

THE MARKET REVOLUTION AND JACKSONIAN AMERICA

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First of all, I want to thank Carolyn and Charlie for the honor of inviting me to speak here today. I'm awed to have been asked to reflect on The Market Revolution in this august company, most of all, of course, in front of Charlie. But I've had a great time thinking about it, rediscovering it, remembering how much and just why I've admired and loved it so much.

When The Market Revolution came out, I was a young teacher making my first fumbling efforts at that synthesizing historical form known as the lecture course. This was the context in which I was bowled over by how brilliantly Charlie synthesized the literatures I'd been reading through graduate school, blending the best of traditional political history -- a rousing narrative centered on the Bank War, of all things -- with the main thrusts of the social history revolution centered on the struggles of ordinary people. It was fashionable in some circles to despair of synthesis altogether, to valorize a division of labor in which separate subfields claimed exclusive rights over their chosen themes in a kind of industrialized knowledge production -- that brought the worst of big science to the putatively humanistic discipline of history. The Market Revolution burst onto this scene as a violent, powerful, and beautiful dissent.

The central drama of Jacksonian America in The Market Revolution, of course, was the rise of democracy and capitalism simultaneously. The democracy was agrarian because the United States was agrarian. It was white, male, and patriarchal, but, within these limits, it was more participatory than anything that had gone before. As a result, elites could never ignore what Charlie calls "the anticommercial animus of a democratic countryside" -- the demands of a rural majority that wanted government to be "weak, cheap, and close to home" (except when it was expanding the backcountry realm by taking land from Indians). The capitalism, meanwhile, was the province first of market elites and then of a broader cast of ambitious strivers who wanted expansive government to promote development and opportunity. The capitalism turned out to be stronger than the democracy: in part because of its power to coopt dissenters of all stripes, in part because it offered concrete benefits even to those whose world it destroyed, and in part because resistance got sidetracked into racism and the endlessly disruptive politics of slavery.

One illustration of the disproportionate power of the capitalism is that it actually dominates the narrative of The Market Revolution. I'll be quoting extensively here because it is impossible to do justice to Charlie's argument without his extraordinarily vibrant language. The "democratic insurgency" is always present on the horizon, even if it is often in the background. There is the "stressed and resistant Jacksonian majority," and, in the towns, a "traditional moral economy" through which working people claimed "a decent competence, ultimate independence, and the civic equality and respect of republican citizenship." There was "farmers' bemusing refusal to behave with market rationality by maximizing return on capital" operating as "the main brake on American economic growth," while the "antidevelopmental democracy of the precapitalist

farmers majority" applied a political brake, and a "pessimistic piety" resisted market aggression in the cultural realm, giving the lie to "our historical mythology of capitalist transformation as human fulfillment."

But most of the action lies on the other side: the transportation improvements, corporations, banks, factories, and lawyers (the unforgettable "shock troops of capitalism"); and the schools, arithmetic, clocks, and ready-made clothing. There are the big political alliances, the elites of the ports and "commercializing interior" in the early republic, and then the "entrepreneurial slaveocracy" with Northeastern commercial and industrial capital in the Jacksonian era proper. There was the Moderate Light religious temper that showed "how antinomian rebellion could be channeled through benevolence into capitalist discipline . . . to make capitalism and an antinomian populace safe for each other," and reinforced by the "self-indulgent evasion" of "Romanticism's loving heart, mustered in service of liberalism's selfish head" -- a hypocritical claim to be spiritualizing nature while reveling in its commodification. There was the cynical elite deployment of racism and nativism, "setting the most exploited at each other's throats," and the racist pogroms that deflected popular anger from the "bosses, banks, and aristocrats." And, of course, there was the party politics that, then and now, has "pacified the class animus of an inattentive majority" to the advantage of "the businessmen who wanted most from government, who followed politics most avidly, and whose money, influence and domination of cultural media far outweighed mere votes." That "legendary saturnalia of mindless pageantry" that the Whigs performed in their 1840 Log Cabin Campaign "crystallized a politics that has ever

since muffled the contradiction between capitalism and democracy in a mythology of consensual and democratic enterprise."

The "folk pain of capitalist transformation" stood little chance against this phalanx of aggressive forces, especially given its most spectacular piece: the viciously comprehensive deployment of shame, guilt, and "instinctual repression." Can anyone think of another book in which partisan political narratives are combined with anything resembling The Market Revolution's chapter 8 ("Ethos vs. Eros")? Actually, both of the two middle chapters, 7 on the Benevolent Empire and 8 on this "antierotic phobia," came as revelations sandwiched between the political dramas of the 1824 and 1828 presidential elections. The spectacle was an "unprecedented denigration of eroticism" that accompanied -- and served -- an equally "unexampled mobilization of human effort." With a "new sexual politics of erotic guilt and asexual love," Americans "inaugurated history's most dramatic and sustained repression of fertility" while also crusading against the nonprocreative prostitution, homosexuality, and masturbation (to be cured by avoiding the use of imagination), along with the nonsexual pleasures of alcohol, rich food, and so on. The main villains here are "self-making" doctors, with "self making" being the quality that licensed them to commit such violence as experimental gynecological surgery (the worst episode involving an Alabama Mengele who "cut and sutured without success on traumatized black women" until a move to New York supplied him with Irish victims). Yet the most shocking part, ultimately, was less this extreme evil than the new normal, the generalized repression of libido in the service of economic exploitation, as "Capital conscripting human labor to productive manipulation of inert matter declared war on the vitality of both human and external nature."

Against all of this modern, middle-class, self-making capitalist aggression, the common man had Andrew Jackson. The first president of non-gentry origins, with Rachel's death and the Peggy Eaton affair aligning his towering rage against the hegemony of repressive moralism, Jackson was tailor made to champion the farmers and workers reeling under the aggressions of capital. His nationalism defeated the Nullifiers while his respect for states rights nullified Indian land rights. His transportation vetoes restrained federal participation in developmental investment, though he never stopped hedging on the tariff. But the Bank War was the key. It was "the acid test of American democracy" because it involved private, elitist, and unaccountable sovereignty. Historians have usually seen Nicholas Biddle's competent management as the classic defense of the Second Bank of the United States, implying that Jackson's war against a functioning central bank was reckless at best. But Charlie accepts the resemblance between the "Monster Bank" and the modern Federal Reserve -- which is also private, elitist, and unaccountably sovereign -- and explains that this was precisely the problem. Nor did Jackson think the solution was the chaos of unregulated pet bank notes that resulted. The solution was the Independent Treasury, to divorce the government from all banks. Van Buren and Polk would create the Independent Treasury that Jackson had sought. "Asserting premarket values against all respectable opinion, Jackson mustered democracy to defend patriarchal independence, equality, and therefore honor, against an activist capitalist state," at both the federal and state levels. Hence the farmers and workers who recognized the Jacksonians as their defenders.

Yet as much as Jackson dominates both the book and the era, I can't help thinking that the most interesting politician in The Market Revolution is Calhoun. It's no revelation to notice the major reversal of Calhoun's career, from ardent defender of tariffs and transportation projects to the theorist of nullification. I especially loved his impatience with tediously strict constructions of the Constitution, his avowal that the Constitution "was not intended as a thesis for the logician to exercise his ingenuity" and "ought to be construed with plain good sense," meaning broadly. But I hadn't realized, or hadn't remembered, just how stunning Calhoun's reversal was, how late he remained in this mode, including offering himself for president in 1824 as nationalizing darling of Northeastern capital. But, of course, politics at home finally forced Calhoun "into the most radical reversal of principle in American politics" -- or, his "breathtaking somersault from hypernationalism to hyperlocalism." And then, over a decade after the Nullification Crisis, his "incurable presidential fantasy" prompted him to support the huge River and Harbor Bill that Polk vetoed in 1846. Calhoun, it seems, issued the South Carolina Exposition (explicating the doctrine of nullification) anonymously not just because he was the Vice President or worried about Jackson's response, but because he had been a vigorous nationalist ten minutes earlier.

The other critical piece of The Market Revolution is its treatment of slavery or, in particular, the role that planter elites played as patrons of small-farmer democracy. Like the other big pieces, this one involves tragedy. The Virginia gentry played "midwife to democracy" until the Missouri debates, when the "spectre of a united antislavery North" spooked them into a fateful sell-out of the antidevelopment yeomen, turning "antinationalism in defense of rural liberty" into "state rights in defense of human bondage." Planters and yeomen united against developmentalism

when it came from antislavery Northerners like John Quincy Adams, but the alliance was filled with contradictions until, ultimately, democratic hopes fell into the arms of an aggressively capitalistic but desperate "cottonocracy."

It is at this point that I start to part company with Charlie's interpretation. The Jeffersonian tobacco planters clearly said and seem genuinely to have thought that they were protecting and promoting yeoman democracy, but my own research has made it pretty clear to me that they were doing quite the opposite -- that southern yeomen enjoyed much less real political power under gentry patronage than their small-farmer counterparts enjoyed in the North, even in the age of the Federalists, whose portrayal by their Jeffersonian opponents endures even in this telling.

And, honestly, the problem of how to think about slaveholding champions of democracy leads to a rather larger problem that I suppose I can illustrate most clearly with reference to Uncle Tom's Cabin. Stowe's critique of the institution of slavery hinged on the misery created by the way the system flouted the disciplinary effects -- Stowe says the Christianity, we might say the collective repression -- that alone could force men to behave in a civilized manner. As the plot runs through the Shelby, St. Clare, and Legree households, readers watch instinctual repression recede until not even the calculating self-interest of a transplanted Yankee can curb an orgy of male aggression and violence. What was wrong with slavery, in this view, was precisely that it vested male patriarchs with untrammelled power. The results were cruel when the masters were Shelby and St. Clare, and catastrophic when the master was Legree.

There is, of course, nothing original in treating Uncle Tom's Cabin as a paean to the Benevolent Empire. And while I can see the violence of arminian domination, the real cost in lost liberty, I like living in a society in which men are taught to discipline their own impulses. I fully accept Charlie's explanation for why this happened: in the service of aggressively expanding capitalism rather than in order to make the world safe for women. I will also readily concede that there are still Legrees all around us, and that they are less disciplined than empowered as exploiters by capitalism and its host of ostensibly civilizing institutions. Nevertheless, I prefer a world in which men have less freedom than they did before the market revolution. Perhaps for this reason alone, I'm pretty sure I would have been a Whig in the 1830s.

But, and it is a very big but, I did not come to this realization until more than a decade after my first awestruck reading of The Market Revolution. I remember exactly when: 9:40 AM on the Thursday after the 2004 election, when I walked into my 7A lecture with an extemporaneous one-liner: that Andrew Jackson had won again. I was thinking of what I saw as the obscenely swaggering militarism and carnivals of racism around George W. Bush's wars, which were all the more obnoxious because, unlike Jackson's, they involved sending other people to do the fighting. Meanwhile, between 1991 and 2004 there had also been the collapse, for many of us, of the idea of capitalism as historically contingent: as having started at one identifiable moment and with a remotely plausible endpoint in the future. Perhaps this reckoning with the end of the Cold War was a failure of courage. Re-reading Charlie's masterpiece has made me take this

suspicion very seriously, wondering if my own Whiggery is more retreat than advance, more intellectual shrinking than growth, though I do think that Whiggery's feminist pull is real.

Yet if use of the term "capitalism" seemed impolite to the generation that ruled the profession when The Market Revolution appeared, it is certainly enjoying a new vogue today. We're going to have to see just what the new history of capitalism turns out to mean. There are signs, like those "up with capitalism" headlines, of an uncritical embrace, of a liberalism without even the restraint of a Whiggish conscience. But there is another possible future, a history of capitalism that takes The Market Revolution as its model for a rich history of work, culture, struggle, and resistance. An integrated labor history, community history, and social history attuned to the human tragedies of development.

On the other hand, even if this aspiration does materialize and the history of capitalism lives up to our fondest hopes for it, there is something else about The Market Revolution that will remain sui generis. It is not only a beautiful book. It is a wildly beautiful book. It violates the domesticated politeness of academic convention and embraces the high price of true honesty. In short, it performs the antinomian libidinal liberty that it celebrates. It is rugged and in some places downright ragged. It evinces some sympathy for the harried self-made men who resent the antinomian holdouts resisting the stifling discipline, but it has only loathing for the sell-outs who could have been more true and honest, who knew better than to lapse into self-indulgent evasion and chose to do it anyway. But Charlie's voice in The Market Revolution offers us proof that this creativity and courage can exist and flourish even in our capitalist world. And that is

an example to which we really can aspire -- as people, as workers, as citizens, as teachers, and as historians.

Thanks.