

Defusing Labor Radicalism: The Dime Novel Outlaw and Modernity, 1877-83

By

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In 1877, a national railroad strike signaled the arrival of an inchoate but powerful labor movement in the United States. Also in 1877, Edward Wheeler wrote and Beadle and Adams published the first dime novel featuring an outlaw as the main protagonist. Far from being unrelated, these two events shared the same historical moment in which industrial capitalism was still new and Americans were in the process of fiercely contesting it. In hindsight it is easy to see the emerging industrial capitalist system as inevitable, but the historical reality was in fact more complicated than that. Though it may require an imaginative leap to envision a society in which industrial capitalism was not yet taken as a given, that very fact hints at the importance of returning to a time when that history was not yet written, when a “producerist” culture resisted an industrial one.

Scholars have written much on the labor movement in the United States, highlighting the many battles between labor and capital as well as the often disproportionate power of the state and the internal divisions hampering labor. Less attention has been given to the processes by which workers acculturated industrial values, even though this acculturation surely stymied the workers’ movement as much as anything else. Clearly workers did adopt many of these values, evident in how they often worked *within* the industrial system for reform, such as shorter hours, higher pay, and safer working conditions. This, no doubt, was due partly to some workers seeing the benefits of industrial life and wanting only to check its excesses. But what about those workers who more stridently opposed industrialism and all it stood for? What cultural options were available to oppose the dominant middle-class culture of industrialism? How may have the cultural universe that workers inhabited actually acculturated them to modern industrial life?

This essay sheds light on these larger questions by examining one major element of workers’ cultural universe at the very moment when the labor movement was developing.

Specifically, the essay examines dime novels, which were an important part of the literature consumed by workers. More narrowly, I analyze dime novels featuring the outlaw figure as the main hero, which the aforementioned Edward Wheeler first wrote in 1877. More than others, these Deadwood Dick stories commented directly on issues of labor and capital, especially in the American West, and in this sense they are key texts whose exegesis can cast light on worker acculturation to modern industrial life. This essay focuses upon Wheeler's novels because it was his stories which sold most and established the outlaw literary formula. Moreover, this essay focuses on the period between 1877 and 1883 for two reasons. First, it is this period when the labor movement was first organizing in earnest, and so it highlights a part of the cultural universe of workers at a key moment in the transition to modern industrial life. Second, this period is what Michael Denning refers to as the time when "outlaws defied the law and got away with it."¹ Specifically, outlaw stories reached their peak in popularity during these seven years, and their readership declined after 1883 as a result of the postmaster general censoring the stories. In analyzing these stories, this essay explores why they were so popular and investigates the type of cultural work that they performed.

In grappling with these issues, this study complicates notions of escapist literature, centering on the scholarly debate seeing reactions to modernity as either modern or anti-modern. Taken at face value, the concept of "escapism" is unfruitful, since any form of entertainment can be seen as escapist, and because people escape *into* very different things. The concept typically says very little about the nature of the entertainment or the people consuming it. Taken further, some historians like T.J. Jackson Lears see escapism as anti-modern, in the sense that people are attempting to escape from a modern society that they find particularly threatening and full of

¹ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents* (New York: Verso, 1987), 160.

anxiety. For Lears, readers of dime novels were attempting to escape their unsettling lives amid the radical changes accompanying industrialization, urbanization, and immigration at the turn of the twentieth century.² Dime novels may have been escapist, but they were unquestionably products of modernity for a number of reasons. First, they were modern in their format and mass production, which was novel and tied to industrial technology. Furthermore, readers would have seen these stories as modern and new. That the stories were filled with nostalgic and mythical stories of the past does not mean that readers wanted to escape the present. People's reactions were likely far more ambivalent about modernity than purely anxious. Yet, even such anxiety and the mythical stories themselves developed within the context of modern life. The desire to escape modernity, then, is a characteristically modern experience, and dime novels should be seen in this light.

Yet more than simply "being" modern, dime novels were part of a wider cultural production that actually reflected and reinforced particular modern cultural values. This essay argues that the values and messages conveyed in the outlaw stories, though often sympathetic to labor and far-reaching in terms of critiquing capital, actually served to acculturate readers to industrial capitalist values. In this sense, these dime novels were not simply products of modernity, but were, in conjunction with other media, tools in producing a particular modern society in which industrial capitalist values became hegemonic. Yet working-class readers may very well have resisted the messages conveyed in the stories, extrapolating their own meaning from them. Indeed, these texts were multi-dimensional, and readers could have taken very different meanings from them. Still, as one part of working-class readers' cultural universe, these stories suggest that many workers may never have been exposed to a full-blown,

² T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

systematic critique of industrialism. In failing to provide this critique while simultaneously engaging issues of labor and capital, these dime novels suggest how and why readers may have failed to more thoroughly resist industrialism. In making these arguments, this study is organized into two main parts: one detailing the literary context of the outlaw dime novels, the other analyzing the Deadwood Dick stories in particular.

II. Context – Institutional – Fiction Factories: From Production to Distribution

What exactly is a “dime novel”? Rather than having a narrow and specific definition, this term usually encompasses literature in varying formats and prices. First, as part of the newspaper revolution in the 1830s, penny presses began publishing “story papers” costing between five and six cents. These were eight-page weekly newspapers that included from five to eight short stories, in addition to correspondence, fashion advice, and brief sermons. Next came the “pamphlet novel” first published in 1842, and these were 5-inch-by-8 ½-inch pamphlets running approximately fifty pages. Though put out of business in 1845 by increasing postal rates, these 12.5 cent novels reemerged in a similar format in 1860, when Beadle and Adams published the first actual “dime novel” – a story pamphlet for a dime. These dime novels were 4-inch-by-6-inch pamphlets running approximately 100 pages. Finally, the “cheap library,” introduced in 1875, was a serialized collection of nickel and dime novels published in 8-in-by-11 ½ inch-pamphlets running between 16 and 32 pages. Despite the heterogeneity of these formats and prices, all of this literature was full of stories sold for popular consumption. For practical purposes, however, and because Beadle and Adams publication of its first “dime novel” and later “half-dime” novel marked a new level of readership, when I use the term “dime novel,” I will be

referring to stories published in 1860 and beyond, including the cheap libraries and stories sold for varying prices.³

Dime novels, then, under this definition, were actually quite standardized. The stories ran from roughly 30,000 to 50,000 words and included constant action and bombastic language. The topics they dealt with, however, varied extensively, ranging from history to love to city life. Moreover, they featured a broad array of characters like pirates, bootblacks, soldiers, and detectives. The production of these novels marked a culmination in printing and publishing that allowed for arguably the first genuine mass-produced literature. The very first dime novel published in 1860, *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, sold over 65,000 copies in just a few months. In the next few years as other publishing houses emerged, dime novel production and readership proliferated, with the first bestseller, *Seth Jones; Or, The Captives of the Frontier*, selling over 600,000 copies and being translated into half a dozen languages. At their height, some publishers were printing 101 different series at one time, with some of these series producing over a thousand titles.⁴

Yet to truly understand the nature and significance of dime novels, we must understand the production, distribution, and reception of these stories. After all, in being the first mass-produced literature, dime novels were produced and read in a particular context that shaped the nature of the literature and how people read it. Beginning with the production side, publishing houses of dime novels, like Beadle and Adams and Street and Smith, are accurately categorized as “fiction factories.” Though conditions varied within the handful of competing firms, they each reflected the industrial production of literature. Aiming to maximize profit by mass-

³ Denning, 10-12.

⁴ Daryl Jones, *The Dime Novel Western* (Bowling Green, OH: The Popular Press, 1978), 5-9.

producing cheap literature, publishers sought proven, standardized fiction that guaranteed large sales. Because they operated under intense commercial pressures, such as the regular payment demanded by printers and paper suppliers as well as the consistent stream of cheap stories demanded by readers, publishers pressured writers to produce stories regularly and systematically. Essentially, publishers sought to exploit proven literary formulas and stories until the novels no longer sold well.

The writers, though they were educated professionals typically also employed as journalists, clerks, and teachers, labored under factory-like conditions. Editors and publishers insisted upon deadlines which demanded furious writing. They both also dictated the rules of imitation and production, as writers enjoyed little autonomy and had to negotiate the details of the plot, the characterization, and the scene.⁵ Conditions for writers did not necessarily start out this way, however. Initially, publishing houses recruited successful writers in a free market system, but soon the industry started selling “characters” rather than celebrated authors. Writers lost autonomy even over the characters they produced, such as Edward Wheeler and his Deadwood Dick, as various authors began to write stories with that same character. In short, the publishers, rather than the authors, had rights to the stories and characters, and this sometimes created resentment among authors. Dime novelists did, however, often enjoy a stable wage, and this sometimes counteracted their discontent. Yet even those writers who were contented with their employment testified to just how far this type of literary work was tied to the market and lacking in creativity. In his autobiography entitled *The Fiction Factory: Being the Experience of a Writer who, for Twenty-Two Years, has Kept a Story-Mill Grinding Successfully*, William Wallace Cook exemplifies this reality, declaring:

⁵ Bold, 9.

A writer is neither better nor worse than any other man who happens in a trade. He is a manufacturer. After gathering his raw product, he puts it through the mill of his imagination, retorts from the mass the personal equation, refines it with a sufficient amount of common sense and runs it into bars—of bullion, let us say. If the product is good it passes at face value and becomes a medium of exchange.⁶

Evident in this system of production, these firms represented an emerging “culture industry” that worked to commodify culture by, for instance, the “restructuring of cultural production of wage labor, a capitalist market, and a capitalist labor process which divides, rationalizes, and deskills work.” In this context it is not surprising that the stories themselves conveyed messages that reinforced industrial values. Yet, as Michael Denning rightly points out, this culture was never entirely commodified because of resistance on all fronts – the government, reformers, readers, and writers.⁷ The federal government, for example, directed the type of stories that were distributed by controlling their distribution. Profitability from dime novels depended upon their cheap distribution, which was largely realized through the American News Company that held a virtual monopoly on the industry from 1864-1904. This company handled the publications of Beadle and Adams, Street and Smith, Frank Tousey, and others, distributing them to newsstands and dry goods stores at a low cost.⁸ Through the federal postal service, however, the government had the ability to deny cheap second-class postal rates, thus severing any potential profit margin. And the government did, in fact, intervene to censor certain stories, such as those celebrating the outlaw hero in 1883 – the very same time that the Jesse James, an actual outlaw, was on trial. Aside from only the government, Christine Bold demonstrates how the writers further resisted the commodification of their labor by controlling their authorial voice. By “tinkering with the presentation of their narratives,” authors managed to “create some

⁶ William Wallace Cook quoted in Bold, 19.

⁷ Denning, 25.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

individual variation within the formulaic outline.”⁹ Indeed, culture could never be fully commodified.

III. Context: Audience Reception – Reading Dime Novels

Perhaps the most important players in the resistance to the commodification of culture, though, were the readers – the people engaging with the stories and creating their own meaning from them. In the last couple of decades, scholars have paid increasing attention to the reception of texts. Since the linguistic turn and the rise of poststructuralist studies, scholars no longer focus only on authors who communicate messages to passive readers. Historians and literary scholars, especially within the field of “the history of books,” now try to extrapolate how readers interpret various texts. This, naturally, is an incredibly difficult task, since reading is such an individual, subjective experience which rarely leaves historical evidence. Recently, however, scholars have attempted to overcome these barriers by situating readers in particular social contexts. By placing readers in “interpretive communities,” scholars examine “collections of people who, by virtue of a common social position and demographic character, unconsciously share certain assumptions about reading as well as preferences for reading material.”¹⁰ The categories of race, class, and gender are essential in this analysis, though reading in reality defies such rigid classifications. When available, scholars attempt to juxtapose primary sources like diaries and journals with the wider social context to interpret how readers as collective entities understand and use reading materials.¹¹

⁹ Bold, xvii.

¹⁰ Janice Radway, “Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America,” in *Reading Acts: U.S. Readers’ Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950*, edited by Barbara Sicherman (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 150.

¹¹ See also David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst, 1996), 169-87; Ezra Greenspan, *Walt Whitman and the American Reader* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990); Cathy N. Davidson, *Reading in*

Drawing from these insights, this essay attempts to come to terms with how readers understood and used dime novels in the late nineteenth century. Here I borrow heavily from Michael Denning, who rightly identifies the audience as primarily working class. More specifically, he sees the primary readers as young, lowbrow, male, working-class people who inhabited cities and mill towns of the North and West.¹² To be sure, people of all backgrounds and ages read dime novels. Indeed, the fact that Beadle and Adams early on advertised its dime novels in highbrow newspapers and magazines like the nationally influential *New York Tribune* and the *North American Review*, for example, is a testament to their wide audience.¹³ But it is also clear that dime novels were not geared towards the middle class, which tended to dismiss them as uncultured and sensationalistic. Magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly*, rather, were at the center of a Victorian culture emphasizing reading as a means to developing character. Dime novels, then, with their emphasis on action and entertainment, were central to an especially youthful working-class popular culture, even if journalists, teachers, and other professionals both created and indulged in them.

So if the working class made up the bulk of the readers of dime novels, *how* did they read these stories? Here Michael Denning provides a useful way to investigate working-class readership. He contends that the working-class read allegorically rather than novelistically. Reading novelistically – seeing characters as “typical” individuals rather than real people or metaphors – was, Denning argues, a bourgeois way of reading tied to a distinctive individualism. Reading allegorically, on the other hand, involved seeing the story as a microcosm for real world. Characters, then, stand in for social groups. Furthermore, a particular master plot

America: Literature and Social History (Baltimore, 1989); Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas, eds., *Reading Acts: U.S. Readers' Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950* (Knoxville, 2002).

¹² Denning, 45.

¹³ Bold, 2.

typically characterizes the stories, from which readers draw meaning. It is through this lens that I will examine the outlaw stories and try to extract the cultural meaning and significance of these stories to working-class people and, in effect, the wider American culture.¹⁴

IV. The Outlaw in Literary Context: Continuity with the Past

To understand the novelty and incredible popularity of the outlaw as a dime novel hero, we must first understand the context from which he arose. Indeed, though one major aspect of the outlaw story was strikingly new, the thrust of the story and its literary formula were half a century old. The literary formulas for stories set in the West, as the Deadwood Dick stories were, drew from that established by James Fenimore Cooper in the early nineteenth century. In his *Leatherstocking Tales*, *The Deerslayer*, *The Prairie*, and other stories, Cooper set up the dualistic model that would frame all of the dime novel stories of the West – which consumed the majority of dime novel content from 1860 to 1890. He pitted wilderness against civilization on the frontier, with the Western hero “caught between these contending forces.”¹⁵ The setting, plot, and characters changed over time to suit contemporary interests, but this archetypal formula persisted throughout the dime novel stories. Cooper had also stressed social conflict, especially between East and West, and an historical inevitability of the result (usually the East manages to civilize the Western wilderness). Dime novelists maintained strong elements of this social conflict, but they mitigated the tension between Eastern and Western values by using the hero as the mediator. In virtually all of the stories, the hero either turns out to be an Easterner or is

¹⁴ Denning, 70-75.

¹⁵ Bold, xi.

sufficiently Eastern-like (through appearance, manners, speech, etc.) to make up for his more characteristically Western behaviors and actions – especially violence.¹⁶

Though some sort of archetypal hero was always present in the dime novels, the type and character of that hero changed over time. Daryl Jones identifies two major categories of heroes that preceded the outlaw in dime novel westerns. The first was the “backwoodsman”, who was a “fiercely independent man” that contended with the forces of savagery and ignorance on the frontier. This character always succeeded in defeating savagery and “settling” the frontier, therefore allowing civilization to move forward. The backwoodsman took the form of two very different protagonists, reflecting Americans’ ambivalence to the wilderness. One figure, modeled after Davy Crocket, was an ugly, ill-mannered braggart who spent much of his time killing Indians. The other, modeled after Daniel Boone, was “shrewd but spiritually unblemished” and protected westering settlers. The former reflected the potential corrupting influence of the “savage” wilderness, while the latter reflected the Romantic conception of the wilderness as free and sublime.¹⁷

Jones sees a similar yet distinct hero develop in the character of the “plainsman”. In the 1860s, the Plainsman was modeled after Kit Carson and was very similar to the backwoodsman. The hero thus moved from being a forest scout to a prairie scout, and he rode atop a horse carrying a Winchester. Yet he still adorned trapper’s clothing and was far from genteel. The later manifestations of this hero in the 1870s and 1880s – especially evident in Prentiss Ingraham’s *Buffalo Bill* dime novels – revealed a plainsman that was thoroughly transformed. This new hero began dressing and speaking more like an Easterner, and he evinced a social

¹⁶ Bold, 10-12.

¹⁷ Jones, 26-27.

polish evident even in his fighting, which increasingly occurred through duels. Despite this polish, this later plainsman began engaging in questionable activities like gambling, and he also began skirting the law to enforce justice. Here the plainsman seems to blur with the outlaw hero, and, indeed, in many ways there was no sharp break between the two.¹⁸

When Deadwood Dick first emerged in 1877, then, much of the story was hardly new. For one thing, outlaws themselves had already appeared in dime novels as minor characters beginning in the early 1870s. Moreover, Edward L. Wheeler, the author of the early Deadwood Dick stories, attributed Dick with similar characteristics that began to apply to later plainsman like Buffalo Bill. Specifically, he was an Easterner who spoke perfect English and was the embodiment of refinement and grace. He was a twenty-year old “specimen of young, healthy manhood” who could “command respect...if not admiration.” He was “strikingly handsome” with piercing black eyes and a countenance “noticeable for its grace, symmetry, and proportionate development” that made him stand out immediately in a crowd. He adorned his athletic body with odd buck-skin attire, reflecting his eccentricity.¹⁹

Aside from personal appearance, the character and virtue of the outlaw harkened back to other western heroes. In every story, Dick acts exceedingly genteel. He threatens only those who violate him or others, but he comes to the aid of any innocent in need, especially women. In *Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road*, for instance, Dick jumps from a train to assist someone whom appears to be in distress, evident in his hearing distant cries. In another story, Dick regularly safeguards the belongings of travelers into Leadville lest they be stolen by other

¹⁸ Jones, 56-76.

¹⁹ Edward L. Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road; Or, The Black Rider of the Black Hills* (1877) in *Reading the West: An Anthology of Dime Westerns* edited by Bill Brown (New York: Bedford Books, 1997), 273.

robbers.²⁰ Despite his “odd freak of dress,” Dick instantly wins over the people he comes across through his genteel disposition and countenance.²¹ People come to trust him irrespective of his reputation since his clear, noble speech and virtuous countenance seem to convey more clearly the type of person that he is. Such an immediate realization of character through appearance, speech, and behavior appealed to Americans populating cities, who were anxious over trusting and being trusted in places where, in contrast to small towns, most people were unacquainted.

So if these elements of Dick’s character were not entirely novel, the basic literary formula was certainly a continuation of the past. James Fenimore Cooper’s simple and stringent dichotomy between good and evil and East and West continued to frame the stories. Moreover, the early dime novelists’ attempt to erase that East-West conflict by using an Eastern or Eastern-like hero as mediator was clearly evident in the Deadwood Dick novels. Yet, despite all of these continuities, there was something different and novel about the outlaw-as-hero stories – something even potentially radical, and it revolved around issues of capital and labor.

V. The Dime Novel Outlaw as Social Criticism: Allegories of Labor and Capital

At the end of the first Deadwood Dick story, Dick declares, “Now, I am inclined to be merciful only to those who have been merciful to me; therefore, I have decided that Alexander and Clarence Filmore shall pay the penalty of hanging, for their attempted crimes. Boys, *string ‘em up!*”²² And so vigilantism and lynch law came to characterize the outlaw stories. Indeed, in this first story there are numerous instances in which Dick steps outside of the law to enforce what he sees as justice. For instance, earlier in the novel, Dick shoots and kills a man who

²⁰ Edward L. Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick in Leadville: Or, A Strange Stroke for Liberty* (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1879), 3.

²¹ Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road*, 273.

²² *Ibid.*, 356.

posted a \$500 bounty on his head.²³ Yet, Wheeler labors painstakingly to justify each instance of Dick's vigilantism, and in doing so he works to mitigate the horrors of lynch law. The most dangerous part of lynch law is its hasty prosecution by angry people and the lack of a trial and defense for the victim. But such a lynching never occurs under Dick's watch, for Dick holds his own pseudo-trial by laying out very clearly his case against the victims. The fellow spectators readily submit to the veracity of his account, and they concur that hanging is the proper penalty. "In the natural laws of Deadwood, such a murder would be classed justice," writes Wheeler, as he attempts to lay out the different moral universe of the West.²⁴ In the end, the reader is left feeling that Dick was justified in his behavior, and in fact, that Dick is a hero for persecuting monolithically-evil enemies that would hurt others if not for him.

Evident in Dick's rationale for lynching the Filmore's is a marked social criticism that characterizes all of the Deadwood Dick stories. After detailing the murderous treachery of the Filmores, Dick explains: "I appealed to our neighbors and even to the courts for protection, but my enemy was a man of great influence, and after many vain attempts, I found that I could not obtain a hearing; that nothing remained for me to do but to fight my own way. And I did fight it."²⁵ Here Dick criticizes the unchecked power wielded by those of wealth and "influence," and he explains how ordinary people were powerless to fight back, while the courts were complicit in the miscarriage of justice. These themes of the law's inadequacy or complicity, of ordinary people's indifference or helplessness, and of capitalists' corruption and disproportionate power permeated the Deadwood Dick series.

²³ Ibid., 284.

²⁴ Ibid., 289.

²⁵ Ibid., 353.

As the series progressed, however, these themes, particularly of labor versus capital, became increasingly pronounced. To be sure, many of the stories still described western robberies, saloons, shootouts, love affairs, and the like, but increasingly the stories were set in industrial mining towns where tensions over capitalism's incursion into the West were high. Wheeler's trilogy in the summer of 1879 is a testament to this. Set in Leadville, CO – home to genuine labor radicalism in 1879, *Deadwood Dick in Leadville; Or, A Strange Stroke for Liberty* (June 24, 1879) opens with a description of the poor shanties in town and with two miners fighting one another. This scene is soon juxtaposed with a corrupt and evil Easterner who owns the local mine. Gardner is his name, and Wheeler describes how he has “naught to do but to kill time and spend a fat income, which rolls in, day by day.”²⁶ Despite this excess of wealth that the speculator derives from exploiting the cheap labor of miners, he is, of course, not satisfied with only that. The story soon reveals that he is also an avid gambler who cheats to scam honest men out of their money. Here Gardner embodies a sort of double theft: exploiting miners on the job and cheating men in their private lives. What is more, the reader soon learns that Gardner came into controlling ownership of the mine only through cheating the scions of a deceased owner. Despite this treachery, the community “lionizes” Gardner as a man of success.²⁷

Rather than an exception, this depiction of capitalists was the rule in the *Deadwood Dick* series. Each capitalist came from the East, and he typically embodied the same licentious and corrupt behavior. For example, in *Deadwood Dick's Device; Or, The Sign of the Double Cross* (July, 1879), Wheeler described a wealthy aristocrat named Major Howell as a portly, well-dressed, jewelry-adorned owner of slaves and a mansion who “looked as if fast living and

²⁶ Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick in Leadville*, 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

dissipation had been his worst enemies.”²⁸ Just as this Howell turned out to be a horrific villain, so too did the primary bad guy in *Deadwood Dick on Deck; Or, Calamity Jane: The Heroine of Whoop-Up* (1878), Cecil Groevenor. Groevenor was an Eastern capitalist whose treachery seemed to have no bounds. In addition to his scandalous business practices and persecution of his wife back East, Groevenor came to the western town of Whoop-Up and attempted to disrepute and kill the three main heroes of the story. In essence, nearly every major villain in these stories was an Eastern capitalist that was corrupt, greedy, and evil.

The community’s ignorance of these capitalists’ villainy is also a permanent theme in the outlaw stories. The fact that the community at times even tended to lionize such men is a testament to their foolishness, and it is such foolishness that performs a vital literary function for the outlaw. Specifically, the outlaw hero assumes the role of protector of a people that are unable to discern their own best interests. They often act in a mob mentality, and they frequently persecute Dick despite his consistently noble and just behavior. This is epitomized in *Deadwood Dick in Leadville*, where Dick saves the day, but the community can only see him as evil because of his days as a road agent – where he still acted virtuously in reality. Dick then nobly sacrifices himself to be lynched as a way of atoning for his petty crimes.²⁹ In the following story, Dick is revived by Calamity Jane – the female counterpart hero to Dick, but the people cannot accept his continuing to live, despite his sacrifice, and so they continue to persecute him. This persecution relegates Dick to a social outcast, where he is even better positioned to criticize the ignorance of the people.

²⁸ Edward L. Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick Deadwood Dick’s Device: Or, The Sign of the Double Cross* (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1879), 3.

²⁹ Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick in Leadville*, 15.

In addition to a strident criticism of capitalists, then, Wheeler's stories evince a stern indictment of the law, the state, and also the people. What is telling, though, is that the criticism always centers on the collusion with – intentionally or unintentionally – the corrupt capitalist. In this sense, industrialism itself is the problem, for it not only reshapes the economic landscape to the detriment of the honest laborer and produces corrupted capitalists, it also corrupts those social institutions supposedly in charge of controlling and inhibiting vice and exploitation. The outlaw dime novels constantly reiterate these themes. The aforementioned evil capitalist, Gardner, for instance, boasts about his ability to debase the law through manipulating trials. He declares, "I can scour up enough evidence against him in an hour, to hang a dozen men!"³⁰ He similarly prostrates the state when it tried to investigate the death of a miner in one of Gardner's mines in order to determine potential reimbursements to the dependent family of the deceased. Gardner, however, quickly exerted his power and influence to thwart any investigations into his mine.³¹ Ignorant of his treachery, the community continued to lionize Gardner, thus derailing the last hope of a democratic system to control Gardner. When the law, the state, and the people all fail to keep capitalism in check, and, in fact, are corrupted by it, the only recourse to save society is the outlaw hero.

Yet, in addition to denouncing industrialism in this way, the Deadwood Dick stories hint at an alternative working-class culture in opposition to industrial capitalism. This is most evident in *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, where a local miner who happened into ownership of a mine conversed with a wealthy capitalist speculator from the East. The mine owner was of the working class and represented competing values of labor with those of the nascent industrial

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

³¹ Ibid.

capitalist system. So the mine owner first discusses how he sold ownership to any miner who could contribute any money at all, aiming to establish a more egalitarian system of management. The capitalist rebuffs, “You did wrong...One first-class corporation would have paid you more for your entire claim, by three-fold.” The miner retorts, “Mebbe yer purty nigh right, stranger; but we pilgrims ain’t generally hogs, an’ we divide up ekal wi’ ther boys.” The miner continues:

I’d ruther ‘a’ not got a cent out o’ ther hull business, than to have sold et ter men who’d hev hed et all under three or four piratical pairs o’ fists, an’ w’ile hoardin’ up their pile, ground ther workin’ men down ter Chinamen’s wages—‘washee shirtee for five cents!’ Mebbe ye cum frum out in Pennsylvania, whar they do thet kind o’playin’, stranger, but et’s most orful sure thet yet ken’t play sech a trick out hyar among ther horney-fisted galoots o’ this delectable Black Hills kentry—no, sir-e-e-e!”³²

Here the miner posits a very different vision from the capitalist insistence at maximizing profit above all else. The miner, instead, emphasizes the importance of a rough equality among the workers, and he insists upon workers receiving fair wages for their toil. This, for him, is the goal of work and labor, and it is a stiff rejection of the capitalist value of accumulation. Furthermore, in this passage the miner plays up the tyrannical nature of industrialism in which mergers and acquisitions lead to excessive wealth and power for the few and “Chinamen’s wages” for the many. Indeed, “giving a gang of honest, industrious men of families employment at paying wages” is the alternative goal for these laboring miners – who do just that: labor in the mines, unlike the “slothful” Eastern capitalists.³³

This story, therefore, lays out very clearly a working-class subculture that is competing with part of the values of the wider middle-class, bureaucratic, industrial culture – namely, the unending need for evermore acquisition. And there is little doubt that the Deadwood Dick stories side with labor’s position, as the heroes of the stories – be they outlaws, laborers, or

³² Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, 3.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

others – are always sympathetic to labor. For example, one of the other noble, laboring mine owners in *Deadwood Dick on Deck* was also:

“an enthusiast on the labor question, and if the country to-day had more of his make and resolute mind, there would, undoubtedly, be a change for the better, when every man would, in a greater or lesser degree, have an independence, and not be ground under the heel of the master of money.”³⁴

So the stories tend to celebrate a working-class, “producerist” subculture that demands fair wages, independence, rough equality, worker cohesion, as well as safe working conditions and limited hours. This subculture stemmed from a pre-industrial society where men upheld individual ownership of land and the means of production as essential to independence, virtue, and, consequently, democracy.

Such a vociferous critique of capitalism and clear siding with the working-class subculture combined with the behavior of outlaws that, when seen from one perspective, seems quite radical. Specifically, the outlaw hero saw the evils of the capitalist system for the reasons listed above, so he or she thus went *outside* of the law to remedy the situation. For instance, when an Eastern capitalist threatened to manipulate the courts in his favor, Calamity Jane proclaims, “Hang the law!” as she overcomes a corrupt legal system by circumventing the courts and stymieing criminals through cunning and coercion.³⁵ One potential message from these stories, then, is that industrialism is a serious threat, and that breaking the law may be necessary to fend off its excesses. Indeed, the wantonness with which heroes shunned the law, especially in conjunction with real-life outlaws, spurred the government to censor the outlaw stories. Yet, these outlaw stories were likely not read as radical by many readers. In fact, the full nature and medium of the stories actually tended to defuse labor radicalism.

³⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁵ Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick in Leadville*, 5.

VI. Defusing Labor Radicalism: The Outlaw and Modernity

The literary Deadwood Dick had his charms, but it is only in historical context does he gain real meaning and implications. All of the labor and capital themes listed above – capitalism’s corruption of the law, the state, the people, and worker’s lives and values – were not inventions of Wheeler’s imagination. Rather, they sprung directly from labor strife pervading the country. A severe depression racked the U.S. in the 1870s, beginning in 1873. The hardships of this time, like always, fell disproportionately on the poor and working class, many of whom became dubbed as “tramps” as they wandered from town to town looking for work. As the depression drove millions of people to the edge of starvation, resentment increased – resentment not only over the lack of work, but especially over workers’ ever increasing dependency on capital for their livelihood. Many workers still held to the “producerist” ideology of independent ownership of productive property, vital in their minds to democracy, livelihood, and self-respect. They, therefore, saw the increasing unemployment and dependency on wage labor under conditions dictated by capitalists as incredibly threatening.³⁶

These tensions boiled over in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. On July 21, 1877, the Pennsylvania National Guard fired into a crowd of strike supporters in Pittsburgh, killing twenty or more and wounding at least thirty. This slaughter sparked massive protests across the country, and the state reacted in turn by using force to suppress protests all over the nation. In Chicago, for instance, the mayor ordered the police to fire into a crowd of protestors, killing at least thirty people. In addition to state force, however, the protests and subsequent state violence prompted serious union organization for the first time, signaled by the founding of the Knights of Labor in 1878. Union development was essential for workers to contest the working conditions dictated

³⁶ Steve Babson, *The Unfinished Struggle: Turning Points in American Labor, 1877-Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.), 1-5.

by capital, yet their development had far broader significance for American society. The historian, Steve Babson, explains the cultural significance of these unions, arguing that unions represented an “oppositional subculture” that “gave many worker protests an evangelical spirit, characterized by the emotional fusing of workplace and community solidarities against the prevailing culture of acquisitive individualism.” It was precisely this “oppositional subculture” and the real-life labor versus capital issues that Wheeler represented in his Deadwood Dick novels.³⁷

So if Wheeler clearly articulated and celebrated pre-industrial, working-class values, did working-class readers read them as radical? Scholars tend to agree that they did not. Daryl Jones sees outlaws as “resolving in fantasy the otherwise insoluble conflicts of the age,” namely the alienation stemming from industrial life and the gap between civil and moral law.³⁸ Richard Slotkin argues similarly that the reader could identify with outlaws, and doing so allowed him/her to “indulge sentiments of resentment and rebellion without having to adopt a radically alienated stance toward his society and its traditional ideology.”³⁹ Both these interpretations, however, employ the “escapism” framework. They suggest that reading these dime novels allowed readers to indulge in a fantasy which then reconciled them to or revitalized them for the stern realities of industrial life. This reading ignores the fact that the conflicts in the Deadwood Dick stories are never completely resolved, as more corruption and capitalist exploitation constantly manifest themselves in new places and new stories. Both Jones and Slotkin, furthermore, tend to treat these stories as monolithic, ignoring how different readers may have derived very different meaning from them regardless of Wheeler’s literary intentions. In this

³⁷ Ibid., 1-11, quote 11.

³⁸ Jones, 98-99.

³⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 146.

sense, the process of reading itself is more instructive than Wheeler's intentions. The question then becomes: how and why did some of the radical notions in the stories, set in social and political context, get transmuted into something else?

In the end, then, the "anti-modernist" or "escapist" framework is problematic and ultimately unhelpful. Recasting the reading of dime novels as a thoroughly modern endeavor sidesteps the limitations of this framework. For one thing, seeing this activity as modern reconciles the reception and production of dime novels, since these authors concede that the novels were produced in modern "fiction factories" and sold as mass literature. It only makes sense, therefore, that readers subsequently saw and experienced these stories as modern, regardless of the values presented in them. Secondly, the values and messages conveyed in the stories should not be designated narrowly as modern or anti-modern. More useful than "anti-modern" is "oppositional," for even if the values presented contest aspects of modern culture, this contestation is a modern experience. In other words, the very critique of modernity is a modern phenomenon. For example, the setting of Leadville, CO, where actual labor conflicts with capital gained national attention, demonstrates how people understood this contestation as entirely new, not as merely a recapitulation of the old Leatherstocking tales.⁴⁰ The term "anti-modern" is insufficient, furthermore, because it dismisses what is new about certain values or critiques, and it misses how anti-modern values and sentiments adapt themselves to certain aspects of modernity. After all, though people may reject some aspects of modernity, they nearly always accept other parts of it. The term "modern" as it is currently used for describing cultural values is equally insufficient in that it accepts the definition imparted by the dominant culture. For example, middle-class, industrial values of accumulation and consumption became culturally

⁴⁰ Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick in Leadville*.

dominant while the working-class, producerist values of independence and fair pay became subordinate. But this did not have to happen. This reality was a contested and contingent process which could have ended otherwise. So to accept as “modern” the middle-class, industrial version is to erase the conflict and load the term with a biased and value-laden meaning.

Eschewing the escapist or anti-modern framework, then, what remains to be explained is how and why middle-class values became dominant while working-class ones did not. Again, how did the radical notions in the stories get transmuted into something else through the process of reading? In one sense, this seems easy to explain: the emerging middle class allied with the upper class, sharing access to society’s power structure – education, wealth, and influence. Furthermore, this power united capitalists and industrial capitalism’s vanguard – the middle class – with state power. As mentioned above, the government sided almost exclusively with capitalists over laborers, coming to the aid of businessmen by breaking up strikes time and time again. In terms of the Deadwood Dick stories, the affluent get roundly criticized and attacked. Yet it seems that they win in the social world. Antonio Gramsci helps to explain this paradox by reminding us that the dominant culture maintains power only occasionally through force. The much more powerful and effective tool of rule comes in the form of “cultural hegemony,” which Gramsci defines loosely as:

“the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”⁴¹

⁴¹ T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985): 568.

Here Gramsci stresses how subordinate groups tend to accept aspects of the dominant culture, and he describes how doing so tends to legitimate their subordination. The theory is exceedingly complex, and it leaves plenty of room for resistance to the dominant culture. For the purposes of this essay, however, it is useful as a way to investigate the power dynamic between the oppositional cultures of the middle and working classes. Specifically, the theory can help explain how and why the middle class culture assumed cultural dominance, and it can illuminate how the working class may have participated in its own subordination.⁴²

The complex process by which middle class values became hegemonic can be hinted at through the dime novel outlaw stories. Since these stories targeted a working-class audience and dealt so explicitly with issues of labor and capital, they serve as a useful site to examine the process of cultural hegemony. Moreover, these novels clearly celebrated labor and working-class values, and so the particular messages that the overall narratives conveyed as well as the type of language and images that the stories employ in terms of race, gender, and national identity are instructive.

First, despite the clearly critical position that Wheeler took towards capitalists in his stories, as outlined above, the plot development and resolution are hardly a call to arms – quite the opposite. The great treachery of the capitalists is always overcome by a few good guys, thus depicting capitalism's problems as far from intractable. Good always defeats evil, then, and it is accomplished through heroic, virtuous individuals rather than collective action. So despite the positive portrayal of laborers like miners in the stories, the prescription for societal problems is not union organization and strikes. Rather, Wheeler's novels see a rugged, virtuous individualism as the solution to the excesses of capitalism. This is an individualism stemming

⁴² Ibid., 567-574.

from an independence which had deep roots American culture, and so Wheeler's stories are celebrating these pre-industrial values. The solution to maintain this sort of independence and individualism, though, is not what was actually required to combat industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century, which would demand rigorous worker organization, unionization, and solidarity. Wheeler's solution to these problems involves outlaws who occasionally break the law, but this law-breaking is thoroughly justified in the stories by the virtuous, enlightened, individualistic outlaw. So Wheeler's stories tend to celebrate and romanticize pre-industrial values while failing to advocate real solutions that would actually preserve them.

Later Deadwood Dick, Jr. novels deal more directly with these issues, and the moral of the story is the same. In one of the Deadwood Dick, Jr. stories, which were all written by other authors, the outlaw hero becomes manager of a factory where he uses his power to fight for fair wages for the workers. Yet even here, Dick, Jr. must use his power to fight not only the capitalists' excesses but also those of labor organizations "whose programs imply the necessity of a war of extermination between the opposing classes."⁴³ In this way, Dick, Jr. is working *within* the industrial system to curtail its excesses through reform – it is not at all a call for an alternative organization of the means of production. To the degree that workers accepted industrial capitalism and sought only reform within that system, workers actually legitimated their subordination. If readers of these dime novels did, in fact, read them as allegories of labor and capital, the messages conveyed to them were far from radical.

The western setting of the dime novels further dilutes any potential intractability of industrial capitalism's problems. As Slotkin explains, "the 'frontier' setting allows Wheeler to

⁴³ Slotkin, 145.

imagine an alternative industrial order in which all the evils of the actual system are avoided.”⁴⁴ Here the line between laborer and owner is permeable, evident, for instance, in *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, where Sandy and Colonel Joe Tubbs rose from miners to mine owners.⁴⁵ This upward mobility restores just relations between the classes and makes radical systemic change unnecessary.⁴⁶ These men, furthermore, retain their pre-industrial virtue despite their role as wealthy capitalists, thereby providing a utopian solution to the concerns over industrialism. In this way, the potentially radical implications of these stories’ critiques of industrialism are co-opted by messages conveying the tractability of industrialism and the plausibility for utopian resolution.

It is hardly surprising, however, that the messages intended by the authors of dime novels were not radical. As members of the middle class industrial system, these men were likely, personally, to support the system that rewarded them with education, wealth, and status. Moreover, as part of “fiction factories,” editors and publishers would hardly allow radical critiques of the very system producing their stories. But this does not mean that working-class readers merely passively received and internalized Wheeler’s intended messages presented in the dime novel stories. In fact, it is much more likely that readers extrapolated from the stories something that was personally meaningful, and certainly the issues of labor and capital must have resonated with many. But in explaining Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, Lears argues that “most people find it difficult, if not impossible, to translate the outlook implicit in their experience into a conception of the world that will directly challenge the hegemonic

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, 3.

⁴⁶ Slotkin, 145.

culture.”⁴⁷ So even if readers identified with the social criticisms in Wheeler’s stories, they were not provided with a larger systematic critique of industrialism, and thus were unlikely to fruitfully contest that system. As multi-dimensional as readers may have understood these texts to be, the fact remains that a full-blown critique of an industrial means of production was not articulated. Furthermore, though it is outside of the scope of this essay, these and other dime novels presented wholly traditional and even stereotypical representations of race, gender, and national identity. Even if working-class readers identified with the critiques of industrialism, they likely held views of race, class, and nationhood which were very much mainstream in the dominant culture. Such views, then, could have undermined a working-class “oppositional culture” since many workers were likely invested in the wider American culture in other ways.

VII. Conclusion

This essay has aimed to shed light on the process whereby a working-class, oppositional subculture adapted to the dominant middle-class, industrial culture. In no way has this process ever been complete, for genuine oppositional cultures persist to contest middle class dominance. Yet today this opposition is weak, as most working-class Americans accept industrial capitalism as a given, even as they fight within that system for better pay, fewer hours, and more time off. To really understand how and why this culture became dominant remains essential to understanding our society today. Industrialism was a contingent process, and Americans’ adaptation to middle class values in line with that system continues to warrant explanation. Only by coming to terms with this process can we critically assess American society and culture today.

⁴⁷ Lears, 569.

This essay returned to a time when a burgeoning working-class culture began to contest industrialism – the Gilded Age. In investigating the outlaw stories in dime novels during this time, I hoped to show that particular cultural sources can illuminate how workers may have adapted to industrialist culture. Specifically, the stories reveal a stark contestation to the values and practices associated with industrialism, and they even hint at genuine oppositional subcultures combating those values and practices. This contestation, though, was wrapped in packaged stories which, in the end, only criticized industrialism's excesses, not it as a system. Indeed, the messages they conveyed actually resolved tensions between capital and labor by suggesting utopian solutions.

Yet readers may have ignored these messages, focusing on the social criticism that made sense in their lives. Still, the dime novels, like most other cultural forms at the time, did not lay out a clear conception of that world that could challenge the hegemonic culture. This, of course, is not at all surprising. These sources were not intended for that purpose, so scholars should not look to popular culture documents for such radicalism. Nevertheless, examining these sources and the messages they do and do not convey can illuminate the cultural universe of working class readers. Indeed, many workers may have been receptive to radical critiques of industrialism and open to an alternative social organization. These outlaw stories reveal that at least part of the cultural universe of workers lacked such radicalism. The texts themselves are multi-dimensional enough that readers could have extrapolated more radical messages from the social criticism included in them. Yet, given the nature and purpose of these stories for their working-class, often young audience, readers likely read them more conservatively. What his more, the stories engaged critiques of industrialism without positing radical change. In this way, these dime novels reveal how a more potent labor radicalism may be been subtly stymied by a cultural

universe largely lacking radical critiques of industrialism and co-opting those elements that could have potentially inspired radicalism.

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