

Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York. By *Thomas Summerhill*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005. xi + 287 pp. Photographs, maps, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$38.00. ISBN: 0-252-02976-3.

Reviewed by Martin Bruegel

The harvest of nineteenth-century rural dissent included, according to Thomas Summerhill, many progressive national laws enacted in the early twentieth century. Taxing incomes, regulating business, and women's suffrage, among others, had all figured at one or another time on the agenda of a wide variety of local protest movements. Between the War of Independence and the onset of World War I, activists in central New York fought against manorial relations, railroad companies, and distant, albeit intrusive, government. They tended to end up on the losing side of history and thus figured mostly as extras in historical writing. According to Summerhill, the status of protagonists helps to identify two recurrent features of farmers' protest: a commitment, first, to land ownership as a guarantee for independence and civic virtue; and second, to local, participatory democracy as a protective shield for, and launch pad of, community interests. Economic and political development changed the triggers of turmoil and the forms and goals of grassroots organizations. But the preservation of family farms and the defense of the individual as well as public autonomy persisted as motives of mobilization. In the last instance, it is this almost structural persistence of social pressure here in New York and elsewhere in the northern United States, rather than any individual cause, that contributed to maintaining the political space where reform would eventually get its way.

This is a seductive argument. Summerhill is aware of its teleological whiff. He mitigates the quasi-absence of evidence that links the different, discrete episodes of social upheaval in central New York by a meticulous description of their political manifestations. While discontent arose more often than not from economic conditions, it is in the political system that Summerhill locates its cumulative effect in the countryside. Farmers in central New York embraced republican values eagerly throughout the nineteenth century: they believed that the survival of republican institutions depended as much on strong rural communities as such vigor depended, in turn, on the safeguarding of

the republic. Yet disillusionment with the actors in the system hit early on. By the 1840s antirenters felt betrayed by politicians who used their cause—and votes—to advance partisan schemes. A decade later, opponents of the Albany & Susquehanna Railroad discovered that they were no match for business interests when it came to exerting influence on public decision-making: deep purses made arguments emphasizing developmental promises resonate more strongly with men in power than noisy but merely vocal pleas for local democracy. These disappointments, including the encounter with corrupt authorities, intensified farmers' search for extrapolitical means to realize their aspiration for an independent way of life and to express their dissatisfaction with the party system. They continued to vote (unfortunately, electoral turnout is a topic on which Summerhill is uncharacteristically reticent). Nonetheless, withdrawal into the private sphere of individual virtue also seemed to mark a conservative, inward turn, an introversion compounded by the more frequent outbursts of xenophobia and antiurbanism after the Civil War. Reforms, then, aimed at both satisfying specific claims and bringing an alienated segment of the population back into the political system.

The retrieval of small-scale sociopolitical history is a notoriously difficult enterprise. Summerhill's commitment to the restoration of the myriad intricacies of local fabric yields a detailed, if somewhat uneven, portrait gallery of groups, ranging from politicians to merchants and, of course, farmers rich and poor. Ordinary people figure prominently in the design of *Harvest of Dissent*, yet they seem to have left few first-hand traces in local archives. This dearth obliges Summerhill to rely on census information to draw social sketches and, more heavily, on outsiders' observations to depict common lives. Such evidence requires careful construction because it offers a biased angle on social experience and slights indigenous viewpoints. In short, it puts a limit on Summerhill's well-taken emphasis on agency. In matters of politics, we hear spokesmen rather than regular citizens (see also G. C. Altschuler and S. M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* [2000]), and the discrepancy between the authorized political rhetoric of the few and the privately held views of the less articulate many (that might or might not converge toward public discontent) invites further inquiry into the system's legitimacy and the habits and rituals of political representation. When it comes to agricultural change, the absence of account books has

Summerhill's farmers in central New York emerge as, at best, imitators and, at worst, victims, rather than as purposeful participants in innovation and economic development insomuch as increases in productivity (dairy) and the introduction of new crops (hops) appear to have trickled down from their enterprising, wealthy neighbors or were imposed by gentlemen landlords in synch with the pulse of the national market. While not inert, ordinary people seem to have followed trends and, if they were not carried away, barely bent them to what appears as their cherished way of life.

Harvest of Dissent aims at integrating the components of an intricate story with the help of the umbrella notion "political economy," the crossroads of economic and political ideas that, in this case, animated agrarian movements (p. 3). While extant evidence at times frustrates the attempt to show the coherence of economic circumstances and political conduct in nineteenth-century central New York, Summerhill only yields in one respect to the temptation of simplifying historical developments (perhaps the rendering of complexity requires the pursuit of exhaustiveness, but it does every so often come at the cost of a diminution in the narrative's reader friendliness). Ignoring recent scholarship that highlights the benefits of a clear distinction between "the market" and capitalism (see Naomi R. Lamoreaux, "Rethinking the Transition to Capitalism in the Early American Northeast," *Journal of American History* [Sept. 2003]), Summerhill constructs an enduringly averse attitude of modest farmers and tenants to commercial relations. This introduces a static element in an otherwise dynamic chronicle, and one that reduces these historical actors to a set of unchanging socioeconomic postures (a *mentalité*?). The unlikeliness of such persistence emerges from a variety of subjects that transform central New York incidents into matters of great interest. However much cooperative efforts in marketing milk and hops toward the end of the nineteenth century rewarded business acumen rather than neighborly mutuality, and benefited wealthier rather than poorer residents, even the most modest, least entrepreneurial, largely self-sufficient farm family had almost always engaged in commercial exchange (the revolutionary period may represent the one exception to this observation: see Allan Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers* [2000]). While they may very well have decided to keep their involvement to a minimum, they were interested in the terms of trade. Hence changing definitions of product quality whose elaboration

pitted local producers against indispensable service providers (millers, pp. 24, 29), middlemen (hops merchants, pp. 183–87), artisanal and industrial users (brewers, pp. 99, 183), and competitors (manufacturers of oleomargarine, pp. 168–69, 213) in the marketplace and the legislative arena. Such episodes make for good reading, and it is Summerhill's accomplishment to show that the advance of our knowledge on rural development will require further research into concrete social relations rather than abstractions.

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