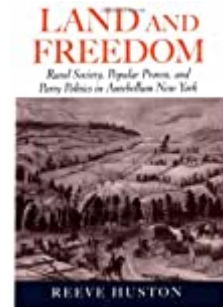


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Reeve Huston.** *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. ix + 291 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513600-5.



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The anti-rent movement of the antebellum era offers much to recommend it to scholars and the historically minded public. At one point, fully one-twelfth of the state's population worked farms held on long-term leases extended by a handful of great proprietors and a larger number of less exalted landlords. At their most patrician, these men could act like feudal aristocrats. Stephen Van Rensselaer IV, it is said, shrank from shaking his tenants' hands, offering them instead his forefinger to be grasped (p. 71). In contrast, tenants could be suitably subservient and fawning, though often evasive when back rent was due, but they generally played their part—that is, until they were pushed too far.

As they did in the so-called Anti-Rent War of the 1840s, hard-pressed tenants then took to the courts to challenge their landlords' titles, entered the political arena backing third-party insurgencies, and formed bands of masked "Indians" to protect their compatriots from evictions and distress sales. Predictably, when "Indian" intimidation resulted in violence against officers of the law, the state militia was dispatched to pacify the hill towns west of the Hudson valley that were the epicenter of the tenants' uprising. Eventually, the tenants' political insurgency was also contained, though not without dealing, at least indirectly, a deathblow to the landlord/tenant system and shaping the emergent "free labor" ideology

of northern Republicans. In brief, the story told by Reeve Huston in his solidly researched book entitled *Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York*, along with Charles W. McCurdy's *The Anti-Rent Era in New York Law and Politics, 1839-1865* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), represents a bit of a boomlet in Anti-Rent studies.

One particular strength of Huston's work is its extensive and compelling coverage of the long foreground to the anti-rent crisis proper. The author notes that troubles in New York stretched back at least as far as the 1740s, when disenchanted tenants first began challenging their colonial landlords' prerogatives. Although the American Revolution destroyed some of these great estates, many survived the conflict, in large part because their proprietors cast their lot with the Patriots. Despite settlers' preference for land in fee simple as against tenantry, massive postwar migration in New York meant that the extent of this quasi-feudal form of land tenure would continue to grow. In return for social deference and political allegiance, landlords offered cash-strapped settlers easy terms. Even if the land was generally hilly, the post-war boom in wheat production meant that it could pay, especially when landlords were willing to provide start-up assistance, fund churches and mills, and forbear on prosecutions for rent arrearages.

But the generally serviceable accommodation that obtained for several decades between landlord and tenant fell apart in the 1830s. In explaining this process, Huston does well to avoid mono-causal explanation. Certainly, the proprietors' financial concerns and renunciation of the previous generation's sense of *noblesse oblige* did much to ramp up the crisis by reducing tenants' access to common land, promoting annual leases that limited tenant rights to improvements, and speeding up prosecutions for unpaid back rent. But the tenants' predicament was also shaped by the hill towns' deforestation, as well as local farmers' move to wool and dairy production, which required greater start-up capital and thus tended to drive marginal farmers into landless-ness.

Huston complements his deft handling of this foreground to conflict with a laudable appreciation of the pitfalls of over-generalization about the social and economic roots of anti-rentism. Within the larger study of the movement, his focus on two key counties (Albany and Delaware) allows him to suggest the complexity of anti-rent sentiment, which often had a local flavor. If Albany County was split politically by geographic, religious, and economic divisions among its people, Delaware County's partisan loyalty reflected disparate economic experience alone (p. 68).

Precisely how these factors worked to determine who became an anti-rent activist is less well spelled out in Huston's account. Charts presented in a statistical appendix purport to provide evidence toward answering this question. Aside from the fact that they would appear more usefully integrated alongside the text (probably an editorial decision out of the author's hands), I wonder if the data is sufficiently robust to carry the interpretive weight Huston would like them to carry. Populations sampled are often small ones, and interpretive categories are occasionally suspect. I am particularly skeptical of Huston's categorization of church membership into two groups: Evangelical/New England churches (including mainline Presbyterians, I think, but maybe not Associate Reformed and other Presbyterian groups—it is unclear) and so-called Conservative Churches (Dutch Reformed/Episcopal). Where the Universalists fit in, I cannot say. This would be an attempt, I suppose, to develop an ethno-cultural argument about the roots of anti-rent sentiment, and at times Huston appears to flirt with this interpretive tack, as when he notes the predominance of Yankee settlers in hill districts. But there is no sustained development on his part of the peculiar *cultural* character that predisposed (presumably) Yankee anti-renters to become activists. More than this, Huston himself notes

that the leasehold areas were settled by a mix of migrants, whose religious and cultural traditions were, I would assert, more complex than Huston's rough religious categorization would recognize. In any case, the crux of the issue here is probably less a matter of culture and more one of perceptions of economic security. On that count, Huston is on firmer ground.

Central to the author's argument is the case that the anti-rent movement's fate was played out in New York State's electoral politics and court system. It is clear from Huston's analysis that neither major party was willing, as a whole, to embrace anti-rentism *in toto*, although both Conservative Democrats and Liberal Whigs at times more or less espoused the cause, as did, in a more substantial way, National Reform Association founder Thomas Devyr. All parties wooing the anti-renters hoped to gain votes to bolster their electoral standing. The situation was such, however, that some party activists and reformers also came to integrate elements of the anti-rent persuasion into their thinking: Horace Greeley is held up as the shining example of a convert to the agrarian belief in the natural right to land, while William Seward's free-labor thinking appears as a more tentative example.

It is for this reason that Huston is moved to describe the relationship between anti-rent activists and their allies as a *dialectical* one. I understand his reason for wanting to characterize it as such; otherwise, the anti-renters emerge from their ordeal as losers, plain and simple, having effected little in the way of true change. The question is, then, how thoroughgoing was the dialectical give-and-take? Huston himself admits that, despite the anti-renters' political strength in the 1840s, neither major party went in for "agrarianism," and the courts never ruled in favor of allowing the State to meddle with existing land titles, a chief aim of the movement. This result would seem to suggest that anti-rent was a flash in the pan. On the other hand, Huston holds up the anti-renters' contribution to demolishing the Second Party System in New York as an indication of their ultimate political impact. The Homestead Act, too, is offered as a sign that anti-rent sentiment survived to contribute to the Republican coalition that emerged to dominate the region in the 1850s.

For all this, we are still left with a fundamental question: was the anti-rent belief that "land belongs to the tillers" (p. 33) a deeply held *ideology* (that is, a vision of what ought to be) or a political rhetoric developed out of the particular experience of (a deep but transitory) economic depression coupled with the transformation of the

rural economy? On this point, Huston may perhaps have been moved, for the sake of argument, to assert more on the side of ideology than his own analysis would suggest. While anti-rent court challenges ultimately helped to demolish the old landlord/tenant system, the farmers who bought the old leasehold properties did not generally do so on anti-rent terms. In many cases, they were not even the old tenants at all, but newer arrivals. As an example, of the sixty-six people who bought Westerlo farms from proprietors Stephen Van Rensselaer or Walter Church between 1849 and 1899, less than a third had worked their farms for ten years or more (p. 203). The other tenants were either evicted for back rents (and thus compelled to leave in the time-honored way) or had left of their own accord in search of greener pastures, many undoubtedly to western homesteads. When pressed, moreover, the newly independent yeomen proprietors fairly quickly backed away from the anti-renters' vision of universal land access into a kind of producer insularity in the New York State Granges, which excluded wage laborers and fostered nativist sentiment. One might have

stopped here, of course, but the case for anti-rent ideology would then have been left hanging. This situation may explain why the book ends not with the post-war Grange (a downer, certainly), but with a chronological hiccup back to the theme of anti-rentism as constituent of pre-war Republicanism's "Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men." So it is that Hutson can conclude his study by asserting that, "Far from being crushed by the parties and the advocates of the emerging capitalist order, the anti-renters unleashed a dialectic that helped usher in a new social and political order" (p. 217).

While it is possible to quibble with this interpretive inflection, one cannot help but be impressed by the breadth of Hutson's research and his engagement with the subject. Happily, it appears that Oxford University Press has seen fit to issue a paperback edition of the book (promised for July of this year at \$19.95). So it is that we can all happily march down to our local bookstores (or sidle up to our computers) secure in the knowledge that, unlike the anti-renters, we won't be forced into insolvency in acquiring the tools of our trade.

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