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Progress and Culture along the Erie Canal

It is easy to envision *The Artificial River* becoming a staple of undergraduate survey courses. Although this is Carol Sheriff's first book (a revision of her Yale dissertation under the direction of William Cronon), her prose has a clarity and forthrightness more often found among journalists than historians (this truly is intended as a compliment). *The Artificial River* engages and energizes the contentious historiography of the market revolution, but historians haunt only the end notes, leaving the main text to the people of upstate New York. While her list of sources shows Sheriff to be a careful and accomplished scholar, she kindly and without condescension explains issues that would be unfamiliar to non-specialists. In short, *The Artificial River* is a rare treat: a book with great intellectual depth, but accessible to the general public.

Sheriff argues that the residents of the canal corridor (a strip of land twenty miles wide on each side of the Erie Canal and its tributaries) eagerly sought long-distance trade and the consumer goods that markets brought to their homes. The fact that people supported the Erie Canal at all "suggests that at least some had aspirations to engage in broader market exchange" (p. 11). But while craving fresh oysters and other luxuries, they worried about the social costs to their communities. This was the "paradox of progress": a desire for money and consumer goods coupled with an ambivalence toward the market processes that made their acquisition possible. "Yet, despite their disagreements and ambivalence," Sheriff writes, "upstate New Yorkers generally shared a commitment to the notion that humans could improve and perfect the world around them" (p. 8).

In the first chapter, "Visions of Progress," Sheriff describes the "culture of progress." She argues that the denizens of the canal corridor, unlike their parents and residents in other parts of the country, combined an "individualistic, or liberal" pursuit of wealth with a belief that "the goals of individuals should be subordinated to the common good, or the commonwealth" (p. 14). This ideology of "practical republicanism" eventually would become institutionalized in the Whig and Republican parties, and it formed the core of the culture of progress.

The next chapter, "The Triumph of Art over Nature," explores in greater detail the republican beliefs of upstate New Yorkers. Canal supporters saw the project as the product of a peculiarly *American* art (here Sheriff uses a nineteenth-century term for technology). "REPUBLICAN FREE MEN" built the canal, according to a capstone in Lockport, near Buffalo (p. 35). This said, western New Yorkers realized that most of the canal laborers bore no resemblance to republican free men. They were landless laborers with few prospects for advancement. Canal supporters consoled themselves that if the laborers were something of a permanent lower class, at least they were geographically mobile (they moved on when the construction did). Rather than try to incorporate the canal workers into their vision of republicanism, they studiously ignored them and hoped that they would keep moving so their degraded status would not taint any one locale. But whom to praise, if not the men digging the mud and hauling the stone? Through some neat rhetorical legerdemain, the canal's sponsors lauded the politicians and officials for their vision and persistence; skilled craftsmen praised themselves and their workmanship; and "Laborers, meanwhile, gave a quick hurrah before moving on to another public works project" (p. 51).

Sheriff then discusses how New Yorkers and tourists conceived of the canal as part of the natural landscape. Transcendentalists such as Nathaniel Hawthorne

mourned the ugliness of Clinton's Ditch, and the devastation its construction had wrought. Few residents of upstate New York cherished such sensibilities. They praised the canal as progress embodied, a genuine "improvement" on the landscape. Sheriff argues that the canal juxtaposed the sublimity of nature with the ingenuity of man, reaffirming the belief "that it was not necessary to choose between material progress and a godly society" (p. 62). When western New Yorkers did complain about the canal, they groused about low bridges, not fewer muskrats. They were angered not by graveyards of rotting trees, but by circumstances that hindered them from exploiting to the fullest the canal's economic promise.

The next two chapters, "The Politics of Land and Water" and "The Politics of Business" draw on the papers of the Canal Board, a state-appointed committee that oversaw the canal and heard grievances about its governance. Petitioners couched most of their appeals in rather republican terms, trying to show how the course of action they urged would serve the common good. But if claimants used a republican vocabulary, the meanings of the words had changed. Sheriff explains: "People still spoke of their republican rights, and they still lauded the common good or public interest. But to many of them, republicanism had come to mean 'fairness"' (p. 100). They agreed that the state had a right to promote the common good, but demanded that it compensate those inured during the process.

By the late 1830s, however, New Yorkers were taking the Erie Canal for granted and seem to have assumed that it, like a natural river, was immutable, unchanging. They had invested time and money on the assumption that the canal always would follow the same course, considering themselves in an informal contract with the state to that effect. Rights, not fairness, became the issue. When the Canal Board considered changing the route of the waterway or the locations of important facilities, petitioners quickly reminded the state of its "obligations," and how violating those promises would betray the public trust. By the 1840s, businessmen expected that the state would help shield them from declines in the economy. In return for this assurance, they acknowledged at least a theoretical responsibility to pursue ventures that served the common good. If businessmen did not always support the common good in their commercial practices, their sense of public duty found other outlets–in the widespread reform impulse of the Burned-Over District.

The presence of an estimated thirty thousand canal workers provided the businessmen with a loud, profane reminder on the need for reform. Missionaries reminded the middle class that "religious, social, and commercial progress" could not be separated (p. 151). They warned the businessmen that unless that wanted responsibility for a depraved republic and a delayed millennium, they had best support Sabbatarianism and the Bethel Society (an organization pledged to the moral reformation of canal workers). The middle class had a glittering dream of commercial progress, but the nightmare of European class conflict was settling like a shadow over the whole canal corridor. Reform, Sheriff argues, was the middle class' way to "direct the market revolution away from the nightmare and toward the dream" (p. 167).

Although *The Artificial River* deals with a range of issues, including religion, reform and the environment, it most clearly addresses the historiography on the market revolution. The debate over the spread of capitalism through America has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention for the past twenty years. Although there is substantial disagreement over terminology,[1] the crux of the issue is this: when did America become a capitalist society in thought and deed? Some of the earlier work in this area argued that many communities during the nineteenth century adhered to a pre-capitalist or use-value economic system. That is, they did not regard goods and labor as commodities to be sold with a market-set cash value, but as items to be exchanged based on traditional reciprocal relationships. Other historians see the American Revolution as unleashing the spirit of capitalism in the new nation, incorporating most of the nation into the market economy during the 1790s. Another group of scholars has argued that Americans may have embraced long-distance exchange for a variety of reasons, not necessarily capitalist or pre-capitalist.[2] Sheriff places herself in that last school, arguing in an end note: "most residents of what would become the canal corridor eagerly turned to market exchange in order to make their daily lives more comfortable and to provide economic opportunities for their children. Yet…many farmers and even a number of merchants publicly criticized the notion of allowing individuals to profit at someone else's expense" (p. 183).

By classifying herself in such a way, however, Sheriff does not give her work the full credit it is due. The intellectual heart of the book is her description of what she calls the "culture of progress," and with its presentation, she transcends the tired debates over the market revolution and begins exploring the early culture (or cultures) of capitalism. Unlike the historians of the moral economy school, Sheriff does not try to explain away people's market activity. Instead, she shows how participation

in long-distance markets was just one part of a cohesive world view that centered around a belief in mankind's progress. Sheriff's chapters initially seem somewhat disconnected for this very reason–she ranges over several ostensibly unrelated topics, only to show by the end of the book how they all fall together.

Americans, Sheriff argues, saw the Erie Canal as a true internal improvement–something that increased the financial value of the landscape and transformed it into "something better...in a moral or social sense" (p. 25). The culture of progress emphasized monetary gain, but recognized other areas of improvement as no less important. Here lay the root of the republican concerns over the canal workers. If the laborers were doomed to manual work, unable to advance into less degraded occupations, then this situation undercut the popular faith that self-improvement was open to everyone. This is why the laborers had to disappear from the rhetorical landscape of the canal. By emphasizing how the canal blended into and improved the natural landscape, travelers also restated their faith that material progress (the canal) was compatible with moral advancement (the sublime in nature). The culture of progress could be a demanding taskmaster. It not only required that people strive for financial advancement, but it also demanded that the community benefit from individuals' quest for profit. The result was the persistence of the rhetoric of the common good in appeals to the Canal Board, and in the efforts of the businessmen to reform the canallers.

Authors such as Paul Johnson and Charles Sellers[3] have linked the market revolution to religion and reform, but their works focus on reform as a means of controlling the working class. Persuasive as their arguments might be for *some* of the budding capitalists in this time period, such motives surely did not lurk behind the philanthropy and religious beliefs of *all* businessmen. Sheriff takes a more sensible approach. Certainly, she argues, landowners and businessmen scrambled for wealth, and were not above duping the state into subsidizing their efforts. But, as the rhetoric of the common good shows, their actions had great psychological costs in a nation just one generation removed from the Revolution. Evangelical religion and reform movements resonated with people in the canal corridor because they helped pay those costs, and because they helped reconcile material improvement with moral progress.[4]

This is a formidable argument, especially when Sheriff links businessmen's participation in the Bethel Society to the culture of progress. Less persuasive is her claim that residents of the canal corridor still believed, even to a small extent, in a moral economy, and that a longing for it was part of the culture of progress. It seems that Sheriff hopes to find the moral economy *someplace* in the canal corridor, but she herself admits that all the talk about the "common good" could be rather self-serving. She writes how the rhetoric in petitions to the Canal Board oftentimes was little more than "a moral justification for pushing their commercial benefit at someone else's expense" (p. 134). When discussing conflicts over changes in the canal route, she notes, "Although most upstate businessmen would acknowledge that the state could change the Canal route for 'good and substantial reasons,' petitioners invariably failed to recognize the presence of such good reasons in case where their business investments depended on the waterway's original route" (p. 125). Even farmers, she writes, "adopted the language of the 'common good' in their appeals to the state, but they saw that good as being intimately connected with their own property investments" (p. 102).

Sheriff bolsters her argument for a vestigial moral economy by describing anti-commercial feelings among landowners. The evidence for this, however, is somewhat contradictory. In one case, the Lansing family grew indignant when the Canal Board assumed that the opportunity to establish a tavern would compensate it for land and trees lost to canal expansion. Levinus and Abraham Lansing wrote a scathing letter, declaring, "it seems a libel upon the character of the State to say that a tipling shop is such a benefit to an individual or to a community that the State ought to compel persons to resort to the establishment of such places of immorality & vice to get pay for the land taken from them for the use of the public" (p. 106). Yet, the Lansings' feelings against taverns cannot be construed as an anti-commercial bias, for as Abraham Lansing explained to the Canal Board, his brother Levinus grew "trees for the purpose of selling the fruit they yield him and not merely for his private use" (p. 97). In another letter, a farmer begged for relief from a neighbor who refused him access to a bridge across the canal, with the goal of forcing him to sell his property at a reduced price (p. 96). Given that businessmen clearly had no monopoly on sharp practices, it seems that landowners complained not so much about commerce, but about situations in which commerce did not benefit them.

How, then, can we explain the petitioners' constant recourse to the rhetoric of the moral economy if they did not believe in it themselves? Certainly, one need not long for a moral economy to use the rhetoric of the common good. In modern America, not many people demand favors of the government *purely* on the basis of self-interest. To do so, even in today's capitalist economy,

would doom one's efforts to failure. When corporations ask for tax breaks, they do not claim that their shareholders deserve the additional income. Instead, they emphasize the benefits that will accrue to the community thanks to the new jobs that the bargain would make possible. Perhaps the petitioners' rhetoric was not indicative of the their beliefs at all, but rather the product of a political lexicon that had not yet changed to accommodate the new market conditions (and remains remarkably resilient to this day)? The rhetoric of republicanism was alive and well in antebellum America, even though, as Sheriff indicates, its meaning had changed. People were familiar with the words and imagery of republicanism and the moral economy, so it is only logical that they would use the materials they had at hand to justify claims in the relatively new environment of long-distance exchange. Sheriff testifies that few people actually practiced the moral economy that they preached. Rather than ascribe mass hypocrisy or secret longings to the people of the canal corridor, and force on them beliefs that they did not seem to take to heart, perhaps we should consider that they had not yet developed a way to say what they meant.

If Sheriff has indeed exaggerated the extent that canal supporters longed for the moral economy while practicing capitalism, this does little to damage the core of her argument for the culture of progress. A more serious concern is the vagueness that surrounds her subjects, the people of the canal corridor. Sheriff divides these people into two general groups: landowners and businessmen. Sensibly, she does not try to establish rigid boundaries between the two groups, for merchants could own land and farmers could keep taverns. Nevertheless, it seems as though some sort of clarification is necessary, especially in the case of the Bethel Society. A crucial question is who supported the Society? Sheriff indicates that some commercial men donated time and money, but where did the rest of the membership come from? Did farm families support the organization? Is there any correlation between membership and proximity to the canal? It would be relatively easy for people living fifteen miles from the canal to forget about the workers plying its waters. If farmers living a distance from the canal did not support worker reforms, could they still be said to adhere to the culture of progress? This is admittedly difficult research to conduct, as it involves cross-indexing memberships lists and manuscript sources with city directories, tax valuations, and census data. Such an examination may have been beyond the scope of this project, but if the culture of progress is to fulfill its promise as an explanatory concept, historians will need to uncover more information on its adherents.

Another serious concern is the seeming inevitability of the culture of progress. Sheriff links it to the Whig and Republican parties and states that it was the wave of the future. The ultimate success of the culture of progress cannot be denied, but evidence from Sheriff's work and that of other scholars suggests that as late as the 1830s and 1840s, its future was not so certain. Donald H. Parkerson has argued that people migrated to the canal corridor to take advantage of market opportunities, and that people migrated *away* from the area in order to avoid such entanglements (p. 5). Between the distinctive culture of the canallers and the beliefs of those who voted against the culture of progress with their feet (by moving out of the corridor), the ultimate supremacy of the culture of progress might have been much less assured than Sheriff allows. This does not so much change Sheriff's thesis as refine it. The book would be richer and more textured if readers had some feel for how adherents defended the culture of progress from the unconverted. It seems that the Bethel Society would be one such effort, but there could have been others. Were there any efforts to persuade people who truly practiced a moral economy? If so, what shape did they take, and how successful were they?

The Artificial River also would have benefited from a fuller discussion of how the law applied to the Erie Canal. As Theodore Steinberg has shown in *Nature Incorporated*,[6] legal documents can tell us much about the ways people thought about the environment in general and waterways in particular. Sheriff notes that people called the canal an artificial river, and differentiated it from the sublime waters of true nature. As time passed, however, she notes that landowners began to take the canal for granted; they seemed to regard it more like a true river. Changes in riparian law were occurring in New England during this time period as the owners of the Lowell mills consolidated their control over the Merrimack River, their source of water power. It would be interesting to see how the law regarded the canal–as a man-made object, as a natural one, or as something in-between–and if the canal changed in the eyes of the law during the time period Sheriff examines. This legal data might serve as a useful baseline, allowing scholars to link the ideas in upstate New York to those in other parts of the country. It also might help in establishing a clearer chronology for the development of the culture of progress.

These caveats and questions, however, do not seriously undermine Sheriff's accomplishment. The culture

of progress is a brilliant concept that synthesizes the best of the current literature on the market revolution, but strikes its own path where the historiography has failed to help us understand people's reactions to the expansion of capitalism. The notion of the culture of progress deserves further refinement and research, but this is the case with any exciting new idea. Like its namesake, *The Artificial River* is a resounding success. It leads us into new landscapes, and it is certain to inspire other projects to investigate the cultures of the marketplace in antebellum America.

Notes:

[1]. See, for example, Michael Merrill, "Putting Capitalism in Its Place: A Review of the Recent Literature," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52:2 (April 1995), 315-326.

[2]. For two excellent overviews of this literature, albeit from different interpretive perspectives, see Merrill, "Putting Capitalism in Its Place" and Gordon Wood, "Inventing American Capitalism," *New York Review of Books*, 9 June 1994, 44-49.

[3]. Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979); Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[4]. Mary Ryan also has argued for Oneida County, New York, that reform and evangelical religion had little to do with social control. Ryan, however, sees changes in the family and gender roles driving these movements. See Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[5]. Donald H. Parkerson, *The Agricultural Transition in New York State: Markets and Migration in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America*, (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995).

[6]. Theodore Steinberg, *Nature Incorporated: Industrialization and the Waters of New England*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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