

Public Markets and Civic Culture in Nineteenth-Century America. By *Helen Tangires*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. xx + 265 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$45. ISBN 0-801-87133-6.

Reviewed by Paul A. Gilje

One of the miracles of civilization is that we can buy food. Living in vast urban conglomerations, working at occupations totally divorced from farming, hunting, and gathering, we can go to the nearest Wal-Mart supercenter and purchase bread, meat, fruits, and vegetables. If you pause and think about this process for a moment, you will find it truly amazing. Before Wal-Mart, before supermarkets, before the corner grocery, civilized urban areas had to figure out ways to bring food to the common folk in a cost-effective manner. Helen Tangires tells the story of how many nineteenth-century American city dwellers obtained food from public markets sponsored by local government.

Tangires argues that, as the nineteenth century opened, city fathers, acting in the spirit of a moral economy, supported and regulated public markets, in which butchers practiced their trade and a variety of other foodstuffs could be obtained. This public-market system, and the moral economy it was based on, came under assault amid the rising tide of aggressive capitalism during the age of Jackson. Private corporations sought to replace public markets in large cities like New York and Philadelphia, raising millions in capital and exerting enough political influence to obtain municipal approval to set up their own shops. But the idea of public markets would not go away. Smaller cities, whose size allowed closer connections to producers in the surrounding countryside, clung to the older civic institutions. And even in the great urban centers the public market could not be totally abandoned; it retained its usefulness as a wholesale supplier for stores spread throughout the city and as a retail center for the poor and the rising middle class. In fact, in the late nineteenth century, many cities erected elaborate multifunction markets, both as a service to the public and as a statement of civic pride.

Public Markets and Civic Culture in the Nineteenth Century focuses on its subject like a laser beam on a target. Therein lie both its strengths and its weaknesses. This is

the book you will turn to if you want to find out anything about the public market in the nineteenth century. Tangires has mined a treasure trove of sources from several cities to put together a complex story in a coherent fashion. Cities dealt with the issue of food distribution by adopting various strategies, most of which involved, to a greater or lesser degree, the public market. While concentrating on the giant emporia of New York and Philadelphia, Tangires offers glimpses of other cities, from Dubuque to Washington, D.C. The book is richly illustrated with scores of pictures of people and buildings. Tangires does a wonderful job of describing the historical context of the public market, whether it is the moral economy of the early republic, the laissez-faire approach of the mid-nineteenth century, or the progressivism and city-beautiful movement of the early twentieth century. The text is carefully written, proceeding smoothly through a series of controversies but never losing sight of the main thesis.

However, in the end, I found myself wanting more. Simply concentrating on the public markets is not enough. Although it might be unfair to criticize Tangires for not writing a different book, I felt that her single-minded concern with the public market skirts the key question: how do we distribute food to people in the cities? In order to understand the rise and fall and the rise again of the public market, we need to get the full story of all the institutions involved. Tangires barely outlines that other story. During the nineteenth century, butchers began to set up shops in many locations, and grocers increasingly satisfied neighborhood needs. Street vendors, too, played a role in this alternate food-distribution network. Tangires could have told us more about these suppliers, describing where and how food distribution changed. Although she discusses the importance of the public market in civic culture throughout the nineteenth century, I she does not analyze how local shops catered to neighborhood needs and fostered individual community cultures.

One reason I would like to have seen Tangires pursue the story of food distribution into the neighborhoods is that it would have enlarged the framework of her story and given her a way to sustain the portrayal of vibrant street life that enlivens the first part of the book. The early chapters contain compelling descriptions of the variety of activities in the public market, from the dancing of African Americans to the blood dripping on a butcher's apron and street vendors selling fruit and other seasonal products.

At times these vignettes compose a portrait that is a bit too nostalgic. I suspect that the moral economy in the marketplace was never quite as dominant as Tangires suggests, and I know that butchers were often mean and violent men with a reputation for fighting and busting up taverns.

Putting aside these caveats, Tangires does a great job in bringing a lost world to life, both with her words and with the illustrations she has uncovered. In the later chapters, we learn less about the people in the market and the streets and more about civic boosters and entrepreneurs. Throughout the book, however, we learn a great deal about the nature of public markets and their role in shaping civic consciousness.

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