WE ARE ALL JEFFERSONIANS, WE ARE ALL JACKSONIANS: OR A POX ON STULTIFYING PERIODIZATIONS

Edward Pessen

A little more than ten years ago, as I was about to take the elevator to my office in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, a colleague stepped in just before the doors closed.* "You have taught us a great deal about the Jacksonian era," he graciously said to me, referring to a book I had just published. "You have enabled many of us to make a living out of the Jacksonian era," I responded. My remark was intended as praise for the originality and provocativeness of his own book, which had attracted so much attention to the era. I hope it was not misconstrued as a sardonic allusion to the plethora of references in his book that seemed to be crying out for the refutations that a small army of Jacksonian scholars has since been busily attending to.

Teaching and writing about the Jacksonian era has indeed buttered my bread, as teaching and writing about the Jeffersonian era and the other eras that historians use to divide up American history has no doubt helped butter the bread of others of us, specialists all. How are we to explain the durability of these ancient periodizations? It may be that such labels, conceived when great men of politics were regarded as the center of American life, per-

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sist in part because they serve historians' vested interest in keeping the boundaries of their expertise sensibly narrow as well as familiar. And yet for history, as for so much else, the passage of time may require fresh thought about old things.

Contemporary American history is concerned with themes and topics not dreamed of by earlier historians: the inarticulate, the downtrodden, women highminded and fallen, their aspirations, their unique diseases, their secret sex lives, symbolic politics, the distribution of wealth, status, opportunity, power, methodological techniques of statisticians and psychoanalysts, working class drinking habits, upper class high life, every class's marital patterns, and the devil knows what else. If it is to be made manageable, even to the most heroic workers among us, it must be broken down into smaller units or categories. The question is, should these units or categories continue to be the classic periods, such as the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian, that seem so ungermane to the broad, largely apolitical interests that intrigue contemporary historians? Periodizations are of course not *in* the events they enclose. They have been imposed *on* these events by historians, inevitably reflecting the intellectual assumptions and preoccupations of those who created them. Should these old rubrics not therefore be regularly and critically reexamined as our interests shift and our knowledge increases, to test whether or not they remain apposite?

I mean in this paper to raise questions about the appropriateness of the periodizations American historians have long relied on to divide the first half of the nineteenth century. I shall do so by discussing several neglected and important similarities of the two eras: the Jeffersonian or early national period, roughly 1790 to 1820, and the Jacksonian or antebellum period, roughly the mid-1820s to 1850. Greater wisdom would no doubt consist in saying nothing until by patient effort I had managed to learn about the earlier period at least as much as I have learned after more than three decades of research about the later. But I am a young man in a hurry.[1] I trust there may be some value in a comparison

[1] The inspiration for this essay came from the founding four years ago of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. The laity would no doubt find unremarkable the decision by specialists of the 1790-1820 period in American history to combine with specialists of the 1820-1850 period. As a child of the long enduring historians'age of specialization, I am charmed, even moved, by the brave attempt to break down some of the barriers dividing Jeffersonian from Jacksonian scholars. Interestingly, the papers given at the new organization's first conference

of two phenomena that is made by someone who is fully cognizant of his greater ignorance of one of the phenomena under comparison. Jeffersonian era specialists may be amused by my lapses and inspired to correct them and, together with other students, perhaps find interest in essentially impressionistic appraisals of their period by an opinionated outsider.

I am of course not the first historian to question the wisdom of the conventional periodizations. Thomas Cochran a generation ago challenged what he called the "presidential synthesis." David Hackett Fischer more recently has suggested that a "great social revolution" occurred between 1800 and 1816, "this most obscure of periods," in which ostensibly "change proceeded with greater power, speed, and effect" than at any other time in American history.[2] Relying heavily on work of Fischer and Richard D. Brown on "modernization," Nancy F. Cott argues that the years 1780 to 1830 witnessed a "wide- and deep-ranging transformation" not only in the "bonds of womanhood" but in American life as a whole.[3] And modern historians writing monographs about single themes, whether early western cities, free blacks in the antebellum South, or women and the family from the American Revolution to the present, when they find turning points, often find them having no relation to the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson or the ascension — political or spiritual — of Andrew Jackson.[4] Barbara Welter, a leading student of the mind and values of young American women in the first half of the nineteenth century, indicates that they were utterly oblivious to the War of 1812, among other

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in Annapolis in August 1979 were either on the one period or the other. I then decided to prepare an exhortation urging historians to do work that ranged over the entire first half of the nineteenth century. At SHEAR's second conference in July 1980 in Urbana, five papers crossed freely over the 1820 barrier.

[2] Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York 1965), 199.

[3] Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven 1977), 3.

[4] Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Cambridge, Mass. 1959), argues that the social structure of western towns became significantly more stratified and unequal after 1815. Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South* (New York 1974), discerns a sharp drop in the proportion of free blacks in the South after 1810. Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York 1980), believes that it was in the years after the Revolution that there was a sharp decrease in the size of American families.

political events.[5] Diligent research will no doubt disclose other examples of the indifference, if not aversion, of modern scholars toward the conventional periodizations. Yet they have hardly been totally forsaken.

Another reason for pursuing this project is the continued affirmation by influential and highly regarded historians of the distinctiveness of the Jacksonian era or, as some would call it, the "age of egalitarianism."[6] In the 1820s, according to one of Marvin Meyers' inspired insights, the democratic "political machine reached into every neighborhood, inducted ordinary citizens of all sorts into active service" and presumably leadership. Basing his observation on the impressions of a few early nineteenth century European visitors, Marcus Cunliffe has written that "all historians would concede" that the United States of Andrew Jackson's time was a "relatively classless society." In his renowned account of the Era of Good Feelings, George Dangerfield explained that the "political transition from Jeffersonian democracy to Jacksonian democracy" meant that the great Jeffersonian "dictum that central government is best when it governs least" had been replaced by the great Jacksonian "dictum that central government must sometimes intervene strongly in behalf of the weak and the oppressed and the exploited." (Presumably Dangerfield had in mind unfortunates other than blacks, Indians, and the poor.) These are all statements made twenty or more years ago, before a quantitative revolution had enabled historians to unearth massive data that made a shambles of these conventional Progressive pieties. But as recently as 1976 Robert V. Remini could advise a general audience that "the nation was in the midst of a profound revolution when Andrew Jackson entered the White House," as "momentous changes . . . transformed American society and government." And recently a popular textbook written by an eminent Jacksonian and an eminent Jeffersonian concludes that in Andrew Jackson's time the "common man" had "scaled uncommon

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[5]See Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, O. 1976), particularly chapters 3 and 6 for anticipation of this point.

[6] Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York As a Test Case* (Princeton 1961), 336-337, argues that the "Age of Jackson" is a misnomer for what he nevertheless views as a distinctive period. According to Benson, the rubric the "Age of Egalitarianism" better captures the "central tendency" of the period.

heights, in a way that seemed natural to Americans fast abandoning the Politics of Deference and embracing the Politics of Egalitarianism . . .[7]"

Who can deny that the Jacksonian era was at least in some respects distinctive? Heraclitus was right. Every moment in human history gives birth to change of some sort. What we have called the Jacksonian era, no less than any other period of two or three decades, was marked by new developments, some of them of great significance, and by the continuation, in some instances by the fulfillment, of trends that had originated earlier. Most of these are too well known to require anything but the swiftest allusion.

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century the population of the United States more than doubled and this growth was abetted by an influx above all of Irish Catholic and German newcomers that dwarfed all previous immigration figures. An increase in ethnic and racial tensions resulted in unprecedented rioting and disorder. Towns and cities grew at a rate that surpassed the growth of population, in the process undergoing significant change in their systems of administration, taxation, and providing their diverse services to urbanites. The nation's territorial expansion and increase in wealth more than kept pace with its population growth, while a transportation revolution bound its most distant parts into a single market that was irresistably attractive to capital, foreign as well as domestic. In politics, a second party system was supplemented by "third parties," short-lived, ideological, and in some cases crucially influential organizations, for all their small memberships, since they were capable of swinging an election toward one or the other of the closely matched major parties, the Democrats and the Whigs. Reform movements, dedicated to the amelioration of the lot of society's economic, social, congenitally enfeebled, sexual, and racial victims, flourished as never before. Citywide labor organizations were formed by skilled craftsmen, inspired in part by the desire to restore the status, security, and opportunity they had known earlier, in part out of fear that they would be engulfed and their skill devalued by the dread factory

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[7] Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Chicago 1957), 7; Marcus Cunliffe, *The Nation Takes Shape, 1789-1837* (Chicago 1959), 168; George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings* (New York 1952), xi; Robert V. Remini, *The Revolutionary Age of Andrew Jackson* (New York 1976), 3; and Frank Otto Gatell and Paul Goodman, *Democracy and Union: The United States, 1815-1877* (New York 1972), 39.

system. New, in some cases bizarre, sects appeared, secular and spiritual, preaching perfectionism, hope, abandonment of this world. 1843 was regarded as a turning point by followers of William Miller, who predicted that the second coming was at hand. The same year was pinpointed a century later by disciples of Walt W. Rostow, proclaiming that railroad development had by 1843 set the stage for a more worldly millennium — the takeoff of the American economy. (Christ of course failed to appear, while according to the heretical Robert W. Fogel the antebellum American economy would have thrived as well as it did in a universe unmarked by the railroad's coming.[8]) Nor does this hasty summary come near exhausting the catalogue of things Jacksonian that were at the same time things largely new and distinctive.[9] Sophisticated readers need no additional reminders of what they know so well.

For all the innovativeness of these and other developments of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, these years came to be periodized as the Jacksonian era, the era of the Common Man, or the Age of Egalitarianism for reasons I have not yet mentioned. It is above all the period's reputation for democracy, popular power, and equality, whether of condition or opportunity, that led scholars to set it aside as distinctive and to label it as they have. And it is precisely these matters I wish to examine. I do not mean to tax your patience by recounting the highlights of the modern scholarly literature that has called into question, where it has not demolished, Tocquevillean and Schlesingerian notions about the social and political egalitarianism that supposedly obtained during the era.[10] What I mean to do rather is to suggest continuities and similarities between that era and the adjacent, earlier, era, in their social structure and in their political features. As I shall try briefly to show, the two eras had other not insignificant likenesses, but here I shall focus on aspects of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian society and politics.

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[8] Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (New York 1960); and Robert W. Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric History* (Baltimore 1964).

[9] The historical generalizations in this paragraph are based on a large body of primary sources and secondary works. For my discussion of this literature see Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (rev. ed., Homewood, Ill. 1978), 329-367.

[10] See particularly *ibid.*, 77-100; Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass. 1973); Douglas T. Miller, *Jacksonian Aristocracy:*

Let me glance first at social structure. Historians would agree, I think, that few things are as important to or throw as much light on a society as its class system, the extent or degree of social stratification and rigidity, the gulf between the social classes or orders in their lifestyle, status, influence, and power. Paradoxically, few features of the American past have been as lightly touched by historians, for all their recognition of its importance. Jackson Turner Main stands in lonely splendor among historians in publishing a book length manuscript on the social structure of a period.[11] And an increasing number of historians have done valuable work on the social structure of America from colonial times to the present.[12] The point is not that we have learned little about the

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Class and Democracy in New York, 1830-1860 (New York 1967); Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870* (New Haven 1975); Gavin Wright, " 'Economic Democracy' and the Concentration of Agricultural Wealth in the Cotton South, 1850-1860," *Agricultural History*, 44 (January 1970), 63-94; Randolph B. Campbell and Richard G. Lowe, *Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas* (College Station 1977); Albert W. Niemi, Jr., "Inequality in the Distribution of Slave Wealth: The Cotton South and Other Southern Agricultural Regions," *Journal of Economic History*, 37 (September 1977), 747-754; Craig Buettinger, "Economic Inequality in Early Chicago, 1840-1850," *Journal of Social History*, 11 (Spring 1978), 413-418; Harold Hurst, "The Elite Class of Newport, Rhode Island: 1830-1860" (Ph.D. diss., New York University 1975); Richard M. Jones, "Stonington Borough: A Connecticut Seaport in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York 1976); Stuart M. Blumin, "Mobility and Change in Antebellum Philadelphia," in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven 1969), 165-208; Peter Levine, *The Behavior of State Legislative Parties in the Jacksonian Era: New Jersey, 1829-1844* (Rutherford 1977); Burton W. Folsom II, "The Politics of Elites: Prominence and Party in Davidson County, Tennessee, 1835-1861," *Journal of Southern History*, 39 (1973), 359-378; Edward Pessen, "Who Governed the Nation's Cities in the 'Era of the Common Man'?" *Political Science Quarterly*, 87 (December 1972), 591-614; Joseph Harrison, Jr., "Oligarchs and Democrats — The Richmond Junto," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 78 (April 1970), 184-198; J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge 1978); and Edward Pessen, "Who Has Power in the Democratic Capitalistic Community? Reflections on Antebellum New York City." *New York History*, 58 (April 1977), 129-156.

[11]Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton 1965).

[12] A small sampling of valuable contributions by historians to our knowledge of the evolving American social structure includes James Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 22 (January 1965), 79-92; James T. Lemon and Gary B. Nash, "The Distribution of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century America: A Century of Changes in

subject. The point rather is that we have been hesitant about offering comprehensive syntheses that would relate the findings of our detailed monographic studies to one another in coherent overviews. The element of simple good sense underlying our hesitancy is an awareness of how little we know, how small a corner of the social landscape our researches to date have illuminated. All of which is to say that he who would generalize about, let alone compare, the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian social structures ventures on a terrain that is dimly charted.

We know little about the Jacksonian social structure and I believe we know even less about the Jeffersonian. This judgment, based as it is on my slight acquaintance with the appropriate literature for the early national period, is confirmed by Alfred F. Young, whose command of that literature is magisterial.[13] What would be most useful for the two periods is the kind of sensible overview Leonard W. Labaree provided for varied aspects of upper crust life and thought before the Revolution, a study that is perceptive and invaluable, for all its impressionism.[14]

Let me begin with the least arguable of assertions. No matter how social class is defined,[15] an internally differentiated, stratified class structure obtained in the United States during the early as

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Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1693-1802," *Journal of Social History*, 2 (Fall 1968), 1-24; Allan Kulikoff, "The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 28 (July 1971), 375-412; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York 1970); Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca 1970); Robert Doherty, *Society and Power: Five New England Towns, 1800-1860* (Amherst 1977); Daniel Scott Smith, "Cyclical, Secular, and Structural Changes in American Elite Composition," *Perspectives in American History*, 4 (1970), 351-374; Peter R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830-1860: A Study in City Growth* (New York 1971); and Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge 1964), and *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge 1973).

[13] Letter from Alfred F. Young to author, July 1, 1980.

[14] Leonard W. Labaree, *Conservatism in Early American History* (Ithaca 1950). The impressionistic basis of Labaree's argument was in a sense unavoidable, since his book preceded by more than a decade the quantitative studies by Main, Nash, Lemon, Kulikoff, Jones, and other modern students of colonial society.

[15] Social class is defined differently by different students of social structure. See, for example, W. Lloyd Warner with Marcia Meeker and Kenneth Eells, *Social Class in America: A Manual of Procedure for the Measurement of Social Status* (New York 1960); Harold Hodges, *Social Stratification: Class in America* (Cambridge 1969); Leonard Reissman, *Class in American Society* (New York 1959); Bernard

during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. It is of course oversimplification to speak of a single class structure, since the very nature of social classes, their chief characteristics, the size of the gulf between them, the likelihood of vertical movement between their ranks, the kind of status or prestige they commanded, and the extent of their influence and power varied according to the size, complexity, wealth, and geographical locale of the communities in which they emerged. The class structure of dissimilar communities that are contemporary with one another, say isolatedly rural as against commercially thriving urban, will be dissimilar. And the structure of communities of similar general typology is likely at different moments, say a generation apart, to have undergone significant change. For example, Brooklyn in 1810 was a city; certainly it met the nineteenth century official definition of a city. Yet thirty years later it was a city whose social structure had been significantly modified by a series of demographic and diverse economic developments.[16]

History or the passage of time modifies the class structure of a single milieu or essentially similar milieus. And the qualitative differences of dissimilar milieus contemporary with one another also account for differences in class structure. If these be banalities, I am prepared to risk them in discussing a theme that the historical evidence indicates has been rarely considered by American historians.

As Thomas B. Alexander has recently observed, we know pitifully little about early nineteenth century rural communities, far less than we do about towns and cities.[17] Alas, my interpretation is perforce based on evidence drawn from urban rather than rural centers and on a small number of communities, all of them located in the northeastern United States.[18] Insofar as wealth is a clue to

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Barber, *Social Stratification: A Comparative Analysis of Structure and Process* (New York 1957); Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power: Before the Civil War* (Lexington 1973), 165-247; *Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective* (New York 1966); and Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington 1973), 165-247.

[16]Edward Pessen, "A Social and Economic Portrait of Jacksonian Brooklyn: Inequality, Social Immobility, and Class Distinction in the Nation's Seventh City," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 55 (October 1971), 318-353.

[17] See comment by Thomas B. Alexander on Edward Pessen, "How Different From Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?" *American Historical Review*, 85 (December 1980), 1151-1152.

[18] See Robert Doherty, *Society and Power: Five New England Towns, 1800-1860*,

class — and I agree with Gavin Wright that in the early decades of the nineteenth century, when almost all modes of wealth accumulation were socially honorific, nothing was a better clue[19] — class differentiation that was clearly marked before the Revolution became somewhat more exaggerated over the next generation. Alice Hansen Jones, Jackson Turner Main, James Henretta, Allan Kulikoff, Gary B. Nash, James T. Lemon, Donald Warner Koch, Charles S. Grant, and Richard J. Morris, among others, have established that wealth in colonial America became more unequally distributed with the passage of time.[20] In what is universally regarded as the socially hierarchical and deferential society of the new nation in the early 1780s, the upper tenth of wealthholders were typically assessed for between two fifths and slightly more than one half of the wealth of the larger urban centers and for slightly smaller portions in smaller communities. In 1789, in the Fourth Ward of New York City, which Edmund P. Willis be-

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which touches the two historical eras; Edmund P. Willis, "Social Origins of Political Leadership in New York City from the Revolution to 1815" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley 1967), whose evidence for Jeffersonian New York City I have compared with my own evidence on New York City for 1828 and 1845; James Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," whose wealth categories for the late eighteenth century I have compared with my own evidence for that city in the early 1830s and the late 1840s; and Pessen, "A Social and Economic Portrait of Jacksonian Brooklyn," the title of which camouflages the fact that it offers detailed information on Brooklyn in 1810, drawn from what had long been believed to be the destroyed manuscript tax assessors' reports, contemporary directories, and the private papers of Brooklyn's elite.

[19]Gavin Wright, *The Political Economy of the Cotton South: Households, Markets, and Wealth in the Nineteenth Century* (New York 1978), 37; and Edward Pessen, "The Social Configuration of the Antebellum City: An Historical and Theoretical Inquiry," *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (May 1976), 278-279.

[20] Alice Hanson Jones, "Wealth Estimates for the American Middle Colonies, 1774," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 18 (July 1970), 1-172, and Jones, *American Colonial Wealth: Documents and Methods* (3 vols., New York 1977); Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*; Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston"; Kulikoff, "The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston"; Lemon and Nash, "The Distribution of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century America"; Donald Warner Koch, "Income Distribution and Political Structure in Seventeenth-Century Salem," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 105 (January 1969), 50-71; Charles S. Grant, *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent* (New York 1961); and Richard J. Morris, "Wealth Distribution in Salem, Massachusetts, 1759-1799: The Impact of the Revolution and Independence," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 114 (April 1978), 87-102.

lieves typical of the city as a whole, the poorer half of the population was assessed for between one seventh and one eighth of the wealth. By 1815 the portion attributed by the assessors to the poorer half had diminished to less than one twelfth the total.[21] Brooklyn tax figures for 1810 reveal that wealth there was distributed somewhat more unequally than it was in its giant neighbor across the East River. As in New York City, most male residents were assessed for some property. Yet the poorer half of Brooklyn's population was assessed for less than three percent of the wealth, while the richest tenth held a slightly larger share of the total than did its counterpart in New York City's Fourth Ward.[22]

Inevitably wealth distributions in different communities were not precisely alike. In Salem, inequality appears to have become most drastically skewed *before* 1800. In the seventeenth century, the wealth owned by the richest five percent more than doubled, increasing to about one half the total. Richard J. Morris has recently shown that "economic stagnation" in Salem after the Revolution, above all in trade, shipbuilding, and fishing, hurt primarily "lower class" persons, resulting by 1799 in increased stagnation. To judge from Robert Doherty's figures for 1860, remarkably slight change occurred in Salem during the following half century.[23]

Similarly in Boston, the figures recently presented by James Henretta for the city on the eve of the Revolution and much earlier by Lemuel C. Shattuck for Boston in 1820, indicate that very little change had taken place in the city's wealth distribution over the interim years. This was in contrast to the striking rise in the Gini coefficient for measuring inequality that had evidently occurred during the eighteenth century.[24] For all the variation among communities, reflecting their differential levels of complexity and their inevitably unique historical circumstances, it

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[21] Willis, "Social Origins of Political Leadership in New York City," 107, 109.

[22] Pessen, "A Social and Economic Portrait of Jacksonian Brooklyn," 328.

[23] Doherty, *Society and Power*, 47; Koch, "Income Distribution and Political Structure in Seventeenth-Century Salem," 54, 58, 59, 63; and Morris, "Wealth Distribution in Salem, Massachusetts."

[24] Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston"; and Lemuel C. Shattuck, *The Census of Boston for the Year 1845* (Boston 1846), 95. In order to compare Boston's situation in 1845 with what it was in earlier years, Shattuck unearthed much valuable evidence on those years.

does seem clear that during the course of the Jeffersonian era, the increasing wealth accumulated in most of the nation's communities was so distributed as to widen the disparities between families. Willis' conclusion about Jeffersonian New York City, if modified slightly, seems applicable too to other urban communities: "the richest taxpayers were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer" and, almost everywhere, "relatively more numerous."[25]

The trend toward increasing inequality continued and in some instances quickened during the Jacksonian decades. If distribution patterns were modified only slightly in Salem, they changed much more dramatically in the great commercial cities on the northeastern seaboard. As midcentury approached, the share of their localities' wealth controlled by individuals in the highest decile had risen from between fifty and sixty to more than eighty percent in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City.[26] In 1800, when Northampton's population was slightly more than 2,000, the wealthiest tenth owned fifty percent and the poorer half of the population owned less than five percent of their community's wealth. By 1860, when the city's population had tripled (although it failed to match the national figures for urban growth), the upper tenth owned almost three quarters of the wealth, while the lower half of the population was assessed for no property whatever.[27] In Brooklyn, which experienced a whopping tenfold increase in population between 1810 and 1841, the richest one percent — not ten percent — of this dynamic metropolis doubled their share, owning close to half the city's wealth, while the poorest two thirds of the families were adjudged propertyless by the assessors.[28] Striking though the latter fraction may be, it was surpassed in antebellum Chicago and Pittsburgh, where approximately three quarters of adults were propertyless, and matched by a number of other Jacksonian communities.[29]

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[25] Willis, "Social Origins of Political Leadership in New York City," 110.

[26] Pessen, "The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality: Wealth, Mobility, and Equality in the 'Era of the Common Man,' " *American Historical Review*, 76 (October 1971), 1021-1024; and Stuart M. Blumin, "Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century American City: Philadelphia, 1820-1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania 1968), 46-48.

[27] Doherty, *Society and Power*, 51.

[28] Pessen, "A Social and Economic Portrait of Jacksonian Brooklyn," 328, 331.

[29] Craig Buettinger, "Economic Inequality in Early Chicago, 1840-1850," *Journal of Social History*, 11 (Spring 1978), 414; Michael Fitzgibbon Holt, *Forging a*

In view of the pervasive underassessments that marked the period, "propertyless" citizens, as I have remarked elsewhere,[30] were not necessarily down-and-outers. Assessors and census takers accepted the lies that people swore to about their personal wealth. The fact remains, the proportion of such persons and the low prestige occupations they typically held, increased between the early and the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

The notion suggested recently by Morton Paglin, Robert E. Gallman, and several other scholars, that the era's seemingly glaring inequality of property ownership can be explained largely if not entirely by age or the tendency of men steadily to increase their income and wealth between ages 20 and 60, remains unpersuasive. It makes the statistical error of overlooking the distinct possibility, if not the likelihood, that the higher per capita wealth of older men masks disparities *within* each age level that may be as glaring as those that obtain for the adult population as a whole. And it makes the historical error of overlooking the differential rates of economic improvement experienced by men already substantial wealthholders: merchants, shipowners, manufacturers, financiers, eminent lawyers and doctors, speculators, large landowners, as against the much larger mass of men who worked in shops, factories, small farms, and as menial labor. Howard Rock's valuable study of early nineteenth century artisans offers a useful corrective here.[31]

The quantitative evidence indicates that the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian eras were not of a piece in their distribution of wealth. Paradoxically, the so-called Age of Egalitarianism was an age of increasing inequality of condition. I am not certain, however, that

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Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860 (New Haven 1969), 28, 320; and Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, passim.*

[30] Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, rev. ed., 81.

[31] For statements of the thesis that the unequal distribution of wealth was a function largely of the differential success in worldly accumulation by different age groups see Morton Paglin, "The Measurement and Trend of Inequality: A Basic Revision," *American Economic Review*, 65 (September 1975), 598-609; and Robert E. Gallman, "Professor Pessen on the 'Egalitarian Myth,'" *Social Science History*, 2 (Winter 1978), 194-207. For refutations see Eric R. Nelson, William R. Johnson, Sheldon Danziger, Robert Haveman, Eugene Smolensky, Joseph J. Minarik, and C. John Kurien, "The Measurement and Trend of Inequality: Comment," *American Economic Review*, 67 (June 1977), 497-531; and Edward Pessen, "On a Recent Cliometric Attempt to Resurrect the Myth of Antebellum Egalitarianism," *Social Science History*, 3 (Winter 1979), 208-227. For evidence that

the widening disparities justify viewing the two periods as qualitatively dissimilar to one another. Traditional evidence, in the form of private papers, correspondence, and diaries indicates that the earlier, like the later, social and economic elites lived lives of relative opulence and exclusivity, tended to spend their leisure time and to marry among their own sort, and played leading roles in the socially purposive voluntary associations that matched, if they did not surpass, government in the influence and power they commanded in local communities. Men like General Matthew Clarkson, John Pintard, David Hosack, Cadwallader D. Colden, and Stephen Allen, "whose connections and influences . . . spanned the whole of the benevolent network" at the beginning of the century, were playing similarly dominant roles a generation later.[32] The expanded Jacksonian elite inevitably contained individuals who were new to the upper crust. But, as I have tried to show, at least for the great northeastern cities, few who were among the richest families early in the era fell from the ranks later. Other scholars have found a similar pattern in smaller communities as well. As for the newcomers to the enlarged upper crust, they were almost invariably either younger members of Old Families or, if relative newcomers to their city, persons who had achieved their success almost without exception "as a result of a great boost given them at birth by wealthy or comfortably situated parents or relatives."[33]

A change did occur in the public role played by members of the most prestigious families. Such men, who were often active in local politics during the early part of the Jacksonian era, by the late 1830s and 1840s were dropping out, at least from officeholding. This was not quite a great sea change. For, as a host of studies of antebellum politics have shown, with or without the direct participation of the Great Families, local governments, in Michael

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journeymen mechanics fared no better as they got older see Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York 1979), 265. For additional historical evidence indicating that poor men of low prestige experienced no appreciable improvement in their material conditions as they aged see Pessen, "On a Recent Cliometric Attempt to Resurrect the Myth of Antebellum Egalitarianism," 217-219.

[32] Raymond A. Mohl, *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825* (New York 1971), 152-153.

[33] Pessen, "The Egalitarian Myth and the American Social Reality," 1017.

Frisch's phrase, continued to serve "the interests of the tax-paying property holders," precisely as they had done earlier.[34]

The group I have focused on, the social and economic upper crust or elite, was larger, richer, and more diverse, economically, by the Jacksonian era than it had been earlier. A sensible judgment, while noting the not insignificant changes affecting the class, must take note too of the profound continuity in its situation over the first half of the nineteenth century. In the South, large cotton planters owned more slaves than ever. In the North, merchants increasingly invested in factories, as earlier they had invested in banks, insurance, transportation projects, and real estate. And yet the general economic underpinnings of the nation's upper classes were not much different at the time of Jackson's death than they had been at the time of Hamilton's.

Abetted by essentially unchanging laws of private property and inheritance, families that had by whatever means earlier engrossed an inordinate portion of the nation's wealth, were strategically situated to exploit the unprecedented opportunities for wealth accumulation created by the vast expansion of the nation's transportation network and in its productive facilities during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Idealistic champions of the public school reform of the 1830s and 1840s promised that the newly educated poor would now have equal opportunity to attain economic and social eminence.[35] It did not quite work out that way. At no point during the era did college attendance or entry

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[34] Michael H. Frisch, "The Community Elite and the Emergence of Urban Politics: Springfield, Massachusetts, 1840-1880," in Thernstrom and Sennett, *Nineteenth-Century Cities*, 281, 283; Edward Pessen, "Who Governed the Nation's Cities in the 'Era of the Common Man'?" *Political Science Quarterly*, 87 (December 1972), 591-614; Wade, *The Urban Frontier*, 77-79, 83, 204, 209-217; Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American Community* (New Haven 1961), 11-12, 16-17, 85; D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge 1968), 93-94, 182; Kenneth W. Wheeler, *To Wear a City's Crown: The Beginnings of Urban Growth in Texas, 1834-1865* (Cambridge 1968), 31, 88, 113, 131-132; and Richard S. Alcorn, "Leadership and Stability in Mid-Nineteenth Century America: A Case Study of an Illinois Town," *Journal of American History*, 61 (December 1974), 679-698, 701.

[35] Samuel Breck, a leader among the Philadelphia elite, argued in 1834 that equal educational opportunity for the poor would mean that rich and poor alike would start "with equal advantage, leaving no discrimination, then or thereafter, but such as study shall produce"; cited in Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War*, 270. Upper class humanitarians in other northeastern cities held similar views.

into the legal profession exceed a fraction of one percent of the eligible young adult population. If the evidence is not in the *Historical Statistics* of the United States, it is nevertheless clear that the practical mercantile and financial education or informal apprenticeship that was, together with family connections, the indispensable route to business success, screened out persons who were not insiders, even more stringently than did the era's expensive university and professional training.

In turning to politics, exigencies of space dictate that I paint in broad strokes. Given my innocence concerning matters Jeffersonian, I anticipate no difficulty in refraining from excessive subtlety. Even a partial and hasty reading of the political literature on the early national period suggests striking similarities in the politics of the two periods. Let me focus on the major parties that dominated the first and second party systems. If I aspire to succinctness in the discussion that follows, it is because I see no need to repeat in detail the evidence and the judgments that a number of us have published about Jacksonian politics or to quote at length from equally well known observations about Jeffersonian politics.

Each of the party systems was dominated by two political parties. By the middle and late 1820s, the Jacksonians were usually known as Democrats and their opponents, who supported for president John Quincy Adams in 1828 and Henry Clay in 1832, as the National Republicans. Unable to win significant support in the South, the latter party was succeeded as the opposition to the Jacksonians in 1834 by the Whigs. The Democratic and Whig parties were evenly matched organizations that came close to monopolizing the nation's elections for the next twenty years. A similar monopoly had been exercised from roughly 1790 to 1815 by the Federalist and the Republican parties. In the long enduring mythology popularized by contemporary party spokesmen and later by Progressive historians, the two systems were similar in this regard: the parties central to each of them had arisen out of the deeply held and clashing ideological convictions of their founders. First the Jeffersonians and then the Jacksonians were the great popular party, dedicated to the expansion of democracy, the needs and interests of "the people," and human rights over property rights. The Federalists and the Whigs were the parties of powerful vested interests, of property if not aristocracy, and critical of democracy precisely because they feared "the people." This fairy tale no doubt continues to command popular support. It has of course been

abandoned by most scholars. Yet portions of this Progressive intellectual structure still stand.

In one well known variation, Federalists, on the death of their party after the War of 1812, supposedly migrated en masse toward their ideological kinsmen, the anti-Jacksonian parties. But as a number of historians, above all Shaw Livermore, Jr., have shown, this idea is nonsense.[36] Unregenerate Progressives have no doubt retreated to the comforting notion that the ex-Federalists who joined the Jackson party had either seen the light and learned to love the people or, as the knaves ex-Federalists were likely to have been, they only simulated such love. That some of the new adherents to the People's Cause might be unworthy, while it might testify to the great popularity of that cause, would hardly detract from its purity.

Jacksonian specialists have come to learn that Whigs and Democrats each were diverse organizations, dissimilar from one state to another, aligning in often uneasy combination different interests, sections, constituencies, principles. They are sure to find interest in Norman K. Risjord's appraisal of the Federalists and Republicans. After reviewing the recent historiographical contributions made by Noble Cunningham, Manning Dauer, Alfred Young, David Hackett Fischer, and J. R. Pole, Risjord concludes that "each party represented a broad spectrum of social and economic groups, regional interests, and hence ideologies." Like the major parties that were to follow, Republicans and Federalists were "comprehensive and eclectic." Subsequent work by James M. Banner, Richard Buel, Jr., John A. Munroe, and Carl E. Prince adds force to the thesis.[37] The Federalists of 1800, reports Fischer, "were as multifarious as any major party in American politics."[38]

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[36] Shaw Livermore, Jr., *The Twilight of Federalism: The Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830* (Princeton 1962); and Robert V. Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia 1963), 106-107.

[37] Risjord, "Introduction," in Risjord, ed., *The Early American Party System* (New York 1969), 11; James M. Banner, *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York 1970), vii, 168, 183-184; Manning J. Dauer, *The Adams Federalists* (Baltimore 1953), 18; Richard Buel, Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789-1815* (Ithaca 1972), 73; John A. Munroe, *Louis McLane: Federalist and Jacksonian* (New Brunswick 1973), 58; Paul Goodman, *The Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts: Politics in a Young Republic* (Cambridge, Mass. 1964), 70-76, 97; and Carl E. Prince, *The Federalists and the Origins of the U.S. Civil Service* (New York 1978), ix.

[38] Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*, 1.

An ingenious modern argument attributes "antipartyism" to the Whigs, discerning in some of their statements an unhappiness with the mundane necessities of political organization and warfare in an increasingly democratic community.[39] No doubt more Whigs than Democrats tried to give this impression; among other things it was good politics to do so. Yet the theory is unpersuasive because it is contradicted by so much Whig practice.[40] Am I wrong in thinking that Federalists too have been interpreted in some quarters as a party in spite of themselves? Unlike the Jeffersonians, who had to organize if they were to succeed to power and who, because of their supposed oneness with the people, took with enthusiasm to the task, Federalists ostensibly clung to the good Washingtonian notion that party is faction and held their noses when dire necessity compelled them to court the support of the lower orders. Fischer has shown, however, that the "young Federalists" who assumed ever greater prominence in the party after 1800, demonstrated what he calls a "none-too-strict sense of propriety," as they took with enthusiasm to mass meetings, parades, door-to-door campaigning, and "outright bribery and corruption of other kinds [with] all of these techniques and more . . . used by the young Federalists on a remarkably broad scale between 1800 and 1816." In Carl Prince's phrase, the Federalist party "was not the uncentralized, loose-jointed political mechanism that historians have almost universally concluded it was." Rather it was a "highly professional, tightly knit" organization, particularly at the local and

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[39] Ronald P. Formisano, "Political Character, Antipartyism, and the Second Party System," *American Quarterly*, 21 (Winter 1969), 683-709, and "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789-1840," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (June 1974),473-487; and Lynn L. Marshall, "The Strange Stillbirth of the Whig Party," *American Historical Review*, 72 (January 1967), 445-468.

[40] See for example L. D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York 1954); Rodney O. Davis, "Partisanship in Jacksonian State Politics: Party Divisions in the Illinois Legislature, 1834-1841," in Robert P. Swierenga, ed., *Quantification in American History* (New York 1970), 149-162; Harry Legare Watson II, " 'Bitter Combinations of the Neighborhood': The Second American Party System in Cumberland County, North Carolina" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University 1976); Paul Murray, *The Whig Party in Georgia, 1825-1853* (Chapel Hill 1948); John V. Mering, *The Whig Party in Missouri* (Columbia 1967); and Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill 1966).

state levels.[41] Robert V. Remini's lively and valuable account of the Jackson party's victory in 1828 might give the unwary the impression that the tight organization Remini describes was something altogether new under the political sun. But as Prince has shown for New Jersey and Robert Nisbet Chambers for the nation as a whole, the Republicans were masterful organizers, capable of creating well run and well oiled machines. "The key elements of early Republican organization became caucus, [nominating] convention, and committee" to organize political campaigns.[42]

For all their understandable emphasis on flamboyant rhetoric which, political men being what they are, they no doubt took seriously, the parties in both party systems were impressively realistic. They were dedicated largely to success at the polls, went to great pains to achieve it, and placed great stress on rewarding the party faithful with offices. Much has been made of the alleged Jacksonian invention of the spoils system and of its allegedly social democratic implications. For had not William Marcy, the New York Democratic leader, brazenly used the term, "the spoils of political warfare"? And had not Jackson hinted in his first annual message that he would turn over many of the duties of high office to "men of intelligence," whatever their social standing or wealth? Carl R. Fish, like James Parton before him, bemoaned the decline of the civil service that resulted from the new political amorality. But as a good Progressive, Fish, unlike Parton, applauded the ascension of the masses to government office. As Sidney H. Aronson has shown, however, Jackson's appointees, at least to the "higher civil service," were hardly less atypical, socially, than John Adams'. In a yet unpublished manuscript, Philip Burch demonstrates that Jackson's judicial, ambassadorial, cabinet, and other appointments were, like those of his predecessors, to men of upper class background. And Prince has shown that Jeffersonian politicos were masters of spoils.[43]

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[41] Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism*, 109; and Prince, *The Federalists and the Origins of the U. S. Civil Service*, xi.

[42] Remini, *Election of Andrew Jackson*; Carl E. Prince, "Patronage and a Party Machine: New Jersey Democratic-Republican Activists, 1801-1816," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 21 (October 1964), 571-578; and William Nisbet Chambers, *Political Parties in a New Nation: The American Experience, 1776-1809* (New York 1963). The quotation is from Chambers at page 162.

[43] Sidney H. Aronson, *Status and Kinship in the Higher Civil Service: Standards of Selection in the Administration of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jack-*

The related suggestions that Jacksonian politics were distinctively violent and its journalism uniquely rancorous have also been called into question, not only because of their reliance on impressionistic evidence, but by the evidence adduced by Marshall Smelser, Donald Henderson Stewart, and John R. Howe, Jr., attesting to the marvelous if appalling vituperativeness of "Jeffersonian journalism" and the violence that disfigured political contests in the 1790s.[44]

As distinct from their rhetoric, the major parties in both party systems put forward and supported at different levels of government a bewildering array of policies that were at times inconsistent, contradictory, and at odds with their heralded principles. As Young has shown, the "battle of the banks" and other issues that divided the parties in New York State in the 1790s anticipated the Bank War and the "anti-monopoly" controversies of a generation later. Cunningham too has remarked the continuity from Washington's presidency to Jackson's of certain issues — particularly the national bank and the tariff. Jefferson, like Jackson, was by no means opposed to all banks, certainly not to banks directed by men of the proper political persuasion. What Risjord has said about Federalists and Republicans in Virginia could be said with equal appropriateness about Whigs and Democrats: ". . . neither party . . . had a monopoly on progressivism, reform, democracy, or virtue."[45]

I am inclined to credit Jefferson's sincerity when, in his first inaugural address, he uttered the words I have paraphrased in the title of this paper. He prefaced them by saying, "We have been

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son (Cambridge 1964); Philip H. Burch, Jr., *Elites in American History: The Federalist Years to the Civil War* (New York 1980); and Prince, "Patronage and a Party Machine." For a different point of view, stressing the ideological convictions of the parties, see Buel, *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789-1815*; and Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca 1970).

[44] Marshall Smelser, "The Federalist Period as an Age of Passion,"*American Quarterly*, 10 (Winter 1958), 391-419; Donald Henderson Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany 1969); and John R. Howe, Jr., "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," *American Quarterly*, 19 (Summer 1967), 147-165.

[45] Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763-1797* (Chapel Hill 1967); Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Jeffersonian Republicans: The Formation of Party Organization, 1789-1801* (Chapel Hill 1957); and Risjord, "The Virginia Federalists," *Journal of Southern History*, 33 (November 1967), 517.

called by different names brethren of the same principle." (He continued, "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.") "Viable democratic politics involves a paradox," Chambers would later write; "at once agreement and disagreement, consensus on fundamentals and cleavage on issues." Chambers' evaluation of the issues dividing Federalists and Republicans is interestingly similar to Ronald P. Formisano's appraisal of Whig and Democratic party warfare in Jacksonian Michigan. Party "cleavages," according to Chambers, "did not really shake the fundamentals of . . . property . . . or the social order." In Michigan in the 1840s, reported Formisano, party cleavages "probably insulated the social order from any serious challenge."[46]

The "social order" that Jeffersonian and Jacksonian party "cleavages" in effect protected was, as we know, grossly inequitable. It subjugated millions of Americans on the basis of their black color alone. It tore millions of acres of land away from a bronze skinned people who had had the misfortune of settling this country prematurely. It assumed the perpetuation of a gross inequality among its white skinned citizens, effectively dooming the mass of them to toilsome, meager lives not explained by any innate lack of talent on their part but rather by the legalization of the oftentimes atrocious usurpations of wealth and property perpetrated by the fathers and the forefathers of the fortunate. (Interestingly, Madison in the early period and James Fenimore Cooper in the later assumed that inequality in wealth was due to men's differing abilities to accumulate it.)[47] Chambers' phrase needs to be modified. It is not a viable *democratic* politics that involves the "paradox" of which he speaks; in a truly democratic politics, it would be precisely the "fundamentals," insuring inequality, that would be the center of political controversy. It is a viable *status quo* politics that requires the "consensus on fundamentals" that Federalists and Republicans, Whigs and Democrats freely gave.

I would emphasize two reasons for the essential conservatism of the major parties of both eras. (There are of course other not

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[46] Chambers, *Political Parties in a New Nation*, 97-98; and Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton 1971), 55. For the view that Jefferson's famous inaugural remarks should not be taken seriously see Burton Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo, and the Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville 1979), 212.

[47] Madison's argument appears of course in the Tenth *Federalist* and Cooper's is in *The American Democrat* (New York 1838), 73.

insignificant reasons but I shall reserve their discussion for another occasion.) The parties were almost invariably led by men drawn from the higher ranks in the American social and economic order. And these men created party organizations that were effectively insulated against intrusion and control by men more representative of the mass of Americans. What was the vaunted caucus, that great instrument of the Republican faith so revered by Martin Van Buren, but a device designed to screen out lesser mortals and assure that insiders would be replaced only by men of their own sort? When Van Buren and others like him gave in to what they called the "spirit of the age," accepting democratically elected nominating conventions as a substitute for the caucus, they knew, and they quickly proved, that it was child's play for insiders to attain the same degree of control over the new agency that they had wielded over the old.

Surely there can be little question about the social and economic unrepresentativeness of the men who organized and ran the parties or of the kind of candidates they typically put forward. The data bank for Jacksonian political leadership at all levels of government is by now quite ample. It covers regencies, juntos, political machines by any other names, most federal and state political and judicial officeholders, and county and local leaders for an impressive number of communities in all sections of the nation. Lawyers and college men, businessmen and landowners, speculators and, in the South, owners of large numbers of slaves, men of atypical wealth, status, and occupation predominated.[48] As in New York in the early national period, when the Jacksonian party occasionally stooped to nominate a "mechanic," it did not have to stoop very low. For mechanics were as internally differentiated as were lawyers and merchants. The Jeffersonian mechanics described by Willis were inclined to be on the boards of directors of banks and insurance companies, possessors of wealth at the highest level, and employers of other men, as the good capitalists they indeed were. In testing the validity of Dixon Ryan Fox's old thesis that New York's Federalist leaders were, in contrast to the Jeffersonians, an aristocratic elite, Willis concludes that "the Federalist leadership might [indeed] be termed 'the few, the rich, and the well born' as it

[48] See Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, rev. ed., 172-174, 235-241, and "How Different From Each Other Were the Antebellum North and South?" 1137-1138.

is by Fox, but the Republican leadership was no less elite."[49] My impression that studies of the social backgrounds and origins of the politicians of the earlier time has produced a literature less ample than the Jacksonian is no doubt due to my unfamiliarity with much of the published work and with the unpublished dissertations done by early national specialists. Doherty's study of Massachusetts, Whitman Ridgway's important dissertation on Maryland, and the work of the other authorities I have cited do sustain the impression that there was little to choose, socially and economically, between the leaders of the major parties of the first and second party systems.[50]

Interestingly, just as the Jacksonians in some communities might have had a slightly more plebeian cast than their opponents, so the Massachusetts Jeffersonians studied by Paul Goodman were evidently more likely than the Federalists to have been men "outside the elite or enjoying a recently acquired and insecure position in local society." But "in time they merged into the social order," and, like their rivals, "constituted a social group united by ties of kinship and marriage."[51]

Long intrigued by James Bryce's dictum that American presidents, like Catholic popes, were men of modest social origins who owed their rise above all to "merit," I have recently been looking into this question. The six presidents who antedated Jackson and the six who followed them, to mid-nineteenth century, were dramatically unlike the people they led, in their early as in their adult circumstances, and surprisingly similar as a group to one another. Freeman and Malone delight in emphasizing how cash poor their great Virginian subjects occasionally were. The "shorts" these great land and slaveowners at times suffered was not the sort of thing that so exercised Thomas Skidmore or, earlier, Thomas Paine when he wrote *Agrarian Justice*. The only questions about

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[49] Willis, "Social Origins of Political Leadership in New York City," 321, *passim*.

[50] Doherty, *Society and Power*; Whitman H. Ridgway, "A Social Analysis of Maryland Community Elites, 1827-1836: A Study of the Distribution of Power in Baltimore County, Frederick County, and Talbot County" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania 1973), and Ridgway, "The Decline of the Post-Revolutionary Establishment: Maryland Community Elites in the First Party Era," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, November 12, 1976, in Atlanta.

[51] Paul Goodman, *The Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts*, 70-76.

the standing of the first group of six concern the precise ranking of John Adams' father, who, in being the second citizen of Braintree was, after all, only a big fish in a very small pond and whether to designate the Monroe family lower upper rather than upper upper. Harrison, Tyler, and Taylor were of pure Virginia blue blood, members of the FFV, all, the Polks were not far below, and even the mighty orphan, Andrew Jackson, was brought up in the household of a family of uncommon wealth and standing, at least in its own milieu. Early in his young adulthood he had learned to move with the smartest and wealthiest set in Tennessee.[52]

I do not mean to make too much of this point. The party managers who selected these men were interested primarily in their working philosophies and their likely votegetting ability, as they were too in choosing candidates for lesser posts. Beard was wrong in suggesting that an individual's pocketbook explains or best explains his political philosophy and actions. Astute men since Aristotle's time have been right, however, in assuming that groups of men who share roughly similar and unusually successful and prestigious backgrounds are likely to favor the social, economic, and political arrangements under which they have thrived. Astute men in John Jacob Astor's time — which coursed through the two periods — shared in this perception.

American politics became increasingly democratized in both eras. Propertyless commoners, at least those blessed with white skin, won the right to participate in most elections and to hold most offices. And yet, in E. James Ferguson's phrase, they were "but distantly represented" in the governing bodies that professed to serve them. The major parties of the early nineteenth century United States were "great popular bodies" very much in the same sense that the great corporations dissected more than a generation ago by Berle and Means were great popular bodies.[53] Both types of organization sought, because they needed, mass support for the product they created, both were strengthened and enriched by

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[52] Edward Pessen, "The Golden 38: A Social Profile of the Presidents," The Seagram Lectures presented at the University of Toronto October 18 and 25, 1979. In progress is a manuscript under the same working title. I decided to undertake this project when I discovered, to my surprise, that the literature on the presidency is bare of a scholarly appraisal of the presidents' backgrounds and the implications of these backgrounds.

[53] Adolph A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New York 1933).

mass participation, on the lower echelons of their activities, and both were organized, led, and controlled by insiders. The great major parties were in a large sense great hoaxes.

I trust it is neither cynical nor ahistorical to state what one believes are truths, no matter how unpleasant these truths may be. Not blessed with the overarching vision of affairs enjoyed by Marx and many of his followers, who approve unlovely human phenomena so long as they are perceived as helping to fulfill the "objective laws of historical development," and lacking too the Norman Rockwellian instincts of the true court historian, who blissfully blots out of his vision almost all that is not wholesome and pleasant in the milieu that supports him, I find myself drawn to call things by what I believe is their rightful name.

Those who would make a stronger case for the essential continuity of the first half of the nineteenth century will find profitable the examination of a great number of other themes. I am convinced of this by my glance at such diverse topics as women's sisterhood, racial ideology, the American character and values portrayed by foreign visitors, the merchant capitalism that John R. Commons and his associates so influentially argued was a creation of the third decade of the nineteenth century, the work lives of artisans, tariff policy, adolescence and growing up in America, the "transformation of American law," the alleged decline of institutions during the Jacksonian years intuited by some modern thinkers, life on the frontier west, the evolution of what has been called the American language, the continuous mushrooming of voluntary associations, and the evolution of the American family. These are rich subjects all, better left undiscussed here than examined cursorily.[54] They all warrant much additional research.

Frank Otto Gatell has recently written that, "if past experience is any guide . . . , the Jacksonian Era will not be discarded in history's dustbin . . ."[55] He may be right. And yet I should like to think that human though they are, historians, unlike Martin Van

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[54] There is of course a vast literature on these themes, too massive a literature to cite in a note. The phrase, "transformation of American law," is taken from Morton J. Horwitz's book of that title (Cambridge, Mass. 1977). My reference to the tariff is based in part on a stimulating paper by Gary L. Browne, "Tariff Policies and the Development of America as a Business Civilization, 1789-1848," presented at the second annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, July 17 and 18, 1980, in Urbana.

[55] Gatell, "The Jacksonian Era, 1824-1848," in William H. Cartwright and

Buren, are men and women of open mind. Van Buren kept on hating DeWitt Clinton even after learning that Clinton had not taken the earlier actions against him that Van Buren claimed had first turned him against the man. I trust historians are capable of abandoning an old sentiment if and when they discover it rests on false premises.

Richard Watson, Jr., eds., *The Reinterpretation of American History and Culture* (Washington 1973), 323.