

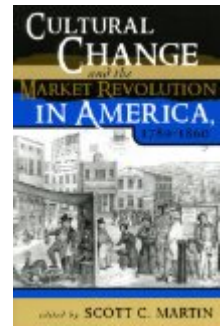
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Scott C. Martin, ed. *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution in America, 1789-1860*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. v + 298 pp. \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2770-6; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2771-3.

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Cultural Change and a Changing Classroom Culture

As a scholar with an abiding interest in the antebellum American “market revolution” and its diverse and far-reaching consequences, I have devoted no little time to searching for classroom texts that convey, in an interesting and accessible manner, some of the complexity and depth of this transformative and pivotal evolution to my students. As many readers of this list undoubtedly know, one of the greatest challenges facing any instructor teaching courses on the early national period is how to make the meaning and ramifications of the “market revolution” both relevant and tangible to a student body that is thoroughly disconnected from that historical era and who can envision no other socio-economic order than the modern capitalist system in which we live.

Anesthetized by the tedium of a high school curriculum that emphasizes the traditional narrative of economic, political and technological change—a tedium that is sadly reinforced by many unimaginative accounts of the era in college-level texts—students’ eyes glaze over when the “market revolution” is mentioned and, as a result, they lose sight of how the changes associated with this process fundamentally reordered everyday life. The historical profession has, over the last three decades, been waging a noble struggle to counter this trend. A spate of social histories have attempted to make discernible the broad contours of the social reordering accompanying the emergence of market capitalism in antebellum America.[1] Scott Martin’s *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution* stands as both a compelling fur-

therance and as a significant fine-tuning of this trend and thus promises to help re-energize classroom discussion of this profound transformation and its ramifications.

From a historiographical perspective, the essays in the volume make a number of important new contributions to the existing historical literature. Patrick Rael’s essay, for instance, offers a fresh assessment of antebellum black protest thought through the lens of market culture. Among the market’s many influences, Rael argues, was black leaders’ embrace of the notion of “respectability” as a panacea for solving the nation’s contemporary racial problems. According to those advocating for “respectability,” the advancement and elevation of blacks—concepts drawn immediately from the marketplace—would ensure blacks’ acceptance by whites and would produce equality between the races. If anything, Rael argues, the black leadership’s commitment to market values surpassed that of most of their white counterparts who, when push came to shove, refused to embrace the race-neutral logic of the marketplace. While the volume’s many historiographical contributions are noteworthy, this reviewer was particularly struck by the book’s pedagogical potential.

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of a “market revolution” assumed a central place in standard accounts of the early national period and in classrooms across the nation. Moving beyond a mere recitation of economic statistics and tales of technologi-

cal innovation, this new paradigm challenged students to think expansively and synthetically and to draw macro-level linkages between broad economic, political, and social change. Indeed, books such as Charles Sellers's *Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (1991) and Harry Watson's *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (1990) masterfully prodded students and scholars alike to consider a great many of the general trends associated with this process and demonstrated how abstract ideas about equality and freedom were re-configured and infused with new meaning by market expansion. Such works also forced scholars and students alike to reconsider the connections between market culture and the predominant political (Jacksonian politics) and social (revivalism, reform, class formation) movements of the antebellum era.

The essays included in *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution* continue in this vein, but also move our understanding of the "market revolution" forward, pushing discussion beyond the broader trends mentioned above. Influenced by the growing field of cultural studies, these essays bore further down into the core of antebellum life and clarify, in a concrete and interesting manner, some of the varied ways that contemporary Americans interpreted this change and the degree to which market culture, and especially ideas about "respectability," permeated and transformed everyday life.

This intersection of ideas and economics, the interplay between the abstract and the material is, of course, what makes the market revolution such a compelling pedagogical tool. At the same time, however, the conceptual nature of much of the work in the field is also one of the reasons why this subject so often fails to engage students. A number of the essays in the collection under review successfully bridge this gap. In doing so, they render the ethos of the market and the scope of the transformations wrought by it palpable to specialists and non-specialists alike.

Brett Mizelle's "I Have Brought my Pig to a Fine Market," for instance, offers an imaginative and engaging assessment of the connections between animal exhibitions and market culture. For a people intimately connected to and dependent upon animals, exhibitions of exotic species (an early example of an emerging entertainment industry) "provided useful metaphors and analogies for thinking about market relations" (p. 192). Promoted as "instructive amusement," animal exhibitors donned the mantle of respectability to attract middle-class Americans who were still grappling with questions about the

legitimacy and virtue of an emerging commercial culture. Once inside the exhibits, moreover, the assembled menageries of exotic animals, such as William Frederick Pinchbeck's "Pig of Knowledge," raised "questions about the uniqueness of human abilities" (p. 196) and challenged audience assumptions about race, gender and social hierarchy, a trend paralleled in society at large.

Kevin Thornton's "A Cultural Frontier: Ethnicity and the Marketplace in Charlotte, Vermont" makes clear (as do other essays in the volume) that there were definite limits to such challenges, however. Thornton examines the life of Antoine Lorraine, a proto-typical nineteenth-century French-Canadian immigrant attempting to carve out a new life in an entrenched market economy. Lorraine and his ethnic peers, drawn south into the Champlain Valley by economic opportunity and attendant market values, found themselves instead confronted by a hostile Yankee population that rendered the new arrivals marginal and relegated them to the social, cultural, and economic fringe in antebellum Charlotte, thus creating a figurative "frontier" in the heart of a long-settled community. This wonderfully constructed and detailed essay (which I actually had the opportunity to use in the classroom), with its nuanced, yet very accessible thesis, readily draws students in and facilitates not only a critical analysis of many commonly held assumptions and the contemporary meanings of ethnicity and class, but also helps to clearly delineate a number of the most important trends associated with the market revolution.

Yankee peddlers are the subject of Joseph Ranier's "Sharper Image." As both "agents and authors of the market revolution" (p. 90), the Yankee peddler makes comprehensible the connections between nascent industrialization, internal improvements, consumerism, the capitalist ethos, and sectional identity. Viewed as a primary means of "seeking the main chance" (p. 94), peddling attracted large numbers of young Yankee males who used the nation's emerging transportation network to carry their wares into the West, and more famously, into the South. A growing regional identity, and rampant price gouging and swindling by peddlers, however, led many southerners, who were clearly ambivalent about the emerging cash nexus, to view these agents of capitalism (who they termed "Damned Yankees") as "part of a larger problem of an imbalance of trade with the manufacturing and financial centers of the Northeast" (p. 101) and gave rise to legislation, boycotts, and the encouragement of home manufactures as methods of stemming the tide of northern goods and the drain of southern wealth.

While some of the book's essays lack the clarity and precision of the three examples given, they all offer the willing reader something of value. Indeed, *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution* is, in my estimation, an exceptional classroom resource which promises to breathe some new life into a vitally important, though sadly underappreciated, instructional paradigm.

Note

[1]. To name but a handful of the many such books that I have assigned to my own students: Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeepers' Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Carol Sheriff, *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996); and, Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1790-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

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