

Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry. By Lawrence A. Peskin. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. xi + 294 pp. Tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-801-87324-X.

Reviewed by Gary J. Kornblith

“Although much has been written about the ‘industrial revolution,’” Lawrence A. Peskin declares at the opening of his fine book, “we rarely read about industrial *revolutionaries*,” because scholars too often concentrate on forces rather than on persons in developing explanatory models of economic change (p. 1). Yet *Manufacturing Revolution* is not an exercise in entrepreneurial history in the manner of Thomas Cochran or Jonathan Hughes. Although it covers the period from 1760 to 1830, the book lacks any mention of such famed American innovators as Oliver Evans, Robert Fulton, or Eli Whitney. Instead of men of action, Peskin is interested in men of words: American authors and orators who “launched a discourse about manufacturing” that provided the intellectual rationale for industrialization well before material factors were available to turn that rationale into a reality (p. 2). The result is a thoughtful and enlightening study of how advocates of increased American manufacturing framed their appeals for popular support and governmental assistance during the Republic’s formative era. Whether Peskin has properly identified the key human agents of American industrialization is open to dispute, however.

Peskin begins his analysis with a consideration of how eighteenth-century observers conceptualized the political economy of the first British Empire. “Britons on both sides of the Atlantic,” he writes, “assumed that the imperial economic system was built on four interrelated principles: systematic planning, complementarity of economic functions among its constituent parts, balance-of-trade theory, and the centrality of manufacturing” (p. 14). Before the 1760s, nobody of note challenged the logic of this system, and virtually every commentator agreed that the role of the mainland North American colonies was to provide raw materials and a captive market for English manufactures. Nor did the advent of the imperial crisis immediately overturn this consensus. Colonial protesters argued that the Sugar and Stamp Acts violated traditional

mercantilist norms, not that those norms were unjust or wrong. But once the patriots contemplated political independence, they also had to ponder the prerequisites for economic independence. In this new context, the need for American manufactures, especially weaponry, loomed large.

After the Revolutionary War was won, advocates of increased manufacturing argued that national strength required a diversified economy based on neomercantilist assumptions. Peskin examines three sets of public organizations that promoted such views in the late eighteenth century: mechanic committees and associations, which called for protective tariffs; manufacturing societies, comprising merchant-manufacturers who advocated government encouragement of capital-intensive enterprises; and agricultural societies, which supported market-based collaboration between farmers and manufacturers, including household producers. According to Peskin, “all shared a belief in the harmony of interests,” but they differed over both means and ends (p. 127). Most notably, whereas mechanics envisioned a manufacturing sector consisting mainly of traditional craft operations, wealthier merchant-manufacturers “looked forward to a day when American manufacturing would be conducted on a large scale in factories owned by corporations and controlled by financiers able to gain support from the state” (p. 118). In Peskin’s judgment, the merchant-manufacturers’ vision of industrial capitalism was already ascendant by 1800.

Peskin devotes the last section of his book to the tangled history of efforts to encourage manufacturing during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. He traces the changing meaning of certain key words, including *mechanic* and *manufacturing*, and tracks the shifting composition and changing partisan loyalties over time of the coalition manufacturing advocates. With the advent of the “Era of Good Feelings” came an upsurge in popular enthusiasm for government aid to manufactures, resulting in the passage of a series of protective tariffs. Peskin views the protectionist Harrisburg convention of 1827 as the climax of the neomercantilist movement that originated in the Revolutionary era. “The emerging American system,” he writes of Henry Clay’s political-economic program, “was the culmination of the discourse colonial mechanics began during the unrest of the 1760s” (p. 221).

Peskin's case for the continuity of pro-manufacturing thought across the period from 1760 to 1830 is convincing. Less persuasive is his contention that the men who espoused these ideas were the prime movers behind early American industrialization. Advocates of the protection and encouragement of manufactures often failed to secure the governmental policies they sought. By Peskin's own calculations, more public funds were directed toward improving transportation and agriculture than toward enhancing manufactures in the early Republic, and Clay's vision of an American system went unrealized. While Peskin argues that manufacturing propagandists created an intellectual climate suitable for industrial enterprise, the nation's most prominent agrarians—Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison—did more to establish the requisite economic climate by imposing the Embargo Act and taking the nation into war in 1812. Of equal significance, Peskin greatly underestimates the continuing contribution of small producers to American development. By his account, mechanics' voices disappeared almost entirely from the public debate about political economy after 1800. Yet the flip side of what Sean Wilentz has termed the "bastardization of craft" in the early nineteenth century was the emergence of artisan entrepreneurs, who introduced a more advanced division of labor and achieved technological improvements in a wide variety of manufacturing processes. Having usually been trained in traditional trades, these self-made men still identified themselves as mechanics, even as they acted increasingly like modern businessmen. They may not have been as articulate as Peskin's authors and orators, but they provided much of the energy and ambition it took for the United States to defy the standard fate of postcolonial societies and rise to global prominence as an industrial power.

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