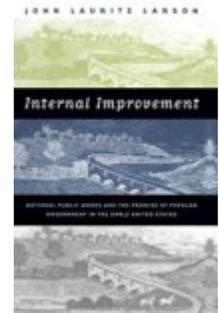


John Lauritz Larson. *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xv + 324 pp. \$55.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-2595-2.



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Railroading Republicanism

The political and ideological power of the free market seems widely triumphant in the early twenty-first century. With the goals and methods of New Deal and Great Society bureaucrats in apparent disgrace, power-suited counselors with Adam Smith neckties insist on market-oriented public policies from every television news show, every economics department, and every corner of Washington and the state capitals. Cold War obstructions swept away, world policymakers draw on American success with liberal capitalism to extend the grasp of the hidden hand across the globe, from Poland to Chile to South Africa and beyond. While holding on (for better or worse) in a few eccentric corners like France and China, deliberate government management of advanced societies is in retreat, frequently at the demand of American experts and officeholders, or those who seek to copy their example.

What better time to ask how this novel situation came to be, starting in the United States, where liberal capitalism has virtually the status of a state religion? Consensus historians like Louis

Hartz and Richard Hofstadter held that America was "born free." In Hofstadter's words, "the sanctity of private property, the right of the individual to dispose of and invest it, the value of opportunity, and the natural evolution of self-interest and self-assertion, within broad legal limits, into a beneficent social order have been staple tenets of the central faith in American political ideologies." [1] Sharply attacked for their blindness to dissident and alternative voices in American history, the consensus historians also overlooked the powerful commonwealth or republican tradition in American thinking. Lacking a modern obsession with individual rights and the uninhibited marketplace, we now realize that the republic's founders mixed their liberalism with corporatist visions of a unitary good, and trusted that a wise and benevolent government of disinterested gentlemen, guided but not ruled by the popular voice, could easily recognize and embrace it. [2]

Rediscovery of the republican vision has greatly improved our understanding of the founding era, but it has made the "transition to liberalism" a hotly debated theme in early republican

history. While Gordon Wood confidently placed the end of classical republican thinking at the end of the Federal convention of 1787, Lance Banning found republicanism at the root of Jeffersonian thinking, others detect it among Whigs and Jacksonians, and J.G.A. Pocock observes republican instincts at the base of all American political culture.[3] Though historians will continue to differ over the details, it does appear that classical, free-market liberalism gained a serious advantage over American republican thinking before the Civil War that it has rarely surrendered ever since.

How did this come to be? As Larson puts it, (p. 263) when "it became clear and unavoidable that some kind of system would be imposed upon a national transportation railroad, how was it that a man like Jay Gould-and not George Washington- stood in line to be the architect of that system, finally to impose design?" More broadly, if Americans were not programmed from birth to prefer private over public power, how did they become so? In its largest terms, this is the question that John Lauritz Larson raises in *Internal Improvement*, his passionate but painstaking analysis of governance and public works in early republican America.

Larson focuses on "internal improvements," the eighteenth and nineteenth century term for public works such as turnpikes, lighthouses, canals, and ultimately railroads, built at public expense and intended to facilitate transportation and commerce for the common benefit of the whole community. He reminds us that the Founders widely supported such projects, and freely assumed that the new federal government, not private investors, should take the lead in constructing them. This agreement even extended to Thomas Jefferson and John C. Calhoun, subsequent icons of states rights and limited government. Its most representative figure was George Washington himself, a forthright spokesman for "energetic government" that would use trans-

portation projects to break thorough the Appalachian wall, open and civilize the West, build up the Union, expand commerce, and silence the detractors of popular self-government.

Visionaries like Washington and Albert Gallatin hoped to accomplish these goals by using the new federal government to plan and construct a national transportation system. Prepared to leave purely local projects to states and private interests, improvers believed that the federal government alone had the superior wisdom, detachment, and dedication-in short, the civic virtue-to determine where major national projects like a route over the mountains, an Atlantic inland waterway, or a road from New England to New Orleans should go. Likewise, no other American entity could command the resources to execute such mammoth projects.

Long before nitpicking Old Republicans began to question the constitutionality of such ambitions, Larson explains that the improvers' visions began to founder on the principle of republican equality. The physical immobility of internal improvements made it impossible to benefit every citizen in every region, equally and all at once. And in the worldview that ordinary Americans had inherited from the Revolution, unequal treatment of republican citizens could only be explained as "corruption," so discussion of specific routes and methods invariably dissolved into accusations of immorality and bad faith between incorrigibly suspicious regions seemingly incapable of lining up and waiting their turns.

To make matters worse, the virtue of the most disinterested leaders tended to wobble in the crunch, as even George Washington allowed his personal preferences, to say nothing of his financial interests, to lead him to advocate a Potomac canal to the Ohio and a national capital just down the river from Mount Vernon. Other improvers were even more vulnerable to the pull of self-interest and bitterly disputed the improvement of rivers that flowed to their rivals' ports or canals

that inevitably disrupted existing patterns of trade. As bickering intensified after 1800, spokesmen for competing interests loudly demanded that their enemies put aside private gain for the general good, while stoutly insisting that their own pet projects go forward.

Here Larson's analysis remains a bit ambiguous. Did self-interested disputes arise over routes and priorities because truly corrupted leaders refused to accept the "obvious" solutions that nature and science demanded, or were the existing choices just too complex for existing decision-making structures to accommodate? Larson occasionally exaggerates the mendacity of Jacksonian politicians, for example, when he attributes their nostalgic rhetoric to opportunism rather than long-held belief. Either way, the politicians' ceaseless bickering clearly tended to discredit the whole notion of a general good, or at least the idea that men of ordinary virtue could ever unite on it.

As the bickering continued, Virginians who were beginning to lament the Old Dominion's long, slow decline from revolutionary glory began to question the constitutionality of any federal role in the finance or construction of a general system of public works. Launched by so-called Old Republicans like John Randolph of Roanoke and Judge Spencer Roane, this cramped interpretation of the Constitution, which Larson aptly calls "neo-Antifederalist," eventually spread to Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, who concluded that the federal government should not attempt significant internal improvements without a constitutional amendment that jealous states were unwilling to grant.

Blessed with the essential geography and resources inside its own borders, New York responded to national paralysis by completing its own spectacular Erie Canal, but other states pursued the same goal with mixed results. Hampered by local interests and inconvenient borders, rivals of the Empire State had difficulty mounting extensive projects with comparable chances of success

and met with widespread bankruptcy when depression struck in 1837.

Consequently, Larson explains, when the development of railroad technology coincided with recovery in the 1840s, Jacksonian Americans had already abandoned the Founders' confidence that republican self-government could act decisively to improve transportation, and believed instead that such actions are always failures at both the state and federal levels. They were therefore willing to leave railroad development to private corporations, chartered and subsidized by government but operated and funded by purely private concerns responsible to their stockholders instead of to the public at large. Ironically, given their Old Republican inclinations, (p. 192) "by withdrawing government from policymaking, Jacksonians empowered markets, perhaps by default, both in politics and enterprise, as arbiters of conflict in American society."

By the time antebellum politicians began to contemplate the possibility of a transcontinental railroad, he concludes, national planning authority over routes and other crucial decisions had been ceded to the marketplace calculations of private investors. "Supposedly natural, self-regulating, cheap, virtually invisible, incorruptible, and superficially democratic," Larson sadly concludes, "free markets for the exchange of goods and services (or for the votes of ordinary citizens) held out the promise of appropriate outcomes to every clash of interests or ideas" (p. 192). In effect, the republican vision had been railroaded aside.

Larson recounts this important story with deep insight, persuasive detail, eloquent prose, and palpable fury that the ideal of popular self-government was so effectively discredited. Nor does his passion distort his story, but rather serves to sharpen his analysis and pushes him to see the largest implications of a story that others might dismiss as a footnote to engineering. At times Larson's narrative is so sweeping it can be read as a pocket political history of the entire fed-

eral government. By linking lofty theories of government with the major issues of presidential and congressional leadership, the grubby realities of state politics, and the quotidian materialism of ordinary life and commerce, *Internal Improvements* makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of republican and liberal America.

Starting with Larson's powerful analysis, future scholars must confront the important questions that still remain. While acknowledging that many farmers and artisans feared that economic development might bring loss of personal and household independence, Larson concludes that discomfort with the ultimate goals of internal improvements had little impact on the movement as a whole. If cavils about particular programs rarely masked discomfort with the overall goals of the movement, however, it is all the more remarkable that leaders were not more able to submerge their particular differences and unite behind some plan or plans to achieve their general objectives. Certainly the relationship between internal improvements, economic development, and popular political values deserves more attention as study of this topic continues.

In addition, Larson's observations about the conflict between transportation planning and republican equality cry out for comparative study. If the demand for equality between localities made it impossible for the government to plan a transportation system in the nineteenth century, what changed to make federally funded highways, dams, and airports possible in the twentieth? Did the construction of the interstate highway system depend on a level of bureaucratic centralization qualitatively different from the popular system of governance that stalemated over the placement of canals? If so, were the founders fundamentally mistaken about the ameliorative potential of republican government? And how do other republics manage public decision making on matters with such profound private significance?

These questions await another author. For the matter at hand, John Lauritz Larson has given us a masterful monograph that embraces a far wider range of serious questions than its seemingly technical subject might imply. Scholars of the early republic will remain in his debt for many years to come.

Notes

[1]. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955); Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948), xxxvii.

[2]. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[3]. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*; Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990); Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*.

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