

Age of Jackson

HIST 4327

Take-Home exam #2

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Is reformation radical or conservative? That really depends on whether you are the reformer or the soon to be reformed. During the Jacksonian there were not only revolutions in class and market strategies but explosions of evangelicalism, millennialism, teetotalism, and sabbatarianism. “Re”form may be a misnomer in some of these cases. Many of these ideas did not exist as movements (or even ideas) prior to the Jacksonian era so they could not be reformed in the true sense of the word. The simplest way to look at these movements is to label one (temperance, sabbatarianism) as radical. The other reform movements (millennialism, sexual reformation) are really ideas constructed, and not reconstructed, during this time and can be easily labeled as conservative.

The first and sometimes hardest argument to make is that some social reform is conservative. Opponents are quick to question how reform or any change can maintain the status quo. Dealing with things such as evangelicalism and millennialism it is not a question of maintaining the status quo, but putting the status quo where it should be when the next step of social evolution is reached. Sellers claims: “Every popular political or social movement arose against the Market” (Sellers 208). If that is indeed true then every political or social movement that arose was conservative. The status quo of pre-market society was agrarian. Politicians and social reformers were happy with the first steps into free market systems but needed to settle into the community, and into themselves, before any further progress could be made. Sexual reform was the most conservative of all the reformative acts during this time. In “The Cult True Womanhood” Welter lists the four pillars of “true womanhood” as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. To add to this argument, A.J. Graves’ scripture has woman placed in the home which is the cradle

of civilization. Women in his idea of the home were to raise virtuous children. So the women of the home remain where they have always been, but with a new found importance. These women are no longer housewives or mothers they are members of the Republican Motherhood. Married women's role has not changed only their status has. Women are now endowed with moral superiority in church and the home. Prostitutes were viewed as the result of men's actions.

Millennialism may or may not have arisen from women's new found status in the church. Regardless its conservative message was spread quickly because of it. "The organization of prayer meetings, the pattern of family visits, and bits of evidence from church records suggest that hundreds of conversions culminated when husbands prayed with their wives" (Johnson 108). This "pattern of family visits" is of great concern. Women would visit with other women while husbands were at work (in the new Market system). Prayers for the family and head of household to repent went up from nearly every house in Rochester. The newly deemed Republican Motherhood-ers would keep at their lost husbands until they (usually) relented and joined a church. Joining the church and becoming part of a wealthy congregation of merchants and business owners was easiest for the upper class. In this social strata church fellowship led to business dealings, good worker-boss relationships, and even occasional "bail-outs" (full context of Lewis Selye's "bail-out", Johnson 125). Conservative social reform led to Republican motherhood, which led to (conservative) Christian soldiers in the "war against sin, not workingmen" (Johnson 115). This is where the line blurs, the message becomes garbled, and the processes of reform take a more radical turn.

This “war on sin” took that radical turn (without signaling) when members of these conservative reformation groups started to preach “teetotalism”, or absolute temperance. “Reverend Penney rose from his seat...and demanded that vendors in the audience stop selling liquor immediately. Eight or ten did so on the spot, and the wholesale grocers retired to hold a meeting of their own” (Johnson 113). Albert and Elijah Smith’s entire whiskey stock was “rolled out onto the sidewalk” and “[they] smashed the barrels and let thousands of gallons of liquid poison run out onto Exchange Street” (Johnson 114). Scenes like this were repeated all over the city of Rochester, New York. The wealthy Christians who were not grocers bought up entire stocks of spirits from stores that did not follow the Smith’s example. It was no longer good enough to give the populace the choice of drinking and hope they made the right decision. The choice of drinking had to be removed to prevent the great unwashed from making the wrong decision. In a country where personal liberties are at the heart of everything (including the Market Revolution which led to these social reforms in the first place), the removal of the freedom of choice may be considered the most radical of all.

Another “free radical” of Jacksonian America was Sabbatarianism. Johnson states that “workingmen were immune to middle-class advice. From the beginning there were men who knew that, and who suggested the use of power” (83). This use of force was not aimed at taking away the vices of individual working men as the absolute temperance actions were. The “use of power” suggested here was boycotts and proscription against companies, businesses and workplaces that did not honor one of the ten original commandments. Businesses were to be closed on Sundays in observance of the Sabbath, or else. That was the plan for Rochester. Johnson quotes De Toqueville

saying, “Boston on Sunday has, literally, the appearance of a deserted town.”(84).

Johnson goes on to say that Rochester is completely different. A canal city that shut down for the Sabbath is left with “hundreds of boatmen and transients stranded in his village on Sundays...to drink grog and court Venus” (Johnson 84). The same wealthy citizens that bought up and destroyed liquor stocks agreed. When a Christian movement is so radical that teetotalers will not come aboard *en masse* it is good evidence of its radical nature.

However there are radical reform superstars. In cases as extreme as Sabbatarianism when a person puts their beliefs to the economic test they either become a successful hero or a martyred goat. Bissell’s six-day travel line would cater to Sabbatarianists, offer coffee instead of spirits, hire non drinking stage drivers and boatmen, and do no work of any kind on Sundays. Bissell would call his endeavor the Pioneer Line. “Immediately they found themselves opposed by some of the richest and most pious men in Rochester” (85).

Bissell’s Pioneer Line would bring Rochester to the “center of a national crusade to maintain Sunday as sacred time” (85) it would eventually fail. John Bissell became an economic martyred goat. A question into human nature that bears asking but can never be answered is: Would Bissell had been so quick to stand on his principles and establish such a Sabbatarianistic stage and boat line with his own capital, without help from Lewis Tappan?

Paul Johnson maintains throughout his book, *The Shopkeeper’s Millennium*, that all reform are for the grand purpose of social control. With the Market Revolution came class divisions and with that the need for cultural hegemony. The upper class needed to control the working and middle classes. This would lead, the elites believed, to better working conditions and cleaner, quieter, and more peaceful neighborhoods. The degrees

of opposition to reform (and social control) from the upper class to the lower class usually depended on what form the reform would take. Would the elite persuade or coerce? Lead by example, or hypocritically damn? These answers also call into view whether the reform would be conservative or radical. Conservative reform from above came as a “do as I do, see you in church Sunday and at work on Monday” reform. . Radical reformation took street forms of breaking whiskey barrels, or feeding (intoxicating) the Erie Canal. By definition all reform is change for someone and all change is radical. Can radical change (reform) be used to maintain the status quo? The answer is yes, with a condition. Radical change is usually immediate and just as short lived. Truth is one needs the other. Radical change can move impediments that conservative reform may not be able to hurdle. Conservative reform needs the radical as a comparison. Another factor of reform is its education prejudice The Conservatives, “do as I do” campaign can be viewed as “you are not smart enough to make the right decisions so just follow my example”. (Monkey-see, monkey-do). Radical reform is the same; even the uneducated understand whiskey barrels being destroyed and no liquor on store shelves. Ways to reform the less educated may be the biggest thing that conservative and radical reforms have in common. The anti-Finney editorial author Anticlericus, evidently an educated man judging by the pseudonym, was probably fine with the moving of his apprentices from his house or even social reform, but he drew the line at Finney’s Millennialism reform of his household. His letter ends “From this unhappy period, peace quiet, and happiness have fled from my dwelling, never, I fear, to return” (Johnson 108). Could this be said of all reform?

Works Cited

Johnson, Paul E. A Shopkeeper's Millennium. Hill & Wang: New York, 2004.

Sellers, Charles. The Market Revolution. Oxford University Press:
New York, 1991.