

The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896. *By Sven Beckert.* Cambridge University Press, 2001. 512 pp. Photographs, 4 maps, graphs, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-521-79039-5.

Reviewed by David Nasaw

While American social and labor historians have devoted a great many words to the “making” of an American working class in the nineteenth century, there has been a studied lack of interest in examining the formation of an American “ruling” or “business” or “capitalist” class. Sven Beckert attempts to fill in this gap in *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896*, by articulating the historical process through which the American bourgeoisie constituted and consolidated itself as a dominant social class after the Depression of 1873.

There was little uniformity of interest among New York City’s economic elites through the later half of the nineteenth century. The deepest fault line was that which separated merchants from manufacturers. While the merchants isolated themselves, culturally, politically, and geographically, from the working masses they both feared and disdained, the manufacturers, many only recently removed from the artisanal ranks, regarded themselves as part of the city’s “producing classes” and were not averse to promoting their historic and organic ties to the wage workers who labored in their workshops and factories. The manufacturers welcomed protectionist assistance from “the fostering hand of government”; the merchants were opposed to governmental intervention in the economy, especially tariffs aimed at stifling foreign trade. The manufacturers, without economic ties to the South, were likely to vote Republican; the merchants, Democrat. The divisions between these two groups surfaced most visibly in the 1850s and early 1860s; by the end of the Civil War, they had been all but eclipsed with the defeat of the confederacy and the rise to dominance within the American bourgeoisie of the manufacturers.

After the Civil War, a “free labor ideology,” embraced by manufacturers and artisans alike, reigned supreme in the Northeast. There was little fear of class conflict or anxiety about future labor problems now that the slaves had been emancipated, the political system liberated from the stranglehold of southern slave owners and their Democratic allies, and the West opened to settlement by free laborers. New York’s artisans and workers, it was assumed, would now be free either to rise in the ranks to become self-employed artisans or manufacturers or to make use of the nation’s safety valve and purchase free or low-priced homesteads in the West. Only in the early 1870s did it become apparent that the major shifts in the political economy that had

accompanied the ascendancy of the manufacturers had brought with them the kind of proletarianization that the nation's business classes had hoped America would escape.

New York City's businessmen united as never before in the 1870s, especially during and after the depression that began in 1873, to protect their interests against what they now perceived to be a dangerous class of urban laborers. They organized themselves into employers' associations to fight strikes and the unions that directed or supported them, did all they could to wrest political power from the factions of the Democratic party that had elected Boss Tweed, retracted their support of municipal services and charities, and executed a radical ideological turn toward a new Darwinian or Spencerian fatalism. Some men, this new ideology decreed, were destined to remain workers forever. Neither government intervention nor private charity was going to change this fact of life, harsh though it might be.

By the middle 1880s, the conflict between workers and employers or labor and capital had, according to Sven Beckert, moved to "center stage" in New York City. As workers mobilized in the workshop and at the polls, the business classes came together to forge a shared bourgeois culture, a shared Social Darwinian ideology, and a united political and economic response to the new "labor problem." The bourgeoisie positioned itself now as the guardian not only of political order but of economic progress as well. Employers banded together to fight unions and invoke the power of the state to quash strikes because, they argued, unions, strikes, and government intervention in the economy interfered with the proper working of the laws of the market.

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the American bourgeoisie had achieved more political, economic, and social power than comparable economic elites in Europe, because the American business classes were united and because a weakened state offered no counterbalancing power structure. Economic and political dominance was not sufficient, however, to suppress social conflict, in large part because the bourgeoisie had failed to translate its overwhelming economic and political power into cultural power. The working people did not accept the weak, capital-dominated laissez-faire state as legitimate and continued to organize against it, politically and in the workplace. Thus, ironically, at the height of its actual power—between 1886 and 1896—the bourgeoisie was wracked with anxiety about the future.

Beckert closes his book with a brief discussion of the armory-building movement of the 1880s and 1890s, which reveals both the dominance of capital over state and society and the bourgeoisie's fear that only military power could, in the end, guarantee future dominance. "Insecure about the future and increasingly aware of the 'danger' to their property engendered by

rising inequality, upper-class New Yorkers saw new armories as a guarantee of their safety” (p. 295).

Sven Beckert has done an admirable job in constructing what will become the indispensable narrative of the historical process by which New York City’s bourgeoisie achieved political and economic dominance in the late nineteenth century. Beckert writes with clarity and precision, ranges widely and wisely over a large and diverse number of sources, and is both astute and graceful in his judgments. This is on all accounts a book that should, and will, be widely read by historians of the city, of labor, and of business.

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