

David Meyer’s *Roots of American Industrialization* is likely to cheer economic and business historians, but it is also likely to infuriate many social, labor, and cultural historians. Meyer mines the census, economic, and patent data from the Northeastern United States from the early national period to 1860, placing the research of Diane Lindstrom, Allan Pred, Robert Gallman, Kenneth Sokoloff and other scholars into an overarching interpretation of early American industrialization. Emphasizing rational actors in the private economy, Meyer locates the engine of economic growth to be market interactions between and among prosperous rural areas, industrializing towns, and dynamic commercial cities. Some historians may worry that his focus on “prosperous farmers” and “astute investors” overlooks important aspects of the story; there are simply no class or ethnic or gender or racial conflicts in sight. Meyer’s business-government interactions are for the most part grandiose failures such as the ill-fated canal-building schemes of the 1830s. Slavery figures mostly as a market for Lynn, Massachusetts, shoemakers.

Put briefly, Meyer’s argument is that the East was the center of industrial development in the United States and that prosperous agriculture in the East was its backbone. Eastern agriculture, far from being a drain on the economy, a source merely of factory workers, or an easy mark for Midwestern farmers, was a crucial part of the country’s economic growth. The basic pattern begins in the 1790s, after the Constitution “established a strong central government with powers to forge a national economy” (p. 16). Meyer finds numerous agricultural areas in the East sending surplus crops to market, such as Pennsylvania’s wheat, upper New York state’s cattle and cheese, and Connecticut’s tobacco. Farmers close enough to the expanding urban areas—especially the leading metropolitan centers of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore but also “subregional metropolises” such as Utica, Albany-Troy, Hartford, and New Haven—responded vigorously to the cities’ demands for hay, vegetables, milk, cheese, and meat. Prosperous farmers in turn created growing markets for diverse manufacturers made in small workshops or factories. The rising demand spurred innovation in manufacturing while at the same time open competition spurred firms to improve their own productivity, driving down
prices and further expanding markets (p. 282). Cost-effective wagons, roads, and turnpikes carried most goods to and from urban markets.

Beginning in the 1820s, certain firms in vibrant regional districts broke through to the national market. Meyer superbly details the variety of relationships they formed with wholesalers, jobbers, commission merchants, and sometimes with commercial networks that they developed themselves. The extended case studies include Boston-area shoemakers, Connecticut’s tinware, clock, and brass firms, the varied textile systems of Providence, Philadelphia and Lowell, and a profusion of specialized manufacturers that sprang up in and around the metropolitan centers. (Chapter 7 anatomizes the big four metropolitan centers and their surrounding counties with locational quotients and Herfindahl indexes.) In examining the diffusion of cotton textile factories in New England and New York, Meyer confirms the centrality of investors, managers or mechanics with direct connections to the pioneering textile network of Providence. When describing the Lowell mills’ distinctive boardinghouse labor system, Meyer disallows any talk of republican values, social harmony, or other “speculations” about the investors’ social views, offering instead that these choices represented “cold calculations” to improve productivity through high-quality labor (p. 118).

Ultimately, the strength of this book in its attention to statistics and analysis is also its weakness. In spotlighting the long-run patterns of economic change, and accenting the attainments of rational actors, Meyer’s tendency is to wash out the accompanying uncertainties, controversies, and conflicts. Perhaps, in retrospect, it is clear that Pennsylvania’s effort to build its state-spanning Mainline Canal in the 1830s was foolish, or that Maryland should not have squandered public resources in “a grand public works project . . . without any rational economic assessment” (p. 151). Perhaps even if railroads provided greater speed, less damage to goods, and greater passenger comfort than wagons and stagecoaches, it is reasonable to insist “these benefits had minimal economic value.” (p. 159) I winced at his optimizing assumptions about technological change (p. 65). Nevertheless Meyer’s analysis is clearly formulated, spatially and temporally bounded, carefully argued, and in its terms comprehensive; this book will serve as an important baseline as historians frame other, more holistic interpretations of early industrialization. Sadly, especially for such a synthesis, the book deserved a more adequate index.
Thomas Misa’s books include *A Nation of Steel* (Johns Hopkins, 1995),

*Modernity and Technology* (MIT Press, 2003)

and *Leonardo to the Internet* (Johns Hopkins, 2004).