



**Peter Knight.** *Reading the Market: Genres of Financial Capitalism in Gilded Age America.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 336 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-2060-8.

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In *Reading the Market*, Peter Knight uses literature and other cultural evidence to suggest that Americans were “emotionally invested in the stock market long before they became financially invested” in the 1920s (p. 5). Knight draws upon popular fiction, political cartoons, advice literature, scientific studies (complete with visual aids), and memoirs produced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to uncover how American culture conceptualized the financial market in all its abstraction. With this study, Knight builds upon his demonstrated expertise in nineteenth-century American literature—particularly in the history and culture of conspiracy theories—and his recent traveling exhibition in the UK on the visual culture of finance.[1]

Knight reads American culture and finds a “vernacular epistemology of finance” (p. 7), suggesting that the idea of the stock market drew both emotional investment and an almost macabre fascination from the American middle classes in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, despite prevailing interpretations that this group did not regularly play the market until sometime after World War I. Throughout his investigation, Knight argues that Americans attempted to render the faceless market legible by attaching a personality

to abstract market principles such as stock market fluctuations. These manifest in verbal descriptions of the market’s temperament (e.g., rising at a “feverish” rate), or visual representations of key players (such as Jay Gould) and synecdochical elements (e.g., the stock ticker as a stand-in for the market as a whole).

In the introduction to the book, Knight convincingly lays out this conceptual argument, and proposes to make three interventions in the existing literature on business history in this period. First, rather than a transition from a moral economy (based on the logic of the gift) to a capitalist economy (based on exchange), Knight finds that these two aspects intertwined in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era (GAPE). This process was “central to the development of financial capitalism” because it “legitimized the impersonal abstractions of finance by personalizing them” (p. 20). Additionally, Knight aims to revise the argument, made in the 1970s by Niklas Luhmann, that interpersonal trust in the nineteenth century was replaced, in this period, by trust in abstract systems. [2] Instead, Knight proposes that people learned to trust financial systems precisely because “inanimate objects and business collectives [were] increasingly being treated as *people* through senti-

mental personifications” (p. 20, emphasis in original). Finally, Knight argues against the prevailing view that financial capitalism increasingly abstracted social relations in this period, instead finding that opaque economic ideas became humanized through visual and verbal rhetoric in popular and professional culture.

The book’s five chapters home in on certain media or symbolic elements of the market to flesh out this argument. Chapter 1 examines financial journalism in popular magazines and newspapers, showing how market reports often took on the flavor of the gossip column. In these reports, the market was presented “simultaneously as an impersonal abstraction, governed by natural laws, and as the product of gossipy, personal relationships” (p. 25). Newspapers and magazines sought to add melodrama to the otherwise dry economic statistics that comprised these reports, and ultimately helped to legitimate financial activity as an important aspect of the broader economy. Market fluctuations took on the tone of insider gossip, infusing a sense of excitement into the stock market that allowed ordinary Americans to participate vicariously in the action. Chapter 2 surveys the growing advice literature published in this period, which aimed to teach average individuals how to understand market fluctuations and read stock tickers. Knight suggests that the ticker tape became a synecdoche for the market as a whole, and that investment guidebooks and biographies of notorious traders incorporated many elements of a “pre-modern financescape” into the newer methods of scientific analysis that emerged in this literature (p. 61). Whereas antebellum investors placed their trust in brokers, who connected to their customers through letters and face-to-face relationships, the advent of the stock ticker, the growth of investment agencies, and the closing of the actual stock exchange to the public (save for a small visitors’ gallery) meant that people were forced to accept (and trust) the authority of these more impersonal systems. Knight argues that the personification of the stock ticker, which seemed to have a mind of

its own, was one way that Americans sought to graft older modes of interpersonal trust onto the new abstract systems of the GAPE.

The next chapter proposes to examine representations of the market in popular imagery, especially political cartoons. Here, Knight digests political caricatures, architectural design, visualizations of the ticker tape, literary descriptions of the visitor’s gallery at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), and scientific charts that aimed to visualize market development and growth. The solution to portraying the abstract components of the market was, in many cases, to represent human behaviors, corruption, and material gain (or loss). In personifying the market in this way, these representations helped to “reconfigure and rationalize the very idea of the market as a coherent, predictable, self-sustaining entity” (p. 103). Bulls, bears, and lambs became frequent tropes for representing fierce traders who swindled unsuspecting members of the public (lambs), while notable elites, such as J. P. Morgan and Cornelius Vanderbilt, became the faces of corruption that caused market losses and financial panics. Knight’s discussion of the architectural designs and guidebook representations of the NYSE are the most convincing here.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn back to literature, specifically the work of Herman Melville, Edith Wharton, William Dean Howells, and Frank Norris, to examine, first, the ways that personal relationships and the gift economy structured and determined business relationships and investment in the GAPE, before turning to critiques of this system and calls for regulation. Personal connections remained intrinsically important in these years, as Knight points out in chapter 4, suggesting that elements of a sentimental gift economy intertwined with the emergent exchange economy at the end of the century. Knight reads Melville’s *Confidence Man* (1857) against the prescriptive work of Anthony Comstock to demonstrate the ways that mid-century notions of character persisted through the Civil War, and facilitated the broader development

of fraud at the end of the century. Gilded Age tricksters played on the public's trust by adopting the accoutrements of the antebellum cult of sincerity, referring to potential marks as "friends" in handwritten letters that intended to bankrupt unsuspecting individuals by promising easy profits in playing the market. In such performances of genteel friendship, con men defrauded the public by promising insider tips. Knight demonstrates that the promise of inside information remained an elusive and highly sought after component of the market, yet paradoxically, the public grew increasingly wary of elites who seemed to always have the inside track—leading to a proliferation of conspiracy theories about market manipulation. Chapter 5 turns to populist critiques of the market and its ills following the financial panics of the 1870s, 1890s, and 1900s. In these years corporations seemed to gain their own personalities (complete with actual legal rights and limited liabilities). In the wake of tragedies such as the Mussel Slough incident of 1880, a California dispute between railroad interests and settlers in which several people died, calls for government regulation increased as the public decried the privilege of moneyed elites and the capitalist system that allowed the concentration of power in the hands of so few.

Knight deftly analyzes this literature, and it is in these final chapters that the book demonstrates its arguments best. *Reading the Market* is clearly meant to be an analysis of cultural representations of the market—rather than an analysis of the market itself—and as such it does not provide a thorough explanation of some of the market's elements. Explaining the detailed workings of the ticker tape, for example, might have enabled readers to better follow his analysis of cultural representations of the same. Moreover, Knight's analysis of the imagery in chapter 3 also falls a bit short. For example, he never fully historicizes why bears and bulls are the most typical symbols of finance and the market, while his point that images of J. P. Morgan and other wealthy industrialists helped to personify the market rests thinly on the stipula-

tion that images of people help to humanize the abstract. This reader had hoped for a more thorough visual analysis of these images. To be sure, Knight has assembled a rich cache of visual evidence here, perhaps too much to fully investigate in a single chapter, and thus part of his analysis feels rushed by an impulse to demonstrate the quantity of his evidence.

Regardless of these shortcomings, *Reading the Market* offers many evidentiary and analytical gems. In particular, Knight offers additional perspective on the forces that pushed the personalization of commercial systems, and therefore can be neatly situated alongside works such as Susan Spellman's recent research on travelling salesmen.[3] A provocative and well-written study, this book also adds new dimension to our understanding of the literatures and popular culture of American finance. Knight's model literary analysis should provide ample material for students of American studies and cultural history, and could easily be incorporated into advanced undergraduate and graduate-level coursework. *Reading the Market* is therefore an important contribution to the recent literature on business history in the GAPE.

#### Notes

[1]. "Show Me the Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the Present" (2014-16) examined visual representations of the financial market in Britain and the United States, and was curated by Knight and Nicky Marsh (University of Southampton, UK), Paul Crosthwaite (University of Edinburgh, UK), Alistair Robinson (National Gallery for Contemporary Art, UK), and Isabella Streffen (Oxford Brookes University, UK). For more information see <http://imageoffinance.com/>.

[2]. Luhmann, *Trust and Power* (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 1979).

[3]. Spellman, "Trust Brokers: Traveling Grocery Salesmen and Confidence in Nineteenth-Century Trade," *Enterprise & Society* 13, no. 2 (2012): 276-312.

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