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**The Whigs, 1833–1856 : Opponents of Tyranny,
Proponents of a Capitalist Revolution or Social Reformers ?**

Introduction : Why should we be interested in the whigs ? After all, shouldn't the democrats be our main focus of attention, since this year's agrégation topic bears on American democracy in the age of Jackson ? Andrew Jackson's supporters portrayed him as the arch democrat, the common man whose rise through universal suffrage he embodied. More generally from Jackson's first presidential campaign to the end of the Mexican-American war, the whole period can be considered as the culmination of the popular expansionism he personally supported when he fought against the Creeks, invaded Florida and removed South-eastern Indians. Isn't American democracy in the age of Jackson just a reference to his party, his followers and the men who voted for them ?

Yet democracy in the United States in the antebellum period was also embodied by the Whigs who, as Ronald Formisano has reminded us, eventually embraced all the tenets of modern democracy, as was revealed during the 1840 presidential campaign¹. Having learnt their lessons from the democrats, they presented the old general Harrison, their candidate, as a pure product of the egalitarian frontier culture. A war hero no less than Jackson Harrison was also born on the frontier (the Ohio frontier this time) and fought Indians like Jackson. Unlike Jackson however, he stood for « reform ». So if the whigs were also democrats, what kind of democracy did they stand for, what kind of reform ? Joseph W. Pearson has entitled his recent book *The Whigs' America. Middle-Class Political Thought in the Age of Jackson and Clay*, clearly

¹ Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People : American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s*. Chapel Hill : UNC Press, 2008.

challenging the phrase « the age of Jackson » by replacing it with the phrase « the age of Jackson and Clay »². Between 1824 and 1848, politics in the United States was indeed dominated by the democrats, the party of Jackson, but this domination was shared with the whigs led by Henry Clay.

There are many reasons why historians have not emphasized the whigs' major contribution to the political and social life of the United States in the 1830s and the 1840s until recently. Due to a generally pro-democrat, pro-Jackson historiography, and more recently due to the major influence of Charles Sellers's monograph *The Market Revolution : Jacksonian America 1815-1846*, published in 1991, the whigs were long seen as the arch representatives of a rising bourgeoisie while democrats were considered as the champions of the common man, the small farmer and the city artisan³. In fact, historians long bought into the Jacksonian definition of the whigs as the elite and as aristocrats. Whig leaders were presented as having little charisma, while their ideas and preoccupations seemed boring. Henry Adams, who wrote on the early American republic at the end of the 19th century, said : « Of all the parties that have existed in the United States, the famous Whig party was the most feeble in ideas. »⁴

Yet by the late 1990s, the whigs started enjoying a revival. While universal male suffrage had long been seen as the litmus test of democracy in the early republic, and made Jacksonian democrats popular because they made it their most characteristic feature, suddenly historians realized that universal suffrage was limited to white men in the early American republic. By contrast American historians such as Nathan O'Hatch were then rediscovering the democratic, anti-authoritarian impulse of evangelical religion in the early decades of the early American

² Joseph. W. Pearson, *The Whigs' America. Middle-Class Political Thought in the Age of Jackson and Clay*, Lexington, Kentucky : University Press of Kentucky, 2020.

³ Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1991.

⁴ Quoted here : <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jala/2629860.0022.206/--rise-and-fall-of-the-american-whig-party-jacksonian-politics?rgn=main;view=fulltext> (December 21, 2021)

republic together with the vast reform and civic movement that pervaded American society after the War of 1812⁵. Because evangelical reformers were more likely to be whigs than democrats, the whigs were no longer seen as aristocrats or bourgeois, but as early progressives. Michael Holt's detailed study of Whig politics in 1999 provided scholars of the early American republic with an essential reference work⁶.

We also tend to relate to the whigs and to understand their ideas more easily today as the election of Donald Trump in 2016 made clear what the Whigs stood for by opposition to Jacksonian democrats. Donald Trump put up Andrew Jackson's portrait in the Oval Office and visited the Hermitage, Andrew Jackson's plantation, in the early days of his presidency. Beginning his presidency under the tutelage of Andrew Jackson, Trump unwillingly or willingly underlined what the Whigs hated in Jackson. Drawing upon a tradition of opposition to excessive executive power which had flourished in the United States at the time of the American Revolution, and had its roots in British rejection of absolute power, the 1830s whigs saw Jackson as a despot and they theorized their political opposition to him as liberty versus tyranny, the law versus executive abuse. Trump's opponents saw him as a despot emulating his model Andrew Jackson. A good example of a whig mini-series highlighting the importance of the law in a democracy and denouncing Trump as a despot is « The Good Fight » (The series also focuses on the rights of minorities as it centers on a black-run law firm which specializes in the defense of victims of police brutality).

In this presentation I will first present how the whigs saw themselves, as opponents of tyranny and further explain what this meant. Then I will examine them as bourgeois proponents of a capitalist revolution as Charles Sellers portrayed them in his epoch-making book, and finally I

⁵Nathan O-Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Yale University Press, 1989 ; Ronald G.Walters, *American Reformers 1815-1860*. Rev. ed. New York : Hill & Wang, 1997.

⁶ Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.

will discuss them as reformers and modernizers, the view which seems to be dominant today and is illustrated in David Walker Howe's massive synthesis of the period.

The whigs as opponents of tyranny

As David Bell has reminded us in a recent book, « men on horseback » were popular in the Age of Revolution : Napoleon, Toussaint Louverture and Simon Bolivar all embodied liberation from monarchy and empire but these authoritarian rulers also entertained a complicated relationship with representative democracy⁷. Bell's book does not include Jackson in his pantheon of great men on horseback. Yet Henry Clay, the inspirator and founder of the whig party, was an early opponent of Andrew Jackson on this very ground. He did not admire « men on horseback » who trampled international treaties and acted unilaterally. This is exactly what Jackson did when he invaded Spanish Florida in 1818 in search of Seminole Indians and without consulting with the Spanish authorities. Once in Spanish Florida, he hanged two British citizens whom he considered as allies of the Indians. Although Jackson was already very popular as a result of his New Orleans victory against the British in early January 1815, his actions were denounced in no uncertain terms by Clay in Congress in a January 9, 1819, speech. To Clay, placing himself under the intellectual control of liberal thinker Mrs de Stael, Jackson's actions were redolent of caesarism and reminded him of Napoleon's anti-republican rule in France and of other despotisms :

« If a Roman citizen had been asked, if he did not fear that the conqueror of Gaul might establish a throne upon the ruins of public liberty, he would have instantly repelled the unjust insinuation. Yet Greece fell, Caesar passed the Rubicon, and the patriotic arm even of Brutus could not preserve the liberties of his devoted country !

[...] I hope not to be misunderstood ; I am far from intimating that General Jackson

⁷ David Bell, *Men on Horseback : The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020.

cherishes any designs inimical to the liberties of the country. I believe his intentions to be pure and patriotic. [...] But precedents, if bad, are fraught with the most dangerous consequences.[...] I hope our happy form of government is to be perpetual. But if it is to be preserved, it must be by the practice of virtue, by justice, by moderation, by magnanimity, by greatness of soul, by keeping a watchful and steady eye on the executive ; and, above all, by holding to a strict accountability the military branch of the public force. »

By 1832 and his reelection, Jackson had established himself as a powerful president and his opponents had not yet fully coalesced into a unified party. Henry Clay set out to organize such an institution in the tense context of Jackson's destruction of the Second Bank of the United States. As Jackson was desirous of getting rid of the BUS without waiting for the expiration of its charter, he removed federal funds from the BUS in the fall of 1833, in the process dismissing the secretary of the treasury who considered this move illegal. A senator at the time, Henry Clay knew he enjoyed the support of the majority of senate members and he organized the censure of Jackson on these two grounds. In a speech on April 14, 1834, he compared the present-day whigs to their political forefathers, first British opposition thinkers, then American revolutionaries, thus clearly delineating the liberal, anti-authoritarian, foundations of the whig party :

« What was the origin, among our British ancestors, of those appellations ? The tories were the supporters of Executive power, of royal prerogative, of the detestable doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance. The whigs were the champions of liberty, the friends of the people, and the defenders of the power of their representatives in the House of Commons.

During our revolutionary war, the tories took sides with executive power and prerogative, and with the king, against liberty and independence. And the whigs,

true to their principles, contended against royal executive power, and for freedom and independence.

And what is the present but the same contest in another form ? The partisans of the present Executive sustain his power in the most boundless extent. They claim for him all Executive authority. They make his sole will the governing power. Every officer concerned in the administration, from the highest to the lowest, is to conform to his mandates. [...] The whigs of the present day are opposing Executive encroachments, and a most alarming extension of Executive power and prerogative. They are ferreting out the abuses and corruptions of an administration, under a Chief Magistrate who is endeavoring to concentrate in his own person the powers of Government. They are contending for the rights of the people, for civil liberty, for free institutions, for the supremacy of the constitution and the laws. »

Eventually the whigs managed to win the presidency in 1840, though Harrison, not Clay, was their candidate. Although Harrison, like Jackson, was also a citizen-soldier figure, unlike Jackson he was committed to the whig ideology of subservience of the executive to the legislative branch. Having won both houses, the whigs were confident they could finally push through their economic agenda centering on the establishment of a new bank of the United States, with the president obediently signing the new bills into law. Yet that was not to be as President Tyler, rapidly replacing Harrison now deceased, decided not to defer to Congress, but to negotiate with it, using his presidential veto, a tyrannical gesture, to challenge and eventually crush the economic programme of the whigs.

The whigs as proponents of a capitalist revolution : the vision of Charles Sellers' 1991 book

Although whig thought originally coalesced around traditional liberal political principles, and the whigs took in stride universal white male suffrage and the new campaigning techniques pioneered by the democrats after 1828, they were constantly denounced as the elite by their democratic opponents, and, in an age of nationalism, as the henchmen of British industry and capital. This is how Andrew Jackson portrayed them through the Bank controversy. In his bank veto address on July 10, 1832, he clearly distinguished between the banking elite of the east allied to Britain, and the exploited pioneers of the West :

« By documents submitted to Congress at the present session it appears that on the 1st of January, 1832, of the twenty-eight millions of private stock in the corporation, \$8,405,500 were held by foreigners, mostly of Great Britain [...] As little stock is held in the West, it is obvious that the debt of the people in that section to the bank is principally a debt to the Eastern and foreign stockholders; that the interest they pay upon it is carried into the Eastern States and into Europe, and that it is a burden upon their industry and a drain of their currency, which no country can bear without inconvenience and occasional distress. ».

In his farewell address in 1837, Jackson even described the bank in conspiracy theory terms, as a tool of the elite intent on wresting power away from the people : if the charter of the BUS had been renewed, he said :

« the Government would have passed from the hands of the many to the hands of the few, and this organized money power from its secret conclave would have dictated the choice of your highest officers and compelled you to make peace or war, as best suited their own wishes. The forms of your Government might for a time have remained, but its living spirit would have departed from it. »

In a way such exaggerated language heralded later historians' vision of the whigs as perfidious betrayers of the original American rural arcadia.

This was particularly the case of Charles Sellers who interpreted the whigs as having « appropriated [the democrats'] egalitarianism » while « skewing outcomes toward the businessmen who wanted most from government, who followed politics most avidly, and whose money, influence and domination of cultural media far outweighed mere votes. ». To Sellers, the whigs were not true democrats, they merely pretended they were. As for the real democrats, the supporters of Jackson's democratic party, they eventually « proved incapable of preserving the yeoman republic », as Sellers regretted. The rise of the whigs meant the advent of merchant and then industrial capitalism, the passing of the country solidarities which had graced pre-industrial America. In his detestation of all things whig, Sellers targeted school reformer Horace Mann as implementing the « bourgeois educational program » which he described merely as « preparation for the « business transactions of life » ». Other whig reformers, such as the temperance men and women who took part in the main reform cause in the early republic, were involved in the « collective repression » of traditional working-class patterns of drinking according to him, not the curbing of widespread and destructive alcoholism. Because antislavery activists were mainly whigs, they were described in the book as mainly motivated by market beliefs : slavery impeded « their vision of a capitalist society of free individuals whose labor could be freely exploited. »

As for the evangelical faith that fueled antislavery commitment in businessmen such as the Tappan brothers, William Lloyd Garrison's financiers, it served a dual purpose according to Sellers : it « offered ... capitalist discipline » and « assuaged their ethical distress »⁸. In Sellers's view, capitalism shaped not only the economy, but also the culture of the early

⁸ Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, p. 350-351, 363, 368, 394, 261, 128, 230.

American republic. However bravely devoted to the slave's cause, antislavery activists were mere tools of the capitalist revolution, a far cry from Manisha Sinha's 2016 analysis which painted abolitionists as political radicals all⁹. Increasingly after 1991 Sellers's great book was seen as too manichean and mechanistic, the type of deterministic marxist history that was going out of fashion. A reassessment of the whigs, their politics, their reform causes and their faith in the economy together with their belief in a controlling federal state safeguarding the poorer part of the population in times of crisis, was under way.

The Whigs as Democratic Social Reformers & Modernizers

The Second Great Awakening was deeply anti-authoritarian. Coming in the wake of the American Revolution, it signalled the end of the deference which people of modest means expressed toward their betters. Methodism boomed in the new nation, empowering poor people, women and former slaves to become preachers without a formal religious and theological education. This democratic spiritual impulse led ordinary men and women to try and perfect their society, the ills of which were very visible (alcoholism, slavery). Although methodism spread north and south, yet it mainly caused Northern and Western methodists, whigs most of the time, to embrace a moral and social reform agenda starting after the War of 1812. Although not all whigs were antislavery activists, especially in the South, yet « white supremacy » as David Walker Howe explains, « constituted an essential component of what contemporaries called « the Democracy » - that is, the Democratic party. And even if whigs were not all supporters of the rights of black men and women, yet in the 1830s they opposed the democratic mobs carrying out early lynchings or starting riots, persecuting abolitionists or disrespecting the rule of law in general. The whigs believed that slavery was wrong, and would be ended at

⁹ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016.

some stage as a more educated public, thanks to the spread of public schools and the rapid development of communications across the country, would realize the errors of their ways.

This would happen because the optimistic whigs deeply believed in progress, social, moral but also technological. David Walker Howe, in *What Hath God Wrought*, devotes considerable space to « the new economy », the new « industrial order » which developed in the United States after the War of 1812 and was supported by the whigs through a tariff and the American System¹⁰. Supported by Clay, the American System led the federal government, and state governments to invest in the building of infrastructures such as canals and railroads, in order to promote the new economic environment while democrats trusted laissez-faire. Unlike in Europe, artisans and industrial workers adapted to the new conditions (in most cases) and used them to rise socially. Howe notes that « after the disappearance of the Working Men's Parties », some of their former supporters became whigs, a logical choice -he says - in terms of that party's positions on tariff protection and public schooling », though in the end journeymen were captured by the democrats' rhetoric and their arguments on behalf of white supremacy. However, although recent immigrants and many workers joined the democratic party in the 1830s and 1840s, the whigs retained their appeal for many ordinary workers believing in the values of evangelicalism and in the central role of the federal government.

In the end, the whigs' belief in the central role in the federal government is what makes it possible to relate to them even more than their opposition to executive tyranny. Not only did they oppose despotic executive power, they also promoted an enlightened and forward-looking view of the federal government which definitely set them apart from the democrats. In his Farewell Address in March 1837, Jackson voiced his recommendations for the future to the American people. Although he urged his fellow-citizens to maintain the Union at any cost, at

¹⁰ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

the same time he warned them against any enlargement of the powers of the federal government, especially in matters of taxation. « There is but one safe rule » he said, « and that is to confine the General Government rigidly within the sphere of its appropriate duties. It has no power to raise a revenue or impose taxes except for the purposes enumerated in the Constitution, and if its income is found to exceed these wants it should be forthwith reduced and the burden of the people so far lightened. » Right after Jackson left office the depression of 1837 struck : realizing the ineffectiveness of Van Buren's democratic, small state solutions, voters massively turned to the whigs for solutions, and put them in power in 1840, electing a whig president and a whig congress.

As a conclusion, I refer you to the man Jo Biden chose to replace Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office : Benjamin Franklin. His portrait now adorns Biden's office. Did he choose Franklin because he considered him as the ultimate whig ? A great believer in technological and business progress as well as a strong central government, Franklin also held dear the moral values of later whiggism, such as education, temperance and antislavery though he was no evangelical.

