
Jonathan Cope
CUNY College of Staten Island

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The Cultural Politics of Labor Republicanism in Progressive-Era Wheeling, West Virginia

In Wheeling, West Virginia, on January 26, 1904, an election was held that included a $50,000 bond levy required for the construction of a Carnegie library to replace the small public library that had been in operation since 1882. The measure failed to receive the sixty percent majority required for its passage. Organized labor, represented by the Ohio Valley Trades and Labor Assembly (OVTLA), was the key constituency that mobilized in opposition to the measure. Andrew Carnegie's role in the bloody strike at Homestead, Pennsylvania in 1892 was a key motivation for organized labor's rejection of the proposed library, but the OVTLA's opposition to the library in Wheeling was not a historical anomaly based on labor's animus towards the person of Carnegie alone. Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein observes that the issue was a "skirmish in the larger, protracted struggle waged by so many turn-of-the-century Americans to define and defend a consciously working-class citizenship." Although an isolated incident—Wheeling was one of only a few cities to reject a Carnegie library—this political struggle, and the discursive framework in which the debate occurred, raises important historical questions about American public libraries.

The OVTLA's opposition was part of a broader working-class political movement that consisted of variegated ideological and ethnic constituencies confronting a rapidly industrializing American economic system. It was a system that created great power and wealth for a few industrialists and financiers, but left many of those excluded from this wealth struggling to devise political approaches to effectively participate in the broader civic realm. In the debates about the library bond issue the OVTLA activists drew upon a tradition of nineteenth century labor republicanism that shaped their involvement in the civic affairs of Wheeling and this can be observed in the OVTLA's discussions and debates about the proposed library and how the library is discursively constructed within them. This episode poses important questions for historians of the American public library and for Library and Information Studies more generally, because the OVTLA's turn-of-the-century labor republicanism can provide a new analytical lens through which to view questions of philanthropy, freedom, and power in 21st century libraries.

The Ohio Valley Trades and Labor Assembly in the World of American Labor and Politics

In 1903 Wheeling was in a prime location in the Ohio River Valley between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati to participate in the rapid industrialization of the region. A 1911 Year Book produced by the Wheeling Board of Trade notes that iron, steel, tinplate, glass, pottery and tobacco industries were thriving. The large size of the cut iron nail manufacturing sector lead Wheeling to become dubbed the "nail capital of the world," or simply "nail city." That same 1911 Year Book boasts that "Wheeling is the heart of a great coal field, which contains the richest steam coal in the world... The supply is practically unlimited." As in other industrializing American cities of the period, a mix of skilled and unskilled, native born and immigrant, rural and urban workers

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5 Wheeling West Virginia Board of Trade, Year Book for 1911, 33.
6 Ibid., 35.
were flooding into the city to fill the demand for labor that fueled a rapidly expanding industrial economy. A trades assembly from this period (1882 to 1915) can be concisely described as "a mixed body covering a city or town and its vicinity and composed of delegates from local trade unions, workingmen's clubs, and reform societies." Established in 1882, the OVTLA was an assembly of this kind active in the Wheeling area. The membership of the Assembly reflected the differing perspectives within the American labor movement at the time. Many of the OVTLA's 1882 founders and most active members were skilled craft workers (e.g., carpenters, potters, stonemakers, ironworkers) drawn from what has been called "the aristocracy of labor." In the longue durée of U.S. labor history, 1904 can be viewed as a time of transition, or as right in the middle of what some historians have called "the long nineteenth century"—an early phase of industrial development. At this time, the most powerful labor organization America had experienced was the Knights of Labor and the key role they played in the development of labor as an organized entity. The OVTLA was responding to an industrial capitalism that had transformed the relationships between producer and society; evidence of which could be easily found in day-to-day experience. The possessors of great fortunes, such as Andrew Carnegie, seemed implacable in their opposition to the efforts of labor. These "robber barons" domination of national and most local political institutions (e.g., Congress, courts, police) meant that the responses varied based on local conditions. While American labor was able to occasionally win local struggles, it would not experience substantial political power—particularly at the federal level—until the passage of the Wagner Act and the Congress of Industrial Organizations' industrial organizing drives in the 1930s. The presence of an institution like the OVTLA meant that the various factions within Wheeling's labor movement had a platform from which to speak the language of class within the context of the strum of municipal politics.

A 1902 history of the OVTLA provides a biographical sketch of the leadership: predominantly American-born (seventy-one of the seventy-nine for whom there is information), of the five foreign-born delegates the UK, Canada, and Germany were the only countries of origin. There is little information on the rank-and-file membership of the Assembly and its affiliated unions. Eastern and Southern Europeans became more involved in the Assembly as their numbers in the ranks of Wheeling's unions grew in the 1910s. Opposition to the library was most solid in Wheeling's "community of German, Scandinavian, Polish, Irish, and Appalachian workers." African-Americans were in the Assembly (Gabriel Jackson is on record as being a officer from 1893 until 1910) and "colored" hod carrier and boothblack unions joined in 1901, so some degree of black membership can be assumed; however, there is scant record of African-American participation in the public Assembly debates. Given that 1904 was the apogee of Jim Crow segregation the capacity for black participation in Wheeling's civic affairs and most lucrative professions (e.g., African-Americans were barred from Wheeling's steel mills until the 1930s[13]) was limited. Women were involved in OVTLA, but their public participation was severely limited as well. In 1904 the Assembly and Wheeling's socialist club endorsed a resolution calling for women's suffrage and equal pay. However, the participants in the library debate for which documentation can be found were craftsmen in the skilled trades and workers who were confronting and making sense of the dislocations being created by a new form of industrial capitalism. This skilled craftworker often found a highly gendered sense of manhood in his skills and ability to provide for his family. For example, on the library issue the vocal library opponent, Ironworker and former OVTLA President Michael Mahoney lambasted Carnegie for having "driven down the women and children to the work­shop... depriving them of their natural buoyancy and youth."[14]

Importantly, the OVTLA of this period was active in the key municipal issues of the day and were a visible presence in the social and political life of Wheeling's working class. Many Assembly delegates were more closely aligned with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unionism of Samuel Gompers. Nick Salvatore argues that Gompers theorized that the way for the working class to improve its lot was to "fully accept... industrial society and its hierarchical structure" and to focus "its energies on improving their position within that society."[15] This tendency can be observed in

7 Norman J. Ware quoted in David T. Javersak, "The Ohio Valley Trades and Labor Assembly: The Formative Years, 1882-1915" (Ph.D. diss., West Virginia University, 1977), 214.
10 Rich Yeselson, "Where's the Outrage?" Dissent, Summer 2015, 142; Fraser, "The Age of Acquiescence." 11 Lichtenstein, 2.
13 Ohio Valley Trades & Labor Assembly, "Minute Book No. 3" (August 11, 1901): West Virginia Collection, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown, W. Va., hereafter WVC, 127.
the Assembly's commitment to a "nonpartisan" approach to elections and a hesitation to endorse independent labor or socialist candidates for public office (although the Assembly did eventually do so several times before AFL affiliation in 1915). This reflected Gompers' belief that "labor organizations had been the victims of so much political trickery that... the only way to keep this new organization free from taint was to exclude all political partisan action." This approach made sense to men who could use their "skill monopolies to gain good contracts." 16

During the period from 1900 to 1915 the Wheeling socialist movement gained a more prominent role in the Assembly. A 1897 coal strike staged by the United Mine Workers in the region brought Eugene Debs to speak to a crowd of roughly 5,000 in downtown Wheeling on July 27. Debs not only advocated the cause of the miners, he also preached the gospel of the socialist "cooperative commonwealth"—drawing from the labor republican tradition—leading several local socialists to found the Eugene V. Debs club for Social Democracy in 1900 that later evolved into the Wheeling Chapter of the Socialist Party of America by 1901. The socialist party of Debs (roughly from 1900 to 1920) was a formidable force in American politics at the time. In 1912 Debs would receive nearly 6 percent of the national vote for president and over a thousand socialists were elected to public office on socialist tickets (a congressman from Montana; Flint, Michigan; New Castle, Pennsylvania; St. Marys, Ohio). Foreign-language and English publications such as Appeal to Reason (published in Girard, Kansas, with a circulation of over 750,000) and the Jewish Daily Forward constituted a rich movement and political culture that was able to hold together for twenty or so years despite enormous ethnic, regional, and cultural differences. Historian Nick Salvatore found that the movement used a rhetorical tradition of Jeffersonian republicanism; an appeal that at heart was "a spirited defense of the dignity of each individual." In other words, the American socialist and labor movements of the period contained all of the contradictions of America itself, because they grew organically out of the uniquely American conditions of the period. 20

The socialists active in the OVTLA (such as Valentine Reuther, father of future United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther who would serve as President of the OVTLA in 1909, and Albert Bauer, OVTLA secretary in 1901) sat in the ideological middle of this socialist milieu. They firmly believed that American democratic institutions could be used to bring about the socialist cooperative commonwealth. They opposed both the "nonpartisan" approach of Gompers' AFL to labor issues and the more radical actions of the Industrial Workers of the World, or "Wobblies," (e.g., their opposition to signing union contracts and celebration of industrial sabotage); instead, they advocated to end capitalism through the ballot box and by building the power of industrial unions (a union organized throughout a particular industry rather than by specialization or trade). Importantly, the laborites in the OVTLA had a broad political vision that went beyond labor relations that can be traced to the labor republicanism espoused by the Knights of Labor in the 1880s. They were responsible for a platform that called for government ownership of all railroads, telegraphs, telephone lines; equal pay for men and women; municipal ownership of gas and electric utilities; the direct election of senators, and an eight hour work day. 17 The Assembly raised funds through an annual Labor Day parade and picnic in addition to various industrial fairs, festivals, carnivals, and plays. The opposition to the Carnegie library in Wheeling emerged from a rich movement culture.

The Carnegie Library Question

The Wheeling Board of Education voted to open a correspondence with Andrew Carnegie in 1899, and the first existing evidence of the OVTLA reaction to the proposal surfaces in 1901. The Board of Education considered a Carnegie library until the Library Committee was disbanded in 1910 and the decision was made to construct a new library without the help of Carnegie. 25 Wheeling's two major newspapers, the Wheeling Daily Intelligencer and the Wheeling Register, were strongly in favor of the bond, as was the majority of Wheeling's middle class. The election occurred shortly after a period of flooding that likely deterred voters who might have voted in favor of the library bond, although turnout was still very high given these conditions. A January 27, 1904, analysis of the election results in the Daily Intelligencer found that it was the overwhelming opposition to the measure and strong turnout in the southern working class wards of Webster, Union, and Ritchie that guaranteed that the measure would fail to gain the sixty percent majority necessary for passage. 26 For the OVTLA the campaign against the library bond was expansive and included a number of soapbox speeches, public meetings, and leaflets printed in both German and English

15 Gompers as quoted in Salvatore, 67.
18 Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs; Howe, Socialism and America.
19 Salvatore, 228.
20 Lichtenstein, 5.
22 Javersak, 27.
23 Bald26.
24 Charles A. Julian, History of the Ohio County Public Library (Presented at Lunch With Books, Ohio County Public Library 2013).
25 Ohio Valley Trades & Labor Assembly, "Minute Book No. 3," (August 11, 1900); WVC, 127.
26 "Death Comes to Carnegie Library," The Wheeling Majority (Wheeling, WV), Feb 17, 1900.
expressing the OVTLA’s objections.\textsuperscript{28} The campaign against the library was recalled as a formative success in Victor Reuther’s recollections about Valentine Reuther’s (his and Walter’s father) involvement in Wheeling’s labor and socialist movements of the period.\textsuperscript{29}

In his opening salvo against the first proposal for a Carnegie library in 1901, Michael Mahoney, a frequent antagonist of the socialist faction within the OVTLA who is described in a 1902 description of the membership as being “young, active, progressive and conservative, considerate of the rights of employer and employee”\textsuperscript{30} asked “Was it Mr. Carnegie’s anxiousness for the spread of education that caused his heart to become like steel to the cries of distress that went up at Homestead that memorable month of July, in 1892?”\textsuperscript{31} Mahoney went on to argue that

[...] but Mr. Carnegie guarded the interests of his employees properly at Homestead in 1892, there is no doubt that many of them would be happy possessors of libraries in their own homes and when they desired to educate their children or cultivate their own mind that no fear would enter their minds that their fingers would be stained with the blood of their fellow man? Whose blood has fertilized these books, taken from the shelves of the Carnegie libraries, which are nothing only discerned souvenirs of organized labor, unbecoming monuments to the liberties of our country?

As free American citizens, as organized working men, is this the kind of education you want to bequeath to your children and children’s children through all generations, to be the victims of aristocratic charity?\textsuperscript{32}

In these statements Mahoney invoked a conception of individual freedom and autonomous educative action that emphasizes a “labor republican” discourse in which the producer/citizen is the ideal. It was the external power of a distant industrialist and philanthropist to create such an institution to which Mahoney objected. For labor republicans Carnegie’s ability to dictate the conditions under which his libraries were built was domination personified. Later, in a debate in the OVTLA’s meeting hall several days prior to the 1904 election when confronting an OVTLA delegate in favor of the bond measure, Mahoney concealed the importance of a new library and he confirmed that his vehement objection to the Carnegie library proposal stemmed from his sense that such a library would represent Carnegie’s domination of national political and economic life.\textsuperscript{33} While of a different ideological persuasion, frequent socialist presidential candidate Eugene Debs declared in a 1901 letter that “[w]e want...”\textsuperscript{34}

...libraries, and we will have them in glorious abundance when capitalism is abolished and workmen are no longer robbed by the philanthropic pirates of the Carnegie class. Then the library will be as it should be, a noble temple dedicated to culture and symbolizing the virtues of the people.”\textsuperscript{35} In the debate around the library the unionists in the OVTLA were struggling to assert a sense of agency with respect to their local public institutions. This was a time when many of the civic institutions that were to become commonplace later in the twentieth century were still in their infancy—the public library was no exception. These activists felt that a faceless “money power” held an iron grip on many of the emerging institutions. The debate around the Wheeling Carnegie library was an opportunity to assert this perspective.

How did debate participants speak a “language of class” with respect to the library? During the contentious debates about the Carnegie library bond at the OVTLA Delegates meeting on Sunday, January 24, 1904, just two days prior to the January 26 election, Mahoney gave an emotional speech on the matter.\textsuperscript{36} Prior to the meeting, in a letter addressed to the OVTLA, the Wheeling Board of Education called upon “the well known fairness and disposition of the Trades Assembly” to request that the citizen John Coniff present an argument in favor of the library to the Assembly.\textsuperscript{37} Coniff argued his case to the Assembly in the following terms:

A public library was conceded to be a necessity and the value of education did not depend on a college education, but to a man’s energy, pluck and determination. In this country more than any other the advantages of the highest education were better, poverty was no bar, the sons of toil had the same advantage as the rich. The natural impulse of the people was for education, the taste for good reading makes a happy man. The present library is not one third sufficient for the needs of the people, there (sic) are craving, in fact they were greedy for good books.\textsuperscript{38}

This passage is an example of how those in favor of the library drew from the same wellspring of American political rhetoric as the library’s opponents, but that they did so in a manner that framed the library as providing a form of freedom that lacked coercion. In his response Mahoney emphasized some of the other problems involving civic infrastructure by noting that “these streets are disgraceful, dangerous and not fit to walk on”—serving as reminder that a great deal of the civic infrastructure that would become commonplace in the twentieth century was still being built and that a library was but one of many civic priorities.

Mahoney’s peroration proclaimed that if the measure were defeated that “there will be one place on this great green planet where Andrew Carnegie can’t get a mon-
uament with his money." Bobinski lists 225 Carnegie libraries, Knowledge, and the Common Good - 65

1973. The defeat of the Carnegie library in Wheeling was one of the OVTLA's most notable political triumphs.

The Forgotten Tradition of Labor Republicanism and the American Public Library

For Alex Gourevitch late nineteenth century labor republicanism in the United States provides political theory with a particularly compelling example of the republican theory of liberty transcending its origins in the privileged sectors of society. The classically liberal idea of freedom as non-interference (that has in many ways defined American liberalism and conservatism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) is particularly unable to see how a philanthropic donation to an institution that would not be operated by Carnegie (Carnegie library grants famously paid for library construction, not books or maintenance) could be found objectionable; Carnegie would not be interfering with the way the library would be run. However, the OVTLA was animated by the nineteenth century labor republican struggle against domination that employed "a strategy of 'self-education.' The main role for the state, to the extent that it could be controlled, was certain regulatory limits, such as maximum-hours laws, and some public schooling. But it was up to worker-citizens to provide the actual content through their own institutions." Viewed from the perspective of the OVTLA, it becomes clear that Carnegie's philanthropy re-inscribed and asserted his domination of both the economic and political systems that dominated the United States at the time. As demonstrated in delegate Michael Mahoney's statements against the library, the OVTLA expressed the view that Wheeling's working class needed to feel a sense of ownership in their civic institutions—something that a library built by Carnegie's money could never provide.

What can this episode tell us about the history of the American public library? In this paper thus far, I have not engaged in the historical literature surrounding Carnegie's philanthropy and the American public library during this period (1900 to 1915). I will limit my engagement to a discussion how the OVTLA discourse around the library can inform that literature. Bobinski's influential study of Carnegie Libraries found that only 225 communities applied for and did not construct a library compared to the 1,679 buildings constructed in the United States. Of the rejected Carnegie library proposals for which documentation exists most were rejected because scarce municipal resources were prioritized for basic sanitation, streetlights, schools, etc. (issues that

39 Ibid., 230.
40 Ibid., 229.
41 Ibid., 230.
43 Ohio Valley Trades & Labor Assembly, "Minute Book No. 3" (August, 11, 1901): WVC, 127.
44 Bobinski, Carnegie Libraries, 3.115. Bobinski lists 225 "Libraries Which Never Materialized" in comparison to the 1,679 public library buildings constructed in 1,422 communities in America from 1880s to the 1920s.
45 Javersak, "One Place on This Great Green Planet."
46 Gourevitch, From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth, 12.
47 Ibid., 158.
the OVTLA was involved in as well). The one existing historical study of communities rejecting Carnegie libraries, Carnegie Denied: Communities Rejecting Carnegie Library Construction Grants, 1898–1925, identifies two other cities in which labor played a key role in communities rejecting Carnegie library proposals (Oelwein, Iowa in 1903 and in Mobile, Alabama, in 1914). The exceptional nature of the OVTLA's successful rejection of a Carnegie library and the documentary record of their organization provides a window into how a politicized group, the labor republicans in OVTLA, perceived the class bias of the American public library at the beginning of the Progressive Era.

Historians of the Public library such as Michael Harris and Eric Novotny have argued that one of the key "problems" that public libraries were attempting to address was anxiety about the influx of immigrants into the United States. In Harris's examination of the American public library during this period he argues that the key motivation for the expansion of the public library and the Carnegie giving was a way for librarians and educators to acculturate immigrants to American institutions. These library actors continually "stressed the importance of their respective institutions in the 'war' to preserve democratic ideas and institutions from demagoguery, communism, and other subversive doctrines." It is a historical irony that for the Irish, German, Scandinavian, Polish, and Jewish immigrants who participated in the "problem" Carnegie's philanthropy represented that motivated the form of republicanization.

Carnegie biographer David Nasaw convincingly demonstrates that Carnegie's philanthropy was not motivated by a sense of guilt over the enormous inequalities that industrialization created, but more by his readings of the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer. Carnegie believed that it was the obligation of the capitalist to follow the dictates of the market so that he or she could give a substantial amount away to philanthropy while contributing to the general industrial development of society. Using the logic of Darwinian evolution meant that those with "talent for organization and management" and who were rewarded with wealth were given this patrimony to "wisely give away." Carnegie thought that, while this process would cause disruption and suffering, it would do more to alleviate poverty in the long run. For purposes of comparison, Carnegie can be viewed as exemplifying what Alex Gourevitch calls "laissez-faire republicanism," the form of republicanism that would later become ascendant, particularly in the twentieth century Republican Party. Labor republicans found independence in the development of the "cooperative commonwealth" and by struggling to develop self-governing institutions such as workers' cooperatives that would provide greater leisure time (by limiting working hours, hence the centrality of the "eight hours for work eight hours for rest and eight hours for what we will" slogan of the period) and greater liberty through collective self-management. By contrast, laissez-faire republicans came to view "wage labor as a universal condition of free labor." In other words, labor was free insofar as each individual worker was able to freely enter into a labor contract with an employer/possessor of capital who could most capably organize and coordinate production.

In Siobhan Stevenson's analysis of Andrew Carnegie, the Knights of Labor, and other library administrators' public proclamations about libraries in the 1890s, Stevenson found that they both offered contesting constructions of the nature of the "missing" information present in society that libraries could provide. Stevenson found that when library administrators did discuss the informational needs of "the worker" they focused on the need for information on technical subjects that could be used for economic improvement by the talented and ambitious few. In the clash over the Wheeling Carnegie library there was very little evidence of a public debate about the nature of the library collection itself. In advocating for the Carnegie library OVTLA delegate McVamara compared the state of the library then in Wheeling to the library in nearby Steubenville, Ohio, and found that "the Steubenville library contained 150 volumes of sociology while the local one (Wheeling) had but 50. Steubenville had 64 periodicals on file, the Wheeling library 32 and contained rooms for women, children and men." The OVTLA did fear that books that might support the cause of labor would be "debarred" from the library and that the proposed library would not be located in or near the working-class neighborhoods making it difficult to use (the library that Wheeling later built was located near Wheeling's working-class neighborhoods). However, the records indicate that it was the larger domination that Carnegie's philanthropy represented that motivated the OVTLA's opposition to the bond.

In conclusion, the available evidence suggests that--although all parties saw the need for a public library in Wheeling and did not differ much over the types of books or information that the library should contain—it was what the library represented in a larger social and political context that set the terms of the debate. Given the OVTLA's other concerns and political stands it is obvious that the public library as a civic insti-
tution was seen as embodying a larger struggle against domination. If Library and Information Studies examined questions about intellectual freedom through a labor republican lens that placed questions about the potential for domination at the center of debates about libraries and freedom, instead of cases in which only visible coercion occurs, it might cast important new light on issues such as the social role of libraries, the common good, philanthropy, corporate partnerships, and the outsourcing of services/resources, just to name a few. In other words, the key questions that the OVTLA activists raised in their opposition to the Wheeling Carnegie library are still very much with us today.

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