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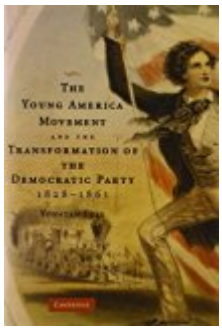
Yonatan Eyal. *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xii + 252 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-87564-6.



Reviewed by Padraig Riley

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Yonatan Eyal has written a smart and subtly provocative new book on the political ideology, aims, and long-term effects of the Young America movement in the Democratic Party. His study should prove both useful and challenging for specialists in antebellum political history and the history of the Democratic Party. But in the end, this book, much like the ideology it documents, provokes more often than it persuades. Eyal will no doubt cause many historians to rethink the political history of the antebellum Democracy, but many readers, like this one, will also likely dissent from Eyal's sympathetic portrayal of the Young America movement.

A history of the political side of Young America, as Eyal notes, is long overdue. While many historians have studied the literary renaissance associated with the Young America label, far less attention has been paid to pivotal Democratic politicians and editors who articulated a new nationalism and a new political vision in the decades before the Civil War. Eyal rectifies this in a series of thematic chapters that explain how Young America Democrats, whom he terms "New Democrats," attempted to transform the ideology and objectives of the Jacksonian Democratic Party. In his study we find some familiar characters, such as Stephen Douglas and John O'Sullivan, recast in terms of the political worldview of Young America, as well as less-studied figures ranging from August Belmont to Robert F. Stockton to William Allen to George Sanders, O'Sullivan's successor at Young America's mouthpiece, the *Democratic Review*. Eyal has read deeply in the manuscript collections of these figures, which are the most important sources for his account.

The political side of Young America has been understudied, as Eyal notes, in part because of it its relative lack of unity. The New Democrats of the 1840s, Eyal explains, should not be seen "as a formal movement, a congressional voting bloc, or even as one intellectual circle ... the mobilization discussed in this book was far more ephemeral, inconsistent, and fleeting" (p. 10). Eyal's New Democrats did not even share the collective name of "Young America," or any collective name, for that matter. They disagreed on some policy issues while agreeing on others. In the end, they were

bound together by an often bombastic sense of their own relative youth and modernity, a "generational self-consciousness" that frequently left them bristling at party elders (p. 9). According to Eyal, this youthful rebellion had considerable substance: New Democrats broke with party orthodoxy in their international orientation, their relative openness to the capitalist marketplace, their support for economic development and a federal role in internal improvements, and their moderate antislavery position.

Eyal's arguments are at their strongest and most persuasive when it comes to economic development and internal improvements. He builds a good case that Young America Democrats supported both capitalist expansion and a greater role for the federal government in facilitating economic growth. Most famous in this regard would be Stephen Douglas, and his ambitions for a national railroad, but other Young America Democrats were equally ambitious, and equally willing to trump their party's commitment to strict construction. John Wentworth backed Douglas's dream of a national railroad, while John O'Sullivan argued for federal support for a canal across Panama. These schemes, Eyal contends, were part of a wider shift in Democratic orientation to the capitalist market. New Democrats, he argues, developed a "progressive market ideology," driven primarily by pressure from their constituents, who desired more goods and services and wanted the federal government to help provide them. For Eyal, significantly, this broader market orientation and relative acceptance of the fruits of capitalism is central to the New Democrats' wider reformist agenda. Eyal sees the New Democratic orientation to Europe, for example, as driven not only by sympathy for the revolutions of 1848, but also for the Anti-Corn Law League and the expansion of free trade. His arguments here should challenge scholars who tend to view antebellum Democratic reform as primarily rooted in suspicion of the market and capitalist institutions.

For Eyal, Young America's new orientation to the market is part of a wider break with what he terms "orthodox Jacksonianism," a political culture dominated by strict construction, anti-market fears, support for slavery, and domestic insularity. Eyal's portrait of orthodox Jacksonianism helps place Young America in relief, but in many respects it seems too stereotypical. As Eyal notes, for example, Young America's support for internal improvements was very similar to the sentiments of National Republicans after the War of 1812, who argued for pro-development policies from within the Jeffersonian coalition. While many National Republicans went on to become Whigs, I am not entirely convinced that they left the Jeffersonian-Jacksonian tradition bereft of support for economic growth through federal power until the days of Young America. Rather than such a stark opposition between "orthodox Jacksonianism" and Eyal's New Democrats, I wonder if it might be better to see Young America as a moment in a much longer argument within the Democratic-Republican and Democratic parties.

Eyal's analytic paradigm, in which Young America consistently revolts against Jacksonian orthodoxy, is even more dubious in the case of foreign policy. In place of Jacksonian insularity, he argues, Young Americans pursued an aggressive foreign policy, supporting democratic uprisings in Europe and democratic expansion at home. But it seems a misnomer to describe Jacksonianism, with its deep roots in the expansion of the early republic and the conquest of Native American tribes, as "insular." I am also skeptical of classing the Mexican-American War as part of "A New International Consciousness," rather than an outgrowth of a long previous history of violent conquest and a diplomatic agenda focused on territorial expansion. In their support for democracy in Europe and conquest in the West, Young America seems to express less a novel "cosmopolitan per-

spective" than a traditional theme in Democratic-Republican and Democratic political ideology.

Similar problems attend Eyal's arguments about Young America and antislavery. Here too, he contends, Young America broke with the Jacksonian past, and adopted a moderate antislavery stance. Building on work by Jonathan Earle and others, Eyal argues for a "strong antislavery tradition" (p. 194) among antebellum Democrats.[1] From the beginning, however, his argument is on unstable ground. Since much of the antislavery agitation in the Democratic Party came in reaction to the ascendancy of the Young American James Polk and his prosecution of the Mexican-American War, it would seem opposed to important strains of the New Democracy. Moreover, as Earle has argued persuasively, Democratic antislavery often took root among constituencies far less open to the capitalist market--and thus far different from the New Democratic constituencies and politicians Eyal argues for early on. Eyal acknowledges this contradiction, but he does not sufficiently explain it (see p. 186). Many of his examples of Young Americans opposed to slavery, moreover, are less than convincing. O'Sullivan did at times oppose slavery in the abstract, but among his antislavery beliefs was the hope that Texas annexation would lead to the diffusion of slavery--an old and, by the 1840s, fundamentally untenable Jeffersonian fantasy. During the Civil War, he and quite a few other Young Americans sided with the Confederacy (p. 200). The case Eyal makes for Stephen Douglas is equally unpersuasive: "Popular sovereignty," he argues, "symbolized a weakening of old Democrats' proslavery rigidity" (p. 194). This may have been true from the perspective of some Southern fire-eaters, but the numerous antislavery Democrats who vilified Douglas for the Kansas-Nebraska Act would disagree with Eyal here.

In his final chapter, Eyal argues that Young America had a "healthy and unifying" effect on the Democratic Party, and suggests that their romantic nationalism forestalled political disintegration in the 1840s and the early 1850s (pp. 219-220). But they were limited by sectional controversy, which was exacerbated by their own nationalist ambitions. Following Michael Holt, Eyal argues that Young America's move toward Whig-like economic policies diminished partisan difference, thus destabilizing the Second Party System. But he believes that New Democrats "left behind valuable precedents" for the future of their party and their country (p. 235). In terms of economic development and federal power, this contention seems plausible, though I expect that many scholars more attached to the Jacksonian egalitarian tradition will object to such an argument. From the perspective of the post-Reconstruction South and late nineteenth-century imperialism, the value of Young America's precedents is far harder to discern.

Eyal is clearly part of a recent scholarly trend that seeks to restore a more positive and complex portrait of the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian tradition. Antebellum Democrats, says Eyal, were "progressive and forward-looking," rather than simply "racists and imperialists" (p. 12). In the case of economic policy, internal improvements, and political reform, Eyal supports this claim fairly well, and in a manner that should cause some important debate among historians. But when it comes to the issues of expansion and slavery, he is both overly sympathetic to his characters and frequently unpersuasive. In portraying the Young Americans in an optimistic light, Eyal pays too little attention to what often seems their callous disregard for those who bore the brunt of western expansion and American slavery. In this respect too, Young Americans might be described as forward-looking, but the future that they anticipated provides little ground for retrospective sympathy or appreciation.

Note

[1]. Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and The Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel

Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Sean Wilentz, "Slavery, Antislavery, and Jacksonian Democracy," in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800"1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 202"223; Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005); and Daniel Feller, "A Brother in Arms: Benjamin Tappan and the Antislavery Democracy," *Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (June 2001): 48-74.