Land of Opportunity?

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America, with all its difficulties and defects, is the most prosperous and highly favoured country... on the habitable globe. There can be no place where the poor working man can so easily obtain subsistence for himself and his family, and where the intellect of all classes is, or may be, highly cultivated, or where man is more highly appreciated according to his real value. Success is certain to the man of energy and good repute.

*Sheffield and Rotherham, Independent, March 22, 1869.*

The idea of America as a place where men and women might find not only freedom but also the opportunity for a prosperous life is as old as the European discovery of the New World. It transposed secular aspirations for material success onto a millennialist template that conceived of America as a providentially blessed place. Images of material abundance, freely available land, and an absence of artificial restraints on human endeavor fused to generate an idea of the United States as a new order in which the poor could actually inherit the earth. Yet counterimages of exploitation and hierarchy were present throughout, inflecting the positive vision of American opportunity with notes of ambiguity. Any reckoning with the image of the United States in Latin America and Europe during the late nineteenth century must account for the powerful appeal of the “land of opportunity” motif, and explain its limits.

In European and Latin American visions of a more economically just society, or discussion of the social problems wrought by industrialization and new technology, the United States was often at stake. Stories of poor workingmen making their fortune in the new world, of abundant land and high wages crop up frequently in our sources. At the same time, advocates
of a more democratic and politically equal social order invariably invoked the United States as the paradigmatic democratic polity. The core question was the relationship between these two ideas, of economic opportunity on the one hand and political equality on the other. Did one lead to the other? Was “democracy” the mechanism for bringing about a more equal society in which ordinary workingmen could prosper free from the artificial constraints of Old World hierarchy? “Look what the Anglo-Saxon race can do without State-Church, king, or aristocracy!” exclaimed one English newspaper in a discussion of American economic growth. “That is what the ballot, household suffrage, short parliaments, and payment of the members, bring a people to!” Others, however, questioned the proposition that political equality and economic opportunity were fundamentally and axiomatically connected. As early as the 1830s and 40s, some Chartists and land reformers in Britain, for example, were well aware of the difficulties faced by industrial workers in America and some drew the natural conclusion that manhood suffrage was not necessarily the panacea that the People’s Charter implied.

In raising the issue of the United States as a land of opportunity, Chartists’ principal objective was to alter the social and political framework of Britain, and something similar was true of virtually every invocation of the land of opportunity image. Those who raised it, whether to laud or dismiss it, were invariably offering commentaries on the shortcomings, prospects, or superiority of their own society in relation to the United States, sometimes overtly, sometimes not. Europeans tapped into centuries of thinking about the New World as a land of emancipation and plenty, in which the contrast between the circumstances in America and in their home countries was taken for granted. For Latin Americans, who also generated images of the United States as a land of opportunity, it was less easy to imagine the great republic of the North as a place apart since their countries too were imagined, not least by themselves, as places of abundance freed from the constrictions of the Old Word. After all, Latin American leaders had embarked on nation building in the 1820s, framing Constitutions in the image of that drawn up at Philadelphia in 1787, in the firm conviction that their countries, too, would realize the utopian promise associated with the idea of America, and that their lands would also become lands of opportunity. Despite all the political and economic difficulties of the first stages of their development, Latin American liberals, especially but not exclusively in the more successful economies of Argentina and Brazil, tended to hold firm to the belief that ultimately their nations would overtake the United States and become more gloriously, humanely modern. Consequently, a distinctive theme of Latin American commentary on the United States as a land of opportunity was the sense that the political and