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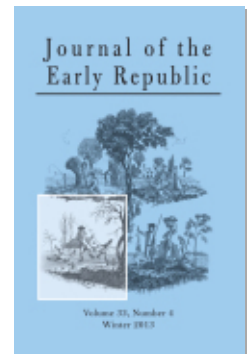
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# Thinking about Elites in the Early Republic

ANDREW M. SCHOCKET

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Despite the ever-growing pile of books about individual elite men and women in the early republic, few historians in the past thirty years have directly addressed the issue of elites in terms of class in the new nation. Perhaps we should not be too heavily blamed, because even some of the more aware Americans of the time unconsciously or even intentionally obfuscated questions regarding their elite status: consider the absurd but politically effective spectacle of plantation-born and college-educated William Henry Harrison posing as a cider-drinking frontier bumpkin in his successful run for the presidency in 1840 (and, no less, trouncing the supposedly elite son of a tavern-keeper). Despite or perhaps because of the contemporary confusion and scholarly reticence on the issue of elites in the context of class, considering elites is crucial if we are to understand class in the early republic. This essay is a conceptual exploration designed not only to provoke further consideration and discussion of how we might better analyze elites, but also, by extension, to offer a framework for investigating class and class differences in the early years of America's nationhood.<sup>1</sup>

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Andrew M. Schocket is an assistant professor of history at Bowling Green State University. He thanks Jennifer Goloboy and Seth Rockman for their thought-provoking papers and especially Seth for originally organizing this forum for the 26th SHEAR Annual Meeting, Sven Beckert for his comments when the papers were first presented, and Gary Kornblith and Christopher Clark for their fine contributions to the printed forum.

1. Notable exceptions to the dearth of recent works examining elites in terms of class include Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (Cambridge, MA 1987); Gary J. Kornblith and John M. Murrin, "The Making and Unmaking of an American Ruling Class," in *Beyond*

Let me first offer at least a basic definition of the term “elite” as a group of people who are (a) a distinct minority, who cannot even be a sizeable plurality, and (b) distinguishable from the rest of the population by some fairly objective criteria that most of society would recognize. So, for example, whites in the antebellum South, while clearly having a common sense of identity and obviously enjoying legal, political, and economic superiority to most blacks, would still not be an elite because they were in the majority (except perhaps in those few areas with an enslaved majority). Conversely, enslaved women working in the big house of a large plantation could be considered elite within their community because of the potential for less harsh treatment and living conditions and better access to food and shelter beyond that of the rest of the slave population. Elites must be considered in context.<sup>2</sup>

I propose two bifocal lenses through which to conceptualize how historians might better define and analyze elites in the early republic. Each of the lenses can be used to identify elites within communities and on different scales, are historically attuned to changing economic, political, and social conditions in the early republic, and reflect on the intersections between issues of race, gender, and ethnicity. One of the lenses deals with power, while the other deals with perception, the first being concerned more with materialistic and mechanistic considerations, while the second reflects on the potentially contradictory issues of identity and behavior. Together, they can offer a picture of class in the early republic that blends the structuralist tradition explored by Seth Rockman in the first essay of this symposium, with the class-consciousness school of thought that Jennie Goloboy focuses on.

The bottom of the materialistic/mechanistic bifocal lens through which we can view class is the most basic: follow the money, and specifically, the degree to which people had access to capital as a critical measure of elites in the early republic. This suggestion might seem to be so obvious as not to require articulation or elaboration, but it deserves considerable attention for both historical and historiographic reasons.

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*the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, IL, 1993); and Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York, 2001), 15–108.

2. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988).

Historiographically, the paradigm of the “market revolution” has presented many ways to think about the reorganization of labor in the early republic. But when thinking about elites, remember that the great economic transformations of the so-called “market revolution” did not significantly alter class relations in terms of changes in the control over modes of production, for the simple reason that most Americans worked in agriculture, either on family farms or on plantations, the structure of which did not much change. Though yeoman farmers (still a plurality of the population) may have oriented themselves more toward market production than their parents, small farmers could really only aspire to local elite economic status. Other changes were of scale rather than quality, as discussed later. While the expansion of the plantation system in the South and Southwest, the extension in cultivation of cotton, sugar, hemp, and other crops, and the concomitant effects on both enslaved and enslaving southerners, are of great importance, they did not alter the basic fact that the plantation complex continued to comprise a small group of white slaveowners controlling the majority of forced labor; no statistic better indicates this than the oft-quoted one that the majority of slaves lived on plantations of twenty or more.

Similarly, the ability to take advantage of new manufacturing and transportation technologies did result in the growth of small local elites who controlled manufacturing facilities, whether in textiles, paper, clocks, guns, or other products, but relations between local manufacturers and their workers did not change markedly in the early republic. The early nineteenth-century owner of a forge, gun factory, or sawmill was not much different from his colonial predecessors in larger-scale employment—ship-builders or gristmillers, for example—except perhaps in terms of size. He ran a capital-intensive operation, but would not necessarily have had access to enough capital either to expand or to ride out misfortune.

The big change for our thinking about elites, and one that has not been adequately studied in terms of class, has to do with developments in finance and the organization of capital. Prior to the American Revolution, there were relatively few ways to access capital. These included book credit, always personal, usually local, and small-scale; personal loans, again generally personal, local, and small-scale; and loan banks sponsored by colonial governments that lent small sums, mostly to yeoman farmers. Capital from British merchant houses, combining book credit and personal loans, reached across the ocean to merchants and

factors and far into the backcountry, while a few well-connected port-city merchants extended marine insurance to each other or obtained it from London. Such access to capital endured into the early republic, but by this time Americans had numerous new ways to organize money, especially from corporate sources, including banks and insurance companies. (The ability to get insured, after all, is a form of access to capital, and meanwhile, insurance companies were investing their capital in mortgage and corporate stocks.) Benevolent societies, too, offered access to capital, again in the form of insurance. These new institutions and new ways of organizing money dramatically expanded options in accessing capital—the bottom lens of the first bifocal.

The use of incorporation in particular created radically new ways of accessing capital, but with a range of consequences. Corporate banks (making mostly short-term mercantile loans in port cities and land speculation loans farther inland) eventually supplanted government-sponsored land banks (making loans to yeoman farmers) in offering credit and providing money. Incorporation also permitted capital accumulation on a previously unheard-of scale. The old practices had spread the availability of credit downwards. Most early republic banks, on the other hand, by deriving their capital from private investment and giving loans primarily to people already connected in some way to their institution, distributed credit either laterally or upwards. Access to credit through banks marks an important distinction in and among elites.<sup>3</sup>

Incorporation also allowed diversification of ownership. Rather than being the principal owner in a venture and thus strongly connected to it, people invested in far-flung projects. But these stockholders were less likely to identify with workers and their community a thousand miles away than local family proprietors. The most striking examples of these kinds of ventures are mining and transportation, both dominated by metropolitan financiers, who often had more power over the communities that hosted their projects than did the local elite.

What was the effect of such developments, and how do they help us think about elites? Consider the difference between a corporate insider in Boston, such as John Murray Forbes, and a Connecticut gun factory

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3. See Mary M. Schweitzer, *Custom and Contract: Household, Government, and the Economy in Colonial Pennsylvania* (New York, 1987), 115–69 for a discussion of Pennsylvania's colonial loan bank.

owner. Forbes owned stock in a number of diverse enterprises such as railroads and textile mills, thus distributing his risk, while his connections to an accommodating Suffolk banking community meant that he encountered few problems with cash flow. The gun manufacturer, on the other hand, could go out of business for any number of reasons, such as the rising cost of fuel or materials, economic downturns, or technological advances by competitors. Yet this factory owner still had advantages over even the wealthiest farmers in the region, because he could exploit another financial innovation—fire insurance. By the 1840s, southern plantation owners were insuring their slaves against untimely death, but farmers and plantation owners had little protection against blight, floods, or drought. Meanwhile the ability of rich and even middling people to purchase corporate stocks, especially bank stock, gave them sources of income denied people lower down the economic ladder. Differing access to new kinds of financial institutions thus created stratification within early republic economic elites. Especially because of the increased availability of cash, the proliferation of state and corporate securities, and the development of banking in the early republic, elites can be identified and differentiated by the extent to which they had access to capital.<sup>4</sup>

The top of this first lens through which to view elites shows the degree to which individuals or groups gained *de facto* access to the power of the state, thereby furthering their economic or social interests. From independence on, the wealthy and self-appointed elites of society were constantly complaining that they had little or no influence in public affairs, since the rabble increasingly dominated the polity. Certainly various elites were pitted against each other, thus preventing any one group from holding sway over public policy, especially at the national level, as evidenced by the constant wrangling over tariffs. But any extended look at the kinds of legislation passed, the direction of jurisprudence, and the consequences of government action reveals that some people consistently benefited a lot more from the power of the state than others, and it certainly was not the people at the bottom of the economic or social ladders. Put simply, elites did not always get their way through government, but they still got more than other groups.

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4. John Lauritz Larson, *Bonds of Enterprise: John Murray Forbes and Western Development in America's Railway Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); Todd L. Savitt, "Slave Life Insurance in Virginia and North Carolina," *Journal of Southern History*, 43 (Nov. 1977), 583–600.

In all sorts of arenas, various elites used the state (in the generic sense) to enforce their interests. At the local and state, but especially at the federal level, during the early republic, slaveholders grew increasingly effective in mobilizing the authority of the government. Whereas measures such as the Missouri Compromise garnered the support and reinforced the interests of the vast majority of the southern electorate, the Fugitive Slave Act is a striking example of an elite using its leverage over national politics to further its own interests. By 1860, no state had more than four percent of the population self-identified as slaveholders, but slaveholders clearly influenced state policy far beyond their numbers; the “slave power” definitely extended to the use of government. Other examples abound. Particularly salient ones involve the invocation of eminent domain on behalf of internal improvement companies and the increasingly generous distribution of railroad subsidies. Elite influence extended to the bench, too. The evolution of jurisprudence against combinations that was used to prosecute strikers and labor organizers and the limitations on damages suits against canal and railroad companies testified eloquently to the power of small groups to bend the state to their will.<sup>5</sup>

The first bifocal lens offered complementary ways of considering elites; the second bifocal lens focuses on seemingly contradictory phenomena. The only way to look at one clearly is to blur the other. One half of the lens focuses on elite identity. Some people pictured themselves as part of a small cadre of individuals who were to some extent superior to their neighbors. Robert Vaux, one of Philadelphia’s wealthiest and best-connected citizens, admitted to Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831 that he “never approved of the system of universal voting rights; in very truth it hands over the governing power to the most passionate and least enlightened classes of society.” This elite white Philadelphian preferred a senate “chosen by the large property-holders” to a democratic legislature. Similarly, Joseph Willson’s *Sketches of the Higher Classes of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (1841) showed the city’s black elite community to be even more conscious of its self-styled status than was Vaux. These conceptions of superiority can be seen among elites from upstate New

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5. University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/> (accessed June 21, 2004).



York to the South Carolina backcountry. And they were not necessarily defined by legal or economic status, but could be tied to church, educational achievement, artisanal skills, a hierarchy of trades, or membership in any number of other groups, formal or informal, to which entry was limited.<sup>6</sup>

Elites signaled their sense of status through affectations, consumption patterns, and social attitudes. The rise of ideas of gentility, so clearly manifested in architecture, reading tastes, manners, speech, eating habits, and clothing fashions, allowed people to show their perceived peers and their perceived inferiors just how elite they were. This was elitism of the mind or heart rather than of the pocketbook or law.<sup>7</sup>

The other half of this second bifocal lens sharpens other aspects of elite consciousness and permits examination of the extent to which an individual's publicly or privately exhibited behavior acknowledges elite status or solidarity with an elite group. This perspective links the seemingly disparate pairing of Andrew Jackson of the Hermitage and Nicholas Biddle of Chestnut Street, moving them beyond the heated battles over the Second Bank of the United States and connecting the sumptuousness of their residences and the predictable results of the policies they pursued. Thus we should look at elitist actions as well as elitist trappings. Jackson, of course, portrayed himself as a rough-hewn man of the people while painting Biddle as the elitist he undoubtedly was: as the forbidding president of the Second Bank of the United States and scion of a wealthy clan of Philadelphia merchants, bankers, lawyers, and politicians. But these two men converged in terms of personal wealth by the 1830s and both acted in ways that furthered the economic and class interests of the elites to which they belonged. Biddle was protecting not only a corporate institution, but also the urban commercial elites in all its branch cities who used it to shore up or expand their business ventures and family

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6. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journey to America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY, 1971), 58; Julie Winch, ed. *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia* (University Park, PA, 2000); Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995); and Rachel Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760–1808* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990).

7. See Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992).

fortunes. Similarly, Jackson knew that killing the national bank would benefit other local elites, especially those in the West and the South, enabling them to craft money policies through state banks that helped their speculations in land and accumulation of slaves. The conflict between Jackson and Biddle did not pit the people against the elite: rather, it represented a battle among elites. When we consider many of the political and social battles of the early republic by looking at actions rather than words, the issue of consciousness becomes problematic.

To the perspectives offered by the bifocals must be added a sense of scale. Although antebellum civic leaders in small Virginia cities like Scottsville and Harrisonburg were no less respected and powerful in their communities than those in Charlottesville, the latter had better political connections and greater access to capital. Accordingly, Charlottesville boosters were able to get the Virginia Central railroad routed through their community in 1847. The Charlottesville elite, in other words, operated at a different scale of influence and power than their counterparts in nearby towns. But they in turn possessed nowhere near the same access to capital as the Philadelphia men who in the same year funded the Pennsylvania Railroad with an initial investment of \$1,000,000. The Philadelphians not only had a say over routes, but also had the political resources necessary to make deals in the Pennsylvania statehouse. Similarly, while the Rhode Island women who helped found the Kent County Anti-Slavery Society may have been leading local activists, they did not hold leadership positions in the national abolitionist movement: they were elites within their own community, but not on a national scale.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately I am proposing that measurement along the spectrums of money, power, elitism, and elite actions allows us to identify and differentiate among and within elites and can be extended to help define class at all levels during the early republic. Some people had access to corporate loans, others could at least afford to invest occasionally in financial instruments, while those at the bottom of the economic ladder either

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8. John D. Majewski, *A House Dividing: Economic Development in Pennsylvania and Virginia Before the Civil War* (New York, 2000), 61–64; Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, “‘Let Your Names Be Enrolled’: Method and Ideology in Women’s Antislavery Petitioning,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 184.

lived from hand to mouth or, even worse, got whatever they could take or were given. Some people could use the power of the state to break strikes or seize land, many people could vote and serve on juries, while the primary interaction of others with the state was at the wrong end of a whip or a gun. Some people put on airs inside well-appointed parlors while others walked home to modest but comfortable dwellings, to shacks, or to miasmic slums. Some maneuvered to reinforce the primacy of private property at a time when many held nothing but hard-earned resentment. In short, the whole point of looking at elites and to distinguish them from other groups is to define better the fault lines of the economy, of politics, of culture, and of community during a period when those distinctions being transformed from a colonial world of “sorts”—better, middling, and lower—into a modern, industrial world of class.

Through the careful and calibrated use of the above criteria, we can not only consider elites in contrast to other groups but also more clearly identify distinctions within elites. But if the application of these lenses may be necessary, it is not sufficient, and we must also differentiate by context. To speak of one elite class is as problematic as talking about one working class in the early republic. There was not one elite, but many elites: those that differed by such criteria as economic or geographic scale, local or regional interest, business pursuits, ethnicity, religion, race, and gender. By examining elites on different scales and in different contexts, and by looking through the lenses of access to capital, use of state power, elite consciousness, and patterns of elite social behavior, we can better identify who the elites were and consider the extent to which their composition and conduct changed over time. Only by doing so can we draw a more accurate, complete, and nuanced picture of class, of society at large, and of social change in the early republic.