

Reflections on The Urban Crucible

Commentaries

I AM GRATEFUL AND DEEPLY HONORED that the editor and editorial board of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* decided to devote space for this forum on *The Urban Crucible* thirty years after its publication. I also extend my thanks and appreciation to the five commentators for their thoughtful appraisals.

Billy G. Smith believes that *The Urban Crucible* would have benefited if I had connected the transition to capitalism in the northern seaports to Atlantic-wide and global changes that were played out on the eastern seaboard of North America as well as in the Caribbean, Central America, and other parts of the world. I agree. I should have known better after sitting at the feet of R. R. Palmer in my second year of graduate study at Princeton in 1960.

Smith is also spot-on about the insufficient treatment of women and gender relations in *The Urban Crucible*. I knew this was the case at the time, and I expressed my regrets in the preface that I would have to leave this task to others. Already, I had scuttled my intention to include Charleston, South Carolina, in the book when I saw that the project was careening out of hand. When chided on the sparse attention to women by Jean Soderlund at an OAH session on the book more than a decade ago, I pleaded that while trying to feature race and class, I was incapable of pulling off what's known in figure skating as a triple axel. In the thirty years since the book's debut, gender and women's historians have leaped into this breach, producing a wealth of studies to my great satisfaction. What I could not do at least provided an open door through which others could stride. Twenty years later, working on *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*, I tried not to repeat this omission. Indeed, the role of women in the tumultuous revolutionary era is one of the main strands of the book.

John Murrin raises an interesting question, sparked by Benjamin Carp's provocative notion, as to whether Boston, New York, and Philadelphia lost their political influence during the British military

occupation and regained little of it after peace returned in 1783. I cannot answer this question with certainty. After *The Urban Crucible* came off the press in 1979, I contemplated a sequel volume that would carry the analysis forward from 1776 to the advent of the Jefferson presidency. That was never to be, as I turned instead to a study of the free black community that emerged in Philadelphia—the largest in the nation for half a century after the American Revolution—and to other projects. I hope that a younger scholar will do just such a *comparative* study. If one does, he or she will no doubt address the question of the leverage of the cities on the politics of their hinterlands. But my conditional understanding is that the cities *did* regain their political heft. This was harder in New York City because the long British occupation squelched political organizing and political influence. But in Philadelphia and Boston, where the British occupation was brief—less than a year in Boston and nine months in Philadelphia—the case was very different. And after peace returned, the rapid growth of the cities, accompanied by the gathering of legal, financial, and mercantile elites, expressed itself in political terms. Indeed, New York and Philadelphia became the nation's capitals for the remainder of the eighteenth century, and in both cities, as well as in Boston, the rapid influx of immigrants, many of them fervently politicized Irish émigrés, added fuel to the growing class resentments and highly charged politics of the early nineteenth century.

Ronald Schultz's *Republic of Labor* is but one example of how the seaboard urban centers remained crucibles of political organizing and political protesting in the era of emerging two-party politics.¹ In his *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution*, Carp proposes that “it was uncertain whether they [the cities] would ever again play so crucial a role in political mobilization and the advancement of democratic ideas and practices.”² Certainly, it was uncertain. But just as certainly, as centers of pamphlet and newspaper publishing, as centers of labor organizing, and as centers of immigration, the seaboard cities remained vortexes of radical ideas, class tensions, and “out-of-doors” politics. The state capitals of New York and Pennsylvania found new climes in Albany and Harrisburg, but New York City and Philadelphia, as well as Boston,

¹ Ronald Schultz, *The Republic of Labor: Philadelphia Artisans and the Politics of Class, 1720–1830* (New York, 1993).

² Benjamin L. Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York, 2007), 22, 213.

remained vibrant centers of political mobilization among the lower classes and schools of political education.

Or so I think. But let's hope that a younger historian, equipped with strong eyes and the kind of data-extracting computer programs that were not available in the late 1960s and 1970s, will answer this central question. Today's ambitious historian who will take on this task will have access to richer municipal records, more complete tax lists, and denser probate records and will find far more traces of female involvement in urban affairs. With these materials for studying the postrevolutionary period at his or her disposal, the urban historian can navigate through waters that are still largely uncharted. Climbing out on a limb, I will venture a guess that the earnest scholar will find that concentrated economic power rarely emerges without the quest for equivalent political power, as we know down to the present day. So I will be surprised if the seaboard cities are found to have descended into political quietude at the same time they were becoming, as in the colonial period, arsenals of economic strength and sites of contention as the postrevolutionary generation approached the industrial era.

The matter of my tendencies toward economic determinism comes up in several of the current reviewers' comments, particularly those from Benjamin Carp and Simon Middleton. Carp quotes my early mentor and long-time friend, Richard Dunn, who indeed, when reading a draft of *The Urban Crucible*, found my analysis "too much [that] of an economic determinist."³ This has led to some banter between us, but it raises an important question. My own reading of Dunn's classic *Sugar and Slaves* convinced me that I was less condemnatory of the urban elite in late colonial society than he was of the British West Indian slave owners. I also believe that his account, supplemented since then in a series of essays comparing Jamaican and Virginian slavery, has all the earmarks of a Marxian analysis. Among the central themes he develops, after all, are the commodification of coerced and degraded labor, the drive to maximize profits, the seizing of the state apparatus to implement the economic ambitions of the wealthy or would-be wealthy, and the impoverishing of those at the bottom of the capitalist class structure. Dunn was an idealist when studying Puritan culture but an economic determinist when study-

³ Richard S. Dunn, "Reminiscences of Gary B. Nash," in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover, NH, 1999), 301–2.

ing the brutal coffee and sugar regimes of the West Indies. The same can be said of Edmund Morgan: an idealist in his lavish studies of Puritanism but a near-Marxist in *American Slavery, American Freedom*.⁴

But what do we mean by economic determinism? In the preface to *The Urban Crucible*, I explained the influence of E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams on my thinking and on the difference between rigid Marxist theory and the more pliable understanding of how economic forces, much in the vein of the American Progressive historians, influenced politics and shaped values and ideas but did not determine them absolutely. I continue to uphold my formulation expressed in the preface that many urban Americans, during the period from about 1680 to 1776, “came to perceive antagonistic divisions based on economic and social position; that they began to struggle around these conflicting interests; and that through these struggles they developed a consciousness of class” (x). This was not the class formation that Marx studied, for the mature class formation of his industrial era had not yet been reached. I followed Thompson—his *The Making of the English Working Class* was key to my thinking—in his argument that it was wrong to think “that classes exist, independent of historical relationship and struggle, and that they struggle *because* they exist, rather than coming into existence out of that struggle.”⁵

If Thompson was an inspiration on how to treat the working people in their quest for equality, social justice, and dignity, my theoretical model on the source of ideas and the interaction of ideas and daily practice was Karl Mannheim. As I explained at a conference organized by two of the essayists above, Billy G. Smith and Simon Middleton, I, like Dunn and Morgan, had never read more than small fragments of Marx’s work and certainly never read him systematically. I had smoked a little Marx, as I said at this conference, but never inhaled.⁶ What I *had* inhaled was Karl Mannheim, whose work still serves to great benefit. More philosopher and sociologist than historian, Mannheim put a new face on what is often deplored as economic determinism. “Modes of thought,” he wrote in

⁴ I have appraised this essay literature in “The Work of Richard Dunn,” *Pennsylvania History* 64 (1997): 11–25. See also, Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1972); and Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975).

⁵ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1964), x–xi.

⁶ More on this in Nash, “Class in Early American History: A Personal Journey,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1 (winter 2004): 15–26.

Ideology and Utopia, first published in German in 1929 when he taught at the universities of Frankfurt and Heidelberg, “. . . cannot be adequately understood as long as their social origins are obscured.” Or, “In every concept, in every concrete meaning, there is contained a crystallization of the experiences of a certain group.” Or, “Thought has always been the expression of group life and group action (except for highly academic thinking which for a time was able to insulate itself from active life).” Or, “Political discussion is, from the very first, more than theoretical argumentation; it is the tearing off of disguises—the unmasking of those unconscious motives which bind the group existence to its cultural aspirations and its theoretical arguments.” Mannheim calls all of this “a sociological approach,” one that “puts an end to the fiction of the detachment of the individual from the group, within the matrix of which the individual thinks and experiences.”⁷ His formulation applies not only to the lower class; it applies to all. Moreover, his emphasis on social origins, social experiences, and social contexts suggests far more than strict economic status or occupation, more than wages and wealth accumulation. This is what I understood to be the connection between ideology and political action as I read every printed pamphlet, broadside, diary entry, newspaper essay, sermon, and letter that I could find. What I could no longer accept was the proposition that an idea or an idea-driven action could stand apart from social experience—and that economic factors constituted a weighty part of that experience.

Others in the history profession were unsettled by my sociological (rather than Marxian) analysis of the urban centers in the late colonial period. But their criticisms were mild compared to the outcry of conservative op-ed writers when the National History Standards came off the press in 1994, fifteen years after Harvard University Press first published *The Urban Crucible*. The U.S. standards, the work of hundreds of teachers and historians and vetted and approved by thirty organizations involved in history education, brought yowls of protest from those who saw American history being rewritten in ways they believed demoted the primacy of white Protestant males of the upper echelon and elevated the agency of ordinary people, whether women, whites with roughened hands, African Americans, immigrants from all points on the compass, or otherwise unnoticed Americans. Even implications that America was

⁷ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, 1936), 2, 22, 39, 28.

something other than a classless society, always full of equal opportunity and social fairness, was an affront.

One case will suffice to illustrate this point. One standard read: "Demonstrate understanding of the principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence." Appended were examples of "student achievement" in meeting this standard. One read: "Draw evidence from biographies to examine the lives of individuals who were in the forefront of the struggle for independence such as Sam Adams, Thomas Paine, Mercy Otis Warren, and Ebenezer MacIntosh." Adams, Paine, and Warren were known to most teachers and much of the history-reading public. MacIntosh, a poor shoemaker, was not. Teachers wanted him included because he was the street leader of the fiery Stamp Act protests in Boston that all but reduced the stamp distributor's and lieutenant governor's houses to rubble. Emerging from the shadows of proper Bostonian life, MacIntosh was representative of lower-class figures largely forgotten by historians but known to every Bostonian of his day. The historian Alfred Young had done much research on MacIntosh, and I had featured him in chapter 11 of *The Urban Crucible* for his central role in the first mass urban protests against British policies after 1763 that led eventually to the American Revolution.

John Leo, columnist for *U.S. News & World Report*, exploded. In an essay titled "The Hijacking of American History," he found it offensive to suggest that precollegiate students explore the life of someone who was "a brawling street lout," an "anti-elitist, anti-oppression, and pro-uprising gang member," a man who "fits right in as a sort of early Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin."⁸ For Leo the revolution might better have been fought without revolutionaries. A descendant of MacIntosh wrote indignantly to *U.S. News & World Report* that his ancestor was no street lout but a brave man leading the opposition to liberty-killing English policies. I took great satisfaction that an ordinary cobbler who commanded the cobblestone streets of Boston in the 1770s had entered the public consciousness. A bit of *The Urban Crucible* had seeped into the National History Standards and became part of a lengthy debate over what young Americans should learn about the nation's past.

Simon Middleton's comments raise important questions about the tra-

⁸ For more on this, and additional quotes from Leo, see Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York, 1997), 191–92, 203–4.

jectory of studies of the colonial seaboard cities. First is the sheer magnitude of the work over the last three decades. Focusing mainly on New York City, Middleton cites sixteen books and dissertations published since 1979; if we add about twenty others on Philadelphia and Boston (the latter is the least furrowed soil) and hundreds of articles, nothing less than a deluge of scholarly work on the cities has appeared in the last generation. When I began research on *The Urban Crucible* in 1966, Carl Bridenbaugh's two books were the beginning, and nearly the end, of what was available.⁹ No longer can we say that the colonial and revolutionary American cities are understudied.

Second, Middleton draws attention to the study of the middle class, which has surely come into fashion. In the United States, where studies of poverty, exploitation, and degradation have not been popular and have often offended the public that prefers to believe in a golden American past, studies of gentility, material consumption, and entrepreneurialism have thus enjoyed greater favor. In *The Urban Crucible*, I had noted that artisans ranged from the very bottom of urban society—say, a poor shoemaker—to well into the upper class—say, a master carpenter who owned real estate and designed houses as well as built them. I had not entirely ignored the “middling sort,” I maintain, and I believe it mistaken to say that the book is organized simplistically around “the binary social division of patrician and plebeian.”¹⁰ Nor did I cast all those who worked with their hands as antiliberal or anticapitalistic. Many artisans, and even more small shopkeepers, embraced the market economy in contrast to the “moral economy,” as E. P. Thompson called the anticapitalistic ethic of the early modern period.

However, I concede that the attention to the middling ranks in recent years has added greatly to what I had to say. It is notable that most of the studies cited by Middleton focus on the language, consumption patterns, gender relations, and material culture of the middle class. Thus, most of the historians he cites can be called cultural rather than social historians. What they have not studied is mobility in and out of the middle ranks, generational patterns of wealth accumulation or wealth disinvestment, ethnic and religious components of middle-class attainment, and occupa-

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ Simon Middleton, “Artisans’ and the ‘Middling Sort’ in Gary Nash’s Eighteenth-Century Urban America,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 133 (2009): 418.

tional pathways to middling status. This is the work of social historians, work of the type that Stuart Blumin did three decades ago in his study of nineteenth-century Philadelphia. This is harder, more eye-straining, and tedious work to do, requiring vast investments of time extracting and processing data from tax, probate, church, and real estate records. Yet who would disagree with Middleton that these new cultural studies, basically eschewing the kind of quantitative analysis that goes with social history, have added much in informing us on “the importance of civility, sensibility, and changing notions of masculinity [and femininity] in the development of the egalitarian discourse of natural rights.”¹¹

Richard Newman’s comments on my treatment of slavery in *The Urban Crucible* (but even more in his discussion of my *Forging Freedom*) are sure-handed. He is right that I treated slavery episodically in *The Urban Crucible* and did not weave it deftly enough into my account of the development of the maritime-based economies of the port cities. He is also on target in noting that I did not make African Americans distinct actors and that “their experiences had still to be delineated.”¹² If I was starting over again on this study of the northern seaport centers, this is the first area where I would dig in deeper, not only to disinter the lives of African Americans but to show how slavery and the slave trade underpinned the maritime economies and were woven into the social, cultural, political, and ideological urban patterns of life. Subsequent work—including notable books by Shane White, Jill Lepore, Richard Newman, James Horton and Lois Horton, Leslie Harris, Thelma Foote, Graham Hodges, Craig Wilder, David Gellman, Julie Winch, and Erica Dunbar—has gone a long way toward remedying this to my great satisfaction.¹³ Still, what we have are collective portraits and collective experi-

¹¹ Middleton, “Artisans’ and the ‘Middling Sort,’” 421.

¹² Richard S. Newman, “Another Urban Crucible: Gary Nash and the New Black Urbanism,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 133 (2009): 425.

¹³ Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens, GA, 1991); White, *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York, 2005); Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York, 2008); James Oliver Horton, *Free People of Color: Inside the African American Community* (Washington, DC, 1993); James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1865* (New York, 1997); Horton and Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North*, rev. ed. (New York, 1999); Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2003); Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863*

ences, not distinct actors and actresses. This is because the sources on enslaved and free black colonists are limited and fragile, though some historians, such as Sidney Kaplan, Vincent Carretta, Timothy Breen, Robert Desrochers, Graham Hodges, and this author, have found material to bring to life the black subaltern part of the population—a fifth of the whole.¹⁴ I tried to incorporate much of this in *The Unknown American Revolution*.¹⁵

It is commonplace to say today that the linguistic turn, the advent of poststructuralism, and the rise of multicultural approaches to history have elbowed class analysis aside, a matter that several of the contributors to this forum comment upon. Some historians today believe that class is no longer a useful explanatory category. No, class is and always will be vital to historical interpretation this side of utopia. Six years ago, a conference in the mountains of Montana, not far from Yellowstone National Park, testified to that truth. Organized by two of the contributors to this discussion of *The Urban Crucible* (Middleton and Smith), the meetings attracted some ninety scholars from three continents, twenty-eight of them presenting class-oriented papers on the preindustrial world. The quality of the essays became clear when nearly all of them were accepted for publication in issues of *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, and in a volume edited by Middleton and Smith and published last year by the University of

(Chapel Hill, NC, 1999); Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665–1865* (Madison, WI, 1997); Craig S. Wilder, *A Covenant with Color: Race and Social Power in Brooklyn* (New York, 2000); Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York, 2001); Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York, 2002); David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2006); Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City* (New Haven, CT, 2008).

¹⁴ Sidney Kaplan and Emma Nogrady Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution*, rev. ed. (Amherst, MA, 1989); Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: A Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens, GA, 2005); T. H. Breen, “Making History: The Force of Public Opinion and the Last Years of Slavery in Revolutionary Massachusetts,” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 67–95; Robert E. Desrochers Jr., “‘Not Fade Away’: The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic,” *Journal of American History* 84 (1997): 40–66; and Gary B. Nash and Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Friends of Liberty: Thomas Jefferson, Tadeuz Kosciuszko, and Agrippa Hull: A Tale of Three Patriots, Two Revolutions, and a Tragic Betrayal of Freedom in the New Nation* (New York, 2008).

¹⁵ Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York, 2005).

Pennsylvania Press.¹⁵ At that conference, where hand-wringing about the decline of class-based studies was often expressed, I had commented that “class is not dead and perhaps never sickened.” The vibrancy of the conference and the number of attendees and participants testified to that. Since then, to judge by recent publications and works in progress, class is far from disappearing as an analytic category in early American studies.¹⁶ That gives me hope that *The Urban Crucible* has not reached the end of its road.

University of California, Los Angeles
Emeritus

GARY B. NASH

¹⁵ Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith, eds., *Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2008).

¹⁶ One example—casting modesty aside—is the forthcoming volume of essays, edited by Alfred F. Young, Ray Raphael, and myself. Titled *Revolutionary Founders: Crusaders for Democracy, Equal Rights, and Liberty and the Promise of the American Revolution* (New York, forthcoming, 2011), the book contains twenty-three biographical essays in which class analysis figures prominently.