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*A Symposium on Charles Sellers,
The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America,
1815-1846*

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Charles Sellers

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A SYMPOSIUM ON CHARLES SELLERS, *THE MARKET REVOLUTION: JACKSONIAN AMERICA, 1815-1846*

(The publication of Charles Sellers's *The Market Revolution* has presented the *Journal of the Early Republic* with a unique opportunity. Most immediately, by assembling a symposium of distinguished historians reflecting a variety of interests and perspectives, the *Journal* hopes to give Sellers's magnificent achievement the extensive and pluralistic assessment it deserves. Yet separately and together, the essays below constitute a dialogue on the origins and essence of Jacksonian society, politics, and economy. Our thanks to the contributors for their reflective and critical reviews and, especially, to Charles Sellers for his well-tempered and thoughtful response. MAM)

A Transforming Revolution

Richard E. Ellis

Charles Sellers has written the most important interpretive survey of the Jacksonian period in the past half-century. It is right up there with Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Rise of the New West, 1819-1829*

A former student of Charles Sellers, Richard E. Ellis is professor of history at State University of New York at Buffalo. Professor Ellis has written extensively on constitutional and legal history in the early republic. His publications include *The Jeffersonian Crisis: Courts and Politics in the Young Republic* (1971), and *The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States' Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (1987).

(1906) and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Age of Jackson* (1945), and like those books it will undoubtedly prove to be very controversial. Sellers's stress upon the market revolution as an organizing theme for the years between 1815 and 1846 will undoubtedly provide a focal point and a target for the next generation of Jacksonian scholars.

Over the last few years a number of other scholars have stressed the importance of understanding the transformation of the American economy as a way of integrating American social, economic and political history during the Jacksonian era.¹ The thesis, however, still primarily belongs to Sellers. Although his *magnum opus* has only just been published, he played a key role, along with Marvin Meyers and Bray Hammond, in developing the concept of the market economy nearly thirty-five years ago.² Since that time he has published a substantial number of important books, articles, essays, and even reviews covering a wide variety of aspects of the Jacksonian era that have used this concept as a frame of reference.³ Moreover, as a

¹ Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York 1990); Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (New York 1989); Daniel Feller, "Politics and Society: Toward a Jacksonian Synthesis," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Summer 1990), 135-161; Sean Wilentz, "Society, Politics and the Market Revolution, 1815-1848," in Eric Foner, ed., *The New American History* (Philadelphia 1990), 51-72.

² Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford 1957); Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton 1957). Early example of Sellers's use of the concept of the market revolution may be found in *James K. Polk: Jacksonian, 1795-1843* (Princeton 1957); *A Synopsis of American History* (Chicago 1963), chs. 9-11; and "Old Mecklenburg, and the Meaning of the American Experience," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 46 (Apr. 1969), 142-156. Although these scholars stress the importance of economic change for understanding the Jacksonian era, they differ widely in how to interpret the period.

³ Sellers's most important works on the Jacksonian era include "Who Were the Southern Whigs?" *American Historical Review*, 59 (Jan. 1954), 335-346; "Banking and Politics in Jackson's Tennessee, 1817-1827," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 41 (June 1954), 61-84; "Jackson Men with Feet of Clay," *American Historical Review*, 62 (Apr. 1957), 537-551; "Andrew Jackson Versus the Historians," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 44 (Mar. 1958), 615-634; "The Travail of Slavery," in *The Southerner as American* (Chapel Hill 1960), 40-71; ed., *Andrew Jackson, Nullification and the State-Rights Tradition* (Chicago 1963); "The Equilibrium Cycle in Two-Party Politics," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 29 (Spring 1965), 16-38; "Comment on Why the Southern States Seceded," in George H. Knoles, ed., *The Crisis of the Union, 1860-1861* (Baton Rouge 1965), 80-89; *James K. Polk: Continentalist, 1843-1846* (Princeton 1966); "The Election of 1844," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and Fred L. Israel, eds., *History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968* (4 vols., New York 1971), I, 747-798; and ed., *Andrew Jackson: A Profile* (New York 1971).

professor of history for over three decades at the University of California at Berkeley, he became the country's foremost trainer of graduate students working in the Jacksonian era.⁴ He has also influenced the work of a number of other important scholars who have taken his seminars and who have had personal contact with him.⁵ As a consequence, few other people have the depth of knowledge and the command of the subject that Sellers brings to the formidable and elusive task of writing a synthesis of the Jackson period. This, combined with an exceptionally incisive mind, a finely honed intelligence, and an extraordinary ability to digest and compress large amounts of information, has led to the production of a very significant book. Simply put, no one else writing about the impact of the market revolution in America has explored the subject as completely, as carefully, and as knowledgeably as Sellers.

Although in certain ways this book does not pay the careful attention to detail that Sellers's earlier work does and the footnotes do not fully demonstrate his extensive research in primary sources or his command of archival material, the book has a number of offsetting compensations. They are to be found in its comprehensiveness, in the ingenious use Sellers makes of other scholars' contributions, and in his aggressive presentation of meaningful and provocative generalizations. The latter, in particular, will undoubtedly lead to an unusually large number of sharp discussions in seminars on the Jacksonian period and at sessions at historical meetings over the next several years, and this, in turn, will act as a catalyst for numerous doctoral dissertations and other research projects. Books like *The Market Revolution* create ferment, in the best sense of the term, in the historical profession, and, measured by this standard, it should prove to be an unqualified success.

The book has other virtues. Impressive is the clarity of the analysis with which Sellers cuts through the complicated political issues of the Jacksonian era, especially the Bank War. Further, Sellers has a fine and nuanced sense of chronology. No other broad

⁴ Students who completed their dissertations under Sellers's direction include Steven Aron, Dennis Berge, Richard E. Ellis, Ric Ferguson, Larry Gerber, David Grimsted, Doreen Hunter, Lynn Marshall, John McFaul, Kim Phillips, Gerda Ray, William J. Rorabaugh, J. Roger Sharp, Ronald Takaki, and Raymond Wolters.

⁵ Other students who took seminars from Sellers include Kinley Brauer, Richard Carwardine, Elizabeth Cohen, Patricia Cline Cohen, Donald Critchlow, William W. Freehling, William Gienapp, Henry Mayer, Reid Mitchell, James Oakes, Donald Ratchiffe, Alexander Saxton, Daniel Smith, and Arthur Zilversmit.

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treatment of the Jacksonian era so ably relates it to the heritage of the American Revolution, the ambiguous nature of the Jeffersonian legacy, or the impact of the Panic of 1819 that preceded it. Sellers also does an admirable job in showing how developments during the Jacksonian era led to the emergence of the slavery issue which, of course, was to dominate events in the years after 1846. Further, in doing this Sellers offers a healthy corrective to the recent tendency of a number of important scholars, led by Eugene Genovese and Eric Foner, to overexaggerate the differences that separated the North and South during the antebellum period.

Of great merit also are the numerous brief sketches Sellers provides of important political figures of the period, especially William H. Crawford, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Hart Benton, and John C. Calhoun, that are scattered throughout the volume. He also makes good use of the findings of the "new legal" and "new labor" history and effectively relates them to the broader social, economic, and political developments of the era. Most important of all is the effective manner in which Sellers demonstrates his main thesis, that the transformation of America from a relatively backward economic country made up primarily of self-sufficient farms and small artisan workshops to a dynamic capitalist economy dominated by the values of the market place affected almost all aspects of American life including family relations, religion, and even sex. In doing this he explains and makes connections between what had heretofore been thought of as a variety of disparate elements.

To recognize Sellers's achievements is not to deny that the book will prove controversial and even unpalatable to some. Sellers overenthusiastically embraces a Marxist analysis of American society. As a result, he tends to stress the darker side of the capitalist experience: the fact that not everyone was successful, the gross materialism and essential unattractiveness of many middle-class values, the growth of inequality and the country's racist proclivities. In doing this, he tends to romanticize America's agrarian or precapitalist past. There may have been a rough egalitarianism and a strong sense of community among small producers and subsistence farmers, but they frequently tended to be narrow, provincial, anti-intellectual, unprogressive, and inordinately suspicious of change and intolerant of people who differed from them in appearance, values, and religion. Thus, Sellers presents John Taylor as essentially the great theoretician of the agrarian underclass, which, to a certain extent, he was, but not as the hidebound curmudgeon and elitist that he also was. Moreover, the book lacks balance, for Sellers only

begrudgingly and inadequately recognizes that with the market revolution came progress, innovation, and a period of extraordinary accomplishment.⁶ Cheap land may have been what brought those Americans who came voluntarily to the new world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it is the dynamic nature of the American economy, which has its roots in the market revolution, that has made the United States a beacon of freedom, opportunity, and success to most people in the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although much of the book's argument is presented with great force and clarity, there are times when it becomes excessively dense and jargon-ridden. This is particularly true of Sellers's very important chapter on religion entitled "God and Mammon." In it he stresses the ongoing struggle for the American soul between arminianism and antinomianism. But it will prove tough going for those not precisely plugged into Sellers's mind-set, and they will have to deal with such idiosyncratic terms as "Presbygational" and "Moderate-Light." The chapter is also mainly concerned with developments in New England and the areas of the West settled by the people of that region. This leaves one to wonder if Sellers's arguments are applicable to the South where evangelical religion and fundamentalism may have gone in a very different direction.

Finally, the book ends with a carefully crafted and perceptive bibliographical essay that focuses on the secondary literature dealing with the Jackson era. In it, Sellers makes clear his indebtedness to various new-left scholars and earlier proponents of a class-conflict interpretation like Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who "may yet be judged more nearly right than his critics." What is surprising, given Sellers's previously demonstrated superb understanding of the historiography of the Jacksonian era and his own emphasis on the role of land, geography, the rural nature of America's past, and the transforming effect of advances in transportation, is that he fails to mention the dated and flawed, but still relevant, work of Frederick Jackson Turner and his students. Why? Could it be that, among other things, Turner's work raises important questions about the appropriateness of taking old-world categories of analysis and

⁶ For a more upbeat treatment of the coming and impact of capitalism in America see Paul Johnson, *The Birth of Modern World Society, 1815-1830* (New York 1991). This book treats not only the United States, but also much of the rest of the world.

applying them to the American scene?

None of this, however, really detracts from the significance of Sellers's accomplishment. He has written the single most important synthesis of the Jacksonian era, and even though not everyone will agree with all his conclusions they will be forced to do some hard thinking about how they view the Jacksonian era. Books like this endure and resonate.

Society and Economic Change

Mary H. Blewett

Social historians have long been criticized for ignoring partisan politics and state policy in their work. In response they have charged that political historians refuse to integrate social and cultural history or economic analysis into their interpretations. Charles Sellers's synthesis of early nineteenth-century America is an opportunity for both sides to assess the merits of an ambitious attempt to integrate the rich social and cultural history of the early nineteenth century with the controversies over the development of the two-party system during the Jacksonian era. At the very best, one hopes to discover a richly interwoven tapestry that explicates the multiple dimensions of change. Sellers has given us instead a brilliant narrative quilt of political dynamics patched together with summaries of social and cultural change that are mostly set off in separate chapters rather than integrated with politics. This approach makes the book repetitious and overly long.

The problems of organizing a synthetic work are clearly enormous and intimidating; attempts inspire awe, empathy, and forbearance. Who is better qualified than Charles Sellers for the endeavor? His chapters on politics demonstrate his masterful command of the remarkable personalities, ferocious conflicts over policies, and the kaleidoscope of shifting interests, factions, and

Mary H. Blewett is professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. An authority on class, gender, and work, Professor Blewett is the author of *Men, Women, and Work: A Study of Class, Gender, and Protest in the Nineteenth-Century New England Shoe Industry* (1988), and editor of *The Lost Generation: Work and Life in the Textile Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts* (1990). She is currently at work on a study of New England textile workers.

strategies. His expert handling of the dramatic Bank War and of the Polk administration's policy of imperial expansion makes for fascinating, exhilarating reading. Yet there are many opportunities missed to integrate the stuff of partisan politics with social and cultural developments and, even more seriously, with the "market revolution" itself. For one example, there is the fascinating story of the rise of John C. Calhoun and how he obtained the family connections and wealth to launch his political career. Sellers's overarching thesis insists that pre-industrial rural America with its traditional values of subsistence living and communitarian ideas was "inexorably" and "irresistibly" overwhelmed by "market revolution." An ambitious and favored son, Calhoun married into Charleston society but refused to abide by the planter class tradition of a wedding portion that limited access to the family fortune by eager sons-in-law. Instead Calhoun took his bride's entire fortune (how he did it is not clear nor are its effects on the marriage or the man examined), apparently fearing that his widowed mother-in-law's religious scruples about slavery would inhibit their plantations' profitability. Here was a chance to explore the social and cultural relationships within the Calhoun family as transformed by capitalist imperatives. Sellers's treatment of John Quincy Adams, however, is a superb model of the human costs of the market revolution. The penetration of family dynamics and the erosion of tradition by market forces make a convincing demonstration of the corrosive power of capitalist development.

For Sellers, the market revolution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries pre-determined the shape of political conflict, culture, and the destiny of America, creating by 1850 what he calls the "Bourgeois Republic." Indeed, he seems overly impressed with the irresistible nature of the market revolution or recurrent "booms," a revolution that in his view impelled politics, culture, and society. Yet this market remains slightly off-stage, relatively unexplored, its mechanics and power assumed rather than demonstrated. In contrast, Judith McGaw's 1987 book on nineteenth-century papermaking does an excellent job directly connecting the growing appetites of commercial New York City for paper products and the transformation of production in Berkshire County, Massachusetts. Rather than a series of decisions made by specific capitalists to position themselves for profit, Sellers's barely visible "market" is endowed with animate characteristics: surging energy, calculating egotism, penetrating tentacles, and proliferating dynamism that "stress" countless people in innumerable places. Such a deterministic

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emphasis risks making politics look like a sideshow among the agents of the new order and their market-serving policies and court decisions.

Seller's sympathies are with Jeffersonian democracy and its evolving political struggles to counter the power of the market, a class conflict that he claims bourgeois/liberal historians have refused to confront, assuming instead that democracy was (and is) capitalism's natural political expression. In a startling argument, however, he sees a proto-Marxist in John Taylor of Caroline, angry at the "paper system" of credit and bank notes, who "anticipated Marx in sensing that capital 'will, in the case of mechanics, soon appropriate the whole of their labour to its use, beyond a bare subsistence.'" (120). The Jeffersonian slaveholder Taylor knew nothing of the expropriation of surplus value, as Marx defined profit. Instead of expropriate, both Taylor and Sellers use the word appropriate (defined for Taylor as "legalized extortion," [121]), a good legal and political term concerned with the world of taxes, mortgages, and probanking legislation, not the means of production. Likewise, Sellers (who embraces uncritically the concepts of true womanhood and separate gender spheres) often uses the word patriarchy, a particularly loaded feminist concept, when he probably simply intends a specific masculine code or paternalism. On the other hand, the recent work of Laurel Ulrich on rural midwives who interacted freely with men in small communities would temper his view of preindustrial families as oppressively patriarchal.

For historians who explore the worlds of nineteenth-century farmers and workers and their persistent political and cultural resistances and adaptations to the unevenness of capitalist change, Sellers's view of their inevitable defeat and "irreversible proletarianization" (25) by an all-powerful market will come as a surprise. The vehicle of this defeat comes through religion, schooling, benevolent societies, sexual repression, patterns of consumption, and the process by which the middle class and its arminian (for me an unfortunate and unnecessarily obscuring usage) tastes, beliefs, and neuroses swallow up what Sellers terms repeatedly the antinomianism of preindustrial culture. To the contrary, working-class people, as Paul Faler, Bruce Laurie, Jama Lazerow, Teresa Murphy, and others have argued, made religious faith, sexual respectability, self-discipline, and temperance a powerful justification of their ongoing resistance to capitalist domination, rather than a pathway to submission. Alan Dawley demonstrated that the political tradition of equal rights, the legacy of the American Revolution, proved a

sustaining ideology of working-class resistance in New England throughout the nineteenth century. My research shows that supply and demand arguments were hotly contested in the 1850s among working- and middle-class people in New England as a false market ideology that masked capitalist greed, while the values of a pre-industrial moral economy surfaced as late as the depression of the 1870s.

Evidence like this belies the hegemony of bourgeois democratic capitalism announced early and often by Sellers as an overwhelming and irresistible tide. Where in his analysis of working people is the contingency of events, the suspense, the contradiction, and the human agency that makes Sellers's skillful handling of Jacksonian politicians and politics so vivid and riveting? In contrast to his treatment of working-class culture, Sellers discusses the culture of slave resistance in the last chapter of the book with the deepest interest and respect.

The possibilities for working-class and small farmer resistance—hardly a match for middle-class hegemony and the inexorable market—were torn apart by hard times, racism, ethnic rivalry, manifest destiny, patriarchy, and a bedrock belief in fee simple property. Here the connection with Antimasonry politics and nativism is made clear, but the organizations of factory workers in New York and Philadelphia and the New England ten-hour movement appear foredoomed, coopted, and negligible. Urban mass culture is presented as apolitical at best; at worst as the cause of civil disorder and racial and ethnic violence.

What is left then is the survival of democratic values in Jacksonian politics that Sellers unblinkingly reveals as racist and patriarchal, unremittingly brutal toward native Americans, ardently imperialistic, and in the final analysis unable to counter the inexorable pressures of capitalism that could engage in "forum-shopping" (359) for favors in twenty-six state legislatures, Congress, and the courts while sectionalism and racial, ethnic, and religious conflict grabbed the headlines. Sellers sadly concludes that the two-party system that emerged from the Bank War gave capitalism unparalleled legitimacy. In the final analysis, Sellers with unstated irony argues that the real heir of Jeffersonian democracy and its potential for human equality is neither Old Hickory nor Young Hickory but William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist rebel who utterly rejected partisan politics.

Oxford University Press failed to give this colossal book the editorial attention it deserved as a potential blockbuster accessible to

undergraduates and the general public. Stern copyediting would have shortened and focused the book, perhaps permitted one *kulturkampf* but not five, eliminated the mix-up of "anti-erotic phobia" (246); fought the recurrent term "patriarchal afflatus" in reference to Jackson, and eliminated the repetitions of argument and use of the same word twice in the same sentence that mar Sellers's otherwise great gifts of expression. This is a pity and a warning. *The Market Revolution* is brilliant in much of its conception and writing, but for social historians I believe that it is frustrating and disappointing as a synthesis.

Hegemony of the Market Questioned

Joel H. Silbey

Charles Sellers's fervent reconceptualization of what was once called the Age of Jackson gives new force to an emerging scholarly consensus about the era. He is awestruck by the hegemonic power of market capitalism to destabilize, and then destroy, traditional patterns of community, work, and ultimately and decisively, politics. In the pre-market era, American political life was characterized by the "egalitarian localism of the subsistence culture." In the early market era, there remained a "widespread yearning for democratic control over a society suddenly grown threatening" (197). But, after the triumph of market capitalism, American politics, although often egalitarian in form and rhetoric, no longer was that in substance. Every political institution was either created to serve the purpose of market elites or fell under their sway. The mobilizing of a white male electorate by national political parties, and the policy consequences of that institutionalization of political conflict, stemmed from the hegemony of the market with determinative anti-democratic consequences. Democracy, after all, is and was "capitalism's ultimate contradiction" (425).

Joel H. Silbey, a professor of history at Cornell University, has written widely and influentially on American electoral behavior and is the author of *The Shrine of Party: Congressional Voting Behavior, 1841-1852* (1967), *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (1985), and *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (1991). Professor Silbey is also the editor of the multivolume series, *The Congress of the United States, 1789-1989* (1991), issued by Carlson Publishing, Inc.

Sellers has moved far from the views of an earlier scholarly generation and from more recent manifestations of psychological, modernizing, organizational, or ethnocultural interpretations of Jacksonian politics. On the other hand, his notions are fully congruent with a line of analysis rooted in the recent work of social and urban historians and so well explored and synthesized previously by Harry Watson. Thanks to that work, no one can argue against the immense impact of the market revolution on American life as a general proposition. Nor can anyone deny the incremental incompleteness and the many democratic failures of American politics as it has evolved since the Age of Jackson. But, as with other such sweeping claims, I think that oversimplification and misdirection occur in the desire to fit together a whole era in a particular way. To make the market revolution account for so much, Sellers stretches very far without adequately demonstrating that the power of capitalism was so sweeping, that the political world fits into his unbridgeable bifurcation between democracy and the market's triumph and that it all happened before 1850.

Sellers's methodology is problematic. The bulk of his text is a chronological narrative of the events of the era. At the beginning and end of chapters, and occasionally in other places, he appends his perspective as to what drove these events, paying particular attention to the manipulating activities of "calculating elites" (297) over the masses in the service of capitalism. This is not the place for an extended consideration of methodology. But *The Market Revolution* does not demonstrate the causal linkages claimed. The particular focus on, and the assertive reiteration of, a point of view as is done here, is not in itself persuasive. And deducing the specifics of behavior from a general proposition is not sufficient, especially since there is much hard evidence that challenges the reach and the power of the market revolution to shape and subordinate critical aspects of American politics in this era.

Let me raise three issues that underscore this and are critical in assessing the power, reach, and timing of Sellers's argument. First is the substance of American political conflict. How are we to account for the persistent and powerful ethnoreligious conflict that remained on the scene throughout this period? Sellers does not ignore ethnicity but discusses it as marginal and derivative of the primary battle between haves and have-nots: "Ethnicity mainly reinforced these alignments of linked class and culture" (299). It was used to direct the masses away from dangerous, class-rooted conflicts.

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I find this view unpersuasive. Ethnicity and class may have been intertwined. They may also reflect distinctive elements in the society. And the evidence we have suggests that, as in other times, there were several axes of conflict in American society in the Jacksonian era, some economic and class-driven, others rooted in powerful religious and nationality divisions. Of course, class resentments were always expressed and class-driven political programs aggressively pushed forward. But alongside this class-structured politics, the political *mentalités* of Americans in many places continued to be shaped powerfully by an older line of political cleavage rooted in persistent ethnoreligious prejudices. Nor were these conflicts simply vestiges of an earlier culture, soon to disappear in their turn. They continued to be tenaciously central to many Americans' concerns, certainly in the northern states, the location of so much of the growth of market capitalism. The evidence that we have suggests that the most explosive political conflicts of this period—over schools, temperance, immigration, that is, the social issues—cannot be attributed to the disciplining desires of market elites.

Nor is it clear that class and ethnicity were directly inter-related with class the driving force of the relationship as Sellers suggests. If such was true, it has to be demonstrated more convincingly than it has been. The differences in behavior, and their source, need fuller, more specific investigation. Until such is done, there is convincing evidence that the ethnoreligious element played *the* major role in popular political consciousness. Moreover, to give this era that kind of hegemonic gloss suggested, to deny the power of more primordial forces, to see them overwhelmed by modernizing elements (with the politically correct exception of racism) is to suggest, ironically, a new kind of American exceptionalism in which the United States is somehow more immune to such conflict as a persistent factor of political life than other countries have been and a rationalist-economic world view explains all political action.

Nor am I comfortable with Sellers's treatment of the dynamics of America's political parties in this era. He seems to resist the need for political coalition building and institutionalization, ignoring the critical role of each in the rise of popular politics in a territorially extensive and diverse nation. Parties appear here, certainly once Jackson passes, in the historiographically once familiar, non-conflictive roles of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, with a particular anti-democratic cast to them: "Two-party politics pacified the class animus of an inattentive majority on the hustings while skewing policy outcomes toward the businessmen" (350). Given "an

inattentive majority" (350), elections lose a great deal of their importance as occasions both for expressing what is on people's minds and for shaping and determining the direction of public policy.

The notion of the irrelevance of elections, popular among journalists as well as some historians and political scientists, has been particularly influenced by the Progressive image of parties as corrupted anti-democratic institutions. But, how did political parties work in the decades before 1850? Were they secretive, cabal-directed, undemocratic institutions? Or was there, in this era, another quality to them, a more democratic impulse in their behavior and organization? I would argue, and have argued, that such a significant difference existed. Bourgeois-directed in large part, to be sure, moving through a seemingly narrow range of policy options, sometimes. But Whigs and Democrats were never simply the playthings of market dominance.

In a variegated, conflict-filled environment, mediating institutions between the people and government structures were necessary. Parties filled the gap, performed reasonably well in the 1830s and 1840s and were certainly more democratic than later observers gave them credit for being. There was in this era, I suggest, an interactive, not simply a top-down, relationship between voters and party leaders. When political combat emerged, political elites could neither totally ignore nor completely redirect a not inattentive popular will rooted in a wide range of substantive conflicts beyond those developing out of the market revolution.

Political parties would eventually become less democratic (although they were never as corrupt or as unresponsive as Progressives believed). But in this period, they did reflect the democratic sensibilities of white male voters across all classes and groups. And Whigs and Democrats still stood for important differences, their policies attracted different groups to them. Old Hickory, in fact, was not the last presidential guardian of the democratic impulses on the American scene, nor was the Bank War the final expression—or organization—of these sensibilities. The Democracy of Van Buren and Polk never foreswore the critique of capitalism present in Jacksonianism. They—and the Whigs—remained more than "uneasy coalitions" led by "pragmatic politicians of enterprising bent" (322).

Finally, like those labor and social historians who have established the analytical beachhead that Sellers develops so extensively, he moves the major transformative moment in American history back from that point later in the nineteenth century when the industrial

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revolution and a national market firmly took hold, to an earlier, more uncertain moment. It is a compelling idea. But nothing yet convinces me that we should readily abandon a somewhat older line of chronological demarcation lost sight of in recent market-directed, neo-Progressive, consensualism. The market revolution ultimately transformed the nature and substance of American society and politics. But, until much later in the nineteenth century, the situation on the ground was, I suggest, more fluid than Sellers admits. The years before 1850 were a transition period in which a number of different basic elements still remained in play, where the corrosive force of market capitalism was digging in, but where a more pluralist and, yes, democratic strain in the polity still survived.

Conflict or Consensus?

Major L. Wilson

The Market Revolution is one of the most important books on Jacksonian America to come out in the last decade. Reposing on a vast body of scholarly works, it provides a coherent and compelling interpretation of the period. And style effectively contributes to its aims. Written in a vigorous and vivid prose, at times richly textured and evocative yet remarkably condensed and often epigrammatic, it draws key trends, events, and personalities into dramatic focus. In many ways Charles Sellers exhibits both of the styles that Isaiah Berlin, in a well-known essay on the hedgehog and the fox, deemed to be separate and distinct.¹ Sellers is a fox who knows a great deal about a lot of things: about the new social history; issues of race, class, and gender; law and constitutional development; politics; religion; and biography. As a gifted biographer, indeed, his sketches of leading figures constitute one highlight of the volume.

Major L. Wilson is a member of the history department at Memphis State University. A prominent intellectual and political historian, he is the author of *Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict, 1815-1861* (1974) and *The Presidency of Martin Van Buren* (1984). Professor Wilson's "Republicanism and the Idea of Party in the Jacksonian Period," was selected the best article published in the *Journal of the Early Republic* in 1988.

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (New York 1970).

Sellers is also a hedgehog who knows one big thing. The concept of "market revolution" supplies an organizing principle for relating together the myriad aspects of economic, social, cultural, and political life. After 1815 the encroachment of market forces from the coast into the interior irreversibly challenged traditional ways. Alternative responses of resistance and accommodation, clearly manifested in the profoundly different cultures of land and market, defined a *kulturkampf* which, in the political arena, led to democratic insurgency under President Andrew Jackson and a "political showdown over the market revolution" (322). Building on a wealth of recent studies, Sellers dismisses the consensual interpretation of democratic capitalism and essentially comes back to the view of class conflict Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., had defined between the great mass of producers and the exploitative business community.² "Contrary to liberal mythology, democracy was born in tension with capitalism, and not as its natural and legitimizing political expression" (32). It is a brilliant formulation that yields great insights and gives distinctiveness to the work, yet it raises conceptual questions to be dealt with in due course.

Sellers refines upon the conflict thesis in two related ways. While sharing Schlesinger's belief in the importance of eastern workingmen in Jacksonian ranks, he gives more attention to subsistence farmers and, in the mode of E.P. Thompson, to the cultural medium in which class consciousness matures. A munificent land/people ratio placed limits on accumulation and thus sustained a democratic social order or relative equality, independence, and community. Central in this order was an "antinomian" mind-set which took the good society to be "natural," and prescribed a laissez-faire policy to foil the market's selfish designs on government. New Light revivals in religion expressed the recurring response of the antinomian majority to market pressures. Assuming the nearness of God to ordinary folk and easy access to His grace, revivals "asserted the subsistence world's commitment to communal love against the market's competitive ethic" (30).

In the dialectic of development a middle-class culture of accommodation emerged to assert the hegemony of market forces. At

² Notable among recent studies challenging the consensual interpretation are Harry L. Watson, *Jacksonian Politics and Community Conflict: The Emergence of the Second Party System in Cumberland County, North Carolina* (Baton Rouge 1981); John Ashworth, *'Agrarians' and 'Aristocrats': Party Ideology in the United States, 1837-1846* (Cambridge, Eng. 1987); and Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era* (New York 1989).

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work here was an "arminian" affirmation of man's control over his destiny. The internalized norms of self-making individuals gained reinforcement from the repressive thrust of reforms—such as prohibition or Sylvester Graham's strictures on diet and sex—most of which served to harness Old Adam's libido to capitalist asceticism. In the same cultural process of accommodation the subsistence family as an economic unit bifurcated into "a female domestic world of altruistic reproduction" and "a male public world of competitive production" (242). By the 1840s an "exfoliating cultural infrastructure" (365) of values and institutions, sustained by the power of cheap print and the public school, irreversibly fixed the myth of merit and equal opportunity in the mind of the nation. Through the genius of Charles G. Finney, a Moderate Light religion performed the indispensable task of mediating the "stressful passage" of millions from ancestral ways to the demands of the market, "tenuously blending the self-discipline of arminian effort with antinomian love" (203). The theology of disinterested benevolence was to purge the market of self-love, while bourgeois romanticism "swathed arminian reality in antinomian illusion" (365). Arminian control in the political arena sought to promote enterprise in the states under the Jeffersonian Republicans and fashioned, with the American System of policies, a plan for economic development at the national level in the boom period following the War of 1812.

Political conflict, maturing rapidly in the wake of the Panic of 1819 and peaking with the Jackson presidency, mirrored the underlying conflict of cultures—"the clash of land and invading market, of contrasting modes of production, and of consequent cultural dispositions" (299). The antinomian masses responded to depression with a new wave of religious revival; and the energies of spiritual "Come-outerism," spilling over into radical insurgency in the states, laid the basis for Jackson's victory in the "realigning" election of 1828. Jackson's popular mandate to dismantle the capitalist designs of the American system culminated in the war on the national bank and, as its essential corollary, the hard-money crusade to restore the "natural" economy of relatively equal and independent producers. At this dramatic juncture, Sellers argues, the politics of class attained its most explicit formulation in the history of the nation; here, under the charismatic Jackson, the antinomian majority came closest to restraining the capitalist state by destroying the credit system of banking, "the lifeblood of escalating enterprise" (333).

Unhappily for Jacksonians seeking to restore an equalitarian social order, the hard-money crusade failed. But the basic reasons Sellers adduces for failure would seem to weaken his argument against the consensual view of democratic capitalism. In "condescending historical hindsight," Sellers admits, the hard-money policy was obsolete; like other democratic insurgencies it was an example of "yesterday's radicalism against a threatening tomorrow" (342). Market forces continued to erode the economic base of subsistence culture and render the antinomian masses more vulnerable to bourgeois hegemonic claims. Meanwhile, the war Jackson had focused so intensely on the national bank now began to splinter into twenty-six smaller battles in the separate state legislatures. "Democrats by trade" joined hands with Whigs against "Democrats in principle" to save the credit system of banking. The market's victories reflected at last an "obdurate polity" of two-party competition, the workings of which made "democracy safe for capitalism" (348). Parties reached out to broaden their coalition of interests, and success inescapably served to displace even the largest popular mandate with a new equilibrium of forces. The common interest of the majority simply became one of many interests in contention and at great disadvantage because the "inattentive majority," in defense of "unambitious equality," was no match for the more organized interests in a market society. On the hustings, "Whig dramaturgy" in the "log cabin" campaign of 1840 fixed the pattern that thenceforth "muffled the contradiction between democracy and capitalism in a mythology of consensual and democratic enterprise" (363).

But were democracy and capitalism as contradictory as Sellers postulates? To address this question requires a more explicit distinction than he makes between democracy as a *political* process and democracy as an equalitarian *social* ideal. In the first instance, it is far from self-evident that democracy was born as a counterweight to capitalism; instead, it can be argued, both collaborated in replacing the older hierarchical and deferential order with a new political arena based on manhood suffrage and the competition of organized parties.³ The political process was more than a mere "epiphenomenon" of underlying class and cultural conflicts: it possessed in some degree a

³ The reciprocal action of democracy and capitalism in creating a "revolution in choices" is central to the argument in Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York 1984).

life of its own; it created as well as reflected community; and the community it created was something that neither party willed into existence.⁴ Nor did Democratic failure mean an unequivocal triumph for Whigs. As Daniel Walker Howe and John Ashworth have argued, Whigs embraced the market in order to direct it toward a good society—one harmonized by the interdependence of all interests and led by a meritocratic elite that retained some of the elements of the older deferential order. Whigs no more than Democrats wanted a society of irreducibly plural interests held in equipoise by broker state politics. The perceptive reviewer of a new biography on Henry Clay thus concludes that Clay, and many fellow Whigs, represent more nearly the course not taken by the nation. Arminians, it would appear, had failed to exercise control.⁵

Further insight into the consensual thrust of democratic politics comes from a closer look at the rhetoric of republicanism in the political debate. This element in the political culture inherited from the eighteenth century, an element which Sellers unaccountably neglects, did serve to sharpen party differences as Democrats and Whigs chose selectively from the legacy of republican ideas. Common to both, however, was the concept of a "conspiracy paradigm" that placed primary emphasis on the political sphere.⁶ Assuming that the basic structure of social arrangements was sound, evil to the republic could only come when self-serving men conspired to bend the government to their purposes. Whigs accordingly warned that the good of the whole would be subverted by spoilsmen partisans and sycophants of a charismatic Caesar. Democrats saw the money power, fully embodied in the banks, as a government within the government calculated to destroy the liberties of the people. Salvation

⁴ Amy Bridges has shown that in the political life of New York City "partisan divisions are not simply the epiphenomena of 'natural' divisions." They rather "have an existence that is relatively autonomous from the social forces they organize." *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Cambridge, Eng. 1984), 13.

⁵ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago 1979); Ashworth, 'Agrarians' and 'Aristocrats', 52-84; Eric L. McKittrick, "The Great White Hope," *New York Review of Books*, June 11, 1992, 33-37.

⁶ Harry L. Watson fruitfully demonstrates the uses of republican rhetoric in his recent work, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York 1990). M. J. Heale, *The Making of American Politics, 1750-1850* (London 1977) is an earlier work that deals with republicanism in the rhetorical appeals of both Democrats and Whigs. The term, "conspiracy paradigm," is borrowed from Howe, *Political Culture of Whigs*, 79-80.

for the republic, in either case, lay in appeal to the people; and the common commitment to the outcome of the electoral process left them with a world neither wanted. Whig no less than Democratic voters might thus be seen as laboring under "false consciousness."

Nor is it certain that democracy, as an equalitarian social ideal, arose in response to the market. Many studies in liberal political thought, another area neglected by Sellers, maintain that democracy and capitalism existed together from the creation, lodged deeply in the liberal psyche going back to John Locke. Richard Ashcraft finds in Locke an irreconcilable tension between two elements: on the one side, a moral egalitarianism based on natural law; on the other, a defense of social inequalities supported by history and prudential judgment. Peter Laslett interprets the original state of nature as a little republic of relatively equal and independent proprietors. Bound in natural community, each person enjoyed equal access to natural law and equal power, in the absence of government, to execute the law on which community was based. The advent of money, unhappily, undermined the republic. Money enabled individuals to transcend the natural limits of accumulation, set loose the spirit of acquisition, and generated conflicts that impelled property holders to create government for their own security. C.B. Macpherson gave to this element in Locke its most capitalist interpretation, calling the resulting social order one of "possessive individualism."⁷ While Sellers explores the ambiguous imperatives of "equality" and "opportunity," he tends to draw them out too neatly along class and cultural lines. The Locke that came to wilderness America was more complex than once supposed: perhaps there is a little of the antinomian and the arminian in all Americans, and the quest for community a never-ending one.

Apart from conceptual questions raised here, it is to be expected that a legion of foxes may challenge particular aspects of Sellers's interpretation. Stressing individual essences in an irreducibly plural world, they may resist the deterministic prescriptions of the market. Horace Mann was surely driven by more than "bourgeois panic" (367); nor was the meaning of romanticism exhausted by its function

⁷ Richard Ashcraft, *Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (London 1987), 10, 265; Peter Laslett, ed., *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge, Eng. 1963), 92-120. See also John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the "Two Treatises of Government"* (London 1969), and C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford 1962).

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as an antinomian mask for arminian reality.⁸ It is not readily apparent how free thinkers among eastern workingmen can be subsumed under the same antinomian rubric with subsistence farmers of the New Light persuasion. While *The Market Revolution* succeeds better than any other work in relating the "Era of Good Feelings" to Jacksonian Democracy, it may have placed undue stress on democratic insurgency and not enough emphasis on concerns over slavery. Struck by the force of unexpected events and interacting personalities, some scholars will question the view that the policies of the Jackson presidency represented a logical unfolding of the essential mandate given in the election of 1828. As the Whig and Democratic parties began to decline in the later 1840s, Sellers skillfully traces the pervasive racism at work in the emerging free-soil North and among subsistence farmers who supported slaveholder capitalism. In doing so, however, he tends to blur important differences between the political economies of the two sections.

Whatever the particular criticisms, *The Market Revolution* will be recognized as a magisterial synthesis of social and political history. It makes sense of the wealth of scholarship over the last three decades and will serve, in the dialectic of historical thought, as a point of departure for new research. One important item on the agenda for further study will be, as perceptively noted in a dust-jacket comment, to look more closely at the related meanings of democracy and capitalism. And hopefully the new studies will be informed in their different ways with that degree of moral passion Sellers here imparts to his work—a passion signaled by his loving memory of Giles Sellers, a two-mule farmer and democrat of a bygone day, and the wish, expressed in the last sentence of the text, that the long struggle for true equality will at last "realize its Jacksonian promise by confronting arminian capital on behalf of antinomian humanity and ravaged land" (427).

The Market and Its Discontents

Harry L. Watson

"The greatest want of civilized society," Henry Clay intoned, "is a market." Warming to this theme in a major Senate speech of 1824,

⁸ Sean Wilentz's perceptive review of the book touches on some of the particular criticisms that can be expected to appear: "The Original Outsider," *The New Republic* (June 22, 1992), 34-38.

Harry L. Watson is professor of history at the University of North Carolina,

the Kentucky presidential candidate went on to sketch out his famous "American System" of tariffs and internal improvements, by which he hoped to reconstruct America. If market conditions were only right, Prince Hal predicted confidently, almighty God Himself would "conduct us into that path which leads to riches, to greatness, to glory."¹

Other Americans were not so sure, and viewed the prospects of divine favor somewhat differently. "A system devised in heaven, would fail to command the respect of a licentious and abandoned people," warned a congressional candidate from North Carolina, on the Fourth of July that followed Clay's address. Calling for strict construction of the Constitution and a fixed adherence to an older political economy, Willis Alston reminded his rural audience of the misfortunes imposed on the children of Israel when they violated their covenant with the Lord. Drawing what he saw as the obvious parallel, this Old Republican concluded that "so long as we remain true to our ancient feelings and principles, we have nothing to fear: when we depart from them, our dignity and our prosperity will leave us. It is beneath a nation of freemen, to entertain an ambition for dominion and luxury."²

Charles Sellers's new portrait of Jacksonian America places clashing visions like those of Henry Clay and his lesser known antagonist at the center of the early republic's history. As the father of the American System made clear, the supporters of capitalist transformation wanted to mobilize American government and religion behind a massive effort to make marketplace relations the fundamental cornerstone of American civilization. Opposing such measures, a motley array of dissidents rose in protest, and found their champion in Andrew Jackson.

The broad outlines of Sellers's argument have been apparent for some time in the work of social historians who have studied the experience of yeomen and artisans from the middle of the eighteenth

Chapel Hill. The author of several significant works on Jacksonian America, Professor Watson's writings include *Jacksonian Politics and Community Conflict: The Emergence of the Second Party System in Cumberland County, North Carolina* (1981) and, most recently, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (1990).

¹ Henry Clay, "Speech on the Tariff," March 30-31, 1824, in James F. Hopkins, ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay* (9 vols., at Lexington, Ky. 1959-1991), III, 683-717; quotations at 687 and 714.

² Willis Alston, Fourth of July Address, Tarboro (N.C.) *Free Press*, July 9, 1824.

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century to the middle of the nineteenth.³ Whether they focus on rural farms or urban workshops, a common theme of these works is the centrality of the small producer's household to the early republican economy, the importance of cooperation, reciprocity, and nonmonetary exchanges among households within the same community, and the equality and independence which male heads of households demanded for themselves. These citizens rallied enthusiastically to the political promises of the American Revolution, but resisted the economic changes that Sellers and others have called the "Market Revolution."

This revolution took many forms. In towns and cities, merchant capitalists undersold skilled artisans by using the poorly paid labor of semiskilled pieceworkers to turn out consumer articles like shoes for mass consumption. In the countryside, turnpikes, canals, and railroads disrupted local patterns of exchange, and pressed yeomen to enter the risky business of commodity production. In both places, a society and economy based on semi-autonomous households was gradually replaced by a society in which markets for labor and commodities exercised drastically increased power over the life of the individual male citizen. In the plantation South, moreover, slaveowning planters sometimes longed for better market connections but, like Willis Alston, also worried that a stronger state and a more complex economy might somehow loosen the bonds of slavery. Wherever doubts arose, a powerful cultural offensive echoed the

³ The details have been most fully explored by labor historians. Key works include Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York 1984); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1820-1860* (New York 1979); and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York 1986). Agricultural transition has attracted somewhat less attention but is equally significant. See James Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 35 (Jan. 1978), 3-32; Michael Merrill, "'Cash is Good to Eat': Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review*, 4 (Winter 1977), 42-71; Kenneth Lockridge, "Land, Population and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790," *Past and Present*, 39 (Apr. 1968), 62-80; Steven Hahn, "The Yeomanry of the Non-Plantation South: Upper Piedmont Georgia, 1850-1860," in Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr., *Class, Conflict, and Consensus: Antebellum Southern Community Studies* (Westport 1982), 29-56; Allan Kulikoff, "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 46 (Jan. 1989), 120-144; and Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca 1990.)

gospel of Clay and his supporters, promising superior civilization and divine blessings to all who applied themselves to the market's invitation to get ahead.

Sellers argues that yeomen and artisans did not welcome the changes that stripped them of independence, and undermined local communities based on cooperation and reciprocal support. They expressed their frustration in a wide variety of religious and political protest movements, including revivalism, Mormonism, Antimasonry, the "People's Party" campaigns of 1824, and, ultimately, the antibank crusades of Andrew Jackson's Democracy. Assuming many guises in the decades after 1815, these movements attacked elites of all descriptions and eventually shaped a more democratic culture and society in place of the more restrictive and deferential republic of the Founding Fathers. "Contrary to liberal mythology," Sellers insists, "democracy was born in tension with capitalism, and not as its natural and legitimizing political expression" (32).

Sellers's analysis will thus sound familiar to readers who remember Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Age of Jackson*, and the generation of Progressive scholarship it summarized. By tying the rise of Jacksonian politics to a particular moment of transition in the capitalist economy, however, Sellers makes a much more nuanced argument than his predecessors. Schlesinger was attacked on the grounds that his "workers" were really petty capitalists, while his lieutenants in the Bank War were no more than "men on the make" who wished to spread the benefits of capitalist development to a wider circle of entrepreneurs.⁴ Over the last generation, however, social historians have been able to move the discussion to a much more sophisticated level by demonstrating the inadequacy of the label "petty capitalist" for the yeomen and artisans of this transition period. Historians have likewise explored how expanded credit and transportation networks roused fears as well as hopes among American voters and played a vital role in Jacksonian party formation.⁵

⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston 1945); Walter Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingman's Movement, 1829-1837* (Stanford 1960); Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton 1957); Richard Hofstadter, "Andrew Jackson and the Rise of Liberal Capitalism," in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York 1948).

⁵ E.g., J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge 1978).

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Yet Sellers tells of more than the romantic triumph of "the People." When conditions were favorable, the popular commitment to private property and its rights made every irate yeoman vulnerable to the whispering allure of the "prices current" column in his local newspaper. Political parties took shape to express the rage and resentment unleashed by market transformation, but later served to channel, contain, and coopt popular protests. Along the way, preachers and other ideological spokesmen instilled a new social ethic based on private ambition, self-denial, self-improvement, and the cult of female purity and domesticity. In the end, what Sellers calls the "Bourgeois Republic" won out, though its triumph would not be complete until after the "Great Contradiction" between slavery and free labor had been resolved in bloody civil war.

The special virtue of Sellers's work lies in its detailed assemblage of social, economic, and political narratives, and its ambitious efforts to incorporate religious and cultural change into the more familiar narrative of technological developments, bank wars, and party politics. In embracing social history, moreover, Sellers has lost none of his talent for telling a lively and beguiling political narrative, which he first revealed in his outstanding biography of James K. Polk.⁶ The great set pieces of Jacksonian political drama are all here, spiced by revealing biographical sketches of the leading actors.

The most obvious potential objection to Sellers's analysis is the concept of "Market Revolution" itself. For many years, historians of the "consensus school" taught that capitalism arrived with the first settlers, and exerted a uniform, liberal, and democratizing influence on American history.⁷ More recently, cliometricians have used aggregate production figures and the lore of classical economics to assert that eighteenth century America was already fully commercialized and that farmers responded eagerly to every opportunity for expanded market involvement. In their view, the Market Revolution never happened.⁸

⁶ Charles Grier Sellers, Jr., *James K. Polk* (2 vols., Princeton 1957, 1966).

⁷ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*; Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York 1955).

⁸ See James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore 1972), and Winifred B. Rothenberg, "The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750-1855," *Journal of Economic History*, 41 (June 1981), 283-314. The debate between "market" and "social" historians has been cogently summarized by Allan Kulikoff in "The Transition to Capitalism in Rural America."

Sellers does not confront these arguments with statistics of his own, but insists that the eighteenth-century commercial economy was limited to coastal and lowland regions where population pressure and access to transportation made a precocious transition more likely. He rests his case most firmly on the structural and institutional history of the economy, and the cultural and political evidence for popular discontent, where the evidence is very much in his favor. In the future, it is unlikely that scholars will be able to tell the story of Jacksonian America without referring to some version of the concept of Market Revolution.

Every book is imperfect, and *The Market Revolution* is no exception. Sellers tends to romanticize the yeomanry and leans too heavily on abstractions like "arminian" and "antinomian" to describe complex movements in religion. There are also several topics which deserved a fuller discussion. Sellers correctly identifies slavery as the "Great Contradiction" to liberal capitalism, but African Americans rarely appear in his account as actors in their own right, even though the Market Revolution touched them repeatedly through the rise of King Cotton and the expansion of the domestic slave trade. Sellers's discussion of women is also ambiguous. He acknowledges the subordination of women in the yeoman household, but also claims that "a durable if undemonstrative loyalty and affection" (10) could overcome the weakness of the wife's legal and material position. As market society developed, however, women appear more frequently as *bourgeoises* fifth columnists in these households, as they hankered for store-bought comforts, harkened to the "Moderate Light" revival, and repressed the "considerable sexual freedom" of the old order (10). Which view of women is the truer one? A fully nuanced answer may well require another generation of research, but Sellers does not always appear to be fully aware of the contradictions in his account.

Friendly and unfriendly critics of the new historical scholarship have frequently commented on the difficulty of devising new synthetic models to incorporate the knowledge which has transformed our understanding of the American past.⁹ Despite some shortcomings, *The Market Revolution* demonstrates that the task of synthesis is not impossible. Sellers has a masterful grasp of the relevance of daily life

⁹ E.g., Herbert G. Gutman, "Whatever Happened to History: The Missing Synthesis," *The Nation*, Nov. 21, 1981; Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History*, 73 (June 1986), 120-136.

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for high politics, and the ongoing importance of presidents and congressmen to the lives of ordinary people. Just as importantly, he shows how the beliefs and prayers of all groups of Americans were intimately related to their material conditions and their efforts to define the meanings of their lives. For that achievement, *The Market Revolution* should stand as a brilliant inspiration to all of us.

Rethinking the Commercial Republic

Amy Bridges

For about twenty-five years students of the history of the United States have been writing "new" histories—social, women's, black, Native American, working class—in an effort to recapture the richness and complexity of the American past. In *The Market Revolution* Charles Sellers has arranged these elements, and lent his own powerful interpretive skills, so that the reader might see the pattern and majesty of the whole.

The order of this narrative is created by the market. The advance of the market follows an inexorable economic path, trickling from the coast inland to raise land prices, reorganize subsistence into commercial farming, and force small farmers to move west. In the cities the market placed tremendous pressure on manufactures, corroding artisans' production to create wage laborers. The advance of the market reconfigures not only production, but also family relations, social roles, and personal identities; manhood and womanhood are rethought and reinvented. Similarly, successive adaptations of protestant Christianity taught the morality and character appropriate to a commercial society. Social change so pervasive was divisive and painful. Sellers offers two—sometimes congruent, sometimes not—understandings of social division. The first opposes the market to the land; the second opposes the capitalist moralism of arminian Protestantism and the more democratic, communal antinomian Protestantism.

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Jackson's Bank War is the climax of Sellers's narrative, the apocalyptic moment in the struggle over the market's advance, in which capitalism and democracy "battle to their historic détente." Earlier, Sellers presents, in brilliant portraits, the contending visions for the republic's future of Jefferson, Marshall, Monroe, Webster, and especially Calhoun. If in Schlesinger's telling Jackson was a nineteenth-century Roosevelt, here Reagan is evoked by Jackson's affirmation of embattled values, his insight into mass feeling, and the cheerful, matter-of-fact ferocity of his racism (more, if the independent treasury had been passed Jackson might be counted the able servant of the commercial republic as well).

The Bank War arrayed the armies of economic development against one another. Arminian commerce saw in credit the lifeblood of prosperity; antinomian land agreed with journalist Leggett that bank charters were "the unclean drippings of venal legislation." Capital triumphed over democracy in Washington and the states alike; later, the stagecraft of partisan politics duped the heretofore deeply sensible mass electorate. Finally, Polk's administration appears as a Bush-like dénouement with the president "contriving a confrontation [in Texas] that forced Congress to bow to jingoistic patriotism" (422).

The political story told here represents a dramatic shift in focus from our understanding of nineteenth-century national politics. As usually told, the foresight of Hamilton and Madison, with an assist from Marshall, set the frame for the republic to move forward to commercial prosperity. In the party period, the natural tendency of congressional representatives to truck, barter, and exchange district-based favors on one hand, and the undeveloped state of the countryside on the other, combined fortuitously to provide federal policies that promoted simultaneously economic development and an amicable politics (the Civil War aside).

Sellers's telling is altogether different, and considerably more plausible. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans were very uncertain about their future. The antebellum period produced an enormous number of pamphlets, tracts, and books debating the economy and the roles of merchants, bankers, farmers, artisans, laborers, and government in it. Nineteenth-century politics could neither rest contentedly on the achievements of Hamilton and Madison, nor logroll and pork barrel the republic forward to prosperity. The economic plans of national leaders, and the arguments about these plans, remind the reader that—as contemporaries were acutely aware—every gift of policy to some

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constituents was a tax on others. As a result, politics, party discipline, the painstaking assemblage of coalitions both legislative and electoral (made more arduous by the extent of the suffrage) were crucial to the advance of the commercial republic. Sellers is to be applauded for restoring to the history of antebellum political life the ambitious plans that followed the forethought of Hamilton and Madison, and the debate, uncertainty, and very high stakes of politics and policy.

Sellers is less persuasive in his presentation of arminian commerce and antinomian land, the two very large conceptual blankets cast over the many diverse conflicts of the antebellum period. Tracing the trickle of market relations to the gentlest seepages into family, identity, and religion, Sellers seeks to unify, by these oppositions, a narrative threatening always to become disorderly because it is broad-ranging. As a rubric for discussion of the Bank War's contending forces the opposition captures the social groups in contention. Elsewhere antinomian land and arminian commerce serve less well. If Sellers shows how strange the bedfellows of politics, he also overestimates how cozy the accommodation, understating the presence of the knees, elbows, deception, and trickery always present in a complex ménage. First, as Sellers for the most part (although not always) recognizes, race and gender have their own historical trajectories, hardly reducible to the spread of commerce. Second, even more obvious are the wide divergences among different groups on the "land" side of the war. Sellers's portrait of the difficulties of assembling them into a political coalition is a strength of the book. Sellers's commitment to antinomian land requires him, however, to underplay the intimate ties of the slave system to the world economy; only in the last chapter does he tag large slaveholders as "capitalists."

Lost entirely in this narrative is the common language and common principle which Hartz claimed for the United States and which every "new" history has affirmed. The large categories of arminian market and antinomian land at war leave Sellers inattentive to the mixed stakes many citizens had in the advance of the commerce, and the mixed feelings they had about it. When Whigs offered "leveling up" and Democrats a government without "privileges," an ambitious artisan might see a bright future in either. There is no evidence whatever that voters were duped by the "dramaturgy of Whig politics" (362), or that periods of prosperity "recruited the susceptible to bourgeois/middle class culture and politics" (353) any more than that twentieth-century intellectuals are seduced by political television commercials. It is much more likely that nineteenth-century voters, like contemporary voters, were faced

with limited political choices, strove to figure out which best suited their interests and principles and then cheerfully, enthusiastically, with resignation or cynicism, cast their ballots. Then as now, the joining of common principle and language, voiced by politicians, to the ambiguities and uncertainties of getting, spending, religion, and family, allowed the recruitment of strange bedfellows to diverse political coalitions.

Sellers is at his weakest in discussions of family, race, and popular encounters with electoral politics. Sellers is at his best in tracing the market's course, in presenting elite portraits, and in conveying the great diverse sweep of the growing republic. He has succeeded at his purpose, as the reader sees the whole commercial republic in its majesty and complexity, its painful and triumphant progress.

Charles Sellers's Response

Charles Sellers

Such generous attention from such gifted peers is a rare privilege. Greatly appreciating their open-mindedness on the main points, I address first their caveats. Many are well taken. I agree the book is too long, and the language does get dense and abstract. I would have liked to offer more on southern religion and on blacks as autonomous actors. And I should have tagged more clearly scholarship's unresolved ambiguities about women's roles.

I ask some indulgence, however, about religion. Daunting theologisms cannot be avoided in exploring the piety we have lost. To me, the Protestant tension between antinomianism and arminianism was the central tension in early American life. Finding no way to temper this semantic gale to the shorn lambs of a secular age, I can only hope that some will have the stamina to assess the argument.

I also appeal the demand for more proof of the many causal linkages considered. History would be stultified if confined to what could be proved to the satisfaction of the most rigorous and

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quantitative empiricists. My assertions, therefore, are what I believe after long and conscientious consideration of the sources and secondary literature.

On some long contested matters, I simply disagree. I have never been persuaded of the explanatory power of "republicanism," for example, nor the primacy of ethnocultural factors in politics.

Predictably the most serious objections arise over the comparative merits of capitalism. There is concern that I have embraced Marxist analysis—romanticized the precapitalist subsistence culture—and stressed capitalism's darker side while begrudging its blessings of progress, innovation, and extraordinary accomplishment.

The problem, I suggest, is a capitalist mythology blind to human needs and capacities for altruism and community. I stand by my characterization of the subsistence culture as "abundantly meeting human needs for security, sociability, and trust," while at the same time "it inflicted costs—in patriarchy, conformity, and circumscribed horizons" (17). A gentle chiding for exaggerating its patriarchal oppressiveness reassures me that my portrayal is not too flattering.

All I urge is a critical historical perspective on capitalism's benefits and costs as the structuring matrix of our society. I stipulate ungrudgingly to its unrivaled capacity for material production. But the non-economic costs, in human relations and stress, were sufficient to generate massive resistance. I challenge the denial of costs by a capitalist liberalism bent on seeing competitive pursuit of wealth as human nature and the competitive market as Millennium. And I do not think, on reconsideration, that I unduly magnify capitalism's costs, minimize its benefits, or beatify its antecedents. Readers are invited to cast the final balance for themselves.

Only reintegration can rescue our splintering historiography from specialized irrelevance and elitist bias. Using political history as a structural core, I have tried to show how every aspect of life can be brought to bear on classic issues of power and justice. After a professional lifetime of seeking, I proffer, not final Truth, but a paradigm that finally satisfies me, as faithful to my experience of both the historical data and the historical consequences. Others may devise better ways of presenting paradigms consistent with their own experience of the same historical terrain.

In the early republic, I found massive upheavals in religion and politics coinciding with profound changes in culture, family, gender, and sexuality. All linkages led back to an explosion of market relations and forward to capitalist transformation—institutional and cultural—long before the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth

century. Massive resistance to this market revolution, I argue, disproves our reigning historical mythology. The panel's generous reaction gives me hope that the dogma of consensual democratic capitalism may be up for reconsideration, along with the relationship between capitalism and democracy. In conclusion, therefore, I venture to extrapolate a scholarly agenda from *The Market Revolution*.

Nothing could be more liberating for American historians—or more salutary in this hour of capitalist triumphalism—than recognizing our own embeddedness in the liberal ideology we should be subjecting to critical analysis. The acid test will be shaking off our ideological blinders to the class dynamics that permeate every area of our historical experience.

Political history must rediscover class to address its central problem, democracy. Is it the natural political expression of capitalist relations? Or has it arisen to protect important human values from capitalist erosion? If so, has it succeeded? Or has a democratic facade legitimized the sway of privileged elites? Why? Answers to these questions require more perceptive readings of voter inputs, however ambiguous, as mediated and distorted by politicians and party. Much remains to be understood about democracy's intricate relationship with racism and slavery. And the new understanding of the law as a major political arena must be further developed.

Social history, for all its advances, still needs more clarity about how the shift to capitalist production changed the structure and dynamics of family, gender, and sexuality. The cultures and dynamics of class cry out for exploration. More must be learned about the shifting relations between farmers and the market, between farmers and planters, between slaves and masters. Labor history is just reaching rural and small-town artisans and workers. New perspectives on social/medical/legal attitudes and policy toward the poor, criminal, deviant, and incapacitated have been far from fully exploited. We should learn more about the dynamics of racism and homophobia as scholarship explodes on the interface between mainstream white society and multiplying subgroups—Native Americans, blacks, Latinos, later immigrants from everywhere, and sexual minorities. The rich new scholarship on subgroup cultures will grow richer.

Cultural history needs to see its domain—education, reading, entertainment, literature, the arts, science, and religion—as, among other things, the critical class battleground for ideational hegemony. With literacy still a mystery, recent scholarship is beginning to reveal the profound impact of cheap print. Religion demands the special

attention of historians because through it, as through politics, the largest numbers of people most visibly register a reaction to their circumstances. Because religious expression (like political expression) is often ambiguous, we are only beginning to get sensitive analyses of the changing relations between social context and theological appeal.

Intellectual history must shake off its elitist bias, and environmental history demands a seat at the head table. As we learn to care about the trans-human consequences of human activity, the costs of capitalism mount.

But all this specialized inquiry will go to waste unless integrated around the most meaningful issues. First among them are the impact of the capitalist market and its relationship to democracy.