

*Consumerism and the Emergence of the Middle Class in Colonial America*

CHRISTINA J. HODGE

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Christina Hodge's book *Consumerism and the Emergence of the Middle Class in Colonial America* deserves accolades and should be required reading for historical archaeologists throughout the Northeast and beyond. It is based on Hodge's dissertation research conducted as part of Salve Regina University's excavations at the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard site in Newport, Rhode Island. Unlike all too many dissertations that have been reworked into first books and suffer from turgid prose, poor organization, and are peppered with unreadable jargon, this volume is a gem.

Hodge posits that refined practices, which were limited to the upper classes in the early 18th century, soon spread to other social classes and became widespread, helping to transform American values. In essence, Hodge argues that the refinement we associate with the 18th century was not limited to society's elite. Moreover, she contradicts the accepted historical and historical archaeological wisdom that gentility, like wealth, trickled down from elites to the middling sort, who would eventually become America's middle class. Hodge terms her thesis, "partible refinement" and defines it to mean, "selective, idiosyncratic, partial adoption of fined and genteel practices" (p. xviii).

Hodge illuminates this through a case study based on the home of Elizabeth Pratt, a shopkeeper from early 18th-century Newport, Rhode Island. Hodge's richly contextual study shows us how one woman and her daughters and sons-in-law participated in the "global flow of commodities and ideas" (p. xx). The study is an archaeological ethnography and also an example of microhistory, but tied to larger social, cultural, and economic contexts.

Hodge begins the first chapter by outlining the methodological and theoretical bases of her study. Her work is a material ethnography that is shaped by practice theory. It builds from earlier historical approaches to gentility, but eschews the notion that competitive emulation and acquisition were deterministic. For Hodge gentility was never complete even among the upper layers of society, instead it was partible and selectively practiced. After reviewing archaeological approaches to gentility she changes gears and examines archaeology at the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House, Newport's oldest extant historic house, and the adjacent Wood Lot, the site of the home and shop of widow Elizabeth Pratt from 1723 to 1749. Tightly dated deposits allow Hodge to examine the Pratt occupation, especially deposits from an 18th-century privy that was closed down ca. 1750 and a midden or trash accumulation from the lot's west side.

Chapter 2 looks at gentility and consumerism in early America. Consumerism's relationship to the ranked world of colonial America is also examined

as is the social construction of gender during the 18th century.

The third chapter, “Living Spaces,” begins broadly by examining the history of Newport. Newport was a prominent port with a rich overseas trade focused on rum, molasses, and slaves. After providing a broad context Hodge drills down more deeply to examine Elizabeth Pratt. Married to a saddler, she was the mother of four daughters, two of whom survived to adulthood. She was widowed and chose to pursue life as a shopkeeper, using her house on Wood Street as a store, though she also rented other shops.

The chapter then moves to an examination of the archaeology of the Pratt household, starting with a discussion of the house itself based on archaeological and contextual information. Pratt had a small house with a rather untidy yard and a privy that went uncleaned and shows considerable evidence of parasitic remains. Hodge writes well, and the reader feels as though they are walking through the house with her. Hodge provides rich contexts for the artifacts recovered at the site, which will be useful to readers. While many of the artifacts were everyday finds, there were some extraordinary pieces such as a molded ball clay cherub’s head. The possibility of some artifacts being associated with enslaved African Americans is also discussed, and the presence of the enslaved Dinah is discussed in the context of glass and stone beads. Dinah’s story becomes an important story within the larger narrative regarding the Pratt site.

The fourth chapter looks at ceramics and glass. Hodge introduces the chapter with a quote from Arjun Appadurai, which notes that even “what looks like a homogenous bulk item of extremely limited

semantic range” (p. 74) such as sugar, can be construed as luxurious or commonplace, depending on the historical situation. Hodge is specifically interested in understanding what the ceramic purchases meant. Plant remains as well as faunal remains are also examined. The discussion of beverage consumption—tea, coffee, chocolate, wine, and punch—is richly nuanced and tied to gender roles. It is this sort of detailed discussion of artifacts that makes the book so valuable.

Chapter 5, “Shopkeeping,” provides a wealth of information about what the fashionable and the less so wore in mid-18th-century Newport. Widow Pratt’s shop stock was largely in textiles and clothing, and her role as a middling entrepreneur connected by trade to the broader Atlantic world reinforces her importance as merchant, consumer, and taste-shaper. Although archaeologists are unlikely to find fragments of “worsted camblet”—a lightweight woolen cloth used in both men’s and women’s clothing—the descriptive and historical information provides a much richer view of colonial life and fashion than most archaeological studies. Moreover, Hodge talks about how clothing could serve individuals as “an act of control and redefinition” (p. 141). She continues by noting that “communities are produced through the circulation and mutual appreciation of objects” (p. 144). Hodge emphasizes social structures as multivalent webs, a productive and thoughtful way of understanding society.

Chapter 6, “Legacies of the Genteel Revolution,” begins with a deep analysis of the cover art, a 1793 painting by William Redmore Bigg titled “A Poor Old Woman’s Comfort.” Hodge’s analysis of this painting shows that it is more complicated than it

initially appears and in so doing illustrates her focus on partible refinement among people of the middling sorts.

Hodge's fine book is a significant contribution to American historical archaeology and provides a new approach to understanding consumption. Rather than top down or Marxist approaches that tend to reduce middling consumers to automatons blindly aping the upper classes, Hodge is able to illustrate the agency and complexity of consumption in early America. She is at her best discussing the theoretical underpinnings of her work and providing detailed contextual analyses of artifacts. The complicated

family history and tribulations of Elizabeth Pratt, her daughters, and their husbands can be hard to follow. But one suspects their actual lives were even more complicated. This book is a major contribution to the historical archaeological literature and will be an excellent book to teach from. One hopes that Cambridge University press issues a paperback edition to make it more accessible to folks of the middling sort from the 21st century.

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