

THE JACKSONIANS: PARADOX LOST?

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O gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for
solution!

—E. A. Poe, "William Wilson"

WHILE CONFLICTING EVIDENCE and interpretations may produce truth, they may also generate anxiety. And those who survey the Jacksonians will find in the gaggle of contradictory interpretations, in the parade of urban proletariat, rising middle classes, agrarian goodfolk, classical economists, and others, ample reason for anxiety. It is possible, of course, to react to this dilemma by suppressing contradictory evidence or, alternatively, by solomonically declaring all interpretations correct *in part* and then proceeding about one's own business. Yet the most satisfactory method of reducing anxiety is by reconciling the discordant themes, and this impulse may account for the attractiveness of the device of paradox as applied to the Jacksonians. In the limbo of paradox, all is possible. Notwithstanding its therapeutic value, however, the employment of a paradox interpretation may be no more than a mechanism by which the confusion of present historians is projected back to the actors of the period. It all bears looking into.

Although the contrary position often is argued implicitly,

an interpretation of the Jacksonian movement should begin at the beginning. Here we have Jackson, the hero of New Orleans, a man who projects himself back into the public eye with his resolute actions in the Seminole Campaign and who receives from congressional criticism and ultimate acquittal an extension of public attention. The "Old Hero," man of action and defender of America against its enemies, triumphantly tours the Eastern cities in 1819 as the country enters a new crisis. The country next discovers Jackson, the proposed presidential candidate, as a local conservative Tennessee political faction advances his name in order to regain advantages on a state level.¹ Support spreads rapidly—despite the limited objectives of his local backers. Jacksonian sentiment emerges in Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and in Northern cities.

In the locus of that initial support is its essence. A Calhoun lieutenant attributes Jackson's popularity early in 1823 in Pennsylvania to "the grog shop politicians of villages and the rabble of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh."² At a Cincinnati Clinton meeting, an attempt is made to reverse the organizers' proposal and to support Jackson for President and Clinton for Vice-President. William Green, who jumped into the Clay camp after the derailment of Clinton's candidacy, describes that meeting (a meeting presumably swelled because of unemployment resulting from a fire at the large steam mill):

A powerful excitement in favour of Jackson among some men and more boys, seemed to threaten a dissolution of the meeting. . . . the noise on the occasion referred was characteristic of the cause it was attempted to promote. The cries of "The Hero of New Orleans," "Hurra for the 8th of January," were calculated to inflame the passions of an ignorant multitude, and did so. . . . Better that N. Orleans had been lost. . . .³

Elsewhere, the early Jackson support is described simply as "the people." The people, the rabble, the ignorant multitude declare themselves early for the Old Hero, the man of action and defender of America against its enemies. Who could compare with him?

Yet the "people" were soon joined by politicians and political factions with ears to the ground and ends to be served. In Ohio, local political leaders and a rural political organization shifted to Jackson as the Clinton campaign dissolved. In Pennsylvania, opposing parties vied to lead the fight for Jackson, and in the process the Calhoun campaign was shelved. In Maryland and New Jersey, displaced Federalist and disappointed Calhoun politicians chose Jackson as the man to lead them to their deserved rewards. The election of 1824 gave Jackson a plurality of electoral votes; yet the forbidding John Quincy Adams was selected to be President in the House of Representatives. The Jackson movement now had at its head the man of action, the choice of the people and the victim of the corrupt bargain of base and dishonest politicians.

Once in office, the Adams administration displayed the strong nationalistic tendencies of its President and Secretary of State and generated, in the process, a congressional opposition which consisted of Jackson and Calhoun men and the Old Republican supporters of Crawford. The Calhoun men, united by ties of ambition and then by opposition to the national policies, were the first to merge with the Jackson cause; subsequently, the Crawford men led by Van Buren came over, convinced that Jackson was more likely than Adams to support a Jeffersonian program of limited central government. Jackson was not the first choice of politicians, with or without programs, but he was available.

Now the Jackson coalition prepared for the next election. Newspapers were established around the country to spread the party line. Correspondence and vigilance committees emerged to guide and coordinate local activities. Legislative bills were tailored to increase support from doubtful regions. And the people were provided with songs, slogans, and talismans to reinforce their faith. Jackson was the candidate of the people, and the people were urged to support him against their enemies. It was a successful campaign, with Jackson receiving an overwhelming majority of electoral votes. The Jackson machine had elected a president, and the people gloried in their triumph.⁴

The Hero in office, believing himself to be the champion

of the people, did not disappoint his most enthusiastic followers. He defeated in battle nationalizing tendencies in his Maysville Road Veto, defended the integrity of the nation in the nullification controversy, and entered into conflict with the greatest of all monsters and enemies of the Republic, the Second Bank of the United States. In return, the people re-elected Jackson and then gave support to his chosen successor. Van Buren, in his turn, punctured the little monsters, the state banks, which had puffed themselves up and feasted at the leavings of their old master.

Not all of Jackson's original backers, however, were pleased. There were defections. Advocates of national public works and protective tariffs, upholders of Southern states' rights, supporters of the national bank and then of the state banks in turn left the Democratic party. Men of wealth, alarmed at what they considered a spirit of anarchy, shifted into the opposition—though they left behind some who were not prepared to move.⁵ The Whig party, a party composed of old opponents of the Jackson men plus recent defectors, a party blatantly united only in its opposition to the Democratic party, took the field against a party which itself had been united largely only in its opposition to the Adams administration. In 1840 the Whigs, with a Western military hero, a well-organized campaign of ballyhoo, and a depression on their side, were given their turn—by the people.

From scattered support to semiorganized movement to machine to victory, one dominant theme comes through, and that is coalition—coalition for power, coalition for political and social ends, coalition against common enemies. In particular, the extent to which the "presidential issue" was used, on a state and national level, by ambitious politicians justifies the description of the Jackson machine as a "loose, opportunistic, all-inclusive and eclectic" coalition.⁶ It similarly devaluates those analyses of the Jacksonians which concentrate on the cross-sectional characteristics of the politicians. For when the Jacksonian movement is considered as an unfolding process, it becomes clear that the movement must be traced to the earlier periods, to the original support for Jackson which surprised and discomfited the state politicians. The shock of Jackson's own Tennessee backers, the dismay

of Calhoun and Crawford men—all this was the product of a movement which caught fire without the manipulations of established politicians. Once the support for the Old Hero had been demonstrated, only the blind, the entrenched, or the unambitious among politicians could ignore it. The politicians followed the “people”; unfortunately, many historians have followed the politicians.

But, then, who were the “people”? In the 1828 election when Jackson received 178 electoral votes to 83 for Adams, he carried only 56 percent of the popular vote. (Nor did the proportion change significantly in subsequent elections.) And since it is doubtful that the “enemies of the people” constituted almost half of the population, it is apparent that many of “the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers” did not vote for Jackson. Nevertheless, neither the closeness of votes nor the employment of leaders drawn from a common stock implies the identity of the two parties. For the Jacksonians deployed a unique rhetoric, a rhetoric chosen for a purpose—and people believed it.

In states where the Jacksonians campaigned actively and called upon the people “to come forth in their own strength and majesty,” they came. Voting participation rates climbed—with special gains in those Middle and Western states which had been the main target of the Jackson campaign.⁷ This was a rhetoric consistent both with the early appeal of Jackson and with Old Republican dogma: a call against aristocracy, privilege, and government interference with a providential order; a call for the simple, the natural, the just. These were clever appeals, but that in no way detracts from the fact that they struck a responsive chord. It was easy enough to call the people out against their enemies, but what determined their enemies? Clearly, both the appeals and the nature of those to whom the appeals were directed must be central in an examination of the Jacksonians.

In *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, John W. Ward explored the symbolic use of Jackson by contemporaries as a way of revealing the values of the period.⁸ It was an age, he found, which emphasized the role of nature, which rested its faith in a providential order, which stressed the role of man’s will. It was an age which believed that the man who

stroke, who exerted his will to conquer nature, would receive his just rewards. An age in which Nature and Providence united to provide the man of will with the opportunity to create his own destiny, it was an age in which every success was further proof of the beneficence of the order. And for a time which stressed such values, Andrew Jackson, orphan and self-made man, man of action and man of iron will, was a fitting vessel.

Many of the same themes appear in Marvin Meyers' examination of Jacksonian values.⁹ Here again the emphasis is upon steady work, upon an industry honest and simple. It is the view of an order in which industry, economy, and useful toil are certain to be rewarded in an ideal world; a world in which the industrious stand in opposition to the idle and speculative. In such a scheme, where the artificial and unnatural were equated with evil, the place of government was a logical one: the ideal government was one which removed itself from interference with the natural order. In a world of bliss, there was no place for the legislation of bliss.¹⁰

In this context, the main Jacksonian policies—opposition to special corporate charters, hostility toward paper money, suspicion of public enterprise and public debt—fall into place; all involve resistance to an interference with a natural and just order. Meyers interprets these policies and the accompanying appeals as reflecting the desire of Jacksonians to maintain or restore the virtues of an earlier and simpler age. They were, he argues, appeals to a generation which sought a return to an old agrarian republic, to a paradise lost.

Yet Meyers is obsessed by facts. He knows that this was a period of rapid economic change, and he is familiar with Hofstadter's treatment of the age as one of emerging liberal capitalism and of acquisitiveness.¹¹ Thus Meyers takes his Old Republican man, blends him with the New Acquisitive man, and discovers the schizophrenic Jacksonian, the man who looks backward while plunging forward. And with this dualistic man, Meyers explains the Jacksonian paradox, that a movement which idealized the past cleared the way for the future. He explains the paradox by personifying it.

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that paradox, irony, and hybrid interpretations of the Jacksonians are the

result of the tendency to think in terms of an archetypical Jacksonian. If we recall the coalitional aspects of the Jackson movement, if we move away from a composite Jacksonian, can we understand better to whom this imagery and rhetoric appealed?¹²

Clearly, the men whose values and status should be examined first (both in order and in importance) were the farmers. They were, after all, a significant majority of the population. However, despite their numbers, despite the description of Jacksonian rhetoric as agrarian rhetoric, despite speculations that the Jacksonians wished to return to an earlier agrarian republic, farmers get little attention from historians of the Jacksonians. The lack of emphasis is striking. There are analyses of party workers, bankers, manufacturers, trade union activists—of any individuals who succeeded in detaching themselves from the mass. Yet the farmers, unorganized, anonymous, and collectively most important, are largely ignored.

When the farmer's political behavior is considered, it becomes readily apparent that although much Jacksonian rhetoric was directed toward the farmer, the most noble of all men, he did not direct all of his collective favor toward the Jacksonian party. Why? Was the type of appeal made by the Democrats more attractive to a particular type of farmer? Can one, in fact, talk accurately about *the* farmer or were differences among farmers great enough to make this a misleading category? Were the differences within the category of farmers greater than differences between farmers and other categories?

The picture of the farmer during this period is generally that of a new settler taking land, either clearing it himself or purchasing it from a person who cleared it. With the aid of the major transportation changes of the period, he finds he is able to produce for distant markets. His land value rises; he invests in more land or improves his land. Often he becomes more interested in the speculative value of his land than in production. He is the rising entrepreneur in farming; he is the expectant agricultural capitalist. For him, transportation changes, banks, and other advances are tools which provide the opportunity for higher returns.

Yet this is not the only farmer of the period. The very changes benefitting the first farmer tend to add to another farmer's problems. While improved river transport and new canals aided both the Western farmer and the consumers, "western wheat demoralized farmers in the older communities, who were already struggling with declining fertility, low yields, parasitic infestations, increasing costs, and declining prices."¹³ These latter farmers, the victims of regional specialization effects of transport changes, might tend to center in the older regions of the Middle States, in New England, in parts of the South. Some might respond simply by moving, others by shifting into different agricultural products in which they had a comparative advantage, and others by working their land even harder. There were two farmers in this period, and one had good reason to be discontent.

But how could nature's nobleman, the hardy farmer, the member of the steady honest class, reconcile the disappointment of his goals with his vision of a world in which men received just returns for honest labor? His vision provided him with an answer: one could expect to receive one's reward only if self-seeking men had not upset the natural balance by obtaining special privileges and other obstructions to justice from government. Here, then, was a farmer to whom the Democratic party could appeal—an embattled farmer, a disappointed farmer, a declining farmer.¹⁴

Of course, if the embattled and declining farmers were the Democratic farmers, the Jacksonian paradox as applied to farmers would be somewhat weakened. One would not be able to argue that these farmers were looking back to a simple old republic while advancing in a new order. Those Democratic farmers who feared the new order would be those who were *injured* by it, those for whom a solid old world was crumbling. In their efforts to find reasons, rather than questioning a providential design or focusing upon the real causes, they tended to emphasize the most obvious artificial aspects of the new order: banks, bank paper, and the paper aristocracy. It was banking which altered the normal relationship between prices and costs; it was banking, both in expansion and contraction, which "disturbed the equality of society," which was "a two-edged sword in the hands of the

enemy."¹⁵ And theirs could not be a negative concept of government, for government action was necessary to undo the evil which had been done. The "independent silence of the farmer, who ask[ed] nothing from his government but equal laws, and nothing of heaven, but rain and sunshine" was replaced by the demand, "Get out of my sunlight."¹⁶

By combining, then, our knowledge of the nature of Jacksonian appeals and of the changes in the fortunes of farmers in the period, it is possible to suggest the hypothesis that farmers in relatively declining regions were more likely to vote for the Democrats than those in relatively rising regions. It should be emphasized that we are not arguing that all Western farmers were rising farmers or that rising farmers had no reason to vote Democratic. Rather our suggestion is twofold: that declining farmers were more likely to vote Democratic than were rising farmers in any region (because of the nature of Jacksonian appeals), and that the proportion of declining farmers was likely to be higher in the older or bypassed areas than in the emerging ones.¹⁷

One of the most significant attempts to examine a hypothesis of this nature and to employ the type of information required for a test occurs in Lee Benson's *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*. Utilizing county and township data for New York State, Benson examines the argument that the Whigs were "the prosperous farmers living on better soils or along good transportation routes" and the Democrats, "the poor or less-well-to-do farmers."¹⁸ He concludes, after looking at figures on voting and housing assessments, that there is no basis for this traditional claim; on the contrary, "the Democrats tended to find their strongest support in eastern New York among groups living in long-settled areas and enjoying considerable prosperity."¹⁹

Benson's conclusions may appear to disprove the hypothesis we have suggested above; but if so, it is only because he is not entirely precise in the interpretation of his observations. Whereas the hypothesis relating declining farmers to the Democrats is a dynamic statement which requires information on *changes* in economic status, Benson examines a static proposition relating wealth to voting affinity. In his hypothesis and in the variables considered, there is no place

for change or for the responses to change. And, as Jacksonian appeals reveal, it was change which was central to the period.

A conclusion that the Democrats received their strongest support from farmers in the wealthiest regions is not necessarily inconsistent with the suggestion that the Democrats were supported by farmers in declining regions. A relatively wealthy Eastern farmer *could* be the farmer whose economic position was declining. Yet would it be his wealth or his declining status which attracted him to the Democratic position? In several places, Benson indicates that the prosperity of Eastern farmers was due not to their enterprise but primarily to their "headstart." "Yorker families," he notes, "had decades, often centuries to pick out the best sites, accumulate wealth (and status) and pass it on to their descendants."²⁰ Of course, the best sites of decades and centuries ago were obviously not the best sites of this period—and accumulated wealth and status were not necessarily *accumulating* wealth and status. In this light, what did it mean to be "enjoying considerable prosperity"?

Actually, it is even questionable whether Benson correctly identifies "prosperous" economic units. His variable for wealth, the average value of dwelling unit per family, tells us more about previous investment in housing than it does about prosperous *farming* units, and it is supported only by "impressionistic" evidence about the relative position of towns within counties.²¹ The image of grand old houses constructed in the bloom of eastern New York and now presiding over declining and marginal farmland is a powerful one.

The significant sectional differences and the identification of older ("wealthier") regions with rural Democratic strength in New York revealed in Benson's study are entirely consistent with the argument relating declining farmers to the Jacksonian persuasion. And as Benson notes in his own discussion, New York may not be an exceptional case. (The correspondence between areas of *long-time* Democratic support and areas of low land value has often been noted.) The hypothesis is not challenged; neither, though, has it been properly tested.²²

Were there any other groups (or segments of groups) besides farmers which had reason to resent the economic

changes of the Jacksonian period? Among the other "humble members of society," mechanics and laborers, employment and price fluctuations or economic dislocation could easily be a source of discontent. The same transportation improvements, for example, which aided Western farmers and demoralized Eastern farmers were logically such as to disrupt the activities of those Western mechanics who had previously functioned behind the natural tariff wall of high transportation costs; and if these mechanics searched, they could certainly find a scapegoat in the presence of a bank which facilitated the import of Eastern merchandise.²³ Yet there were more far-reaching changes than these, which increased the insecurity of many members of the remaining two humble classes.

The Jacksonian period was one in which master mechanics found themselves threatened by the emergence of the merchant-capitalists. "With easy access to credit," this new group "began to invade the mechanical trades and to establish small-scale factories."²⁴ For masters who found themselves undersold by quantity production, an obvious response was an attack on what they considered the source of their problem: the banks, which made possible the engrossing activities of their favored competitors and which thus increased the difficulties of those who earned their living by labor. Another response for a master, though, was the attempt to emulate the merchant-capitalist by shifting to a greater use of apprentices as a source of cheap labor in place of more costly journeymen. This reaction, shifting the pressure to the journeymen, produced trade union activity on the part of the journeymen with the intent of preventing the downgrading of craft skills and status. Innovations in the organization of industry during this period clearly were the cause of discontent for some mechanics.

Overriding all concerns in the 1830s, though, for the journeyman and the master (and other small businessmen) was the enormous price increase from 1834 to 1837. For the small businessman, the contractor, the grocer, price changes upset the normal relations between costs and prices; for the wage earner, both journeyman mechanic and unskilled laborer, gains in money wages lagged significantly behind price rises.

“Wage-workers, already concerned over their loss in status, became desperately alarmed over money-earnings, which exchanged for less and less food and shelter.”²⁵

For those injured by declining real wages, there were two resorts: an attempt to increase money wages at least proportionately to price rises, and/or an attack on the source of inflationary tendencies. Generally, that source was identified as the banking system—and in particular, the small notes generated by the banks. In the Loco Foco claim “as the currency expands, the loaf contracts” was typified the belief that bank notes operated as a tax upon the laboring people.²⁶ Therefore, the participation of wage earners in trade union activity to raise money wages and in political coalition to attack the banking system were in no way inconsistent.²⁷

Both in trade union activity and in the struggle against the inflationary tendencies of the banking system, there was a common assumption that wage earners suffered from a weak position relative to the power of other groups within the society. And central to this weakness was their inability to combine—both for legal reasons and also because of the nature of their productive activity. In relationship to trade union activity, this issue was often raised; unions were defended as a countervailing force against the combinations of others. Thus Frederick Robinson argued: “the capitalists, monopolists, judges, lawyers, doctors and priests . . . know that the secret of their own power and wealth consists in the strictest concert of action. . . . Unions among themselves have always enabled the few to rule and ride the people.”²⁸ Or, as John Greenleaf Whittier complained:

The merchants may agree upon their prices; the lawyers upon their fees; the physicians upon their charges; the manufacturers upon the wages given to their operatives; but the *laborer* shall not consult his interest and fix the price of his toil and skill. If this be the *law*, it is unjust, oppressive and wicked.²⁹

Although it was less obvious, the same weakness characterized the position of wage earners in respect to rising prices. “The laboring part of the community (farmers and laborers) are the last in society who can bring up their services to the

standard of a depreciated currency," noted William Carroll in 1823.³⁰ "Wages are the first to be affected by a depreciated medium, and the last to adapt themselves to it. The poor are therefore the first victims of overissues," argued Theodore Sedgewick, Jr., in 1835.³¹ The vulnerability of wage earners, however, was not the result of chance factors; it too had its roots in their relative weakness, in their relationship to the productive process. Rhetorically asking if wages rose proportionately to prices, the *Weekly Ohio Statesman* replied:

*They do not, and from the circumstances of the case, they can not. And the reason is obvious.—The bankers who cause the expansion, and consequent depreciation of paper, (or increase of prices, just as you choose—the meaning is the same) are incorporated—connected—concentrated. They act simultaneously and immediately. But mechanics and laborers are simply individuals—unincorporated—unconnected—pursuing different occupations, and frequently waging opposite pursuits.*³²

Nor was it only the bankers who were able to swim with the tide of bank money. "There is a privity of interest and feeling between these banks and the merchants and speculators dependent upon them. The latter *anticipate* the expansion. They expand with it. They govern their dealings by it. But the mechanic and the laborer are only aware of it when everything they consume is cracked up 100 or 200 per cent. upon their hands." A belief in their relative weakness (attributed often to unequal legislation), an acceptance of the quantity theory of money, and the experience of falling real wages: all of this made logical an attack by wage earners upon the banks, which gave artificial and fictitious value to all things, which disturbed the equality of society, which were a two-edged sword in the hands of the enemies of the people.³³

Rather than simply the cupidity of expectant capitalists, among urban mechanics and laborers there were attitudes and reactions identifiable as those of people *injured* by change—as opposed to those of people impatient with it. The expectant capitalist argument is an attractive one; but before concluding that it was a dominant attitude among wage earners, it is necessary to show that wage earners acted and supported positions during this period which were not

in their interest *as wage earners* to take. While on many issues the interests of wage earners were not inconsistent with those of small businessmen, for some wage earners this coincidence was probably no more than that. Unskilled laborers, for example, were the least well off of all workingmen, the most subject to seasonal and cyclical unemployment and the most helpless in dealing with uncurrent paper money; they were probably also the least likely to allow illusions of expectant capitalism to dominate their concern over their immediate position.³⁴

If the hypothesis relating the relatively declining farmers to the Democrats has an urban counterpart, it is that the laborers and mechanics least subject to illusions of expectant capitalism, most helpless in the face of movements of an economy which they did not understand, were more likely to vote Democratic. (Once again, this is a statement of a general tendency—not all rising mechanics would be Whigs.) In this light, Benson's identification of New York lumbering towns as generally Democratic is worthy of note. Unable to find any "economic" reason for this pattern, Benson suggests that lumbering may have generated antipuritanical behavior and that antipuritans may have tended to vote Democratic.³⁵ However, before concluding that frequenters of grog shops were more likely to vote Democratic (and confusing a symptom with a cause), it may be suggested that Jacksonian attractions on paper money and privilege were particularly attractive to low-skill and unskilled workers with limited horizons. And this same attraction may go a long way towards explaining the initial adherence of unskilled immigrant Irish Catholics to the Democratic party.³⁶

The opposition of workingmen's parties to Democratic candidates has often been cited as an indication of a gap between the Jacksonians and labor.³⁷ Yet the dominant tone of that opposition (where it in fact occurred) was that of the vehemence of reformers to betrayers of the faith. Workies and Loco Focos, "methodists of democracy," sought to bring the Democrats back from where they had been led astray by entrepreneurial elements in the party; and when the Democrats responded by absorbing parts of the workingmen's program, support for the latter groups dwindled. In this sense,

the workingmen's parties may be viewed as a wing of a general movement which centered in the Democratic party. As Pessen concluded, the existence of workingmen's parties reveals that "an important minority in the Jacksonian Era were disenchanted with their society and its institutions."³⁸ And much of this disenchantment was the disenchantment of the injured and declining rather than that of the rising.

Thus, consideration of economic changes during the Jacksonian era indicates that not all groups within the society had reason to praise the changes which were occurring. Some in this period found their positions and status under attack or deteriorating; and they were likely to respond to Jacksonian (or more extreme) attacks on government—granted privileges, public spending, and paper money. In this sense, it may be argued that the Jacksonians represented, partly, declining groups. An association of the Jacksonian persuasion with declining groups is a natural one; Meyers himself notes that the political analysis of Jacksonian Democracy would be simpler and clearer "if the Jacksonians could in fact be taken for innocent—still better, struggling—victims of external social changes."³⁹ Impressed, though, by the economic changes of the period and the apparent role of Jacksonians in creating them, Meyers rejects this possibility and creates in its stead the paradoxical Jacksonian, the man who backed into the future. The Jacksonians need not be viewed as only the losers of the period; it is sufficient to suggest that a significant portion of them, however, were.

Where does this leave the expectant capitalists, the rising merchants and manufacturers, the frontier achievers who have generally been identified with the Jackson party? And what of programs in Jacksonian and workingmen's platforms which were designed to appeal to men on the make, men who supported reforms in order to rise? Obviously, there were many of these men among the Jacksonians—more than can be accounted for by the availability of patronage and favors from a successful party. The Jacksonians were a coalition of rising and declining men; but on what basis were they able to unite?

For people unsatisfied with the status quo, the belief in a beneficent natural order provided an obvious scapegoat to

explain the failure of goals—man-made disasters. The unhappy rising master mechanic and the declining farmer could easily agree that it was the existence of artificial privileges which was the bane of all. Thus, the attack on artificial interferences with the natural order was a logical recourse for those who failed to receive their just rewards (as defined by themselves). This was clearly the argument of men on the rise, who found themselves confronted by special privileges; yet it was similarly the cry of injured men. Whereas historians have heard in the Jacksonian appeals the voice of the rising middle classes, they have largely turned a deaf ear to the supporting chorus from men who were the victims of economic change.⁴⁰

As the discussion has developed, the issue which has come increasingly to the fore is that of banking. And this is as it should be. The battle over privilege in the Jacksonian period was primarily one over the privilege of banking. Banking dominated both national and state politics in all regions, and it is not unimportant that both parties attempted to pin the "bank party" label on the other. For banks were the monsters, the unnatural things, and those associated with the banks were the enemies of the people. Thus, it is both necessary and appropriate that the peculiar Jacksonian coalition be examined in relation to banking.

In political and economic life, banking occupied a position more central than it was subsequently to hold. Banks had two essential functions: as providers of currency at a time when the demand for money for transaction purposes was rapidly increasing, and as providers of credit facilities at a time when the opportunities for investment were outrunning the resources of private accumulation.⁴¹ Individuals, accordingly, confronted banks in two roles: as credit seekers and as currency takers. Often one role was dominant.

On the credit side, access to banking facilities meant an ability to command resources. Yet since only banks chartered by governments were able to function freely under normal circumstances (and charters were limited), the holders of existing bank charters were in a position to dominate and to exclude. The merchant or manufacturer from a distant (deprived) town or region suffered from discrimination when

he sought accommodation from a bank; the small, unestablished merchant or mechanic found the limited resources of existing banks in his own town channeled to his more respectable competitors; and boosters and entrepreneurs in new industries saw older, more traditional callings favored by banks dominated by representatives of the latter. Limitation of bank charters meant that established groups, established industries, established regions were in a position to gain and maintain undue influence and power.

For the excluded credit seekers, the further extension of banks, in both newer regions and older regions, was a first demand. Where efforts to achieve this were unsuccessful, however, the solution was either a removal of *all* privileges or a removal of all controls over the extension of these privileges. Eliminate artificial privileges which produce injustice and unnatural power or extend these privileges sufficiently to remove any suggestion of power and monopoly: this was the program of rising men, of rising sections, of rising industries.⁴² The dominant tone was that of men who expected to rise once unnatural and discriminatory constructs were removed. And there appears to be no reason to associate such men more with the Democrats than with the Whigs. While Democrats (particularly in older regions) often fell into this category, Whig supporters, especially of the Anti-Masonic variety, were as likely to attack monopoly and privilege from this perspective.

For those individuals whose primary relationship to banks was that of currency takers, banking was also the central issue of the period. Both because of the bank notes which circulated below face value and because of rising prices (which contemporaries attributed to bank-note issues), the power of banking was judged by such men as the power to tax. It was uncurrent money or who found their returns rising less rapidly than their costs, by men who were struggling or declining.⁴³ And such men were hard-money Democrats.

Clearly, an entrepreneurial demand for more banks or for the removal of legislative control over banks and a currency taker's demand either for *no* banks or for the removal of bank control over the currency were inconsistent—once the issues

were drawn distinctly. *As long, however, as the conflict was one between defenders of existing banks and those disturbed by the status quo, rising and declining groups could unite under the same banner.* All could agree: the banks were a source of power for a selected few, were the product of discriminatory legislation which upset the natural balance, and were the enemy of the people. What was uncertain, though, was whether banks per se were all these things.⁴⁴

One way of examining the differences between those Democrats who represented declining elements and those who fit the stereotype of rising men may be to investigate the distinction between hard-money Democrats and those more "moderate" on the bank issue. It should be possible to study state legislative debates on the question and to explore the economic characteristics of the sections represented on each side of the debate. From legislative votes, there is some indication that on this issue the difference between the two types of Democrats was greater than that between "moderate" Democrats and Whigs.⁴⁵ If subsequent study does reveal such a pattern, then one suggested conclusion is that the rising man, the man on the make, the expectant capitalist was in no way uniquely related to the Jacksonians; rather, the declining or embattled man who struggled against change would appear the more unique Jacksonian.⁴⁶ And this conclusion would conform not only to the image appropriate to the Jacksonian persuasion, but also to the identities discovered by those historians who have studied the rising men in each party.

However, if the Jacksonians included both rising men and declining men, with the declining men representing the unique element in the party, then why have the Jacksonians been identified as rising men? In part, it may be due to the tendencies to study dominant and emerging individuals or to ignore declining elements in the period.⁴⁷ Yet a more deceptive tendency may be operative. Since there have been no systematic studies of the characteristics of the Jacksonians, one is inclined to conclude that the identification of the Jacksonians as rising men has been made because the period of Jacksonian national political dominance coincided with a period of rapid economic growth—and that, implicitly, his-

torians have assumed that the policies pursued by the Jacksonians produced (and were intended to produce) the economic changes of the period.

But why assume that Jacksonian policies had anything (significant) to do with the economic growth of the Jacksonian Era? The Jacksonians had little to do with the flow of capital from Europe (which also made its way to Canada and Australia). In fact, the Whigs were often more enthusiastic advocates of public projects, which generated the securities for foreign investors. Nor does the argument emphasizing the assault on the Bank of the United States and the subsequent flood of state banks provide much support for the view that the Jacksonians changed the course of development. Even assuming that the expansion in the number of state banks had a positive effect on economic growth, it began *before* Jackson's veto. In New York State, for example, the expansion followed the passage of the Safety Fund Act in 1829, which broke a long impasse over the chartering of banks. And in Ohio, banks which had failed were re-established and banks previously authorized were placed in operation—beginning in early 1831. The expansion of state banks occurred as the demand for banks rose; and this was a function of the expansion in general economic activity. It was an expansion in the number of banks which occurred via specific state charters—not via *laissez-faire* policies. Here, too, contemporary records suggest that a large proportion of state bankers were Whigs.

The Jacksonian paradox, the idea that Jacksonians, though opposing economic progress, in fact cleared the path for it, has as its base the assumption that the Jacksonians actually *did* foster economic change. This is an unsubstantiated assumption, and without it the paradox disappears. Attempts to explain the paradox by arguing from the general to the particular, by creating hybrid, Janus-like, confused, paradoxical Jacksonians, are marred by the neglect of injured and declining men in this age of rising men, by the failure to recognize that not everyone benefits, in the short run, from economic advance. The suggestion here has been that it was these "victims," these farmers, laborers, and mechanics, who gave Jacksonian Democracy its dominant tone.⁴⁸ But this

would imply that the "campaign claptrap" meant something, that studies of leading men in each party are misleading, and that speculations based upon a consideration of rhetoric and ideology may be a better guide than an implicit vulgar economic determinism which substitutes, for the study of economic problems, genuflection to indices of past economic growth.

NOTES

1. Charles G. Sellers, Jr., "Jackson Men with Feet of Clay," *American Historical Review* (April 1957).
2. George McDuffie to Charles Fisher, January 13, 1823, cited by Sellers, *ibid.*
3. Harry Stevens, *The Early Jackson Party in Ohio* (Durham, N.C., 1957), p. 87.
4. See Robert Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1963) for a fine discussion of events from 1824 to 1828 and the creation of the Democratic election machine. By beginning his account in 1824, however, Remini de-emphasizes the origins and appeal of the early Jacksonian movement and thus may place undue emphasis on the activities of politicians in his chosen period.
5. In his paper "Money and Party in Jacksonian America" (presented to the American Historical Association in December 1966), Frank Gatell notes both that 84 percent of the men of wealth in New York City were Whigs in 1844 and that one third of the original wealthy Democrats bolted the party.
6. Edward Pessen, "The Working Men's Party Revisited," *Labor History* (Fall 1963), p. 220.
7. Statistics on voting participation rates, a significant additional tool for analysis, are the work of Richard P. McCormick in his "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics," *American Historical Review* (January 1960) and later, his *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1966). McCormick uses decennial federal census data, and then, by "interpolation," estimates the number eligible to vote at the time of national elections. Unfortunately, he does not explain his restriction to federal data. Thus, his voting participation rates for Ohio in the elections of 1824 and 1828 are 35 percent and 76 percent respectively. Calculation of voting participation, however, from Ohio's official count of eligible voters (collected on a county basis and published in the official state newspaper) indicates voting participation of 40 percent and 90 percent respectively. McCormick, by his method, overstates the number of eligible voters by 15 percent in

1824 and 19 percent in 1828. (McCormick's Ohio 1840 estimate of 84.5 percent is less impressive when compared with earlier official estimates.) Several questions are in order: To what extent did McCormick's method for interpolation take into account business cycles? Are waves of migration considered and was there a lag between migration and eligibility? (*Any lag!*) To what extent does an 1840 voting participation rate (calculated from actual population and coming at a point when westward migration and immigration are lessened) contain less of a downward bias than those for preceding elections? McCormick explains that he avoided the available state data in order to maintain consistency. Was this data used, however, to improve his method of extrapolation and his estimates of the number eligible to vote? These questions, which are important, should not have to be asked. For McCormick's methodology, see *ibid.*, p. 379. For figures on eligible Ohio voters, see *Ohio State Journal*, January 9, 1828; for figures on voting, see *Ohio State Journal*, November 11, 1828.

8. John W. Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York, 1962).
9. Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (New York, 1960).
10. John Kenneth Galbraith, *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power* (Boston, 1956), p. 28: "In a state of bliss, there is no need for a Ministry of Bliss."
11. Richard Hofstadter, "Andrew Jackson and the Rise of Liberal Capitalism," in *The American Political Tradition* (New York, 1961).
12. As Lynn Marshall noted in his discussion of Jackson's Bank Veto message, it is necessary to move beyond talk of the Jacksonian appeal and to an "investigation of the general values and aspirations of the people to whom it was addressed." "The Authorship of Jackson's Bank Veto Message," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (1963-64), p. 466.
13. Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture, 1815-1860* (New York, 1960), p. 160.
14. Charles G. Sellers' description of ferment in Tennessee as that of the "disquietude of an agrarian people, nurtured on Jeffersonian precepts" is quite consistent with the general argument here: "Banking and Politics in Jackson's Tennessee," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (June 1954).
15. Joseph L. Blau, ed., *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy: Representative Writings of the Period, 1825-1850* (Indianapolis, 1954), p. 333.
16. James Kirke Paulding, *Letters from the South* (New York, 1817), p. 73.

It is significant to note the similarity of Jacksonian themes to the arguments of Adam Smith (all quotations are from the Modern Library edition of *Wealth of Nations*):

- is exactly proportioned to the ordinary cost of provision, rent, fuel, etc." Disaster follows a decision made "in the secret councils of the Banks."
34. Taylor, *Transportation Revolution*, pp. 288 ff.
 35. Benson estimates that 75 percent of men engaged in lumbering in New York State voted Democratic. *Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, p. 205.
 36. Benson estimates that 95 percent of the Catholic Irish in New York State voted Democratic in 1844. *Ibid.*, p. 171, p. 185.
 37. The workingmen's parties, of course, included among the leaders and members many who were neither mechanics nor laborers. They too were coalitions, and even the mechanics among them may not have been a representative sample of labor. Mechanics, for example, as a group were more likely to respond favorably to the tariff issue than common laborers.
 38. Pessen, "Working Men's Party Revisited," p. 226.
 39. Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*, p. 140.
 40. See, for example, Hofstadter: "This is the philosophy of a rising middle class; its aim is not to throttle but to liberate business, to open every possible pathway for the creative enterprise of the people." *American Political Tradition*, p. 62. Much of the confusion over the battle against privilege in this period has been the result of a failure to distinguish clearly between those in the coalition who opposed the existence of specific privileges and those who were opposed only to their exclusiveness.
 41. The Turner-Hammond conflict over the frontier demand for banks rests on this dual function. For a discussion emphasizing the importance of the growing public demand for banknotes, see the writer's "The Role of Banks in Developing Regions . . ." presented to the Canadian Political Science Association in June, 1967.
 42. Specific evidence concerning New York State supporting many of these general points appears in the writer's "In the Absence of Free Banks, What?" in the *Bulletin* of the Canadian Association for American Studies, Winter, 1967.
 43. This "tax" was not one which fell only upon labor: "Banks are, in fact, legally authorized banditti, levying contributions and indirect taxation from every honest business." Byrdsall, *History of the Loco-Foco*, p. 111.
 44. A definite effort has been made to avoid the particular issue of the Second Bank of the United States and to concentrate instead on the general issue of banking. On one level, the Second Bank may be viewed as a Philadelphia bank, attempting to control a hinterland that was slipping away from it, as a bank equipped with a capital and an institutional form which were inflexible and which came into conflict with a national (Western) bourgeoisie and competing (imperial) metropoli. However, most of those who cheered and voted for Jackson in the Great Struggle fought the symbol rather than the reality of the Bank.

45. In Ohio Assembly debates in 1837, for example, a series of proposals aimed at curbing banks received the consistent support of over 20 Democrats (out of 36) and a handful of Whigs (out of 30). "Moderate" Democrats and Whigs combined to defeat these measures.
46. Apropos, Meyers notes at one point that there is some evidence that "the Jacksonians were relatively weak among the most successful, ambitious, enterprising groups." He finds the evidence inconclusive—it is most damaging to his thesis—and returns to his split Jacksonian. It may be suggested that not only were the Jacksonians relatively weak among such groups, but that the Jacksonians of this ilk were, as a group, the major source of defectors to the Whigs. Meyers, *Jacksonian Persuasion*, p. 138.
47. Although Meyers summarizes Taylor's discussion of economic changes (in the above-cited work) and at several points notes the effect of transportation innovation upon the "intersectional division of labor," he does not appear to recognize that the "sequence of economic adaptations of the largest consequence" meant disappointment and decline for some. Adaptation is not the hope of every man, and "a view of economic processes" which sees only the good side of adaptation is perhaps not the best one with which to understand the Jacksonians (many of whom saw only the bad side). *Ibid.*, pp. 116–20.
48. The generalization that the Whigs spoke to the hopes of Americans, and the Jacksonians to their fears and resentments, would appear not only to be true but also to be logical. Cf. Meyers, *ibid.*, p. 13, and Glydon G. Van Deusen, "Some Aspects of Whig Thought and Theory in the Jacksonian Period," *American Historical Review* (Jan. 1958).