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Pullman Town: A Story of Dependency

According to Locke, the right of an individual to own and improve his property stands only “… at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.”[[1]](#endnote-1) But in this nation that boasted the successes of industrial giants like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, this right did not seem to stand in the year of 1894, the “most savage year of the depression that lasted from 1893 to 1897.”[[2]](#endnote-2) In 1894, the unemployment rate nationwide reached 20 percent, a shocking figure that paled in comparison to the 40 percent unemployment rate in Chicago’s manufacturing industry. [[3]](#endnote-3) And it was just outside of this city that one of the most momentous strikes of 19th century America took place: the Pullman Strike. On May 11th, 1894, thousands of employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company joined the American Railway Union and walked off the job, driven to desperation by a series of five wage cuts that had been made without a corresponding reduction in rents for company housing.[[4]](#endnote-4) In 27 states across the U.S., railroad union members refused to switch Pullman cars in an act of solidarity.[[5]](#endnote-5) But while the Pullman Strike can be seen as a culmination of the labor turmoil that plagued America in the 1890’s, it was more specifically the downfall of Pullman Town, a social experiment that had attempted to elevate the condition of the workingman. Home to a majority of Pullman Company’s employees, Pullman Town was designed by George Pullman to be a model company town, an environment that would discourage strikes of the very kind that exploded in May of 1894. Though Pullman Town was originally a hopeful departure from the democracy overrun by capitalism America had become, the Strike of 1894 revealed that it ultimately failed as a social model due to a dangerous overconcentration of power in the hands of one individual.

There is no doubt that in times of economic prosperity, there was much to admire about the Pullman model, which sought to practice an economically profitable form of paternalism. Even Richard T. Ely, the first outside visitor to criticize the construct of Pullman Town, praises George Pullman’s intentions in his well-respected essay, “Pullman: A Social Study.” “What might have been taken for a wealthy suburban town is given up to busy workers, who literally earn their bread in the sweat of their brow,”[[6]](#endnote-6) writes Ely. With beautiful row houses and parks maintained courtesy of the Pullman Company, as well as an advanced sewage system, Pullman Town was an externally beautiful space, offering to employees a standard of living unavailable to the proletariat in most of the United States. [[7]](#endnote-7) Ely was also impressed by the safety nets the Company provided for residents who became incapacitated and unable to work. But this same author notes in his investigative report that there was an unsettling degree of control exercised by the Company in every facility offered to the people of Pullman. George Pullman censored everything from the theatrical pieces to be performed in the town to the volumes to be offered in the library (whose membership most workers could not afford). The only barroom allowed in the town was located in the Pullman-owned Florence Hotel, and was essentially only frequented by visitors because of high prices. Nevertheless, there seemed to be something attractive, even Robin Hood-like, in this era of economic stratification about a town that aimed to “surround laborers as far as possible with all the privileges of large wealth.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

But the Panic of 1893, the worst economic depression ever experienced by America up to that point in its history, revealed how the organization of Pullman Town made its inhabitants dangerously dependent upon George Pullman and his Company. The first and most obvious example of this dependency was the workers’ complete lack of control over their payroll. When the United States Strike Commission interviewed Thomas W. Heathcoate (a Pullman employee and resident) in 1894, asking him how much he would have earned for the same work in June of 1893 compared to September of 1893, Heathcoate responded, “Instead of earning $20 I would have earned about $38.”[[9]](#endnote-9) His pay had been cut in half in a matter of three months. Heathcoate also said that the last of the five wage cuts the Pullman Company made in response to the Panic of 1893 “made it impossible for [Pullman workers] to maintain our families and pay our rent,”[[10]](#endnote-10) a rent that had not been reduced despite the cuts in wages. Visitors like Richard Ely advertised that in Pullman Town “even the humblest suite of rooms in the flats is provided with water, gas, and closets, and no requisite of cleanliness is omitted,”[[11]](#endnote-11) but Heathcoate found that after his family paid the rent they could not even afford to turn on the gas.[[12]](#endnote-12) Before the economic depression, rent in Pullman Town was reflective of its idealistic goals, about three-fifths what prices were in the nearby city of Chicago.[[13]](#endnote-13) But lack of rent reduction during the hard times of the Panic led to rent in Pullman being considerably higher than average. In 1893, one-third rather than the more typical one-fifth of a worker’s income went to paying rent in Pullman.[[14]](#endnote-14)

In his defense, George Pullman insisted, “The renting of the dwellings and the employment of workmen at Pullman are in no way tied together. They are let alike to Pullman employees and to very many others in no way connected with the company.”[[15]](#endnote-15) But the reality was that ¾ of the residents of Pullman were employed by the Pullman Palace Car Company, and those who did not technically work for it were employed “in establishments in which the company… or a prominent member of it” was interested.[[16]](#endnote-16) Furthermore, the Pullman Companies owned *all* property in Pullman Town. No organization, not even a church, can occupy any other than rented quarters,” observed Ely. And shockingly enough, all residents of Pullman Town held a house on a lease “which may be terminated on ten days’ notice.”[[17]](#endnote-17) In this way, workers for the Pullman Company were deprived of the most fundamental of American dreams, home ownership, making the typical Pullman resident a far cry from the ideal image of the independent citizen that America had once championed.

The issue of dependency was only worsened by the impossibility of change or escape. Though Pullman was part of the town of Hyde Park, Ely writes that “the latter seems to have relinquished the government of this potion of its territory bearing the name of Pullman to private corporations,” and all administrative offices in Pullman Town were occupied by officers of the Company rather than a working resident of the community.[[18]](#endnote-18) This lack of representation may have seemed less significant in times of economic prosperity, but proved crippling in 1894 when two members of the workers’ grievance committee, who had been guaranteed “absolute immunity” by George Pullman himself, were discharged.[[19]](#endnote-19) Those who wanted to *escape* Pullman’s cold-hearted labor practices were likewise out of luck. Thomas W. Heathcoate, who had gone on strike with the rest of the ARU union members at Pullman in 1894, told the U.S. Strike Commission he would “never be able to get a job in the railway service again.”[[20]](#endnote-20) The Pullman Palace Car Company was known to send out blacklists of workers to other railroad companies so as to prevent strikers from obtaining employment elsewhere.

Furthermore, close historical examination reveals that the workers of the Pullman Company were not at all a population of individuals naturally disposed to revolt. Richard T. Ely writes that during his visit to Pullman, he felt that he was “mingling with a dependent, servile people.”[[21]](#endnote-21) The men of Pullman believed they were being watched by the “company’s spotter,” and Ely found it difficult to obtain a single honest opinion on Pullman Town from a resident population of 8,000 men and women.[[22]](#endnote-22) But as the workers explained it themselves in their Appeal to the People of Chicago, “forced for years to work on starvation wages… they at last struck against the soulless corporation which sought to fatten on the very marrow of their bones.”[[23]](#endnote-23) In 1894, Pullman residents finally recognized that the passivity of character that had once marked them as a “peaceable and orderly”[[24]](#endnote-24) town had also left them completely at George Pullman’s mercy. Pullman, who once sought to be a father figure for the inhabitants of the town he had named after himself, soon found his “children” applying the rhetoric of slavery to the strike:

They [the people of Pullman] struck against a slavery worse than that of the negroes of the south. These, at least, were well fed and well cared for, while the white slaves of Pullman, worked they ever so willingly, could not earn enough to keep body and soul together.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Therein lay the paradox. In attempting to protect his workers from the destructive path of a rampant American capitalism, George Pullman had effectively driven them to the greatest pitfall of them all: complete dependency. It is no wonder, then, that the American public was quick to criticize Pullman Town as an ultimately failed, un-American social model. But to label Pullman Town as “un-American”[[26]](#endnote-26) in the context of the 1890’s would be to ignore the fact that in late nineteenth-century America, the issue of ‘dependency’ faced not just Pullman Town but also the nation as a whole. Workers for the Pullman Palace Car Company may have seen themselves as slaves to George Pullman, but the reality was that cruelest taskmaster of all, the taskmaster to whom even Mr. Pullman had to answer, was capitalism. An industrial economy that grew unchecked had led to the deterioration of the American dream. Dependency, be it upon distant markets for cash crops or domestic demand for manufactured goods, plagued a nation that seemed to be changing too much, too quickly. But in the midst of this turmoil, there were a number of critics who blamed not the individuals involved, but the system itself. The Pullman Strike was one of many labor conflicts that precipitated the emergence of American socialism, a school of thought that sought to remedy some of the very same kinds of evils George Pullman perceived in the American social model. This school of thought, however, would abandon Mr. Pullman’s failed approach of compromise and directly address the root of America’s labor struggles, as revealed by the downfall of Pullman Town: that seemingly fundamental incompatibility between capitalism and social welfare.

Endnotes

1. 1. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. McPherson, (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett), 1980, *Oregon State University Instructional Sites* <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2. Faith Jaycox, "The Crisis of the '90s: 1894-1897," *The Progressive Era*, (New York: Eyewitness History, 2005), N. pag. *American History Online*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 3. Faith Jaycox, "The Crisis of the '90s: 1894-1897," *The Progressive Era*, (New York: Eyewitness History, 2005), N. pag. *American History Online*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 4. Paul S. Boyer, et al, *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People*, (Boston: Wadsworth CENGAGE Learning, 2013), 442. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 5. Jaycox, "The Crisis of the '90s: 1894-1897.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 6. Richard T. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study," *Harper's Magazine* Feb. 1885: 452-66, *Cornell University Library*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 7. "The Pullman Era," *The History Files*, ed. Chicago Historical Society, Chicago Historical Society. <http://www.chicagohs.org >. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 8. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 9. United States Strike Commission, *Report of the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894*, Comp. Carroll D. Wright, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1895), *Google Books*, 418. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 10. United States Strike Commission, *Report of the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894*, 417. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 11. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 12. United States Strike Commission, *Report of the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894*, 420. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 13. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. 14. Jaycox, "The Crisis of the '90s: 1894-1897.” [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 15. George M. Pullman, "For the Further Benefit of Our People," *Chicago Herald* [Chicago] June 1894: n. pag. *History Matters*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. 16. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. 17. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 18. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. 19. United States Strike Commission, *Statement of the Pullman Strikers*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1895), Report and Testimony on the Pullman Strike of 1894, *American History*. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. 20. United States Strike Commission, *Report of the Chicago Strike of June-July, 1894*, 421. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. 21. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. 22. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.” [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. 23. Union Members at Pullman, *Appeal to the People of Chicago*, *American History Online*, Facts on File. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. 24. United States Strike Commission, *Statement of the Pullman Strikers*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. 25. Union Members at Pullman, *Appeal to the People of Chicago*. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. 26. Ely, "Pullman: A Social Study.”

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