

The Lost Tradition of Economic Equality in America, 1600–1870. By Daniel R. Mandell. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. 314 pp. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 978-1-4214-3711-8

doi:10.1017/S0007680523000454

Reviewed by Terry Bouton

This book argues in the passive voice. Daniel Mandel never makes it clear exactly how or why the tradition of economic equality lost out. If anything, he suggests that the ideal simply became unpopular over time. That interpretation largely ignores the great power imbalance that decisively shaped the debate over economic equality in America. Put simply, the advocates of equality held far less economic, political, and cultural power than those trying to uphold concentrations of wealth. Economic equality was not merely lost in the passive way Mandel suggests. Rather, wealthy and powerful men deployed their vast and varied authority to bludgeon it out of public debate each time it gained traction.

This book works best when describing the public debates over economic equality and showing how people at different levels of society at different historical time periods understood the term. The book starts with the diggers and levelers of the English Civil War and their calls for land redistribution. Mandel shows how related ideas of economic equality took root among white settlers in North America, where conquest of Native peoples secured so much land that colonial elites were unable to monopolize it like the aristocracy and gentry had done in Europe. Widespread landownership shaped how most white people of the Revolutionary generation defined liberty and independence and led to them to retain property requirements for voting rights and office-holding.

As Mandel frames it, the big shift away from ideals of economic equality began at the close of the American Revolution. In the decades following independence, many elite men openly celebrated concentrations of wealth as the product of good morals, rare talent, hard work, and divine blessings. These economic apostles spread their new gospel through churches, novels, and pamphlets. They wrote textbooks aimed at indoctrinating school children with respect for social hierarchy and an acceptance of their lowly place in it. Those messages were reinforced by middle-class reformers who empathized with displaced farmers, urban workers, and sometimes Black Americans, but who denied the underlying structural economic causes of inequality. Instead, they chose to believe that the real culprit was the immorality of the masses.

Americans from all segments of society pushed back against inequality. There were direct challenges from insurgent farmers in the 1780s and

'90s. Later, the challenges came from striking craftsmen and factory workers, free-soilers trying to populate the West with white land-owning farmers, and utopian communities that attacked wealth inequality by isolating themselves and starting over. As economic life became more unequal, ordinary white men pushed to sever the link between property ownership and voting rights. The increased political power of the propertyless, however, did little to slow wealth concentration. Mandel ends the book with the failed efforts to support Black economic equality during Reconstruction. He frames that defeat as the moment when the tradition became lost (even though the Populists, Knights of Labor, and Industrial Workers of the World, etc. were right around the corner).

The main problem with Mandel's interpretation is the way it removes public debate over economic inequality from the power realities that shaped and defined it. The elite men who defended wealth inequality were not just fighting with words and ideas. They had an enormous cache of resources and institutional power at their disposal. The defenders of the status quo used newspapers, print media, church pulpits, and school curricula to get their message out. They designed governments, constitutions, laws, court systems, police forces, and corporate protections to shield their property and consolidate their authority. They deployed that array of power to defeat insurgent farmers and smother the early labor movement with strike-busting injunctions, union-banning laws, and Supreme Court rulings that all but outlawed the most successful strategies ordinary people used to make economic life more equitable.

These realities defined the debate over equality and inequality. The shift away from economic equality that Mandel portrays began with great concentrations of political and economic power during the Revolutionary era that radically shifted the conversation. The Federal Constitution, new national government, and court systems worked in tandem with the spread of the corporate form to narrow the possibilities for addressing economic inequality. They also created enormous obstacles to meaningful reform with laws, courts, and even state-sponsored violence.

Reform-minded elites were often no help. They typically co-opted the message and watered down popular demands to neutralize the threat. Not even Thomas Jefferson was willing to do much to address wealth inequality. In fact, he openly rejected the specific reforms that his beloved yeomen farmers said they needed to stay solvent. When farms failed in huge numbers, Jefferson did not see the devastation as sufficiently worrisome to merit the kinds of government interventions in economic life many farmers saw as crucial. With elite allies like this,

no wonder ideals of economic equality had trouble competing in the public sphere.

In the years covered by Mandel's book, there was no free and fair hearing for economic equality in the marketplace of ideas. The mismatch usually ended with the proponents of equality beaten down and their favored policies and tactics restricted by law. The ideal of economic equality kept resurfacing. But each time, a new generation had to reinvent the tradition with little carryover from the past, usually in a more hostile environment that constrained possibilities. By largely ignoring these critical dynamics, Mandel misses the opportunity to provide a more complete understanding of the debate over economic equality in a way that appreciates both the stiff resistance it faced and its remarkable resilience despite near-constant opposition from those in power.

TERRY BOUTON, Associate Professor of History, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD, USA

Professor Bouton is the author of Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution (2007). He is currently completing two book projects: one on James Madison and executive power and another on economic self-interest and the creation of the Constitution.

. . .

Money in the Dutch Republic: Everyday Practice and Circuits of Exchange. *By Sebastian Felten.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Hardcover, \$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-00-909884-7.

doi:10.1017/S0007680523000521

Reviewed by Stephen Quinn

Money in the Dutch Republic uses primary sources to reveal how select people handled the multiplicity of monies that existed in the 1600s and the 1700s. The author, Sebastian Felten, does this from the perspective of family enterprises. Those families range from living on a farm to the sprawling domains of the noble house of Orange-Nassau to the household of a rural preacher. The book favors these stories because these people are neither the urban merchants nor financiers that are often the focus of monetary studies of the Netherlands. In the process, the book considers money broadly—as means of payment, as units of account, as stores of value, and as means of settlement. The points are that a diversity of monies existed, that those monies were used in many different ways, and that those ways were often collaborative because the various situations created complementarities.