; or he may have from a clerk passed to a partner, or from a workman to an overseer. The simple market wages for ordinary labor, has never been adequate to raise him from poverty to wealth. This fact is decisive of the whole controversy, and proves that the system of wages must be supplanted by some other system, or else one half of the human race must forever be the virtual slaves of the other.

VIEWPOINT 4

"It is in the power of every young girl who comes here to work . . . to acquire every accomplishment, and get as good an education as any lady in the country. Have the slaves that privilege?"

Industrial Workers Are Not Worse Off than Black Slaves

Clementine Averill (dates unknown)

Many defenders of the South argued that its agricultural society was superior to the industrial economy evolving in the northern states—and, more specifically, that slaves in the South were better off than factory workers who worked for wages in places like Lowell, Massachusetts. In 1850 Jeremiah Clemens, a senator from Alabama, asked a series of questions concerning the state of factory workers and asserted that the "Southern slaves are better off than the Northern operatives." Clementine Averill, a "factory-girl" from Lowell, Massachusetts, wrote a reply letter to Clemens that was published in the *New York Tribune* and is reprinted here. Answering his questions one by one, she describes the conditions of her employment in favorable terms and argues that there is no real comparison between her situation and that of chattel slaves.

LETTER FROM A FACTORY-GIRL TO SENATOR CLEMENS
Communicated for *The Weekly Tribune*.

Lowell, March 6, 1850.

From Clementine Averill, "Letter from a Factory-Girl to Senator Clemens," *Lowell Weekly Tribune*, March 6, 1850.

Mr. Clemens,—Sir, in some of the late papers I have read several questions which you asked concerning the New England operatives. They have been well answered perhaps, but enough has not yet been said, and I deem it proper that the operatives should answer for themselves.

Pay and Conditions of Work

1st, You wish to know what pay we have. I will speak only for the girls, and think I am stating it very low when I say that we average two dollars a week beside our board. Hundreds of girls in these mills clear from three to five dollars a week, while others, who have not been here long, and are not used to the work, make less than two dollars. If my wages are ever reduced lower than that, I shall seek employment elsewhere.

2nd, Children are never taken from their parents and put into the mill. What an ideal! No person has a right to take a child from its parents, whether they be black or white, bond or free, unless there is danger of the child's suffering harm by remaining with its parents. Girls come here from the country of their own free will, because they can earn more money, and because they wish to see and know more of the world.

3d, One manufacturer will employ laborers dismissed by another if they bring a regular discharge and have given two weeks' notice previous to leaving.

4th, We never work more than twelve and a half hours a day; the majority would not be willing to work less, if their earnings were less, as they only intend working a few years, and they wish to make all they can while here, for they have only one object in view.

5th, When operatives are sick they select their own physician, and usually have money enough laid by to supply all their wants. If they are sick long, and have not money enough, those who have give to them freely; for let me tell you, there is warm-hearted charity here, as well as hard work and economy.

6th, I have inquired, but have not ascertained that one person ever went from a factory to a poor-house in this city.

7th, Any person can see us, who wishes to, by calling for us at the counting-room, or after hours of labor by calling at our boarding places.

8th, The factory girls generally marry, and their husbands are expected to care for them when old. There are some, however, who do not marry, but such often have hundreds and thousands of dollars at interest; if you do not believe it, come and examine the bank-books and railroad stocks for yourself.

9th, We have as much and as good food as we want. We usually have warm biscuit, or nice toast and pie, with good bread and

butter, coffee and tea, for breakfast; for dinner, meat and potatoes, with vegetables, tomatoes and pickles, pudding or pie, with bread, butter, coffee and tea; for supper we have nice bread or warm biscuit, with some kind of sauce, cake, pie, and tea. But these questions seem to relate merely to our animal wants. We have all that is necessary for the health and comfort of the body, if that is all; and the richest person needs no more. But is the body all? Have we no minds to improve, no hearts to purify? Truly, to provide for our physical wants is our first great duty, in order that our mental faculties may be fully developed. If we had no higher nature than the animal, life would not be worth possessing; but we have Godlike faculties to cultivate and expand, without limit and without end. What is the object of our existence, if it is not to glorify God? and how shall we glorify him but by striving to be like him, aiming at the perfection of our whole nature, and aiding all within our influence in their onward progress to perfection? Do you think we would come here and toil early and late with no other object in view than the gratification of mere animal propensities? No, we would not try to live; and this is

Slaves Lack Liberty

The following excerpt is taken from an August 5, 1847, article in the National Anti-Slavery Standard refuting the assertion that industrial wage earners are worse off than black slaves.

Even in England, the condition of the poorest people is far preferable to that of the American slaves, for they are recognized as men having rights—men to be cared for, and legislated for—men who hope for a chance to be legislators themselves, and who will, by and by, have the chance. The American slave is entirely a different being, and though he may have enough to eat and to wear, and a place to lay his bones upon after a day's otherwise unrequited toil, yet he is not a *man*, but a *chattel*. This is all the difference in the world. . . .

There is no condition, here in New England, at least, which bears the least resemblance to the condition of the Southern chattels—nothing which deserves the name of White Slavery. There are a thousand disabilities which the poor labour under, and to find a speedy remedy for these should be the wish of every man, and not only the wish, but the *effort*. A consideration of evil to the negroes should blind no one to the hardships of his neighbours; and it is not likely to. But it should be recollected that the extinction of chattel slavery—the ownership of man by another man—is to precede other reforms. . . . A man must own *himself* before he can own anything else—soil, or house, or furniture, or railroad stock; and the abolition of Slavery will be the only way to bring about a general reform in the condition of man throughout the world.

wherein consists the insult, both in your questions and in your remarks in the Senate; as though to provide for the body was all we had to live for, as though we had no immortal minds to train for usefulness and a glorious existence.

Comparisons with Slavery

Let us see whether the "Southern slaves are better off than the Northern operatives." As I have said, we have all that is necessary for health and comfort. Do the slaves have more? It is in the power of every young girl who comes here to work, if she has good health and no one but herself to provide for, to acquire every accomplishment, and get as good an education as any lady in the country. Have the slaves that privilege? By giving two weeks' notice we can leave when we please, visit our friends, attend any school, or travel for pleasure or information. Some of us have visited the White Mountains, Niagara Falls, and the city of Washington; have talked with the President, and visited the tomb of him who was greatest and best. Would that our present rulers had a portion of the same spirit which animated him, then would misrule and oppression cease, and the gathering storm pass harmless by. Can the slaves leave when they please, and go where they please? Are they allowed to attend school, or travel for pleasure, and sit at the same table with any gentlemen or lady? Some of the operatives of this city have been teachers in institutions of learning in your own State. Why do your people send here for teachers if your slaves are better off than they? Shame on the man who would stand up in the Senate of the United States, and say that the slaves at the South are better off than the operatives of New England; such a man is not fit for any office in a free country. Are we torn from our friends and kindred, sold and driven about like cattle, chained and whipped, and not allowed to speak one word in self-defense? We can appeal to the laws for redress, while the slaves cannot. . . . And now, Mr. Clemens, I would most earnestly invite you, Mr. Foote, [Henry Stuart Foote, U.S. Senator from Mississippi] and all other Southern men who want to know anything about us, to come and see us. We will treat you with all the politeness in our power. I should be pleased to see you at my boarding place, No. 61 Kirk Street, Boot Corporation. In closing, I must say that I pity not only the slave, but the slave-owner. I pity him for his want of principle, for his hardness of heart and wrong education. May God, in his infinite mercy, convince all pro-slavery men of the great sin of holding their fellow-men in bondage! May he turn their hearts from cruelty and oppression to the love of himself and all mankind! Please excuse me for omitting the "Hon." before your name. I cannot apply titles where they are not deserved.

Clementine Averill

CHAPTER 3 Wealth, Poverty, and Industrialization in the Gilded Age