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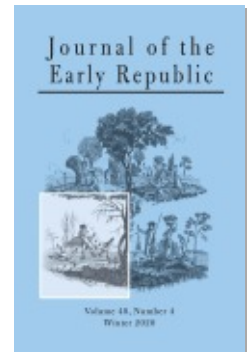
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The Symmetry of 1819 in American History

SCOTT A. SANDAGE

But for Andrew Browning and a SHEAR panel, the 1819 bicentennial might have passed with no more notice than Jessica Lepler found a century ago. Commemoratively, 2019 belonged to *The New York Times*' 1619 Project; even in 1919, a few black churches "Celebrated the 300th Anniversary of the Landing of Negroes at Jamestown." Its bicentennial had also been remembered in 1819 and—as if the Dutch slaver had not come before the *Mayflower*—misremembered in 1820. That first "cargo of negroes" came up in articles about the Missouri crisis and colonization, adjacent to headlines like "Bank of the United States" and "Monstrous Hard Times." Oddly enough, both 2019 and 2020 mark the bicentennials of bicentennials. Even without a pandemic, Mayflower hoopla will overshadow academic panels revisiting the Missouri Compromise.¹

All of these dates add up to an opportunity to talk about periodization. How might the Panic of 1819 (give or take 200 years) help us recut, rethink, and rewrite the history of capitalism, slavery, and freedom? American

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1. "The 1619 Project," *New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 18, 2019. "Baptist [sic] of Virginia Held a Great Reunion in Richmond; Celebrated the 300th Anniversary of the Landing of Negroes at Jamestown," *Richmond Planet* (VA), Aug. 30, 1919, 2. "Monstrous Hard Times," "Bank of the United States," and "From the Boston Daily Advertiser: Piracy, the Slave-trade and Slavery in the new States," all in *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), Nov. 16, 1819, 2. "Mr. King's Observations in the senate [sic] of the United States, on the Exclusion of slavery from the state of Missouri," *Evening Post* (New York), Nov. 26, 1819, 2. "Missouri Question" and "One Remark," both in *Evening Post* (New York), Dec. 13, 1820, 2

history neither began in 1619 nor ended in 2020, Twitter storms notwithstanding. But the Panic of 1819 and the Compromise of 1820 arguably mark a momentary halfway point. Living in this moment invites us to reconsider how we periodize and how the early republic fits into twenty-first-century understandings of the four centuries past.

Historians do not believe in centennials and bicentennials, except as commemorations to study, because these are conventional rather than analytical units. We do not think in base-100. Rather, we elongate or truncate centuries. Eric Hobsbawm's famously long one, from 1789 to 1914, formed an expansive age of revolution, capital, and empire. His midpoints, the transnational upheavals of 1848 and the 1860s, mirror the usual endpoints of the early American republic. Yet, such choices have until recently consigned "America's first great depression" to textbook timelines and sidebars, at best.²

Before the nineteenth century grew historiographically long, it was shorter and rounded on the ends by panics. Samuel Rezneck—a forgotten pioneer of socioeconomic cultural history—worked painstakingly from 1819 to 1893, publishing six articles (but alas no book) between 1933 and 1956. More notably, the labor historian Herbert Gutman showed how re-interpretation required re-periodization in a single classic essay: "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919." Having written his master's thesis and dissertation on the Panic of 1873, Gutman pointedly decentered "the Civil War as a crucial divide" in its century and in U.S. history. Instead, he subdivided the span in his subtitle at 1843 and 1893, keeping the overflow to 1919 for contrast. Invoking Hobsbawm as well as Clifford Geertz, Gutman argued that "an analytic model that distinguishes between culture and society reveals that even in periods of radical economic and social change powerful cultural continuities and adaptations continued to shape the historical behavior of diverse working-class populations."³

2. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York, 1987), 6–11.

3. Samuel Rezneck's major articles are "The Depression of 1819–1822, A Social History," *American Historical Review* 39 (Oct. 1933), 28–47; "The Social History of an American Depression, 1837–1843," *American Historical Review* 40 (July 1935), 662–87; "The Influence of Depression Upon American Public Opinion, 1857–1859," *Journal of Economic History* 2 (May 1942), 1–23; "Distress, Relief, and Discontent in the United States During the Depression of 1873–78," *Journal of Political History* 58 (Dec. 1950), 494–512; "Unemployment, Unrest, and Relief in the United States During the Depression of 1893–97," *Journal of Political Econ-*

This is a fair description of how the panelists are reinterpreting work, culture, and society (not to mention speculation, identity, dispossession, foreclosure, dishonor, housework, disease, morals, and tariffs) in industrializing America. We have simply, or rather complexly, broadened Gutman's diverse populations. Besides adding gender and race to class, we include more marginal and more powerful actors (including states and institutions) that shaped and were shaped by U.S. and global capitalism in this short nineteenth century. Delimited by a series of depressions not seen before or since, periodizing it begins with defining the Panic of 1819. Scott Reynolds Nelson, who literally wrote the book on this century of panic, narrows its origins to 1817–1819, while Jessica Lepler reminds us that the harsh realities of its outcomes “lasted about a decade.”

My Twitter tagline is “History is not reality; it's methodology.” Like Gutman, I believe that period and method are mutually reinforcing choices. What Lepler calls a “boom in non-quantitative scholarship on the history of capitalism” (including that subset lately known as its “new history”) has fueled and been fueled by new periodizations (no more market revolution, no more Civil War as “crucial divide”) and new methodologies.

The panelists exemplify three research and writing priorities underlying this “boom.” First, we share a commitment to recovering and reconstructing what I described (too long ago) as vernacular political economies. That is, we study American capitalism from the premise that people—bottom to top and at every margin—articulated their own understandings of it (in neglected but plentiful archival sources) and acted in ways that affected its outcomes. Second, we study capitalism having realized that business records and other economic sources are also remarkably rich in social and cultural history. Third, we write about capitalism by telling stories about people in all its strata; by joining in the return to narrative that has, in itself, become a method for synthesizing all that broadened horizons tend to fragment. All of the panelists do this well, particularly Julia P. R. Mansfield, and Lepler wonders whether new stories about new ordeals may be in need of a new name.⁴

omy 61 (Aug. 1953), 324–45; and “Patterns of Thought and Action in an American Depression, 1882–1886,” *American Historical Review* 61 (Jan. 1956), 284–307. Herbert G. Gutman, “Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919,” *American Historical Review* 78 (June 1973), 531–88, esp. 542–543, 555.

4. Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 229, 250.

Naming new experiences always lags, but those of circa 1819 entered the vernacular within (at most) a dozen years. In 1831, a Nashville newspaper complained that “in the pressure and panic of 1818–19, the Bank of the U.S. afforded no relief to the wants of the West.” Reprinted from a series in a Philadelphia paper, the article contrasted 1819 with “the pressure and panic of 1822” and “the tremendous panic and pressure of 1825–26.” This wild ride, felt by Philadelphians and Tennesseans alike, spread across the map to folks urban and rural, east and west—including first nations. That staccato decade’s repetitiveness gave its recurrent, overlapping hard times a name that is close enough (for my money) to the one we know. It was neither read backward from 1837 nor imposed later by eggheads.⁵

The phrasing varied and evolved, in real time and in contemporary postmortems, but that vernacular process itself suggests how actors devise and revise new names for new experiences. We need not quibble over “pressure and panic” versus just panic, or “1818–19” versus 1819—nor over proper nouns in those days of archaic or arbitrary capitalization (typographically speaking). Another in that same 1831 series of articles compared “the Pressure of 1818–19” to “the Panic of 1822–23” and tried to explain what happens generally, “during the Pressure and Panic of a Period” or “a Period of Panic.” By rhetorical trial and error, as Daniel Dupre argues, people learned how to talk about economic trial and error. Moreover, they were learning that capitalism could define “a Period” of national, regional, local, and individual life as profoundly as revolutions or elections, revivals or embargos did.⁶

Which brings us back to periodization. Renaming the Panic of 1819 would break up a set—1837, 1857, 1873, 1893, and many lesser crises—of lived increments for historical actors and mile markers for historians of capitalism. The panics defined a *short* nineteenth century (with its darker, vernacular political economy) within the long, liberal century of 1789 to 1914. That longer *durée* of democracy, as history and as historiography, was easily coopted into consensus and congratulation, which treated capitalism as self-evident and American capitalism as exceptional.

5. Aladdin [pseud.], “No. 11.—The West,” *National Banner and Nashville Whig* (TN), Apr. 13, 1831, 4. This item and the next were both reprinted from *The National Gazette and Literary Register*, Philadelphia.

6. Aladdin [pseud.], “No. 8.—Panic,” *National Banner and Nashville Whig* (TN), Apr. 6, 1831, 4.

We know better now, but the people of the panics knew best. They should retain the naming rights in perpetuity, at least until a subsequent generation reclaims them to make sense of harder times. The people of the Gilded Age (that title did not catch on colloquially) called several spans of those years “the great depression,” having forgotten that Andrew Brown- ing’s cohort and Robert Richard’s Murphey had done likewise.⁷

At this late date, we are as stuck with the Panic of 1819 as with the War of 1812. Historians are pedants who resent imprecision and presentism, nursing grudges and rarely in silence. And yet, in the passing convergence of minor bicentennials and major quadricentennials in 2019–2020, our own lived periodization presents a fleeting symmetry in American history and historiography. If both are bisected by 1819, temporarily, how might that recast the two centuries before and since? How could we use this moment to rebrand the “early” republic?

Wither the new history of capitalism is yet to be seen, but the market revolution did not work as a paradigm in part because it did not work as a periodization. From the narrow spans of Charles Sellers (1815–1846) and Harry Watson (1816–1848) to the overreach (1800–1880) of Melvyn Stokes and Steven Conway, no fine-tuning quite made the period cohere around the structures and cultures of markets, across subfields and disciplines. Scott C. Martin and contributors fell back to a mid-length revolution (1789–1860), as did John Lauritz Larson (1800–1860) in his definitive synthesis. However, note the retreat to an older periodization: after Rati- fication but before Disunion. This approximated the default shared by good old New Economic and New Social historians—from Douglass C. North to Christine Stansell and myriads you could recite. Conveniently evading big bangs at each end, this was the very periodization the market revolutionaries had tried to replace, because 1789 and 1860 emphasize political milestones, not economic turning points.⁸

7. Scott A. Sandage, “The Gilded Age,” in *A Companion to American Cul- tural History*, ed. Karen Halttunen (Oxford, UK, 2008), 139–53.

8. Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution in Early America, 1815–1846* (New York, 1994). Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990). Melvyn Stokes and Steven Conway, eds., *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880* (Charlottesville, VA, 1996). Scott C. Martin, ed., *Cultural Change and the Market Revolution in America, 1789–1860* (Lanham, MD, 2004). John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge, UK, 2010). Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United*

SHEAR itself gradually expanded its mission toward these defaults. The first issue of the *JER* set the parameters for “an expansion of knowledge and understanding about all aspects of the history and culture of the years between 1789 to approximately 1850.” SHEAR’s tent is bigger now, and so much the better, as “an association of scholars dedicated to exploring the events and the meaning of United States history between 1776 and 1861.” Yet consider: If 1819–1820 is the economic and political turning point of American history so far, then so are the decades immediately before and after. Indeed, the “early” republic might even be seen as America’s “middle passage,” not least for encompassing the peak years of external and internal slave trading in the United States. We might rebrand our subfield as less preliminary than pivotal.⁹

Richard Hofstadter once cursed the Civil War, historiographically, as “this massive, inconvenient reality of the nineteenth century.” Like Gutman, who rejected “the Civil War as a crucial divide,” Hofstadter saw it as an obstacle to rethinking and reconnecting democracy, slavery, and capitalism. More than fifty years later, not only textbooks and survey courses but public and professors still habitually “break” U.S. history at the Civil War—lopping off a second “half” barely half as long as the first. The economic and political turns of 1819–1820 not only break the past equally, at least in this current bicentennial minute, they draw attention to profoundly important facts. Slavery lasted well into “this half” of the story, and capitalism was well underway during “that half.” Planting a foot in both halves, we could recast our field: no longer “early,” but rather the period when there and then turned decisively toward here and now.¹⁰

States, 1790–1860 (New York, 1966). Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986).

9. “Prologue,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (Spring 1981), v–vi. “About us,” <https://www.shear.org/about-us/>. Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>.

10. Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968), 461.