Today's Issues Reading for Feb 23 2020

For this Sunday, February 23, the Today's Issues group will discuss two topics:

- From page 36 of the February 25 issue of the New York Review of Books, T.H.Breen, "there was a Boston once," a review of Mark Peterson's book *The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power: 1630-1865,*
- The Democratic primary debate to be held this Wednesday, Feb 19, in Las Vegas. You might watch the debate or read coverage of it in your favorite news source.

The group meets in the parlor next to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please join our lively discussion.

A copy of "There Was a Boston Once" is attached.

'There Was a Boston Once'
T.H. BreenFEBRUARY 27, 2020 ISSUE
The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power, 1630–1865
by Mark Peterson
Princeton University Press, 741 pp., $39.95
A View of Boston, 1738; painting by John Smibert
Granger
John Smibert: A View of Boston, 1738
During the 1850s Boston's belief that it held a special place in the history of the United States came to a sudden and humiliating end. No longer could one describe it as a City on a Hill, as the beacon of political and religious liberty founded by Puritan settlers in 1630. Mark Peterson argues in The City-State of Boston that a series of brutal events just before the Civil War exposed the full magnitude of Boston's fall.

One incident in particular revealed the extent to which political and economic developments beyond the city's control had eroded its long-standing tradition of regional autonomy. This sense of independence from outside interference had been established within the British Empire and then fiercely maintained after the creation of the United States of America. It collapsed in 1854, when Anthony Burns, a slave who had escaped bondage in Alexandria, Virginia, was arrested in Boston. Although many people in the city defended his claim to freedom, federal authorities were determined to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, passed by Congress in 1850, and return him to the South. Crowds protested, to no avail. Several companies of marines armed with bayonets and supported by artillery escorted the prisoner to a ship in the harbor that would carry him back to Virginia.

Peterson, a professor of history at Yale, recognizes that most scholars would interpret Burns's ordeal within a familiar narrative that chronicles the development of an irresolvable sectional conflict over slavery that led to civil war, but he takes an entirely different approach. The failure

to protect Burns, he argues, marked the surrender of Boston's independence to southern slaveholders who controlled Congress. The Reverend Theodore Parker, a leading abolitionist, concluded soon after Burns's rendition, "There is no Boston to-day. There was a Boston once. Now, there is a north suburb to the city of Alexandria; that is what Boston is. And you and I, fellow-subjects of the State of Virginia."

To understand this breakdown of the city's sense of itself, Peterson takes readers on a long historical journey. He returns to the world of John Winthrop, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; to the 1689 rebellion against the British governor Edmund Andros; to the resistance to King George III on the eve of American independence; and to the ratification of the US Constitution. These events not only shaped Boston's self-identity within a larger Atlantic world but also made its failure to protect Burns all the more painful.

The City-State of Boston makes no attempt to cover topics that one might expect to find in an ordinary urban history. Peterson has little interest, for example, in the kind of detailed economic and environmental analysis that William Cronon provides in Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (1991), which impressively documents how Chicago became the dominant urban hub of the Midwest. Missing too are descriptions of the evolution of local government. Religion receives only passing attention. "This book," Peterson observes,

dwells less on the internal development of the town and city of Boston proper—its political institutions and conflicts, population growth, built environment, and social and cultural life, or what is typically seen as the conventional materials of urban history—than on the life of Boston as lived beyond the boundaries of the city and region.

What Peterson provides instead is an account of the rise and fall of a unique polity within the Atlantic world. He labels Boston a city-state, a designation that calls to mind the city-states of Renaissance Italy—Lucca, Florence, and Siena, for example—that defended their independence against rivals while at the same time forging economic and political bonds with surrounding regions. Although no one in New England used the term, comparing Boston to other city-states is both original and provocative. After all, Peterson notes, "before the nineteenth century, small self-governing polities comprised of a city and its hinterland, relatively autonomous but not necessarily independent, were common sociopolitical forms."

Aggressive nation-states ultimately gobbled up most of the European city-states, and incorporation into the federal union was ultimately the fate of Boston. Yet by adopting the notion that Boston and its neighboring communities comprised a genuine city-state—a distinct form of regional economic and political organization—we can avoid viewing every event in the history of New England as if it represented, from the very beginning of European settlement, the core values of what became the United States. Peterson has no interest in searching through the records of a city-state that no longer exists to find the origins of a modern nation. No one, he observes, has paid proper attention to the creation of a New England city-state because

there is too much power, too profound a desire among authors and readers alike for narratives that sustain American national identities. The overly familiar narratives effectively drown out other stories that the rich archive of Boston's past affords.

Retrieving a past that historians have so long ignored yields a bittersweet story of determination and disappointment.

This revised story of Boston raises hard questions. After all, how does one go about writing the history of a city-state? Peterson's answer is to weave together a series of biographies of people whose ambitions and frustrations centered on a region that over time acquired a strong and independent identity. "Throughout this book," he suggests,

individual chapters attend to the layering effect of cumulative events over time, to the ways that lived experience built on, echoed, or rhymed with the past. Bostonians' awareness of the past often shaped the meaning of events through their understanding, consciously perceived or unconsciously felt, that the present moment was implicated in (though not determined by) the past and might be judged against the standards of history.

Figures such as Winthrop, Cotton Mather, and John Adams make predictable appearances. Others are more obscure. A few spent little time in Boston, touring Germany for long periods or focusing their entrepreneurial attention on incorporating Nova Scotia into the city-state. Phillis Wheatley, the African-American slave and poet who earned widespread praise before the revolution, is the subject of a long section. Peterson includes Francis Cabot Lowell, an early industrialist, as well as the cantankerous Federalist congressman Fisher Ames. It is a large and impressive list of people who, with rare exception, enjoyed high standing in the community.

One might question why others—for example, John Winthrop Jr., a brilliant seventeenth-century student of alchemy; John Wise, an outspoken eighteenth-century defender of the independence of individual Congregational churches from higher clerical authority; George Whitefield, the charismatic evangelical preacher who sparked the Great Awakening in the 1740s; and James Otis, the uncompromising defender of colonial rights on the eve of the revolution—go missing or are mentioned only in passing. What the characters who appear in Peterson's history had in common was a desire "to build and sustain the region's political economy, society, or culture, or whose connections in the larger Atlantic world are especially revelatory about the changing relationships between the city and its larger contexts." It is the totality of these collective experiences that provides "an empathetic understanding of the public life of Boston in New England."

The history of what became the city-state of Boston began during the 1630s with the arrival of John Winthrop and thousands of Puritans who could no longer tolerate what they saw as the corruption of the Anglican Church. They proclaimed that they were on a mission ordained by God to reform religion. Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to live in the New World, reminded the migrants, "Wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill." Because people in

England would be following events in the new colony—some hoping that the entire enterprise would fail—the settlers in the New World required extraordinary resolve. “Wee must be knitt together in this work as one man,” Winthrop advised, “wee must entertaine each other in brotherly affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of superfluities, for the supply of others necessities.” Unlike the English who went to Virginia or the Caribbean Islands, the Puritans insisted that they had not sacrificed the comforts of home for the chance to become rich. From the start, they championed a fundamental assumption that would shape the city-state’s self-identity long after the demand for religious reform had dimmed: an insistence on independence from any outside influence that threatened to compromise their special place in the Atlantic world.

Commerce soon transformed the struggling religious experiment into a thriving city-state. The immigrants who streamed into Boston and the many other Massachusetts communities discovered a market in the Caribbean for wood products and foodstuffs such as salted fish. Ships returning north carried molasses for New England’s rum distilleries and occasionally slaves who worked in the households of the well-to-do. Although these trade links may have exposed the colonists to worldly temptations, they created a complex exchange network as the towns surrounding Boston sold their agricultural surplus to merchants who transported it to distant ports. The development of economic links between Boston and an expanding hinterland in western Massachusetts and Connecticut sustained the prosperity of the new city-state. Not surprisingly, it was during this period that Boston became a synecdoche for New England. The strategy that drove growth, explains Peterson, was balancing “the powers and forces of the Atlantic world against independence from or resistance to the ways in which those powers could corrupt, dominate, or destroy.”

The unintended consequences of commercial success were the very things that Boston most wanted to avoid: it came into conflict with authorities who had no interest in preserving its independence. The greatest threat came from the restored Stuart monarchy. When Charles II returned to the English throne following the end of the civil wars, he decided that however much Massachusetts proclaimed its loyalty to the king, it brazenly ignored parliamentary legislation and royal command. He had a point. For much of the seventeenth century, the colony refused to enforce the Navigation Acts that prohibited other nations from trading in English ports. Dutch ships made frequent appearances in Boston. More provocatively, Massachusetts in 1652 began to mint its own money, turning out thousands of “pine tree shillings” every year. The right to produce money was indisputably the king’s prerogative, and no amount of obfuscation could hide the fact that by producing silver coins the city-state was putting its own political and economic autonomy at risk.

Peterson’s account of John Hull’s extraordinary career is one of the most impressive and original sections of the book. More than any other seventeenth-century Bostonian, Hull understood how to balance the colony’s commercial ambitions with the policies of the increasingly hostile British Empire. After the Massachusetts government appointed him mint master, Hull put a bold economic strategy into practice. Local transactions between Boston

merchants and country farmers suffered from a chronic shortage of small coins, which greatly obstructed the flow of goods. But Hull knew that if he minted shillings that possessed as much silver as the value stamped on the coin, they would soon leave Massachusetts and be used to pay debts and negotiate deals in distant ports. To address this problem, Hull reduced the amount of silver in his shillings—they contained only three quarters of the metal found in their English equivalents—calculating that the debased coins would likely remain in New England.

The plan worked. Since Atlantic traders had no incentive to conduct long-distance business with short-weighted coins, the pine tree shillings stayed in New England, facilitating local trade. As Peterson explains, “This currency played a critical role in assuring the city-state of Boston’s autonomy, and developing a stable, prosperous, and growing economy for the colonists who spread rapidly across the New England region.” Hull’s fiscal genius affected the colony’s independence in another way. Commercial prosperity meant that Massachusetts was able to finance wars against the Native Americans without having to beg the king for help. In the process, the mint master became very rich.

In 1685 a new king threatened to destroy all that Hull had accomplished. James II lost patience with the colony’s disingenuous declarations of loyalty: he ordered crown courts to annul the charter that Winthrop had carried to the New World in 1630 and restructured the government of the entire region. An appointed royal governor, Sir Edmund Andros, assumed control over New England as well as New Jersey and New York. He and his officers engaged in such blatantly corrupt practices that the city-state arrested the entire group, a rebellion that could have led to severe retaliation from England. That did not happen. William III replaced James on the English throne in the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and instead of punishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he awarded it a charter preserving most of the features that the colonists believed were essential to maintaining their autonomy within the empire. The episode served to reaffirm the city-state’s sense of itself. By resisting external intervention in their affairs, New Englanders solidified their belief that they were a special people.

The city-state avoided crises of this sort for a very long time, during which it negotiated a secure place within an imperial system. As the shipping trade expanded, and during the French and Indian War (1754–1763), New Englanders enthusiastically supported British forces. But then Parliament, eager to find new ways to fund its war debt, abruptly changed the rules. As had been the case under the Andros regime, crown officials attempted to collect revenue from Americans who insisted that these were taxes without representation. Once again, Boston resisted. The road to revolution ran through Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. The city-state repeatedly defended its own independence while claiming to bring forth a new nation.

The problem was that other regions in the United States, such as Virginia, that were proud of their own historic traditions soon made clear that they did not view New England as a model for civil society. John Adams never quite understood such thinking. For example, he lectured Southern colleagues about the importance of frequent elections in order to give voice to the will of the people. Adams regarded this as a crucial element of New England’s distinctive and

praiseworthy character. So too was a sense of social equality. In a burst of revolutionary excitement he explained to Patrick Henry, “The Decree is gone forth…that a more equal Liberty, than has prevail’d in other Parts of the Earth, must be established in America.”

Carter Braxton, a leading Virginia planter, would have none of it. He dismissed calls for greater social equality as well as frequent elections. Virginians, he stated, would “gather estates for themselves and children without regarding the whimsical impropriety of being richer than their neighbors. These are rights which freemen will never consent to relinquish.” Adams rejected arguments for special privilege, but he felt compelled to walk back his conviction that the Boston city-state remained a beacon for the rest of the nation. He grudgingly informed Henry that although frequent elections might not suit the culture of Virginia, “the Usages and Genius and Manners of the People, must be consulted.”

Worse was yet to come. Peterson argues that Massachusetts should not have ratified the US Constitution. The leaders of the city-state—a region that included most of New England—joined the federal union under the erroneous assumption that its relationship with other states in the new nation would be analogous to the one it had enjoyed with England before the revolution. It saw itself now as part of a loose federation in which each partner in the republican experiment would respect the economic and political interests of all the others.

That proved not to be the case. The southern delegates drove a hard bargain at the Constitutional Convention in 1787, demanding that slaves be counted as three fifths of a white person in calculating a state’s population. The slaves could not vote, of course, but they gave the South a huge advantage in determining how many representatives it would have in Congress as well as in the Electoral College. Peterson describes Boston’s entering the federal union on these terms as a “mistake.” New Englanders who took pride in the memory of their ancestors’ rebellion against Andros and the courageous fight against George III now found themselves beholden to outsiders who set the country’s agenda without the slightest concern for the needs of Boston and its hinterland. The decision to ratify the Constitution, Peterson argues, “began the slow demise of Boston’s independence and regional power, as southern planters with continental ambitions dominated national politics, damaging Boston’s interests and corroding its values.”

The ultimate eclipse of the city-state did not come without a struggle. A group of disheartened New Englanders met in Hartford late in 1814 to consider radical reforms in the structure of the national government. A major complaint was the tariffs favored by the Madison administration that destroyed the profitability of Boston’s shipping trade. Talk of secession was in the air. But news of Andrew Jackson’s stunning victory early in 1815 over the British army in New Orleans made the Hartford delegates look like foolish whiners, perhaps even traitors. There seemed no escape from a federal structure that systematically compromised the region’s commercial and political independence.

To be sure, Francis Lowell and other early industrialists tried to redefine the city-state's relationship with the rest of the nation. During the early nineteenth century, they established textile mills along the rivers of New England. Driven in part by the need to diversify the region's economy, these efforts created impressive employment opportunities and produced a new generation of wealthy entrepreneurs. But the success of the mills came at a price. The production of cloth required huge amounts of raw cotton from the South, and this dependence made it harder for the spokesmen for the city-state effectively to criticize the policies of the slave states. Moreover, the expansion of the mills meant that industrialists who centered their activities in eastern Massachusetts were less reliant on the market ties that had for so long linked small farmers to the region around Boston. "The rise of textile production," Peterson notes, "meant a newfound reliance on a commodity, cotton, that New England farmers could not produce."

Although Peterson does not cast the end of Boston's city-state as a jeremiad, his argument has an elegiac quality. Like the seventeenth-century Puritans, he finds the city's fall from a more desirable state—a story of the loss of a distinctive identity within the Atlantic world—lamentable, possibly a "tragedy." He observes that the sprawling nation-state has become in modern times the normative form of governance, and he is not sure whether "the ideals of responsible self-government can be achieved in units reaching the hundreds of millions or even billions of citizens."

Although he may have a point, the history of the city-state invites a different interpretation. Change does not necessarily imply decline. The people in the nineteenth century who championed the notion that Boston remained an independent, self-confident city on a hill for more than two hundred years had also successfully adjusted to new technologies, different political challenges, and shifting cultural currents. They dealt with change in creative ways. Americans living in other regions of the country may no longer consider Boston a model for their own affairs, but it is also true that in the current debates about the future of our nation, New England still possesses a powerful voice.