

The Ages of Jackson

by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

*In the following article, Schlesinger is reflecting on his book from 1945, *The Age of Jackson**

My involvement with the age of Jackson began more than half a century ago. Seeking a subject for an honors essay as an undergraduate at Harvard College in the autumn of 1937, I chose the formidable nineteenth-century American intellectual Orestes A. Brownson. Brownson was a man of many careers—preacher, editor, Transcendentalist fellow traveler, Jacksonian reformer, Catholic convert—and an episode in his Jacksonian phase struck me as of curious interest.

In 1838 Brownson's services in the Jacksonian cause had been rewarded by his appointment as inspector of a government hospital. The arrangement permitted him to continue editing a magazine; and when Jackson's friend and successor President Martin Van Buren ran for reelection in the picturesque "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" contest of 1840, Brownson created considerable embarrassment for his fellow Democrats by writing an inflammatory essay entitled "The Laboring Classes." After describing the exploitation of the workers, Brownson raised the specter of "that most dreaded of all wars, the war of the poor against the rich, a war which, however long it may be delayed, will come, and come with all its horrors." To avert that war, he said, the age must recognize its historic responsibility. "Our business is to emancipate the proletaries, as the past has emancipated the slaves."

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Jackson had conventionally been seen as a champion of the frontier; his presidency as the eruption of the backwoods west into national power. Yet it appeared that eastern intellectuals like Brownson and Bancroft had their own stake in the Jacksonian uprising. Moreover, was not someone like Henry Clay of Kentucky quite as representative of the frontier as Andrew Jackson of Tennessee? And Clay, as the champion of the American System of national development, based on the protective tariff, the United States Bank, and federal aid for internal improvement, was Jackson's mortal political antagonist.

If Jacksonianism meant no more than the surge of uncouth backwoodsmen onto the national scene, why were so many leading writers and artists of the day—not only Bancroft and Brownson but James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving, Walt Whitman, James Kirke Paulding, the actor Edwin Forrest, the sculptors Horatio Greenough and Hiram Powers—ardent Jacksonians? And if the frontier was the force driving the Jacksonian upheaval, how to account for the preoccupation in the pamphlet literature by Jackson's supporters with problems of a commercial society—with monopoly, with banking, with the business cycle, with the unequal distribution of the fruits of labor, with workingmen, with trade unions, with class conflict? How to account for the hatred the business community showed for Jackson and his works?

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The Age of Jackson sought to combine narrative and analysis in a fresh look at the Jacksonian revolution. Historians had nearly all agreed that Jacksonian democracy was a frontier phenomenon, but they had vigorously disagreed on whether this was a good or bad thing. Judgment on the merits had varied according to the political climate...

The Age of Jackson took a different tack. It argued that more could be understood about Jacksonian democracy if it were regarded as a problem not of sections but of classes. As Jacksonian policies evolved, I contended, they were increasingly shaped not by the needs and demands of the frontier but by

the needs and demands of workingmen, small farmers, and intellectuals in the East. Class conflict, for example, was hardly a feature of the far frontier, yet it was a favorite Jacksonian theme. Frontiers breed equality and individualism. Class resentments arise in a developed and stratified economic order. It was the East, not the frontier, that had the bitter experience of shrinking opportunity, growing inequality, and hardening class lines. *The Age of Jackson* further contended that Jacksonian democracy constituted the second phase, Jeffersonianism having been the first, of the perennial struggle between the business community and the rest of society for control of the state, a struggle I saw as the basic meaning of American liberalism and as the guarantee of freedom in a capitalist democracy.

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Now, as *The Age of Jackson* makes clear, there were indeed entrepreneurial hustlers in the Jacksonian coalition of the 1830s. There were state banking interests, southern planters, western inflationists, eastern businessmen on the way up. As a movement, Jacksonian democracy included opportunists out for a fast buck as well as radical democrats committed to pure doctrine. The same thing, *mutatis mutandis*, could be said of the Roosevelt coalition of the 1930s. Yet it seems to me hard to argue that Jacksonianism, or the New Deal for that matter, was essentially the philosophy of acquisitive enterprise. To identify Jackson with Biddle (or Herbert Hoover with FDR) would be to drain meaning from American political conflict. Analysis depends on the capacity to draw distinctions.

If the Jacksonians were a rabble of grasping entrepreneurs, who were the Whigs? If Jacksonian democracy served the interests of liberated capitalism, why were so many capitalists so ferociously against it? If many of the self-styled “workingmen” of Jackson’s day were not, in fact, workers at all but small proprietors on their way up, why should they define themselves as members of the working class and carry on so about the rich? If Americans of the 1830s were all dedicated to the same capitalist ends, what in the world were the rhetoric of Orestes Brownson and George Bancroft and the savage political conflict of the Jackson era all about?

Now our vanity as historians is to suppose that we understand better than the people who were there what the shouting was about. It is true enough that scholars looking back can know some things better than contemporary participants did. But 20-20 hindsight can be carried too far. Too often we suggest that those poor chaps in the past may have thought they were acting for one set of reasons; but we, so much wiser, know they were acting for quite other reasons. This reductionism denies historical figures the validity of their own judgments and thereby denies their human dignity—and of course invites future historians to practice the same reductionism on us. When participants explain in urgent words why they lived, fought, and bled, is it not intellectual arrogance for historians to reject their testimony?

What then was the source of the intense sense of conflict? My surmise is that it had to do with the basic question of a democratic polity: Who is to control the state? The clarity of this point is obscured, however, by confusion with a separate question: What is the proper role of the state?

On the second question, Jackson regarded himself as a Jeffersonian who believed—or believed he believed—that that government was best which governed least. His purpose, he said, was

“...to persuade my countrymen, so far as I may, that it is not in a splendid government supported by powerful monopolies and aristocratical establishments that they will find happiness, but in a plain system, void of pomp, protecting all and granting favors to none, dispensing its blessings, like the dews of Heaven, unseen and unfelt save in the freshness and bounty they contribute to produce.”

This was what I call “the Jeffersonian myth” in the last chapter of *The Age of Jackson*. As Marvin Meyers showed in his book *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (1957), the Jeffersonian myth was an essential part of the

Jacksonian appeal—a potent appeal, in a time of wrenching economic change, to the frugal virtues of the old republic against the rising luxury, corruption, and concentrated money power.

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Most scholars today, I believe, would agree with the Jacksonians and Whigs of the 1830s that the two parties represented very different attitudes toward business and, to a degree, different classes. “The entrepreneurial thesis, as it applies to Jacksonian democracy,” Professor McFaul concluded, “requires severe modification if not abandonment.” “The Democratic party,” Professor Sharp wrote, “did not engage in the battle over banks and currency as the party of the entrepreneur.... The Whigs were the champions of the banks against the ‘radicalism’ of the Jacksonians. Despite internal feuding, the main body of the Democratic party supported radical reform of the banks.” “In the ideological universe of Jacksonian America,” Dr. John Ashworth wrote in *“Agrarians” and “Aristocrats”: Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837–1846*,

Democracy and capitalism were in conflict. Unless this fundamental truth is recognized the politics of the age will remain ultimately incomprehensible.... More obviously anti-entrepreneurial than entrepreneurial, more nearly anti-capitalist than pro-capitalist, and more overtly radical than conservative, Jacksonian Democracy was an avowedly egalitarian movement which sought to utilize the power that democracy gave to the individual in order to resist those social and political forces which took it away.”

“The evidence of the radical period,” Professor Cole said of New Hampshire, “...suggests that Arthur Schlesinger’s interpretation of Jacksonian democracy is more accurate than that of the entrepreneurial historians.” It seems, after all, that there was a struggle between the business community and the rest of society over who should control the state.