

CHANTS DEMOCRATIC, by Sean Wilentz. Oxford University Press, 1984.

*Chants Democratic* by Sean Wilentz is, in his own words, "an extended historical essay on capitalism and democracy in the United States." The book presents a much more specific analysis than Wilentz claims, since its study becomes a treatment of the peculiar capitalism and democracy evident in early nineteenth-century New York. We might title Wilentz's work a Marxist critical approach to the developing class structures in nineteenth-century New York. It is important to realize, though, that Wilentz has identified an urban culture representative of the growing class tensions of early industrial America and that this culture can be identified as the fuel upon which young radicals such as Walt Whitman seemed to thrive.

Our mention of Whitman is not merely a shallow gesture. Wilentz begins every chapter with an excerpt from "Song of Myself" and, of course, the title of Wilentz's book is borrowed from Whitman. Wilentz understands the role which Whitman fulfills as spokesman for nineteenth-century America. At the close of the book, he quotes from Whitman's proclamation, "At this moment, New York is the most radical city in America." But Wilentz is not simply quoting Whitman as spokesman; he is instead recognizing that Whitman was representative, in his writings and as an individual, of the tensions in New York during the early nineteenth century.

Wilentz traces the development of an essentially artisan republic, rooted in eighteenth-century European labor traditions, to a mid-nineteenth-century industrialized and socially stratified capitalist democracy in New York City. He continually elucidates the important fact that stratification in New York was not evident or clear-cut. Wilentz gives us an insight to the early artisan vision of the republic when he states on page 95:

Their vision was egalitarian and suffused with the ethic of the small producer—but not "liberal" or "petit-bourgeois," as the twentieth-century understands the terms. It was a vision of a democratic society that balanced individual rights with communal responsibilities—of independent, competent citizens and men who would soon win their competence, whose indus-

try in the pursuit of happiness, as in politics, was undertaken not for personal gain alone but for the public good.

Whitman's exposure to radical thought in New York is a documented reality from which Wilentz draws an important conclusion. In 1829, Robert Dale Owen, the son of Robert Owen, and Francis Wright, a fiery feminist radical, established a temple of freethinking referred to as "The Hall of Science." Wilentz recounts the association of Whitman and his family with Fanny Wright through a conversation Whitman had with Horace Traubel:

One subscriber [to *The Free Examiner*] was a Brooklyn house carpenter and Hicksite Quaker, Walter Whitman; his ten year old son Walt would later recall participating in the "frenzy" that attended Wright's lectures, and remember Fanny as "one of the sweetest of sweet memories: we all loved her, fell down before her; her appearance seemed to enthral us." Her ideas and Owen's would help stimulate the boy in later years to turn to poetry. So, in 1829, they would help direct ordinary small masters and journeymen to radicalism and to politics.

We are not to believe, as Wilentz warns us time and again, that there was any firm left and right political climate. Many of the political interests of employers were the same as the employees. Wilentz's study is crucial, finally, to our understanding of a period and location ripe for new ideas as it grappled to define the very ideas the new republic was founded upon. Temperance, independence, evangelism, deism, socialism and capitalist democracy were ideas vying for ascendancy in nineteenth-century New York. It is appropriate that Whitman should emerge from this city, which was America's tie to the old world, but was also the unique American statement on itself. Wilentz's study becomes a must for anyone who wishes to understand the cauldron of politics and society which shaped Walt Whitman in the early part of his life.

— William K. O'Brien