
Orestes Brownson on Capitalism and Democracy 1842

Orestes Augustus Brownson (1803–1876) was born in Vermont, came of age in upstate New York, and gravitated toward the intellectual center of Boston during the 1830s in order to advance his career as a minister, a speaker, and, most importantly, a writer. Up until his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1844, Brownson was known as a Christian rationalist and a fervent democrat. By 1842, when he wrote the article excerpted below, he had already rejected the notion that political democracy alone could bring about a godly society on earth. He formed this conclusion based on his analysis of the effects of market capitalism on American society. (Less abstractly, he had been profoundly disappointed by the Whig victory in the presidential election of 1840; he believed that the people had been duped.) The United States, he determined, needed something more than democracy to create a just society. After a long struggle, Brownson concluded that that “something more” was the Roman Catholic Church, which he believed could serve as a moral authority to help redeem society. By the time that he converted, however, Brownson had given up his earlier utopian hopes; he no longer believed that the Kingdom of Heaven would be established on earth in the regular course of history. It’s important to notice that in the piece below Brownson both recalled Jeffersonian and republican concerns about the state of dependence beget by wage labor and anticipated the Marxist critique of capitalism. —D. Voelker

{1} Everywhere is the question raised, how shall the actual condition of mankind be made to correspond to the Christian Ideal? How shall be introduced that equality of moral and physical well-being which is the expression of the equality of all men before God and the State?

{2} The third answer worth considering, is that of the POLITICIANS. This implies in this country the complete establishment of what may be termed democracy, or more definitely, political democracy. This consists in making every man, who has not by crime or misdemeanor forfeited his manhood, an equal member of the state or body politic;—that is to say, in the establishment of universal *suffrage* and *eligibility*. But these we already have established so far as they can practically affect the question under consideration; yet they do not prove to be the sovereign remedy it was hoped they would.

{3} The evils complained of exist here as well as in Europe, and every day become more widespread and intense. New England and the northern Middle States, in their factory system, are rapidly reproducing Old England; and thus far experience proves that the more extended the suffrage, the greater will be the influence and the more certain the triumph of wealth, or rather of the business classes. The great mass of our operatives are every day losing somewhat of their independence, and sinking into the servile condition of the operatives of the old world. Every day does something to prepare them to be the mere tools of those who have the disposition and the skill to use them. We may deny this; we may flatter the people; talk of their intelligence, virtue, firmness, and incorruptibleness; but we shall do well to remember the election of 1840,—an election which is a lucid commentary on many popular theories, full of instruction to those who are not past learning. That election demonstrates this much, that when the leading business interests of the country unite, though for purposes glaringly selfish and base, the result at the polls is never problematical.

{4} Some have seen this; nay, the friends of the people very generally see this, and deplore it. They seek to remedy it by UNIVERSAL EDUCATION. The people, say they, are honest, but they are deceived; they mean right, but they are misled by ambitious and designing politicians, by corrupt and selfish men of business. We must enlighten them. We must educate them, so that they shall know what are their rights and their interests. Well, and what then? Do you suppose that the evil lies no deeper than the people's ignorance of their rights and interests? The people are as a mass no doubt tolerably honest and well-meaning; but they are not free to act according to their own convictions. The result of an election is rarely determined by the wisdom, the virtue, or the intelligence of the great mass of the electors. It is time for us to cease this mischievous nonsense we have been for so long a time in the habit of uttering about the wisdom, virtue, and intelligence, of the people. Were we in Europe, and did we understand by the *people*, the unprivileged many, in distinction from the privileged few, there would be some meaning in what we say; for it would imply that these unprivileged many are as competent to the management of their own affairs, as the few are to manage their affairs for them, and better too; which is unquestionably a truth. But here, where there are no privileged orders, where the term *people* means, not as in Europe, the plebeians, but the whole mass of the population, whether rich or poor, learned or unlearned, refined or unrefined, these praises of the people are worse than idle. The result of an election here, I think I may say, is invariably determined by the necessities which grow out of the condition and relations of the mass of the electors, and would be the same, the political and domestic economies remaining unchanged, whatever the extent to which you should carry the education of the people.

{5} Formerly, before the banking and protective systems had destroyed our old system of Home Industry, the mass of our people were independent; because there rarely intervened any interest between the interest of the consumer and that of the producer; the consumer was the employer, and consumption and production regulated each other, in each immediate neighborhood, without being dependent on the general state of trade throughout the world. Now, the consumer ceases in a great measure to be the direct employer. The employer is now a middle man, capitalist, speculator, factor, or, as the French call him, *l'entrepreneur*, who comes between the producer and the consumer. I will not say that this change is unfavorable to the actual increase of wealth in a nation. In the light of what is called political economy, which interests itself in the question of the production of wealth, rather than in the happiness of the people, I will not say but this should be regarded as a progress; yet touching the independence of the people, it makes all the difference in the world.

{6} Say, I am a shoemaker. Under the old system I made shoes for the consumer, and received in exchange such articles as he produced, which I needed for the support of myself and family; I was as independent as he, because if he did not employ me he must go without shoes; and he as independent as I, because if I would not make his shoes I must want the means of subsistence. Now I am employed to make shoes; not because my employer must have them or go barefoot, but because he would derive a profit from my labor. Consequently, whenever he can derive no profit from my labor, he will cease to employ me. Consumers buy shoes because they need them, and must buy them whether they buy them cheap or dear; but the shoe-dealer will contract for the making of shoes only when he can sell, or has a reasonable prospect of selling them, at an advance. He believes that to enable him to do this, the Government must adopt what is called the protective [tariff] policy. I must support this policy, or the policy that enables him to derive a profit from my labors as a shoemaker, or else he must cease to employ me, and then how am I to

find the means of subsistence for myself, my wife, and children? Here is the difficulty. The employer of the operative, and the purchaser of the surplus produce of the farmer, what I call the business man, may be an enlightened, honest and benevolent individual, but he cannot do business unless he can derive a profit from it. The new relations created by the banking and protective systems have however rendered him absolutely indispensable both to the producers and the operatives. Hence the necessity imposed upon both producers and operatives to support that policy which will enable him to derive a profit from employing the labor of the one, and from buying the produce of the other. Both of these classes to a very considerable extent become dependent on the business class.

{7} Now, you may educate as much as you please, but so long as this dependence remains, your elections will have virtually but one termination. The business men, not through their wickedness, not through their inordinate selfishness,—for the business class is as enlightened, as liberal, and as high-minded as any class of the people,—but through laws which even they cannot control, become the actual rulers of the community. It is useless to contend against them. True wisdom consists, not in endeavoring politically to wrest the power from their grasp, but in so constituting the state, that one branch of business is always able to interpose an effectual veto on the efforts of another to obtain any exclusive privilege or undue advantage.

{8} I am far from intending in these remarks to undervalue the importance of a well-ordered commonwealth, or to speak lightly of universal suffrage or universal education, for both of which I have contended when to do so was less popular than it is now. Every man, who can substantiate his claim to be a man, should be admitted an equal member of the body-politic under the dominion of which he was born; and that community which neglects to bestow the best education in its power on all its children, of what-ever condition, and of both sexes, forfeits its right to punish the offender. What I mean is simply that universal suffrage, and universal education, do not give us the power we need to introduce the moral and physical equality demanded. We must change our political and domestic economies before they can effect anything; and they who suppose universal suffrage and education able to effect the change needed in these economies, overlook the laws which grow out of them, and which override all the other laws of the commonwealth, and in a majority of cases of individual action. These economies must be changed by other agents than suffrage and education.

Discussion Questions:

1. How, according to Brownson, had capitalism reshaped social relations?
2. In what ways did Brownson draw on Jeffersonian and republican concerns about economic development? How did he go beyond their concerns?
3. Why did Brownson believe that an educated and virtuous electorate would be unable to protect its own interests?

SOURCE: "Brook Farm," *The United States and Democratic Review* (November 1842): 481–96. Some additional paragraph breaks have been added to the original, and paragraph numbers have been added in braces.



This electronic text is © 2006 David J. Voelker. Permission is granted to reproduce this text freely for educational, non-commercial purposes only. All users must retain this notice and cite <http://www.historytools.org>.