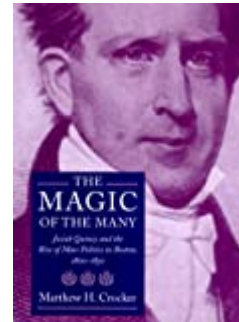


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Deference, Democracy, and Ethics in Josiah Quincy's Boston

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Historians of Jacksonian America are no more likely to agree on major interpretative lines than students of other periods. Some describe an increasingly individuated society with wide vistas of freedom, while others depict a suffocating world of market capitalism and chattel slavery. But if they differ in their viewpoints, early national scholars have recently moved towards a common synthetic approach. Aided by broad conceptual frameworks like the Market Revolution, these historians have blended social, intellectual, and cultural history. Their monographs will doubtless become still more multifaceted. Work on politics should prove no exception. Yet if politics retains a special interest for early national historians, it sometimes proves difficult to integrate with other areas of study. Perhaps because of its exclusionary connotations, the political realm presents a particular challenge to those seeking to draw various strands of history together.

Matthew Crocker's *The Magic of the Many: Josiah Quincy and the Rise of Mass Politics in Boston, 1800-1830*

answers this challenge with a focused study of Boston's political culture. In one hundred sixty-three smoothly written pages, Crocker argues that Boston moved "from a democracy of the few to a democracy of the many" (pp. 162-63). A Federalist gentry ruled over a quiescent populace at the turn of the century, but under the heat of class conflict, insurgent political forces toppled the city's ruling clique. The insurgents, who organized as "the Middling Interest" in 1822, forged odd coalitions between discontented workingmen, opportunistic Republicans, and estranged Federalists. They eventually cohered behind ex-Federalist Josiah Quincy, who reigned as mayor from 1823 to 1828 with a populist style. Crocker tells a straightforward democratization story with an ironic twist. "In the quest for inclusive democracy," he concludes, "Boston surrendered itself to a dominating Caesarist." Still, the author believes that Quincy's leadership introduced "a more advanced form of democracy to Boston" (p. 162). Readers interested in behind-the-scenes politics will find *The Magic of the Many* delightful. Few books offer political history in such high resolution. The subject matter that Crocker touches upon, ranging from municipal law to class formation, also points the way

for future work. Even more than other historians, scholars who write about politics must blend social, intellectual, and cultural history into a synthetic story about the sources and exercise of power.

Crocker begins with a portrait of Federalist Boston in 1800. Amidst the commercial wealth and cultural prestige of New England's capital, Federalism appeared in its most unabashedly elitist form. Its Central Committee, headed by the likes of Harrison Gray Otis, exercised tight control over both the party and the city at large. The author intelligently describes this bygone social order, but he often wields "deference" and "democracy" as self-evident antipodes – an oversight that restricts the meaning of both. While powerful Federalists "enjoyed Madeira together and schemed over politics and business," ordinary Bostonians remained compliant (p. 6). Even after Jeffersonian victories throughout the Commonwealth by 1807, the Federalists held onto Boston. The twilight of Federalism has fascinated students of American democracy for decades, and now Crocker adds a glimpse of some of the nation's most unrepentant aristocrats. [1] Many Federalists retreated to the pursuit of experimental agriculture, while others fought their opponents, however hesitantly, with the weapons of popular politics. Josiah Quincy did both. While helping to lead the often-raucous Washington Benevolent Society, Quincy learned of the power that popularity offered.

Cracks began to appear in the Federalists' armor when Jefferson triumphed in 1800, but not until the 1810s did Bostonians summon the temerity to defy their leaders. For Crocker, basic class grievances fueled political insurgency. During the 1819 Panic, over one hundred businesses failed. Debtors' prisons swelled. Economic chaos gave rise to grassroots movements against debtor laws and militia requirements. "Honest" debtors demanded wider access to work if imprisoned, while artisans called for exemption from the militia service that kept them from their workbenches. These movements, Crocker asserts, "helped redefine Boston's political standard by injecting class issues into the political dialogue" (p. 25). Yet the reform groups lacked coordination and were ultimately held together only by a shared hatred for the Federalists' Central Committee. At the Constitutional Convention of 1820-21, the old guard outfoxed its noisy but disorganized enemies. Crocker masterfully recreates the machinations of the Central Committee. Otis and his brethren rigged the Convention by placing allies in key positions, leaving angry debtors and resentful militiamen in the cold.

Despite their failures at the Convention, dissident groups continued to gain strength as the economy withered. Insurgency found a voice in publications like *The Debtor's Journal* and *The New England Galaxy*; during the 1821-22 debate over a city charter, it found a unifying cause. Throngs packed Faneuil Hall to demand a ward-voting section to the new charter. (Federalists preferred the more pliable Town Meeting form). Crocker rightly stresses the significance of these gatherings. Amidst boisterous cheering and defiant hissing, inbred habits of quietude melted away. Crocker's analysis is thorough and compelling, though it might have benefited from exposure to recent work on street theater in the early republic.[2] The author proceeds to describe the rise of the self-proclaimed "Middling Interest." This anti-aristocratic, anti-partisan movement attracted older insurgent elements, plus opponents of an 1803 law that restricted the construction of wooden structures over ten feet tall. These "ten-footers" demanded access to cheaper housing. Many leading Federalists, however, were also leading landlords who feared competition from new wooden buildings. Harrison Gray Otis, for instance, collected princely sums from his tenants and thus supported the 1803 law. Again, Crocker uncovers and underscores the class conflict behind political struggle.

Boston's first mayoral election in 1822 reflected the Central Committee's decline. The Middling Interest formally broke with the Federalists and backed that most unlikely populist, Josiah Quincy. An anti-Jeffersonian representative in his early days, Quincy had fallen from the Central Committee's graces and taken a post as a municipal judge. There he criticized both the debtor laws and the militia requirements. Quincy accepted the Middling Interest's nomination against Otis, the Federalist standard bearer. (The hapless Republicans also entered a sacrificial lamb). Once again, the Central Committee staved off defeat by adding a nominee in the final days of the campaign. Quincy captured a plurality but was denied a majority. The Middling Interest then rallied at the second balloting to elect John Phillips, an ally of Quincy. "The wheels of revolution are in motion," exulted the *Galaxy*, and indeed the Middling Interest had won an unprecedented victory (p. 96). But Phillips proved a timid leader, and Boston's five municipal boards stymied all reform efforts. In the 1823 election, Quincy capitalized on a bizarre series of partisan reconfigurations to win the mayoralty on the Federalist ticket. He soon proved himself more of a Middling Interest man.

>From 1823 to 1828, Quincy turned the Mayor's office into a bully pulpit from which insurgent demands

descended upon the city. The Mayor used “the spirit of the [city] charter” to challenge municipal boards, rewrite state laws, and upend local traditions. Quincy’s career should draw the close attention of legal and urban scholars.[3] When he deemed the Board of Health insensitive to the needs of common folk, the Mayor summarily abolished it; when he found the Overseers of the Poor recalcitrant, he sold one of their facilities, forcing them to transfer inmates to his pet project, the House of Industry. Quincy took a close hand in the “modernization” of the city’s firefighting forces and personally led quasi-legal forces to suppress extra-legal crowds in 1825. Most remarkably, this patrician-turned-populist conceived and carried out a plan to provide Boston’s tradesmen with a public market. To build the aptly named Quincy Market, the Mayor purchased 142,000 square feet of real estate, redefining the concept of eminent domain in the process. Most Bostonians supported such heavy-handed leadership. Yet when Quincy challenged the popular School Committee in 1828, opponents called him arrogant. He was defeated by another unlikely political coalition, this one headed by a contrite Harrison Gray Otis. For Crocker, the election of 1828 epitomized Boston’s transition from deference to democracy. After the fall of Federalist hegemony, ordinary people “evaluated their mayor from an independent viewpoint, judging his worthiness by his actions – not his class, pedigree, or party” (p. 145). Quincy thus fell victim in 1828 to the very forces that he had helped to unleash.

Crocker’s book speaks to the vast and contentious literature on the Democratic-Republican and Jacksonian movements. Since Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Age of Jackson*, scholars have portrayed the democrats less in class terms and more in ethnocultural or regional ones. Recent interpretations see the Jacksonian insurgency as a fist shaken at the encroaching market.[4] Crocker adds a strikingly different, and in many ways old-fashioned view. He describes a popular movement of ordinary folks (although not card-carrying Jacksonians) to win greater control over public affairs.

The author’s informed sympathy for Boston’s insurgents gives the book a welcome piquancy. Readers wearied of postmodern hedging will find Crocker’s prose refreshing. He does not hesitate to fault the Federalists’ “insecurity and stupidity,” to label Phillips’s mayoralty “an utter failure,” or to call Quincy’s opponents “totally ineffective” (pp. 114, 134, 150). In some monographs, such unequivocal statements might make for a flat read, but here they add analytical tension. Above all, Crocker succeeds in penetrating the murky depths of politicking. He

finds the actual workings of state conventions and town meetings. Whereas many scholars outline patterns of partisan allegiance and leave the actual outcomes of particular elections to the imagination, Crocker delves into the smoke-filled backrooms. *The Magic of the Many* thus satisfies the historian’s hunger for causation in a way that few studies do.

Yet Crocker also loses some explanatory firepower by restricting his inquiry to class and politics. The story of Josiah Quincy and the Middling Interest, as noted above, raises issues that might carry the book beyond the political realm. But the author sticks quite closely to the economics-and-power formula. Disaffection for the Federalist fathers, Crocker argues, originated in the hardships of 1819. And throughout the book, class issues remain “barely beneath the surface” or “resting just below the surface” of Boston’s political culture (pp. 119, 121). Class-derived grievances undoubtedly fueled much of the period’s popular contention; recent work has uncovered quantifiable distinctions in wealth between the nation’s first parties.[5] A richer story, however, might emerge by engaging the cultural and intellectual forces at work in Quincy’s Boston.

In particular, Crocker’s book stirs questions about ethics in the early republic. In chapter five, Crocker discusses Francis Wayland, who helped organize the Middling Interest before achieving fame as a moral philosopher. Wayland added Christian righteousness to the insurgency’s rhetorical arsenal. By supporting a self-conscious organization of poor and middling sorts, he also departed from the venerable concept of the Great Chain of Being. Eighteenth-century thinkers renounced “combinations” as wicked perversions of the Great Chain. English laborers and American college students alike were accused of forming “combinations” when they organized among themselves. Yet by the 1820s, Wayland and others implicitly justified exactly this kind of horizontal mobilization. Such a shift in Anglo-American ethical standards clearly relates to the larger social transition from “ranks” to “classes.” While defending their particular combination, Middling Interest leaders habitually described their supporters as “honest” – “honest workingmen,” “honest laborers,” etc. Whereas we view honesty as a purely personal quality, and as one clouded by moral relativism, early nineteenth-century Americans saw it as a social virtue. “Honesty” connoted an individual’s acceptance of his or her social duties. In future work, scholars should explore applications of truthfulness in political discourse.[6]

The concept of deference provides a particularly fertile field for synthetic work in early American history. Many readers will no doubt find this assertion hackneyed, considering the amount of attention the term has already garnered. Nevertheless, deference remains a surprisingly unexplored historical frontier because of the narrow meaning it has acquired. Scholars have traditionally treated deference as a political concept, expressed in low voter turnouts and high retention rates for officeholders. The early nineteenth-century surge in electoral activity thus signifies the end of deference in this paradigm. Crocker contributes to this type of scholarship with his thorough study of Boston. He sees deference for social status giving way in the city's politics to respect for actual achievement; hence the conditional loyalty accorded to Josiah Quincy. For Crocker, the Mayor's defeat in 1828 announced the arrival of a demanding, contentious democracy. By this line of analysis, deference exists where opposition (in this case, political opposition) does not. Unfortunately for such interpretations, New England has never lacked for opposition and contention in the public sphere. In 1722, scores of Connecticut farmers stormed through Hartford to protest land speculation in the northwest part of the colony. In 1741, Massachusetts freemen voted out thirty-six members of the General Court who had rejected the popular Land Bank scheme. And as Gary Nash has shown, colonial Bostonians regularly and vigorously clamored against the abuses of "the Great." When measured in terms of popular opposition to unpopular rule, deference becomes a nebulous and none-too-helpful concept.[7]

Deference should instead be understood in terms of social hierarchy and popular conceptions thereof. The question for historians is not whether a commoner opposed or combatted a grandee in some way, but whether the commoner perceived of him or herself as inferior. Eighteenth-century rioters might still "know" that only gentlemen could handle leadership, just as nineteenth-century students might curse a professor yet still acknowledge his superior mental powers. Thus, historians must look for deferential behavior in everyday interactions and realize that feelings of inferiority may coexist with expressions of discontent. Did voting represent a qualitative break from other forms of popular contention? Did Boston's voters match their assertiveness at the polls with quotidian displays of self-respect on the streets? Only by understanding deference in terms of social hierarchy will scholars be able to answer such questions.[8]

Matthew Crocker's *The Magic of the Many* should

command the attention of early national and urban historians. It is a well written, tautly argued work that throws light on the interaction between class struggle and public power in the nineteenth century. Crocker unveils the everyday functioning of politics as well as any author in recent years. By touching upon so many topics – municipal authority, legal change, and crowd action to name a few – Crocker also offers a guide to future political historians. As intellectual, social, and cultural history continue to run together, politically-inclined scholars must embrace the synthetic approach if they are to secure a place for politics in the past of the future.

Notes

[1]. Shaw Livermore, Jr., *The Twilight of Federalism* (Princeton, 1962); David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism* (New York, 1965); Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, New York, 1970).

[2]. David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, Mass., 1997).

[3]. In particular, Quincy's career speaks to the doctrine of "Salus Populi" as discussed in William J. Novak, *The People's Welfare: Law and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

[4]. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (New York, 1945); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York, 1983); Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York, 1990); Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York, 1991).

[5]. See, for example, Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995), 280-281.

[6]. A superb example of such work is James T. Kloppenberg, "The Virtues of Liberalism: Republicanism, Christianity, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse," *Journal of American History*, 74, 1 (June 1987), 9-33.

[7]. James M. Poteet, "Unrest in the 'Land of Steady Habits': The Hartford Riot of 1722," *American Philosophi-*

cal Society Proceedings, 119, 3 (June 1975), 223-232; John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1731-1861* (New York, 1989), 55-65; Gary D. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

[8]. Michael Zuckerman et als., "Deference or Defi-

ance in Eighteenth-Century America: A Round Table," *Journal of American History*, 85, 1 (June 1998), 13-97, 27.

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