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Review of: Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry

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Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry. By Lawrence A. Peskin. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. Pp. x, 294. Illustrations. Cloth, \$49.95.)

Lawrence A. Peskin's *Manufacturing Revolution* makes two important contributions to our understanding of early American industrialization. First, Peskin demonstrates that mercantilist ideas about economics persisted and continued to influence public policy well into the nineteenth century. Second, he makes the bold claim that the rhetoric of manufacturing preceded and paved the way for the subsequent Industrial Revolution. In essence, Americans underwent a manufacturing revolution in their minds well before things changed on the ground.

It is a commonplace assumption that mercantilism—the theory that a state's health depends on balancing its exports and imports in order to keep wealth within its borders—faded away during the nineteenth century under the influence of Adam Smith and his laissez-faire heirs. Not so, argues Peskin, who stresses instead the continuity of economic thought between the colonial and the early national eras. Under the British Empire, American colonists were expected to provide commodities to the mother country in return for manufactured goods. The colonies ensured that Britain could import raw commodities from within its domain. The goal was to make Britain both economically more vibrant and less dependent on other nations for its welfare. Following the American Revolution, many Americans staked out similar goals, now, of course, outside of the British Empire. While many historians have noted the emergence of free trade republicanism, Peskin reminds us that free traders were balanced out by those who continued to believe that nations must be both politically and economically independent. The patriotic drive for economic independence was one of the major components of promanufacturing rhetoric in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Advocates of American manufacturing stressed protectionist policies, namely high tariffs and public bounties to encourage American producers. The earliest advocates were artisanal mechanics who manufactured goods in traditional ways. They formed voluntary associations in order to pressure political leaders. Their “popular neomercantilism” stressed the public benefits and patriotic virtue of American economic independence (75–77). A nation is only as strong as its output, they argued.

They also suggested that the American economy would benefit from the harmony of interests created between interdependent agricultural, commercial, and manufacturing sectors in a new domestic economy. The mechanics' rhetoric was picked up in the 1790s by merchants turned manufacturers who formed voluntary manufacturing societies that produced few goods but much rhetoric, "their true legacy" (98).

The success of these early promanufacturing movements lay not in the goods they produced but the ideological changes they spawned. Peskin argues that we can better understand the origins of the Industrial Revolution by examining language and not production. Examining Americans' changing understanding of the words "mechanic," "manufacturer," and "manufacturing" from the 1790s onward, Peskin traces a transformation in public assumptions about what it meant to manufacture. In the 1790s, manufacturers were independent artisans. By the early 1800s, however, the word was linked to large-scale factories. Thus, Peskin argues, the public mind had reconceptualized the sites and scale of manufacturing before factories proliferated. Why did they do so? In the 1810s and 1820s, manufacturers formed associations that echoed earlier artisans on the importance of protection as a means to make America economically independent and to foster a harmonious domestic market. These men, unlike the mechanics of an earlier era, invested in large-scale factory production. The radicalism of the shift from small-scale to large-scale production was, however, masked by several factors. Most important was the familiarity and patriotic sound of promanufacturing rhetoric. In addition, many factories opened in rural areas, where mechanics and artisans exerted less influence. Finally, in an age of progress, small producers were seen as anachronistic. The result was the displacement of small producers by large manufacturers in the public mind well before small producers had been displaced by the familiar changes linked with industrialization.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Peskin's story is his discussion of how voluntary manufacturing associations became private manufacturing corporations. In the 1810s and 1820s, there were two models of manufacturing. In Philadelphia, manufacturers relied on relatively small factories and voluntary associations. These associations pooled capital to encourage manufacturing and also publicized their achievements in the public sphere. They thus encouraged dialogue about the proper role of manufacturing in American society. In New England, however, an

alternative approach had been discovered: corporate capitalism. Instead of proprietors banding together in associations, New England's textile mills were private corporations made up of wealthy shareholders. Their affairs were private, and they did little, Peskin argues, to promote public debates over manufacturing. This model soon found its way to New York and Baltimore. "The emerging corporate capitalism," Peskin writes, "privatized manufacturing and therefore removed key discussions from the public sphere" (170). Whereas the mechanics' societies of the 1790s and the manufacturing societies that followed them were all agents of publicity, the new corporations sought profit and control without deliberation.

This is an intriguing argument that Peskin might have developed in more detail. Peskin overlooks the work of historians such as Thomas Bender, Robert Dalzell, and Theodore Steinberg, who have written about New England manufacturers' rhetorical efforts to legitimize corporate capitalism in the face of hostile opposition. Peskin also might have provided a more theoretical elaboration of the relationships between the state, the public sphere, and the market. Mercantilism was a strong public ideology that sanctioned an active state committed to interfering with the market to serve the common good. Simultaneously, early manufacturing voluntary associations were engaged in market activity that is often seen as outside the boundaries of the public sphere. Peskin's suggestive interpretation hopefully will inspire more work about the changing relationships between these spheres and why and how manufacturers were successful in taking their economic activities out of the realm of public discussion and state action.

Peskin has written a fine book that raises many interesting questions and provides cogent answers. He has convincingly argued that an industrial revolution took place in discourse before it happened on the ground. In doing so, he helps us understand why Americans did not protest more as industrialization progressed. Revolutionary-era promanufacturing rhetoric—which combined patriotism and self-interest—helped open the door to a nineteenth century vastly different than its artisanal spokesmen had imagined in the 1770s and 1780s.

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