

"Was this not
the meaning of California:
that ordinary men
could do great things?"

— Hubert Howe Bancroft

What does this mean?

THE CULTURE OF GOLD RUSH SAN FRANCISCO

“**Culture** means the sum-total of a people's institutions, customs, and arts.” — Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*

- Darwinian Democracy
- Ethnocentrism
- Near-Anarchy
- Up-tempo Capitalism

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST



DARWINIAN DEMOCRACY

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

Tumbled Topsy-Turvy

- “Very few were following that particular business to which they had been bred, or for which they were best fitted by nature. Every immigrant on landing at San Francisco became a new man in his own estimation, and was prepared to undertake any thing or any piece of business whatsoever. And truly he did it; but it was with a deal of noise, bustle, and unnecessary confusion. The great recognized orders of society were tumbled topsy-turvy. Doctors and dentists became draymen, or barber, or shoe-blacks; lawyers, brokers and clerks, turned waiters, or auctioneers, or perhaps butchers; merchants tried laboring and lumping, while laborers and lumpers changed to merchants.” — *The Annals of San Francisco* (page 77)

New Roles

“In this theater of the noisiest international carnival that human memory records, no actor played the role that had fallen to his lot in his own country. The master became a servant; the lawyer, a mover of freight; the doctor a porter; the sailor a ditch digger; and the philosopher abandoned the limitless void to become a toiler in the solid matter of reality. I have seen without surprise, but with pardonable pride as a Chilean, the soft and effeminate fop from Santiago, the gold chain that had adorned his vest at balls in the capital now dangling from the button-hole of a sweat-drenched woolen shirt, unload the belongings of a muscular sailor in waterproofs while standing with sea water up to his waist; I have seen him smile, accept pay for his job, and hurry to offer his services to some other plain fellow.

— Vincente Perez Rosales, *California Adventure*, page 95

Cut Out For Any Calling

Let me say here never accept any person's opinion of your qualifications or capacities for any calling. If you feel that you are "cut out" for any calling or that you desire to follow it, abide by that feeling, and trust to it. It will carry you through in time.

I believe that thousands on thousands of lives have been blasted and crippled through the discouragement thrown on them by relation, friend, parent, or employer's saying continually (or if not saying it verbally, thinking it), "You are a dunce. you are stupid. You can't do this or that. It's ridiculous for you to think of becoming this or that."

The boy or girl goes off with this thought thrown on them by others. It remains with them, becomes a part of them and chokes off aspiration and effort.

—Prentice Mulford, *Prentice Mulford's Story*, page 140

Bayard Taylor

on

Darwinian Democracy

Reckless and Daring Spirit

The direct effect of the state of things growing out of the discovery of the placers, was to develop new qualities and traits of character, not in single individuals, but in every individual of the entire community — traits frequently most unlooked for in those who exhibited them in the most marked degree. Society, therefore, was for the time cast into new forms, or, rather, deprived of any fixed form. A man, on coming to California, could no more expect to retain his old nature unchanged than he could retain in his lungs the air he had inhaled on the Atlantic shore.

The most immediate and striking change which came upon the greater portion of the emigrants was an increase of activity, and opportunity, of **reckless and daring** spirit. -

-Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, page 127-128

The Most Democratic Country

After what has been said, it will appear natural that California should be the most democratic country in the world. The practical equality of all the members of a community, whatever might be the wealth, intelligence, or profession of each, was never before thoroughly demonstrated. Dress was no gauge of respectability, and no honest occupation, however menial in its character, affected a man's standing. Lawyers, physicians, and ex-professors dug cellars, drove ox-teams, sawed wood and carried luggage; while men who had been Army privates, sailors, cooks or day laborers were at the head of profitable establishments, and not infrequently assisted in some of the minor details of government...

Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, page 130

The Most Democratic Country

A man who would consider his fellow beneath him, on account of his appearance or occupation, would have had some difficulty in living peaceably in California. The security of the country is owing, in no small degree, to this plain, practical development of what the French reverence as an abstraction, under the name of Fraternité. To sum up all, in three words, LABOR IS RESPECTABLE.: may it never be otherwise, while a grain of gold is left to glitter in California soil!

Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, page 130

Darwinian Democracy:

A Point to Remember

- *Note that many writers — such as Rosales and Taylor — marvel not only that the “lowly” can achieve high levels, but that the privileged and high can take on “lowly” work and succeed there, too.*

“Active, Hopeful and Industrious”

The emigrants who arrive in California, very soon divide into two distinct classes. About two-thirds, or possibly three-fourths of them are active, hopeful and industrious. They feel this singular intoxication of society, and go to work at something, no matter what, by which they hope to thrive...

Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, page 128

“Through a Glass, Darkly”

The remaining portion see everything “through a glass, darkly.” Their first bright anticipations are unrealized; the horrid winds of San Francisco during the dry season, chill and unnerve them; or, if they go to the placers, the severe labor and the ill success of inexperienced hands, completes their disgust. They commit a multitude of sins in the shape of curses upon everyone who has written or spoken favorably of California. Some of them return home without having seen the country at all and others, even if they obtain profitable situations, **labor without a will**. It is no place for a slow, an over-cautious, or a desponding man. The emigrant should be willing to work, not only at one business, but many, if need be; the grumbler or the idler had far better stay home.

Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, page 128

The Cost of Failure and Success

- The City Hospital, a large, well-ventilated and regulated establishment, contained about fifty patients. The attending physician described to me several cases of nearly hopeless lunacy which had come under his care, some of them produced by disappointment and ill-luck, and others by sudden increase of fortune. Poor human nature!

Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, page 126

Success by Lunacy:

Joshua Norton, Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico

From \$40K to \$250K to broke

Announcement of Imperial Status

“In what other city would a harmless madman who supposed himself to be the emperor of the two Americas have been so fostered and encouraged? Where else would even the people of the streets have respected the poor soul’s illusion? Where else would bankers and merchants have received his visits, cashed his cheques, and submitted to his small assessments?” -- R.L.

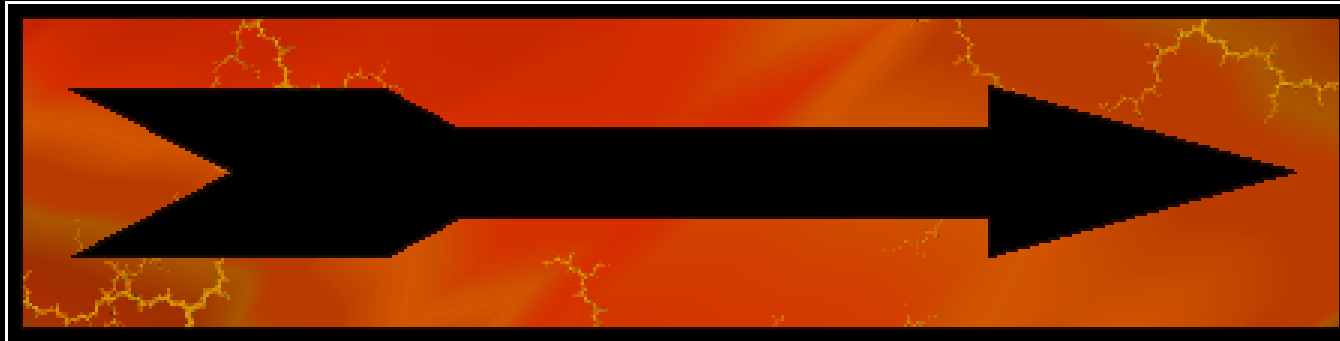


Innocentism



ETHNOCENTRICISM

Feelings of “my people are better than yours” preceded the Gold Rush, and of course still exerts their force today. The following selections show the face of ethnocentrism in the midst of Darwinian Democracy.



“A Congregation of All Nations”

A congregation of all nations, creeds, and tongues — English and Spanish, German, French, Chinese, Sandwich Islands, Indian &c., and in passing through, one hears their jargon at every corner, and sees the strange and peculiar costume of each nation — the flashy silk or muslin dresses of the embrowned Mexican señoritas — we can not call them pretty — bareheaded, or with a rich shawl carelessly thrown over their heads, which half hides a seeming Indian face; the sturdy German, with a heavy package nicely balanced on her head, or the neat, tidy French and American belle, tripping along with a light step and joyous countenance; or, perchance, the plain, honest, good-natured face of the Kanaka girl” *Alonzo Delano, Pen-Knife Sketches, page 132*

PORTSMOUTH PLAZA



“The Animus of the Average American”

[At first, the American government declared that no foreigners could exploit the gold fields. Then the government attempted to tax foreigners for the privilege of mining. As a result:]

The animus of the average American toward the natives of other countries, and particularly toward the Chileans, has increased as a result. A simple and conclusive argument was adduced: the Chileans were descendants of the Spaniards; the Spaniards had Moorish blood; ergo, the Chileans were Hottentots at the very least or, to give them the utmost one possibly could, something like the timid and humble Californians...

Vincente Pérez Rosales, *California Adventure*, page 96

Bravery and Cowardice

...The Americans had found it hard to swallow the Chileans' intrepidity. Compliant in their own country, Chileans ceased to be so abroad, even in the face of a pistol aimed at their hearts, provided they can lay hand on the knife hilt at their belts. The Chileans in turn detested the Americans, whom they constantly averred to be cowards; and this mutual detestation explains the bloody disasters and atrocities that we saw at every step in the land of gold and hope.

Vincente Pérez Rosales, *California Adventure*, page 96

Attack on a Latino Camp



Awkward Americans

Although Americans are generally awkward and unbending, they enjoy dancing, and above all they love to watch other people dance. [At the public dances] all the women in town appear, French, American and Mexican; the men gather in crowds; and one often sees beautiful costumes richly adorned with lace, which the women make themselves or order from dressmakers for each occasion. A masked ball naturally permits a certain freedom, but here the feverish atmosphere of the city produces an abandon I have never seen elsewhere...

— Albert Benard de Russailh, *Last Adventure*, pp. 104-105

Genuine French Gaiety

Three distinct quadrilles are always in progress simultaneously, French, American, and Mexican, and the races mix only in waltzes, polkas, and gallops. The American quadrille is danced with Anglo-Saxon stiffness and passivity; the Mexican with a southern languor and indolent grace; but the French quadrille is the center of genuine gaiety and animation. I often notice how American men steal away from their own group and enviously watch the vivacious French women, who do not hesitate to let themselves go, when they see they are being admired....

Paris and San Francisco

... I am occasionally reminded of our balls at the Salle Valentine on the Rue St. Honoré. There is one important difference: Parisian rowdies often come to blows; but in San Francisco hardly an evening passes without drunken brawls during which shots are fired. — Albert Benard de Russailh, *Last Adventure*, pp. 104-105

Gold Rush Dance





An Equal Footing

- In San Francisco the Dance House has fixed its location in the vicinity of Pacific and Jackson Streets. It is liberty hall — all colors, classes, conditions, ages and nationalities meet on an equal footing on the passage of its portal. There are no grades or classes — all are on an equality, be it the European, the Mexican or the Negro. — Dame Shirley, *The Shirley Letters*



“The Negro Dance House”



- When the dance is announced, a master of ceremonies hurries around and bustles the couples on the floor to participate in a quadrille, whose figures would puzzle a veteran in the dance. Negroes select white partners, and white men, negresses, Americans, Mexicans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Chilenos, of every hue, are here, each vociferating in their vernaculars; but the jargon ceases, on the musicians operating on their harps and violins. — Dame Shirley

Dancin' in Camp!



Russailh Again: God Help the Foreigners!

And as for foreigners, God help them if they have any legal difficulties with Americans. No matter how strong their case may be, they have no chance. The spirit of nationalism is all-powerful here. The great American people is free, but one must admit that this liberty is put to strange uses. —

Albert Benard de Russailh, *Last Adventure*, pp. 108



“No Bounds”

A person arrived here from the Sandwich Islands, by the name of Montgomery, who carried on the business of auctioneering, and he found it very profitable, as some good that were brought here would not sell for any price, and he would often purchase them by private sale, and would lay them over until they were in demand. He would go for a month or more without liquor, but whenever he got started he knew no bounds, and would keep on a spree for one or two weeks...

“No Bounds”

... One time he rode up to the bar-room window (which was very large) and said he was going to ride through. I informed him that if he did so it would be a very dear ride. He then asked how much it would cost him. I made the figures rather high, thinking it would keep him from coming through. The price was \$500. The words were hardly out of my mouth, when he threw a bag of dust through the window to me, and said, “Weigh out your \$500, and take out enough for a basket of wine,” and before I could pick up the bag he and his horse was [sic] through the window into the bar-room. — John Brown, *Reminiscences and Incidents of the Early Days* 89)



“A Pretense of Civil Government”

Brought to the scene by the bustle, shouting and swearing of a crowd of people, I saw that they were pushing one of their number into the presence of the Alcalde. casually joining them, I went with the rest into the courtroom, a large, bare hall with a door at one end and a low window at the other, where the judge sat. The latter, after a brief exchange of words with plaintiffs and defendant, considered himself informed — again time was money — and standing up, loudly said, “Hear, hear! I condemn the culprit to fifty lashes, to be administered at once!” —>

“Kicks in the — !”

At the mention of fifty lashes, another voice, alcoholic and broken by hiccoughs, also pronounced a “Hear, hear!” All of us turned to the direction from which the bellow had issued, and saw with amazement that it came from an Oregonian who, precariously poised on a speaker’s platform made by the shoulders of three heavy-faced companions, after another command of “Hear, hear!” cried out: “Citizens! Inasmuch as the Alcalde is in favor of the immediate application of fifty strokes to this citizen of the United States, I propose that ten of us escort the Alcalde for a distance of one mile with kicks in the — !”

Litigation by Pistol and Knife

“Hurray!” exclaimed all present with one voice.

The culprit himself and all the rest rushed toward the Alcalde who, swifter than a hare, leaped out of the window and evaporated among the adjoining alleys. With such judges and such litigants, it was not surprising that suits of the first and second instance were adjusted with pistols and knives.” — Vincente Rosales, *California Adventure*, pages 95-96

“The Dregs of Every Nation”

Immediately after the discovery of gold, the dregs of every nation, from Australia to Europe, rushed to San Francisco and began to exercise their profession on a grand scale. I am sure that no other city in the world contains so many rogues and cut-throats. The streets and public places are infested with them; notorious thieves and murderers brush by you on the wooden sidewalks; it often seems as if the earth's entire supply of brigands had been dumped here...

“The Society of Death”

For all these men the gambling-halls provide the chief means of livelihood. Their favorite method is to hang around a table and to start a fight; and when the brawl is raging, they manage to snatch money from the bank and slip away. Powerful secret organizations, such as the *Do or Die* or *The Society of Death*, bind them together, and they have a leader in Sacramento whom they obey unquestioningly....

“Breathe a Prayer for the Victim”

You must never walk through the outlying streets of the city at night, for robbers are always prowling about armed to the teeth, and they do not hesitate to use their weapons at the slightest provocation. They are good shots and deadly with the knife. At any dark corner they may fall upon you; and nobody will answer your cries for help. We are so used to hearing shots during the night in this terrible country that we never even get up, but only turn over in bed and breathe a prayer for the victim. — Albert Benard de Russailh, *Last Adventure*, page 105

MADAME MOUSTACHE DEFENDS HERSELF IN GOLD RUSH BODIE!



“An Iron Hand”

As for the police, I have only one thing to say. The police force is largely made up of ex-bandits, and naturally the members are interested above all in saving their old friends from punishment.

Policemen here are quite as much to be feared as the robbers; if they know you have money, they will be the first to knock you on the head. You pay them well to watch over your house, and they set it on fire. In short, I think that all the people concerned with justice are in league with the criminals. The city is in a hopeless chaos, and many years must pass before order can be established. In a country where so many races are mingled, a severe and inflexible justice is desirable, which would govern with an iron hand. — Albert Benard de Russailh, *Last Adventure*, page 109

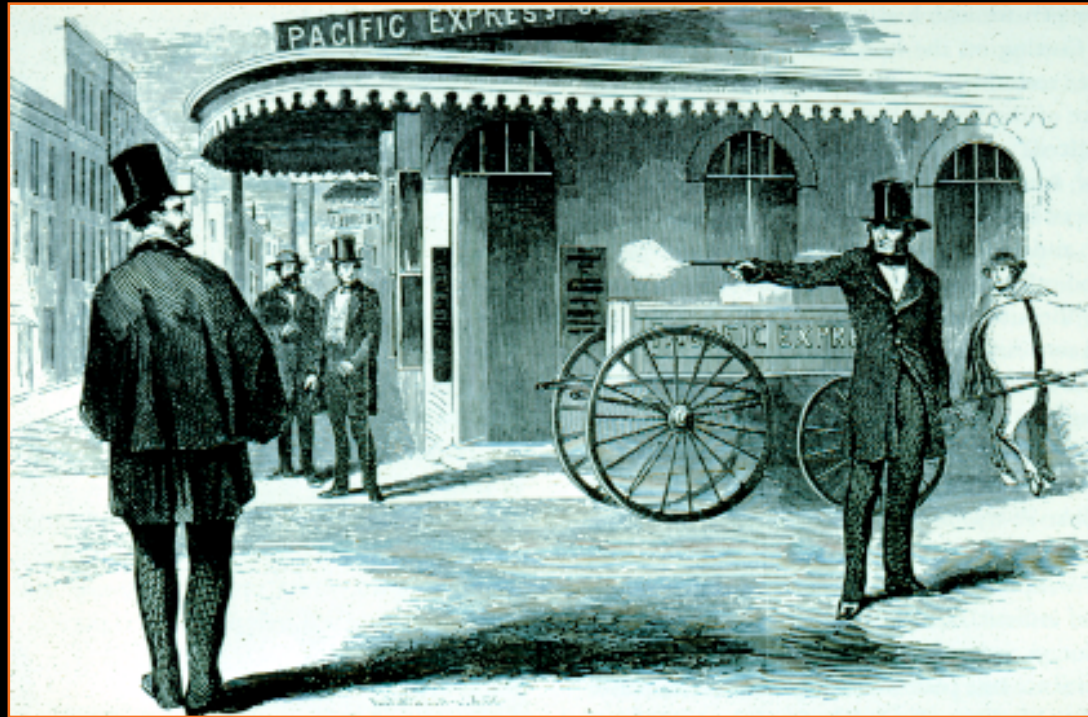
“The Noble Vigilance Committee”

You must not confound this miner's judgment with the doings of the noble Vigilance Committee of San Francisco. They are almost totally different in their organization and manner of proceeding. The Vigilance Committee had become absolutely necessary for the protection of society. It was composed of the best and wisest men in the city. They used their powers with a moderation unexampled in history, and they laid it down with a calm and quiet readiness which was absolutely sublime, when they found that legal justice had again resumed that course of stern, unflinching duty which should always be its characteristic...

DESTRUCTION BY FIRE



Casey Murders James King on the Streets of San Francisco 1856

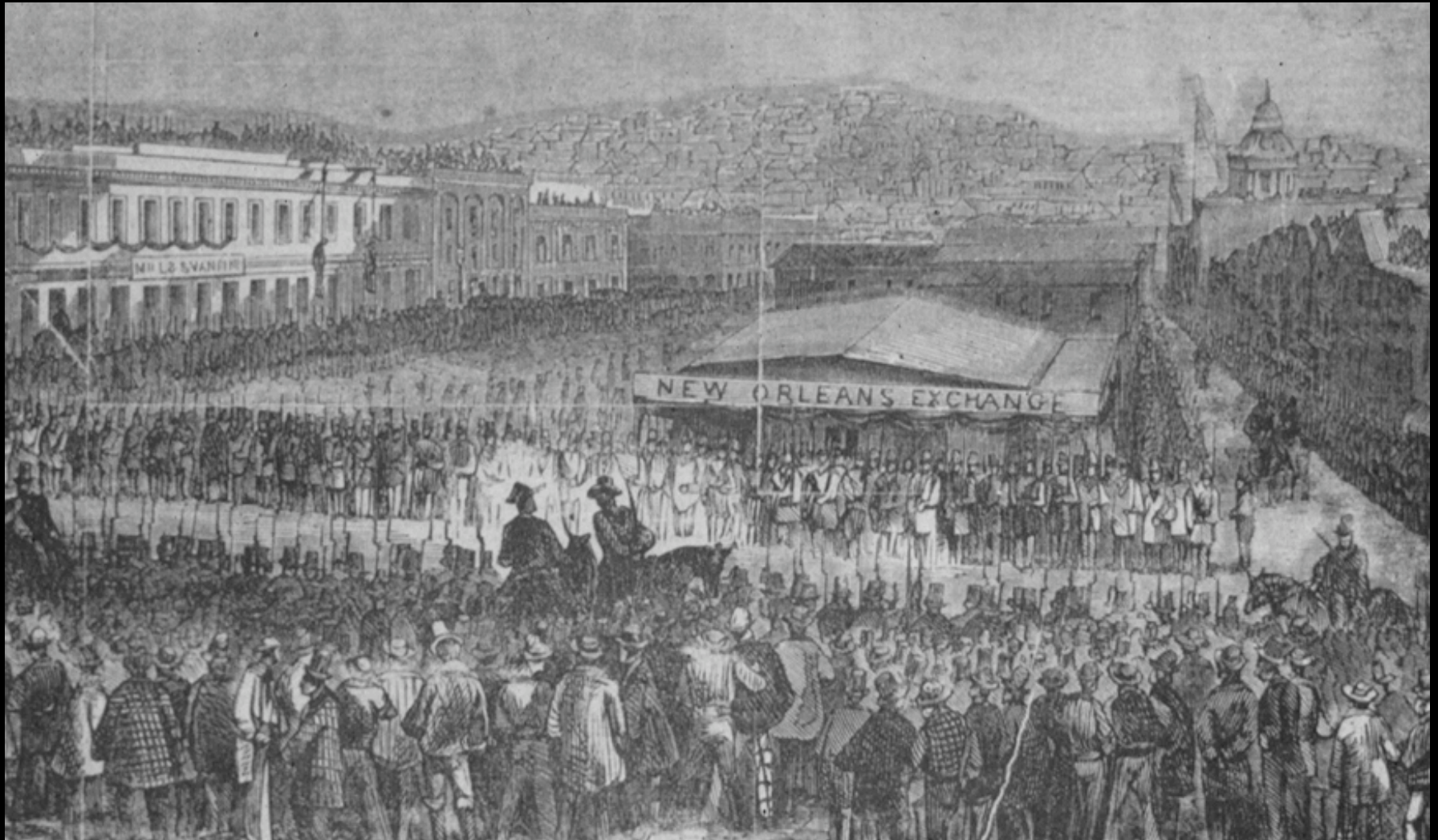


The Vigilance Committee Takes Casey and Cora Into Custody



Cora and Casey Hanged





“Justice must not only be done: it must be seen to be done.”

Vigilance Committee Certificate

by
Charles
Christian
Nahl



Vigilance



Physical Power

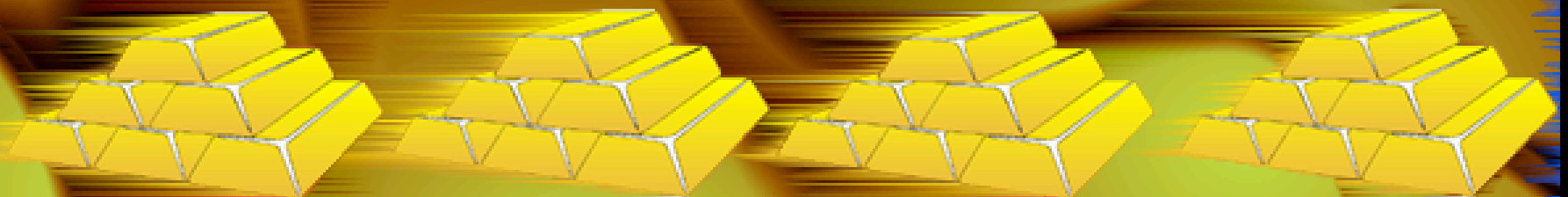


Moral Power

“The Criminals Who Fell Into Their Hands”

They took ample time for a thorough investigation of all the circumstances relating to the criminals who fell into their hands; and in *no* case have they hung a man, who had not been proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, to have committed at least one robbery in which life had been endangered, if not absolutely taken. — Dame Shirley, *Letters*, page 152

Corporate Capitalism



Multicultural Capitalism



Comparative Prices 1849 and 1996

- Price of Gold: \$14/oz
- Day's Wages: \$1/day
- Loaf of bread: \$.02
- Restaurant baked beans: \$.75
- Restaurant baked beans greased: \$1.00
- Bottle of champagne: \$120

- Price of Gold: \$330/oz
- Day's Wages: \$40/day
- Loaf of bread: ??
- Plain beans??
- Greasy beans??
- Good champagne: ??

“Every body was busy”

People bustled and jostled against each other, bawled, railed and fought, cursed and swore, sweated and labored lustily, and somehow the work was done. A spectator would have imagined the confusion inextricable, but soon had reason to change his opinion. Every body was busy, and knew very well what he himself had to do. Heaps of goods disappeared, as if by magic, and new heaps appeared in their place. Where there was a vacant piece of ground one day, the next saw it covered with half a dozen tents or shanties. — *The Annals of San Francisco*, page 77

“Riotous excess”

While wages and profits were so high, and there was no comfort at their sleeping quarters, men spent money frequently at different places of riotous excess, and were indeed forced to pass their hours of leisure or recreation at drinking bars, billiard rooms, and gambling saloons. — *Annals of San Francisco*, page 78

WHERE DO FOLKS GO TODAY FOR PLACES OF RIOTOUS EXCESS?

Riotous Excess!



Frantic and Lewd

To vary amusements, occasionally a fancy-dress ball or masquerade would be announced at high prices. There the most extraordinary scenes were exhibited, as might have been expected where the actors and dancers were chiefly hot-headed young men, flush with money and half frantic with excitement, and lewd girls freed from the necessity of all moral restraint. A concert or a lecture would at other times help to entertain the weary spirits of the town. But of all their haunts, the gambling saloons were the most notorious and best patronized. — *Annals*, page 78

Frantic and Lewd !



500% Mark-Up

A basket of champagne wine was sold in the bar for one hundred and twenty dollars. The only thing which would buy these wines was gold coin. In that way I could purchase it for from twenty-four dollars per basket.

— John Brown, *Reminiscences and Incidents of “The Early Days” of San Francisco*, page 86

“Forced to believe many things”

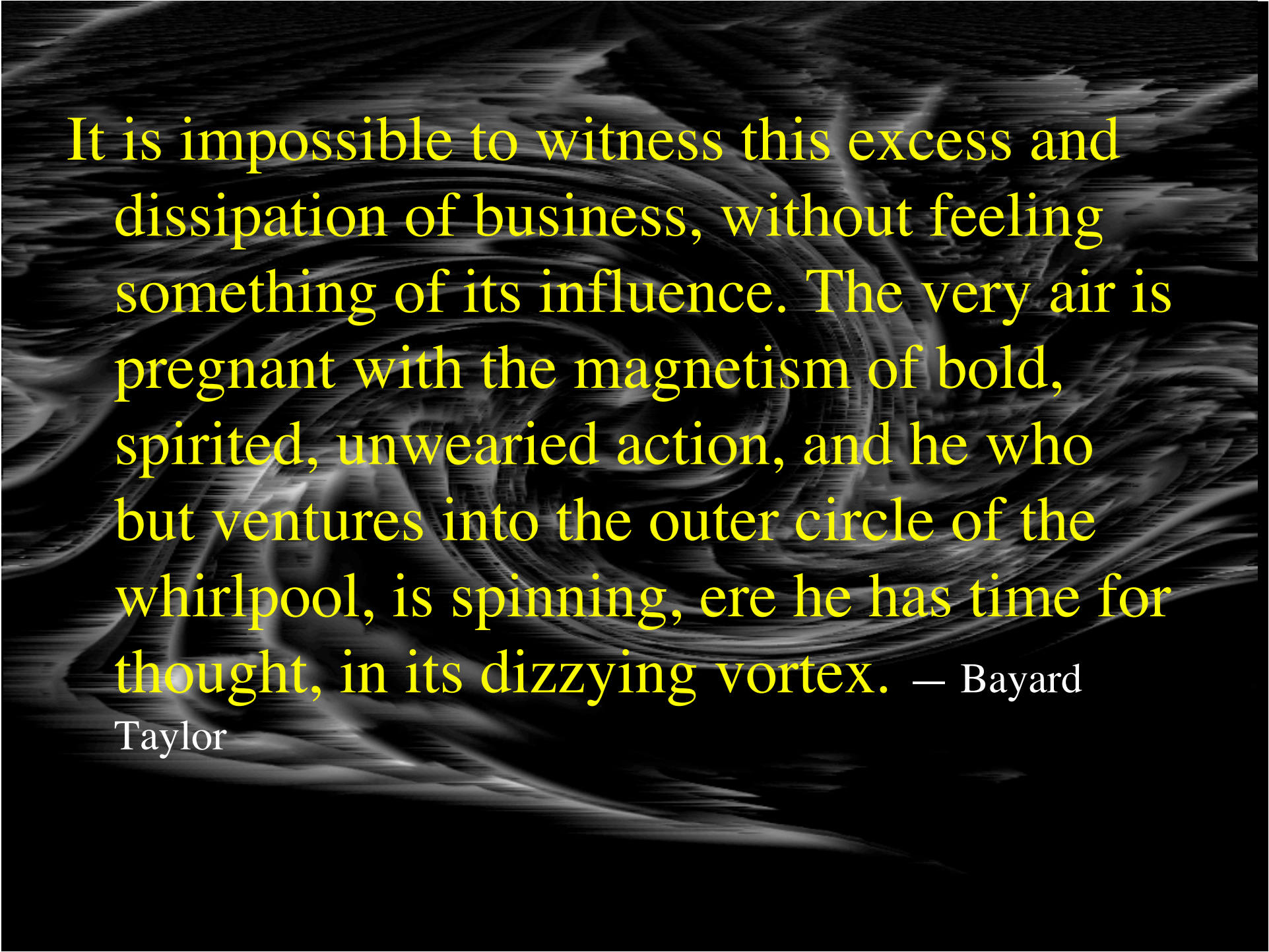
I was forced to believe many things, which in my communication to The Tribune I was almost afraid to write, with any hope of their obtaining credence.....

The prices paid for labor were in proportion to everything else. The car-man of Mellus, Howard & Co. had a salary of \$6,000 a year, and many others made from \$15 to \$20 daily. Servants were paid from \$100 to \$200 a month, but the wages of the rougher kinds of labor had fallen to about \$8. — Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, pages 114-115

“Dizzying Vortex”

The crowd in the streets is now wholly alive.

Men dart hither and thither, as if possessed with a never-resting spirit. You speak to an acquaintance — a merchant, perhaps. He utters a few hurried words of greeting, while his eyes send keen glances on all sides of you; suddenly he catches sight of somebody in the crowd; he is off, and in the next five minutes has bought up half a cargo, sold a town lot at treble the sum he gave, and taken a share in some new and imposing speculation...



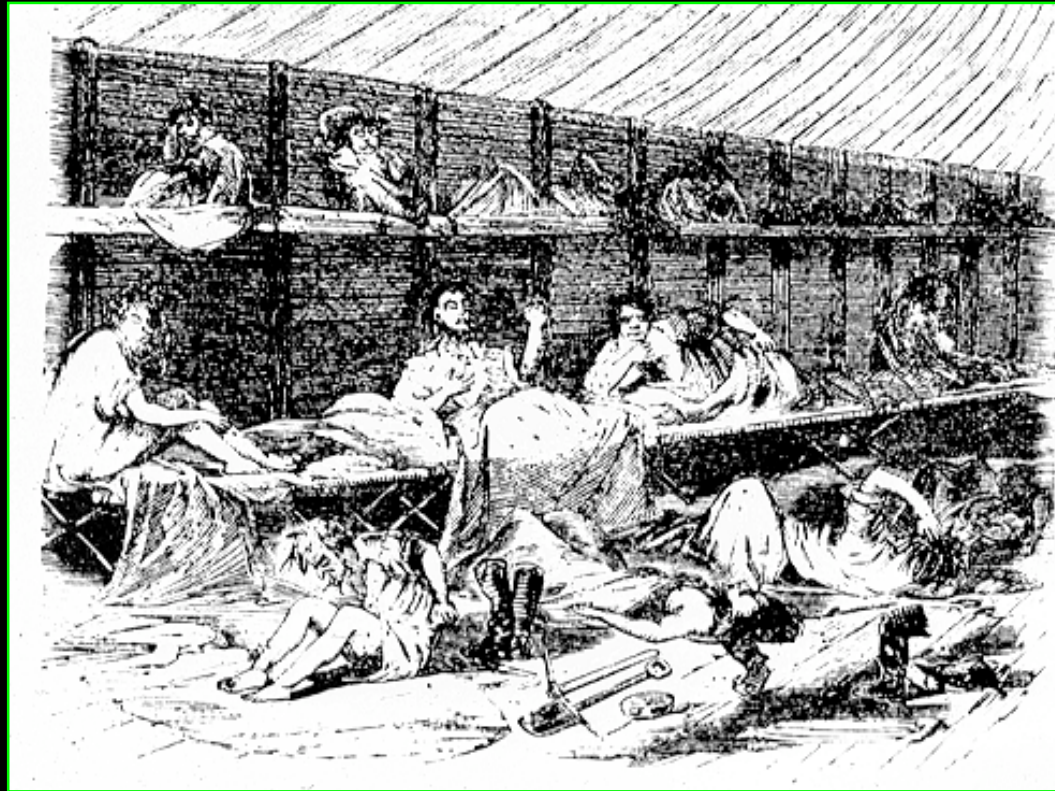
It is impossible to witness this excess and dissipation of business, without feeling something of its influence. The very air is pregnant with the magnetism of bold, spirited, unwearied action, and he who but ventures into the outer circle of the whirlpool, is spinning, ere he has time for thought, in its dizzying vortex. — Bayard

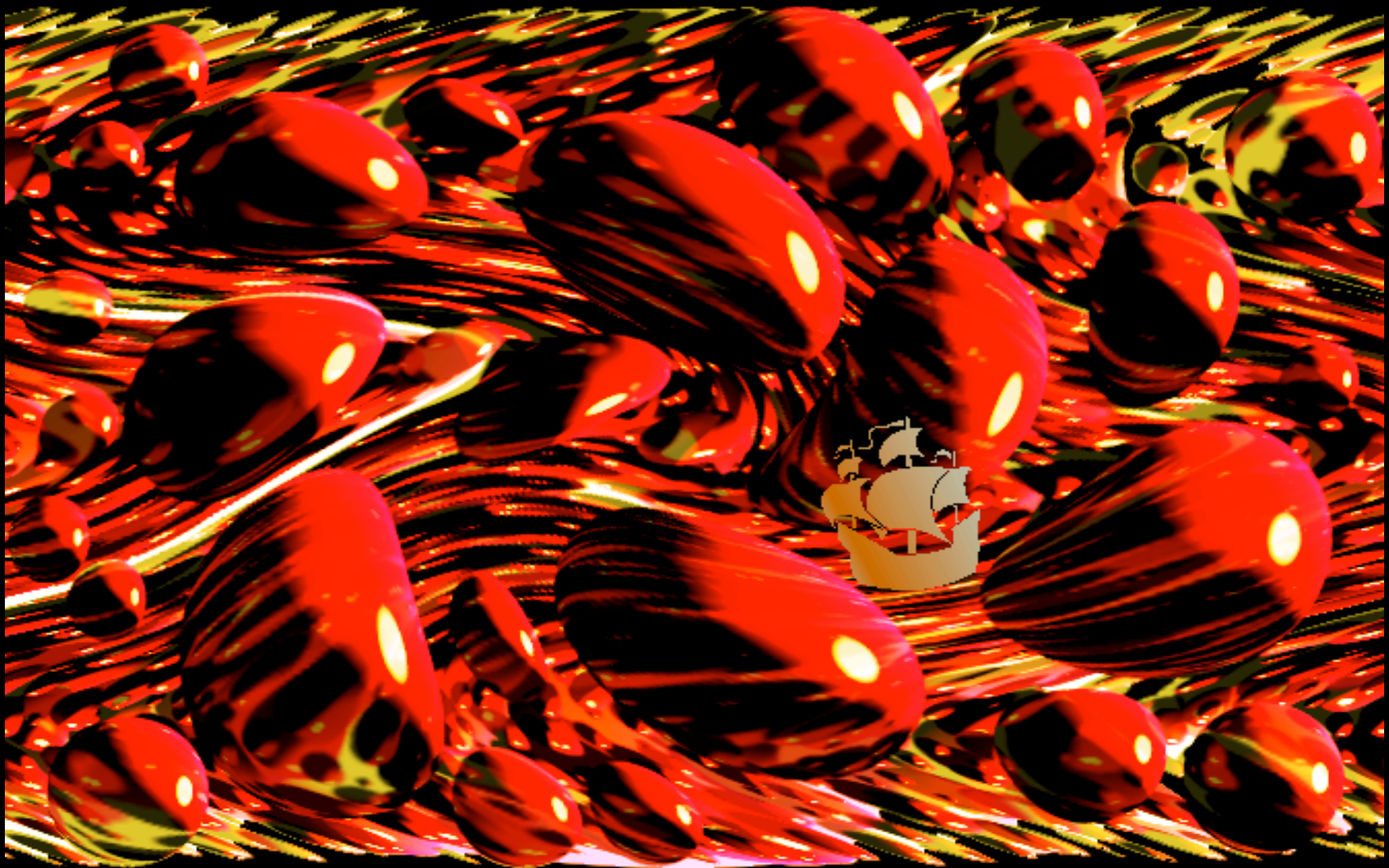
Taylor

Chow

In the matter of dining, the tastes of all nations can be gratified here. There are French restaurants on the plaza and Dupont street; an extensive German establishment on Pacific Street; the Fonda Peruana; the Italian Confectionery; and three Chinese houses... The latter are much frequented by Americans, on account of their excellent cookery, and the fact that meals are \$1 each, without regard to quantity.... The grave Celestials serve up their chow-chow and curry, besides many genuine English dishes; their tea and coffee cannot be surpassed. — Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado*, page

The Down Side to Darwinian Democracy





F I N I S

