

THE MARKET REVOLUTION AND THE AMERICAN WEST

A Symposium in Honor of Charles Sellers's 90th Birthday

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In preparation for this event, I returned to *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* this summer, coming back to it more than two decades after I read the draft chapters as a graduate student. Rereading it, I was struck by how differently it reads in light of recent history. That, in turn, made me wonder how differently it might be written in light of recent historiography, especially as related to the American West.

The Market Revolution, we all know, was published in 1991. That was, of course, the year the Soviet Union collapsed. It was two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The following year Francis Fukuyama proclaimed "the end of history." With the specter of communism no longer haunting, capitalism reigned. Across what was left of the political spectrum, the supremacy of the market went essentially unquestioned. Bill Clinton soon moved into the White House, but, as Sean Wilentz has underscored, it remained the "Age of Reagan."

And so *The Market Revolution* appeared at what seemed capitalism's triumphant moment. This boom time was probably not the best time to bring out a book that inveighed against the repressiveness of market culture and that blasted the "historical mythology of capitalist transformation as human fulfilment." With its salvos against merchants and sellers and, maybe above all, lawyers, *The Market Revolution* ran very much against the tenor of the Age of Reagan. And it salted the historical wound by savaging "liberal historians" for their deafness to the cries of "the stressed and resistant Jacksonian majority" and for their blind faith in "our historiography of consensual, democratic capitalism." No wonder, Oxford University Press, while publishing the book, deemed it unsuitable for the Oxford History of the United States, the series for which it was initially commissioned, but with which it was so at odds -- given that those volumes, especially the one by Daniel Howe that replaced *The Market Revolution* in the series, have generally been celebrations of consensual, democratic capitalism.

Twenty years later, it is the homages to consensual capitalism, so fashionable in the 1990s, that seem out of tune with the times. As Mark Twain discerned, history may not repeat itself, but it rhymes. In the clamor generated by financial collapse and great recession, it is much easier to hear the rhymes linking our times with the Age of Jackson. Was that John C. Calhoun railing against the rural majority "who contributed so little as taxpayers" or Mitt Romney critiquing the 47 percent? When Sellers speaks of "the stigmatization of the poor as never before" was he reviewing Whigs of yore or previewing Republicans today? Was that John Marshall or John Roberts issuing Supreme Court decisions that buttressed corporate power and gave those with money the means to undermine majority rule? Do not the bank bailouts passed in the Panic of 2008 look very much like the conservative form of debtor relief that emerged after the Panic of

1819? Both propped up banks and imperiled market elites, who were as Sellers noted, the perpetrators of general misery, while offering little to those who suffered most.

Changing times mean we read *The Market Revolution* differently today than two decades ago. But I suppose the question for us this afternoon is how might it be written differently? That is, how has scholarship in the last twenty years reshaped our understanding of the Jacksonian landscape? There have been two sweeping syntheses of that scholarship: Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy* and Daniel Walker Howe's *What Hath God Wrought*. Sean is here to speak for himself. And unless Charlie has undergone a profound conversion experience in the last twenty years, I don't think Daniel Howe's extraordinarily whiggish interpretation would persuade him to revise his vision of the market revolution into a Howe-like canonization of John Quincy Adams.

Still, while the main thrust of *The Market Revolution* has not just stood the test of time but been buttressed by it, I would argue that at its edges, by which I mean its territorial fringe, recent scholarship on frontiers and borderlands has profoundly altered the way we view the westward expansion of the United States. That's true for the years between 1815 and 1846, as well as before and after those dates. Taken together, new studies of the periphery have been anything but peripheral to the core of American history.

In Sellers's telling, the West, which in the book refers primarily to the lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, has a featured role in the market revolution. In this drama's opening act, Indians in this region, described by Sellers as "people of the land *par excellence*," exist principally as obstacles. In the years before 1815, their resistance to American expansion slowed the settlement of trans-Appalachian lands. After the War of 1812, however, Indians in the trans-Appalachian West had been sufficiently decimated by the "white man's market and microbes" that they could no longer effectively contain the flood of white settlers. When Sellers wrote the book, the term "ethnic cleansing" had not yet been coined, and so the contemporary euphemism of "Indian removal" had to do to describe the process by which the American state "opened" western lands for white settlement, as well as for the expansion of African-American slavery.

The West, then, became the ground on which competing hopes and dreams and clashing political economies intersected. On the one hand, its land and resources offered opportunities for the most enterprising. On the other, its abundant acreage beckoned as an escape route from market demands for those who required the restoration of more favorable land-person ratios to maintain their "subsistence culture." As Sellers notes, "irony compounded tragedy as a doomed white culture sustained itself a few generations longer and cleared the American land for market domination by sweeping away a more archaic Indian culture." It is those generations, however, that did battle against the market tide. Their stress and their resistance to market imperatives turned Andrew Jackson from an autocratic military hero into a champion of *herrenvolk* democracy and a crusader for hard money. Yet the West simultaneously nourished the political economy of Henry Clay. On the contest between these contrasting western visions hinged the

contours of national capitalist transformation – and whether this would be the Age of Jackson or of Clay.

We know where Charlie Sellers's sympathies lie in the struggle for western land between the subsistence-oriented settlers, who rallied to Jackson, and the enterprising engrossers, who embraced Clay. But we also know that the bifurcation between ordinary settlers and moneyed speculators was not always as sharp as Jacksonian rhetoric presumed. As Sellers acknowledges, a shared commitment to private property in land separated white westerners from Indians and "compromised rural resistance to capitalism and its culture." Thus, while rhetorical claims to a "homestead ethic," which posited that by occupancy and labor a man had the right to have and hold a family-size farm, collided with the money-making aspirations of grandees, the line between homesteading pioneer and speculative profiteer often blurred. As I've detailed for frontier Kentucky, the scale of real estate accumulations made by many occupant claimants showed that, when given the opportunity, subsistence-minded patriarchs, like better-capitalized gentlemen, were susceptible to unrestrained acquisitiveness in the pursuit of land.

This commitment to private property in land, I would argue, also contributed to the erosion of the customary common rights that were an integral component of subsistence culture. Because subsistence farmers cultivated and enclosed only a small fraction of their lands, the rest was viewed like unclaimed woods as a common on which all white inhabitants had certain rights - to cross at will, to range stock, to collect dead timber, to hunt game. An informal communal consensus limited private enjoyment of individuated property. Once again, though, traditions of usufruct "rights in the woods" faced challenges from alternative conceptions of exclusive private property rights. As in struggles over distribution of land, a combination of legislation, litigation, and sometimes extra-legal intimidation codified the privatization of natural resources. But if lawyers served as the "shock troops" for the more complete privatization and commodification of land, the erosion of traditional arrangements was not simply the result of nefarious legal manipulations. It was as well a product of the temptations that came with private ownership in land – and the seductive attractiveness of the market, especially for those who were not fully aware of the penalties that the market also imposed.

I should be careful not to silently substitute my views for Charlie's. If he concedes that the market tempted, he would (I anticipate) also warn against exaggerating its seductive pull or constructing an interpretation that blames the victims for the demise of subsistence culture. Indeed, his counter argument is clearly stated: "despite contradictions of patriarchy, racism, and fee-simple property" and in the face of market pressures backed by state power, rural folk across the West "rallied around the enduring human values of family, trust, cooperation, love, and [white male] equality."

Where I think recent scholarship would push Sellers harder to amend his interpretation of the Jacksonian Era is in the treatment of Indians and of lands further west. In addition to Sellers's *The Market Revolution*, 1991 also saw the publication of Richard White's *The Middle Ground*. Now, in its chronology, White's book is not directly relevant to the Jacksonian Era. Its focus is on the eighteenth century, and White

ends the book and what remains of “the middle ground” in 1815. Yet White’s book has had an enormous impact on how historians, of all eras, approach the study of frontiers.

The middle ground, as White delineated it, was at once a diplomatic alliance fashioned by French and Algonquian Indians around the Great Lakes. Born of mutual weakness and fortuitous misunderstandings, this political and economic arrangement involved as well a broader blurring of European and Indian ways. As his book detailed, the middle ground endured (if often tenuously) through much of the eighteenth century and extended (if often tentatively) around the Great Lakes and into the Ohio Valley.

The Middle Ground (by which I mean the book and the specific chronology and geography that it addresses) has given rise to middle grounds, as historians, following White, found (or claimed to find) similar intercultural compositions in other places at other times. Rather than a landscape dominated by Europeans, the “middle grounding” of early American history emphasized the power that native peoples exercised and their ability to compel accommodations from colonial intruders. This situation, Jeremy Adelman and I posited, most often emerged in the interior of the continent where the claims of European empires overlapped. In these borderlands during the eighteenth century, Indians successfully played imperial rivals off against one another, which allowed them to negotiate more favorable terms of trade and sustain more inclusive frontiers.

Beyond middle grounds, the latest western history has affirmed the existence and persistence of “native grounds,” zones where Europeans remained subordinated to Indians. Consider, for example, the conditions in what was nominally the Spanish province of Texas. There, as Juliana Barr has shown, Indians “dictated the rules and Europeans were the ones who had to accommodate, resist, and persevere.” The apotheosis of Indian power was the “Comanche Empire,” a designation that has as yet found its way onto few maps of colonial or nineteenth-century North America, but soon should, thanks to path-breaking books by Pekka Hämäläinen and Brian Delay. In giving his book that title, Hämäläinen challenged the convention that reserved empire-building to Europeans, at least north of Mexico. But as *The Comanche Empire* explicated, on the southern Plains “European imperialism not only stalled in the face of indigenous resistance, it was eclipsed by indigenous imperialism.” “Comancheria” continued to expand well into the nineteenth century. As Delay has detailed, the raiding of Comanches (as well as Kiowas, Apaches, and Navajos) nearly depopulated parts of northern Mexico, weakened the inhabitants’ attachment to the Mexican nation, and contributed to the loss of the territory to the United States.

Now I realize that much of what I’ve here described in terms of the development of Indian countries and of Indian-Euroamerican relations took place before the beginning of the Jacksonian Era and beyond the geographic focus of Sellers’s book. But if no longer so prevalent around the Great Lakes or the trans-Appalachian West after 1815, complex cultural blendings and political/economic accommodations continued to characterize relations between peoples across much of that part of the United States which lay beyond the Mississippi River.

That is certainly a lesson to be gained from Anne Hyde's recent book, *Empires, Nations, and Families*, which, as its subtitle proclaims, offers a "new history of the North American West" from 1800 to 1860. In place of the white male individuals who once dominated Turnerian interpretations of western American history, Hyde puts the spotlight on mixed-race families. In the fate of these men and women across a couple of generations, she explains how a region of nations was incorporated into a nation of regions. In narrating the transition from a region of nations (or a region where empires and nations were often distant entities that mattered less than familial connections) to a nation of regions when the American republic (or really the American empire) assumed increasing dominance over the country from the Mississippi to the Pacific, Hyde's book continues the remapping project that is at the heart of the latest western history.

First and foremost, *Empires, Nations, and Families* destroys the misconception, so common in early nineteenth-century maps, that the western half of the North American continent was a blank space, an unpeopled, unbordered, "virgin land" awaiting the arrival of westering Americans. As it turns out, though, the maps that typically adorn our textbooks are not much better than their historical antecedents when it comes to displaying the actual borders of North America. Current textbook maps almost always erase Indian countries and present instead maps that lay out the westward expansion of the United States by demarcating the Louisiana Purchase, the Mexican cession, and the Oregon settlement, over blank space. Lest students miss the manifestly destined character of these expansions, the boundaries of future states are conveniently included, along with the dates of their admission to the union. *Empires, Nations, and Families*, by contrast, makes clear that such maps were cartographic fantasies. Like earlier colonial maps that divvy up North America into Spanish, French, and British domains, those showing westward expansion through the Jacksonian Era mistake imperial projections for realities on the ground. Essentially what mapmakers in the service of national/imperial agents did was to erect walls in places where there were yet no true foundations – or at best very shaky ones. These projections, as Hyde's book demonstrates, failed to respect the claims of Indian peoples or to reflect the intricacies of interpersonal, intercultural, interimperial, and international relations. Even after various portions of western North America were supposedly incorporated into the United States, the national orientation of the inhabitants of these regions remained tentative and contested.

Sellers's *The Market Revolution*, you could say, sidesteps these issues. For Sellers, as I mentioned, "West" primarily refers to the lands between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. Historians have sometimes designated this region as the New West, which has prompted plenty of confusion from students in my western history courses who don't see this region as west at all and then wonder how the so called New West can be older than what came to be called the Old West, which came into the United States as a Far West, at least when set aside the First West -- that is the New West. Such confusing nomenclature begs for good maps.

And it doesn't include much about lands and peoples west of the Mississippi River. The "Louisiana Purchase" is dealt with on a couple of pages as a matter of

Franco-American diplomacy. The territory's Indian, European, and mixed inhabitants go unmentioned. American explorations across the territory are not charted; nor does the book make reference to "the Great American Desert," the denigrating designation by which many eastern Americans came to view the continent's western half. Oregon, California, and Texas enter only in the last chapter with the entrance of Americans and their pending takeover by the United States. New Mexico, the most populous colony, gets left out. The West, in other words, remains as much a blank space as it appeared on now discredited maps.

Would filling in the blank spaces change Sellers's interpretation of the Age of Jackson or our vision of the market revolution? Certainly, it would complicate our understanding of the place of Indians in that history. Seeing Indians as complex political and economic actors, and sometimes as empire builders in their own right, would challenge the distillation that they were just people of the land *par excellence*. Extending the geographic canvas would also complicate the ways in which we view the history of American expansion, which was so closely entwined with the political and economic struggles of the era.