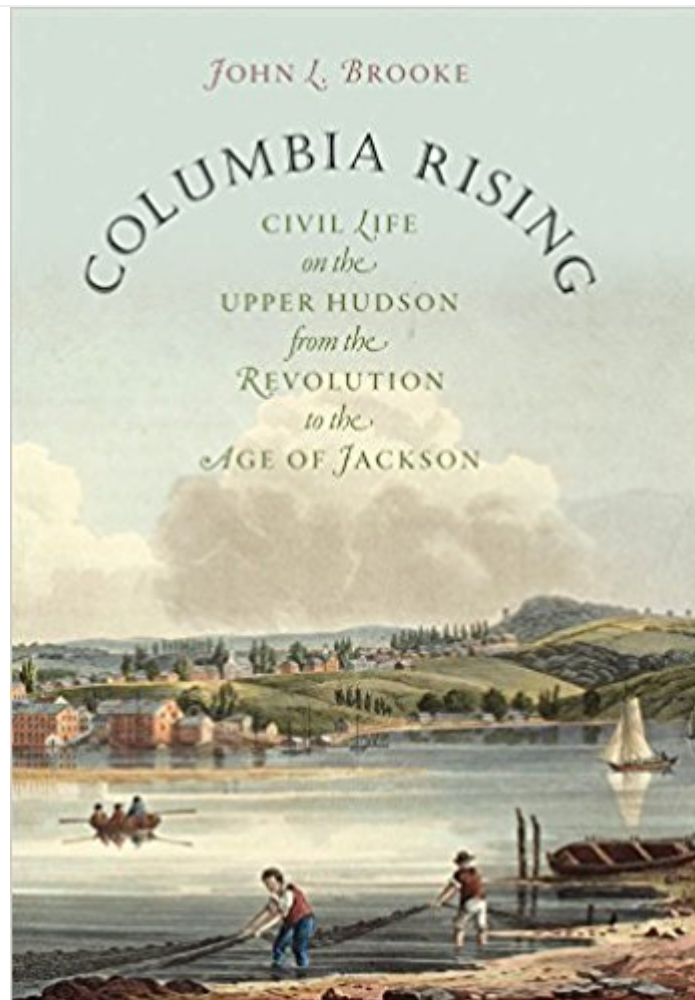


{essays in history}

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Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson



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Reviewed Work(s)

Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson. By John L. Brooke (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Cloth, \$45.00.

Victory in the Revolutionary War created an independent America, but establishing and defining citizenship in the new nation was a contested project subject to the particular experiences and traditions of individuals and communities at the local level. From this premise, John L. Brooke has provided a rich study of a “problem and a place.” The problem is “the forging of citizenship in a revolutionary settlement,” which he argues is a question that “lies at the heart of the American experience” (3). Indeed, Brooke argues that “the history of the entire nation has revolved around these issues of extending the political and social rights that embody the promise of the age of Enlightenment” (4). The place Brooke has chosen as a laboratory for examining such a problem is Columbia County, New York, located between the Hudson River and the Massachusetts border just south of Albany. The rise of Columbia, incorporated in 1786 from land formerly part of Albany County, is mirrored with the rise of Martin Van Buren, perhaps the county’s best-known son. Brooke aims to reveal how the politics of Columbia influenced the young Van Buren, whom he calls the “first theoretician President” (2). Nevertheless, to call *Columbia Rising* a biography of Van Buren would be inaccurate; indeed the true focus of this study is how the residents of Columbia negotiated the inherent tensions of civil life in the new Republic. These tensions, which occasionally boiled over into violent conflict, were created by the seemingly incompatible ideal of equal civil participation with the reality of the hierarchically organized institutions that comprise the public sphere.

The central argument of *Columbia Rising* is that the settlement made by the residents of Columbia eventually came into being as a result of the tensions between three “civil paradigms”: the old oligarchic order, a Revolutionary and at times militant popular politics, and a nascent culture of bourgeois improvement that emerged in the early Republic.

Conceptually Brooke's work is underpinned by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere.^[1] Like Habermas, Brooke believes that governments gain legitimacy from common and equal participation in the public sphere – both informally through the press and association and formally through legislatures and courts. The people of Columbia County were deeply divided along the traditional lines of landownership, and the conflicts between landlord and tenant over power and the rights of citizenship in the county are the backbone of Brooke's narrative. In the new environ of the Republic, the competing interests of these two sides made Columbia a “precocious hothouse of partisan politics,” which occasionally boiled over into violence before settling into a period of “routine politics” around the time that John Jay was elected Governor of New York. Brooke states that his goal is to define the “shape of civil society and the public sphere in post-Revolutionary America,” but at no point does he claim that the history of Columbia County is nationally representative. However, he reminds the reader that the national narrative is “lived in the host of localities where Americans embody and enact their collective society” (11). Columbia may not have been representative, but Brooke argues that through the national prominence of Van Buren the peculiarities of Columbia's settlement had national implications.

Critics of Habermas have often focused on the restrictions of the public sphere, especially the concept of equal deliberation within the space. In the case of the early American republic, Brooke acknowledges the exclusion of marginalized groups from participation in formal politics, which includes office holding and voting. In *Columbia Rising*, he attempts to address these critiques by revealing multiple avenues of consent that existed outside of formal political deliberation and were indeed available to women, the poor, and African Americans. Citizenship afforded an individual the opportunity to participate in the *deliberative* arena of the public sphere by effecting change through voting or office holding in the new republic. However a great number of individuals – Brooke pays special attention to women and tenants – were excluded from the deliberative arena, and instead engaged with the public sphere through the *persuasive* arena – that is, through their engagement with institutions such as the press and associative bodies. Here again, for Brooke, the concept of consent is critical to understand the political settlement. Landownership and associated wealth

constituted prerequisites for admission into the deliberative arena, where consent was made manifest through voting and office holding. Those who did not meet the prerequisites instead expressed their consent through the participation in the persuasive culture of print and association. In this manner, Brooke attempts to address critics of the public sphere who argue that it is an inherently masculine and exclusionary concept. Catherine E. Kelly's *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* shows us that women in this era were cultural producers, and in many ways Brooke reminds the reader that women were also cultural and political consumers, an equally significant and powerful position in his understanding of the public sphere.^[2]

Brooke's treatment of women in *Columbia Rising* is at times convincing, but at other times leaves the reader with some questions. On one hand, it is very clear that a gradual shift towards a culture of sentiment and sensibility took place. In the first twenty years of the nineteenth century the major newspapers of Columbia dedicated about a third of their pages to what Brooke identifies as "polite and sentimental literature" (352-353). Yet, even as this space in the persuasive sphere slowly emerged, Brooke admits that the women of Columbia rarely found themselves as full participants in the public sphere. Brooke presents the cases of three radical women who "created spaces and boundaries for female counterpublics" by defying the concept of republican motherhood and leading their own particular initiatives. Lucy Wright and Catherine Livingston Garrettson, for example, both held prominent positions in local religious life. Lucy Wright became the spiritual leader of the Shaker community in the years following the death of Ann Lee, and Catherine Livingston adopted the mystical Methodist pietism of her husband, the itinerant Freeborn Garrettson. Hannah Barnard formed the Hudson Female Benevolent Society, the first overtly female voluntary association in Columbia. Brooke highlights these women not only because of their unique biographies but also because they represent the varying degrees in which women engaged with some form of civil life: Wright fully removed herself and her followers, Barnard attempted a full integration, and Garrettson occupied somewhat of a middle position (373). Brooke presents these women as extraordinary in their society, and though he makes a compelling counterargument to those who criticize the public sphere as a purely masculine space, one must wonder if these clearly rare

examples actually reinforce the notion of an exclusionary public sphere. Brooke admits that these women struggled to “carve out zones of female autonomy,” but because of their disengagement with the sentimental culture of the public sphere, the lives of these specific women “would be increasingly anachronistic in coming years and decades” (381).

Perhaps the strongest section of *Columbia Rising* is Brooke’s examination of slaveholding in the county, as part of the overarching narrative of the Revolutionary settlement. The persistence of slaveholding in Columbia County serves as evidence to Brooke that issues of citizenship and equality were still an open contest that delayed the full arrival of a Revolutionary settlement. The enslaved were precluded not only from the public sphere, but also from any kind of civil life. Because of their marginalization, the enslaved themselves do not play a large role in this narrative; in fact it is not until the very last page of the main body that Brooke shows how black Columbians eventually began to forge a degree of civil equality for themselves through their participation in the Civil War. Slaveholders have a place in this study, however, and Brooke’s fine section explaining the patterns of pro- and anti-slavery opinion superbly reinforces his larger arguments on the pervasiveness and causal power of the public sphere. According to Brooke, pro-slaveholder politics in Columbia were rooted in households where English was not the primary language, households which were “insulated from or resisted the print and association of the public sphere and the culture of sentiment and sensibility that it carried” (266). Even though slaveholding persisted in New York well into the nineteenth century, in the specific example of Columbia “engagements with the new forms of the public sphere were shaping a departure from the racial configurations of the past” (279). Brooke is able to identify additional patterns in slaveholding, and indeed those least likely to own slaves were the people most engaged with the voluntary associations such as the Library Society and Mechanics Society that partly comprised the public sphere in Columbia.

Of his many accomplishments in this work, Brooke must be especially lauded for the care and detail with which he recreates public life in Columbia County in the decades following the Revolution. His meticulous research allows him to create an incredibly vivid look at the interpersonal dramas central to this Revolutionary settlement. He

gratefully provides the reader with a *dramatis personae*, which becomes especially critical considering that no fewer than three different Benjamin Birdsalls have some role to play in the narrative he weaves. It takes a great amount of skill to guide the reader through so many names and places, but Brooke is more than up to such a task. By revealing the difficult process of settlement in Columbia, and the eventual arrival at a more routine politics in the antebellum era, Brooke contributes greatly to our understandings of the meaning of citizenship in the early Republic, and adds to our knowledge of what the American Revolution meant to those who lived it.

Perhaps to an even greater degree, we are given an insight into what these events meant to that first generation born after Independence. In this context, the rise of Martin Van Buren from a middling Dutch family in Columbia to the very head of party politics in antebellum America is even more representative of Brooke's main thesis. Van Buren emerges near the end of Brooke's narrative, as the political settlement was coalescing in Columbia. "Van Buren," Brooke writes, "was always conscious of his precarious place as a poor man's son in a rich man's world" (284). However, as Brooke describes, Van Buren negotiated his way through these unique circumstances of his home county, first as a local lawyer and eventually as a national politician, and emerged possessing a "pragmatic style of public life that empowered men of middling station by virtue of their bourgeois respectability" (285). The concepts of civility and respectability became sanctified by the public sphere, and allowed an individual with Van Buren's background to gain a level of authority that would likely have been impossible when Columbia was incorporated in the aftermath of the Revolution. This story of a problem and a place will certainly be of interest to students of early New York political history, and is a welcome contribution to the cultural history of the early American republic.

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[1] See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989); Habermas, *Between Facts and*

Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy,
trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

[2] Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).



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