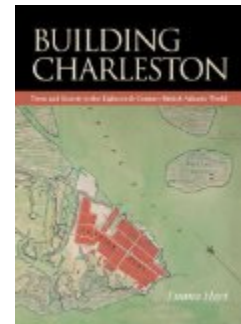


Emma Hart. *Building Charleston: Town and Society in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. xii + 274 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2867-8.

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## Capitalism and Curtain-Twitching in Colonial Charleston

It is surprising that until Emma Hart's *Building Charleston* we have lacked a modern study of the foundation and early history of the largest town in the colonial South, the fourth-largest in the colonies, and one of the top forty urban communities in the Atlantic world. Asked to account for this gap in the literature some colonial historians might venture that as a town defined by the services it provided the surrounding slave and staples economy, Charleston was more of a plantation satellite than an urban setting, with a particular character and history—like its better-studied mid Atlantic and New England peers. Historians have long considered New York, Philadelphia, and Boston worthy of investigation in their own right, seeing them as crucibles for the development of market culture and revolutionary ideology and settings for the emergence of distinctive class, gendered, and racial identities. But Charleston? This is the wrong that Hart sets out to right. If one were to sum up her central claim, it is that Charleston was much more than a staples town and from early in its history rice was not the only root of the urban economy, any more than race was the predominant feature in its social life and divisions. In addition to its function as an entrepôt, receiving slaves and imported household goods and exporting plantation products, Charleston flourished because of its provinciality, its status as a critical geographic nexus which, no less than Cambridge or Canterbury, brought together people, resources, and services that generated a local, middling, and mostly prosperous population. This urban middling sort, much discussed in English histori-

ography upon which Hart draws and forerunners of the middle class, are the protagonists in this study of the settlement's social, economic, and cultural development from the late seventeenth century through to the era of the American Revolution.

The book, based on Hart's Johns Hopkins University doctoral dissertation, is presented in six chapters. Chapter 1 tells of the founding of the settlement and its early difficulties owing to disease and a lack of trade before the growth of slavery and the staples economy transformed its fortunes. Chapter 2 traces the way in which staples provided a foundation for an ancillary economy which gradually acquired a purpose and momentum of its own and which by the middle of the eighteenth century offered urban residents a "staggering variety" of household and luxury goods, only some of which were directed towards the planter elite. Chapter 3 focuses on the city's physical growth and, in particular, on house building and ownership, which became a key focus for middle-class ambition and prosperity. Urban development and house building also inspired increasingly complex financial and legal institutions and practices, further adding to the city's emerging urban character. Chapter 4 traces the evidence of this growth and prosperity in the city's social structure wherein, by the mid eighteenth century, the richest 10 percent owned half of all taxable property and the poorest 25 percent shared less than 1 percent. This level of inequality placed Charleston ahead of other colonial towns such as Boston. But in a revealing

reading of the statistics Hart argues that the breakdown left approximately 65 percent of the population sharing roughly 45 percent of city wealth. This distribution of taxable wealth indicated that there were ample opportunities for advancement amongst the urban middling sort independent of the staples economy from which it originally derived. Chapter 5 explores the cultural expression of these economic foundations and social structure and, in particular, the emergence of the city's middling sort, elements of which articulated sober ideals of self-control and took a dim view of the dissolute habits of some of the planter elite. The final chapter traces the influence of these middling sentiments into the era of the American Revolution, questioning the established view of civic harmony under elite, planter leadership. In fact, according to Hart, the increasingly confident and self-assured urban middling sort did not always defer to those above and shared with their English provincial peers a distrust of crowds and lower-sort mobs. Anticipating the reform campaigns of the early republic, they advocated strong local government and action in education and civic discipline, which became bound up with questions of tax and empire.

Hart is clearly concerned with the question of class formation as it relates to middling householders, artisans, and petty dealers, but not in the way it was addressed by social and labor historians in the 1960s through 1980s. For if part of her aim is to capture the life and times of this entrepreneurial and urbane middling sort independent of the surrounding slave economy, a second and related ambition seems to be to liberate them from the ranks of those whom previous scholars considered the source of radical and socially-leveling political principles aimed, for the most part, at the colonial gentry and emerging ruling class. In this she follows a generation of English historians who have challenged the binary division of the eighteenth century, usually associated with E. P. Thompson and his acolytes, into plebeians and patricians, drawing inspiration, instead, from studies of the eighteenth-century urban renaissance and rise of politeness, "men of feeling," and sensibility. It is in this pursuit that Hart urges a particular and nuanced reading of the meaning of colonial provinciality and the formation of genteel culture. Once historians described a process of mere emulation, with colonists styling themselves after metropolitan, mostly London, norms of taste and etiquette. But taking her lead from British historians and also colonial scholars such as Ned Landsman, Hart proposes that middling and elite colonists looked to metropolitan manners but also "nurtured values that

sprang from their local situation" (p. 131). It is in tracing the origins of this Southern urban middling-class identity and its social, cultural, and economic negotiations that *Building Charleston* makes its original and significant contribution to urban history and our understanding of the composite character of notions of eighteenth-century gentility and refinement.

There may be some, however, who will wonder about the tenor of some of these arguments and their relationship to earlier historiography. Early on Hart notes in passing the contentious debates concerning the transition to capitalism, which she quickly dispenses with as a "loaded term," electing thereafter "to concentrate on the nuts and bolts of economic change" (p. 213, notes 25 and 26). Her survey begins with an arguably quirky review of the establishment of the colony under the Lords Proprietors' Fundamental Constitution, a document which many historians have long considered feudalistic in intent and an illiberal stain on the reputation of its otherwise radical author, John Locke, which some have sought to erase.[1] Hart, by contrast, considers the plan for settlement as "among America's more idealistic" founding texts, imagining an "enlightened society of nobles and commoners" which was "too radical" for its day (pp. 18, 22). Whatever principles and ideals filled the heads of Charleston's Lords Proprietors, "profit triumphed over principle" (p. 17) and thereafter the market and, it has to be said, the staples economy transformed the backwater settlement into a thriving colonial town (p. 39). Thereafter commercial opportunities nurtured agency and drove prosperity. Where some studies of northern urban and rural communities have described markets and merchants as agents of not always harmonious change, for example in the transformation of earlier communal and/or civic orders and rise of greater inequality, for Charleston's middling sort the story is mostly one of advantages, security, and contentment. Their participation in the Atlantic trade and desire for fashionable and comfortable housing introduced more "capitalist practices" (p. 66) in the building industry as they threw off the fetters of corporate control and encouraged entrepreneurship within increasingly complex commercial and financial frameworks. Even the social differentiation which gave Charleston its egregious social and economic inequality was a product of the opportunities taken by some rather than the disadvantages suffered by others as the shrewd and industrious rose to the top (p. 99).

As one proceeds it becomes clear that "the nuts and bolts of economic change" generally implies the expan-

sion of a market economy that provides for the urban middling sort's success in social and cultural spheres. Consumption is an important part of this story, creating new desires to be serviced by innovative craft production and encouraging commodity exchange and social mobility. But in telling this tale Hart is arguably not simply avoiding getting bogged down in earlier arguments, so much as bypassing them altogether in favor of an earlier account of the ineluctable development of profit-minded pursuits in a colonial American setting. Historians of every ideological stripe have long accepted that colonial Americans, like other early moderns, worked hard and produced for gain. But they did so in legal and ethical contexts that stressed, for example, customary rights or community obligations which, along with market opportunities and limitations, contributed to the distinctive economic culture for which historians have latterly developed metaphors of "competitive household," "competence," and "composite farms" in an effort to get a better grip on the specific and contemporary meanings of terms such as individual, exchange, and interests.[2]

In short, the early modern period, roughly 1500-1800, witnessed a transformation of economic culture for which the idea of "transition" is now doubtless inadequate, but which it is dangerous to opt out of if the consequence is falling back on the earlier anachronism of the casting of the neoclassical liberal figure, homo economicus, back in time. And there are moments when one feels this danger, perhaps in part because of the singular focus on the middling sort and the "values of hard work, discipline and prudence" (p. 8) that differentiated them from their impecunious neighbors and underpinned their success. Can, or should, we study the formation of the middling sort and their economic opportunities and prosperity abstracted from the backbreaking toil of plantation slaves and the poverty that pocked the mid-century city? One wants to know more, for example, about urban power relations and how the middling sort related to those we glimpse only occasionally: the slaves deployed by middling owners (pp. 127-129), the men and women who labored under difficult circumstances (p. 109), especially beginning in the 1740s when the population doubled and those claiming poor relief trebled (pp. 124 and 234, note 59). Although it may have come too late for Hart to consider, a recent study that offers a darker but perhaps more compelling view of the formation of a colonial urban middle class considers consumption to have

been as much about enhancing status and earning power as it was about fulfilling desires. And in the acquisition of skills such as conversation and letter writing the colonial middling sort fashioned social power that was as effective as it was self-effacing, providing for agency and opportunities that could be actively denied to others.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); and Holly Brewer, "Slavery, Sovereignty, and 'Inheritable Blood': The Struggle Over Locke's Virginia Plan of 1698," in Peter Thompson and Peter Onuf, eds., *Citizenship and State Formation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, forthcoming).

[2]. For the sociocultural elements that made early modern economic culture distinctive see, for example, Allan Kulikoff, *Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992); Richard Lyman Bushman, "Markets and Composite Farms in Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (1998): 351-74; Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998); and Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1990): 3-29, whom Hart also cites but whom I would claim for my critique, as evidenced by his recent reiteration of the distinctiveness of early modern economic culture in "Errors Expected: The Culture of Credit in Rural New England, 1750-1801," *Economic History Review* 63, no. 4 (2010): 1032-57.

[3]. Konstantin Diercks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009). Also excellent, and helpful in extending our view of the middling sort, are two other studies from Bloomington-based scholars: Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); and Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), especially, in this context, the latter's rehabilitation of Thompson's view of eighteenth-century social relations as a "field of force" between patrician and plebeian poles (see 146-160).

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