

“Artisans” and the “Middling Sort” in Gary Nash’s Eighteenth-Century Urban America?

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED *THE URBAN CRUCIBLE* in 1992 while studying as a foreign (English) student at the City University of New York Graduate Center. I was already a fan of the British Marxist historians when I arrived in the United States, and Nash’s book soon loomed large in what I came to know as the “new social history.” Reading for general examinations, I learned that Nash worked within the tradition of the Progressive historians and later scholars of early American labor and radicalism, such as Jesse Lemisch, Staughton Lynd, and Alfred Young. While others had focused on the era of the American Revolution and early republic, Nash provided the back story—or, for moviegoers, the prequel for the late eighteenth-century imperial crisis. Marrying a painstaking analysis of sparse sources—tax rolls, poor relief returns, wills, and shipping records—to a political narrative of the growth of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, *The Urban Crucible* went beyond the sometimes antiquarian approach of earlier scholars such as Carl Bridenbaugh and Richard Morris.¹ Describing a classic *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* transformation, Nash traced the evolution of popular politics and class consciousness that developed in the wake of economic and political turbulence and the narrowing of opportunities for working people: at the dawn of the eighteenth century, urban artisans worked at their own pace in face-to-face towns, aiming to stay off the bottom rather than climb to the top of the social ladder; on the eve of the Revolution, they were struggling to keep pace with the vicissitudes of a market-driven and an increasingly and egregiously unequal urban society. By the summer of my graduate exams, I considered *The Urban Crucible* foundational to the then dominant interpretation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American history: a Marxian narrative that ran from the Glorious

¹ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1742* (1938; repr., New York, 1971); Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743–1776* (1955; repr., New York, 1971); and Richard Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1965)

Revolution through the late nineteenth century and described the fracturing of Old World corporatism and the transition to capitalism. The American Revolution was a revolution of democratic and egalitarian possibilities that were stifled by the rise of possessive individualism and a market society. This set up a final reckoning between the still emerging culture of “free labor” and the slave system of plantation production during the era of Civil War and Reconstruction.²

Several contemporary reviewers were less convinced than I regarding the connections Nash drew between economic inequalities and radical artisanal consciousness, and we might start by asking how well his findings have held up in light of subsequent work.³ Limitations of space make it sensible to focus on one of Nash’s three chosen towns; the limitations of this contributor dictate that that town is New York, arguably the weakest of *The Urban Crucible*’s three case studies. Work undertaken in the last twenty years locates New Amsterdam and early New York at the heart of a burgeoning Dutch, and later English, Atlantic trade, challenging Nash’s characterization of the late seventeenth-century community as sleepy colonial backwater. His sketch of Leisler’s Rebellion as part-ethnic and part-economic struggle between city artisans and merchant grandees also has to be reconsidered in light of studies of confessional loyalties and the city’s civic culture.⁴ *The Urban Crucible*’s account of the rising tide of

² Since I passed my general exams, I have always assumed that there must have been at least some merit in my positioning of Nash’s study in relation to other studies I read that academic year, including David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1967); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1975), and his *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984); and Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York, 1991).

³ The reviews are reviewed in Shane White’s witty appreciation of *The Urban Crucible* on the *Common-place* Web site at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/cp/vol-03/no-04/reviews/white.shtml>.

⁴ Debate concerning ethnic tensions and the endurance of Dutch influences continues, in large part because of the work of Nash’s graduate student Joyce D. Goodfriend. See her *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664–1730* (Princeton, NJ, 1994). Some of the best work on early New York commerce and Leisler’s Rebellion is unpublished. For example, see Dennis J. Maika’s “Commerce and Community: Manhattan Merchants in the Seventeenth Century” (PhD diss., New York University, 1995), and David William Voorhees’s “In Behalf of the One True Religion: Leisler’s Rebellion in Colonial New York” (PhD diss., New York University, 1988). Also essential is Donna Merwick’s work on Dutch and civic culture; see “Being Dutch: An Interpretation of Why Jacob Leisler Died,” *New York History* 70 (1989): 373–404, and *Possessing Albany, 1630–1710: The Dutch and English Experiences* (Cambridge, 1990), chap. 6. Merwick’s doctoral student Adriaen Howe wrote an excellent dissertation on the Dutch influence in eighteenth-century

later eighteenth-century artisanal radicalism fared better in contemporary and subsequent studies that worked with a similar conception of the material foundations of political culture and consciousness.⁵

However, there have also been challenges, particularly to the binary social division of patrician and plebeian adapted from E. P. Thompson's studies of eighteenth-century English society whose inspiration Nash acknowledged early on in the book. Studies of colonial slavery—arguably and ironically following Nash's own pathbreaking work in the field—have stressed the ways in which developing racial prejudice and notions of whiteness served imperial interests by binding together culturally diverse New Yorkers of different social status.⁶ In a reassessment of middle-colony politics, Alan Tully has challenged the emphasis on conflict between plebeians and patricians, arguing instead for the evolution of self-interested, voluntaristic, and pragmatic politics leading not to class struggle but to an emerging American liberalism. In her deeply researched study of eighteenth-century merchant trade, Cathy Matson recruited many of Nash's artisans to the ranks of her individualistic petty dealers who shared an intermittent commitment to free trade. These

New York that challenged Nash's evolutionary take on city politics; see "Accommodation and Retreat: Politics and Anglo-Dutch New York City, 1700–1760" (PhD diss., Melbourne, 1982). For another view of the rebellion as a class struggle, see Simon Middleton, "Leisler's Rebellion: Class Struggle in New York?" in *Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World*, ed. Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith (Philadelphia, 2008), 88–99.

⁵ For example, Howard B. Rock's interpretation, in *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York, 1979), sounded with Nash's and appeared as part of the developing field of "artisan studies"—after reviewed in Howard B. Rock, Paul A. Gilje, Robert Asher, eds., *American Artisans: Crafting Social Identity, 1750–1850* (Baltimore, 1995). Also see Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Paul Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987); Graham Russell Hodges, *New York City Cartmen, 1667–1850* (New York, 1987), which was distinguished by its chronological reach into the late seventeenth century. Also important were Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790* (Baltimore, 1981), and, more recently, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (New York, 2000). They have traced dissatisfactions with material and social inequalities and a form of class consciousness back into the seventeenth century.

⁶ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2004); Thelma Wills Foot, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (New York, 2004); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York, 2005).

apparent reinstatements of the long-established liberal claims concerning the evolution of trade and interest politics—arguably the impression that *The Urban Crucible* partly set out to critique—appeared in the wake of Gordon Wood’s prominent reorientation of our view of eighteenth-century political culture away from anxiety-ridden republican paranoia and towards an insurgent and, in his terms, radical middle class who were intent on debunking aristocratic social mores and pursuing individual commercial ambitions.⁷

In this way subsequent studies chipped away at the connection drawn between economic immiseration, class formation, and the evolution of a radical political consciousness that was central to *The Urban Crucible*. Without this claim, headlined in its subtitle, the book is still richly sourced and crafted urban history, but it lacks the animation and controversy that prompted so much debate. In his preface Nash was careful to set out his notion of class, decrying earlier, deterministic conceptions and, again following Thompson, emphasizing the culture and agency of ordinary subjects and the manner in which their historical experience gave rise to collective social consciousness. He was also alert to the risks in using a term more often applied to industrial or wage-earning proletarians than eighteenth-century artisans and the laboring sort. Indeed his tentativeness on the “maturity” of class identities in the late eighteenth century, especially in the closing chapters, demonstrated his commitment to the distinctions between a class “in” and “for” itself and rather detracted from the confident tone elsewhere in the book.

By the early 1990s, however, such subtleties were swept aside by an insurgent scepticism regarding the interpretive weight historians placed on documentary texts and the language recorded therein as evidence of their subjects’ experiences and intentions. Critics argued that rather than reflecting prior material causes or motives, historical texts and languages had histories and import of their own and, as such, operated as contexts that inflected construed meaning for both contemporaries and later historians. For social historians this “linguistic turn” severely undermined the view of their subjects as meaning-giving agents whose intentions and

⁷ Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992); Alan Tully, *Forming American Politics: Ideas, Interests, and Institutions in Colonial New York and Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1994), esp. 358–65; Cathy D. Matson, *Merchants and Empire: Trading in Colonial New York* (Baltimore, 1997).

experiences could be read from the archival records.⁸ The effects of this turn towards language and culture were felt throughout Anglo-American early modern studies, not least via the “contextualist” approach to political language and its unpicking of the hegemonic liberal tradition and recovery of alternatives such as classical republicanism and the Scottish Enlightenment.⁹ The historicizing of notions of interest, virtue, rights, and manners fed into new inquiries into urban society, consumption, gender relations, and material culture, which collectively generated a novel and increasingly pervasive subject: the “middling sort.”¹⁰ Seemingly insulated from the icy blasts of ontological critiques that had done for the Marxian working class—perhaps owing to extra linguistic and cultural lagging—the middling sort quickly colonised the broad social space between the extremes of the gentry and the laboring poor previously occupied by Nash’s artisans.

In retrospect we might have seen the imminence of the middling sort in the uncertainties regarding the social and economic status and outlook of the “artisan.”¹¹ Bypassing this lengthy and ultimately unsatisfying debate, studies of the middling sort provided a more layered and richer picture of eighteenth-century society: attention shifted from journeymen and apprentices in the workshop to male and female family members and dependents in the household; from moral economies, craft mysteries, and deskilling to the expansion of the market, consumption, and the use of

⁸ A good introduction to this large and complex literature is Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).

⁹ For example, see Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983); Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1987); Richard B. Sher and Jeffery R. Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ, 1990); Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2002), see esp. Donald Winch, “Commercial Realities, Republican Principles,” 2:293–311.

¹⁰ Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks, eds., *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, UK, 1994), introduction. Major contributions in British history include Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), and, more recently, Shani D’Cruze, *A Pleasing Prospect: Society and Culture in Eighteenth-Century Colchester* (Hatfield, UK, 2008). Although Richard L. Bushman’s *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York, 1992) clearly anticipated the emerging historiography, the middling sort came relatively late to colonial America, according to C. Dallet Hemphill, in “Manners and Class in the Revolutionary Era: A Transatlantic Comparison,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 63 (2006): 345–72.

¹¹ For example, in 1976, Eric Foner pointed out that “Historians have been unable to agree about the economic and political status of the artisans, or even the correct terminology to describe them.”

household and luxury goods. Scholars continued to stress the momentous economic and political change that accompanied the growth of an increasingly mobile and literate colonial population. For some the experience of the middling sort offered a new and more compelling origin for the advent of liberal America: consumer goods brought the colonists not only comfort, pleasure, and status but also the power to free minds and even level inequalities spawning a liberal society premised on “a process of ever more egalitarian self-fashioning.”¹² For others the same experience offered evidence of inequalities and new conceptions of social power: even as public consumption and the pursuit of gentility symbolised the social superiority of some, it deepened social divisions and added a moral dimension by awarding different sensibilities and emotional range to rich and poor.¹³ It is this moral and emotional dimension that has engaged recent and forthcoming studies that look beyond the social unrest and republican-versus-liberal ideologies that concerned an earlier generation to consider the importance of civility, sensibility, and changing notions of masculinity in the development of the egalitarian discourse of natural rights. In this respect the history of the Revolution, and its familiar narrative of imperial reforms and colonial protest, has become secondary to a structural, and presumably fundamental, cultural transformation.¹⁴

These developments take us a long way from the emerging class-conscious indignation that fired revolutionary artisanal protests in Nash’s

In 1983, Gary Nash, Billy Smith, and Dick Hoerder observed that “Artisans (also called tradesmen, craftsmen, and artificers) . . . were spread along nearly the entire spectrum of wealth in all cities . . . [and] ranged from the impecunious apprentice shoemakers to the wealthy master builders.” In 1995, Paul Gilje observed that historians continued to debate “exactly what social position mechanics occupied in the colonial period. Some scholars described artisans as would-be entrepreneurs; others saw them as more akin to common laborers and as the makings of an American working class.” Foner, *Tom Paine*, 28; Hermann Wellenreuther, “Rejoinder” to Gary B. Nash, Billy G. Smith, and Dirk Hoerder, “Labor in the Era of the American Revolution: An Exchange,” *Labor History* 24 (1983): 415–39; Rock, Gilje, and Asher, *American Artisans*, introduction.

¹² See Alan Taylor’s review of T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York, 2004), in *New Republic*, Feb. 26, 2004.

¹³ Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 183.

¹⁴ Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008); Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (New York, 2009); Sarah Knott, “Sensibility and the American War for Independence,” *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 19–41, and her *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Konstantin Dierks, “Middle-Class Formation in Eighteenth-Century North America,” in *Class Matters*, ed. Middleton and Smith, 99–108, and his *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009).

account and for his generation of social historians. Does this mean that *The Urban Crucible* has little left to teach us? If the example of recent writing on New York and, more broadly, on the future of cultural history are any indication, then it would seem not. Returning to our earlier theme, recent studies of eighteenth-century New York are content to invoke Nash's view of the structure and development of urban political economy.¹⁵ Moreover, one notable recent synthesis of eighteenth-century Anglo-American cultural history rehabilitates Thompson's characterization of prerevolutionary social relations as a "field of force" between patrician and plebeian poles that provided such a clear inspiration for Nash's own work. Locating the origins of the modern notion of selfhood, Dror Wahrman argues that it was only during the 1780s and later that the interiority and psychological depth that became essential features of the individualistic self displaced an earlier, more fluid and community-derived identity. In this earlier period, Wahrman further contends, there was no prior expectation of a correlation between social and political configurations of the kind that developed later in class politics.¹⁶

Nash and his generation may have been hasty in locating the dynamic of this transition in economic immiseration and struggles over material resources. Yet the generation of cultural historians who followed—and who grappled with other and related ethnic, gendered, and racial contexts—find themselves returning to similar questions. As Michael Meranze has argued, while there can be no turning back from the recognition that historical experience is mediated through linguistic and symbolic forms, cultural history needs to reflect on its conceptual roots and think about the ways in which culture figures as an agent in the construction and deployment of power as well as a less dynamic realm of value and resource. Commenting on recent and ongoing research, Meranze, like Wahrman, revisits problems raised by Thompson and investigated in the eighteenth-century American context by Nash—problems relating to distinctions between what is and what is not culture, to its particular historical forms,

¹⁵ Freed from this responsibility, recent studies have been able to focus on political language, tavern culture, gender, and consumption. See Simon Middleton, *From Privileges to Rights: Work and Politics in Colonial New York City* (Philadelphia, 2006), 229, 264, 267, 284–85; Benjamin Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York, 2007), 9–10, 235; Serena R. Zabin, *Dangerous Economies: Status and Commerce in Imperial New York* (Philadelphia, 2009).

¹⁶ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2004), 128, 146–52.

and to the processes through which it acts and is acted upon and history is made.¹⁷

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¹⁷ That Meranze makes these comments in an article summing up papers presented by mid-career and senior scholars at a seminar convened by the house journal of early American history to ponder whether the future of cultural history merely underscores their import; Michael Meranze, “Culture and Governance: Reflections on the Cultural History of Eighteenth-Century British America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 65 (2008): 713–44. E. P. Thompson argued in his review of Raymond Williams’s *Long Revolution* in 1961, “Any theory of culture must include a concept of the dialectical interaction between culture and something which is not culture. We must suppose the raw material of life-experience to be at one pole, and all the infinitely-complex human disciplines and systems, articulate and inarticulate, formalized in institutions or dispersed in the least formal ways, which ‘handle,’ transmit, or distort this raw material to be at the other. It is the active process—which is at the same time the process through which men make their history—that I am insisting upon.” In *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978; London, 1995), 289. The review first appeared in the *New Left Review* 9 and 10 (1961), emphasis in the original. Also see his “Folklore, Anthropology and Social History,” *Indian Historical Review* 3 (1978): 247–66, reprinted in E. P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics: Historical Essays by E. P. Thompson* (London, 1976). For a critique of social historians’ use of the culture concept that anticipates some of Meranze’s concerns, see Gerald M. Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (New York, 1986), preface; also William H. Sewell Jr., “The Concepts of Culture,” in *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn*, ed. Gabrielle M. Spiegel (London, 2005), 76–97.