

It's the Economy and Class, Stupid: A Retrospective on The Urban Crucible

GARY NASH'S *THE URBAN CRUCIBLE* is, sans doubt, the best book ever written about class in early America. It is likewise, without a doubt, the best book ever written about cities in early America. It is among the best books ever written about why the colonies fought a War for Independence—not only to gain their sovereignty but also to transform North America radically. It is among the best-documented, most thoroughly researched books ever written about early America. The book epitomized and brought to fruition the promise of the “new social history,” which emerged in the 1960s and still shapes the way that scholars and students understand the past today. The book was relevant in 1979. In our own times of increasing material inequality and, at least until the depression of the last year, of intensifying and expanding capitalism, *The Urban Crucible* is even more germane. Other than all of that, it is a relatively ordinary book about ordinary people. However, “all of that” is reason enough to make me pleased to rethink the meaning, importance, and legacy of its publication three decades ago.

There is no need, of course, merely to trust the evaluation (faultless, though it may be) of an empiricist, structuralist, pre-postmodernist, pre-“linguistic turn” human like myself, but I am far from the only person to make these sorts of outrageous claims verging on hagiography for Gary Nash. In their reviews, historians at the time recognized the significance and achievements of *The Urban Crucible*. Nash provides a “historical interpretation with uncommon clarity, subtlety, and intelligence,” Douglas Greenberg glowed. “It is one of that rare breed of scholarly books whose importance lies not only in its substantive conclusions, but also in its sensitivity to nuance and the standard it sets for subsequent studies in a wide range of specialties.” Ira Berlin praised the volume as the “fullest and best account of life in the major colonial seaports.” An “excellent book,” Christopher Clark wrote, “one of the most important contributions to colonial history in recent years.” It constituted, according to urban historian Raymond Mohl, “a major reinterpretation of urban life in

eighteenth-century America." J. R. Pole, in a long and thoughtful review, characterized it as a "distinguished book" and "one of the finest works on colonial America" ever written. Even scholars who questioned the book's arguments or conclusions acknowledged its import. A "major volume of social history" and "superb as a narrative of the struggle of laboring men," commented Charles Akers. "A work of the first importance," admired Marc Egnal. No other historian "until Nash approached early American urban history in a similarly comprehensive way," Pauline Maier noted. Even Jack Greene, in a petulant review, grudgingly admitted that *The Urban Crucible* "makes a highly significant contribution to the reconstruction of early American social history and demands the serious attention of all scholars in the field."¹

As an old quantitative historian, I cannot resist complimenting Nash on the sheer enormity of the work involved in his statistical research in primary documents. The twelve tables and nine graphs represent, literally, thousands of hours spent reading, recording, and crunching numbers from tax lists, inventories of estates, wills, portledge bills, ship arrival registries, almshouse dockets, and a host of official reports. Measuring *either* the distribution of wealth or a lengthy series of wages and prices would have been sufficient research for many other impressive books. Virtually every contemporary reviewer praised the richness of the quantitative and qualitative evidence alike. Raymond Mohl, another practitioner of this kind of research, called it "remarkable." *The Urban Crucible* is "fully informed by quantitative analyses," claimed Pauline Maier. Jack Greene grumbled that the tables should have been in the text rather than in the appendices.²

The Urban Crucible entered into a vigorous, sometimes heated debate among historians about how best to understand early America and the American Revolution, with clear implications about what those interpretations meant to the authors' own turbulent times in the 1960s and early 1970s. Along with notables Jesse Lemisch and Alfred Young, Nash pre-

¹ Quotes from the following reviews: Douglas Greenberg, *Business History Review* 54 (1980): 274; Ira Berlin, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11 (1981): 737; Christopher Clark, *Journal of Social History* 15 (1981): 121; Raymond A. Mohl, *Journal of American History* 67 (1980): 390; J. R. Pole, "Citizen against Citizen," *Times Literary Supplement*, Apr. 11, 1980; Charles W. Akers, *New England Quarterly* 53 (1980): 259–60; Marc Egnal, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 37 (1980): 657; Pauline Maier, "Poverty, Mobility, and the Problem of Class in Colonial Cities," *Reviews in American History* 8 (1980): 471; Jack Greene, *American Historical Review* 86 (1981): 200.

² Mohl, 391; Maier, "Poverty, Mobility, and the Problem of Class in Colonial Cities," 472; Greene, 201.

sented a powerful New Left perspective. *The Urban Crucible* provided the most eloquent explanation, identifying the evolution of class, class conflict, and, at least in fragmentary terms, class consciousness in colonial cities during the eighteenth century. E. P. Thompson, the British sage of class studies, located the emergence of class in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century industrializing Britain. Nash found that class materialized on American soil thirty years earlier. This insight remains, I believe, one of Nash's best contributions to the historiography and one of the most important legacies of his analysis.³

Although slighting *The Urban Crucible* with brevity, let me summarize a few of the major arguments. While recognizing that urban dwellers accounted for only about 5 percent of the colonial population, Nash postulated that the towns-cum-cities carved the way to the future between the late seventeenth century and the American Revolution. Understanding the dynamics of the three major port cities was thus crucial to comprehending what happened in and what would happen to British North America. These cities "predicted the future" (vii). To use Nash's metaphor, they served as the crucible for refining the economic, social, and political raw materials into a new alloy, a new society, and a new country. The book analyzes the changing "social morphology" (viii) of urban America, in part, by focusing on class. The reordering of the "web of seaport life" (3) transformed the cities in innumerable ways. The emergence of a new market economy was among the most important factors. By stimulating the growth of poverty among working people, limiting the material opportunities for some aspiring artisans, and encouraging the accumulation of vast wealth by an urban elite, these economic developments exacerbated class tensions and stirred the creation of class identity. Traditional notions of a "moral economy" and a political commonwealth gave way to a social order based on competition and individual interest. Politics changed accordingly, as "a hierarchical and deferential polity yielded to participatory and contentious civic life" (vii). Indeed, for a major representative of the new social history, *The Urban Crucible*, as Jack Greene still grumbled, dealt a great deal with the nuts-and-bolts of

³ See, for example, Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 25 (1968): 373–407; Lemisch, "The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up," in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York, 1967), 3–45; Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, IL, 1976); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963).

everyday politics. Like many new social historians, Nash envisioned politics, ideology, economics, and material conditions as intertwined in a “web” of life. By “painstakingly connecting structure and ideological changes to the course of urban life,” applauded Ira Berlin in his review, “Nash enriches scholarly understanding of urban attachments to republicanism before the creation of the Republic.”⁴

Wars, according to Nash, were a major engine of change, reshaping the economic and social landscape of the cities. A series of colonial wars created both wealth and poverty in the three cities. The differential impact on the cities accounted in large part for variations in their development, and Nash’s sensitivity to those local distinctions are a strength of his book. Boston, for example, suffered the most, losing numerous male citizens to the conflicts, needing to care for their widows and children after the fighting, and enduring long decades of economic despair and population stagnation. It thus should have been little surprise (although apparently it was to many narrowly ideological historians in 1979) that Boston was the most radical resistor of British imperial measures.⁵ The depression following the Seven Years’ War affected all of the port cities in a similar fashion by polarizing classes and energizing many urban residents both to defy Britain and transform their own society.

Had Nash been a fortuneteller in the 1970s, anticipating the intense interest in both global and Atlantic World history of the past fifteen years, he might have connected the wars in colonial America and the related growth of poverty in its urban centers more tightly to the early stages of European imperialism and capitalist expansion during the eighteenth century. Thomas Paine made a somewhat similar point in *Common Sense*. America fought so many wars, he claimed, because the British Empire entangled it in conflicts growing out of the dynastic ambition of kings. Paine associated wars with monarchs and peace with republics. In our own times, we have learned, tragically, that regardless of the claims of neoconservatives like George Bush, republics and democracies, especially when supported by global capitalism, wage wars to control markets and labor as often as do dictators and monarchs. One of the promises of the new global and Atlantic World history is to place Nash’s

⁴ Greene, 200; Berlin, 737.

⁵ Bernard Bailyn wrote the history of the American Revolution as if social and economic factors mattered not a whit; *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); Gordon S. Wood continued that tradition in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991), 4.

findings in a considerably larger framework, to make connections, for instance, between local conditions in colonial cities and violent conflicts over markets and resources that transcend national boundaries.⁶

When *The Urban Crucible* initially appeared, many reviewers and readers, I believe, misread the importance of wars in the book's explanation of change. The liabilities and benefits, distributed primarily according to class, of the slow transition to capitalism in colonial urban centers were at the heart of the thesis. The differential impact of wars (both on the various cities and on the various classes) is important, but best understood as occurring within the context of new, commercial market relationships. The measured shift from bound to free labor—one of the most important points of the book—meant that urban residents were differently situated either to take advantage of or to suffer from economic changes wrought by wars. During postwar busts, for example, employers could minimize their costs and maximize their profits by firing their laborers. Wage workers, meanwhile, lost their security, their jobs, and sometimes even their freedom if they fell into poverty and were confined to the almshouses that sprouted in the port cities. In these and other matters, the urban lower classes paid by far the largest price in the transition to capitalism.

A few of my students, overwhelmed both by the weighty arguments and the physical weight of *The Urban Crucible*, found it difficult reading. "Once I put it down," one undergraduate remarked facetiously, "I couldn't pick it up again." In that regard, the abridged version helped greatly to make the book more accessible to a wider audience. Consequently, it seems *small* to criticize the unabridged book for not being even longer, but I often am a small person. Besides, this unfair comment will at least partly balance the earlier hagiography.

Where is the other half of the residents of urban centers: women? One of the justifiable criticisms leveled at labor history by feminist scholars has been the neglect of the lives, roles, and accomplishments of women. To his credit, Nash expressed his regret in the preface that *The Urban Crucible* did not consider gender more extensively; he realized that "our understanding of the American cities before the Revolution" will "remain imperfect" until that task is accomplished (xiii). To his even greater credit, he subsequently wrote about women in the colonies and in the American

⁶ As just one example, see Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400–the Present* (Armonk, NY, 1999).

revolutionary era. However, *The Urban Crucible*, judged on its own merits, fails in this regard. Written at the beginning of a new wave of early American women's history, Nash's volume would have been greatly enriched not merely by including women but also by incorporating them into and modifying the larger class analysis. Still, and as a reflection of the myopia among many historians at that time, not one contemporary reviewer grumbled about the absence of gender considerations in *The Urban Crucible*.

The Urban Crucible is a marvelous book, one that holds up well three decades later; if anything, its concerns have become even more relevant to the crucial issues of our own times. It continues to be read, used, and admired. At both a recent major conference and in an anthology about class in early America and the Atlantic World, *The Urban Crucible* received more references than any other book, including *The Making of the English Working Class*, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the writings of Karl Marx, and even the Bible! Many of the newer histories focus on the evolution of the middle and upper classes as well as that of laboring people, but it is an inclusiveness that I know that Nash applauds. *The Urban Crucible* will continue to appear on syllabi for undergraduate and graduate courses not only as a classic in the field but also as a book from which we can still learn a great deal about America and its past.⁷

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⁷ The conference was "Class and Class Struggle in North America and the Atlantic World, 1500–1820," Big Sky, Montana, September, 2003; the book is Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith, eds., *Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2008). Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (New York, 2002).