

## The Rise of the Market: Individuation and Integration in Antebellum America

During the first half of the nineteenth century, American society underwent profound transformations that touched nearly every domain of life. A once “insignificant nation on the European periphery” emerged as a consequential participant on the world stage (McPherson 1988, 9). Thirteen loosely federated states, each with distinct local conditions, institutions, and cultures, coalesced around shared interests and identities, political as well as economic, sectional as well as national. The lives of ordinary persons were touched in countless ways by new technologies, opportunities, risks, freedoms, and imperatives, transforming American society so dramatically that Washington Irving’s allegorical tale of Rip Van Winkle is understated in comparison.

Seeking a common denominator to comprehend these profound changes, many historians have embraced the language of revolution. Some have posited unprecedented advances in transportation or communication as explanatory keys or unifying factors.<sup>1</sup> However, perhaps the strongest scholarly consensus has formed around the so-called market revolution, a term popularized by Charles Sellers (Sellers 1991). According to the widely shared thesis, between roughly 1800 and 1860, the “largely subsistence economy of small farms and tiny workshops, satisfying mostly local needs through barter and exchange, gave place to” a simultaneously diversified and integrated economy “in which farmers and manufacturers produced food and goods for the cash rewards of an often distant marketplace” (Stokes 1996, 1). Though this revolution played out according to different scales, rates, and patterns both between

and within the North and South, the concept provides a useful heuristic because it comprehends technological as well as social, economic, and political change, and thus it has become the dominant stock in trade for historical understanding of the antebellum period (e.g., Clark 1996; Watson 1996).

My approach, in this chapter and for the remainder of this book, is not to collect or interpret new historical facts, but to assemble the more or less familiar and view it from a slightly different angle. My immediate aim is to construct a sketch of the social and economic context within and against which Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau articulated their respective forms of individualism. The market revolution is a central feature of this context, as I hope to show. However, that transformation was itself inseparable from a burgeoning, contemporaneous culture of individualism in nineteenth-century America.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of an integrated, national market economy was facilitated by (and itself served to facilitate) numerous individualistic and individualizing developments, reaching from family life and informal social norms, to religion, law, and politics.

Yet I suggest that there is no simple, linear causal story at work. The rise of the market was neither the efficient cause nor the strict consequence of a larger culture of individualism. Rather, the two developed together, like interdependent species evolving through interactions with one another in a common environment. Economic change was facilitated and intensified by new, more individualistic ways of life, and economic changes of many kinds served to further partition already individualizing social space. Thus, while it would be too simple to say that one caused the other, it is impossible to account adequately for either development without its counterpart, as it is impossible to account for the evolution of the bee without the flower, or the flower without the bee.

By way of exploring the relationship between antebellum individualism and the rise of the market, I shall also contend that individualism and the market are not interchangeable, coextensive, or conceptually interdependent terms. Though it has long been orthodoxy to explain the origins and operations of market systems in terms of individualistic ideologies and practices,<sup>3</sup> there is no genuine necessity at work. As this and subsequent chapters shall illustrate, though often indirectly, robust individualism does not entail a commitment to the acquisitive pursuit of self-interest so often attributed to individuals in market societies. Strong commitments to individual autonomy, self-development, and

self-enactment can be articulated and lived in terms skeptical of and even hostile to market participation. Likewise, the patterns of activity characteristic of a market do not logically presuppose individual persons as the atomic particles of which an economy or society is composed. It is possible, if not prevalent, for market economies to exist in which households, communities, and firms of many different descriptions are the principal participants. Individualism may figure prominently in the histories of most market economies, but it is no more “necessary” than it was that persons named Ford and Taylor should figure prominently in the history of modern mass production and corporate organization. Hence, what follows is the elucidation of fortuitous, contingent, and sometimes tense and tenuous connections, not inevitable necessities or iron laws.

In the first section, I characterize antebellum individualism by assembling a number of salient aspects of American life that individuated social space and elevated the individual to a new privilege and prominence. The second examines the imbrications of individualism and the rise of the market, their mutual dependence and articulation in the context of the first half of the nineteenth century.

## 2.1 THE ERA OF THE INDIVIDUAL

It is the age of the first person singular.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal* (1827)

The first half of the nineteenth century, during which the market revolution occurred, was characterized by palpable, energetic individualism in thought as well as in practice. Emerson was not alone in recognizing the privileged status of the individual in antebellum American society. Religious sermons, literary works, political and moral ideals, social reforms, economic transformations, and the textures of ordinary life all testified to the prominence of the individual person. Yet the individualism characteristic of the period was often less ideological than it was dispositional and practical. It was manifest in ways of life and often born of necessity, as Americans strove for greater prosperity, and was only later refined and elevated to an intellectualized ideal. Furthermore, like the market, individualism was a complex, evolving phenomenon comprising many distinct components, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes hindering one another. Intersubjective bonds and affections of community and family remained deeply important for many, and a new sense

of shared nationality took shape, but forces of individualization were apparent everywhere (Kohl 1989, 8–10). No catalog or sketch of these developments could express fully their complexity or interconnection, but the rise of the market and the contemporaneous articulation of individualist philosophies cannot be adequately appreciated or understood without a sense of how varied and profound were the individualistic dimensions of early nineteenth-century life.

### 2.1.1 *Tocqueville's Shadow*

The most encompassing and systematic contemporary reflection upon antebellum society was Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, a work which has left a lasting imprint upon subsequent understanding of the period. In Tocqueville's comprehensive estimate:

No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay there than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the immense influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society. It gives a particular turn to public opinion and a particular twist to the laws, new maxims to those who govern and particular habits to the governed[. I]t creates opinions, gives birth to feelings, suggests customs, and modifies whatever it does not create. (1835/1969, 9)

Though his extensive discussion of American society often remains vague about precisely which conditions were more equal in America than in Europe and often neglects the remaining inequalities (economic, political, gender, racial, ethnic, and religious) that partitioned American society, his penetrating observation and analysis repeatedly begins from and returns to this sweeping egalitarian premise.

As Emerson remarked toward the end of his life: “America was opened after the feudal mischief was spent, and so the people made a good start. We began well. No inquisition here, no kings, no nobles, no dominant church” (1909, 410–1). Compared to the social conditions of European societies, the lives of free white men in antebellum America were certainly more egalitarian in principle as well as practice (2006, 79). Tocqueville believed that democracy (namely in the form of expanded white male suffrage) was the most notable face of this distinctly American egalitarianism<sup>4</sup> (2007, 304; Pessen 1978, 150–60; Van Deusen 1959, 10–11, 2009, 21–3). The ascendancy of democratic culture had both a leveling and an individualizing effect, “loosen[ing] social ties”

which had typically relied upon distinctions of rank, and “separat[ing] citizens” as it placed them on an equal, undifferentiated footing<sup>5</sup> (Tocqueville 1835/1969, 589). Complementing these political conditions was the availability of seemingly endless tracts of inexpensive land, which promised measures of both social and economic equality unimaginable in Europe.<sup>6</sup> The presence of fewer entrenched impediments to, and more plentiful opportunities for, personal advancement cultivated an enterprising, go-ahead spirit and a “yeoman’s worldview” that was suspicious of authority and the hindrances it imposed upon individuals (Howe 2007, 37; see also Hofstadter 1989, 72–86). Indeed, equality of conditions might best be understood to refer to this sense of openness to rise by personal ambition and effort. This understanding of American equality also suggests at least a partial explanation for why “an individualistic social order” developed rather than a more integral, communal social order (Kohl 1989, 5). The country was physically capacious enough, and its population was diverse, independent, and mobile enough, to encourage a centrifugal rather than centripetal expression of egalitarianism—equality pushed away from social holism and toward individualism.

Tocqueville explicitly identified a form of intellectual individualism that equality of conditions encouraged. Americans, he declared, “have a philosophical method shared by all.” Freed from “imposed systems, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices, and to a certain extent national prejudices as well[,] in most mental operations each American relies on individual effort and judgments” (Tocqueville 1835/1969, 429). Americans were unwitting yet adept Cartesians—each sweeping aside prejudice and receiving ideas in order to work out a personal worldview from scratch. While there is certainly some exaggeration in this description (as Emerson’s and Thoreau’s critiques of conformity suggest), it identifies something fundamental to antebellum social conditions.<sup>7</sup> The prevailing atmosphere of opportunity, coupled with weaker or altogether absent institutions of intellectual authority (such as an established church or entrenched aristocracy), left individuals to think and judge for themselves, and thus brought about at least an approximate realization of the Enlightenment ideals of intellectual freedom. Each person was free, and often required, to make use of his own intellect without direction from another (Kant 1784/1996). Equality of conditions thus dovetailed with an untutored intellectual individualism. Tocqueville reserved as much criticism for this development as he did praise (suggesting, for instance, that it encourages deference to mass

opinion and paves the way to the tyranny of the majority), but he was emphatic about its prevalence and potency.

Yet Tocqueville did not refer to this intellectual independence or the separating effects of political democracy as “individualism,” instead of reserving the name for a distinctive disposition fostered by America’s egalitarian culture.

Our fathers knew only egoism[,] a passionate and exaggerated love of self which leads a man to think of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all.

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. (1835/1969, 506)

Whereas egoism is a perennial human characteristic, what Tocqueville calls individualism is a distinctly modern phenomenon accompanying the equality of conditions Americans experienced. Egoism signifies an exaggerated sense of self, which modern philosophers from Thomas Hobbes to Jean-Jacques Rousseau recognized as natural (or nearly so) yet prone to lead individuals to immoral or antisocial conduct. Tocqueville’s egoist sees the world as a banquet either available or denied to himself. Individualism, however, signifies a careful partitioning of the world into spheres of life that is only feasible in an environment that presents opportunity and counsels confidence in individual efforts. That is, individualism is a distinctly modern view of mine and thine, and of private and public, that gets traction precisely because the average (white, male) person can choose if and when to cross the line between spheres (Siedentop 2014, 18). Rather than an egoistic craving to have it all, such individualism entails a willingness to leave much of the world to others and to content oneself with the care and enjoyment of one’s own little corner.<sup>8</sup>

While perceptive in its analysis of the American ways of delineating public and private spheres of life, Tocqueville’s discussion of individualism is myopic. He was so deeply impressed by equality of conditions that he only saw individualism as an egalitarian reinterpretation of a timeless vice, a troubling quirk occasioned by his real object of fascination. One might then say that he did not recognize the full scope of American individualism because he was not looking for it, and when he encountered it he interpreted it through a narrowly circumscribed conceptual lens.

Many of the remarkable individualistic tendencies of antebellum America escaped his attention or figured only marginally. However, scholarship since *Democracy in America* has provided a much richer sense of the distinctively individualistic character of antebellum society, correcting and supplementing Tocqueville's account without abandoning its valuable insights.

### 2.1.2 *Patterns of Individuation and Individualism*

Both contemporary observers and later historians have characterized early nineteenth-century Americans as “a busy, bustling, industrious population, hacking and hewing their way” toward an eagerly anticipated yet unrealized future.<sup>9</sup> The roots of this disposition ran deep. According to historian John Lauritz Larson, “the [American] Revolution, with its promises of liberty and equality, had planted in free people's souls a restless sense of entitlement that tended to accelerate habits of mobility and innovation, habits that, in colonial days, often seemed to contradict good order and tradition” (2010, 14). Tocqueville vividly recorded this spirit of restlessness. “No sooner do you set foot on American soil than you find yourself in a sort of tumult [...] All around you everything is on the move [...] a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere” (1835/1969, 242, 244). It was a common perception in the nineteenth century, and not always a welcome one, that the pace of life was accelerating. As one contemporary American observer tepidly remarked, “[e]verything goes fast now-a-days; the winds, even begin to improve upon the speed which they have hitherto maintained; everything goes ahead but good manners and sound principles.”<sup>10</sup> Individual expectation and striving rent much of the social fabric inherited from the previous century, setting individuals loose from their traditional roles, trades, locales, and communities, eager to realize for themselves the promise of the revolution.

The spirit of restlessness and industry paralleled improvements in transportation technology and infrastructure that gave outlet to “a nationwide surge of energy,” “[q]uickening the flow of people, goods, and ideas throughout the country[,] collapsing distances and widening horizons” (Feller 1995, 22; see also Fishlow 1996 and Larkin 1988, 204–5). The individualizing effects of such mobility were most powerful upon the younger generation. Thanks in part to new employment opportunities across the expanding country, and new means of learning

of and traveling to them, the gravity of traditional, communal life weakened. Young women as well as young men embraced new opportunities to make a life in a place and manner of their own choosing, beyond the reach of the expectations and constraints of family, church, and community (Halttunen 1982, 1; Boorstin 1965, 90–1; Howe 2007, 242). The “pioneering spirit” that had led the expansion of original colonies was finding new expressions as individuals struck out to make their respective ways in the world (Boorstin 1965, 51). Even the instruments of travel had individuating effects. New modes of transportation (such as stagecoaches, steamboats, and trains) were typically open to all who could afford them, and thus traveling itself eroded lingering European-styled class distinctions, further sifting society into individual particles in motion<sup>11</sup> (Ibid., 107–8; Larkin 1988, 222).

Mobility and restlessness nurtured “a new competitive age” (Licht 1995, 78). The time was ripe for individual striving for land, for employment, for self-improvement, for social, economic, and even political advancement. One of the marks of transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century in America—from lingering colonial sensibilities to a new individualistic ethos—was the legitimization of ambition and its pursuits. According to Gordon Wood,

Americans were in fact using competition to democratize ambition and make it the basis for a new kind of middling society [...] Americans celebrated the “ambition and fire of youth” and allowed genius to express itself. Many cultures feared the expression of ambition because it was an aristocratic passion that belonged to the Macbeths of the world—great-souled individuals who were apt to be dangerous. Americans, however, need not have this fear, at least not to the same extent. In a republic ambition should belong to everyone[.] (2009, 325)

In a country of plentiful land, few and sparse laws and institutions, and widespread egalitarian sentiments, relying on one’s own grit and drive was often a matter of pragmatic prudence, if not outright necessity. Individuals had to solve more of their own problems than in European societies with entrenched remnants of feudal privilege and obligation, contributing to a “fascination with things new and better” and an “urge to tinker and invent” that turned restlessness toward improvement (Feller 1995, 27; see also Tocqueville 1835/1969, 419–20). This practical ethos and the lack of rigid social hierarchies allowed personal



ambition to carry a resourceful and fortunate individual farther than most of his or her Old World counterparts.

The new respectability and fecundity of ambition were readily apparent in changing relationships to one's work. Rather than an inheritance or a destiny, occupation became a matter of personal aspiration and initiative, serving as a flexible means adapted to the end of self-advancement and satisfaction (Wood 2009, 325; Howe 2007, 131). This openness to individual choice reflected the relative underdevelopment and rapid growth of the American economy, as well as the erosion of traditional practices of regulation within and across professions (which, in the colonies, were already weak by European standards) (Boorstin 1965, 22–6, 34; Larson 2010, 104). Employment relationships subsequently took on new, individualized forms, as farmhands, “[a]pprentices and journeymen were turning into employees,” farmers and master artisans into employers, and all enterprises experienced greater measures of “turnover, turmoil and uncertainty” (Larkin 1988, 59; see also Larson 2010, 114; Sellers 1991, 25). Hence, the age saw the emergence of what Polanyi called “that most potent of all modern institutions, the labor market” (1944/2001, 87). Liberated from communal claims, labor took on the character of individual property—free men owned their energies and skills and were entitled to take them and use them where and how they saw fit. At the same time that the view of “property as a commodity,” as an article of acquisition and exchange, achieved dominance, so did labor increasingly take on the aspect of a commodity to be bargained and exchanged between individuals (Wood 2009, 19). The activities of producing and reproducing biological and social existence lost the appearance of fate and took on that of voluntary undertaking, cut loose from cultural and communal moorings.

The individuation of work and occupation was most apparent and most dramatic where wage labor prevailed. Cities and new factory towns, primarily in the North, were first to be shaped by the agitations of a mobile, voluntary labor force. Yet the individualizing effects of new economic patterns reached into rural communities as well. Near urban and manufacturing centers, the “putting-out” system employed men, children, and especially women to perform simplified steps in a larger chain of production (Kessler-Harris 2003, 28–30, 46–8; Larkin 1988, 58; Sellers 1991, 24–5). Farther from cities and nascent manufacturing, more farms turned to composite agriculture, crossing the already “porous boundary between household production and market

production” (Bushman 1998, 364; Larkin 1988, 36). Farming increasingly shifted from an inward-looking activity of sustaining the household and family life to an outward-looking activity of commodity production. Technological advance and westward movement to more fertile land improved agricultural productivity, encouraging and sometimes forcing hired farmhands and children without land of their own to seek employment in towns and cities, further breaking down the bonds that had kept individuals and their labor tied to family and community settings (Meyer 2003, 11; Howe 2007, 525–6; McPherson 1988, 13). Even when the household retained its traditional integrity as a productive unit, it came to act more like an individual firm in a competitive marketplace, initially by choice and ultimately of necessity in a changing economic landscape.

The transformation of individual labor was institutionalized through the law, especially the law regarding contracts, which provided a new conceptual and normative vocabulary for employment relationships. According to Daniel Walker Howe,

[i]n the eighteenth century the essence of a contract had been the concept of *consideration*—that is, the contract as a promise made in return for money or some other advantage. Judges felt free to invalidate contracts in cases where the consideration seemed inadequate. The nineteenth century saw judges becoming more concerned with the concept of *free will*—that is, the contract as an agreement freely entered into by both sides, with the implication that if one chose to make a promise one should keep it. (2007, 559; see also Feller 1995, 33–6; Larson 2010, 23–5; Sellers 1991, 47–57)

Mirroring changing views of agency and freedom in theology and moral thought, evaluative criteria of contractual validity and obligation generally discarded substantive considerations, including matters of justice and contingent outcome that were often beyond the control of individuals, in favor of procedural considerations emphasizing nominally equal footing in negotiation and free agreement to the ultimate terms, whatever they may be. The law thus underscored what was already apparent elsewhere—individuals had to make their own way, by their own wits and efforts, at their own risk. Monetary developments supplemented the new contractual mindset. Although the antebellum economy was still, at bottom, premised upon gold and silver, and although both specie and paper money were chronically scarce, cash was nonetheless gradually displacing barter and informal credit as the choice medium of exchange in ordinary life (Henretta 1998, 297; Larkin 1988, 53; Larson 2010, 25–8). On the

one hand, reliance upon money as the “great instrument” of modern market transactions entailed new dependence upon its sources (both the institutions that controlled its circulation, and employers and customers from whom it could be gotten through transactions) (Lindblom 2001, 198). Yet, on the other hand, it also urged equalizing and individualizing patterns of life. The “cash-nexus” of exchange freed the individual to negotiate, buy, and sell on impersonal, quantitative terms, complementing the changing views of labor and property (Herzog 2014, 70; see also Gilmore 1985, 4). Personal relationships no doubt continued to facilitate or hinder economic transactions, but their salience was waning as that of “the almighty dollar” was waxing.<sup>12</sup> The instruments of economic exchange and advancement were becoming as mobile and restless as the persons who used them.

Ambition, mobility, and economic change had profound effects upon the fundamental building-blocks of society. As Clark notes, “[t]he central social institution in eighteenth-century America was the family household. Households were the primary, and almost universal, agents of social and economic organization, and it was under their auspices that most productive activity took place” (2006, 3). Economic production centered upon the farm or shop as a “functional unity” in which men, women, children, apprentices, hired hands, servants, and slaves all contributed—indeed “family” had been understood broadly, to include all persons joined in the operation and maintenance of a single household and its economic life (Larkin 1988, 10). Custom and limited horizons of ambition and opportunity had kept the family integral and central. When they came of age, men and women typically left one household to join or found another of the same basic kind. Yet expanding opportunities for land and other employment, as well as the necessities imposed by new modes of market participation, shook the foundations of family life, and not simply by encouraging or requiring individuals to become wage laborers. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, “traditional subordinations were challenged and undermined,” including those within the household (Wood 2009, 342). The “stem family” that encompassed the full productive household and connected it to a larger community gave way to the externally and internally individualized “nuclear family” comprising the married couple and immediate offspring<sup>13</sup> (Sellers 1991, 241–2; see also Trachtenberg 2007, 150). As the archetypal family changed, especially for the middling sorts, so did marriage and the economic roles of women. The authority of fathers over their children

weakened, and emotional fulfillment came to rival community ties and economic productivity as the proper basis of a good marriage (Howe 2007, 36, 44; Larkin 1988, 14). And despite the laws of coverture (which placed a wife's body and property under control of her husband), many wives gained greater legal and social recognition, in part through liberalizing divorce and inheritance laws (Wood 2009, 495–8). Intimate relationships thus came to share at least somewhat the new character of employment relationships: Contractual agreements freely entered into independent individuals, instruments to personal fulfillment.

Living spaces and customs of habitation evolved to reflect both the internal and external individuation of the household. Whereas the dwellings of the middling and poor had long been essentially open, communal spaces, in which several generations might sleep in the same bed, dress and wash in front of one another, and eat from shared bowls with shared utensils, nineteenth-century dwellings bore the mark of new ideas of prosperity and propriety. Sleeping spaces became more individualized; kitchens, workspaces, and privies were separated from common quarters, not only for comfort but also out of a sense of privacy and decency; and family meals incorporated separate place settings, individualizing even the shared enjoyment of basic sustenance (Larkin 1988, 116–27, 138, 160, 180). For those with the requisite resources, the partitioning of physical space within the household made the separateness and independence of the individual tangible in even the most mundane aspects of daily life.

Outside the home, in the hustle and bustle of antebellum society, social customs paid homage to the individual's new standing. "Shaking hands became the accustomed American greeting between men, a gesture whose symmetry and mutuality signified equality" and a greater sense of individual pride and worth (Ibid., 155; Howe 2007, 37; Pessen 1978, 79). Such a shift was likewise evident in nomenclature and modes of address. "Middling men began asserting themselves as never before," bringing the formerly genteel appellation "Mister" into currency between free men and using given names rather than family names as the public markers of identity (Wood 2009, 320; Boorstin 1965, 91). The language of the age turned sharply inward, focusing on the self, its identity and character. "Individual" came to serve as a noun signifying a distinct person rather than a mere unit of counting, and "personality" came to refer to individual character rather than a generic status of personhood (Cayton 1989, 223). Drawing upon this new linguistic richness,

common practices of keeping diaries and journals joined fascination with individual personality to anxious moral and psychological self-auditing. Visual culture, too, rode the rising tide of individualism. With the introduction of the daguerreotype in the 1840s, a new form of self-artistry was born. Whereas portraiture had been a process of creative interpretation of the typically wealthy subject by the artist, photography reflected self-styling in the more affordable and replicable mirror of technology (Jaffee 2010, 275–325; Masur 1991, 208–11). Everywhere one looked and listened, persons of all classes and occupations put the self on display.

This recognition of individual dignity was one aspect of a deeper set of beliefs about the potential of each human being. The nineteenth century was not only the age of the individual as a brute fact, but the age of self-culture, the belief that “character could be improved, that people [women as well as men] could elevate themselves by concerted effort” (Feller 1995, 143; see also Richardson 1986, 54–7). Resurgent doctrines of free will in liberal Protestantism, lingering Enlightenment ideals of progress and perfection, diversifying economic opportunities, and the revolution’s still echoing promises of liberty and equality all lent their support to a faith in “agency” understood as a person’s “ability to act purposefully in the service of goals” of one’s own deliberate choosing (Howe 2007, 40, 44). For some, the ideal of agency promised access to the highest economic, social, and political strata of society, but for most, the ideal promised the nonetheless remarkable achievement of “competence” understood as material sufficiency won through self-employment. (Even though wage laborers depended on another for wages, they could still aspire to material security and comfort through their own free labor.) Such agency entailed correlative responsibility. Widespread was the belief that worldly fortunes, both favorable and unfavorable, reflected the character of the person who bore them. A natural consequence of the ideal of agency, which would evolve throughout the nineteenth century, was belief in the “self-made man,” whatever his station may be (Cawelti 1965; Sellers 1991, 238).

An overtly social manifestation of agency was “a greatly expanded associational life within formally organized, specialized, voluntary institutions whose multiplication within [the antebellum] era was indeed one of its outstanding characteristics” (Blumin 1989, 192). Impressed by this voluntarism, Tocqueville remarked that “Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations [...] of a thousand different types” (1835/1969, 513). This phenomenon

cut across many long-standing social divisions, especially those between men and women, as many of the new associations (especially those oriented around reform agendas) afforded women hitherto unprecedented public presence and leverage.<sup>14</sup> Yet the fevered pitch of organizing and joining retained a doubly individualistic character. On the one hand, the very existence of voluntary associations testified to the ideal of purposive individual action. Whereas Old World institutions were frequently inherited from time out of mind and seen as emanations of the super-individual social body, American institutions were often manifestly the artifice of collected individual choice and will. On the other hand, the purposes animating these associations testified to the ideal of both individual and social improvement. The antebellum institutional landscape was awash in a spirit of reform, as the optimistic, pragmatic mentality that established colonial settlement and had stretched its boundaries westward now looked inward, to the care and cultivation of individuals and the society they formed (Boorstin 1965, 43–8; Rose 1981, ix).

Reform movements are particularly illustrative of American individualism in (collective) action. By 1840, America enjoyed an adult literacy rate of roughly 91% (at least among free persons), which was comparable to the most advanced countries in Europe (Howe 2007, 455; Larkin 1988, 35). In a democratic society, especially one in which the printed word (carried by newspapers, pamphlets, and books) circulated ever more cheaply and widely, literacy was an essential tool of individual empowerment and self-direction (McPherson 1988, 12–3). Through the first decades of the nineteenth century, home schooling and local churches still performed crucial educational functions, especially in teaching basic reading, but publicly funded common schools were coming to rival and eventually to replace them (Howe 2007, 449–54). The new schools brought with them a new pedagogy suited to a belief in individual agency. Rather than mere disciplining or training (e.g., for a trade), education was reimagined as “a process of development” that works upon “the character as a whole, not just the intellect,” thus serving as “the great lever of upward mobility” (Ibid., 617; Howe 1997, 127; McPherson 1988, 29; see also Feller 1995, 150–2). Ambition and competition were encouraged, rather than repressed, inculcating in the young (women as well as men, albeit in different ways) the belief in deliberate self-advancement (Wood 2009, 326; Kessler-Harris 2003, 56–7). The lyceum movement did for adults what the common school movement did for youth. Beginning in New England in the 1820s, by

the middle of the 1840s, local lyceums and other societies for the public diffusion of knowledge formed the backbone of a professional lecture circuit that stretched throughout the USA (Bode 1956; Feller 1995, 146–7; Howe 1997, 125; Scott 1980, 795–7). Traveling speakers brought knowledge on subjects from poetry and physics to natural history and phrenology, delivered in lectures intended to equip their audience to use their agency more completely and resolutely, regardless of gender or occupation.

The same basic spirit that animated education reform led to changes in practices of punishment. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, visionaries such as Benjamin Rush worked to replace long-standing practices of brutal and often public punishment meant to extract penance with gentler techniques aimed at individuating and reforming criminals, carried out in the seclusion of specialized correctional institutions<sup>15</sup> (Feller 1995, 138–42; Rothman 1977). What were once little more than “holding pens” for social refuse were redesigned to be disciplinary as well as educational institutions, serving as “one of the most daring facets of the national experiment: the attempt to forge in this new country a new and improved character” (Feller 1995, 139). Again, the ideal of agency was at work, ascribing to the criminal both responsibility for his or her wrongs and a potential for self-improvement that should be cultivated for the sake of both individual and society.

However, the reform movement that perhaps best illustrates the spirit of improvement is the anti-slavery movement. Comprising many different associations acting upon often divergent understandings of how best to address the institution of chattel slavery, all iterations of abolitionism extended the ideals of agency and self-improvement to persons long denied them.<sup>16</sup> In contesting the practice of human bondage, abolitionists asserted (however, implicitly) an essentially egalitarian understanding of the human capacity for self-development. Even those who assailed slavery’s evils without believing in the possibility or desirability of full racial equality acted upon the idea that all persons are capable of living a meaningfully self-directed life and could ascend from a state of forced intellectual and practical subjection to the station of responsible individuals. Like education and penal reform movements, the anti-slavery movement was a testament to the age’s faith that through opportunity and effort, each individual could attain a more perfect condition. As with other voluntary associations, abolitionism demonstrated the popular belief that “a gathering of individuals” could willfully and fruitfully work

toward the improvements of themselves, other individuals, and the entire society (Cumbler 2008, 3). Deeply entrenched social institutions were ultimately human artifacts and were thus amenable to purposive, transformative action, individual as well as collective.

The era of the individual was also marked by a widespread surge of religious interest and energy quickly termed the Second Great Awakening that was “more evangelical, more ecstatic, more personal, and more optimistic” than the eighteenth-century Awakening that preceded it (Wood 2009, 582; see also Feller 1995, 95–117; Howe 2007, 164–202, 285–327). Americans embraced numerous (though primarily Protestant) denominations, some of Old World provenance and others newly minted or modified to suit the character of a restless and striving people, many of which were characterized by heightened millennial expectations and utopian projects. In nearly all denominations, “[d]octrines of divine omnipotence and original sin sank from view as confidence in human efficacy grew,” singing Pelagian refrains of “individual empowerment” in temporal as well as spiritual matters (Feller 1995, 99; see also Howe 2007, 179; Sellers 1991, 31). The pluralistic, frenetic religious landscape again illustrates many connected dimensions of antebellum individualism. Even among denominations that did not soften old Calvinist doctrines, religion was widely recognized as a matter of individual choice rather than birth (Howe 2007, 165–6; Wood 2009, 576, 579). In keeping with the egalitarian, democratic culture of the day, churches thus assumed the status of voluntary organizations of willing individuals (Hatch 1989; see also Wood 2009, 588). Such voluntarism and innovation were facilitated by the abolition of established churches during the first decades of the century (Hatch 1989, 59–62; Howe 2007, 164). As the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening spread throughout much of American society, traditional religious institutions fragmented or dissolved, leaving space for sectarian entrepreneurialism and inviting if not demanding independence of individual thought and belief (Howe 1997, 111–2; Rose 1981, 45).

Insofar as religion supplied an encompassing view of the world and a basic psychological and moral vocabulary, it was interwoven with nearly every other aspect of private and public life. The rise of the market was sometimes hindered and sometimes aided by religious doctrines regarding idleness, work, and reward. Religious belief was the animus behind many antebellum projects of reform, including abolitionism, educational and penal reform, and the nascent temperance movement—all variously



espousing the notion that individuals can improve their own character, and by both direct action and indirect example can elevate those around them (Howe 2007, 187–8). Religious life furthermore provided a palpable experience of equality and agency for those elsewhere denied their full measure. Despite the continuing use of religion to justify slavery,<sup>17</sup> African American and white abolitionist churches provided spaces in which both free and enslaved could enjoy the status of personal dignity and independence routinely afforded to free whites. Similarly, religious congregations often provided “the one public arena in which women could play a substantial part” in antebellum society (Wood 2009, 598; see also Wayne 2007, 49–67). Though the age belonged primarily to white males, egalitarian and individualistic forces were slowly working away at such privilege.

Antebellum politics (still entirely the domain of white men) likewise bore the impress of the individuation and individualism of American society. The contours of democratic contestation traced the public manifestations of the restlessness, ambition, mobility, and agency of ordinary persons. Again, the roots of this political individualism are to be found prior to the nineteenth century. As Daniel Boorstin put it,

[b]y the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in crowded, pre-empted Europe, “No Trespassing” signs were everywhere; control by government covered the map. America offered a sharp contrast. From the beginning, *communities* existed here before there were governments to care for public needs or to enforce public duties [...] There was seldom any hint of doubt that final control on all matters rested with the majority[.] (1965, 65, 67)

Beginning with the initial colonial settlement and continuing through the settlement of the continental interior, society and economy were typically a step ahead of government in all but the most abstract matters. Along the shifting frontier, settlers and speculators frequently squatted on land, whether it was already owned or not, publicly or privately, in the hopes that habitation and improving labors would grant them a lasting claim (Ibid., 241–8; Murtazashvili 2013). Rather than government and law providing the frame for living, the tangible facts of life would provide the frame for government and law. Tocqueville suggested that the American phenomenon of living just beyond the horizons of government was a powerful force behind individualism (in the broad rather than narrow sense): “One of the happiest consequences of the absence of government

(when a people is happy enough to be able to do without it, a rare event) is the ripening of individual strength which never fails to follow from it. Each man learns to think and act for himself without counting on the support of any outside power which, however, watchful it be, can never answer all the needs of man in society" (1832/1971, 38–9). The relative lack of government instilled a sense of practical and dispositional individualism in ordinary life, which could not but manifest in the politics of the day. Even the rise of mass democracy and organized political parties was of a piece with individualism—ways to draw together the energies of an independently minded, mobile, and literate electorate; to wage and win the “battle over public opinion” (Howe 2007, 237, 488–98).

The Second Party System furnishes an especially salient example of the political manifestations of antebellum individualism and can be understood as a prolonged battle for its soul (Cawelti 1965, 40; Kohl 1989, 13–20). The Democratic Party of Andrew Jackson (which carried the banner of the so-called Democratic or Old School Republicans of the First Party System) and the Whig Party (which rose from the ashes of the Federalists and National Republicans in opposition to Jackson’s energetic executive power) each articulated a distinct political expression of individualism. According to Lawrence Kohl, “Jacksonian America demanded, and the values of the age extolled, personal independence” (1989, 28). The Democratic vision presented a jealous, anxious individualism, committed to the agency of the individual, yet suspicious of the elites, institutions, and corrupt interests it saw as constant threats to that agency<sup>18</sup> (Ibid., 21–62). It was a mindset indebted to the revolutionary rejection of European aristocratic control, which saw first the Federalists and later the Whigs as American imitations of this tainted past. Yet it also bores the impress of frontier experience, and the mixed invitation to individualism and pressure to conform that was characteristic of frontier life (Becker 1910). Individuals ought to be left to govern themselves locally (which presumably meant to be governed less), untrammelled by the distant government and the self-interested elites that control it. In contrast, Whig individualism was optimistic and confident where the Democratic vision was nervous and suspicious (Kohl 1989, 63–99; see also Howe 1997, 264; Watson 1990, 231–53). Its confidence rested, first and last, upon the individual’s capacity for self-discipline and deliberate self-improvement. Whereas Democrats sought to liberate the individual from the chains of corrupt institutions and interests and were committed to rear-guard actions against their return, Whigs sought to augment the powers of the individual wherever possible.

The national government, in particular, was to provide a framework of opportunity, both directly (e.g., internal improvements) and indirectly (e.g., protectionist tariffs and central banking). Government, sufficiently enlightened, could help the individual strive toward good character and earned competence. The Democratic worldview was, both in its day and with hindsight, a sort of counter-modern individualism, watchful against new conspiracies against equality and independence. The Whig worldview, on the contrary, was deliberately and thoroughly modern, articulating individualism at home in a new world of large, complex, and interconnected institutions.

The common choice in antebellum politics was thus not between individualism and some collectivist opposite, but between competing political interpretations of a growing cultural individualism and the various policies instrumental to their realization. This is neither to suggest that political doctrines or practices of governance afforded the individual supremacy or sovereignty in all, or even most matters, nor to deny the substantial exercises of police powers by state and local governments in the first half of the nineteenth century, which included substantial regulations dealing with public health, spaces, and morals as well as individual property, trades, and economic transactions.<sup>19</sup> Rather, what this characterization suggests is that the political ideas, identities, and institutions inherited from the first few decades of the nation's existence were being upset by larger social and economic changes. The growing prominence of individuals in the smaller details of daily life and experience sought, and found, reflection in antebellum politics.

Politics also gave to the age a representative figure. Andrew Jackson, who stood at the center of the contest between competing political visions of individualism, embodied "aspirations that were widely shared by American men of his time," namely that "if people were left to themselves they could improve their lot by their own efforts" (Howe 2007, 330, 381; Hofstadter 1989, 86; Wood 2009, 714–5). His rise from humble, frontier beginnings to fame as a hero in the War of 1812, a successful politician, and ultimately a president whose name became synonymous with the middle decades of the antebellum period, all testified to the ideal of the self-made individual. Even more than Benjamin Franklin's had for the revolutionary generation, Jackson's life and the lore surrounding it confirmed America as a country of tremendous opportunities for ordinary persons, regardless of religious or political leanings, offering respectable and virtuous outlets for personal ambition.

In an age of realignment, wherein the large and small details of life reflected the waxing gravity of the individual, Jackson gave a name to the promise of American culture.

## 2.2 INDIVIDUALISM AND THE MARKET

Though not identical or interchangeable, the progress of individualism and of the market form of economic and social organization in antebellum America is practically and ideologically coincident phenomena. One can scarcely make sense of what it meant to be an individual in the nineteenth century—early, middle, or late—without drawing upon ideas and practices at least indirectly connected to the emergent rhythms of a market economy and its penetration into other domains of life. Even without attempting to settle ultimate causal questions, examination of the interaction between individualism and the market sheds substantial light on the personal experiences and social life that were the occasion and context for the individualistic thought of Emerson, Thoreau, and which also laid the foundations of the Gilded Age that was Sumner's milieu. What happened to the American economy and what happened to the American individual are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. Distinguishable, they inform and complement one another.

### 2.2.1 *From Markets to the Market*

The market revolution cannot be reduced to a single event or turning point, though the Panic of 1837 is a punctual illustration of its progress and consequence. Between 1835 and 1836, the national economy experienced unprecedented growth. Land sales and commodity prices soared, credit flowed freely and cheaply, new fortunes were made and old fortunes augmented, and prospering Americans purchased ever greater quantities of European goods. In March 1837, Andrew Jackson's successor Martin Van Buren unknowingly inherited the last days of a period of hitherto unrivaled American prosperity that would lay in tatters within months. Although there is significant dispute about the role of President Jackson's policies in generating the Panic, his repayment in specie of the nation's foreign debt had depleted hard currency reserves while his Specie Circular tightened money supplies, his successful campaign against the Second Bank of the USA prevented a calculated and central response to economic instability, and his shift of federal

government reserves to politically favored state banks placed American individuals, businesses, and financial institutions under significant economic constraints at a time of debt-supported speculative activity that had been encouraged by Jackson's earlier land policies. In the twenty-first-century parlance, an economic bubble was forming. A combination of domestic and foreign events pushed a tenuous situation over the edge. The unfortunate coincidence of falling commodity prices (especially for America's largest export, cotton), slowing land sales, as well as a tight money supply and high interest rates (at home and abroad) threw the money-starved, debt-laden economy into decline, bringing waves of bank and business failures, dramatic contraction of credit, further declines in prices, and substantial unemployment (Howe 2007, 503–4; Larson 2010, 92–6; Pessen 1978, 146–8; Roberts 2012; Schlesinger 1953, 217–26; Watson 1990, 205–7). Followed by another sharp economic downturn in 1839, the closing years of the 1830s proved to be “America's First Great Depression,” rooted in market volatility.<sup>20</sup>

The Panic would not have been possible a mere three decades earlier. Before the 1814 Treaty of Ghent freed the USA from the vestiges of colonial-era mercantilism, the country had limited and sporadic access to the most lucrative international commodity and credit markets, and thus American producers and merchants had limited opportunities for profit and limited exposure to risk beyond domestic markets (Howe 2007, 70–3). Furthermore, prior to the 1820s, those domestic markets were often geographically isolated. Composite agriculture and domestic manufactures were typically limited by the technological and institutional capacities available to connect producers and consumers and to facilitate their transactions. Between 1815 and 1836, a crucial, complex change had taken place. An economy comprising countless “locally oriented, regionally self-sufficient rural economies” was replaced by “a national market network” (Clark 1996, 25; see also Blumin 1996, 853; Howe 2007, 118; Wood 2009, 703, 706). Not only did farmers and artisans enjoy greater opportunities to sell surpluses for cash, and to consume goods once both financially and physically unattainable, but new modes of market participation quickly became “regular enterprise without which [farms and shops] would fail” (Larson 2010, 64). Thus, a patchwork of marketplaces evolved into a nascent, national market economy. The two most immediately salient aspects of this process of expansion and integration were the profusion of outlets for individual ambition (however, modest) and the interconnection it created between individual

market participants. The horizons of each market participant expanded dramatically at the very same time that each individual's fortunes were linked to those of others. Market integration brought conspicuous liberty and opportunity along with often imperceptible interdependence—and this tightening of connections between participants prepared the way for the Panic. A downturn that decades earlier would have thrown farmers, artisans, and merchants back upon subsistence practices, local markets, and personal favors instead traveled rapidly and devastatingly throughout an interconnected economic system.

It is clear that a dramatic shift in ideas and practices had taken place. The basic language and logic of production and commerce had changed, installing the market as the hegemonic pattern of economic activity. The process had been gradual and often short-sighted or unintended. Throughout the nineteenth century, individuals looking for advantage or improvement stretched the boundaries of markets, a phenomenon that intensified with the “lure of cash” in a modernizing economy (Wood 2009, 355). The forces, values, and rationality of the market reached deeper into the daily lives of ordinary persons, as the persons wittingly or not “assemble[d] themselves in a giant, interlocking network of institutions, expectations, and behaviors that all found their coordination in market forces” (Larson 2010, 3, 91). A market economy, and its attendant business cycles, had arrived.

The dawn of a new economic system entails the twilight of its predecessor. Yet just as the complex realities of a market economy are distorted when overly simplified, the American predecessor to the market defies easy, categorical characterization. Recent historical scholarship suggests that the American economy, even in its earliest colonial, mercantilist days, was never truly a subsistence economy. The market revolution was carried along by intensification of manufacturing and composite agriculture, but these activities were already visible features of economic life in all but the remotest settlements. Similarly, the degree of integration of local markets into a national market economy illustrated by the Panic is better understood as a change of degree than one of kind. Relationships of credit and debt, profit and loss, risk and reward that were familiar elements of local and regional economies were reproduced and integrated at national and international levels. And even the hegemony of market values and rationality were intensifications of already existing patterns (Ibid., 3–4; Rothenberg 1992, 33–7). Nonetheless, the collected intensifications and extensions of the familiar effected a dramatic

transformation—the rise of a market economy set Americans down the path to a market society. Perhaps the single most telling development was the shift from diverse markets “embedded within and constrained by values antithetical to them within the culture to the ‘disembedded’ market whose values penetrated and reinvented that culture” (Rothenberg 1992, 3). This is the primary insight of the so-called moral economists: prior to the rise of an integrated market economy, the various domains of economic life had been substantially “submerged in general social relations,” rendering markets “an accessory feature of an institutional setting controlled and regulated” by exogenous norms and authority (Polanyi 1944/2001, 70; see also Thompson 1971, 79). That is, premarket economies reflected a society’s deeper moral, political, and religious norms. From this starting point, the market revolution signified not just a practical shift in who participated in the market and how, but a deeper normative shift in how economic activity and its place in both individual and social life was understood. The imperatives of the market overstepped traditional boundaries, as common images of ambition, opportunity, prudence, and prosperity took on the hues imparted by more frequent market participation. Though the market never became absolutely autonomous, the antebellum economy underwent a dramatic and reverberating normative realignment that serves as the backdrop of this book. The concepts of liberty and equality became more closely associated with their economic manifestations, and individualism began its complex yet enduring marriage to the market (Larson 2010, 23).

### 2.2.2 *Individuals and the Antebellum Market*

The individualism of the antebellum period was, as I have suggested, not merely a consequence of economic developments. For instance, religious doctrines, modes of speech, and ideals of self-improvement led the progress of the market as often as they followed it, and such aspects of American life were at times in marked tension with the demands of the new economy. It is therefore important to avoid overstating the coincidence or complementarity of individualism and the market, casting the age of the first-person singular as little more than the age of economic self-interest, and individualism as another name for market culture.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, individualism and the market evolved together, however, sporadically and unevenly. The rhythms, practices, and ideals of life in the new market economy variously inspired, informed, and contradicted the

rising culture of the individual. This complex, evolving relationship provided the context for antebellum individualist thought, especially that of Emerson and Thoreau.

Integration of local and regional markets into a national market economy wrought profound changes in the economic activities and opportunities of individuals, subtly redefining the lived conditions of dependence and independence. As agriculture (which was still the largest sector of the economy) shifted toward market-oriented commodity production, the pseudo-aristocratic practices of the indenture and tenant farming gave way to a relatively free market in agricultural wage labor outside of the plantation areas of the South (Howe 2007, 552). However, the free flows of labor were balanced against the new imperatives of market production. Even at the smallest scales of composite agriculture, commodity crops claimed greater proportions of arable land and available labor, marginalizing diversified production for household consumption. Simultaneously, farmers reprioritized the distribution of their produce. Whereas the best crops would have once directly supplied the household while the surplus supplied the market, it became common for the market to receive the first and best, with the household consuming the surplus and whatever the cash earned in the market could buy. This example of how market participation brought “new values and attitudes” also illustrates a subtle redefinition of the yeoman’s worldview of individual independence (Clark 1996, 26). Agrarian ideals of self-sufficiency and self-employment, and the visions of prosperity they informed, frequently gave way to commercial ideals of shrewdness and acquisitive acumen. As farms were reorganizing around the individuated nuclear family and ancillary wage labor, the archetype of the successful, self-improving farmer was likewise falling in line with the pace and direction of larger economic change.

Even starker were the transformations in trades and manufactures, which were to define the new market economy. During the first decades of the nineteenth century, the scale and variety of domestic production exploded. Americans had long shown a remarkable facility for commodifying nature, but the market revolution was accompanied by hitherto unprecedented creativity and energy.<sup>22</sup> Simultaneous expansion and integration of markets gave both incentive and outlet to the pragmatic, tinkering spirit, spurring individuals to seek their self-improvement not only through solving their own problems but also through devising and selling solutions to the problems of others. Technological advances



that typically originated as novel solutions to immediate, local difficulties quickly became articles of commerce and intellectual property, enabling inventors, consumers, and merchants to claim a greater share of prosperity through market transactions (Howe 2007, 535; Larkin 1988, 47–53). Again, as in agriculture, the market redefined the terms of individual opportunity and success. Furthermore, technological advance and gains in agricultural productivity depressed the price of farm labor, fueling a century-long exodus from the countryside and small towns to the growing manufacturing centers.

Work itself also changed in ways that had complex, individualizing effects. Market participation had a solvent effect upon the traditional integrity of trades, devoted to a particular, more or less self-complete, production process. The status of an artisan went hand in hand with the integrity of the trade. Since the earliest colonial days, artisans—men in shops as well as women in the home—had enjoyed a dignity and standing akin to that of the yeoman farmer. Personal independence was bound up in control over an entire productive process. The market, however, thrived on efficiencies and economies of scale, and one of its signal imperatives was the division of labor. The putting-out system was perhaps the first step in the atomization of productive processes, breaking manufacturing into steps that could be contracted out as piecework to individuals (often women and children). The practice not only simplified and cheapened labor, but it also converted the work of an artisan into discrete steps, performed by distinct persons, overseen by a management structure, however rudimentary (Clark 2006, 163–4; Larkin 1988, 58; Sellers 1991, 25–6). It opened opportunities for market participation and wages to many persons, but only by carving households into laborers, and crafts into discrete tasks that need not be housed within an independent workshop.

Yet the putting-out system was only the intimation of what was to come. Antebellum Americans sowed the seeds of industrialization that would bear fruit after the Civil War. In addition to the division of labor into individuated tasks performed by separate laborers, great innovations in mechanization, standardization, and interchangeability of parts ushered in the so-called American system of manufactures that animated the booming manufacturing sector (Howe 2007, 532–8; McPherson 1988, 13–6). The age witnessed the birth of mills and factories, and at all scales, more Americans “were becoming full-time producers of objects” (Larkin 1988, 58). New manufacturing operations furthered

the atomization of traditional crafts into steps performed by low-skilled wage laborers, beginning with hand manufactures performed by women and later spreading to trades primarily worked by men (Kessler-Harris 2003, 29). The artisanal shops that were once the backbone of early American manufacturing, in which masters, journeymen, and apprentices performed highly skilled crafts in their entirety, slowly withered in the shadows of new factories that could produce more commodities more efficiently and cheaply (Margo 1996, 232–5). The decline of the traditional workshop also meant the disembedding of labor and trades from professional norms that had both constrained and protected individual artisans. While some early experiments in mechanized manufacturing, especially the planned mill towns of New England, enforced fairly traditional moral norms upon novel industrial arrangements (e.g., the domestic and sexual virtues expected of “mill girls”), the market ultimately proved stronger than traditional morality and consigned these experiments to the status of idealistic interludes (Feller 1995, 119–21; Kessler-Harris 2003, 33–5; Larkin 1988, 54–8; Larson 2010, 112–6; Wayne 2007, 34–6). Businesses of all sorts became larger and more dependent upon the new economy, outgrowing the normative frames of traditional workplaces and adopting market values in their stead.

What is more, the new modes of industrial labor were socially as well as functionally divided (Larkin 1988, 60). Even under the early arrangements of the putting-out system, a laborer could sustain a variety of social relationships during working hours. Women spinning and sewing at home could, like artisans in a small shop, interact with others in a variety of capacities throughout the course of a workday. Work life and home life could fruitfully coexist, as they ostensibly had for countless generations. New modes of manufacturing, however, clearly partitioned time and space into work and leisure, on the clock and off the clock (McPherson 1988, 24). Before Taylorism turned the late nineteenth-century workplace into the site of precise measurement and management, antebellum mills and factories began arranging individual laborers as if parts in a machine, each performing a distinct, repetitive function, in relative physical and social isolation, moving to the rhythms of clock-time.

Taking place in an age of ambition and striving, wherein the decline of traditional trades contributed to the effective deregulation of the post-mercantilist economy, the advent of modern industry and wage labor reinforced the egalitarian ideal of individual self-making. The reserve

of seemingly limitless, cheap frontier lands and proliferating examples of market success at all levels of society underscored the binary of opportunity and responsibility. The popular attitudes of the day, apparent in both the Democratic and Whig outlooks, demonstrated unwavering faith in the individual. So long he was not stymied by conspiracy and corruption (according to the Democrats) or the lack of a developed setting in which to strive (according to the Whigs), each earns and deserves what he or she makes for himself or herself. As a greater proportion of economic activity took the form of wage labor, the path to self-employment had to be reinterpreted, but the end itself remained largely the same<sup>23</sup> (Wood 2009, 349). Whether it meant saving the cash to start one's own business or to buy land in the expanding frontier, the age promised opportunity for self-advancement. The realities of the new economy, in which labor was less skilled and the labor market more fluid, were sometimes in tension with practical realization of this dream. De-skilling, for instance, both equalized prospects for advancement, because the average worker could realistically perform a greater range of jobs, yet it also made individual workers largely interchangeable, as fewer jobs required uncommon skills (Howe 2007, 537–8; Rose 1981, 110). Thus, in the land of opportunity, individuals were on their own in the market, especially the labor market, as autonomous, responsible economic atoms—rising and falling, it was commonly believed, according to their own lights and efforts. Ironically, however, individuals in the market tended to look like and be treated as indistinguishable, interchangeable components of an economic machine. Economic individuation thus looked quite different depending upon where one stood in the marketplace.

It was also during the antebellum period that “[e]xchange, divorced from manufacture or shipping, emerged as a distinct and often lucrative calling” (Feller 1995, 124). Country shopkeepers and city merchants had been familiar characters in American commercial life since colonial times, but the expansion and integration of markets, coupled with internal improvements and technological advance, created new opportunities for the aspiring middle-men of the market (Ibid.; Larkin 1988, 38; McPherson 1988, 14). Itinerant peddlers and specialized vendors were among the most effective market vectors, bringing the new economy and its distinctive culture into nearly every home (Feller 1995, 124–5; Howe 2007, 45–7; Jaffee 1991; Larkin 1988, 208). They also exemplified a new vocation of self-making uniquely suited to the dynamics of a market economy. Only a few generations earlier, the merchant trade was the reserve of the wealthy

and the well-connected; ordinary individuals were fated to remain suppliers and customers of merchants. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, an individual with a small amount of capital could try his hand at the calling of commerce, making a living off of market transactions in goods that he did not personally create. Perhaps more than other market participants, the canny, striving merchant embodied the dynamism and inner tensions of antebellum individualism. On the one hand, self-making through commerce often required reinvention of oneself and one's business, riding the waves of supply and demand, and responding to trends of production and consumption. Success stories vindicated the ideals of agency and equal opportunity. On the other hand, commercial vocations entailed a special subjection to the market. A merchant's prosperity was ultimately dependent upon needs, tastes, technologies, and economic forces far beyond his control. The same could be said of the wage laborer and commodity farmer. All found themselves in a "leveled society, more horizontal than hierarchical," reaching for the fruits of agency seemingly within the reach of each and all, but mired in an interdependent economic order that made grasping and holding those fruits all the more challenging (Feller 1995, 123).

The market revolution thus transformed the ways in which individuals related to their own work and to one another through their work. For nearly all occupations—agricultural, manufacturing, and commercial—work became more productive, but less collaborative; more mobile, but less social; and more open to personal ambition, but less secure. The human scale of the premarket economy gave way to a new, superhuman or inhuman scale of integrated markets and aggregated business firms. Nothing embodied this simultaneous individuation and integration more tangibly than the nineteenth-century city. Throughout the century, urban centers were fed by migration from rural areas and immigration from European countries and colonies (Howe 2007, 526–7; McPherson 1988, 9–10). Whereas the location and layout of European cities were typically the results of centuries of organic growth representing far more than just economic considerations, American cities were typically recent outgrowths of primarily economic considerations, especially once railroads blazed the trail of westward expansion (Howe 2007, 526–7; Trachtenberg 2007, 115–6). Even cities that were not planned from the ground up by businesses effectively became auxiliaries of the market. Cities based around a single industry, such as textile hubs of Waltham and Lowell, Massachusetts, furnish the clearest examples, but

the organization of all modern cities reflected the realities of a market economy premised upon an individuated, fluid labor force. According to Alan Trachtenberg, “[a]s the domestic making of goods receded, city dwellers became more and more enmeshed in the market, more and more dependent on buying and selling, selling their labor in order to buy their sustenance; the network of personal relations, of family, friends, neighbors, comes to count for less in the maintenance of life than the impersonal transactions and abstract structures of the marketplace” (2007, 121). The city was becoming a microcosm of the market, a nexus of modern agriculture, industry, and commerce. Of course communal ties remained, but their nature changed. Cities were a subtle element of the broader reimagination of community as a voluntaristic association of individuals. Even neighborhoods structured along the seemingly unchosen or fixed lines of class or ethnicity ultimately reflected (or were interpreted to reflect) personal choices and fortunes in one way or another, mediated by market activities and values. For a rapidly growing number of adults in the highly mobile, volatile antebellum society, one’s physical dwelling was the result not of ancestry or unalterable identity but of one’s achieved standing in the market, with wealth, success, and class variously stemming from deliberate self-making. One’s place, literal or figurative, was the result of responsible agency.

### 2.2.3 *Individuals and Antebellum Culture*

Under the egalitarian and individualistic conditions of antebellum society, in which attachments and purposes were chosen, and sustenance and self-improvement were increasingly mediated by the market, the bases of personal identity and social standing were rendered tenuous. Both within cities and without, “the density and stability of the social medium” inherited from the eighteenth century were eroding (Anderson 1971, 4). Premarket society was, by most historical accounts, characterized by moral economies and “patterns of reciprocal obligation” that blurred the lines between economic, religious, and other domains of life (Larkin 1988, 37; see also Stokes 1996, 4). Individual horizons of opportunity were oriented and constrained, and the textures of community and identity were supplied, by typically unchosen and seemingly unalterable contingencies—family, religion, ethnicity, locale, and class. Work or profession was by no means unimportant elements of life and identity prior to the rise of the market, but their salience waxed as other elements were

marginalized. The egalitarian culture and ideals of the early nineteenth century undermined traditional divisions of society into hierarchical ranks (natural or otherwise), leaving individual striving and the fortunes won thereby as the primary determinants of social standing.<sup>24</sup> Market participation became the common denominator of a voluntaristic society, with profession signaling one's relative place in society and, because it could be read as the outcome of individual choice and effort, often serving as a proxy for one's character (Bledstein 2001, 7). As Ralph Waldo Emerson noted in 1842, Americans seemed to credit "the State Street proverb that nobody fails who ought not to fail. There is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money" (1970, 295). Though he might not have fully believed it himself, many people apparently embraced the notion that worldly success was a sign of individual character.

The promise of equal opportunity for self-making through the market created a sense of anxiety about identity and social standing, and the market itself furnished new means of addressing this unease. Changing clothing fashions, especially for men, reflected the high valuation of pragmatic striving and furnished a text from which elements of identity could be read. As Jack Larkin has noted, "[m]en's shorter coats and longer pants were in reality an embellished version of the working costume of sailors and laborers. As a whole society donned working dress, the new men's fashion defined a transition into commercial and industrial ways" (1988, 182–3). Hair and dress were worn not to indicate one's fixed station in a social hierarchy, but one's chosen ways of getting a living and making a self in a market society (even if occupations were interpreted hierarchically). Because of the common faith that fortunes followed character, the distinctions of dress between a banker and a dock worker could be read not simply as markers of taste and disposable wealth, but as markers of personality, communicating something meaningful if partial about the life and character of the wearer.

Fashion was only the most publicly visible face of the new material culture of a market society. Over the span of little more than a generation, the household had changed from the primary site of social and economic production to "the place of consumption" (Trachtenberg 2007, 129). "[R]ising personal incomes," typically earned outside the home, enabled indulgence in an "expanding array of consumer goods" that were the products of new market-oriented domestic and foreign factories (Blumin 1989, 138; see also Larkin 1988, 53). As the center of life

shifted away from community and family toward the more individualistic and voluntaristic market, home life, and the values and identities it inculcated and sustained, became defined less by what one did (in the encompassing, largely noneconomic sense) than by what one had and how one displayed it. The same sense of individual potential and its responsiveness to environment illustrated by the reform movements of the period is subtly displayed in a contemporaneous “ideal of domestic comfort and decency” that was not confined to persons of wealth<sup>25</sup> (Larkin 1988, 133). The circulation of goods in the market provided a world of consumer opportunity and “promoted a more commodified type of social awareness, one more nearly derived from styles of living than from personal and particular hierarchical relations” (Blumin 1996, 830). Much like how one’s contributions to the market were understood to give a glimpse of the soul, what one took from it likewise bespoke one’s character. Consuming too little, or too much, or things of the wrong kind or in the wrong combination suggested inadequate or excessive ambition, or a confused sense of value or priority. Modern advertising, which began in earnest during the first half of the nineteenth century and matured by its end, was premised upon this widely appreciated connection between product and consumer, using idealized identities to appeal to a target audience (Trachtenberg 2007, 137). The identity-consumption nexus was also apparent at the aggregate level of class, especially as changing practices and scales of production diverted more and more workers into wage labor. Disparities in wealth and status resulting from market participation were to be addressed not by deliberately “reordering social relations,” but by “providing more opportunities for the lower classes to consume a greater variety of goods” (Ibid., 151). Thus, the market offered a pervasive frame for prospects of individual status and identity—production and consumption, work and home, fell under the hegemony of its values. Deficiencies in one dimension of economic life ought to find their remedy in another dimension. Antebellum judges and politicians institutionalized this rising faith in the market as the primary locus of both individual and collective self-improvement by placing many economic matters beyond the reach of law and politics<sup>26</sup> (Clark 1996, 37; Feller 1995, 175; Sellers 1991, 34–69).

Despite the vague and malleable egalitarianism that often stood behind them, the cultural transformations wrought by the market bore upon men and women in markedly different ways. Even though women

were entering the wage-earning workforce in greater numbers, in an increasing range of trades, ideals of “true womanhood” (that often provided a degree of moral standing in the context of voluntary associations) stigmatized women’s participation in the market.<sup>27</sup> As men were drawn into the cold, competitive domain of the market, women, especially of the middle and upper classes, were expected to “preserve the home as a sanctuary,” and “to serve as the repository of the higher moral and ethical values” that market participation compromised, carefully cultivating and displaying their own “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Kessler-Harris 2003, 49–50; Welter 1976, 21). The antebellum “domestic ideology” dictated a gendered division of labor between earning wages and tending to the home. Women were thus often caught between countervailing forces. As historian Alice Kessler-Harris has noted, “[i]n return for an ideology that glorified their roles and perhaps offered some power within the family, women were denied a broad range of social and economic options” enjoyed by even the poorest of free men (Kessler-Harris 2003, 50; see also Lerner 1969). Notwithstanding the disadvantages they faced, women were not merely “cloistered away from competitive economic relations”; they participated in the market in myriad ways, often effacing the tenets of the prevailing domestic ideology (Stanley 1996, 79; see also Cogan 1989, 3–26, 199–255; Margo 1996, 207–43). Many young and unmarried women performed given-out piecework at home, or worked as domestic servants or “mill girls,” if only until marriage, and financial straits compelled many to work for wages their entire lives. Those who remained in the home nonetheless continued to perform substantial work that brought them in touch with the market, producing goods for supplemental income, taking in boarders, and tending the day-to-day life and consumptive practices of the household, though this work became largely hidden and, compared to the work of wage-earning men, devalued. Thus women were denied the full opportunities of the market economy even as they were, directly or indirectly, exposed to its forces and risks. Whereas men were expected to earn a livelihood and forge an identity in the bustle of the marketplace, women were expected, at some point in their lives, to tend the hearth and craft an identity within the confines of the nuclear family home. All, however, were now ineluctably subject to the new economic order and its distinctive culture.

As Emerson and Thoreau were keenly and critically aware, work and consumption were tenuous bases of identity, especially in the face



of the looming, dynamic, impersonal forces of the market. It is easy to romanticize or exaggerate premarket social life as a panacea of human scale, “face-to-face” life, economic, and otherwise, but there is no question that the market revolution profoundly changed how people lived (Blumin 1989, 26; Schlesinger 1953, 334–5). In the old economy, farmers and artisans most commonly “rendered their services [...] to meet immediate needs of lifelong neighbors, who usually furnished the raw materials and made return in farm produce or labor” (Sellers 1991, 13). Economic activity, even outside of the home, was oriented primarily by personal, familial, or communal needs and relationships. One could say that for most Americans the very notion of “economic” activity clung to its ancient meaning, connected to management and flourishing of a household (especially in the extended sense of a stem family). With the ascendancy of the market came a new, depersonalized economic order, in which individual economic agents dealt with one another through instrumental transactions. “The producer no longer personally delivered his product to market, exchanging words with the buyer as well as title to the product and thus no longer conveyed and individualized identity” unique to both product and producer (Atack et al. 1996, 257). In part, depersonalization of economic life was necessitated by the sheer scale of a market economy, which in some ways reflected the scale of American society, in terms of both geography and population. Whether they took advantage of their mobility or stayed near their birthplace, ordinary individuals “did business far more frequently with total strangers” and between strangers only the impersonal medium of money supplied the assurance that once derived from established relationships (Larson 2010, 28). One mode of depersonalization fed others, as “everything about the cash nexus emphasized fleeting, anonymous transactions, in private life as in business” (Ibid., 127). The cumulative effect of such transactions was the creation of an economy driven by the invisible, superhuman hands of market forces. In the old economy, a substantial proportion of transactions were negotiated in terms that reflected unique constellations of custom, personality, relationship, and circumstance. In the new order, market prices, the universal units of exchange-value, were the result of “[c]utthroat competition” between scores of instrumentally-minded individuals who probably never met and never would—productive though the antebellum period was, it was an age of “heartless markets and heartless men” (Ibid., 74, 98; see also Trachtenberg 2007, 82).

Though the market consisted of a “nearly infinite number of individual choices,” and thus was the fruit of a distinctive kind of individualism, it only rarely and fleetingly wore a human face (Lepler 2013, 8).

Identity and authenticity were fundamental personal as well as social problems in antebellum America (Halttunen 1982, xv, 33–55). As suggested above, one’s profession and location in the “great chain of acquisition” provided some footing upon which to base a sense of self (Breen 2004, 140). But these were themselves precarious and even destabilizing accomplishments for many antebellum Americans. The market’s simultaneous liberation and domestication of ambition encouraged even common folk to reach beyond the usual horizon of the “decent competency” of an unadorned yet relatively self-sustaining life (Blumin 1989, 38). As Sellers put it, “[t]he market fostered individualism and competitive pursuit of wealth by open-ended production of commodity values that could be accumulated as money” (Sellers 1991, 5). That is, market participation entailed at least provisional endorsement of a striving ideal of economic self-improvement. As the ways of the market increasingly became *the* ways of securing a living, economic success and failure underwent both conceptual and normative redefinition. The State Street proverb that the reason for success is “in the man” reflects the promotion of economic success to the status of a verdict on an individual’s life and character more generally. Yet two terms denoting economic failure crossed paths as their meanings also changed. Debt lost “the stigma that for generations had made it shameful,” while “poverty, long thought of as misfortune, started to *acquire* a stigma as evidence of weakness or vice, a refusal to scramble for wages in the new free-market economy”<sup>28</sup> (Larson 2010, 137). Apart from instances of consumption beyond one’s means, debt signified striving to improve oneself, and the common belief was that in seeking diligently his own uplift, the individual would enhance the commonweal along the way even if doing so “was no part of his intention” (Smith 1776/1994, 485; see also Cawelti 1965, 42). In the “go ahead” age of striving, poverty signified a lack of self-control, an unwillingness to avail oneself of opportunities for self-improvement, or both (Lepler 2013, 8). This conceptual shift announced an eager optimism but it also papered over a persistent anxiety. As Weber famously noted almost a century later, antebellum Americans were caught in a feedback effect whereby the desire to have worldly proof of one’s worth (which, though Weber did not use the term, was inseparable from one’s sense of personal identity) pushes the individual into the very modes

of economic striving and acquisition that only partly deliver and continually risk worldly ruin. Or, in the contemporary, moralizing words of Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing,

Anxiety grows with possession. Riches become dearer by time [...] He who has more than he can use or manage, grows more and more eager and restless for new gains, muses by day and dreams by night of wealth; and in this way the whole vigor of his soul, of intellect and affection, shoots up into an intense, unconquerable, and almost infinite passion for accumulation[.]<sup>29</sup>

Economic success and failure acquired the status of windows onto the soul, keys to personal identity and worth, however, the interdependence and fickleness of the market left the individual in a difficult situation: Striving by himself to climb a ladder whose constantly changing structure and stability was mostly out of his hands.

The inexorable volatility of the market, which made it both friend and foe of self-making, came to define antebellum life, and most palpably so for those who made up the middle and lower parts of society. A common experience of the various “middling sorts” in the early nineteenth century

was a shaky independence in the precarious marketplace. Life was a ‘business’ to them, with specific goals to achieve: the accumulation of sufficient property to support a family, a competence in old age, reasonable health and longevity [...] Caught in the middle, between great and small, the powerful and the anonymous, the dissolute above and the wretched below—the middling sorts tossed around on a sea of risk. (Bledstein 2001, 5)

Absent the premarket norms and institutions that both constrained ambition and provided an informal safety net, middling folk were haunted by the kindred specters of success and failure. An ever greater part of one’s identity became tied-up in the contingencies of the most dynamic and volatile economic system human beings had hitherto experienced. Consequently, for those in the precarious middle “the smallest economic misfortunes—a deal gone bad, an extended illness, or a general economic crisis—threatened not only a specific business venture, but the whole social status of a person” (Beckert 2001, 288). In the new market economy, the line between debt and poverty was fine and easily crossed;

middling opportunities for self-making held out tantalizing promise, yet their fruits could quickly turn to dust. Despite the growth of the middling sorts as a proportion of antebellum society, the majority still consisted of those at the relative bottom, laboring for wages, owning little if any real property, and these multitudes were also profoundly vulnerable to the very market that promised their improvement. Poverty was often their daily reality rather than a dreaded condition whose taste they hoped skillfully to avoid, and both agricultural and artisanal wage laborers were acutely vulnerable to unemployment, even short bouts of which could be ruinous (Pessen 1978, 84). The rise of the market thus left all—the high, the middling, and the low—in a situation formally, if not materially, akin to holding a wolf by the ears. Deriving a livelihood and a significant aspect of identity from market participation was risky and potentially disastrous, but few could afford to let go.

The Panic of 1837 again illustrates the complex realities of life in the new market economy, and the situation of the individual within it. The boom that preceded the Panic seemed to confirm popular notions of self-making that the reason for success or failure is “in the man.” But as a sharp economic contraction rippled through local, national, and international markets, “Americans who had prided themselves on their self-made success [or the future promise thereof] began to doubt their faith in individual economic agency” (Lepler 2013, 3). Diligent striving in the market did not, it turned out, guarantee economic self-improvement anymore surely than planting extra acreage had guaranteed a bumper crop for premarket farmers. Personal fortunes, no matter how wisely or resolutely pursued, were still dependent upon many things beyond any individual’s control. However, rather than disproving the premises and values of the market culture that produced it, the Panic ultimately fostered even deeper commitment to them. There is perhaps no better example of this doubling-down on both the market and a broader individualism than the advent of credit agencies.

New York businessman and abolitionist Lewis Tappan pioneered this novel venture, which uniquely reflected the promise and problems of the new economy. The Panic was at least partly the result of an unfortunate constellation of speculative, credit-driven transactions between and among strangers. According to historian Scott Sandage,

[t]ransportation and communication linked regions into a national market, yet technology outpaced economic, legal, and social infrastructures.

Trading beyond the horizon precluded looking another man in the eye. Confidence men now moved faster than their reputations, and even if the man was good, his money might not be. (Sandage 2005, 99–128; quote from 101)

Individuals frequently had little to inform and guide their economic transactions other than raw numbers, rumors, and (if they were lucky) second- or third-hand reports about the reputations of others. Tappan, whose earlier commercial ventures had failed in the Panic, was impressed and disturbed by how readily imprudent or dishonest economic actors could move to a new locale and reinvent themselves, leaving their failures, debts, and misdeeds behind. Sensing that the impersonality of the new economy was a source of both the boom and the bust, Tappan established his Mercantile Agency in 1841 as a means to “manag[e] risk by managing identity” (Ibid., 100). This innovative enterprise offered private files to its paid subscribers, compiled and updated by ever-growing networks of local informants, supplying a market-oriented substitute for personal acquaintance and confidence: the credit report. With its advent,

[t]he market now had a memory, an archive for permanent records of entire careers [...] More than a bank balance or a character reference, a credit report folded morals, talents, finances, past performance, and future potential into one summary judgment. As a credential of such broad scope, it resembled the modern concept of identity. (Ibid., 101–3)

A firm believer in the ideal of the self-made individual, Tappan put the State Street proverb into diligent, calculated practice, commodifying knowledge of the “reason in the man” that stood behind his worldly success or failure (Lepler 2013, 224–5). This ingenious response to the hard lessons of the Panic illustrates how individualism and the market were at once intertwined and in tension with one another. On the one hand, credit reporting was a solution to a problem antebellum individualism had introduced into the new economy—the risky, protean character of striving, mobile, and self-improving agents. Tappan’s venture, and others that followed its example, produced badges of relatively fixed and stable identity that would follow even the most ambitiously self-making persons. On the other hand, the personalized profiles supplied by such reporting also equipped individuals to move more fluidly through an atomized, disembedded economic system. The assurances of character

that would have once been supplied by personal experience were supplied by a new kind of impersonal economic transaction, thereby facilitating profitable markets in credit that would have once been supplied by family and community. Credit reporting was, as it were, a scar indicating where two titanic forces had collided, a reminder that one way of life had ended and another had begun.

### 2.2.4 *Pervasive, Ambiguous Individualism*

After the Panic of 1837 and the years of painful recovery that followed it, few could deny that the market was an entrenched feature of American life, however, dimly its nature was understood. Opposition to the market lost its early tones of defiance and resistance and took on those of nostalgia and resignation. Democrats and Whigs differed deeply over how, but not whether, the market would serve to bind the nation together. Religious congregations and denominations offered alternative views of how individuals should conduct themselves in market life, and what success or failure indicated, but very few seriously counseled or attempted withdrawal or resistance. The material as well as intellectual aftermath of the crisis put on subtle display what one might call the cunning of the market, its “power to bend oppositional forces to its ends” (Sellers 1991, 208). Struggling to make sense of their world and to pick up the pieces, most looked to the very economic system that had crumbled.

The upheavals that tested and entrenched the market likewise tested and entrenched the pragmatic and dispositional individualism interwoven with it. The Panic inspired a modest wave of communitarian and utopian experiments (such as Fruitlands, Brook Farm, and a number of Fourierist phalanxes), as well as labor protests and attempts at organization by both male artisans and female factory workers, but these proved to be exceptions rather than the rule.<sup>30</sup> Despite its occasionally bitter wages, individualism would remain a dominant, animating ethos not only of antebellum society but of the entire nineteenth century, and “[t]he self-made man was individualism’s favorite son” (Sandage 2005, 94). But what “individualism” meant, who exactly “the self-made man (or woman)” was, remained persistently indeterminate—the words on everyone’s lips were, to no great surprise, subject to many different, imprecise interpretations. The pervasive yet ambiguous spirit of antebellum individualism was in need of thoughtful articulation and self-conscious exemplification.

Few heard the call more clearly, or answered it more resolutely, than Emerson and Thoreau. Although these two Harvard-educated, radical New England Transcendentalists can scarcely be taken as representative of the breadth of individualistic spirit in antebellum America, they remain to this day two of its most careful expositors. As Quentin Anderson suggested, Emerson (and, I would add, his protégé Thoreau) must “be looked at squarely if we are to understand how the process of shaking off our ties to others was first imagined” (1971, 5). An inchoate individualism was in the air, and these two strove to give it refined, robust expression. Yet these expressions were not identical. Indebted as they were to a common spiritual and intellectual vocabulary and recoil as they did at what they took to be betrayals or perversions of individuality all around them, they offer markedly different postures toward society writ large and toward other individuals. The two chapters that follow are attempts to make good on this appraisal and explore its contours.

Emerson and Thoreau were astute observers of antebellum society, its economics and politics, as well as its religion and arts, and they recognized that the age of the first-person singular was, for better or worse, the age of the market. Each sought to understand how the individual could properly attend to his or her own vocation of self-making in a society whose rhythms were increasingly accommodated to, if not dictated by, a new economic order. Was the market the friend or the foe of self-improvement? How ought the self-making individual to navigate economic life and how might economic activity serve or endanger other worthy undertakings? Here again, these kindred thinkers, undoubted champions of the individual, arrived at different assessments. Emerson, the elder and more economically successful of the two, struggled for decades to reconcile the promise and peril of the market to the stringent demands of his individualistic philosophy. This negotiation was on public display throughout his long career as an essayist and lecturer, whereas Thoreau, the more practically eccentric of the two, arrived early in his short life at an antagonistic understanding of the individual vis-à-vis the market. Through experiments in principled living, and the writings arrayed around them, he articulated an importantly different individualistic ideal that was inseparable from a scathing critique of the market. These two friends thus offer unique, intricate perspectives upon related phenomena that unfolded throughout the nineteenth century:

the individuation of American society and the rise of the market as an encompassing pattern of social integration and coordination. That one conditionally accepted the new economic order, while the other literally embodied a repudiation of it demonstrates all the more vividly the fecundity and ambiguity of antebellum individualism.

## NOTES

1. On the “transportation revolution” see Taylor (1951); on the ‘communication revolution’ see Howe 2007.
2. In treating the rise of individualism in America as a nineteenth phenomenon, my account takes its bearings from revisionist historical works that have challenged the once dominant view of eighteenth-century America as a land of liberal individualism (e.g., Pocock 2003; Shain 1994; Wood 1998).
3. Such strong connections have been made by scholars on both sides of a normative and descriptive debate. Critics of individualism and the market that see them as inextricably linked include MacPherson (1962) and Sellers (1991) and to a lesser extent Polanyi (1944–2001), whereas defenders of individualism and the market who likewise treat them as necessary companions include Friedman (1962), von Hayek (1948), and Nozick (1974). The same basic notion is evident in the somewhat more neutral work of Robertson (1933–1973) and Weber (1905–1958).
4. Yet this egalitarianism must not be overstated, as between two and three million persons were held as chattel slaves during the era about which Tocqueville wrote (e.g., Watson 1990, 13).
5. Rephrasing Rousseau, one might say that in being made equally connected to all as citizens, one is deeply connected to few if any as persons.
6. Although Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis that both the idea and the reality of the frontier deeply shaped antebellum culture has been challenged by subsequent historians, the age was undoubtedly moved by the promise that America possessed adequate land for a thousand generations (Turner 1920; Jefferson 1801).
7. The exaggeration is also illustrated by American attitudes toward race, in the North as well as in the South, throughout the nineteenth century. See, for instance, Turner (2012).
8. Yet Tocqueville worried that such a disposition “isolates [individuals] from their contemporaries,” leaving each “forever thrown back on himself alone,” in “danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart” (1835–1969, 508). Understood thus, individualism is a kind of social and political vice, the opposite of social cohesion



and fellow-feeling, and foreshadowing the atomization and *anomie* that Emile Durkheim attributed to late nineteenth-century industrial societies. Admittedly, the Americans had unwittingly invented a novel doctrine of enlightened self-interest to restrain some of the excesses of individualism, but for Tocqueville individualism remained an interesting if unfortunate adjunct of equality and democracy (*ibid.*, 525–8).

9. Frances Trollope (1832) quoted in Larkin (1988), 1.
10. Philip Hone, quoted in Howe (2007), 835.
11. Yet nineteenth-century Americans would invent new distinctions of their own, primarily on bases of wealth and race.
12. The phrase was the coinage of Washington Irving in the 1837 short story “The Creole Village” (Irving 1998, 654–60).
13. In Howe’s characterization, somewhat to the contrary, American farms were nearly always “economically individualistic, operated by a single nuclear family, not an extended kin-group or communal enterprise” (2007, 34).
14. This theme is plentifully exemplified in Wayne (2007).
15. For a more general view incorporating the American context, see Foucault (1977), especially 135–228.
16. For studies showing the intellectual and practical diversity of the movement, as well as their shared commitment to individual agency and its necessary social and political supports, see Blue (2005) and Cumbler (2008). See also Howe (2007), 643–56.
17. Such views are exemplified by Richard Furman’s 1823 “Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured Population of the United States in Communication to the Governor of South Carolina” (Furman 1985, 274–86).
18. President Andrew Jackson’s Bank War and the legacy of localism it left behind can be understood as a crusade not so much against national power (as Jackson repeatedly insisted upon the supremacy of federal power, such as during the Nullification Crisis of 1832–1833) as against a corrupt elite, a “moneyed power” that conspired to undermine the independence of the ordinary individual (Howe 2007, 373–95; Sellers 1991, 301–63).
19. As will be discussed further in Chap. 4, the *laissez-faire* economic and political doctrines that were so influential in the Gilded Age were substantial and deliberate departures from earlier notions of police powers and their proper use for the public welfare going back to the common law traditions inherited from Great Britain (Fine 1956; Gilman 1993; Novak 1996).
20. Sellers suggests that the Panic of 1819 was the country’s “traumatic awakening to the capitalist reality of boom and bust,” but scholarly consensus has since converged on the notion that the more extended and profound

- Panic of 1837 better captures the realities of market economy business cycles (Sellers 1991, 137; Larson 2010, 44–5; Roberts 2012).
21. Sellers falls squarely into this intellectual groove, though most scholars of the period have since offered more moderate, measured views.
  22. Boorstin discusses the trade in ice and granite as examples of the American knack for turning natural processes and objects toward economic gain (1965, 10–20).
  23. However, for much of the antebellum period, wage labor was primarily the province of men and boys, with “housework” (itself a new concept, differentiated from work for the market) receding into the obscurity of private life (Larson 2010, 119).
  24. On the evolution of the notion of rank into the notion of class, see Blumin (1989), 17–137.
  25. Though the new material culture of consumerism bores a normative weight upon all Americans, the middling and upper classes were most deeply enmeshed in “the codified parlor vocabulary that signified taste and refinement” (Jaffee 2010, xiii).
  26. Even the tariff could be (and by the Whigs often was) construed as a way of sheltering the new economy, enabling it to grow, spreading its influence and benefits.
  27. As Gerda Lerner notes, in a sense women in the antebellum period lost ground compared to women of the colonial period, during which it was both more necessary and more accepted for women to work outside of the home (1969, 5–7).
  28. On the changing views of success and failure in nineteenth-century America, see also Sandage (2005).
  29. Quoted in Masur (1991, 200–1).
  30. On labor unrest and organization, (see Kessler-Harris 2003, 75–83; Licht 1995, 48–63; Wilentz 2004, 299–362.)

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