

Review Essay

The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power, 1630–1865. *By Mark Peterson*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. xviii + 741 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 9780691179995.

Reviewed by Noam Maggor

Mark Peterson's *The City-State of Boston* is a formidable work of history—prodigiously researched, lucidly written, immense in scope, and yet scrupulously detailed. A meticulous history of New England over more than two centuries, the book argues that Boston and its hinterland emerged as a city-state, a “self-governing republic” that was committed first and foremost to its own regional autonomy (p. 6). Rather than as a British colonial outpost or the birthplace of the American Revolution—the site of a nationalist struggle for independence—the book recovers Boston's long-lost tradition as a “polity in its own right,” a fervently independent hub of Atlantic trade whose true identity placed it in tension with the overtures of both the British Empire and, later, the American nation-state (p. 631).

What are the stakes in advancing this type of reinterpretation? And in what ways do the implications extend beyond New England's parochial concerns? To fully appreciate the book's contribution, it makes sense to think of it not simply as a standalone achievement but as a capstone to several important inversions in recent historiography of the United States.

The first inversion is the recasting of Southern history as national history. For most of the twentieth century, historians of the American South were quintessential regionalists (C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* [1960]). The South, these historians explained, was an idiosyncratic antibourgeois section besieged within a liberal nation. White Southerners fought to protect their “peculiar institution” on behalf of states' rights, pushing back against the encroachments of Federal power and the capitalist marketplace. They lost the Civil War and ultimately gave way—a few reactionary remnants notwithstanding—to national consolidation and urban-industrial modernity. No more. Over the last twenty years, the history of the South has emphatically become *American* history. Armed with the potent power of slavery,

Business History Review 94 (Autumn 2020): 631–636. doi:10.1017/S0007680520000641
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we now learn, the cotton kingdom provided the essential engine behind America's capitalist takeoff and its relentless territorial drive (Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* [2018]; Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* [2014]). As Americans for all intents and purposes, white Southerners defined the institutions of the U.S. state and dominated Washington all the way to the Civil War and beyond (Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* [2016]). Far from receding in the aftermath of defeat, they forged a resilient legacy that continues to shape the United States all the way to the twenty-first century, as evident in Americans' perennial resistance to taxation or their racialized welfare state (Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* [2013]).

A second, related, historiographical inversion involves some unintuitive changes to the geographical scale of historical analysis. Modern, twentieth-century U.S. history was once organized around the study of national politics and international affairs. More recently, this approach has been sidelined in favor of metropolitan histories and the discovery that "all politics is local," with a particular focus on contests over property taxes and residential segregation. (See, for example, Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* [1996]; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* [2001]; N. D. B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* [2014]; Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890–1960* [2020].) An analogous flip has taken place in the study of Early America—but in the opposite direction. As historians of the modern United States have become increasingly focused on local politics, historians of the colonial period—previously the authors of highly textured community studies—started to examine the North American colonies as part of the larger "Atlantic World." Turning their attention to the long-distance and entangled oceanic connections that shaped early settlement in North America, they have embedded colonial America in a broader geography of empire, trade, migration, and intellectual exchange (David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* [2002]; Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* [2005]; Alison Games, "Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities," *The American Historical Review* [June 2006]).

Third, Americanists have developed an increasing fascination with counterfactuals. Historians are conventionally taught that what did not

happen is not history and that reflecting, let alone speculating, about alternative histories is a dangerous exercise. More recently, this position too has been rethought. Americanists like Richard White have advanced the notion that in fact “we need to think about what did not happen in order to think historically” (White, *Railroaded* [2011], 517). In this view, historians must uncover the paths not taken as a way of grasping the open-ended and contingent nature of history. A far greater sin is to take the end point of a historical process too much for granted, thereby infusing historical narratives with dangerous teleology. Taken a bit further, one senses a deeper desire to defy posterity. It is almost as if historians find the actual course of history to be stifling and even tedious. In this vein, to name one prominent example, Walter Johnson deliberately turns his study of the slave South away from the focus on origins of the Civil War. His account instead lingers on how white Southerners boldly imagined their future, including, for example, their plot to extend their slave empire into Latin America and reopen the Atlantic slave trade, which, he argues, is “revealing for the merciful fact that it never came to pass” (Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams* [2013], 17). This horrifying specter looms larger in his narrative than the less thrilling history of the Confederacy and its collapse, an outcome that this account is by design not geared to explain.

Peterson’s history of Boston marks a tectonic shift akin to, and congruent with, these three inversions. First and foremost, his account is all too happy, perhaps even overeager, to concede American history to the South. In casting New England as an autonomous region, at odds with American nationalism, Peterson departs from a venerable scholarly tradition, stretching from the likes of Francis Parkman to Perry Miller, that took for granted that New England’s origins were America’s. For Peterson, theirs was an unfortunate misreading. Rather than being representative of North American colonization as a whole, let alone a stand-in for the American nation, Boston was in fact “peculiar,” “different,” and even “exceptional” (pp. 84, 167). Flipping on its head Eugene Genovese’s memorable formulation of the South’s relationship to capitalism, Peterson argues that New England was “fully in, but not completely of” its surrounding contexts (p. 66).

In Peterson’s telling, New Englanders successfully pursued and sustained the independence of the city-state for more than two centuries, again and again resisting intrusions from the British Empire and the U.S. government. He builds a persuasive case. Bostonians jealously guarded the self-sovereignty that allowed them to thrive as traders within a larger system of global commerce. In cautious defiance of royal and parliamentary decrees, they issued their own silver coins and paper money to lubricate regional exchange and erect their own “fiscal

military state.” They traded with Britain’s rivals around the world in violation of the Navigation Acts and overturned the conversion of the colony into a royal dominion. Their quest for autonomy reached its climax in the run-up to the American Revolution, which marked yet another chapter in New England’s quest to retain its liberties. The last episode in this sequence was the botched secessionist Hartford Convention of 1815, which unsuccessfully asserted regional autonomy, this time within the framework of the Union.

Regional independence in no way meant isolationism or localism, hence the book’s strong Atlanticist orientation. Self-government allowed Bostonians to forge long-distance connections across the world. The book thus offers a remarkable study of a city that takes place largely away from its home turf, sailing far afield from Boston’s Shawmut Peninsula to Bermuda, Guinea, Göttingen, London, Potosí, Havana, Hanover, Amsterdam, Canton, and Acadia. Preoccupied with situating Boston in a larger geography, Peterson explores the city’s entanglements in the great English civil wars, the international Protestant revival, the Atlantic slave trade and Haitian Revolution, the European imperial contests, and radical ferment in post-Napoleonic Germany. The individual chapters are framed around exceedingly well-rendered biographical sketches that explore the formative experiences of prominent Bostonians in these remote locales, experiences that in turn shaped the history of their hometown. This framework necessarily privileges the purview of merchant princes, high diplomats, and imperial officials. With hardly a farming household or artisanal workshop in sight, this is unapologetically a cosmopolitan history with free trade, exchange, and “circulation” as central leitmotifs.

Lastly, the book is strongly antiteleological, aiming to salvage the city-state from the condescension of nationalist historiography. It narrates the story of a polity whose topmost commitment was to free maritime commerce and that had no territorial aspirations beyond its adjoining region. Peterson does not elide elite Bostonians’ anxiety about ethnic and racial homogeneity, violence against Indigenous peoples, and dealings with the slave economies of the Caribbean and the American South. His account nevertheless underscores their liberal commitments, acclaiming their sober political leadership, moderation, worldliness, and sophistication. It foregrounds their antislavery sentiments, apprehensions about the militarization of British imperialism, and alienation from the “winner takes all” political culture of the young United States. Their quest to preserve Boston’s autonomy as a city-state, with a preference for “commerce and cooperation” over “invasion and conquest” (a questionable dichotomy), assumes historical significance for representing everything that the United

States—“the nation-state that the South had built”—could never become (pp. 276–77, 622).

Peterson thus completes a masterful revisionist turn, breathing fresh life into one of the most exhaustively studied regions in the United States and bringing the scholarship about New England into alignment with the other major shifts in American historiography. But, for these very reasons, the book also reveals some real and broadly symptomatic limitations.

For starters, the decoupling of New England from American history not only conveniently associates U.S. nationalism, especially its most pernicious aspects, with the slaveholding South. It also radically understates the centrality of the liberals from the Northeast in shaping the trajectory of the American republic, not excluding its land-grabbing, war-making, and resource-extracting proclivities. As a result, Peterson shows little interest in some of New England’s favored sons. He says almost nothing about John Quincy Adams, who supported the Louisiana Purchase, bargained hard for the Adams-Onís Treaty (also known as the Transcontinental Treaty) that extended American sovereignty from Florida to the Pacific, and famously envisioned Cuba and Puerto Rico as “natural appendages” of the United States; or Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, a born-and-bred New Englander, who espoused Federal activism on behalf of “the commercial and national concerns of the United States,” including a strong army, navy, and central bank; or Daniel Webster, “Defender of the Constitution” and apologist for slavery on behalf of New England’s textile magnates, whom Peterson writes off in good Puritan fashion for having “sold his soul to the money devil” (p. 484). Such distinguished men represented a social class that was bent not on surrendering Boston’s autonomy to a domineering South but on forging a capacious national state, which they fully intended to govern in their own best interests. Peterson refuses to contend with their lasting legacy and its effects.

The lack of engagement with New Englanders’ own designs for the United States speaks to a broader weakness with the “city-state” as an organizing schema, namely, that it is not dynamic enough to effectively explain change over time. While the book’s Atlanticism offers a compelling critique of nationalist teleologies, it struggles to account for the Bostonians’ deeper motivations as a bourgeois class, especially as they—the same families and in many cases the very same individuals—turned away from ocean shipping to textile manufacturing, and then to cross-regional finance and banking. Was not this capacity to repeatedly reinvent themselves and their city one of the Bostonians’ defining qualities, one that indeed marked them as in some ways different from their brethren in the South? The book never reflects on this question. Instead, it treats

the trade-oriented city-state—"the very idea of what Boston had always stood for"—as sacrosanct, allowing the powerful few to almost unproblematically speak for the general interest (p. 577). Any departure from this hallowed point of origin is excused as either an unfortunate error in judgment ("rash embrace," "tragic mistake," "fail[ure]" of foresight [pp. 265, 331, 400]) or the effect of exogenous intrusions by British imperialism and U.S. nationalism (which "disrupt[ed] and pervert[ed]" New England's true inclinations [p. 249]). Analytically, this deeply conservative stance presents the changing relationship between Boston and the forces around it not as an ongoing political contest over who governs and how but as a test of fortitude and fidelity to a longstanding tradition. In this way, the book inadvertently reproduces a classic discursive maneuver, one the New Englanders mastered to perfection, which is to deny the existence of politics even while engaging in it at every turn.

Finally, working against the historical grain, Peterson folds the Bostonians' clear moment of triumph, the Civil War, into a melancholy declension narrative about the city-state's "dissolution" and even "dis-memberment" (pp. 20, 541). Members of a confident, aggressive, and affluent urban elite, with continental ambitions and a strong sense of superiority, are thus allowed to represent themselves (in typical heightened language) as somehow perpetually beleaguered "under Virginia's thumb"—unwitting heirs to an America not of their own making (p. 617). Needless to say, this does not square well with the realities of Southern secession and the emergence of the United States as an industrial and imperial power over the following decades, a process that was presided over in large part by the folks from Harvard Yard. Ironically, the nationalist historiography Peterson is keen to debunk—authored disproportionately by New Englanders and New England-educated scholars—reflects precisely the assertion of regional and class power that the narrative downplays. But more significantly, this implausible end point is characteristic of a topsy-turvy historiography that seeks to "escape the inevitability of the present" at the cost of skewing our sense of the past—the losers are the winners, the periphery overwhelms the core, the powerful are downtrodden, and the systemic is contingent—in ways that make accounting for it almost into an afterthought. The Brahmins of Boston would not have it any other way.

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