

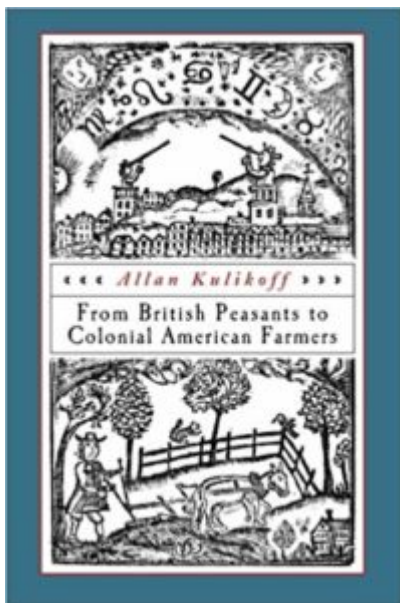
To Market, To Market . . .



In the United States today the small family farm is a fossil. In a world of genetically modified crops, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, and agribusiness, it is hard to imagine a time when small-scale family farming dominated in North America. But from the early seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth, most Americans lived on small farms. In 1800 three-quarters of Americans worked on farms and plantations. Until 1880 half the labor force worked in agriculture; and even as late as 1920 half the population lived in the countryside or in small towns. The independent yeoman farmers of folklore were the people that Jefferson eulogized as “the chosen people of God.” By aiming at “a big history of small farmers” (xi), Kulikoff is undoubtedly tackling a vital subject, of critical significance for much of American history. A substantial majority of American colonists lived on the land they owned; their independence was rooted in landownership. At a time when small farms had disappeared from large parts of Europe, they were ubiquitous in America. Kulikoff focuses on a key element of the world we have lost. Furthermore, if the rise of capitalism in America is to be understood, it must encompass the small family farm. The American road to capitalism was strewn not so much with landlords, tenants, and wage laborers, but rather with yeoman farmers.

As its title suggests, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers* is a developmental study. It traces the origins of American small farmers to medieval Europe and tracks their growth down to the American Revolution. The story spans two continents and more than two centuries. It begins with the peasantry’s loss of land in early modern Britain. Displaced peasants yearned for their formerly secure existence. Those who emigrated to the New World craved above all what had been denied them in Europe: communal rights, familial self-sufficiency, and landed independence. The immigrants to North America sought to recreate what they had lost, and they found more opportunities than they could ever have imagined. The vast majority acquired land. A series of processes—migration, Indian warfare, and farm building—shaped and reshaped the lives of small farmers in early America. On the eve of the American Revolution, landholding farmers enjoyed remarkable prosperity. The Revolutionary War was traumatic for American farmers; savagery was commonplace; scarcity and hunger stalked the land. It took about thirty years before early national farmers regained the prosperity of their late colonial counterparts. Political independence was bought at an enormous price. Once peace returned, the cycle of frontier warfare, migration, and farm making resumed. The book ends by looking forward into the nineteenth century when an “empire of freeholders, spreading endlessly into the west, made an old land forever new, turned potential wage laborers into independent farmers, and sustained an agrarian way of life—based on energetic labor by the entire family, subsistence production, neighborly exchange, sale of surpluses, and movement to new lands—for more than a century” (292).

The subplot of the book concerns capitalist transformation. Widespread landownership, in Kulikoff's opinion, negates the argument, espoused by historians ranging from Louis Hartz in the 1950s to Jon Butler in 2000, that colonial America was born capitalistic. As late as the American Revolution, Kulikoff states, capitalism had not yet reached America, primarily because freehold farmers worked their own land, largely with the assistance of their families, rather than by employing rural wage laborers. These American farmers were not, then, in the classic Marxist formulation, expropriating the surplus value of a proletariat. Moreover, while these farmers owned the means of production in the form of productive land, they were not true capitalists because they were not profit-driven but rather sought the competency and independence of their households. Because they lived on the periphery of the capitalist world, American farmers sold their crops to English capitalists, bought goods made by wage workers, and sought overseas capital. Nevertheless, Kulikoff maintains, providing for their families was a major preoccupation of small farmers; they referred to products sent to market as a surplus, a term which suggests their subsistence priorities.



Allan Kulikoff, *From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers*.
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Two main schools—one emphasizing the market, the other a moral economy—dominate present thinking about early American capitalism. Market historians tend to view early American farmers as acquisitive, money-making, land-hungry, entrepreneurial go-getters. Early American colonists, so this interpretation goes, bought and sold land at dizzying rates, speculated “their heads off,” as one historian put it, and became involved in trade and exchange of growing intensity. In the more extreme versions of this line of thought, early American farmers are seen as incipient John Rockefellers, embryonic Horatio Algiers. By

contrast, a moral economy approach sees early American farmers as more interested in public good than private interest, more committed to the lineal family than the furtherance of the individual, producing largely for their own consumption and bartering with neighbors than engaging in market transactions. In part, the debate employs two markedly different definitions of capitalism. Market historians tend to see capitalism primarily as an economic system based on an enterprising ethic, the division of labor, the sanctity of private property, and market penetration. Moral economy historians tend to view capitalism as a system in which some exploit the labor of others: the key division in society is between property-owning capitalists and propertyless proletarians. Kulikoff is most at home in the moral economy camp, although he strives to give the market approach its due.

From British Peasants to Colonial American Farmers is framed around a discussion of four themes: migration, land acquisition, market relations, and household formation. The first chapter on the seventeenth century outlines the promotional literature used to recruit migrants, probes the mix of motives that pushed and pulled them to move, and dissects the various migration streams, distinguishing between servants and free people, between those destined for plantations and those to farms. A second chapter on the new environment settlers confronted notes that the newcomers found a densely occupied land, well utilized by Indians, outlines the exchanges of ideas and goods between Indians and colonists, and depicts the struggles between the two for control of the land. Colonists encountered a hostile environment but gradually made it English, by dispossessing Indians and staking out private property in land. Kulikoff emphasizes "the shocks to body and soul immigrants experienced, from the harsh climate to hostile Indians" because, for him, they explain why those immigrants clung so tenaciously to English social norms and why land was so important to them. Land acquisition and ownership, the focus of a third chapter, became much more widespread in America than in Europe. By the late seventeenth century, North America was a society of smallholders, or in the words of contemporaries, a best poor man's country. A fourth chapter resumes the story of migration, but focuses on the eighteenth century. It puts emigration into a larger context, rightly noting that many more people moved to European cities than to the New World or to the east rather than to the west. Far fewer Englishmen emigrated than in the preceding century; newcomers to America were primarily Ulster Protestants, Scottish Highlanders, and German-speakers, and many of them acquired land, especially if they moved to the backcountry. The last major chapter notes how eighteenth-century farmers participated more often in markets than their seventeenth-century predecessors, although even most late colonial farmers worked for subsistence before engaging in commercial production. The eighteenth century also witnessed, Kulikoff believes, "a new kind of household . . . , characterized by subsistence and market production, male field labor and female domestic production, male authority and female subservience, and shared authority over child raising" (227). Patriarchal authority was real, but it was also fragile, because of the need for cooperation in farm labor and by wives' involvement in farm business.

The book represents a heroic synthesis of a prodigious amount of recent historical investigation. Kulikoff seems to have read almost every secondary work pertinent to his subject. His book includes over seventy pages of dense endnotes and an enormous hundred-page bibliography. By my rough count, he has read and cited about twenty-five hundred monographs and articles. Nothing seems to have escaped his gaze, whether a study of peasant deer poachers in the medieval forest, the age at marriage of Scottish women, landlord-tenant relations in Ulster, early American child labor, weaning in New England, Irish famines, American droughts, Anglo-Indian land deeds in early Maine, fish fertilizer as a Native American agricultural practice, surviving Indian names in West Jersey, German-American concepts of property and inheritance, neighborhood exchanges in the Hudson Valley, or civilians and Revolutionary conflict in the Delaware Valley. These subjects just scratch the surface of Kulikoff's troll through a rich periodical and monographic literature. If nothing else, the present book identifies many of the key works—and masses of obscure, arcane, out-of-the-way material—on all aspects of farm life in early America and Europe.

Heroic in its synthesizing, perhaps, but not in its style, this book conceives of people lifelessly and in the aggregate. It is extremely difficult, I will concede, to inject drama into the kind of narrative Kulikoff tells. He manfully claims that "Big economic and demographic structures . . . tell a story all their own, one as compelling as narratives of Indian captivity [or] biographies of common folk." But do they? Structures cannot tell stories. And the historian who tries to tell a structural story has to be extremely artful to hold the reader's attention. The "rhythm of thousands of hoes and plows clearing virgin land; or the struggle for subsistence" are not inherently gripping (5). They are important subjects, to be sure, but how to give them dynamism and make them the subjects of a stirring story will never be easy. Readers might imagine listening to Virgil Thompson and envision grainy pictures of sturdy yeomen battling the odds, but words on a page must sparkle if such visions are to be realized and emotions stirred. Striking metaphors and luminous prose would help, but too often the language of this book is wooden and pedestrian. Unintentionally humorous statements—"Every farm needed a wife" (28), "Scots divided their country into two regions—Lowlands and Highlands" (173), and "Since farmwives usually married older men, they lost their spouses more often than farm husbands" (237)—mar the book. Rendering the story in human terms would assist, but only briefly does Kulikoff show us real people grappling with real problems. Too often he paints in broad brushstrokes. His canvas is Lowry-like; it is peopled by anonymous figures. Rarely do we see individual people up close and personal, warts and all.

There are also too many mind-numbing statistics. Numbers matter, of course; they give a sense of overall dimension. But this book suffers from what may be labeled proportional overkill. Of British emigrants to America in 1773-76, we learn that over half migrated in family groups, six-sevenths of Highlanders paid their passage, two-fifths of Highlanders were farmers, and a fifth of Lowlanders (but half the household heads) worked in agriculture. So it goes:

proportions overwhelm the reader. Consider this fairly typical paragraph—in this case, demonstrating widespread landownership in the seventeenth century—in which the following series of proportions, percentages, and raw numbers are presented to the reader:

All but 4 of the first 238 inhabitants of Salem, Massachusetts got land, and later arrivals fared nearly as well, eleven-twelfths (134 of 146) getting land . . . In three towns in Essex County, Massachusetts, in the late seventeenth century, half the men owned land before they were thirty, as did 95 percent of men over thirty-six. Before 1660 two-fifths of Connecticut settlers, most of them young men, had no land, but by the 1690s six-sevenths of all farmers owned land . . . In 1660 four-fifths of the white men in Charles County, Maryland, were landowners; as the opportunity for former servants to get land plummeted, the proportion of owners among taxable men declined to seven-tenths in 1675 and six-tenths in 1690 . . . In both 1687 and 1704 nearly two-thirds of the household heads in Surry County, Virginia, held land, as did three-quarters of householders in Talbot County, on Maryland's Eastern Shore, in 1704. Landownership, moreover, might have been nearly universal in early Pennsylvania; during the 1690s eight-ninths of the householders in one Chester County township owned land (113).

The same point keeps getting made repeatedly.

A more serious criticism is that some of Kulikoff's arguments and characterizations are either idiosyncratic or internally contradictory. The term peasant is inappropriate for early modern farmers in England. Seventeenth-century England's small farmers, a standard authority tells us, "were far from being peasant farmers concerned only to provide for their families' needs . . . and for most, market opportunities were the first factor to consider in their husbandry." After stressing how much early modern English farmers were peasants, Kulikoff mentions in passing that by the middle of the seventeenth century "the peasantry had disappeared." Immigrants to the New World, then, were not exactly displaced peasants. Kulikoff exaggerates a harsh American environment, with its "bitter cold, scorching heat, unbearable humidity, searing drought" (73), in contrast to a halcyon Europe. As one brought up in England, I beg to differ with his description of that land's "pleasant climate." Kulikoff emphasizes how much epidemics and death confronted the immigrants, but, as he well knows, many early Americans lived longer, ate more meat, and grew in height, by coming to the New World. After claiming that immigrants clung tenaciously to English social norms, he acknowledges that they adapted to new foods, clothes, borrowed from the Indians, and integrated new habits into Old World regional customs. At one point he notes that real estate was a farmer's most valuable possession, but later states that "labor, not land, was the most precious commodity on early American farms" (126, 242). He

owes the reader an explanation of how to reconcile both these statements. On one page Kulikoff describes the typical eighteenth-century British and German emigrant as leaving a life of "wretched hovels, barely able to cover their nakedness, hungry much of the time, and oppressed by their superiors." Under such circumstances, why so few left for America is pronounced "baffling" (166). On the succeeding pages, we learn that opportunities "abounded" in eighteenth-century Europe and that new urban middle classes grew apace. During the American Revolutionary War, the farm economy "nearly disintegrated," but later we learn that "farmers benefited from inflation" (256, 260).

One particular puzzle is Kulikoff's delimitation of his subject as a study of small farmers. America's so-called small farmers were not so small by any contemporary standard. Their farms generally ranged from twenty-five to two hundred acres. By a European or global yardstick, such acreages were large. In comparative terms such farmers were not small farmers at all. And what about the sizeable number of farmers and, of course, planters who owned more than two hundred acres? Where do they fit into the story Kulikoff tells? Why is his book about so-called "small farmers" when many should be more accurately termed middling farmers? He notes, at one point, that his book slights slaves, Indians, planters, land speculators, and merchants. He is at liberty, of course, to restrict his study if he chooses, but the reader could legitimately expect a rationalization for the choice, some attempt to define a small farmer both in an American and world context, and some effort to relate these so-called small farmers to all American farmers—and to those who labored for them, such as slaves, or who marketed their produce, such as merchants.

Finally, issue can be taken with the subplot of the book. To say that eighteenth-century America is not capitalistic, or that it is precapitalist, prior to the American Revolution is to describe a society and an economy, not in terms of what it is, but in terms of what it will become. Kulikoff recognizes that the market was important to colonial farmers, but he insists that most "worked for subsistence before engaging in market production" (204). He acknowledges that eighteenth-century farmers bought more consumer goods than their ancestors but he believes that "communal self-sufficiency may have grown" over time (205). Kulikoff, then, clings to a view of eighteenth-century farmers as essentially precapitalist, as more subsistence than commercially oriented, more household than market producers, more committed to a moral than a market economy. To his credit, he recognizes both features, and he does try to split the difference, but he is hamstrung by the dichotomies that the notion of a single transition to capitalism imposes. In fact, most early American farmers had to produce a surplus to acquire necessities, not just luxuries; no colonial farm was self-sufficient; most early American farmers were calculating risk-takers who exploited available resources; most viewed land as a commodity and speculated in it extensively; most went to market not in opposition to household production but to extend and sustain it. Early American farmers behaved much like early American merchants and manufacturers, as Naomi Lamoreaux has recently argued, by engaging in cooperative behavior that was not necessarily in opposition to profit maximization, and by emphasizing family

commitments that in some cases, but by no means all, entailed some sacrifice of income. To identify some moment—in Kulikoff's case, all we are told is that the caesura occurs after the American Revolution—as marking the birth of true capitalism is to place too much emphasis on one supposedly sharp break. There was not one major transformation in the early American countryside, a single watershed dividing precapitalist farmers from their capitalist brethren. Colonial America had certain essentials of capitalism from its inception; capitalism's expansion occurred as much spatially as temporally, radiating outward from commercial outposts into more remote hinterlands; and change occurred incrementally rather than pivoting on one dramatic divide. What, for example, was the more dramatic transformation: the increased consumption of amenities and luxuries that swept across America from about the 1740s onward and that some historians label a consumer revolution, or the time (the 1780s) when commodity prices in Massachusetts towns converged with those of major northern cities, thus marking significant market integration? Why not describe these and many other structural shifts in the eighteenth-century countryside without privileging a single one?

In sum, this book tackles an enormously important subject, provides masses of useful information, but is hampered by a reductive framework. If what is required is the most up-to-date summary of how people emigrated to early America, how they established themselves on the land, how they formed farm households, this book is the best available. All readers will owe Kulikoff their thanks for synthesizing a huge scholarly literature. The bibliography alone will make this work a treasure trove. But Kulikoff's narrative of developments in the early American countryside hinges on a revolution that allegedly has failed to happen when the book concludes. Because capitalism is defined as a society dominated by two classes—the owners of the means of production and the workers who sell their labor for wages—it can be said not to have reached American shores by the time of the American Revolution. By that criterion America was not a capitalist society until fairly recently. But surely a better way to proceed is to recognize that colonial settlements, as extensions of European commercial capitalism, contained within them significant capitalistic elements from the very beginning. Rather than fixate on one major transformation, the aim would be to identify a series of changes, a set of strands that accumulate and get woven together into new permutations over time. Instead of assuming one uniform mode of development, the goal would be to outline divergent regional paths of change. Rather than focusing almost entirely on demographic and economic structures, the political and ideological implications of the lived experience of propertied independence, its equation with freedom, would also be explored. The American Revolution would then be seen not primarily as a time of destruction and terror, but also as a time when many questioned the link between property and political participation, when the concept of property expanded to include rights as well as possessions, when an extraordinary release of energies and hopes occurred, and when the pursuit of happiness and individual self-fulfillment became a central element of American liberty, even as freedom's opposite, slavery, became more firmly entrenched than ever.

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