

Ready-Made Democracy: A History of Men's Dress in the American Republic, 1760–1860. By Michael Zakim. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. x + 296 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. Cloth, \$30. ISBN: 0-226-97793-5.

Reviewed by Wendy Gamber

Ready-Made Democracy transforms what might have been a narrow economic history into a remarkably expansive study of American society, politics, and culture. Michael Zakim places the men's clothing industry at the literal and metaphorical center of a key historical question: the relationship between capitalism and democracy. Zakim rejects the so-called consensus school's timeless and reassuring equation of the two. But he also has little patience for revisionist accounts that pit a fundamentally antidemocratic market revolution against tenaciously persistent anticapitalist values. Opting instead to document "capitalism's rise to greatness" (p. 5), Zakim sees both capitalism and democracy as revolutionary agents that emerged simultaneously in nineteenth-century America. Using clothing as both "material and metaphor" (p. 1), *Ready-Made Democracy* tells the story of how the American bourgeoisie, a "revolutionary class" (p. 8), achieved economic and cultural hegemony.

Without steam power or new technologies, an army of ambitious, self-made entrepreneurs transformed the men's clothing trade into an industry valued in excess of forty-eight million dollars by the 1850 census, established markets throughout much of the nation, and employed tens of thousands of mostly ill-paid, casual workers. Cultural transformations were no less important. Homespun once symbolized the rejection of luxury that guaranteed civic virtue; in what might have been viewed as a threat to the republic itself, mass-produced ready-mades replaced scarcity with abundance. But abundance in the form of the sober business suit, theoretically available to everyone, embodied traditional notions of industry and economy. Or, as Zakim puts it, "proper attire became the means by which the capitalist class dressed-up the ready-made revolution in the primal myth of the homespun past" (p. 10). Luxury could be safely feminized, relegated to women, who were denied access both to ready-made clothes and to a newly egalitarian political sphere. Likewise, by spilling gallons of ink on the plight

of the seamstress, popular representations transformed industrial relations into a gender problem, defusing potentially explosive issues of class conflict. For men, on the other hand, fashion became a “paradigm of liberal governance” (p. 3), mediating the tensions between individualism and uniformity.

A brief review cannot do justice to the complexity of Zakim’s argument or to the multifaceted nature of his book, which literally bursts at the seams (pun intended). Zakim’s ruminations range widely, from regional and national marketing networks to tariffs to Anna Mowatt’s popular play, *Fashion*, to Andrew Jackson’s instructions for the attire of diplomats. Zakim is at his best when he analyzes the seemingly commonplace as indications of new ways of thinking and new modes of social organization. He notes, for example, that the 1850 census, by decreeing the inclusion of all establishments with annual products valued at \$500 or more, redefined “manufacture” in the process. Once the term meant transforming raw materials into something for human use; now it signified the production of “surplus value” (p. 40). Or consider Zakim’s astute reading of the newly coined expression “the standard of living” as a phrase that “conflated market equivalences and social equalities” (p. 191). Zakim interprets piecework as not merely a tool of economic exploitation but also as a novel method of labor discipline. And he brilliantly demonstrates that custom tailoring, ostensibly a relic from a preindustrial past, was thoroughly transformed by the industrial revolution. Conversely—and rightly—Zakim takes publications such as *Godey’s*, the *Mirror of Fashion*, and *Hunt’s Merchants Magazine* as serious contributions to political discourse.

In short, Zakim combines a careful, perceptive, often original discussion of the evolution of the clothing industry—one that encompasses entrepreneurs, workers, and consumers—with a broader cultural history of “ready-made democracy.” But the two parts don’t always form a seamless whole; in particular, Zakim’s discussion of clerks, while fascinating in its own right, seems only tenuously connected to the suits they wore. And while Zakim is right to insist on the importance of clothing manufacturing—easily dismissed by historians enthralled by the cogs and wheels of heavy industry—his ready-made suits may carry too heavy a symbolic weight on their padded shoulders. At times Zakim risks turning clothing from *a* metaphor of nineteenth-century politics and culture into *the* metaphor. One wonders if the histories of other antebellum consumer goods—

carpets, clocks, stoves, pianos, for instance—would yield similar stories. And incorporating the custom production of women’s clothing—a field monopolized by female craftworkers—might confirm, but might also complicate, the gendered story Zakim tells.

Finally, for all its breadth and sophistication, *Ready-Made Democracy* has a frustratingly teleological feel. Perhaps Zakim borrows a bit too heavily from the consensus school; he sews up potential political, economic, and cultural conflicts (gender relations trump class conflict; fashion regimes impose self-governance on an otherwise unruly urban population) a bit too neatly—and hence a bit unconvincingly. This may be partly because—despite his insistence to the contrary—he paints a relatively homogeneous portrait of the bourgeoisie, rather than listening for divergent points of view. His “employer class,” for example, includes everyone from Mathew Carey to Sarah Josepha Hale to the members of the Female Moral Reform Society.

Nevertheless, *Ready-Made Democracy* is an impressive achievement that charts the direction in which I believe business history should be heading. More than a decade ago, historian Louis Galambos challenged scholars to “put business back into American history.” Zakim, at least implicitly, responds to that challenge. As *Ready-Made Democracy* beautifully demonstrates, the endeavor yields rich rewards.

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