The Making of New York City's Bourgeoisie, 1850-1886

Sven Beckert¹ Harvard University

Among the most deeply engrained popular images of the nineteenth century United States are those of the nation's wealthy. As villains or heroes, the Carnegies and Lows, Goulds and Mellons have found a solid place in the national collective memory. We know about the mansions of the Vanderbilts on Fifth Avenue, August Belmont's sumptuous dinners at Delmonico's, and J.P. Morgan's unsuccessful jockeying for a box at the Academy of Music. Ever since Edith Wharton we can picture their complicated web of friendship and kinship ties. And if we walk around New York City today, we cannot help but encounter the great monuments the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie left behind, from the Metropolitan Opera to Central Park, from Cooper Union to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The nineteenth century, as these observations suggest, was indeed the century of the bourgeoisie's making and of the making of the bourgeoisie. From the factory floor to the Opera house, from City Hall to Congress, merchants, industrialists, and bankers wrought tremendous changes on the economy, social life, and politics of the nation. Not only the Vanderbilts and Morgans, but also New Yorkers such as John Roach, William Dodge, Alexander Masterson, and Peter Cooper fundamentally transformed the way Americans lived and worked, and in the process turned the United States from an outpost of the Atlantic economy into one of the powerhouses of the world economy. They shaped the institutions of a rapidly expanding state, and their very success helped generate a degree of social inequality and social conflict that had been unknown to earlier generations of Americans.

While the bourgeoisie in some sense "made" the nineteenth century, the nineteenth century also "made" the bourgeoisie. During the century's first decades, merchants and bankers, joined by a growing number of industrialists and professionals, controlled most of the young nation's capital. Yet, even as late as the 1850s these groups were culturally and ideologically quite removed from one another. Each of them espoused distinct and often antithetical forms of the universalist belief in a society without fundamental social conflicts. Ultimately, however, the two most prominent effects of their rise – proletarianization and the

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overthrow of slavery during the Civil War – resulted in social cohesion among different segments of the bourgeoisie and the embrace of a separate class identity.

My dissertation, The Making of New York City's Bourgeoisie, 1850-1886, explores the central role of New York's bourgeoisie in the making of modern America. To do so, I focus on the intersection of two large questions: First, I ask when, how, and why bourgeois New Yorkers articulated shared identities during the nineteenth century. Second, I examine how the relationship of merchants, industrialists, and bankers to the state changed and in particular how the bourgeoisie eventually shaped state institutions.

To answer these broad questions, I look at the economic structure, social life, beliefs, and politics of bourgeois New Yorkers between 1850 and 1886. It was during these years that the city's bourgeoisie changed dramatically, facilitated by the catalytic events of the Civil War. To understand these changes I look at merchant families in their parlors, flag waving bankers addressing public assemblies, and industrialists confronting workers in front of their factory gates. I am writing on issues such as the social geography of New York City, on the changing connection of the city's wealthy with the South, on dress, travel, and manners, on the alternating relationship between merchants and industrialists, and on politics. I situate these actors in the analysis of large processes – war making, state expansion and proletarianization. And I tie the resulting narrative together by the broad questions outlined earlier.

Let me summarize my argument and then add a few general observations. Above all, I maintain that New York's merchants, industrialists, and bankers formed a socially cohesive and self-conscious class in the 1870s and 1880s. This, I claim, was a decisive departure from earlier decades. In the 1850s, the city's bourgeoisie had been socially, ideologically, and politically fragmented, and had articulated various universalist beliefs in free labor, the absence of fundamental social conflicts, the need for hierarchy to maintain social order, and the duty of stewardship and responsibility for the community. The Civil War and the working-class mobilizations of the 1860s and 1870s, however, moved the city's merchants, industrialists and bankers to greater unity and an articulated consciousness of separate class identity. Bourgeois social life and politics increasingly manifested a new and greater distance from other social groups especially from workers whom they perceived as a double threat to their political and economic power. This process accelerated during the depression of the 1870s. As a result, many bourgeois New Yorkers abandoned earlier universalist beliefs and their reluctant wartime support for a state-sponsored social revolution in the South, articulating instead a new liberalism that advocated a limit to the political regulation of markets while demanding an expansion of the role of the state in protecting the owners of property. This social and ideological cohesion, combined with an entirely new scale of economic power, translated into ever growing influence over the state. By the 1880s, bourgeois New Yorkers stood at the heart of the nation's economic, cultural, and political life.

This has to suffice here as a short summary of the major findings of my work. Let me conclude with some general considerations that have framed my study. First, the impetus for this study derived from my sense that the history of the bourgeoisie has been largely neglected by historians during the last twenty years. Two very different historiographical traditions have contributed to this omission. While in the late 1940s and 1950s, historians such as Louis Hartz and Richard Hofstadter recognized that the United States was by the nineteenth century the most bourgeois country in the world, they argued that without a history of feudalism a distinct social group that could be termed "bourgeoisie" could not arise [10, pp. 7, 51-52]. More recent works by social historians have conclusively shown that this view of nineteenth century America as a middle class country without fundamental social conflicts cannot be sustained in the face of how the Civil War and the emergence of a working class tore at the very fabric of American life. Yet these revisionists produced an image of the United States that is also quite incomplete. While emphasizing conflict, the emergence of separate working class cultures, and widespread resistance to market relations. they did not explain convincingly why the United States turned out to be such an unusually hospitable terrain for the owners of capital. The sophisticated new research methods they employed - from collective biographies to the reconstruction of social geographies - deepened our knowledge of workers and other social groups, yet the most basic questions about the bourgeoisie went unexplored.² As a result, historians of the United States have missed a great opportunity - the opportunity to link the conceptual and methodological insights of social history to the large synthetic questions about the nature of nineteenth century America and its bourgeoisie that Hartz and Hofstadter, among others, had formulated.³

This contrasts strikingly with the work of historians of nineteenth century Europe, from Catherine Hall to David Blackbourn, from Jürgen Kocka to Adeline Daumard, who have demonstrated that such an endeavor is possible.⁴ They have shown that to understand the nineteenth century we need to understand the bourgeoisie, and to understand the bourgeoisie we need to put emphasis on class relations, identity formation, the totality of different social spheres, and the family as well as politics and power.

This brings me to my second point. In contrast to much historical writing that has sought to isolate one or the other aspect, my work aims at looking simultaneously at all spheres of social life – changing economic structures, the changing form of bourgeois social life, the emergence of new beliefs, and the

²Among the few works which address these issues see particularly [1, 8, 11, 16, 17, 19].

³Social historians have successfully done so, especially in their analysis of nineteenth century labor. For example, see [7, 14, 20]. For a good example of social history that is attentive to the bourgeoisie see [9, pp. 209-292].

⁴Ernest Labrousse's 1955 call urging historians to engage in comparative research on the bourgeoisie has been heeded in Europe. See [13]. By far the largest comprehensive research effort was accomplished in the context of the University of Bielefeld's project on the German bourgeoisie in European perspective. For the results see [12, 15]. Other important works on the European bourgeoisie include [2, 4, 5, 18].

relationship to the state. Consequently, courting practices at balls are as significant as alterations in incorporation law; the mustering of arms of the elite Seventh New York Regiment in April of 1861 is as important as changes in the marketing of manufactured goods. None of these levels, I emphasize, stood separately; each aspect related to all others. Merchants, industrialists, and bankers cannot be understood if reduced solely to their business undertakings, not least because without understanding changing family structures, gender relations and the relationship to the state, the trajectory of economic and political change remains incomprehensible.

My third point is that by analyzing the making of the bourgeoisie as a process that occurred on related but distinct levels of social reality, I emphasize change. Most fundamentally, this is reflected in my definition of the bourgeoisie. I define the bourgeoisie not only as a category but also as a process, the process of the emergence of shared identities. After all, the common ownership of capital did not necessarily translate into collective identities. Indeed, market competition and diverse macro-economic interests, as well as religious and ethnic identities, potentially divided them. Therefore, beyond masculine occupation or wealth, inclusion in the bourgeoisie demanded adhesion to models of domesticity and consumption.⁵ At times, these shared social identities then would translate into shared beliefs and even politics, albeit only rarely.

The fourth point I would like to make is that I situate the bourgeoisie firmly in the political history of the United States and the major transformations of the second half of the nineteenth century. The state obviously mattered a great deal to the bourgeoisie and vice versa. Therefore, my work analyzes not only the process by which the bourgeoisie re-negotiates the relationship of the state to the market, but also the relationship of the bourgeoise to the project of bourgeois society in general and democracy in particular.

In conclusion, the goal of this work is to bring the history of merchants, industrialists, and bankers into the center of the narrative of nineteenth century American history and to enable us to systematically compare Europe and the United States. This does not imply a return to the outmoded assumptions of a half century ago; indeed, the project is only viable from the vantage point of the new historiographical trends of the past twenty years. The exciting new ideas, insights, and methodologies of social and political history have posed the questions and provided the tools for their answer. Once we engage the issues these historians have raised we will understand how the nineteenth century made the bourgeoisie, and how the bourgeoisie made the nineteenth century United States.

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⁵For the general point see [3, pp. 2, 77; 6].

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