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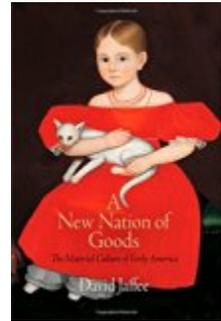
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Jaffee. *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. Illustrations. xv + 400 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4257-7.

Reviewed by Joanna Cohen (Queen Mary, University of London)

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The Crafted Revolution: How Clocks, Cabinets, and Portraits Transformed the American Economy

David Jaffee's new book offers readers a detailed and colorful portrait of emerging market relations in the early American Republic. Much like the folk paintings he examines, the content is sometimes deceptively simple. The life stories of inventors, itinerants, and artisans are plainly told; but embedded in the details of these multiple lives is a clear and convincing argument for reimagining the market revolution as a market evolution, one driven by the rural production and hinterland taste of America's protean middling classes.

Jaffee is hardly the first person to challenge the idea that the market revolution was an unstoppable tidal wave of capitalist market relations that swept all before it. Many have agreed before now that Charles Sellers's thesis in *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (1991) overstated the transformative and inexorable qualities of the market revolution. Indeed, alongside older studies on the resistance to market capitalism, there has been excellent work in recent years on America's unsteady embrace of capitalist habits and practices. Naomi Lamoreaux's work on accountancy (*Insider Lending: Banks, Personal Connections, and Economic Development in Industrial New England* [1994]), Stephen Mihm's research on counterfeiting (*A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* [2007]), and Scott Sandage's book on failure (*Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* [2005]) all point to the ways in which Americans muddled their way through a creation of a new national political economy.

Yet Jaffee's research adds a valuable new facet to this scholarship. He brings a new perspective to an old story of industrialization, demonstrating conclusively that the mills of Lowell and the workshops of Philadelphia and New York City were not the only means by which Americans made the transition from preindustrial colony to industrializing nation. Jaffee's story centers on New England, the Hudson River and Mohawk River valleys, and the rural counties around Philadelphia. These were, he argues, the critical regions for the "development of an indigenous manufacturing movement," first in provincial British North America and then in the United States (p. xii). In his hands, this region comes alive, populated by the inhabitants of small towns and growing villages. In these communities, Jaffee finds chairmakers, cabinetworkers, clockmakers, and portrait-painters, increasingly interconnected through the efforts of printers and peddlers. The townspeople of New Milford, Plymouth, Gardener, and Sterling resided in "cosmopolitan communities." Motivated by what Jaffee dubs the "village enlightenment," they eagerly sought to consume new goods fashioned to their own tastes (p. 48).

As a concept, the term "village enlightenment" works well. Clearly defined as the moment when a "market for cultural commodities in printed form" took shape, Jaffee uses the concept to explain how older social hierarchies were eroded, making way for a new group of rural folk who strived for status through innovation in enterprise and consumption (p. 48). In Jaffee's hands, access to and

control of new knowledge stimulated the commercialization of that knowledge. New schools, lyceums, societies, and bookshops all helped rural Americans capitalize on the growing availability of knowledge. This process in turn proved to be the springboard for rural commercial culture. Indeed, by beginning with the “village enlightenment,” Jaffee highlights the important role that print culture played in igniting rural consumer desires. Interestingly, as Jaffee’s research indicates, it was not advertising flowing out from metropolitan areas that prompted new desires, but locally printed tracts, almanacs, and school books instead. Authors of these tomes offered up ideas about what to buy and what to value—ideas that reflected emerging local sensibilities. Although Jaffee does not analyze readership in depth, we can only assume that these ideas were absorbed by those who could afford to buy such material.

However, if European enlightenment contained the seeds of political unrest, the American village enlightenment, as Jaffee points out, was the product of a successful revolution. American purveyors of print thus lacked the critical edge honed by the hacks on London’s Grub Street or sharpened by aspiring Parisian literati. Indeed, in Jaffee’s depiction, the village enlightenment is curiously consensual. Although Jaffee gestures toward the formation of new and exclusive social hierarchies, this is clearly a moment of inclusive possibility in his mind. Both political and social tension seem strangely absent from this depiction of enlightenment and indeed more broadly from his delineation of transforming market relations.

The absence of tension or conflict within these hinterland communities is never really addressed. This is perhaps due to the fact that Jaffee makes a very clear argument that rural consumers developed their own standards of taste and aesthetic beauty, resisting the efforts of metropolitan trendsetters to impose city habits on their communities. Thus if fault lines existed, then they developed between rural and urban communities and not within them. This is not to say that Jaffee presents a picture of uniform contentedness. A historian like Jaffee, who excels at the personal details, does not overlook the tales of disappointment, frustration, and failure that emerge from the papers and diaries of aspiring mechanics and entrepreneurs. But it is notable that all the men and women whom Jaffee describes sought to adapt rather than protest any of these changes.

Moreover, the consumers Jaffee discusses seem by and large to have shared the same hinterland sensibili-

ties. Although not the focus of his argument, Jaffee does suggest that these sensibilities spread south and west via clocks, chairs, and portrait paintings. Thus the book makes a case for a national consensus on market evolution emanating from the Northeast. On the one hand, it seems likely that rural New Yorkers had more in common with rural Virginians than with the urban inhabitants of the same state. The development of similar sensibilities seems highly possible. On the other hand, given the increasing frustrations that were erupting over issues of national political economy by the 1820s and 1830s, the gentle diffusion of northeastern goods and sensibilities seems somewhat incongruous.

At the heart of Jaffee’s book is his vivid and detailed discussion of three evolving artisanal industries. Clockmaking, chairmaking, and portraiture all receive the same meticulous treatment, bringing each of these crafts to life. One of the key strengths of this book is undoubtedly the range of approaches Jaffee brings to bear on his material. The discussion of production alone sheds new light on how we ought to think about industrialization in artisanal crafts. Paying close attention to how craftsmen created design details on cabinets and chairs, for example, allows Jaffee to discuss the gradual move from “the workmanship of risk to the workmanship of certainty” (p. 178). Demonstrating how furniture production became slowly more standardized enables Jaffee to prove how industrialization developed in specific and distinctive ways.

In this context, Jaffee’s discussion of portrait painting is especially compelling. Examining the work of Ammi Phillips, Jaffee illustrates the ways in which this “artisan-artist” provided an increasingly standardized portrait for consumers, using repetition to deliver finished products more efficiently (p. 222). The comparison of four portraits of children dressed in red and holding pets demonstrates this element of Phillips’s commercial strategy in stark visual terms. Moreover, Jaffee’s decision to include portrait painting in this context helps to confirm the sheer diversity of activity that must be included under the banner of industrialization. Not only does he debunk the idea that artistic creation is separate from the broader process of mechanization and standardization, but he also demonstrates that representations of individualism were subject to these developments.

In bringing the study of production, marketing, distribution, and consumption together in such nuanced ways, Jaffee has provided a range of crucial insights into the development of market relations in the early Repub-

lic. His claim that this is a national story is slightly less convincing. His clockmakers certainly have national reach, but the other two crafts seem to be more confined to the Northeast. Yet in the final chapter it is possible to see how publications with a national reach, such as *Godey's Lady Book*, did start to produce a more standardized middle-class culture and in tandem, some of Jaffee's entrepreneurs worked within that trend. And as he points out, it was the urban manufacturers and merchants who benefited more from this consolidation of taste. The distinctive world of hinterland taste-makers began to erode by the 1840s.

The arc of Jaffee's narrative is compelling but it also raises questions. If he had concentrated on the more familiar tale of textiles, would the realm of hinterland fashion have seemed quite so distinctive? Given Americans' voracious appetite for imported cloth, it seems unlikely. In terms of seeking out fashionable woolens, printed calicos, and silks, rural Americans remained more connected to the metropolitan world of Europe and the ports of the East Coast. The question of textiles also raises other questions about the Northeast's connection to the South. With cotton production shaping the entire nation's economic future by the 1820s, how did northern producers of farm equipment or coarse clothing and shoes for slaves imagine their connections with

their community and their nation? Jaffee's model implies that artisans imagined new consumer goods, created them, and then successfully marketed them across the nation. In other words, these consumer products emanated from the Northeast in a unilateral way. Yet Michael Zakim's study of the men's clothing industry (*Ready-Made Democracy: A History of the Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760-1860* [2003]) and Seth Rockman's new project about the business relationships between northern manufacturers and southern planters indicate that these networks were more bilateral than Jaffee's model suggests. Local desires, regional production, and sectional needs all played a part in shaping the industrialization of the Northeast.

Nonetheless, Jaffee's beautiful book has certainly augmented the growing picture of the transformation of the early Republic. Its rich details provide compelling evidence for a distinctive brand of taste that inspired new enterprise in rural areas. Moreover, these same details offer teachers a valuable array of stories and objects with which to entice their students into understanding this protean period of America's social and economic history. The vivid clarity of Jaffee's prose and the steady consolidation of his argument means that the images, characters, and artifacts he presents will stay with readers long after they have put down the book.

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