

The Roots of American Industrialization. By *David R. Meyer*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. xiii + 333 pp. Tables, figures, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-801-87141-7.

Reviewed by A. Glenn Crothers

Industrialization in the antebellum Northeast, U.S. history textbooks tell us, was a result of the region's declining agriculture, which pushed farmers off the land into factories or forced them to migrate west. At the same time, transportation improvements enabled midwestern farmers to ship their crops east, exacerbating the agrarian decline of the eastern states and accelerating the region's industrial growth. According to geographer David R. Meyer, this standard portrait requires sharp revision. In *The Roots of American Industrialization*, he argues that it was the *prosperity* of eastern agriculture that sparked the industrial transformation of the antebellum era. Once a manufacturing base had been established in the East, moreover, the region's urban metropolises further fueled demand and supplied capital. Finally, within each industry, entrepreneurs developed a variety of innovative organizational, technological, and marketing strategies to ensure that the region retained its premier industrial position and eventually expanded into national markets.

In the first part of his study, Meyer argues that between 1790 and 1820 "significant changes" in commerce, agriculture, and manufacturing "set the stage for faster growth from 1820 to 1860" (p. 281). Foremost among the changes was the increasing commercialization and prosperity of eastern agriculture, which led to a growing rural population and labor force and to rising per capita incomes, wages, and capital investment. Though Meyer recognizes that some rural areas—particularly less fertile, hilly regions—experienced economic decline and outmigration, most eastern farmers "responded to local opportunities" (p. 35), transporting farm produce to nearby markets by wagon and embracing new agricultural techniques. According to Meyer, the prosperous agricultural economy that resulted spurred capital accumulation; inspired the creation of a hierarchy of urban places that provided retail outlets and commercial services for farmers; opened up markets for manufactured goods as prosperous farmers

abandoned home production; and encouraged technological innovation, literacy, and the construction of dense communication networks. Between 1820 and 1860—which Meyer covers in the second part of the book—these trends only intensified. Strikingly, Meyer downplays the importance of internal improvements. Because both eastern farmers and manufacturers produced primarily for subregional markets prior to the late-1840s, the costs of building canals and railroads greatly exceeded their developmental impact. Instead, wagons remained the most cost-effective mode for shipping goods between local urban places and their rural hinterlands.

But Meyer's thesis goes further than this: If a prosperous rural economy provided the basis for the East's industrial transformation, the urban metropolises of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were pivotal factors in eastern growth. Indeed, Meyer sees the rapid expansion of these cities and the prosperity of eastern agriculture as mutually reinforcing. In and around these urban places there developed what Meyer calls "metropolitan industrial complexes" (p. 194), which served a number of purposes: they provided enormous markets for agricultural and manufactured goods; they were home to the financial intermediaries that pooled the capital necessary for industrial development; and they offered a variety of marketing, wholesaling, and transportation services for distributing manufactured goods. Equally important, within each of these metropolises there arose "social networks of capital" (p. 70), in which market and distribution information, technological and organizational innovations, and financial resources were shared to the mutual benefit of all participants. As a result, these metropolises became home to most of the East's manufacturing, and within each successful industry entrepreneurs developed new organizational and marketing strategies that enabled them to access ever larger markets. Not until after 1850 and the establishment of an effective railroad network, however, were most eastern industries able to exploit national markets; before 1850, eastern manufacturers produced goods primarily for their own regions.

Meyer's study is a signal contribution to our understanding of the process of industrial development in the antebellum United States. His emphasis on the prosperity of eastern agriculture forces a reevaluation of the "transition to capitalism" debate that has so exercised historians in the last thirty years. In particular, Meyer's work makes clear that social historians' emphasis on the farmers pushed off the land has obscured the

overall prosperity of eastern agriculture. Likewise, his case that turnpikes constituted the primary form of transportation before the 1840s forces economic historians to reassess the role of canals and railroads. Though based primarily on secondary works and census data, Meyer weaves into his text multiple case studies—of Massachusetts farmers, of the Slater mill system, of the Boston Associates, the merchants turned manufacturers who established the Waltham and Lowell textile mills, of Connecticut’s brass-making industry—that effectively illustrate his broader thesis about the centrality of agriculture and urban metropolises to the East’s industrial growth. His discussion of the Boston Associates’ eight-part “business plan” (pp. 115–19) is particularly strong, as it reveals the organizational innovations necessary for industrial success, although the cases also demonstrate that each successful industry followed its own unique plan. Though few will find Meyer’s work an enjoyable read, burdened as it is by a rather leaden prose style, it is nonetheless an important reevaluation of the process of U.S. industrialization and necessary reading for all historians of antebellum economic life. And if undergraduates are overwhelmed by the denseness of the text and its quantitative apparatus, Meyer’s insights will surely be contained in subsequent editions of the textbooks they do read.

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