

cultural achievement and the twentieth-century aspiration for mere celebrity?

For those open to the author's forays into the imagination, however, Sankovitch's book will likely make an engaging means for students to see the American past through the eyes of a family whose personal history is deeply enmeshed with the nation's political, business, and cultural development.

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**Brahmin Capitalism: Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America's First Gilded Age.** *By Noam Maggor.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017. xii + 284 pp. Figures, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-97146-2.

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Reviewed by Sharon Ann Murphy

In this well-written, highly readable examination of Boston's Gilded Age elites, Noam Maggor asks an important yet often overlooked question: "How did a slave-owning, cotton-exporting republic become a hegemonic industrial nation in the span of less than four decades?" (p. ix). The answer, he argues, is that "the migration of wealth from Boston and other old cities in the East toward bold new investment frontiers in the West financed railroads, mines, farms, stockyards, and many other business ventures" (p. xi). Yet, somewhat oddly, supporting the intriguing argument of how and why this transition occurred becomes a secondary concern of the book. Instead, the heart of the book is a fascinating urban history of Boston itself. In alternating chapters, the author vacillates between these two competing themes, making little effort to demonstrate to the reader how they are connected—beyond their common Boston elite protagonists. Maggor has essentially taken two separate yet equally worthwhile research projects and shuffled them together into one book.

Despite the emphasis of the title and preface, the more developed of the two stories involves the growing pains of a modernizing Boston, as the elites attempted to defend their historic political and economic power from the forces of democratization. Maggor illustrates this

struggle through an in-depth examination of three illuminating battles: disputes over the annexation of Boston suburbs, debates over urban taxation policy, and the campaign to control the meaning and usage of the Boston Common. Taking what could be bland policy debates over redistricting, finance, and land-use policy, the author effectively engages the reader by keeping what was at stake front and center at all times. What are the mutual obligations of the city and its citizens? Are taxes a *quid pro quo* for services rendered? Or are they a cost of a person's "membership in society," which "preceded his right to property"—that is, "part of the obligations 'man, as a human being, owes . . . to his fellows,' making 'civilization possible'" (pp. 88, 180)? The answer to the latter question then helps to determine what constitutes a fair distribution of taxes. But beyond questions of fairness, should this distribution take into account pragmatic considerations such as the difficulty of collecting taxes on personal property or the fear of reducing the tax base by driving wealthier citizens into the lower-taxed suburbs? Moreover, where is the line between public and private, and "between the state and civil society" (p. 75)? Who gets to decide what policies are in the best interest of the public? All of these provocative questions, and more, percolate up throughout these three debates, giving them deeper meaning and importance. Indeed, these questions are still relevant in most policy debates today. What is less clear is how unique these questions and debates were to Boston. Did other cities experience similar growing pains? Was Boston on the forefront of these issues? What did Bostonians learn from the positive and negative experiences of other urban areas? What did later cities learn from Boston's debates? In short, how did Boston's experiences fit into the larger history of urban America?

Rather than making connections with other cities, Maggor attempts to link this urban story to developments on the frontier by arguing that the spread of eastern financial capital to the territories required elites "to recast political institutions to better facilitate the formation of a seamless national market" (p. 6). As in Boston, these efforts created a similar battle over "the unchecked power of centralized financial authority," which "manifested in contests over metropolitan space, public finance, and civic institutions" and led to both greater politicization and a fragmentation of the political sphere (pp. 12, 158). Yet while the author sketches out the framework for this argument, he provides only limited anecdotal evidence of specific Bostonians shifting their focus from a cotton-dependent textile industry to railroads and mining. Unlike the detailed chapters on Boston, these chapters take more of a bird's-eye perspective on eastern investments in the West, providing almost no details of the political questions and policy debates he

claims emerged from this transition. He is asking important questions but providing only the beginnings of an answer. And as with the urban chapters, it is unclear how unique Boston elites were with these endeavors. Maggor's preface is tantalizing in asserting that he will explain the emergence of America's industrial power, but his examples are much more parochial. Is this transition from a reliance on southern cotton just a Boston story? Weren't elites in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore likewise investing on the frontier? Were Bostonians doing it to a greater extent? Or for different reasons? This is unclear.

Despite the shortcomings of this book, the individual parts still make it a highly worthwhile read. The chapters on Boston are skillfully written and argued, providing interesting insights into urban debates. The chapters on the frontier ask provocative questions that have the potential to open up new paths of inquiry regarding both the development of the frontier and the industrialization of the United States. The author's instinct to bring together urban history and western studies at this critical point in American history is not only unique, but potentially groundbreaking. Even if these connections were not adequately fleshed out in this particular book, the implications for the future of both urban and frontier history are no less important.

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*This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy. By Matthew Karp. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016. 360 pp. Figures, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-73725-9.*

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Reviewed by David Prior

Matthew Karp's excellent book enriches the growing scholarship examining U.S. slaveholders from an Atlantic perspective. His focus is on proslavery diplomats, politicians, and authors who, he argues, attempted to transform the United States into a bulwark of slavery in the Americas following British West Indian abolition in 1833. This proslavery foreign-policy elite, Karp contends, developed an ambitious vision of American power in the Western Hemisphere that proved resilient to domestic political divisions.