Rediscovering Alger

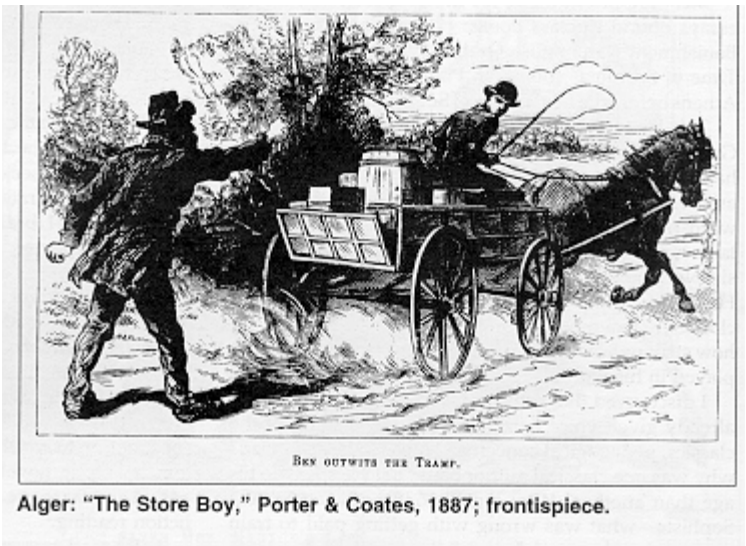
by Carol Nackenoff

I began to think about writing about Alger without a very clear understanding of why I had gotten "hooked" late in my graduate school years. I had written a dissertation on how different segments of the workforce's experiences with changes in the post-World War II U.S. job structure affected their political attitudes, attachments, and agendas.

But I became convinced that survey research was not the best way to get at "worldviews"--understandings of how the world worked. I combatted a long "writer's block" with what I thought would be an article on Alger. Six years later, I signed a book contract with Oxford University Press. And I realized, along the way, how this work united my background in political theory, American political thought, political economy, my love of literature, and even literary theory; I also realized how it got at the patterning of American politics, in which I had long been interested.

Why my title: "Rediscovering Alger"? I want to share three things with you.

First, as collectors and Alger enthusiasts, I thought you might like to hear a few words about some of the finds or gems I discovered while travelling to collections from Boston to California--and sources that helped me think about Alger that aren't often examined. Second are some of the new insights and perspectives I gained on Alger, when Alger scholarship has been served so very ably by authors such as Ralph Gardner and by Gary Scharnhorst of the University of New Mexico, writing sometimes with Jack Bales.



Alger: "The Store Boy," Porter & Coates, 1887; frontispiece.

Third, I want to talk a bit about what interest Alger has to political science or to social scientists. Alger is enjoying renewed interest-rediscovery-in light of new questions, methods, and types of inquiry. The number of people teaching Alger these days in courses on American literature, popular culture, history, sociology, and American politics seems to be increasing. I am interested in where Alger fits into a discussion of contemporary political debates and agendas.

Let me turn first to some of the gems, from my perspective. The Harvard University Archives has a wonderful collection of materials from the class of 1852--including menus from the class reunion dinners, poems composed, songs sung, etc. (Another hobby of mine is food--what great fun it would be to replicate one of these dinners!) Here is a copy of Alger's last will and testament, including the bequest of his calendar gold watch to the son of a niece in San Francisco, Stanley Hemceld (also spelled Himceld).

There are Alger newspaper obituaries. There are faculty meeting notes, including a notice about Alger being admonished about twice missing prayers. There are library charging lists for Horatio Alger, Jr.; I saw what kind of reading Alger was doing, which included quite a few Scottish Enlightenment figures, as well as some literature.

Most important there, for my purposes, were some essays bound in class books: "Cicero's Return From Banishment" (an English Oration Prize); "Athens in the Time of Socrates" (Bowdoin Prize).

This last was a translation *into* Greek of a section of Grote's "History of Greece." (I don't read Greek and had it looked at by some classics scholars; once they assured me that Alger had done a pretty straightforward translation, and that there was nothing particularly noteworthy about the nature of this translation, I simply used the passage and other parts of Grote's History to think about how Alger was reading the classics.) Examination of these essays helped me to see how striking was the role that Alger's classics education played in his work.

I discovered that some of his lifelong concerns were already given voice here. I saw, in his reading of the classics, pedagogical concerns: How did Pericles lead? Why was one classical author better able to speak to his age than another? Why did Plato/Socrates attack the Sophists--what was wrong with getting paid to train the young in the art of rhetoric? Some of these questions were particularly fascinating, given my training as a political theorist, and given the work I had done on Plato in particular.

These Harvard essays have not been well-enough examined. They also locate Alger in a Harvard Unitarian tradition, Christianizing Plato and thinking about how the cultural elite could speak to an emerging generation, including the working classes. This last issue was one with which Harvard President Edward Everett, for whom Alger ran errands in 1848-49, was especially concerned. Looking at these essays, I began to think about how, after the Astor Place Riots of '49, Alger was sitting at Harvard, yearning for a world in which classes met in the same theater, were moved in common, spoke a common language. He wrote of the theater of classical antiquity:

"It must have been an impressive spectacle--that vast multitude-- seated tier above tier, bench upon bench, occupied by one common subject of interest, with their passions alternately soothed and excited surrendering their whole souls to the absorbing interest with which the poet had invested the brilliant creations of his fancy." (from "Athens in the Time of Socrates")

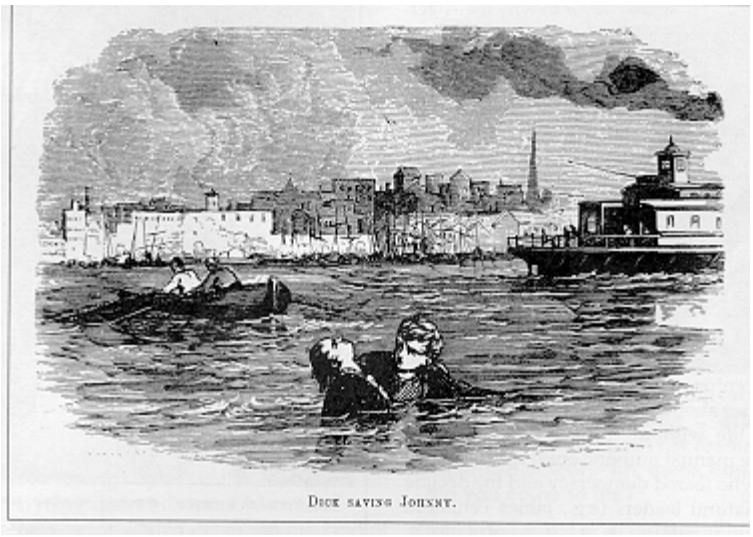
Another "gem" I found at the American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, Mass.) helped me think about another set of Alger questions: Who read Alger? Through what medium? Who bought books? Where did people have access to Alger stories and novels? How diverse was his audience?

Luke saves Mrs. Merton's Life.

Although it could not help me answer this last question (librarians observing patrons at the Boston Public Library were enlightening here), the American Antiquarian Society's Children as Diaists Collection yielded an unusual find. The Grenville Howland Norcross Diaries recorded the reading habits of a young boy of about 14 (his father was, at one point, Mayor of Boston).

One could see the diversity of one middle class boy's reading diet in the late 1860s. Much more could and should be done seeking out this kind of data. Young Norcross, at any rate, frequented lending libraries, the Boston Public Library, read railroad literature, dime novels, and played an early game of authors (Alger would later appear in the religous suit).

He recited Alger's John Maynard at school in 1868 (having surely read it in **Student and Schoolmate**, where the poem had recently appeared), and then went off to the lending library (Burnham's--probably something like Loring's) and read first "Helen Ford" and then "Ragged Dick," both in 1868. His parents gave him a subscription to an Oliver Optic magazine; his aunt gave him an Optic novel. But middle-class youth of the period appear to use the libraries for a good deal of their fiction reading.



Alger: "Ragged Dick," A.K. Loring 1868, p. 284.

I also read correspondence at the Andover-Harvard Theological Library (Cambridge) between the Brewster parish committee and the Secretary of the Unitarian Society. (The program for Alger's ordination service in Brewster is also here.) I read the Senior Alger's letter trying to quiet down the Brewster affair, and assuring the society that Horatio Jr. would never again seek a pulpit. Correspondence *refers* to a letter of resignation by Horatio Alger, Jr. that isn't there (I wonder where it is?) I read the continuing correspondence from Solomon Freeman, a Brewster parish committeeman, as he continued to try to get the Society to act against Horatio Alger, Jr. Freeman wrote Willian Allen, publisher of **Student and Schoolmate**, protesting Alger's appearance as an author who purported to seek to exert a positive influence on the young; Freeman tried unsuccessfully to have the Unitarian Society contact Allen to put a stop to Alger's appearance in **Student and Schoolmate**.

The correspondence made me think about Alger's attitude toward the church and the clergy as a force influencing the young--and how Alger downplayed the role of the clergy and formal religious institutions in moral guidance. In "Ragged Dick", which was underway at the time of the Brewster affair, Mr. Greyson takes Dick to Sunday School; but the clergy drop out in many of Alger's novels. Even in the early novel "Paul Prescott's Charge," Paul is taken in by a church sexton after falling asleep in a church--we are told the sermon was boring.

Also, the Brewster matter helped me begin to see just what it meant for an author to be totally dependent on his (or her) pen for a living--and how attuned to the market such an author needed to be.

I pursued this theme in a chapter on "The Author in the Literary Marketplace," which examined mass fiction writing, and the way in which expansion of fiction reading, book purchasing, and mass marketing of cheap fiction all helped shape authorship and literary production. The importance of owning and producing oneself was not only an issue for Alger heroes but also for authors.

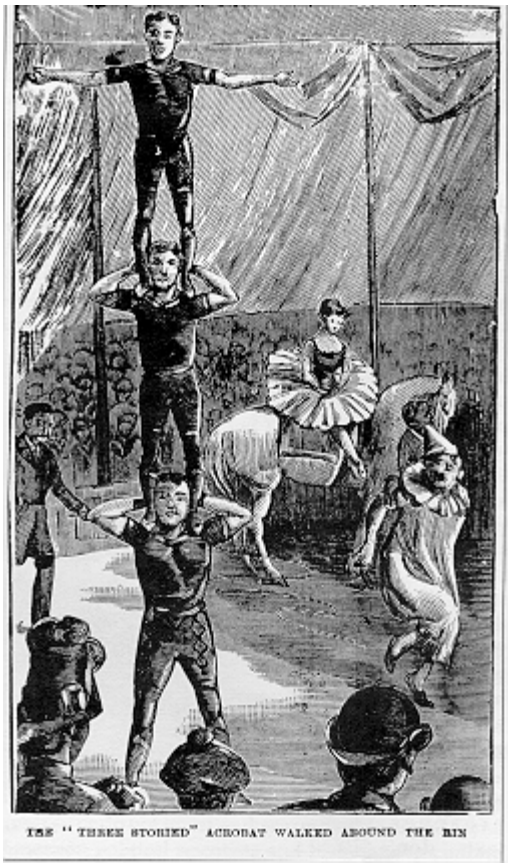
On this note, a major "gem" in my travels was the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. The Huntington houses 96 letters from Alger to Irving Blake, a young Tribune correspondent. I learned about what Alger was reading, the entertainments he went to or remembered, reflections on political contests...

Apart from the letter collection--the largest in a library (Columbia University is next with the Edwin Seligman collection of about 24 letters)--the grounds of the Huntington were unbelievable--it is called the Huntington Library and gardens. Samuel Huntington, a 19th century railroad magnate, built the estate, with mansion, art gallery, and theme gardens. Alger's letters there date from 1896 to the end of his life; there are also some letters others wrote to Joseph P. Loeb, a San Francisco lawyer and Alger collector. There are several photos (one of Alger's mother that I've never seen or seen refered to). One of these letters to Joseph Loeb, from a Joy Lichtenstein, was especially interesting as I thought about issues of production and consumption--the place of the mass fiction author and of one who depends upon being consumed. Here is his recollection of Alger's 1890 trip:

He came out here to write a book on the gold mining days, and I cannot remember the name of it, but it never was of much importance. He was a slight man with gray hair, and a gray mustache. He seemed quite elderly to me, but perhaps he was not sixty at that time. He rented a room in a hotel on Sansome Street, between California and Sacramento where the Security Building now is, right across the Street from Wells-Fargo Express. It was a third class hotel, as I remember, and not having to work in the Library some mornings, I would spend the mornings with him. He sat at a small marble topped table, writing on small sheets of paper.

The room was terribly cold. He would write a certain length of time and complete a certain number of sheets and then we would go out to lunch. In about two weeks, he had exactly one-half of the book finished, and I remember going over to the Express office while he sent it back to the publisher. Some evenings we would walk around the lower part of town, and he would stop before some of the cheap stores and examine the goods that were on display and inquire about the prices. He had New England characteristics. He was a bachelor.

Alger's own position at the margins of the economy, at the margins of what genteel culture saw as literary respectability, is highlighted. His slight frame and his slight late literary accomplishments and the drabness of his terribly cold, third-class hotel room all indicate his status as a producer. Staring into the cheap stores and attempting to determine the prices of ordinary goods displayed there, Alger gathers "data" for his stories in the marketplace.



Alger: "The Young Acrobat," Strettt & Smith, 1900, frontispiece.

In my book, I go from here to examining the difficult time one had living by writing mass fiction. There was the rapid pace and poor pay; at least Alger owned his own name, unlike the Bertha M. Clays and Old Sleuths of dime novel production, produced by different people. And when and if they "moved" to another publisher, they didn't own their names.

The author also had to be a self-marketer. Alger's reflections on politics housed at the Huntington and in the Seligman letters (and a few at the University of Michigan) helped me grapple with Alger's Whig-Republican politics. You see him as an enthusiastic partisan. He was out on the streets with cousin William Rounseville Alger the night of the Rutherford B. Hayes-Samuel Tilden contest in '76 (as others were, seeking election news). You see his enthusiasm for Theodore Roosevelt, and his narration of an incident in which he was called to the stage as a stand-in once when he went to hear Roosevelt speak at Railroad Hall in New York (the featured speaker had not arrived). You see Alger's hostility to the only Democratic president of the era, Grover Cleveland, and his remark (to Russell A. Alger, a distant relation relation seeking the Republican nomination in 1888) that the first Cleveland administration was "unamerican, and hostile to the industrial interests of the people."

I thought long and hard about what Alger meant by this remark, and I eventually concluded that there is no way Alger joined in the Mugwump defection of '84 (in which some progressive northern Republicans defected from Blaine to help elect the Democrat, Cleveland).

In this correspondence, one will also notice Alger's disdain for political corruption and for Tammany Hall, and his remarks lauding Teddy Roosevelt's reform police. Alger voices his opinions about William Jennings Bryan, hard money--especially the gold standard-- and his enthusiasm about the McKinley election of 1896. Here is part of one of my favorite letters, penned to young Irving Blake on this occasion:

I judge by the papers that McKinley will receive 302 electoral votes, and Bryan 300. Both shall be elected, and there will be three Vice Presidents. We shall have both silver and gold, and all will be happy. Our incomes will be doubled,

and you can drink all the whisky [sic] you want. Perhaps you do now. Let us live and hope!

Alger's various gold standard remarks got me thinking about the relationship between gold, as the medium of exchange, and *character* in Alger novels. I came to see that the individual Alger hero, whose status is in flux, is much like liquid capital. The value of the individual travels with and is inherent in that person. Once acquired, character possesses the property attributed to gold by the gold standard advocate--for like gold, its value is constant and inheres in the metal. It is of recognized value in any market, just like hard currency.

I've discussed both some of the gems I've found and how these pieces helped me think about Alger. But I should turn to what I was not interested in doing with Alger (which was certainly NOT to write a biography), and to why I think *academics* have been interested in Alger lately and have even been teaching "Ragged Dick" or another widely available Alger novel in courses in literature, economics, sociology, and political science.

An issue I had been struggling with was the relationship of ideology--or understandings of how the world works--to material conditions.

What was the relationship of such understandings of how the world works to changes in economy and society? How did people make sense of the world in order to act in it? How do changes in economy and society upset--or do not upset--these understandings? Some American political scientists and historians (including myself) have a long-lived interest in the *stability* of these understandings. There seem to be some shared agreements and understandings (how widely? among whom?) *despite* massive transformations in how people live and work. There are formulations--like Alger's--that seem to survive as truths about the way the world works despite the advent of organization, bureaucratization, the corporate form, internationalization of capital and of the division of labor, depression, decline in real wages, etc. The Alger formula voices something thought to be true about America.

One of the most important of these studies talked about "liberal Lockean, Horatio Alger atomistic individualism," claiming that concensus was forged by the 1840s; that experiences could never fundamentally shake self-evident truths. There was, in this view, something distinctive about the United States; here was one answer to the question of why there was no socialism in the United States. This was Louis Hartz's "The Liberal Tradition in America," a book which, by the use it made of Alger as a symbol, aroused my interest in reading Alger.

Hartz, writing in the 1950s about the static, sterile nature of American political thought by comparison with Europe, talks as if people who bought the Alger myth were dupes; they suffer false consciousness and don't know who they really are. Hartz's work has come under a lot of criticism.

More recently, scholars including literary theorists have gotten interested in the ways people make sense of the world, including the ways they "read" texts. They have been discovering the little guy--what (s)he did, thought, read. They have become interested in popular culture. Some of these scholars look at narratives--the stories people tell themselves about themseves--who they are, where they have been, where they're going.

According to recent approaches, texts don't have "a" meaning; authorial intent doesn't govern; reading (as Janice Radway writes) is not like eating; and Stanley Fish asks "is there a text in this class?"

Rather, people *construct* meanings as members of communities. These scholars tend to critique the notion of "false consciousness." Citizens--like readers--are not merely acted upon. If one attends to the "lenses" people use to make sense of experiences, for example, one can argue that people understand justice in particular ways and particpate in politics when their sense of justice is outraged.

Scholars attend increasingly to *mentalities*--to the language in which battles are fought out, to modes of resistance and dissent, to the ways in which communities are constituted and reconstituted. Let me note a few examples of some of the fine recent work being done by social scientists and by other American Studies scholars in the field of popular culture.

John Kasson's "Rudeness and Civility" attends to manners and class markers in 19th century America as he looks at struggles over culture and class. When he looks at the Astor Place Riots of 1849, he asks (and provides an answer to)

what is going on when a theatre audience heaves a sheep's carcass onto stage during a production.

Michael Denning's "Mechanic Accents" examines dime novels and working class fiction in the nineteenth century, and makes an argument (which I ultimately question) that Alger was merely a ventriloquist--using working class forms but attempting to reform his audience--whose ventriloquism "fell on deaf ears."

Michael Rogin at Berkeley has been "reading" Hollywood movies as speaking to changes in American race and ethnic group relations. George Shulman at the New School for Social Research reads Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in light of the American jeremiad and the genre of captivity narratives.

And in a monumental trilogy which I recommend to you most highly, Richard Slotkin at Wesleyan University has examined the role of the frontier myth in American history--most recently in "Gunfighter Nation," which examines the changing role of the frontier myth in the 20th century as reflected in Hollywood movies.

This newer, rich tradition helps me rediscover Alger as an author who wrote in the penny papers nest to stories of Molly Maguires, tramps, and romances as well as an author for Grenville Howland Norcross, who picked up bound volumes in different Boston libraries at five cents per week. There were different literary vehicles, different audiences, different texts--in effect, multiple Algers. There was Alger the moral reformer, but also Alger the leveller--bringing down selfish capitalists and arranging justice; bringing Ragged Dick into the dining rooms and parlors of the wealthy on terms of equality. There was Alger who celebrated community and those who preserved it.

I wrote about the way in which the Alger story, formulas, and melodramas became *available* for incorporation as a *language* or grammer of political discourse, carrying multiple possibilities and responses to corruption and to capitalism.

I provide a different kind of answer to why the Alger story survives, and attempt to locate its place in our *contemporary* discourses about difference, virtue, the identity of America, television violence, sex education, urban problems, drugs, English only, etc. My examination of the survival of Alger in modern political discourse is part of the rediscovery of Alger I allude to in the title of this article.

The other part of my job of "rediscovery" was to make sense of where Alger fit into discourse in the 19th century about the identity of the republic, virtue, growing differences of class, immigration...I talk about what *kind* of sense Alger made of transformations of economy and society, and to whom.

With whom was Alger engaged in dialogue? I locate Alger amid 19th century authors of religious fiction; in pedagogical debates about how to reach the young and teach lessons of life without turning them off; in a tradition of advice manual authors; amid the discourse of cultural elites who feared democracy and the decline in deference to natural leaders (e.g., James Fenimore Cooper); in a debate about the fate of Jeffersonian ideals, linking property and independence, and amid concerns about what industrialization was doing to independence and republican virtue.

I also place Alger in what I call the "culture wars" of the late 19th century--battles over reading, habits, and class markers.

This included the famed Comstock crusades and the movement to remove Alger, Ellis, Optic, and Castlemon from public libraries. Why did librarians go on a crusade against Alger late in the century? What was the debate over "manly" fiction? What images of of manliness and of citizenship were at stake in the differences between those who stressed production of the self and those who stressed production of goods as the essense of manhood? Alger made a lot of sense of the Gilded Age and groped for a language in which to talk about it. In "The Fictional Republic," I have attempted to accord Alger a *seriousness* he is often denied. Alger's stories are not mere fantasy, but rather his texts attempt to name and work out problems.

Alger is not just the romanticizer of a dying era nor an unabashed booster of capitalism. He is not a *great* writer, but a writer who had his hand on the pulse of an era. The optimism Alger exuded was, in considerable measure, via the optimism he had about the health, virtue, and unity of the republic when so many around him saw a world coming apart at the seams.

Having written some 400 pages on Alger, is Alger out of my system? Not at all. I would love to write an article about Alger and temperance politics...but my family may kill me if I write another word on Alger. For now, I will have to channel my Alger energies into collecting, while I think about my next research project.

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