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Andrew Jackson versus the Historians

BY CHARLES GRIER SELLERS, JR.

Andrew Jackson's masterful personality was enough by itself to make him one of the most controversial figures ever to stride across the American stage. "It can hardly be expected that the present generation will do justice to the character of Jackson," complained the compiler of his funeral eulogies in 1846, for "his opponents have ever been most bitter enemies, and his friends almost his worshippers."¹ And when James Parton sat down fifteen years later to attempt the first impartial biography of Old Hickory, he despairingly concluded from the mountain of conflicting sources before him that his subject "was a patriot and a traitor. He was one of the greatest of generals, and wholly ignorant of the art of war. A writer brilliant, elegant, eloquent, without being able to compose a correct sentence, or spell words of four syllables. The first of statesmen, he never devised, he never framed a measure. He was the most candid of men, and was capable of the profoundest dissimulation. A most law-defying, law-obeying citizen. A stickler for discipline, he never hesitated to disobey his superior. A democratic autocrat. An urbane savage. An atrocious saint."²

Such radical opposites could not be reconciled simply by splitting the difference; Parton and all who followed him on this difficult terrain have been forced pretty substantially either into the Jackson camp or into the camp of Jackson's enemies. Indeed, Parton's lament could almost stand today as the conclusion to a review of Jacksonian historiography.

The reasons for such continuing disagreement run far deeper than the individual characteristics of any historical personality. Andrew Jackson was intimately identified with the full flowering of American democracy; and as long as democracy remains pre-eminently the

¹ Benjamin M. Dusenbery (comp.), *Monument to the Memory of General Andrew Jackson: Containing Twenty-five Eulogies and Sermons Delivered on Occasion of His Death* (Philadelphia, 1846), 32.

² James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (3 vols., New York, 1861), I, vii.

distinguishing feature of our society, the period and symbol of its triumph will remain controversial.

While American democracy emerged victorious on the plane of political ideology around 1776 or 1800, and on the plane of political practice around 1828, it did not achieve respectability in American historiography (for all George Bancroft's efforts) until about 1900. From the Jacksonian era to the end of the nineteenth century the writing of American history was dominated, as Charles H. Peck observed in 1899, by men "who were educated under the sway of the Whiggish culture of the country."³ This "Whig" school of Jacksonian historiography included the first two important Jackson biographers, James Parton and William Graham Sumner; the authors of the first two detailed American histories extending to the Civil War, Hermann E. von Holst and James Schouler; and Moisei Ostrogorski, author of the enormously influential study of *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*.

These writers, in effect, stamped the partisan fulminations of Jackson's political enemies with the cachet of scholarly authority. If Henry Clay had pronounced Old Hickory "ignorant, passionate, hypocritical, corrupt, and easily swayed by the base men who surround him," von Holst could similarly pronounce him an "arrogant general" whose "mind was as untrained as his passions were unbridled" and who was "like wax in skillful hands." Sumner thought him a "barbarian" who "acted from spite, pique, instinct, prejudice or emotion"; Schouler flatly declared him "illiterate"; Ostrogorski expatiated on his "autocratic policy"; and Parton, despite a grudging admiration for some aspects of Jackson's character, lamented "the elevation to the presidency of a man whose ignorance, whose good intentions, and whose passions combined to render him, of all conceivable human beings, the most unfit for the office."⁴

Yet it was not fundamentally Jackson's personality that turned the Whig historians against him, nor was it the general policies he pursued as president. These writers were all liberals of the nine-

³ Charles H. Peck, *The Jacksonian Epoch* (New York, 1899), 328.

⁴ Calvin Colton (ed.), *The Private Correspondence of Henry Clay* (Boston, 1856), 368-69; Hermann E. von Holst, *The Constitutional and Political History of the United States* (8 vols., Chicago, 1876-1892), II, 2, 3, 30; William Graham Sumner, *Andrew Jackson as a Public Man: What He Was, What Chances He Had, and What He Did with Them* (Boston, 1882), 25, 278-79; James Schouler, *History of the United States of America under the Constitution* (Rev. ed., 6 vols., New York, 1894-1904), II, 439; M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties* (2 vols., New York, 1902), II, 46, 65; Parton, *Jackson*, III, 694-700.

teenth-century stripe and actually approved the laissez-faire tendencies of most of the Jacksonian measures. Sumner was outraged that Jackson had "unjustly, passionately, ignorantly, and without regard to truth assailed a great and valuable financial institution," for the Yale economist was a stout champion of sound money and vested interests. But Sumner was an even more strenuous champion of Herbert Spencer's doctrine of unfettered individual enterprise, and his philosophy compelled him to admit that "it came in Jackson's way to do some good, to check some bad tendencies and to strengthen some good ones." Parton went further in approval of Jackson's policies, defending not only the objectives but also the aggressive tactics of the Jacksonian assault on the national bank. An admirer of Jefferson, Parton was also one of the earliest American Spencerians, and he considered Jackson an instinctive disciple of both his ideological heroes.⁵ And all the Whig historians were ardent nationalists and applauded Jackson's bold stand against the South Carolina nullifiers.

How, then, could Parton say that "notwithstanding the good done by General Jackson during his presidency, his election to power was a mistake"? How could von Holst speak of "the frightful influence . . . which he exercised during the eight years of his presidency"? A clue may be found in the abhorrence with which the Whig historians uniformly treated Jackson's policy of removing his political enemies from federal office and replacing them with his friends. Indeed, for these scholarly mugwumps, the institution of the spoils system on a large scale became almost the distinguishing feature of Jackson's administration. "If all his other public acts had been perfectly wise and right," said Parton, "this single feature of his administration would suffice to render it deplorable."⁶

Yet the spoils system was only a symptom of the real disease — the new system of democratic politics that both Jackson and the spoils system symbolized. "Popular sovereignty," said von Holst, would be "a dreadful condition of things"; and Schouler lamented

⁵ Sumner, *Jackson*, 279, 339; Parton, *Jackson*, III, 693-94. Jackson, said Parton, "had a clear perception that the toiling millions are not a class in the community, but *are* the community. He knew and felt that government should exist only for the benefit of the governed; that the strong are strong only that they may aid the weak; that the rich are rightfully rich only that they may so combine and direct the labors of the poor as to make labor more profitable to the laborer. He did not comprehend these truths as they are demonstrated by Jefferson and Spencer, but he had an intuitive and instinctive perception of them." *Jackson*, III, 699.

⁶ Parton, *Jackson*, III, 692, 694; von Holst, *History*, II, 29-31.

the fact that, all too often, "the great body of our American democracy . . . slips back unconsciously into the mire whence the poverty-stricken millions emerge and falls too easy a prey to vice and ignorance." Ostrogorski got to the heart of the Whig historians' case against Jacksonian Democracy when he complained that it "excluded men of sterling worth and high principles from public life." Von Holst similarly argued that since Jackson "the people have begun to exchange the leadership of a small number of statesmen and politicians of a higher order for the rule of an ever increasing crowd of politicians of high and low degree, down even to the pothouse politician and the common thief, in the protecting mantle of demagogism." And as a result, said Parton, "the public affairs of the United States have been conducted with a stupidity which has excited the wonder of mankind."⁷

It is important to remember that the Whig historians all came from eastern or European middle-class or upper-middle-class families with traditions of education, prestige, and public service, the kind of families that had claimed social and political leadership as their natural right during the early days of the republic. By the time these men began to write the history of Jacksonian Democracy, however, their kind had been largely ousted from political leadership by the professional politicians and new-style parties that had arisen as the institutional embodiments of the Jacksonian democratic revolution. They were writing, moreover, in the era of Grantism in national politics and Tweedism in local politics, when the least lovely aspects of democracy were most conspicuous. Whig historiography, indeed, was a facet of "patrician liberalism," the movement that sought to restore the pristine purity of American politics by destroying the spoils system, breaking the bosses' power, ending the unholy alliance between government and business, and placing gentlemen in public office. What could be more natural, then, than for the Whig historians to find in Jacksonian Democracy the origin of the features of American life they most deplored? These scholars displayed, in short, the class bias of an elite displaced from leadership by a vulgar and frequently corrupt democracy.

By the 1890's patrician liberalism was giving way to the broader movement which under the name Progressivism was soon to effect a

⁷ Von Holst, *History*, II, 77-79; Schouler, *History*, III, 198-99; Ostrogorski, *Democracy and Political Parties*, II, 50, 69-70; Parton, *Jackson*, III, 149-50, 698, 700.

profound shift in the mood and direction of American life. A corresponding shift in the mood of American historiography was signaled in 1893, when the young Wisconsin historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, read his famous paper emphasizing "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Yet Turner's real significance lies less in his controversial frontier thesis than in his influence as leader of the massive shift of American historiography to a pro-democratic orientation. A whole new generation of young historians — men like Woodrow Wilson, William E. Dodd, John Spencer Bassett, Charles A. Beard, and Vernon L. Parrington — stood ready to echo Turner's vibrantly sympathetic description of democracy emerging "stark and strong and full of life, from the American forest."⁸

Two facts should be especially noted about these young scholars who were to transform the writing of American history. One is that nearly all of them came from rural or small-town backgrounds in the West or South, and this in itself brought a new point of view into a field previously dominated by the urban Northeast. The second significant fact is that though they came from substantial middle-class families, they lived in a period when middle-class Americans, and particularly middle-class intellectuals, were being swept into the current of reform. The Progressive campaign to preserve the traditional values of American society in the threatening new context of industrialism and urbanism was made possible by a revival of faith in the possibilities of the whole people, and the Progressives characteristically devoted much of their energy to making the democratic process work more effectively. Small wonder, then, that the young scholars of the Progressive era responded enthusiastically to Turner's reaffirmation of the long-tarnished democratic faith of an earlier day.

Andrew Jackson and his Democracy were naturally among the leading beneficiaries of the new pro-democratic orientation of American historiography. Out of the "frontier democratic society" of the West, said Turner, "where the freedom and abundance of land in the great Valley opened a refuge to the oppressed in all regions, came the Jacksonian democracy which governed the nation after the downfall of the party of John Quincy Adams." This

⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 216.

Jacksonian Democracy was "strong in the faith of the intrinsic excellence of the common man, and in his capacity to share in government."⁹

Turner's contemporaries quickly took up the refrain. John W. Burgess enthusiastically acclaimed Jackson as "the noblest Roman of them all"; while William E. Dodd thought of the "brave and generous" Old Hickory as "a second Jefferson," whose mission it was "to arouse the people to a sense of their responsibility." In the eyes of that rather romantic nationalist, Woodrow Wilson, Jackson represented the "forces of health" that were to "nationalize the government." Though Jackson's policies "temporarily ruined the business of the country" and "permanently demoralized our politics," Wilson nevertheless regarded his election as "a great democratic upheaval," which "did the incalculable good of giving to the national spirit its first self-reliant expression of resolution and of consentaneous power."¹⁰

The earliest major product of the democratic school of Jacksonian historiography was John Spencer Bassett's *Life of Andrew Jackson*, published in 1911. Bassett was the first scholar since Parton to work thoroughly through the extant Jacksonian sources, which now seemed to reveal "a man who was great, spite of many limitations." Bassett was generally sympathetic to Jackson's purposes and policies, but he was not uncritical, and his final chapter remains the most successful attempt to appraise Jackson's baffling character. Jackson had plenty of shortcomings — "lack of education, his crude judgments in many affairs, his occasional outbreaks of passion, his habitual hatred of those enemies with whom he had not made friends for party purposes, and his crude ideas of some political policies" — yet, for Bassett, "all lose some of their infelicity in the face of his brave, frank, masterly leadership of the democratic movement which then established itself in our life. . . . Few American Presidents have better lived up to the demands of the movement which brought them into power."¹¹

The transitional indecision of a few scholars was best represented by William MacDonald, whose volume on the Jackson period for

⁹ *Ibid.*, 192, 302.

¹⁰ John W. Burgess, *The Middle Period, 1817-1858* (New York, 1905), 135; William E. Dodd, *Expansion and Conflict* (Boston, 1915), 3, 36; Woodrow Wilson, *Division and Reunion, 1829-1909* (New York, 1910), 25, 115.

¹¹ John Spencer Bassett, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (2 vols., Garden City, 1911), I, xi; II, 750.

the American Nation Series fell squarely between the Whig and Democratic positions. Though MacDonald described Jackson as "an untrained, self-willed, passionate frontier soldier," he admonished his readers that "It was as idle then as it is now to bemoan" his election, for "this predominance of the masses" is "the price of popular government." It almost seems that MacDonald was unconsciously making the same accommodation to democracy as a Whig historian in 1906 that Daniel Webster had made as a Whig politician in 1840.¹²

But most American historians embraced the democratic orientation with only slight hesitation, and even the Spencerians capitulated to Jackson. The anti-democratic Whiggery that had made Parton and Sumner so critical of Old Hickory, despite their sympathy for his laissez-faire policies, had little effect on their fellow Spencerian, John Fiske. Though Fiske boggled a bit at the spoils system, he concluded that Jackson's "sounder instincts prompted him to a course of action quite in harmony with the highest political philosophy," as contained in the works of Herbert Spencer. For Jackson had checked "a tendency toward the mollycoddling, old granny theory of government, according to which the ruling powers are to take care of the people, build their roads for them, do their banking for them, rob Peter to pay Paul for carrying on a losing business, and tinker and bemuddle things generally."¹³

What a dramatic shift in interpretation the democratic orientation could effect was demonstrated even more strikingly when Carl Russell Fish, writing in 1904, almost made a Jacksonian virtue of the spoils system in his study of *The Civil Service and the Patronage*. By careful scholarship Fish showed that the civil service had needed some ventilation in 1829, and that the irresistible pressures for the spoils system must have triumphed regardless of who was president. But it was Fish's democratic frame of reference rather than his research that produced his most startling conclusions. "The spoils system paid for the party organization . . . which established a 'government of the people' in the United States in 1829," he declared, and in so doing, "it served a purpose that could probably

¹² William MacDonald, *Jacksonian Democracy, 1829-1837* (New York, 1906), 42, 311-12. The influence of Turner is conspicuous in MacDonald's volume. See, for example, p. 314.

¹³ John Fiske, *Essays Historical and Literary* (2 vols., New York, 1902), I, 286, 310-11.

have been performed in no other way, and that was fully worth the cost.”¹⁴

While the new democratic orientation was winning converts, another influence was finally making itself felt in Jacksonian historiography: the cult of objectivity. In 1903 Ralph C. H. Catterall produced a study of the Second Bank of the United States that was a masterpiece. Though Catterall's personal sympathies were unquestionably Whiggish — he regretted, for example, that the influence of “enlightened business men” and other members of “the intelligent class” on public affairs “has always been inconsiderable, partly because they are not interested in politics, partly because they are themselves objects of suspicion to the democratic masses” — he nevertheless granted Jackson's complete sincerity and reported his position fully and fairly.¹⁵

The desire for objectivity had less fortunate results in the case of John Bach McMaster, whose habit of quoting copiously from the contemporary arguments on both sides of every question, while scrupulously withholding his own judgments and interpretations, made an arid waste of his multi-volume history. Yet the reader can discern that by 1900, when he reached the Jackson period, he had gone over to the democratic camp, for he described in great detail the democratic reform movements of the era, he relieved Jackson from responsibility for the spoils system, and he acclaimed Old Hickory's victory of 1828, with unwonted enthusiasm, as “indeed a great uprising of the people, a triumph of democracy, another political revolution the like of which the country had not seen since 1800.”¹⁶

The pro-democratic orientation that transformed Jacksonian historiography at the turn of the century has continued to be the dominant influence on writings about the Jackson period ever since. It permeated Marquis James's impressive Jackson biography of the 1930's, as well as the extensive studies of the Jackson period by Claude G. Bowers in the 1920's and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in the 1940's. More significantly, it has controlled the interpreta-

¹⁴ Carl Russell Fish, *The Civil Service and the Patronage* (Cambridge, 1904), 75-78, 155-57.

¹⁵ Ralph C. H. Catterall, *The Second Bank of the United States* (Chicago, 1903), 168 and *passim*.

¹⁶ John B. McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States from the Revolution to the Civil War* (8 vols., New York, 1883-1913), V, 518, 522, and V-VI *passim*.

tions of Jacksonian Democracy to be found in nearly all the general works on American history written in the twentieth century, from the widely influential accounts of Vernon L. Parrington and Charles and Mary Beard to the most obscure textbooks. Political scientists have joined in the chorus of approval, with such writers as John W. Burgess, Wilfred E. Binkley, and Leonard D. White praising Jackson and his followers for strengthening the presidency and developing the new-style political party as an indispensable democratic institution.¹⁷

Despite this widespread acceptance, the twentieth-century democratic school of Jacksonian historiography has attained neither the unchallenged hegemony nor the unity of outlook that the Whig school enjoyed in the nineteenth century. For one thing, the Whig interpretation would not play dead.¹⁸ Most embarrassing to the democratic view of Andrew Jackson has been the interpretation of Old Hickory's role in early Tennessee politics advanced by Thomas P. Abernethy. Abernethy presents Jackson as a frontier nabob who took sides against the democratic movement in his own state. Actually, this leader of the democratic movement in national politics was a demagogic aristocrat, says Abernethy, an "opportunist" for whom

¹⁷ See, for example, Marquis James, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (2 vols. in 1, Indianapolis, 1938), 720-24 and *passim*; Claude G. Bowers, *The Party Battles of the Jackson Period* (Boston, 1922); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945); Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920* (3 vols., New York, 1927-1930), II, 146; Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (2 vols., New York, 1927), I, 557; Burgess, *Middle Period*, 282-83; Wilfred E. Binkley, *The Powers of the President: Problems of American Democracy* (Garden City, 1937), 67-88; Wilfred E. Binkley, *American Political Parties: Their Natural History* (2nd ed., New York, 1954), 141; Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York, 1954), 17, 48-49, 566.

¹⁸ Jackson's most inveterate scholarly foe in the twentieth century has been Richard R. Stenberg, who undertook "an extensive critique of Jackson's career and character" to be entitled *The Insidious Andrew Jackson*. Though the book never appeared, Stenberg's point of view gained some currency through a series of articles: "Jackson, Anthony Butler, and Texas," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* (Austin), XIII (December, 1932), 264-86; "The Texas Schemes of Jackson and Houston, 1829-1836," *ibid.*, XV (December, 1934), 229-50; "Jackson, Buchanan, and the 'Corrupt Bargain' Calumny," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (Philadelphia), LVIII (January, 1934), 61-85; "Jackson's Neches Claim, 1829-1836," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* (Austin), XXXIX (April, 1936), 255-74; "Andrew Jackson and the Erving Affidavit," *ibid.*, XLI (October, 1937), 142-53; "Jackson's 'Rhea Letter' Hoax," *Journal of Southern History* (Baton Rouge), II (November, 1936), 480-96; "The Jefferson Birthday Dinner, 1830," *ibid.*, IV (August, 1938), 334-45; "President Jackson and Anthony Butler," *Southwest Review* (Dallas), XXII (Summer, 1937), 391-404; "A Note on the Jackson-Calhoun Breach of 1830-31," *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine* (Holdercoft, Va.), XXI (October, 1939), 65-69.

"Democracy was good talk with which to win the favor of the people and thereby accomplish ulterior objectives."¹⁹

The Whig interpretation has received its fullest modern application to the Jackson movement as a whole in Charles M. Wiltse's impressive biography of Calhoun. Wiltse sees the reality of Jacksonian politics as a selfish struggle for office and federal subsidy. Jackson was in many respects "a frontier bully," and "in a growing, expanding, gambling, ebullient country like the United States of the 1820's and 30's, the frontier bully was a national hero."²⁰

Yet the democratic historians have suffered less from these dissenting views than from their own inability to make clear just what they mean by "democracy." The men of Turner's generation who originated democratic historiography conceived of the democratic process in a characteristically middle-class, Progressive way. Hating monopoly and plutocracy, they rejoiced in the egalitarian, anti-monopolistic tradition that stemmed from Jacksonian Democracy. But hating the class consciousness of Populism and Socialism as much or more, they shrank from any interpretation of the American past that smacked of social conflict. Their enthusiasm for democracy rested on an essentially romantic faith in the whole people, whom they saw as an undifferentiated mass, virtually free of inequalities and conflicts. Democracy, in the view which informed both Progressive politics and Turnerean historiography, was the process by which the whole people's fundamentally virtuous impulses were translated into public policy.

Thus Turner was careful to assert that "classes and inequalities of fortune played little part" in frontier democracy. It "did not demand equality of condition," he declared, for it believed that the

¹⁹ For Abernethy's view of Jackson see: "Andrew Jackson and the Rise of Southwestern Democracy," *American Historical Review* (New York), XXXIII (October, 1927), 64-77; *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study in Frontier Democracy* (Chapel Hill, 1932), especially 238-49; and *Dictionary of American Biography* (21 vols., New York, 1928-1944), IX, 526-34.

Even the most democratically oriented historian had no choice, without an independent study of Tennessee political history, but to accept Abernethy's interpretation as sound and adjust his own interpretation of Jackson to it as painlessly as possible. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., for example, was driven to argue that "No amount of inference based on what Jackson was like before 1828 can be a substitute for the facts after 1828." *Age of Jackson*, 44.

Abernethy's interpretation of Jackson's role in Tennessee politics is criticized in Charles G. Sellers, Jr., "Banking and Politics in Jackson's Tennessee, 1817-1827," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids), XLI (June, 1954), 61-84.

²⁰ Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun* (3 vols., Indianapolis, 1944-1951), II, 234-35 and *passim*.

“self-made man had a right to his success in the free competition which western life afforded.” Mere inequality of condition was a negligible consideration to Turner, alongside the more spiritual brand of equality that the frontier process had guaranteed. “Mere success in the game . . . gave to the successful ones no right to look down upon their neighbors,” he insisted, and he clung passionately to his conviction that the abundance of free land made it impossible for “the successful ones . . . to harden their triumphs into the rule of a privileged class.”²¹

However plausible this view of democracy may have been for the early nineteenth century, the free land was undeniably gone by Turner’s day, while inequality of condition had become so gross that its danger to democracy could no longer be ignored. The successful ones now threatened either to harden their triumphs into the rule of a privileged class, or to provoke a bitter class struggle, and both possibilities disturbed middle-class Americans. It was this apparent crisis of democracy that produced both the Progressive movement and the democratic school of historians.

Turner mirrored one mood of his generation in his desperate efforts to believe that there was no crisis, that the great monopolists themselves were products of the democratic West and, by a quasi-Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics “still profess its principles.”²² But the more typical response of the democratic historians was to rely upon a revival of democracy, a movement of the whole people; and they were in effect supplying a historical tradition for Progressivism when they described the democratic upheaval of Jackson’s day as an amorphous force, arising with no specific cause or particular program from the creative western forest, and spreading over the East by contagion.

The democratic historians’ aversion to social conflict was a major factor in causing them to supplement the frontier thesis with a heavy emphasis on sectionalism. Conflict was simply too obvious in

²¹ Turner, *Frontier*, 302-303, 342-43.

²² Turner virtually staked the future of democracy on the fact that Andrew Carnegie had built up his fortune in Pittsburgh, “then a distinctively Western town,” and whatever the tendencies of his Steel Trust, “there can be little doubt of the democratic ideals of Mr. Carnegie himself.” Carnegie had after all written a book entitled *Triumphant Democracy*, Turner pointed out, in which the steel master rejoiced that America’s vast resources were “in the hands of an intelligent people, the Democracy, to be used for the general good of the masses, and not made the spoils of monarchs, courts, and aristocracy, to be turned to the base and selfish ends of a privileged hereditary class.” Turner, *Frontier*, 264-65.

the Jackson era to be ignored, but Turner and his followers muted the discordant note of class struggle by transposing it into conflict between distinct geographical sections. Thus, alongside the Jacksonian rise of the whole people, we find in their writings a three-way contest among the democratic West (epitomized by Jackson), the capitalist Northeast, and the planting and increasingly aristocratic South.²³ Beard and Parrington, to be sure, made social conflict central to their interpretations. But even their dramas of struggle against privileged minorities were grounded on the same Rousseauistic concept of the whole people as the conventional democratic interpretation; and more often than not they, too, fell back upon oversimplified sectional categories.

This vague conception of democracy remained prevalent in Jacksonian historiography until 1945, when Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., published *The Age of Jackson*. Schlesinger's thesis was that "more can be understood about Jacksonian democracy if it is regarded as a problem not of sections but of classes." Defining the central theme of American political history to be the efforts "on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community," he interpreted Jacksonian Democracy as a movement "to control the power of the capitalistic groups, mainly Eastern, for the benefit of noncapitalist groups, farmers and laboring men, East, West, and South." Schlesinger traced the movement to the economic hardships of the 1820's, and he saw the East and the workingmen as playing the crucial roles in the Jacksonian coalition.²⁴

Schlesinger not only provided a sharper definition of the democratic movement and a clearer explanation of its origins, but he also stirred up a warm debate which prompted other historians to offer alternative definitions. The attack on *The Age of Jackson* was launched by a scholarly official of the Federal Reserve Board, Bray Hammond, who was irritated in the first instance by Schlesinger's failure to appreciate the central banking functions that

²³ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Rise of the New West, 1819-1829* (New York, 1906); F. J. Turner, *The United States, 1830-1850: The Nation and Its Sections* (New York, 1932); Wilson, *Division and Reunion*; Bassett, *Jackson*; Dodd, *Expansion and Conflict*. Edward Channing in his *A History of the United States* (6 vols., New York, 1905-1925), V, 380-402, follows von Holst's odd interpretation, which makes Jackson a representative of the southern planters.

²⁴ Schlesinger, *Age of Jackson*, 208-209, 263, 505; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Communication," *American Historical Review*, LIV (April, 1949), 785-86.

the national bank had exercised so beneficially before it was attacked by Jackson. Emphasizing the role of the state banks in fomenting the Jacksonian assault on the national bank, Hammond insisted that the real animus of Jacksonian Democracy was not against business but against the exclusion of new entrepreneurs from business opportunities. Schlesinger "represents the age of Jackson as one of triumphant liberalism," he complained, "when it was as much or more an age of triumphant exploitation."²⁵

Hammond was quickly joined in his criticism of Schlesinger by a group of historians at Columbia University. Joseph Dorfman argued that the "labor" spokesmen whom Schlesinger had emphasized did not represent a genuine labor movement, and that their views were far from anti-business.²⁶ Richard B. Morris contended that Jackson was anti-labor rather than pro-labor,²⁷ while several of Morris' students attempted, with questionable success, to demonstrate that workingmen did not vote for Jackson.²⁸

²⁵ Bray Hammond, "Jackson, Biddle, and the Bank of the United States," *Journal of Economic History* (New York), VII (May, 1947), 1-23. See also his review of the *Age of Jackson*, *ibid.*, VI (May, 1946), 79-84. In another article, "Banking in the Early West: Monopoly, Prohibition, and Laissez Faire," *ibid.*, VIII (May, 1949), 1-25, Hammond contended that hard-money sentiment, which Schlesinger attributed mainly to eastern labor circles, was actually as strong or stronger in the West. In a recent book review Schlesinger agrees that he did not sufficiently emphasize the central banking functions of the national bank; he also suggests that he now believes that "The men in Jackson's day who were most nearly right from the viewpoint of economic growth were neither the Bank advocates nor the hard money theorists but the soft money men of the West." *American Historical Review*, LIX (October, 1953), 140-41.

²⁶ Joseph Dorfman, *The Economic Mind in American Civilization* (3 vols., New York, 1946-1949), II, 601; Joseph Dorfman, "The Jackson Wage-Earner Thesis," *American Historical Review*, LIV (January, 1949), 296-306. For Schlesinger's reply to Dorfman's article see *ibid.*, LIV (April, 1949), 785-86.

²⁷ Richard B. Morris, "'Old Hickory' Jackson Was No FDR," *Labor and Nation* (New York), V (May-June, 1949), 38-40; Richard B. Morris, "Andrew Jackson, Strikebreaker," *American Historical Review*, LV (October, 1949), 54-68.

²⁸ William A. Sullivan, "Did Labor Support Andrew Jackson?" *Political Science Quarterly* (New York), LXII (December, 1947), 569-80; Edward Pessen, "Did Labor Support Andrew Jackson? The Boston Story," *ibid.*, LXIV (June, 1949), 262-74; William A. Sullivan, *The Industrial Worker in Pennsylvania, 1800-1840* (Harrisburg, 1955), 159-207. These studies are criticized in a review by Joseph G. Rayback, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII (September, 1956), 311-12, and in Robert T. Bower, "Note on 'Did Labor Support Jackson? The Boston Story,'" *Political Science Quarterly*, LXV (September, 1950), 441-44.

In a recent article Pessen has retreated from some of the positions formerly maintained by the Columbia historians. He concedes that the workingmen's political organizations, newspapers, and spokesmen were closely identified with a genuine labor movement and that their anti-business views may properly be called radical, though not necessarily anti-capitalist. He also shows that the specifically workingmen's political organizations usually remained independent of, and sometimes hostile to, the

These historians showed a considerable affinity for the Whig view of Jackson personally, especially in the version advanced by Thomas P. Abernethy. Their own interpretation of the Jackson movement was expressed best, perhaps, by Richard Hofstadter, who described it as "a phase in the expansion of liberated capitalism," and as "closely linked to the ambitions of the small capitalist."²⁹

Thus the recent historiography of Jacksonian Democracy has been dominated by the debate over Schlesinger's "class-conflict" or "labor" thesis on the one hand and the "entrepreneurial" thesis put forward by Schlesinger's critics on the other. Schlesinger and his supporters picture the democratic impulse largely as a movement of protest against the unfair privileges claimed by an exploitative business elite, while the Columbia historians defend the diametrically opposed view that the democratic movement was itself strongly capitalist in spirit and objected only to any limitation on free entry into the game of capitalist exploitation.

Yet closer examination reveals some significant affinities between the two interpretations. They share, for one thing, a common origin. It was the socialist publicist Algie M. Simons who staked the first effective claim of real significance for Jacksonian labor.³⁰ Using

Democratic party. It must be remembered, however, that these organizations rarely attracted the votes of more than a small minority of the workingmen, and the question of how "labor" at large voted remains open. Edward Pessen, "The Workingmen's Movement of the Jacksonian Era," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII (December, 1956), 428-43.

²⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1954), 58. For a convenient summary of the views of this group of historians, see the preface to the volume of Jackson documents compiled by another Columbia scholar: Harold C. Syrett, *Andrew Jackson: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis, 1954).

³⁰ Though Simons was the first to develop the labor thesis fully, it had been foreshadowed by, of all people, William Graham Sumner. An admirer of those earlier sound-money men, the labor-oriented Loco Focos, Sumner declared that their "sound and imperishable ideas . . . first put the democratic party on the platform which . . . it had been trying to find." Sumner, *Jackson*, 373. Very different assumptions prompted Sumner's perennial antagonist, the socialist-influenced economist Richard T. Ely, to claim a few years later that "the Democratic party from 1829 to 1841 was more truly a workingmen's party than has been the case with any other great party in our country." *The Labor Movement in America* (New York, 1886), 42-43. And a sympathy with popular causes that has never been adequately recognized induced John B. McMaster to include in his *History* at the turn of the century the first full account of the Jacksonian labor movement. *History*, V, 82-108; VI, 100-103, 181-82, 220-23, 364-70. For a clear indication of the reformist sympathies that never became explicit in McMaster's *History*, see his *The Acquisition of Political, Social, and Industrial Rights of Man in America* (Cleveland, 1903), especially 96-110 for the Jacksonian labor movement. It was apparently through this little book that Simons became acquainted with Jacksonian labor.

data first turned up by John B. McMaster, Simons argued that the labor movement not only was an important part of the democratic upsurge of Jackson's day, but "measured by the impress it left, was the most important event in American history."³¹

After John R. Commons and his associates published their monumental *Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, labor's importance in the Jackson era could no longer be ignored. Even Turner gave the eastern workingmen a minor place in the Jackson movement, and a few scholars went further. In 1913 a textbook writer, Willis Mason West, assigned labor equal weight with the West and asserted that for some years the Democratic party "remained in large degree a workingmen's party." Ten years later Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., used West's treatment as the basis for an essay on Jacksonian Democracy that dealt briefly with many of the points subsequently developed in the younger Schlesinger's *Age of Jackson*.³²

Labor historians were following the same line,³³ but general American historians remained largely unshaken in their devotion to the frontier-sectional interpretation set by Turner. It is rather remarkable, in fact, that the growing vogue of economic interpretation did not produce a greater emphasis on economic class interests in the Jackson period. Even Charles and Mary Beard treated the Jacksonian conflicts as mainly sectional in their *Rise of American Civilization*, an approach which belied their chapter title, "Jack-

³¹ A. M. Simons, *Social Forces in American History* (New York, 1911), 188. Simons' discovery of the Jacksonian labor movement from a reading of McMaster is interestingly illustrated in a series of his writings: *Class Struggles in America* (Chicago, 1903); "The Rise of Labor in America," *International Socialist Review* (Chicago), V (September, 1904), 143-49; *Class Struggles in America* (Rev. ed., Chicago, 1906). In 1903 he knew nothing of the Jacksonian labor movement, interpreting this period of American history in slavishly Turnerean terms. The 1904 article reveals his reading of McMaster, and in 1906 he revised his earlier pamphlet to make a major place for Jacksonian labor. *Social Forces in American History* is an expansion of the 1906 revision.

³² Turner, *Frontier*, 216, 303; Willis Mason West, *The Story of American Democracy, Political and Industrial* (Boston, 1922), 438; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York, 1922), 200-19. I have quoted from the 1922 edition of West's textbook rather than the 1913 edition which Schlesinger used.

³³ John R. Commons and others, *History of Labour in the United States* (2 vols., New York, 1918), I, 459, 461, 465; Selig Perlman, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States* (New York, 1922), 9-10, 27-28; Nathan Fine, *Labor and Farmer Parties in the United States, 1828-1928* (New York, 1928), 12, 15; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor* (New York, 1947), 143-66; Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History* (New York, 1949), 25, 37-38, 45-46.

sonian Democracy — A Triumphant Farmer-Labor Party,” as well as their over-all interpretation of American history.³⁴

The entrepreneurial thesis, like the labor thesis, found its first full statement in the socialist tracts of Algie Simons, where it appeared as a gloss on Turner's frontier thesis. “The ‘frontier’ which is spoken of as being in the ascendent under Jackson was distinctly individualistic and small capitalistic in its instincts, rather than proletarian,” Simons declared. Jacksonian Democracy was “neither frontier, nor wageworking, or even purely capitalist in its mental make-up.” It was the “democracy of expectant capitalists.” Throughout Simons' account there runs a note of Marxian distaste for this greedy democracy of “petit bourgeois,” an attitude which, at one remove from its Marxian roots, may be detected in later expositions of the entrepreneurial thesis.³⁵

The striking fact that both the labor thesis and the entrepreneurial thesis found their first full development in Simons invites a further examination of their affinities. Both, it is clear, are indebted to Marxian analysis and represent a “realistic” approach to history, the one maintaining a detached, analytical attitude, which occasionally betrays an implicit distaste for the middle-class norms of American democratic capitalism, and the other viewing democratic liberalism as being perennially sustained and advanced by anti-business elements in American society, class-conscious and organized for social and political struggle. This “realism” explains the hostility of both to the diffuse Turnerean conception of democracy, but it does not account for the fact that writers of both schools are consistently critical of agrarian elements and seek to de-emphasize their importance in our history. These latter facts, when correlated with the personal origins and sympathies of the writers involved, suggest the belated emergence of the city as a major influence on American historical scholarship.

³⁴ Beard, *Rise of American Civilization*, I, 542-57.

³⁵ Simons, *Class Struggle* (1903 ed.), 10; Simons, *Social Forces*, 210. Turner was quite sensitive to Simons' viewpoint, for he had recognized on occasion that the conflict between Clay and Jackson reflected a larger conflict between two elements in western life: “the industrial forces (town-makers and the business builders), on the one side and the old rural democracy of the uplands on the other.” Yet Turner was never able to clarify this ambiguity in his conception of western democracy, and he reacted defensively to Simons' interpretation. “If this . . . Jacksonian democracy, was, as its socialist critics have called it, in reality a democracy of ‘expectant capitalists,’” Turner declared, “it was not one which expected or acknowledged on the part of the successful ones the right to harden their triumphs into the rule of a privileged class.” Turner, *Frontier*, 172-73, 342-43.

Thus we are reminded once again of the profound influence of frames of reference. Indeed the historians of Jacksonian Democracy might best be classified by the social and intellectual environments that seem so largely to control their interpretations. In place of the simple categories of a Whig school and a democratic school, we might distinguish three main groups.

First, a "patrician" school of historians, drawn from eastern or European upper-middle-class backgrounds, dominated Jacksonian historiography until the end of the nineteenth century. Resenting the vulgar democracy and the equally vulgar plutocracy that were displacing their kind of social and intellectual elite from leadership, these men spoke for the conservative, semi-aristocratic, mugwumpish liberalism of the Gilded Age.

Around 1900 the patrician historians were displaced by an "agrarian democratic" school, drawn from western and southern middle-class backgrounds and reflecting the revival of old-fashioned democratic dogmas in the Progressive era. Fearful of both class antagonism and monopoly capitalism, these men effected a re-orientation of American historiography around the concept of an agrarian-derived democracy of the whole people.

Finally, in recent years, we have seen the emergence of a school of "urban" scholars, drawn from eastern cities, who find the agrarian democratic theme naïve or otherwise unsatisfactory. Most of these urban historians came to maturity during the New Deal years, and they often manifest a greater sympathy for industrial labor than for farmers and middle-class businessmen. Their stance seems to be that of self-conscious intellectuals and critics, expressing through their detached, "scientific," faintly ironic, "realistic" analysis an alienation from the middle-class mainstream of American life that is reminiscent of the patrician school. The entrepreneurial thesis is the most characteristic product of this group, though the labor thesis grows out of many of the same influences.

Actually, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the leading proponent of the labor thesis, emphasizes entrepreneurial elements in Jacksonian Democracy far more than his critics appear to realize; indeed, he sees the western Jacksonians as almost wholly entrepreneurial in spirit. Basically, however, his *Age of Jackson* seems to represent a marriage of the agrarian democratic and the urban points of view, in much the same way that Simons seemed to mix Populism with Marxism. Schlesinger's semi-Marxist "realism" is solidly urban,

but the democratic idealism with which he combines it is clearly in the tradition of Turner.⁸⁶

But what of Old Hickory himself and Jacksonian Democracy? What are we to conclude when, after a century of scholarship, historians still squarely contradict each other about the essential nature of both the man and the movement? Has the frame of reference cut us off from the past as it actually was? Do historical writings tell us more about their authors than they do about their purported subjects?

Before accepting these disheartening conclusions, it may be well to remind ourselves that an interpretation is not necessarily wrong merely because a writer seems to have been impelled toward that interpretation by a particular frame of reference. The conclusions of honest men, working within limits set by an abundance of reliable and relatively unmalleable evidence, must have some basis in the reality of the past they seek to interpret. This may suggest that each school of Jacksonian historiography has been correct up to a point, and that the real problem of interpreting Jacksonian Democracy is to define the proper relationship among the various elements emphasized by the different schools.

Several recent writers, in attempting to do just this, have concluded that the Jacksonian movement was essentially paradoxical. Louis Hartz describes the American democrat of the Jackson era as a hybrid personality — both a class-conscious democrat and an incipient entrepreneur — at once the “man of the land, the factory, and the forge . . . who has all the proletarian virtues that Marx was forever contrasting with the pettiness of the petit-bourgeois,” and “an aggressive entrepreneur, buying ‘on speculation,’ combining ‘some trade with agriculture,’ making ‘agriculture itself a trade.’” He had “a certain smallness of entrepreneurial preoccupation which has never been glamorous in Western thought,” Hartz concludes, but at the same time he was involved in “two heroic dramas, the covered wagon drama of the American frontier and the strike-ridden

⁸⁶ Schlesinger, it should be remembered, is deeply indebted to his father, who came out of Turner’s “valley of democracy” to proclaim the city as the great new frontier for historical scholarship. The elder Schlesinger’s essay on Jacksonian Democracy is even more obviously composed of equal parts of Turnerean and labor themes.

Of course, the three schools as defined above represent central positions, leaving some historians on the fringes. Woodrow Wilson, for example, shows both patrician and agrarian democratic tendencies, while Parrington and the Beards reveal urban tendencies in a context that is mainly agrarian democratic.

drama of a rising labor movement, so that when we come to men like Jackson and Leggett we are never quite sure whether we are dealing with a petty hope or a glorious dream."⁸⁷

Another scholar has defined the paradox of Jacksonian Democracy somewhat differently. Judging from Jackson's own public papers, says Marvin Meyers, the Jacksonians appealed "not to some workingman's yearning for a brave new world; not to the possibilities of a fresh creation at the western limits of civilization; not to the ambitions of a rising laissez-faire capitalism — not to any of these so much as to a *restoration* of old virtues and a (perhaps imaginary) old republican way of life." Meyers states the paradox thus: "The movement which in many ways cleared the path for the triumph of laissez-faire capitalism and its culture in America, and the public which in its daily life acted out that victory, held nevertheless in their conscience an image of a chaste republican order, resisting the seductions of risk and novelty, greed and extravagance, rapid motion and complex dealings." Still another scholar, John W. Ward, has found confirmation for this mood of Old Republican restorationism in the symbolic uses to which Jackson was put by his generation.⁸⁸

If these scholars are right about the paradoxical character of the Jacksonian democratic impulse, then it is easy to see why historians, in emphasizing different elements of the paradox, have reached such different interpretations. Viewed in this light, the frame of reference has served a valuable purpose after all, by leading historians to the different elements of the complex Jacksonian past out of which an over-all synthesis must eventually be constructed.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), 89-138, especially 115-16.

⁸⁸ Marvin Meyers, "The Jacksonian Persuasion," *American Quarterly* (Philadelphia), V (Spring, 1953), 3-15; John W. Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1955).

⁸⁹ This utility of the frame of reference is especially evident in the case of a historian caught between several contexts. Strangely enough it was Vernon L. Parrington — so wrong about so many things — who first described the contradictory character of the American democrat in the Jackson period. Parrington lived early enough in the twentieth century to share the agrarian-derived democratic faith of Turner and company, but late enough to embrace the hard-headed "critical realism" that was soon to displace their rather romantic nostalgia. His heart yearning for an agrarian democracy that his head told him was doomed, he defined the essential meaning of the American democratic impulse as paradoxical. Inspired by both Turner and Simons, Parrington found in Jacksonian Democracy a growing, and to him fatal, entrepreneurial spirit on the one hand, and a delaying action by an anti-aristocratic, anti-business alliance of farmers and workingmen on the other. *American Thought*, II, v, 137-52. Cf. Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., "Parrington and the Decline of American Liberalism," *American Quarterly*, III (Winter, 1951), 295-308.

Yet the succession of frames of reference and the multiplication of hypotheses can distort as well as amplify the past, and our current wealth in hypotheses about the Jackson period suggests that we are poor in the data by which our hypotheses must be checked. The sources, moreover, can force upon our notice factors to which our frames of reference might never lead us.⁴⁰ But the melancholy truth is that from Parton's day to our own, hardly more than a half-dozen scholars have worked thoroughly through the available Jackson material. Consequently few phases of American history offer historians a greater challenge to research and synthesis.

Looking back over a century of scholarship, students of Jacksonian Democracy may well rejoice that their subject has been so central to defining the American experience as to become a major focus for each succeeding reorientation of historical interpretation. New frames of reference have steadily yielded new insights, and the critical spirit in which frames of reference are increasingly used is itself a momentous advance in historical technique. The course from Parton to Turner to our present indecision between labor thesis and entrepreneurial thesis may not look like a straight-line approach to Truth. "Objective reality" we know we can never altogether reach, but we need not apologize for assuming it is there, or for believing that our zigzag course brings us swinging in on a circle of ever closer vantage points for discerning its salient features.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Few scholars, for example, can ever again possess the Jeffersonian frame of reference that led Parrington to discover the profound influence of Old Republican ideology on the Jacksonian generation. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., had to discover the same thing from the sources themselves; in fact, he had some difficulty reconciling it with his central hypotheses.

The findings of Meyers and Ward suggest the value of devising new ways to start from the sources as well as from our hypotheses. Meyers analyzed the value content of Jackson's public papers by a technique akin to literary criticism, while Ward recovered the revealing "public image" of Old Hickory from a wide variety of contemporary sources. Previous scholars seem to have missed the important feature of Jacksonian America yielded by these novel techniques simply because it was not significantly related to any modern frame of reference.

⁴¹ Unfortunately, two major contributions to Jacksonian historiography have appeared barely too late for discussion here: Bray Hammond, *Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton, 1957), and Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, 1957). Each author has brought added richness and authority to the important interpretation that he had previously adumbrated in the articles discussed above. Though I have not done full justice to these interpretations as they are now developed in book-length statements, I believe I have indicated fairly adequately the authors' essential positions, on the basis of their earlier articles.