

AMERICA'S UNENDING REVOLUTION

How did a deferential republic become a mass democracy and a commercial colossus? A crucial transformation of America, historians agree, was under way during the early Republic, but they have debated the nature of this “transition to capitalism” and its political implications. Our budding capitalists, it now seems clear, were the country’s enterprising laborers, not its leisured few. And the democratic ideas that spurred them on were vigorously contested—as they still are.



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Was America Born Capitalist?

by Gordon S. Wood

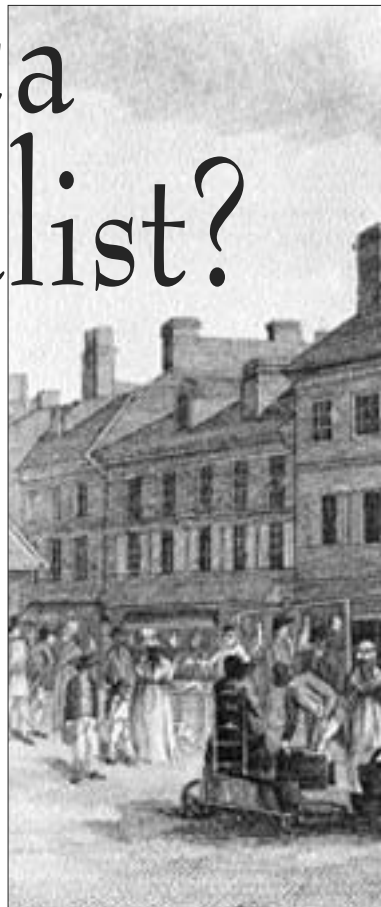
Of all the “isms” that afflict us, capitalism is the worst. According to many scholars, capitalism has been ultimately responsible for much of what ails us, in both the past and the present, including our race problem, our grossly unequal distribution of wealth, and the general sense of malaise and oppression that academics in particular feel. It is not surprising therefore that scholars should be interested in the origins of such a powerful force, especially one that seems to affect them so personally.

The trouble is that we scholars cannot agree on the nature of the beast. Some identify it with a general market economy; others, following Marx, with a particular mode of production, involving a bourgeoisie that owns the means of production and a proletariat that is forced to sell its labor for monetary wages; still others, following Weber, with a system of calculative and secularized rationalism; and still others, with simple hard work and a spirit of development. As has often been pointed out, the way in which scholars define the term *capitalism* usually determines the results of their analysis.

Despite the confusion of definition, however, nearly everyone seems to agree with Marx and other theorists on the way in which capitalism originally developed in the West. Most scholars seem to believe that the sources of the transition from feu-

dalism to capitalism lay in the changing nature of rural society. Only when the farming population increased its agricultural productivity to the point where it could allow an increasing proportion of its members to engage in manufacturing and at the same time provide a home market for that manufacturing—only then, it is assumed, could the takeoff into capitalistic expansion take place.

For this reason, American historians have tended to focus on the agricultural productivity of early New England, where presumably American capitalism first developed. Of course, from almost the beginning of professional historical scholarship in the late-19th century, many American historians assumed that nearly all early American farmers, especially those in New England, were incipient cap-





The scene in 1799 at the corner of Third and Market in Philadelphia.

italists, eager to make money and get land and get ahead. Most colonial farmers, it seemed, were involved in trade of various sorts—sending tobacco and wheat to England and Europe, selling fish, food-stuffs, and lumber to the West Indies, and exchanging an array of goods among themselves. For these historians, usually labeled “liberal” or “market” historians these days, explaining the origins of capitalism in America has never been an issue: America has always been capitalistic.

Three decades or so ago a group of historians, generally labeled “social” or “moral economy” historians, began challenging this view of early America as a modern market-oriented capitalistic world. According to these scholars, including James Henretta, Alan Kulikoff, Christopher Clark, and Michael Merrill

(among others), the colonial farmers, particularly the New England farmers, did not possess a capitalistic mentality after all. The colonial farmers were not much interested in markets and were not primarily interested in working for profit. For these historians, the farmers’ disregard for the bottom line is something to be cherished. The less capitalism the better, as far as they are concerned.

These moral economy historians have mounted a major challenge to the older view that Americans were born free, equal, and capitalistic in the 17th century. All of them, in one way or another, are seeking, in the words of Henretta, a professor of history at the University of Maryland, “to confound an uncritical ‘liberal’ interpretation of



A cooper

American history,” primarily by demonstrating that “capitalist practices and values were not central to the lives of most of the inhabitants of British North America before 1750.” Many American farmers, especially in the South and middle colonies, may have been producing for distant markets, but most New England farmers were not.

To be sure, many colonial farmers produced “surpluses” that they sold to distant markets, but the very term suggests that this sort of production was not normal or primary. Most of their output was for family or local consumption, not for sale in the market. The anthropologically minded moral economy historians, borrowing an important distinction Marx made, argue that most of the northern farmers were not producing for exchange; they were producing for use. Farmers were involved in a household mode of production in which they sought only to satisfy their family needs and maintain the competency and

independence of their households. They sought land not to increase their personal wealth but to provide estates for their lineal families. Indeed, providing for their families and transmitting their accumulated property and customary beliefs from one generation to another were the major preoccupations of these farmers. They were certainly not major exploiters of a wage-earning labor force.

The economy that resulted, these historians say, was inevitably a moral one. Household interests and communal values overrode the acquisitive and exploitative instincts of individuals. The farmers were enmeshed in local webs of moral and social relationships that inhibited capitalistic behavior. Self-aggrandizement gave way to concern for one’s family and neighbors, and community-regulated “just prices” were often more important than what the market would bear. Not the Atlantic world but their tiny communities were the places where most of these farmers’ exchanges occurred. Most of them may not have been technically self-sufficient, but the towns and small localities in which they lived more or less were.

Rather than relying on the market, farmers met their needs by producing their own goods for consumption and by swapping or exchanging goods and services within their local communities. They charged each other for these goods and services, but the prices were set by custom, not by the market, and in the absence of much specie or coin, the charges were usually not paid in cash but were instead entered in each person’s account book. Through these numerous exchanges, farmers built up in their localities incredibly complicated networks of credits and debts—“book accounts”—among neighbors that sometimes ran on for years at a time. Although litigation could and did result from these obligations, such credits and debts were based

>GORDON S. WOOD, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is Alda O. Way University Professor and professor of history at Brown University. He is the author of *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), which won the Pulitzer Prize for history. Copyright © 1999 by Gordon S. Wood.

largely on mutual trust, and thus they worked to tie local people together and to define and stabilize communal relationships. Therefore, instead of seeing the New England farmers as would-be entrepreneurs waiting for markets to rescue them from stagnation, these social historians see them as pre-modern husbandmen trying to avoid market participation in order to preserve their moral and communal culture.

This “transition to capitalism” debate, which has gone on now for several decades, is no petty ivory-tower dispute; it actually goes to the heart of what kind of people we Americans are or would like to become. The moral economy historians in particular have been very explicit about this. They have more at stake than just recapturing an idyllic past. For them, such an 18th-century communal world offers a noncapitalist vision of what still might be, in the words of Michael Merrill, coeditor with Sean Wilentz of *The Key of Liberty: The Life and Democratic Writings of William Manning* (1993), a vision of

a lived and viable alternative to capitalist relations, institutions and practices. . . . Alongside the world of capital and its ways we would point to an alternative world of labor and its ways; alongside the world of cities built on money and contract we would point to an alternative world of the countryside built on personal credit and mutual obligation; alongside a government designed to secure to the few the opportunity to rule the many. . . we would point to an alternative government designed to secure to the many the chance to rule themselves.

This debate over the origins of capitalism has meaning not only for us Americans but for a world seeking to acquire the prosperity of the capitalist West. In the struggle to invent capitalism and market societies, does Eastern Europe or China have anything to learn from the

way it originally happened in America? Is the rise of capitalism inevitably linked to the development of a democratic society? Is it possible that anything that happened in New England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries can have any significance for the world today?

Whatever answers ultimately emerge to such large political questions, we certainly know much more now about the behavior and values of the early New England farmers than we did before. Especially helpful in the debate has been the work of Winifred Barr Rothenberg, a professor of economics at Tufts University. In *From Market-Places to a Market Economy* (1992), Rothenberg has cleared the air of a lot of cant by simply concentrating on some basic questions about the rural New England economy that can be empirically investigated. Marketplace economies, she says, have existed for thousands of years; people have always bought and sold goods, even over long distances, without experiencing market economies. Only when the market separates from the political, social, and cultural systems constraining it and becomes itself an agent of change, only when most people in the society are involved in buying and selling and think in terms of bettering themselves economically—only then, she contends, can we talk of the beginnings of a market economy. Throughout the colonial period, she suggests, Americans had only a marketplace economy, not a market economy. By analyzing the behavior of the prices of farm commodities, farm labor, and rural savings, Rothenberg has been able to date the emergence in the New England countryside of an authentic market economy. She places it in the last two decades of the 18th century, following the American Revolution.

Although Rothenberg saw herself writing in opposition to the moral economy historians, whom she affectionately calls her “dear enemies,” her work actually has helped to reconcile the differences between these “dear enemies” and most



A blacksmith

market historians, including herself. Backed by Rothenberg's impressive empirical investigations, scholars now seem to have attained a remarkable amount of agreement over the behavior of people in early America, even if they cannot agree on what to call that behavior. Although most are doubtful that capitalism came over on the first ships, they realize that commercial activities in the New World were present from the beginning. Although historians recognize that a new stage in America's commercial development was reached in the middle of the 18th century, many seem to agree that it was the American Revolution above all that gave birth to something that can be called capitalism.

Indeed, writes Allan Kulikoff, a neo-Marxist who teaches history at the University of Northern Illinois and has tried to mediate the debate, "the American Revolution may have been the most crucial event in the creation of capitalism." James Henretta, probably the most influential of the moral economy historians, cites Rothenberg's findings in support of his thesis "that the emergence of a new system of economic behavior, values, and

institutions occurred at the beginning of the 19th century." Moreover, both the market historians and the moral economy historians agree that New England farmers engaged in local exchanges throughout the 18th century. If these local exchanges could be seen as variants of market behavior, then the differences between the two groups of historians would tend to collapse. Kulikoff admits as much when he says that "the two sides contend over the degree of local self-sufficiency and the extent of market exchange rather than the fact of exchange."

The problem seems to be the commitment of the moral economy historians to Marx's distinction between producing for use and producing for exchange, a distinction that seems very dubious. When the social or moral economy historians come to examine the actual behavior of the New England farmers, they keep falling back on this distinction to explain why the farmers were not really market oriented—in effect relying on their ability to decipher the motives of these rural folk. What seems to be the farmers' profit seeking or land speculation the moral economy historians dismiss as merely the farmers' looking after the needs of their families. No matter how sharp or avaricious the farmers might be—and even the moral economy historians admit that they could indeed be sharp and avaricious—these characteristics apparently did not turn them into entrepreneurs; as Henretta says, "there was no determined pursuit of profit."

Many of these moral economy historians seem to have a caricatured image of an entrepreneur or capitalist as someone who thinks about nothing but the bottom line and has an all-consuming drive for profits that rides roughshod over the needs of his family or his relationship with the community. If this is what it takes, then very few farmers in history have ever been this kind of selfish, profit-maximizing individualist.

It is these historians' deep aversion to capitalism that lies behind their overdrawn images of capitalists. This aversion

requires evil-intentioned individuals; it is no easy matter morally condemning people who are well intentioned and have no sense of the bad and exploitative consequences of their actions. Although many of these moral historians have a lingering commitment to Marxist theory, they have not found it very useful in explaining the origins of capitalism in early rural New England. They have had difficulty deciding, for example, whether the small-producer farmers who relied mostly on family labor belong in the category of “exploiters” or “exploited.”

Michael Merrill has tried to solve the problem by absolving the New England farmers of capitalist behavior altogether. Realizing that the long-standing identification of capitalism with commercial enterprise and a general market economy is disastrous for any moral condemnation of capitalism (there being these days, it seems, no alternative to markets), Merrill has sought to define capitalism as just one particular market economy among many. “Capitalism, properly speaking,” he says, “is not just an economic system based on market exchange, private property, wage labor, and sophisticated financial instruments.” These are necessary but not sufficient features. “Capitalism, more precisely, is a market economy ruled by, or in the interests of, capitalists.” In other words, capitalism is antidemocratic. It involves politics, power, and the exploitation of one class by another—in particular, in the early Republic, the exploitation of the farmers, artisans, and laborers by those whom Merrill calls “the monied classes.”

Since the American economy, however market-oriented and intensely commercialized it may have been, seemed to remain

under the control of small producers and not the so-called capitalistic moneyed classes in the decades following the Revolution, Merrill can make his astonishing claim that the American Revolution was “a profoundly anticapitalist enterprise.” The burgeoning and prosperous economy of the early Republic, far from representing “an emergent, radically new, capitalist order,” was, Merrill says, in reality only “the expansion of a dynamic, profoundly anticapitalist, and democratic old order.”

This is an unconventional argument, to say the least, and it seems unlikely that it will take hold: it runs too much against the grain of our traditional identification of



A sawyer

early-19th-century capitalism with a free-enterprise market economy, an identification shared by nearly all the “transition-to-capitalism” historians. But it does have the merit of helping us to understand more precisely what we mean by capitalism in the early Republic and to see more clearly how the transition in New England from farming to manufacturing and business enter-

prise took place. Merrill suggests that his small producer class includes most artisans as well as farmers and laborers. Against these democratic anticapitalists he places the capitalists, or “the monied classes,” composed of “merchants, financiers, or budding master manufacturers.”

The problem arises with this last group, the “budding master manufacturers.” We today might readily agree that these master manufacturers (soon to be labeled businessmen) are capitalists or future capitalists, but in the 18th century should they be separated from the rest of the artisans? Contemporaries in the early Republic, including the master manufacturers themselves, did not think so. They still thought of these master

manufacturers, however wealthy, however many employees they had working for them, as men who worked for a living in a craft that involved manual labor, and thus they grouped them with the other laborers in the society. The Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers, organized in 1789, was composed of men who ranged from among the wealthiest property-holders in the city to the poorest. All, however, were still regarded as workingmen.

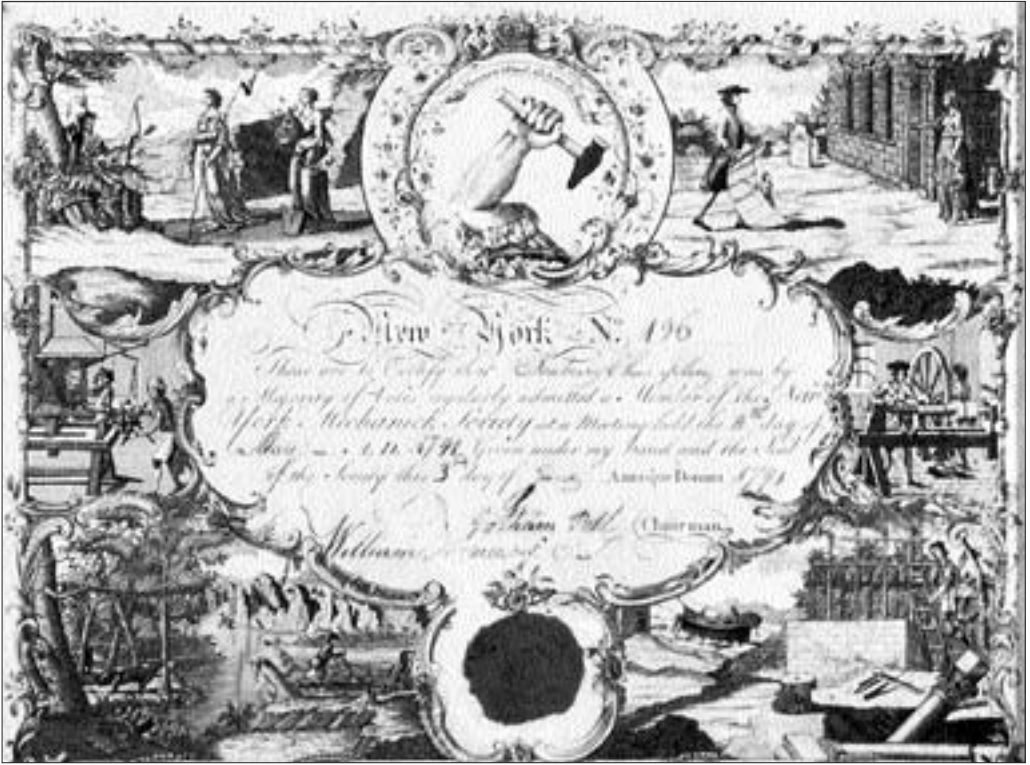
The issue for the society of the early Republic was not who was a capitalist, but rather who was a laborer. As John Adams put it in 1790, “the great question will forever remain, who shall work?” Adams was speaking out of a 2,000-year-old tradition of horizontally dividing the society between those aristocrats or gentlemen who did not have to labor for a living and the rest of the society that did. It is almost impossible for us today to appreciate the degree of contempt and scorn felt by aristocrats or gentlemen throughout history for those who had to work. Aristotle simply assumed that those who engaged in trade or labored, particularly with their hands, were ignoble and were incapable of elevated or virtuous thoughts. In the eyes of many 18th-century gentlemen, labor was still associated with pain and meanness, and for most of them manual productivity lacked the superior moral value it would soon acquire. It was, in fact, this traditional contempt for labor that had sustained and justified slavery from time immemorial; indeed, in a world that despised labor, slavery was accepted as a matter of course.

Even by the late 18th century, Americans still tended to divide themselves into the leisured few and the laboring many. Although many artisans and mechanics were claiming to be among the middling sort, most aristocrats or gentlemen still tended to lump together into the ignoble and mean category of “laborers” a wide variety of craftsmen and mechanics. They thus mingled in their minds wealthy masters with journeymen and apprentices, and indeed the lowliest and poorest of workers. Despite a growing appreciation of the value of labor

and heightened egalitarian sentiments in the 18th century, many gentry, in other words, still clung to the ancient prejudice against labor, especially manual labor. As long as artisans or mechanics continued to work for a living with their hands, or even to run a business that involved employees working with their hands, they found it very difficult to claim genteel status, however rich and elevated in other respects they may have become.

Walter Brewster, a young, struggling shoemaker of Canterbury, Connecticut, was very different in many ways from Christopher Leffingwell, a well-to-do manufacturer of Norwich, Connecticut, who owned several mills and shops and was his town’s largest employer. Yet both Brewster and Leffingwell still saw themselves as “laborers” having to work for a living. They shared a common resentment of a genteel world that had humiliated them and scorned their “laboring” status from the beginning of time. Thus both men naturally allied in political movements on behalf of artisans and understandably sought to identify their “laboring interest” with “the general or common interest” of the whole state. In time, of course, the once vertically organized artisans would split apart horizontally, separating into rich master businessmen (or employers) and poor journeymen and apprentices (or employees). But this important development would come haltingly and confusedly, and we distort our understanding of the 18th century if we anachronistically rush it.

Perhaps we can help to clarify what was happening in the early Republic by focusing on William Manning (1747–1814), the self-educated common New England farmer whose writings Merrill and Wilentz have recently edited. Manning has often been celebrated by left-leaning historians as a plebeian critic of capitalism and a forerunner of the later working class. But what if he is not quite what these historians have said he is? What if he is in fact one of the contributors to the rise of capitalism in New England? Since Manning did represent the beginnings of



A 1791 certificate of membership in the New York Mechanick [sic] Society.

American democracy, his being as well an unsuspecting agent of capitalism may help us clarify the relationship between capitalism and democracy in the early Republic. Manning’s ideas of labor may also help us understand better the eventual connections between democracy, capitalism, and the anti-slavery movement.

Manning, writing in the 1790s under the pseudonym “Laborer,” realized only too keenly that for ages leisured aristocrats had held workers like him in contempt. Therefore, in response to the traditional view of work as demeaning and contemptible, he offered a vigorous defense of labor as the source of property and productivity in the society. As vivid as Manning’s writings were, however, they were not unusual: attacks on the leisured aristocratic few and defenses of labor by mechanics, farmers, and other laborers like Manning became increasingly common in post-Revolutionary America. Indeed, the Americans’ celebration of work in these

years was far more successful in conquering the culture, at least in the northern states, than comparable efforts in Europe. By the early decades of the 19th century, there were very few gentry left in the northern United States who could openly admit that they did not work for a living, in other words, who could openly admit any longer that they were fundamentally different from the likes of William Manning, Walter Brewster, or Christopher Leffingwell.

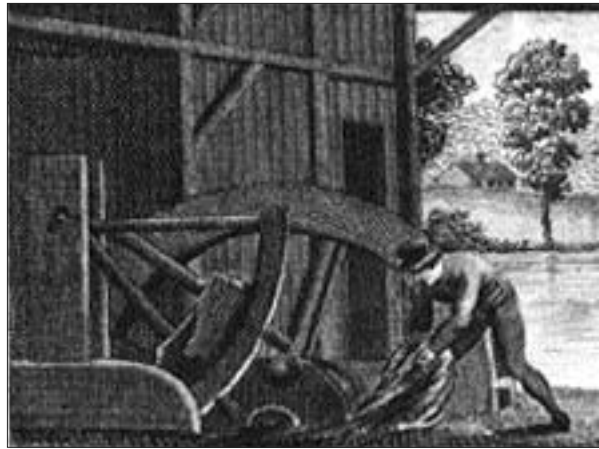
We are only beginning to appreciate the historical character of work and the way its changing meanings at the end of the 18th century contributed to the development of capitalism and to the separation of the free, labor-capitalist North from the aristocratic, slave-holding South. Sooner or later, the North’s celebration of work was bound to lead to a condemnation of slavery and the aristocratic southern society that sustained it. Democratic capitalism, the extolling of

free labor, and anti-slavery were linked in the North, and together they created the growing cultural chasm between the democratic North and the cavalier South that led to the Civil War.

Manning, writing in the 1790s, of course had no idea that he was participating in the cause of capitalism or democracy or anti-slavery. All he could see was a great social struggle in which “the whole contention lies between those that labor for a living and those that do not.” In Manning’s opinion, those who did not have to work were mainly big, leisured merchants engaged in international commerce, professionals, executive and judicial officers of government, “and all the rich who could live on their incomes without bodily labor.” They were the kinds of men who had a “sense of superiority” and who “generally associate together and look down with too much contempt on those that labor.”

Although Manning at times included stockjobbers and speculators in his category of the leisured, he was scarcely thinking of those who did not labor for a living as “capitalists.” Rather, his leisured few, numbering what he took to be about one-eighth of the population, were those traditionally referred to as aristocrats or gentlemen. Most such gentlemen did not work for a living, in any traditional meaning of the term, or if they did, they worked solely with their heads. Instead, as Manning realized, the incomes of such leisured gentry “lie chiefly in money at interest, rents, salaries, and fees that are fixed on the nominal value of money,” which is why these gentry were generally opposed to paper money and its inflationary effects.

Although we might want anachronistically to designate as capitalists some of Manning’s leisured few, those Federalist leaders (and they were essentially the men Manning had in mind) were not really the persons most responsible for the emergence of the dynamic capitalistic economy of the early Republic. Indeed, the Federalists represented much more the old aristocratic order than they did the capitalist future. We make a big mistake thinking that capitalism was created mainly by



Alexander Hamilton and a few stockjobbers, speculators, and wealthy merchants.

If any group was most responsible for the burgeoning capitalist economy of the early Republic, it was, as historian Joyce Appleby has reminded us, the northern members of the Republican party and all the commercially minded artisans and farmers who were striving to get ahead—“laboring” men such as Walter Brewster, Christopher Leffingwell, and William Manning. These were the sort of men who eventually became what self-made Boston printer, publisher, and editor Joseph T. Buckingham in 1830 called the “middling class”—“the farmers, the mechanics, the manufacturers, the traders, who carry on professionally the ordinary operations of buying, selling, and exchanging merchandize.” These middling men, said Buckingham, were those who, in contrast to “the unproductive poor and the unprofitable rich,” worked for a living and whose “unextinguishable desire for more” gave “birth to invention, and impart[ed] vigor to enterprise.”

Manning was one of these enterprising types. As Merrill and Wilentz concede, he certainly was no “injured little yeoman” uninvolved in a commercial economy. He was much more than a small farmer in his little developing town of Billerica; he was as well an improver and a smalltime entrepreneurial hustler. He ran a tavern off and on, erected a saltpeter works that produced gunpowder during the Revolutionary War,



From sheep-shearing to loom at the Brandywine Woollen Mill, circa 1815.

helped build a canal, bought and sold land, constantly borrowed money, and urged the printing of money by state-chartered banks, seeking (not very successfully, it seems) every which way to better his and his family's condition. By themselves Manning's commercial activities may not be much, but multiply them many thousandfold throughout the society, and we have the makings of an expanding capitalist economy.

Although some of the Federalist leaders whom Manning called the leisured few may have invested in businesses, by themselves these aristocratic gentry were never numerous or wealthy enough to finance the rise of capitalism. As historian Bray Hammond pointed out 40 years ago, America in the late 18th century, unlike the Old World, had a severe shortage of capital, the popular solution to which was banks, lots of them. In the early Republic, the capitalists whom most American entrepreneurs and borrowers, including Manning, actually relied upon were all those bankers in the proliferating state-chartered banks. These New England banks sold shares in bank stock to thousands of ordinary citizens, often, as economic historian Naomi Lamoreaux has pointed out, "getting people with savings with accumulations as small as \$100 to invest their resources in bank stock." These proliferating banks, in turn,

issued hundreds of thousands of dollars of paper money, supplying much of the capital that fueled the economy of the early Republic.

Manning knew a great deal about modern paper money, and, like many other antifederalist and Republican entrepreneurs in these years, he fervently defended paper money and state banks; he may even have invested in a bank. As historian Janet Riesman has said, it was Manning and others like him, more than the Federalist "moneyed men," who saw that the primary source of America's wealth lay in its "internal productivity." They came to appreciate that it was the energy and hard work of America's laboring people, and not any great resources of specie, that supported the credit of the bank notes. Although men such as Manning do not fit Merrill and Wilentz's caricature of capitalists as "profit-maximizing individualists who believed in the universal justice of commercial markets," nevertheless he and his hard-working northern Republican "laborers" were the main force behind America's capitalist market revolution. For good or ill, American capitalism was created by American democracy.

In the end, it was precisely because men such as Manning were not "profit-maximizing individualists" that they were able to create a viable capitalist society. Only in recent decades have we

come to appreciate the full significance of what we call a civil society—that network of social associations and organizations that stand between the individual and the state and that help to temper and civilize the stark crudities of a market society, indeed, that make a viable market society possible. One of the remarkable results of the American Revolution was the sudden emergence in the early Republic of this sort of rich associational life. In the several decades following the Revolution, hundreds and thousands of voluntary associations of all kinds sprang up, particularly in New England, where American capitalism was born.

Probably the most important of these voluntary associations were the new evangelical religious organizations—Baptists, Methodists, New Divinity Congregationalists, and dozens of other sects—that in three decades or so transformed the religious landscape of America. Most of the evangelicals in these new associations were not unworldly or anticapitalist. Quite the contrary, it was the involvement of people such as

Manning in these religious associations that helped make possible the rise of capitalism. Evangelical religious passion worked to increase people's energy as it restrained their selfishness, got them on with their work as it disciplined their acquisitive urges. Even the New Divinity Calvinism to which Manning subscribed recognized, as historians William Britenbach and James D. German have pointed out, that "wicked self-interest was no threat to a moral economic order." The New Divinity theology that dominated much of New England "admitted a sphere within which self-interest was morally legitimate"; it gave people confidence that self-interested individuals nevertheless believed in absolute standards of right and wrong and thus could be trusted in market exchanges and contract relationships. Those who assume that a capitalist society requires mainly selfish individuals preoccupied with the bottom line do not understand the sources of America's capitalism in the early Republic. It's time that we recognize who the capitalists in America really are: we have met the enemy and it is us.

WORKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

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Striving for Democracy

by Sean Wilentz

Americans, including many historians, like to think of the period from the end of the War of 1812 to the outbreak of the Civil War as an ebullient, egalitarian era, the age of the common man, when ordinary workingmen and farmers came into their own as full-throated citizens and voters. It was a time, so the story goes, when age-old prejudices linking virtue with property holding finally dissolved. Men of humble back-

ground who worked with their hands could aspire one day to gain wealth and social standing—and even, like Andrew Jackson or Abraham Lincoln, to become the nation’s head of state. It was all a far cry from the high-blown, deferential New World republic that the Revolutionary generation had envisaged. Instead of a cultivated gentry elite, it would be the People—“King Numbers,” in the disdainful phrase of the disgruntled Virginia aris-



Election Day, Philadelphia (1815), by John S. Kimmel, a classic tableau of political harmony in the “Era of Good Feelings”

ocrat, John Randolph of Roanoke—who would guide the nation’s destiny. Democracy, a word that greatly troubled the Framers in Philadelphia in 1787, became a shibboleth for partisans of almost every persuasion.

More skeptical scholars have questioned this colorful, egalitarian tableau. Some have pointed out important anti-democratic features of the period. In several states, for example, expansion of the suffrage for white men before 1860 was accompanied by an abridgement of the suffrage and other political rights for free blacks, as well as (in the one state where such rights had existed, New Jersey) for women. Egalitarian with respect to class, these historians argue, the era was just the opposite with respect to race and gender. Moreover, although officeholding became less attached to family influence and noblesse oblige than it had been after the Revolution, politics remained firmly in the control of coteries of well-connected local partisans. Other historians have argued the opposite: that an excess of democracy opened the way for the rise of demagogues, whose agitation degraded politics and led directly to the Civil War.

For all of their differences, these impressions, popular and academic, share a misleading assumption that what Americans of the time called democracy was something coherent and unified. That assumption owes much to the influence of Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) continues to color most accounts of the period. Because Tocqueville was chiefly interested in understanding what American democracy had to teach France, he tended to render American realities as ideal types, in glittering epigrammatic generalizations. Even when he drew important distinc-

tions (none more important than his contrast between southern slavery and northern freedom), his discussions of American politics and manners always returned to his ruminations about this thing called democracy. Yet there was no one American democracy in the early 19th century. When Americans spoke about democracy, they articulated clashing ideals. Those clashes, the deepest legacy of the early Republic, unleashed in peculiarly American ways issues of class, race, and region. Any account that glosses over those conflicts slights how much the early national period tells us about our unsettled and contentious political life even today. For what is most distinctive, finally, about American democracy is that it is not so much an ideal as an argument.

In the early Republic, two battles over democracy dominated public affairs, and in time became the warp and woof of national politics. First, there was a struggle over how economic power should be organized in a democracy. Second, conflict arose over increasingly different northern and southern conceptions of democracy.

The first debate—over politics, privilege, and economics—had supposedly been settled by the Jeffersonian victory in 1800. Among other things, that triumph thwarted Alexander Hamilton’s plans for an American version of the British state, based on a strong military establishment, backed by a centralized system of taxation. The second battle, Americans hoped, had been laid to rest by the compromises over slavery worked out in the constitutional debates of 1787–88. Yet the democratizing politics of the early 19th century helped revive these issues dramatically during the misnamed Era of Good Feelings—the decade or so after 1815. That revival set the stage for both the political party battles

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In The Downfall of Mother Bank (1833), President Jackson is hailed for removing government deposits from Nicholas Biddle's Bank of the United States.

of the Jacksonian era and the sectional battles that culminated in southern secession and the Civil War.

The close of the War of 1812, historians have long noted, stirred a nationalist spirit that was celebrated from one end of the country to the other. Having escaped defeat at the hands of the British, Americans proclaimed that their Revolution had been vindicated. They set to work on plans to build up their economy and expand their empire of liberty. With the virtual demise of the Federalist Party after the New England Federalists' disastrous anti-war Hartford Convention in 1814, partisan conflict, so worrisome to the founding generation, seemed dead at last. "Equally gratifying is it to witness the increased harmony of opinion which pervades our Union," the newly inaugurated President James Monroe declared in 1817. "Discord does not belong in our system."

Yet the very election that elevated Monroe to the White House showed the depth of America's discord. In the spring of

1816, the Fourteenth Congress passed a compensation act that roughly doubled congressional pay—and created a tidal wave of populist revulsion. Congress, the critics declared, had made a selfish salary grab that violated the simple habits of republicanism. In the elections later that year, voters wreaked havoc on congressional incumbents. All told, more than half of the members of the House of Representatives judiciously declined to stand for re-election, while only 15 of the 81 who had supported the Compensation Act of 1816 were returned to Washington. Three states—Ohio, Delaware, and Vermont—elected entirely new congressional delegations. (The redoubtable young Speaker of the House, Henry Clay of Kentucky, held his seat only after completing a barnstorming tour to apologize abjectly to his constituents.) Even in an era when normal congressional turnover rates were high, it was a huge political awakening, one that John Randolph likened to the "great Leviathan roused into action." Although not explicitly concerned with economic issues, the controversy foretold future eruptions over the



John C. Calhoun

alleged antidemocratic corruption of the nation's political and economic elites.

Congress got the message, hastily repealed the hated Compensation Act, and preserved (or so President Monroe believed) the new nationalist consensus. But the next decade brought fresh political battles, at the local as well as the national level, which left politicians scrambling to reach accommodation with their constituents. In New England and New York, where once-powerful Federalists had been severely weakened by their opposition to the War of 1812, suffrage agitation at the grassroots and in state capitals led to the toppling of old property restrictions and other checks on popular government. Older states in the upper South shared in the agitation—but did so, significantly, to a lesser degree and with far less immediate results.

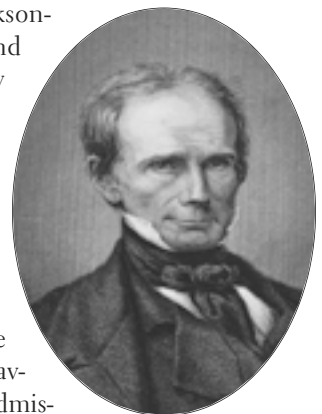
More furious and widespread political insurgencies followed in the wake of the calamitous financial panic of 1819. In the Northeast, farmers ruined by bank failures and workingmen paid off in now-worthless scrip rejected claims by their preachers and politicians that an inscrutable Providence had caused the depression. Anti-bank legislation and a variety of debtor relief efforts quickly followed. Further west, similar unrest rocked every state except Louisiana and Mississippi. Impoverished farmers and other rural debtors demanded more radical forms of legislative relief than petty enterprisers and imperiled bankers wanted to provide. Plebeian democratic outrage against banks and moneyed men, dormant since the 1790s, revived. Banks, above all, were the villains, wrote the editor of the *Cleveland Register*, because they enabled speculators

to steal the hard-won earnings of honest and industrious farmers in order to create “moneyed aristocracies [sic].”

This growing sense of outrage—what the South Carolinian John C. Calhoun called “a general mass of disaffection”—utterly shattered the nationalist Republican consensus hailed by Monroe. After the panic, in particular, Old Republican attacks on banks and capitalist commerce gained a new lease on life. And those ideas now received backing from more than just the nostalgic, arcadian gentlemen admirers of Randolph and John Taylor of Caroline. The critics included hard-bitten debtors and workingmen, along with a new generation of self-styled democratic politicians, including the likes of Martin Van Buren, Felix Grundy, and, in time, Andrew Jackson.

Democratic reform, advancing more swiftly and dramatically in the North than in the South, became an additional vehicle for some of these same new politicians and their followers. The harmonious, nationalist “one-party” coalition, buckling under pressure from the bottom and the top, fell apart completely following the election of 1824, when Jackson’s supporters charged that the nationalist John Quincy Adams had won the presidency by making a “corrupt bargain” with Henry Clay. Fresh realignments loomed.

There was, however, another momentous crisis of the period that cut across the emerging political battle lines in ways that appalled nationalists and proto-Jacksonians alike, and that profoundly affected the course of democratic development: the congressional debates from 1819 through 1821 over the extension of slavery and the admission of Missouri to



Henry Clay

the Union. A close reading of those debates shows that fundamental ideological and political shifts were under way, caused by the renaissance of slavery in the cotton South after 1800—a development the Revolutionary generation could not have foreseen. “The Missouri debate shocked Americans,” one recent account of the period observes, “by revealing a resurgent slavery on a collision course with an aroused antislavery North.” That northern arousal, aimed at restricting slavery’s expansion by admitting Missouri as a free state, spread far beyond the halls of Congress.

The restrictionist cause gained a following only gradually after Representative James Tallmadge of New York introduced two amendments, in February 1819, barring slavery in Missouri. At first, restrictionist views appeared chiefly in the writings of the aging New Jersey patrician Elias Boudinot, the editorials of Theodore Dwight in the *New York Daily Advertiser*, and the speeches of New York’s antislavery senator Rufus King. By the late summer of 1819, however, the increasingly bitter debates in Washington, combined with lurid reports of atrocities committed by proslavery men in Missouri, began raising the temperature of northern public opinion to a fever pitch.

In New Jersey, an antislavery meeting chaired by Boudinot made plans for future action across the North. These efforts found their headquarters in New York City, where, on November 13, more than 2,000 citizens gathered to approve antislavery resolutions and establish Revolutionary-style committees of correspondence to communicate with allies in other states. By December, according to one New Hampshire congressman, it had become “political suicide” for any free-state officeholder “to tolerate slavery beyond its present limits.” From New Jersey, Boudinot reported that the protests appeared “to have run like a flaming fire thro our middle states and cause[d] great anxiety.”

Much of that anxiety was, naturally,

centered in the South. The violence of the southern reaction in Congress to Tallmadge’s proposals had laid to rest, once and for all, the lingering myth that many of the South’s leading citizens harbored deep antislavery convictions. Significantly, however, there was no mass popular response on anything approaching the scale of the northern mobilization. In part, ordinary southerners were much less alarmed at the controversy than either their northern counterparts or their slaveholder representatives in Congress were. And in part, southern politicians were wary of sponsoring too much public discussion of the issue back home, lest the slaves somehow overhear it and get their minds foolishly and dangerously set on freedom. “Public meetings will be held and legislative resolutions will probably be passed,” the *Richmond Enquirer* correctly predicted about the North late in 1819. “But in the slave-holding states, not one meeting, not one resolution.”

Nationalist Republicans and their emerging Jacksonian adversaries were just as upset as the slaveholders were about Northern unrest. While John Calhoun—still a leading nationalist, not yet



Martin Van Buren

the chief theoretician of states’ rights—led the public efforts to calm southern fears, President Monroe and his allies (including the Philadelphia banker Nicholas Biddle) worked skillfully behind the scenes to check both pro- and antislavery activists. In New York, the young and ambitious Martin Van Buren smoothly acted to neutralize Senator Rufus King as an antislavery tribune. And finally, when southern die-hards refused to let the matter rest even after the House approved Missouri statehood with slavery, Henry Clay cobbled together a compromise

that linked Missouri's admission to the Union with Maine's. Slavery was also to be banned in any state admitted from the Louisiana Purchase territories north of latitude 36°30'.

Calhoun, Biddle, Van Buren, Clay: with the exception of Andrew Jackson, the list of moderate compromisers in the Missouri debates reads like the general staffs of the opposing parties in the other national political struggles to come in the 1830s. Divided over so many of the economic and political issues inflamed by mass protests since 1815, these moderates were united on the need to keep sectional animosities at bay. They were determined to suppress the slavery issue in national affairs. And so American politics would unfold over the next 30 years, as party leaders made the conflicts over economics and privilege the premier points of party rhetoric, while checking the conflicts over slavery.

In the national political mainstream, what remained of antidemocratic sentiment seemed to disappear in the 1830s and 1840s, so much so that, as Tocqueville observed, even "the wealthy man" who harbored "a great distaste for [his] country's democratic institutions" could be found "boasting in public of the blessings of republican government and the advantages of democratic forms." Yet the major parties did fight, passionately, over what democracy meant.

The followers of Andrew Jackson—who once described himself as an upholder of "good old jeffersonian democratic principles"—proclaimed that all history had been a battle between the few and the many. Democracy, by these lights, was the chief political weapon of "the great labouring classes," namely ordinary farmers and workmen, in their battles against monopolists, "paper bank" financiers, and other moneyed, would-be aristocrats. (By classing slaveholders among the farmers, the Jacksonians solidified their southern base.)

The Whigs, meanwhile, were no less emphatic in calling themselves (as one of their chief publicists, Calvin Colton, wrote) "uncompromising *American Demo-*

crat[s]." But the Whigs celebrated a supposed harmony of interests between the few and the many. Democracy, in the Whig view, arose not out of social conflict but by the individual exertions of moral, prudent citizens, in an America that was, as Colton put it, "a country of *self-made men*, than which nothing better could be said of any state of society."

Beneath this divide, meanwhile, sectional differences on the subject of democracy also widened, as the South's growing connection to slavery stunted democratic development. This stunting was caused largely by the fact (so obvious that it often goes unnoticed) that the bulk of the dependent southern work force, the slaves, were not simply un-enfranchised but relegated to what the Harvard University sociologist Orlando Patterson has called "social death." Labor issues, increasingly contested by northern workers in the 1830s and 1840s, lay outside the purview of southern political controversy, at least as far as the slaves were concerned.

Moreover, the intellectual cornerstone of the slaveholders' democracy was the traditional precept that personal dependency rendered a man dangerous to the polity and unfit for citizenship. That precept was quickly losing favor in the more expansively democratic North. It was this very principle, which Calhoun, J. H. Hammond, and other incipient southern nationalists lauded as part of the genius of southern institutions, that led many free-soilers and incipient Republicans to castigate the South as a cryptoaristocratic "mudsill democracy."

Southern politics was, to be sure, democratic enough to stimulate fractious disputes. Some engaged rival factions of elite families and some pitted the planters against nonslaveholding yeomen, tenants, and laborers. Still, southern politics became structured ever more in ways that thwarted challenges to the slaveholders' dominion. The imposing power of the masters accounts for why battles over suffrage reform and representation lasted

much longer in some of the older southern states than they did in the North. As late as 1857, for example, North Carolina's 50-acre property requirement for voting in state senate elections disfranchised an estimated one-half of the state's voters. Many other constitutional provisions and electoral codes helped keep southern political offices, from governors to county sheriffs, firmly in the hands of the slaveholders or their personal clients.

Southern social and cultural norms reinforced the slaveholders' political power. With its widely dispersed rural citizenry and relatively poor inland transportation networks (apart from the rivers and other cotton routes), the South proved less hospitable to the sorts of independent political organizing and discussion that blossomed in the North. On those few occasions, other than election days, when ordinary citizens would gather in public—above all, compulsory militia musters—local notables often presided, and used the opportunity for political proselytizing. Much of that proselytizing had to do with slavery, as rival politicians tried to surpass each other in portraying themselves as defenders of white men's equality, states' rights, and the peculiar institution. Should anyone dare to speak or write too rashly (or, in time, too publicly) against slavery, thereby raising the specter of slave insurrection, the slaveholders quickly gained popular and legislative support to suppress the miscreants, their assemblies, and their publications.

The backwardness of southern democracy was, it should be emphasized, only relative. Northern politics, at least party politics in the 1830s and 1840s, was run primarily by small clusters of insiders, chiefly lawyers and other professionals, who were adept at screening out discomfiting public opinions and their advocates. Anyone naive enough to look for a participatory democracy of white men in the party machinations of the

Jacksonian and antebellum North is bound to be quickly disillusioned. Nevertheless, compared with the South, democracy in the North was flourishing. No one class or class fraction held sway over politics as the slaveholders did in the South. A much greater variety of ethnic and, more important, religious loyalties, cutting across class and geographical lines, made northern politics more complex and vibrant. It was this fluidity that made possible the rise of popular political movements such as the Liberty and Free-Soil Parties, successors to the pro-restrictionist movement of the Missouri crisis. Despite their unanimity, the Whig and Democratic parties faced enormous difficulties in their efforts to keep the slavery issue out of national debates.

Indeed, the great irony of national politics after 1830 was that mainstream efforts to suppress debates over slavery only widened the breach between North and

CAUTION!!
COLORED PEOPLE
OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,
 You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the
Watchmen and Police Officers
of Boston,
 For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as
KIDNAPPERS
 AND
Slave Catchers,
 And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the Welfare of the Fugitives among you, Shun them in every possible manner, as so many HOUNDS on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.
Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.
 APRIL 24, 1851.

With placards like this, the Vigilance Committee of Boston helped make slavery a Northern issue.

South. Politicians of both major parties thwarted Calhoun and the sectionalist nullification movement in 1832. They also backed efforts to silence the abolitionists. Yet in the North, attacks on the fairly small abolitionist minority (by raucous, sometimes pro-southern mobs as well as by the slaveholders themselves) made non-abolitionists ask whether slavery could coexist with democratic institutions. Between 1836 and 1842, the continuing controversy over the Gag Rule, which automatically squelched any discussion of antislavery petitions in Congress, heightened northern fears that an arrogant slaveholder aristocracy was trying to impose its will on the entire country. And after 1840, when one wing of the abolitionist movement joined forces with Whig and Democratic dissidents and entered electoral politics, the machinery of mass democracy helped expand the antislavery cause into a sectional political crusade.

The planters, for their part, became increasingly unnerved at the boldness of northern criticism and the failure of northern political leaders to squelch it. While clamping down on any hints of homegrown antislavery dissent, they oversaw the final, pained completion of white male suffrage and more equal representation in the South—with the explicit aim, voiced by Henry Wise of Virginia, of enhancing the “common safety” against “our Northern brethren on the subject of slavery.” Having forged a democracy built on slavery, they would brook no interference. In the mid-1840s, convinced that they needed additional political bulwarks, Calhoun and his allies set about securing Jackson and Van Buren’s Democratic Party as their own. Thereafter, in a point-counterpoint long familiar to historians, northern democracy and southern democracy crystallized as antagonistic political forces, and the fighting turned lethal.

The Civil War settled the issue of slavery, as bequeathed by the early national period. It did not, however, settle America’s arguments over democracy. In the controversies

over populism in the 1890s, the Great Depression in the 1930s, and the War on Poverty in the 1960s, Americans would return to their debates over how economic power and privilege ought to be squared with political democracy. And in the continuing controversies over racial justice, states’ rights, and civil rights, from the close of Reconstruction to the present, we have struggled with the abiding effects of slavery and the outcome of the Civil War. At times, political alignments have resembled those of the Jackson era, most notably during the ascendancy of the New Deal coalition. But at other times (though the party labels might change), sectional differences have been more pronounced, as with the rise of a southern-based conservative Republican Party since the 1960s.

Here, finally, is the full and lasting legacy of the early Republic. The old impressions of the bustling, democratizing new nation certainly carry a measure of truth. Politically, as well as economically, changes that were well under way by 1815—including the linking of capitalism and democracy highlighted by Gordon S. Wood and other scholars—decisively reshaped the country and have continued to shape American political perceptions and behavior ever since. But no one of these changes or linkages can account for the politics of the early Republic and after, just as no one image of democracy can stand as the single, agreed-upon American way. Whatever our agreements—about the illegitimacy of kingship and aristocracy, or about popular sovereignty and the rule of law, or about the sanctity of private property—ours has been a democracy ever in conflict, ever unfinished, on the subject of what a proper American democracy should be. Those conflicts arose with the democratizing movements that followed the American Revolution, and they have survived, in different forms, for nearly two centuries. In that respect, whether we consider the Americans of that long-ago time as friends or as enemies (or as both), they are us.