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J. M. Opal. *Beyond the Farm: National Ambitions in Rural New England.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 280 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4062-7.

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Making Self-Made Men

Rural Americans in the early republic discovered that they were capable of being much more than what their fathers had been. This assumption, that hard work–what was then called enterprise and self-improvement–could make one better than one's original lot, was a fundamental change in how young rural American men thought about their own identities and lives. It required, first, recognizing that change was good, and that one could and even should reject one's family's longstanding practices. The second, central to J. M. Opal's argument in this insightful, well-written book, was ambition–the fostering of a desire to improve one's self, to better one's own lot in life.

Opal frames his study around the lives of six young rural New England men who grew up in relative obscurity but were transformed by the emergence of a new American nation committed to encouraging their ambition by providing them new opportunities to improve themselves. As they left home to try new things in new places, they also became more cosmopolitan, more aware of what life might offer a young man on the make outside the provincial farm and town where he had grown up. Moreover, as they moved from town to city and as they gained education in the young republic's new academies, they experienced tension between the expectations of their parents and the community in which they were raised and the new opportunities and possibilities before them. What kind of man ought one to be in this new nation?

Opal helps us understand the nuanced, tension-fraught, and uncertain ways in which ordinary people negotiated major changes in society and in their own lives. His biographical approach illuminates how large abstract trends identified by other historians–modernization, democratization, the market and industrial revolutions, the transportation revolution, the spread of consumer culture and its embodiment in the ideal of refinement, and domesticity–all intersected with a new nationalism that sought to transform parochial, isolated individuals into citizens of a nation committed to progress. As young men following the Revolution were self-consciously encouraged to participate in national public life, their entire self-conception changed–what they had taken for granted now seemed backward and limited. New horizons were opened up that enabled them to enter, participate in, and further all the major trends listed above.

Gordon S. Wood has traced the broad contours of these changes. In his *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991), Wood explains how a relatively traditional colonial society became, by the 1830s, an individualistic, egalitarian, free market society in which ordinary people were urged to pursue their own interests. Alexis de Tocqueville observed this transformation in American life in *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840). Set loose from the moorings that had once held people in place in a vertically organized society, democracy–as an idea and an experience–liberated people from inherited positions. It also sundered the chains that had once held society together, connecting peasants to nobles, nobles to the king, and the king to God. More recently, Charles Taylor in *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004) argues that modernity itself depends on the disruptions Tocqueville witnessed and Wood articulated. People long assumed that the social order and their place within it were eternal, but now it could be changed. They also assumed that the social order was natural and divine, but now we see it as a product of human artifice. This transformation in Americans' understanding of the social order allowed young men, like those Opal follows, to leave their farms to find their own fortune.

But how did this happen? It took not just the democratic revolution in ideas about individuals and society but the market revolution as well. And here, Opal provides a new perspective on how and why rural Americans embraced market behavior following the American

Revolution. Modifying Christopher Clark's argument, in *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (1990), that eighteenth-century rural Americans sought to sustain independent households, Opal argues that intellectual changes connected with the formation of the new republic–a national government that created a new social imaginary–preceded the material forces that Clark and others have invoked to explain the market revolution. In other words, ideas about personal economic behavior shifted before economic realities made it necessary to do so.[1]

But what were these ideas and where did they come from? One of the ongoing debates concerning America's embrace of capitalism has to do with who is to blame or, depending on one's persuasion, thank. For many historians, there are clear villains (or heroes)–elites who had the most to gain and imposed their monetary policy, corporations, and industrial labor systems on an unwilling, hesitant population. Others respond that, whatever one may wish to say, ordinary Americans embraced what markets made available. They enjoyed the opportunity to sell more surplus in return for consuming more goods and gaining access to the refinement that had once been reserved for elites. Even if many Americans resisted the specific economic policies of the Federalist and later Whig elite, they were thrilled by the freedoms and opportunities that free markets made available–in other words, they fought over specifics but not over capitalism and markets themselves. Clark provided a middle ground, an exploration of how and why household heads, in their effort to sustain their family's traditional independence, their "competence," slowly embraced more market activities as economic conditions made doing so necessary. The result was a gradual transformation in economic practices that, over several decades, undermined the economic foundations for the traditional New England household economy.[2]

Opal disagrees. Following ratification of the Constitution, Opal writes, "came a widespread effort to uproot households and communities from their provincial identities and align them with national judgments of self and success, value and virtue, public need and personal worth." This was a "discernable project" undertaken by cosmopolitan national elites who envisioned a great republic that could rival Europe (p. ix). This project required inculcating ambition in the rising generation, a generation that assumed that it would inherit its place in society rather than make it. Opal's key point is that economic necessity initially did not spur young men to embrace market behavior. Rather, it had to do with new ideas that connected economic improvement, both collective and individual, to the new nation: "Before it became a casualty of the market and industrial economy … the independent home was the target of a cultural endeavor. Ambition had emerged in the United States as a personal and national ideal before it evolved into a social necessity" (p. 180).

Opal notes that ambition was long understood as both a threat and a benefit. Since classical times, ambition could endanger society–as Julius Caesar did–but it could also spur heroic acts for the public good. America's enlightened founding fathers hoped not just to inculcate ambition in America's youth but to channel it to serve the public good. They did not do so by employing Bernard Mandeville's method, letting private vices free in the faith that ultimately they would serve the common good. Instead, they hoped that ambitious young men would connect their efforts to improve their own lot in life to serving the republic. Progress depended on improving the republic's economic, social, and intellectual life, and this required striving individuals who would seek to move beyond their condition. In essence, national elites urged Americans to improve themselves as an act of patriotism, and to be careful that as they embraced new careers, they consciously connected their own actions to the larger public good. An ambitious young man must not only make himself but also must earn a reputation as a public servant.

Opal's book offers a new twist on the Progressive interpretation of the founding. While Opal's nationalist elites–the Hamiltonians and their ilk–are now no longer serving their base economic interests as Charles Beard (*An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* [1913]) and more recently Woody Holton (*Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* [2007]) argue, they are still imposing a new conception of social and economic life on rural people to further their own goals. Opal argues that the broad changes in young men's lives that he chronicles are due to elites' power to effect cultural change or, if one was a bit more skeptical, their hegemony. By imposing new ideas on unsuspecting young men, by taking them out of their homes and into a larger, national life in which they could make themselves wealthy and famous, America's national elite fundamentally transformed the relationship between self and society, consciously bringing traditional men into modernity. Opal's founders are the modernizers, the ones who used the new Constitution to replace traditional, collective values with modern, liberal, individualistic ones.

Opal helps us understand why a new national social imaginary, premised on the ambitious, striving be-

havior of young men, replaced the traditional household embedded in local, relatively isolated communities. But his conclusion reveals the real lesson he takes from his research. The founders authorized a selfish society in which individuals sought to better themselves. By the antebellum era, Americans celebrated the "self-made man," forgetting that the self-made man was initially a collective project, and that the selves they made connected fame and fortune to public service. The men Opal studies would have been lost in the selfish, individualistic capitalist society that the American founders inadvertently had created, because they, like the founders, believed that one's reputation was still premised in service. As Opal writes, the men he studied "had all left home and found society, left family and discovered themselves.... But no matter how amazed they were at their own passage, they could never have guessed that the nation they reflected would reinvent them once again, as 'self-made' men within a society to which they owed nothing" (p. 178).

Yet Opal is on to something. His neo-Progressive subtext is transcended by his discussion of how new ideas affected the lives of the six young men he studies. What he calls ambition is, in fact, the basis of American liberalism and its liberating spirit. Opal's case studies, thus, reinforce recent work by Joyce O. Appleby (*Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* [2000]) and Daniel Walker Howe (*Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* [1997]) about how and why Americans learned to engage in self-making, and whether this process was democratic or whether, as historians inspired by Michel Foucault argue, liberalism is nothing more than a new form of socially imposed discipline on unsuspecting people.[3] Opal helps us see that the combined democratic and market revolutions helped create a new conception of the self, of personhood, that cannot be captured by the Foucauldian perspective. Instead, we must recognize the ways in which the revolutions that transformed the early American republic enabled ordinary people to learn about their innate dignity and inner potential.

More important, Opal argues that it was the national state that helped liberate people from what Thomas Jefferson described as the "the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves."[4] National elites had to pry open households to gain access to their sons, and to teach their sons that they were not obliged to follow in their fathers' and grandfathers' footsteps but could instead use their unique talents–their genius–to engage in self-making. Nationalism, national greatness, and individual freedom reinforced each other under the rubric of ambition.

No institution was more important than the academy. In Opal's best chapter, he demonstrates how the national elites' goals for the new republic spurred the proliferation of private academies around New England. These academies were often met with hostility by local communities who saw in them both a cosmopolitan challenge to their traditional values and a threat to each household's dependence on their children's labor. But to the teachers who opened the academies and the young men who forced, often after much disagreement, their parents to let them attend, the academies brought new ideas about the world. They made their graduates feel that they were destined for better things than the farm. At times, they, like many who leave home, looked back to their upbringing with disdain. But the academies also provided opportunities for young men to develop their talents and discover their potential. The academies prove that the liberal self was a social project, one that offered exciting new opportunities for self-making to young men following the Revolution. In Opal's assessment, which is reinforced by Mary Kelley's *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (2006) about the transformative effect of liberal education for young women, the "school became a crucial vehicle of cultural and personal change, an institutional base for new ways of thinking and aspiring" (p. 97).

Democratic ambition rejected the classical fear that ambitious elites would threaten society. Instead, it redefined ambition as a healthy spur to self-improvement for all citizens. If today that drive has led to a materialistic, shallow, overly individualistic society, we cannot forget that in the period between the American Revolution and the Civil War it also liberated the human spirit. Let us thank Opal, therefore, for historicizing ambition and its public spiritedness in the past and hope with him that if ambition "worked differently in the past it might do so in the future" (p. 192).

Notes

[1]. Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) makes a similar argument about the important role of ideas in laying a foundation for economic change.

[2]. For discussions of the market revolution, among many sources, see "The Transition to Capitalism: A Panel Discussion," *The History Teacher* 27 (1994): 264-288; Michael Merrill, "Putting 'Capitalism' in Its Place: A Review of Recent Literature," *William and Mary Quarterly* 52 (April 1995): 315-326; and Gordon S. Wood, "The En-

emy is Us: Democratic Capitalism in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (Summer 1996): 293-308.

[3]. Compare Appleby's and Howe's studies to Michael Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue: Punishment, Revolution, and Authority in Philadelphia, 1760-1835* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[4]. Thomas Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1516-1517.

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