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ON CLASS AND POLITICS IN JACKSONIAN AMERICA

Sean Wilentz

"Our virtues are the virtues of merchants . . ."

*The American Review; A Whig Journal of Politics.
Literature, Art and Science* [New York], I (1845), p. 95.

Jacksonian political history, once a battleground of academic controversy, has been a quiet field of late (see Fig. 1). The recent shift in interest toward social history in part accounts for the calm, a point to which I will return later. Just as important, however, Jacksonian political historians more or less killed off interest in the subject themselves by failing to move beyond their advances of the 1960s and by obscuring the question that had originally stirred so many of them to action: What were the relationships between class and politics in the early nineteenth-century United States? Now that the weaknesses of the "new" Jacksonian political history have been pointed out, it is proper to reflect on its rise and decline—and on why the social historians failed to construct their own interpretation of class and politics. It is also time to build on the social historians' reconceptualizations of class and social relations in nineteenth-century America, and offer a different approach to the social history of politics in the 1830s and 1840s.

The great revision of Jacksonian politics began in earnest in the late 1940s, almost immediately after the publication of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s celebratory, *The Age of Jackson*. Richard Hofstadter's savage and bitter discussion of Andrew Jackson's place in the genealogy of American liberal politics set the tone. Once Hofstadter had done in the prevailing Progressive and New Deal myths about The Man of the People, all of the old simplifications about class and politics began to fall. On close examination, the leading Jacksonians were shown to be not champions of deprived workers and small farmers, but cold-blooded political entrepreneurs, often men of great wealth or men eager to become wealthy, whose main purpose was to get power and keep it. Jackson himself, it turned out, was an inconsistent opportunist, a shady land speculator, a political fraud—and a strikebreaker to boot.¹

It was left to Lee Benson to assault the Progressives' very concept of Jacksonian democracy, especially their ideas that the Whigs were a "conservative" business party and that party conflicts were the direct expressions of clashing

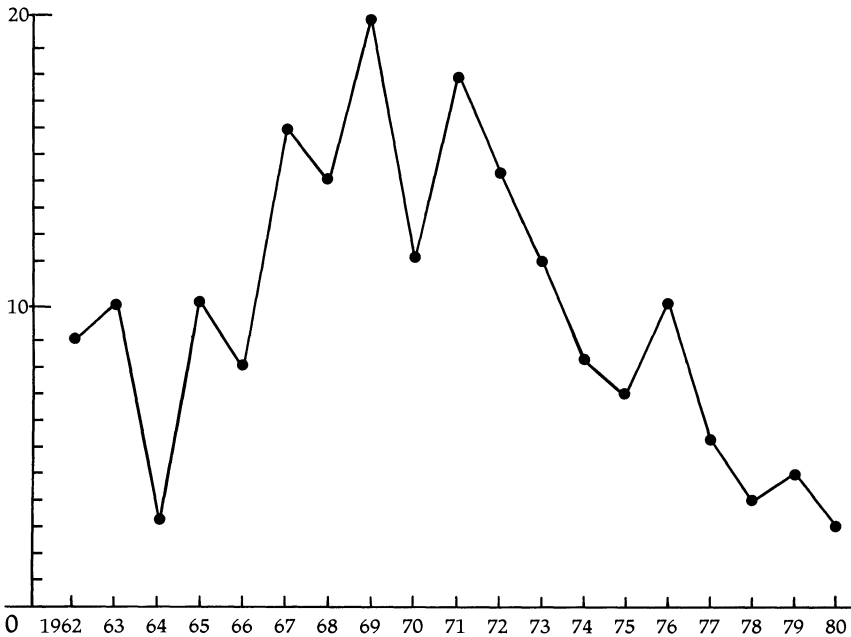


Figure 1. Number of journal articles on Jacksonian political history, 1962–1980, by year
 Source: *Writings on American History: A Subject Bibliography*, Various editors
 (Washington, D.C., 1962–), 1962–79/80.

economic interests. Benson worded his major conclusion carefully: “[E]thnic and religious differences tended to be *relatively* the most important sources of political differences.” His message, however, was clear, at least for New York: wealthy men led both major parties; no significant relationship existed between political affiliations and class; to the extent that ideology entered into political struggles, it consisted of variants of liberalism and little more; any appearance to the contrary, in the form of party rhetoric or “economic” issues, was symbolic claptrap, which hid the essentially liberal motivations and ethnoreligious discord that were most decisive in Jacksonian New York politics.²

Because Benson’s argument advanced on several fronts at once, it was a formidable challenge. *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* raised a host of questions about the complexity and character of American liberal political culture that are only beginning to be debated and clarified;³ even more, it established the importance of what we now label the “social” issues—temperance, comportment, morality—in any analysis of Jacksonian politics

in the North. Through the late 1970s, however, political historians working beside Benson or under his inspiration adhered most closely to a few counter-Progressive points. One exceptional study, Richard P. McCormick's state-by-state examination of party formation, criticized Benson on some matters, eschewed multivariate voting analysis, and concentrated on the parties and the politicians themselves—but appeared to clinch the argument that the “second party system” aimed to eliminate ideology and touchy issues from politics, not to agitate them.⁴ More symptomatic was the rash of heavily quantitative studies on voting behavior and the social structure of party elites that refined and affirmed Benson's basic arguments about politics, culture, and class.⁵

When joined with similar work on the late nineteenth century, these “new,” “scientific” political histories quickly hardened into an orthodoxy, a veritable ethnocultural school of American politics united by their belief that American political (and, by inference, social) divisions are explicable in terms of ethnicity and religion and not of class.⁶ When joined with the work on Jacksonian party formation and professionalism, they so thoroughly marginalized class and economic change that class relations began to disappear from explanations of Jacksonian political history altogether. What had begun as an effective attack on Progressive economic determinism had turned into something different, a new interpretation of the key social determinants of American political consciousness and conflict. It all fit perfectly with that brand of consensus scholarship most closely identified with Richard Hofstadter—a view that allowed for conflict over “status” questions but that denied the centrality of class in a society unified by a “fiercely individualistic and capitalistic” political culture.⁷

In time, there were some demurrers and even some second thoughts. Studies of elite party affiliations and of evanescent third “parties” contended that class differences and conflicts were not entirely absent from the politics of the 1830s and 1840s.⁸ Others pointed out that contrasting views on slavery—a matter of relatively little importance to the revisionists—tended to divide Democrats and Whigs, even though party chieftains tried to keep the question out of national politics.⁹ At least one Jacksonian economic historian criticized the early revisionists' work from a Marxist perspective.¹⁰ Some young political historians wondered if the ethnoculturalists imputed too much from the vote alone and if they threatened to replace one determinism with another.¹¹ Still, through the late 1970s, the revisionist paradigm continued to dominate the study of Jacksonian politics.¹² And that paradigm remained pretty much as it had been formulated by Samuel Hays in 1960: “Party differences in voting patterns were cultural, not economic.”¹³

It is not surprising that so many of the social historians of the early nine-

teenth century in the late 1960s and 1970s read these revelations with varying degrees of boredom and hostility. Only the most thoroughgoing behavioralists and quantifiers had any real affinity for the political historians' work, and this was based as much on shared methodological obsessions as on shared concerns about political history. For most historians of slaves, free blacks, women, and the rest of the disfranchised majority, Jacksonian political history—Progressive or counter-Progressive—could not have been more irrelevant. Party systems and the vote were pertinent enough for historians of popular protest, radicalism, and reform, but had little to say directly about men and women of genuine moral passion and ideological commitment. Revisionist axioms about the paucity of any "meaningful" popular political consciousness ran counter to the entire enterprise of social history.¹⁴ Above all, the revisionists' consensual approach and conclusions appeared dubious to historians who found little constancy or unity in Americans' attitudes toward capitalist development. As the ranks of the social historians grew, Jacksonian political history became a bothersome distraction, a subject to be crammed in for orals or for survey lectures but then quickly forgotten, an unimportant realm where the real conflicts did not take place.

By the mid-1970s, this instinctive distaste had sharpened into a critique of the limitations and biases of the revisionists' work.¹⁵ The voting studies, some claimed, were marred by serious flaws—a tendency to argue from a few supposedly telling examples, an inability to overcome the limitations of available aggregate data on wealth, demography, and voting, an openness to misinterpretations of that data, a neglect of the interconnections between ethnicity, religion, and emerging class structure. In some cases, reassembly of the revisionists' voting data and use of more exact poll book records (when possible) yielded results at odds with the ethnocultural formula about politics and class.¹⁶ Moreover, the critics reminded other historians that the voting studies, like all behavioral investigations, strictly speaking said nothing about consciousness and motivation (and hence about causality) apart from what they imputed from their analysis of the vote. They could help clear away some potent historical legends about the character of party politics and the direct correspondence of politics and economic interest. But beyond that (even if their correlations had been perfectly accurate), the voting studies did not prove why anyone—not one single voter, let alone an entire electorate—voted the way he did. Did, for example, an Irish hod carrier and his friends vote Democratic because they were poor, wage laborers, Irish, Catholic, or some combination of all four? The revisionists could not say.

It followed, the critics observed, that the revisionists had construed politics far too narrowly, and thereby distorted social relations, social consciousness, and the exercise of political power.¹⁷ For the "new" political historians,

politics virtually began and ended at the polling place and the party meeting hall. Other areas of life—religious life especially—occasionally entered in, but mainly as a way of working up categories and dichotomies with which to interpret the voting returns. All of the various social tensions and solidarities—of class, sex, and race—explored by the social historians were subordinated to the search for functionalist explanations of mass electoral behavior. Little allowance was made for how these tensions might have shaped the structure and conduct—the very social context—of party politics, and the use of power outside elections. By reconstructing political and social consciousness primarily on the basis of the vote the revisionists instead erected an odd double standard: believing they had shown the ethnocultural basis of voting behavior, they reasoned that other matters—especially economic or “class” questions—were either evanescent or symbolic, emblematic of the status and moral concerns at stake. What seemed to the social historians to be a matter of common sense—that early nineteenth-century campaigns, rhetoric, and statecraft reflected (in some way) changing economic and class relations—was consigned to the dustbin of erroneous progressivism.¹⁸

Lurking in all of these procedural criticisms were the social historians’ fundamental objections to the revisionists’ concepts of class and culture. For the “new” political historians following the dictates of empirical functionalist American sociology, the two were not unlike social institutions whose membership could be defined in purely statistical terms: class was some concatenation of wealth (usually) and occupation, which amounted to economic interest; “culture” was what church a voter belonged to, what accent he spoke with, where he (and, occasionally, his father) was born, which revealed a moral viewpoint or a status interest. To discover the relative impact of class and culture on politics, one lined up the voters (or, usually, a county, township, or ward) according to these indicators, ran innumerable operations through the voting data, and the ethnocultural models emerged.

Just as these models appeared, social historians were transforming their own concepts of class. To equate “class” politics with pure polarization of the parties along economic lines, it seemed, was only to reproduce the Progressives’ strict economic determinism. More important, it was argued, little could be learned by analyzing class as an institution, as the sum of a series of static, “socioeconomic indicators” abstracted from their social and historical context. Class only had meaning as a dynamic social *relation*, a system of social domination determined largely by relations of production, not merely by wealth or occupation. Class relations assumed historical significance as people came to terms with that system, to define (often unselfconsciously) a common identity and a universalizing notion of rights and obligations, dif-

ferent from—and, at times, directly opposed to—those of other classes.¹⁹ Moreover, the social historians pointed out, early nineteenth-century American history was marked by a range of interconnected, uneven processes of class *formation*, in which patriarchal, petty agrarian, and artisanal social relations gave way to new relations of wage labor (urban and rural), new market and credit relations, reordered sexual and family relations, and altered relations between producers and the state (primarily through banking and taxation). New perceptions and identities of interest took shape continually amidst these social transformations, in strikes and early trade unionism, in emerging middle class religion and reform, in rural disputes over land and property rights, in the law, in the meanest sides of everyday existence.²⁰ To understand the connections between class and politics required some understanding of how the structure and social relations of politics and the exercise of political power might have been related to these transitions—something unobtainable from behavioralist attempts to determine who voted for whom.

The social historians, moreover, considered culture not as something distinct from class, not as a series of affiliations or ideal types, but as the totality of perceptions, beliefs, practices, traditions, and innovations in which people express their relations with each other. All of those “values, attitudes, and beliefs” which the revisionists tied to ethnicity and religion and analyzed independent of class had no meaning unless the changing context of class relations in which they developed was taken into account. To take a well-studied example: to be an evangelical Protestant in the North in the 1830s and 1840s certainly signified adherence to a broad cultural outlook, a particular moral viewpoint. It also signified something about a person’s social position or expected social position in an evolving class society; even more, that “culture,” that moral viewpoint, was in part defined and reinforced by changing class relations, in which inherited religious ideals assumed new—and in this case, quintessentially bourgeois—meanings and forms. Working with such concepts, social historians like Herbert Gutman, Paul Johnson, and Mary Ryan found ways to explore the interactions of class formation and cultural expression without separating the two and without reducing culture to a mere byproduct of economic interest.²¹ By contrast, the political historians, in trying to determine whether “class” or “culture” exerted greater independent influence on voting, fractured history beyond recognition.

These criticisms cleared the way for a fresh discussion of class and politics. For the revisionists, class relations would have been a significant factor in the politics of the age *if and only if* the “lower classes” (loosely defined) had gathered together and all (or mostly) voted for their own party, to counter the opposing party of property. Might there have been more subtle ways for

class to have been a factor in politics—even the institutionalized politics of party—especially in an era of class formation? Might the ascendancy of liberal, “middle class” politics have been due to something more than consensus among the politicians and the undeniable tensions of creed and ethnicity in the North and West? Might the very patterns of “ethnic” politics and elite party domination discussed by the revisionists have been associated with changing class relations?

Here, then, were some important questions that promised to reunite the study of society and politics. Unfortunately, by the time the questions began to be formulated, the social historians had all but forsaken the study of politics, especially party politics. They were interested in culture, not in the desiccated form served up by the political historians but in the form of lived experience, as social process, a process which seemed virtually unaffected by the empty machinations of the parties. Labor historians explored the taverns, debating clubs, churches, and other cultural milieux in which class was embedded; historians of slavery examined songs, jokes, and the oral tradition; historians of women and gender discovered “woman’s sphere” and complex middle class and working class female worlds—and so on, with at best passing reference to Whigs and Democrats. Michael Rogin’s provocative attempt to wed Freud and Marx to understand Jackson and America was something of an exception, but Rogin said little about party politics and nothing the “new” political historians would understand as such.²² Otherwise, Andrew Jackson—indeed, politics—virtually disappeared from what had once been called the Age of Jackson.²³

The salutary effects of this scholarly revolution are well-known. What is interesting was how, like all successful revolutionists just after the new regime is installed, the social historians looked at each others’ work and grimaced. Early polemics pitted the behavioralist “new” social historians against their detractors; simultaneously, social historians of every description began to divide over the place of power, politics, and party in social history.²⁴ Could social historians, some asked, safely ignore parties and politics—the one area in which nineteenth-century America was profoundly different from the rest of the world? Could they possibly write about the exercise of social power—meant broadly as all systems of group and personal domination—without considering formal political power and institutions?

The more these questions appeared, the more troublesome they became, raising doubts about some of the most influential work on social history from the 1970s. How much, for example, could the paternalism of the plantation masters be considered the chief instrument of class rule in the slave South if this paternalism did not turn up in the discourse of southern state politics?²⁵ How truly separate was the “woman’s sphere” of the emerging Jacksonian

middle class—and how separate from men's politics—given women's informal participation in politics and the early feminists' focus on winning the vote?²⁶ Others responded, quite properly, that the study of some aspects of social life would be distracted and diluted if forced to pay a great deal of attention to party politics; above all, it was important not to subordinate the study of social structures and relations to the study of political institutions, or to pit the kind of political history the dissenting social historians had in mind against other kinds of social history.²⁷ Still, the questions lingered for those who wanted to keep their eye on the whole story, on the history of nineteenth-century American society.

But how were the social historians to approach politics in ways sensitive to their new conceptions of class and culture? The few attempts to link social and political history in the early and mid-1970s inspired partial confidence at best. Modernization theory promised to assemble all elements of society, politics, and culture. In doing so, however, it also made a dangerous series of ahistorical substitutions—functionalist teleology for historical process, static and reified ideal types for complex social realities, temporal labels for social categories—all while it eviscerated class relations and culture. Not only did modernization theory (like certain strains of orthodox Marxism) transform social life into an abstract struggle between intellectual inventions; it hopelessly muddled the history of the Jacksonian parties, each of which contained elements of "tradition" and "modernity."²⁸

Edward Pessen's important work on riches, class, and politics was of a different order; at least it presented some useful figures on growing inequality of wealth in America's northern seaboard cities, showed that mercantile-professional elites held municipal office through the 1840s, and offered some fascinating glimpses of upper class urban social life. If nothing else, Pessen forced historians to recognize that, in material terms, Jacksonian America (or at least urban America) could hardly be described as egalitarian. But Pessen's ripostes to Tocqueville (and by extension to the consensus historians and to Benson) did not fully answer the social historians' questions. Pessen's conception of class remained much like that of earlier Progressives and their opponents, a social institution which could be outlined with figures on wealth, social mobility, and inequality; changing social and economic *relations* of class, and their relationships to the structure and meaning of party politics, all but missed his gaze. More important, Pessen's evidence on inequality and the cohesiveness of the urban elite did not refute Tocqueville's and Benson's main point, that a widespread belief in democratic liberalism held sway over American politics. Any number of sources—from Tocqueville's American moral equivalent, James Fenimore Cooper, to the "uncommon" labor radicals Pessen treated so well earlier—could have been cited to dispel any notions

that Americans believed they lived in a land of thoroughgoing social and material equality. The heart of Tocqueville's remarks on liberalism, egalitarianism, and American political beliefs, however, remained unshaken; indeed, given Pessen's figures, Tocqueville's interpretation of American politics appeared to be all the more compelling.²⁹

So, into the early 1980s, the social historians were in a quandary. The labor historians made some admirable efforts to unite the culture of class and politics; unfortunately, their analyses remained beholden to ideal types, flattened out the necessarily dialectical process whereby these diverse types emerged, and said almost nothing about party politics.³⁰ Eric Foner's influential study of free labor ideology and politics in the North and West had been helpful in explaining some features of class, popular consciousness, and politics, and was a key work in restoring a more expansive concept of ideology—but Foner likewise slighted social process and conflict within the free states, ignored over one million northerners and westerners of the Old Democracy who saw things differently from Lincoln, Chase, Seward, & Co., and thus left little way of understanding how, in social terms, the free labor vision acquired political dominance outside the South.³¹ David Montgomery's *Beyond Equality* was more help—but Montgomery (like Foner) had written about an age when politics truly were inflamed by moral passion, when the party system described by McCormick had broken down and was being reassembled along new lines.³² On the South (too often excluded, at least since the 1940s, from "Jacksonian America") we had only begun to learn about the connections between politics and society.³³ And on the West, we still knew very little about changing social relations and perceptions.

It is not without irony, then, that some social historians, and some of the political historians they have influenced, are now returning with fresh eyes to the work of McCormick, Benson, and through them back to Hofstadter. Not that they are abandoning their concepts of class and culture and their criticisms about behavioralism—far from it. They are taking the revisionists' important insights—about the liberalism of party leaders, about the structure of party elites, and about the influence of religious impulses in the North—and placing them in a different frame of reference. More to the point, they are returning to the counter-Progressives' original problem: to explain the triumph of liberal democratic party politics just as the United States entered a revolution in market and class relations. Seen in this way, politics, and the social process whereby the legitimacy of a liberal party system was established and maintained *despite* the upheavals of class formation, becomes a central question for social historians interested in class and political power. With this social history of politics still in its infancy, any attempt at a new, overall synthesis on these matters would be premature. Enough has appeared,

however, to offer some hypotheses and some fresh lines of inquiry—and to suggest the possible outlines of a new interpretation.

We may begin with the rich and important recent literature on political ideology, popular consciousness, and class. "Republicanism" has become the key concept here, but because it threatens to become a reified code word, it is important to be precise about its definition and significance. For Hofstadter and Benson (and nearly everyone else since World War II), American formal and informal political thought from at least the 1820s on was quintessentially liberal—materialistic, individualist, acquisitive, capitalist, post-Lockean, "middle class," liberal.³⁴ Recently, historians have come to see the nineteenth-century political universe rather differently. Jacksonian American individualism no longer seems to have been so closely bound up with a supposedly universal, Tocquevillean pursuit of self-interest; as Yehoshua Arieli suggested in 1964, Tocqueville and his later admirers had too readily construed American political libertarianism as a kind of American bourgeois egotism.³⁵ Even more, it now seems that early nineteenth-century politicians and party spokesmen thought primarily not in straightforward liberal terms but in classical republican terms leavened by egalitarian notions of natural political rights—of a polity of independent virtuous citizens, working to build and maintain a commonwealth of political equality.³⁶ Historians had been premature to claim that classical politics died in 1787.³⁷ Despite the Constitution, despite James Madison and Federalist #10, Americans continued to think (and, presumably, to act) in accordance with eighteenth-century republican ideals, ideals that stressed the primacy of politics in dictating social relations, ideals rooted in a social world of patriarchal, petty production and early commercial capitalism.³⁸

What are we to make of this discovery? Classical republicanism was certainly not *necessarily* liberal or acquisitive; indeed, it contained, in its tension between virtue and commerce, between capitalist expansion and commonwealth, a tension that bordered on contradiction, one that led J. G. A. Pocock at one time to describe republicanism as "premodern" and "anticapitalist."³⁹ Does this mean that America's republican politicians of the early nineteenth century were not also liberals or becoming liberals—that American republicanism was so narrow and fixed a conception of politics and society that it could not be made to accommodate or fit liberal-capitalist principles? Of course not. If anything, the recent literature argues that politicians and lawmakers of all persuasions (including southern politicians, although in a manner that also accommodated plantation paternalism and Negro slavery) were becoming increasingly enamored of liberal concepts of property, the market, and (in the North) wage labor—although the timing, nature, and extent of these adaptations remains in dispute.⁴⁰ But does this in turn mean,

as Hofstadter and the ethnoculturalists' work implies, that *all* Americans were liberal republicans, or liberal republicans in the Jeffersonian/Federalist, Jacksonian/Whig mold? Given all that we now know about class formation and popular ideology, clearly not. In any number of ways, capitalist social transformations led those who benefited least from—and those who were injured by—these transformations to interpret equality and the republican ideal to mean something very different from what liberal capitalist politicians had in mind. One finds these alternative definitions throughout the country, North and South, from as early as the 1790s through the 1850s, in rural conflicts, in the declarations of the first class-conscious trade unions, even (one historian discovers) in the views of southern slaves.⁴¹

What we have learned is this: Americans of all backgrounds (with the obvious exception of the American Indians) framed their political and social discourse in eighteenth-century republican terms. Between the Revolution and 1850 changing class and social relations led to recurring reinterpretations of republicanism and battles over what the republican legacy meant. During that period, some groups of Americans—preeminently, so far as we know, the nation's leading politicians and jurists but certainly many more—came increasingly to interpret the republican framework as one or another form of liberal capitalist polity and economy. They did not reject republicanism in favor of liberalism; they associated one with the other. Others—threatened or displaced small producers, laborers, journeymen in rapidly changing skilled trades—associated the revolution in market and class relations (and emerging liberal definitions of republicanism) with the decline of their own independence and “self-government,” and therefore with the Republic's demise.

How, then, were these ideological developments and conflicts related to the reputedly intellectually inert politics of the 1830s and 1840s? Here we may turn to the literature on parties since McCormick. McCormick's depiction of party professionalism was certainly correct. Yet as Michael Wallace and (eventually) Hofstadter himself pointed out—and as Harry L. Watson has more recently demonstrated in his exemplary study of North Carolina—the creation of this antiideological party system was an act of profound social and ideological importance.⁴² The leading proto-Jacksonians (above all those political pioneers, Martin Van Buren and the Albany Regency) held to all the familiar civic humanist rhetoric, but they also shattered resurgent eighteenth-century Commonwealth ideas on consensus and fear of faction and created a genuinely liberal party politics, a system based on competition for office by disciplined organizations of professional leaders and a loyal partisan rank-and-file. With this vision of politics and attacks on the “aristocratic,” “privileged,” “family” politics of their Adamsite opponents, the Jacksonians

eventually consolidated power in vital states, elected their man to the presidency, and laid the foundations for a national Democratic party. Their adversaries, especially in the North, were horrified; they flailed away at the new system until (nudged by political entrepreneurs like Thurlow Weed), they learned the new party tactics and created the Whig party. Although a considerable number of Whig partisans remained unreconciled to the new system, their party gradually began to operate as a mirror image of the Jackson Democracy.

Put squarely, Jacksonian politics did not in themselves reflect either an all-pervasive, "middle class" liberalism or a challenge to capitalist values. Rather, the Jacksonian party system marked the advent of a specific conception of republican politics, one that combined republican rhetoric with a post-Madisonian liberalism, a politics in which republican virtue became what *The American Review* would call the virtues of merchants. In social terms, there is strong evidence that this political revolution brought a kind of *embourgeoisement* of party leadership in varying degrees in different parts of the country. Both the parties and local offices remained in the hands of the wealthy (as Benson and, in a different vein, Pessen had said) but both seem to have included far more men of recent wealth and standing, paragons of the Tocquevillean American.⁴³ In ideological terms, the new party professionals, although they proclaimed they followed principles and not men, in fact stood for the orderly pursuit of office, in which loyalty, merit, talent, and hard work for the party—not honor, reputation, and family connections, and certainly not the pursuit of larger ideological goals—brought preferment and power. As that conception of politics took hold in most of the nation, America's politicians and their closest allies either destroyed or dramatically transformed what remained of old-fashioned dynastic or "courthouse" parties, tried to cauterize political affairs from disturbing issues and ideas, and validated an ethos that might be described as the American republican equivalent of the European bourgeois liberalism of the 1830s and 1840s. Or, put simply, they took a critical step in the making of the American capitalist middle class.

But if liberal republicanism and middle class capitalist ideals were validated (and, in part, forged) in the creation of a professional party system, how did anything contrary to liberal republicanism play any role at all in politics? Here, we must remember that although the parties shared liberal values, they differed sharply about how to implement those values—differences that turned on related questions of party interest, political economy, and republican political morality. Had American political participation been wholly restricted to men of property, these differences might have been debated by legislators, with plenty of infighting among local notables and

entrepreneurs and, in some areas no doubt, more than a few mobs. But by 1840, the states (with some important exceptions) had severed most of the important connections between property and citizenship; indeed, in certain key, well-studied states like New York, early battles between proto-Jacksonians and their opponents had brought about an expansion of the suffrage very much *against* the original designs of both emerging political groups. With the new professional party system falling into place in such a democratic setting, politicians had to be good, even enthusiastic democrats.⁴⁴

It was in the manner that the parties and politicians approached the voters, at different times and in different areas of the country, that ideology, republicanism, class, and culture assumed such preeminent roles in politics. The timing here was obviously crucial: the quarter century in which the second party system emerged and flourished, roughly 1825–1850, also saw a rapid acceleration of American capitalist development and class formation.⁴⁵ In the process of defining their differences, liberal republican politicians, Democrat and Whig, laid the basis for political controversy, over banking, tariffs, moral reform, territorial expansion, and a host of local and regional issues. However, in translating these differences into party institutions, platforms, and rhetoric, the party leaders had to win the support of men who shared their entrepreneurial assumptions and those whom the social historians have shown did not. The rules of the American political system, as revised in 1787–88, eased some of the burden, by establishing important seats of power away from the most direct forms of popular control, and by allowing later politicians to make what McCormick has called the “presidential game” the central focus of popular participation in national affairs.⁴⁶ Beyond playing by the rules, meanwhile, politicians in both parties enlarged their institutional base and reached out for support and loyalty by turning local government into a fountain of patronage and by creating an ever-proliferating number of minor party posts and voluntary associations. Through these methods, and judicious reform, the parties deflected and coopted new social conflicts as they arose, keeping politics safe for the politicians and expanding their followings. Above all, the parties sealed their political identities by making their appeals not in liberal terms but with broader egalitarian republican language stressing the traditional republican assumption that social disorder stemmed from political corruption.

The first great example of this mass republican politicking was certainly Jackson’s bank veto message, a document which, as Marvin Meyers noted, was clearly addressed to “a society divided into classes invidiously and profoundly antagonistic.”⁴⁷ Jackson’s genius lay in his language: by describing the Bank War in the broadest way as a struggle of virtuous farmers and mechanics against corrupt financier aristocrats, he provided a common

ground on which entrepreneurs (seeking more banks or an end to legislative control over banking) could unite with wage-earners and small producers who sought to abolish banks or to remove bank control over the currency. Thereafter, Democrats and their opponents refined their republican appeals—to fight “purse-proud aristocrats” or “executive usurpers”—in ways that promoted their own political interests and liberal ideals but also yoked together, at least on election day, the support of a wide range of voters, across the lines of wealth and occupation.

The exact nature of these appeals varied at different times and in different places, stressing economic questions, “social” questions, and (at times) political personality. Through the thicket of popular politics, however, a general pattern can be discerned: while both Whigs and Democrats were liberal parties led by different members of new and existing elites, the Whigs *tended* to draw their *popular* support chiefly from men who believed that they (and the Republic) benefited from the ongoing transformations of American market and class relations. The Democrats *tended* to appeal to those who did not.⁴⁸

How, then, can we move from hypothesis to writing a new social history of Jacksonian politics? Obviously, the economic and social history of the market revolution needs to be written in full, building on the still unsurpassed work of George Rogers Taylor and Paul Gates, but with an even greater emphasis on changing social relations and popular ideology.⁴⁹ While that project is being completed, a great deal can be learned about the character of the Jacksonian political system. How were the ideological tensions between republicanism and the market revolution handled by politicians and their allies at different times in all areas of the country? Given the recent work of Fred Siegel, J. Mills Thornton, and James Oakes, what was the character of southern political and economic liberalism in a slave society, in comparison with northern liberalism in a racist, free-labor society?⁵⁰ What *was* the political culture of the frontier—a question that despite Henry Nash Smith and Merle Curti has led as much to bald assertions about a universal “grasping materialism” as to informed investigations?⁵¹ How did the parties turn popular perceptions to their own uses? How much did they reshape people’s perceptions? What were the parties’ popular institutions?⁵² Who joined them, and how did they operate? What were the ideological and social issues at stake during the expansion of the suffrage in the first third of the century? How was policy—and the political economy of the emerging American state—related to class formation and party formation (a matter to take us back to the work of Louis Hartz and the Handlins)?⁵³ Did the sexual and family rearrangements so central to the rise of middle class evangelicalism in the North have any further impact on men’s approach to politics—and if so,

how? How common was "antipartyism" outside of politics and the Whig party? Who held such beliefs, and how were they expressed? Finally—the ultimate problem for Jacksonian historians—what were the social, ideological and political contradictions in the second party system, and especially in the Whig party, that led to the system's demise, and how did these contradictions arise?

Beyond raising these questions, meanwhile, we can also finally reorient the way we think about the place of the so-called Age of Jackson in American history. For too long, historians have seen the second quarter of the nineteenth century as a discrete epoch, with its own set of political and social institutions sealed off from what came before and from what followed. Instead, given the republican discourse of early nineteenth-century politics, given the social processes underway, it would make more sense to consider the era as a phase in the American experience of what Eric Hobsbawm has called the Age of Revolution, an age which began (to amend Hobsbawm slightly) with the democratic republican revolution of 1776, developed amidst the contradictions between the political legacy of the Revolution and the social consequences of the market revolution, and ended in the political chaos of 1848–1854.⁵⁴ Viewing the period this way, we may finally begin to bridge the distance between social and political history. And we may also begin to comprehend, as even Hofstadter did not, the supreme pathos of the triumphant American political tradition.

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2. Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York As a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 64–109, 123–207, 216–53, et passim.

3. See, for example, Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), which again confronts the problem of the Whigs' "morality" and party image, albeit very differently.

4. Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966).

5. Alexandra McCoy, "Political Affiliations of American Economic Elites: Wayne County, Michigan, 1844, 1860, As a Test Case" (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 1965); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827–1861* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971); William G. Shade, *Banks Or No Banks: The Money Issue In Western Politics, 1832–1865* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972); William A. Gudelunas, Jr., and William G. Shade, *Before the Molly Maguires: The Emergence of the Ethno-Religious Factor in the Politics of the Lower Anthracite Region, 1844–1872* (New York: Amo Press, 1976). See also Michael F. Holt, *Forging A Majority: The Formation of the*

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7. Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, p. xxxix.

8. Frank Otto Gatell, "Money and Party in Jacksonian America: A Quantitative Look At New York's Men of Quality," *Political Science Quarterly* 82 (1967): 235-52; Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1967).

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10. Michael A. Lebowitz, "The Significance of Claptrap in American History," *Studies on the Left* 3 (1963), and "The Jacksonians: Paradox Lost?" in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton Bernstein (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), pp. 65-89.

11. McCormick, "Ethno-Cultural Interpretations."

12. See, for example, Carl Degler, "Remaking American History," *Journal of American History* 67 (1980): 18.

13. Samuel P. Hays, "History As Human Behavior," *Iowa Journal of History* 58 (1960): 196.

14. Formisano, *Birth of Mass Political Parties*, p. 12; Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Politics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 245. Cf., Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 6-7.

15. In addition to the essays by Lebowitz in n. 10, see James R. Green, "Behavioralism and Class Analysis: A Methodological and Ideological Critique," *Labor History* 13 (1972): 89-106; James E. Wright, "The Ethno-Cultural Model of Voting: A Behavioral and Historical Critique," *American Behavioral Scientist* 16 (1973): 653-74; Richard P. Latner and Peter Levine, "Perspectives On Antebellum Pietistic Politics," *Reviews in American History* 4 (1976): 15-24; Michael Merrill, "Class and Polity: A Critique of the Ethno-Cultural Synthesis in American Political History," unpublished essay (1976). See also David Montgomery, "The New Urban History," *Reviews in American History* 2 (1974): 498-504; James A. Henretta, "The Study of Social Mobility: Ideological Assumptions and Conceptual Bias," *Labor History* 18 (1977): 165-78.

16. Lebowitz, "The Jacksonians," pp. 73-4, 86-7; Latner and Levine, "Pietistic Politics," pp. 19-23; Merrill, "Class and Polity," pp. 14-18. On the use of poll books, see Paul L. Bourke and Donald A. De Bats, "Identifiable Voting in Nineteenth-Century America: Toward a Comparison of Britain and the United States Before the Secret Ballot," *Perspectives in American History* 11 (1977-78): 257-88; and Formisano, *Birth of Mass Political Parties*, pp. 297-98, 318-23.

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45. See George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1950). See also, on the pace of Northeastern industrialization, Thomas C. Cochran, *Frontiers of Change: Early Industrialism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

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