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978-1-107-03439-6 - Consumerism and the Emergence of the Middle Class in Colonial America

Christina J. Hodge

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CONSUMERISM AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN COLONIAL AMERICA

This interdisciplinary study presents compelling evidence for a revolutionary idea: that to understand the historical entrenchment of gentility in America, we must understand its creation among non-elite people: colonial middling sorts who laid the groundwork for the later American middle class. Focusing on the daily life of Widow Elizabeth Pratt, a shopkeeper from early-eighteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island, Christina J. Hodge uses material remains as a means of reconstructing not only how Mrs. Pratt lived, but also how objects reflect shifting class and gender relationships in this period. Challenging the “emulation thesis,” a common assumption that wealthy elites led fashion and culture change while middling sorts only followed, Hodge shows how middling consumers were in fact discerning cultural leaders, adopting genteel material practices earlier and more aggressively than is commonly thought. By focusing on the rise and emergence of the middle class, this book brings new insights into the evolution of consumerism, class, and identity in colonial America. Despite the central importance of the middling sorts to cultural transformations of the eighteenth century – including consumerism, merchant capitalism, and urbanization – this is the first major study dedicated to the material culture of their daily lives.

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*This book is dedicated to my mother, Janice M. Hodge,
and to my father, Barry R. Hodge.*

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P R E F A C E

Vivent les revolutions

How did refined practices that were exclusive at the start of the eighteenth century become common necessity by its end, transforming American values into the nineteenth century and beyond? The life of Elizabeth Pratt, an English widow and shopkeeper who lived in Newport, Rhode Island, from about 1720 to 1750, both raises and addresses this vital question. The archaeological and documentary residues of Pratt's life are remarkably rich. They provide compelling evidence for a revolutionary idea: that the eighteenth century's iconic refinements were never exclusive to society's elite. This notion runs contrary to entrenched assumptions about gentility's top-down promulgation during the early modern period. I argue, instead, that we must understand gentility's creation among *non*-elite people: in particular, the colonial middling sorts who laid the cultural groundwork for the later American middle class.

Even in the early to mid-eighteenth century, middling sorts selectively used refined practices to situate themselves in relation to ideological expectations of "gentility," which they simultaneously defined. "Partible refinement" – their selective, idiosyncratic, partial adoption of refined and genteel practices – was not a paradox to be reconciled or discounted. Rather, it was a powerful engine driving fashion and the Consumer Revolution itself. This conclusion offers a new perspective on lived status and the mythos of colonial gentility, undermining any notion of a singular, generative elite culture against which others were, or should be, measured.

The foundations of the American middle class and the simultaneous emergence of a recognizable consumer society may be traced to the eighteenth century. Certain ideals, values, behaviors, and tastes that condensed during that period underpin much of American culture, and its middle-class style of life, today: standards such as being clean, being polite, dressing well for formal occasions, keeping track of time, setting the table for individual dining, reserving rooms in our homes for particular

uses, expressing personal aspirations through the things we buy, and ascribing particular kinds of household roles and authority to men and women. Cultural practices that work to maintain the American middle class (or its veneer) now seem so essential they are commonly taken for granted. Acrimonious debate, anxiety, and alterity, however, lie behind both our current world order and the nineteenth-century rise of the middle class. Foundational to this history are the partible refinements of America's eighteenth-century middling sorts – their selective adoption of fashionable, refined practices that signaled a deep investment in genteel values.

The energy and pace with which life changed in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world has long inspired historians to define the period through its “revolutions”: consumer, capitalist, secular, scientific, agrarian, domestic, and industrial. A reconception of individuals and families; the violent emergence of national identities in America, France, and beyond; redefinitions of race, class, and gender; and early transformations in trade, industry, and agriculture are all studied within a revolutionary rubric. The framework of revolution foregrounds radical shifts – upheavals that birthed the modern (and postmodern) world. It captures our imagination, and it captures both the uncertainty and momentousness of the times.

During the eighteenth century, divisions between status groups – varieties of upper, middling, and lower sorts of people – were among those social structures radically remade through daily practices. Being à la mode in appearance, manners, and understanding was widely desirable. In a time of growing consumerism and shifting wealth, however, social cleavages were increasingly difficult to define, let alone police. Too often, scholars treat emerging refined, genteel, and fashionable practices as a totalizing package – and an “elite” one at that. In practice, however, “elite” and “genteel” were not synonyms. This historical archaeological study of Elizabeth Pratt, a widow and shopkeeper in colonial Newport, Rhode Island, suggests that gentility retained its symbolic power even in division, partition, and selective adoption. Middling sorts generated their own, demonstrably successful, formulations of gentility that were partial and selective.

The demand side of the Consumer Revolution is more significant than the supply to the study of partible refinements. At the individual level, consumption is fundamentally about desire and aspiration, as well as about stabilizing one's sense of self with respect to group identities (Mullins, 2011). New goods organized new kinds of desire, provoked new fantasies, shaped new economies, created meaning through new epistemologies (Brown, 2003: 12). Middling sorts were early adopters in some areas of life but not in others. Their choices (1) deviated both from ideal metropolitan models and elite colonial neighbors and (2) integrated genteel values into the cultural identity of the middle social rank as strongly as the upper. These developments occurred during the first half of the eighteenth century, generations before most scholars recognize a widespread genteel culture or study the emergence of an American middle class. Elizabeth Pratt's life and times, therefore, describe an

additional eighteenth-century revolution: the “Genteel Revolution,” in which people in the middle social strata became invested – demonstrably, transformatively, knowingly – in emergent genteel values but adopted only some related practices. Consumable things, activated within particular social spaces, mediated this process. Therefore, archaeological and documentary evidence reveals the entrenchment of gentility through middling sorts’ selective material refinements.

The contours of these partible refinements were locally defined with reference to widely shared values, creating ideological cohesion within a field of diverse improvisational practices. This process was selective and contextual, and it cannot adequately be captured through the language of emulation, oppression, false consciousness, or ideological diffusion. Rather than broach early modern consumerism as middling sorts trying to be like upper sorts, I argue, it is more useful to broach it as upper and middling sorts trying to be genteel. Gentility was expressed through partible refined practices that, firstly, defined social values as they emerged on the ground; and, secondly, allowed gentility to reach further and transform more deeply than accounted for in top-down diffusion models. Power struggles and alterity occur at the margins of social authority, the location of new ideas and counter-cultural forms. It is through the middling sorts’ struggles and variations that we understand gentility’s successful formulation in the early to mid-eighteenth century and its legacies in the Revolutionary period and beyond. The adoption of partible refinements was a Genteel Revolution that transformed American culture in the long term.

Pratt as Paradigm

Is one woman enough to broach the Genteel Revolution? I believe so. Elizabeth Pratt’s life is an entrée into the world of early-eighteenth-century Newport and middling colonial America, especially its urban centers. Pratt established herself as a shopkeeper in the densely populated port of Newport by the early 1720s. Newport was an ideal location for Pratt’s enterprise. With many men away at sea for months or years at a time, a gender imbalance made women-run businesses and households relatively common in the town. All sorts of women, elite to enslaved, undertook diverse forms of retail (Crane, 1985: 5, 1998; Hartigan-O’Connor, 2009). Pratt was among them. She specialized in textiles and other dry goods and sold a range of fabrics, finished clothing items, and sewing supplies, as well as foodstuffs such as sugar, chocolate, nutmeg, and coffee and household items such as indigo and paper. By using commercial goods and social relationships to make her way in the world, Pratt positioned herself in society and continuously defined roles as mother, matriarch, entrepreneur, widow, and head-of-household. Understanding Pratt’s wider

world flows from an understanding of her socially derived identities within developing norms of consumerism, status, and gender.

Trading towns were bellwethers of social change and nodes of the burgeoning World of Goods. A mercantile economy sustained Newport, and entrepreneurship was prevalent. As a consumer and a trader, Pratt was doubly entangled in a global flow of commodities and ideas. Her story is also the story of her daughters, their mariner and trading husbands, their children who survived, and those who did not; of her enslaved servant Dinah; and of her socially diverse customers, from the gentleman to the seamstress. It is the story of the international merchants who supplied her, the fellow-traders she met at the shop, and the neighbors whom she clothed, fed, and entertained with products from her own stock of goods. She was part of a family, congregation, community, and colony, as well as a member of the middling sorts. A study of Pratt exposes the active negotiation of identity and social circumstances in colonial New England.

By considering different practices within a holistic life, I find clear evidence for selective adoption of new refinements, rather than for emulation. Pratt’s consumerism, dining, trading, and other material choices are not predictable based on practices of her contemporaries or on market availability. That is, she did not simply copy well-to-do neighbors; neither did she make the same choices as other middling property owners in the town, despite similar access to goods. Pratt certainly participated in new fashions and tastes, but she also maintained traditional, unfashionable practices. How does one reconcile Pratt’s small house with the high value of her merchandise; her financial struggles with her shopkeeping acumen; her vulnerability as a widow with her authority as a businesswoman; her parasitic maladies with her fine silk clothes; her role as a dependent with her role as a slave owner? Contextual inquiry offers a path forward. This study focuses on material practices, things, and places and embraces individual agency, creative choice, and multiple interpretive scales.

Chapters 1 and 2 are about context. Chapter 1 introduces the cultural, historical, and intellectual frameworks of the “Genteel Revolution”: the middling sorts’ invention and appropriation of partible refinement. This chapter describes methodologies used to draw together material and documentary traces of Elizabeth Pratt’s life into an interdisciplinary whole. It also addresses the theoretical and epistemological orientations I write from and against, combining aspects of historical ethnography and practice theory within a material ethnography. Chapter 2 broadly reviews the shifting consumer opportunities and anxieties of eighteenth-century America. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 synthesize evidence of Elizabeth Pratt’s middling lifestyles and idiosyncratic refinements. Substantial archaeological evidence from her small house lot is gathered with robust documentary traces, exposing intimate details of household geography and community economics. Chapter 3, “Living Spaces,” introduces Pratt and the world of eighteenth-century Newport. She, and

her kin, and household members dynamically situated themselves within its social scenes. Chapter 4, “At Table,” explores Pratt’s selectively refined practices of drinking and dining. In Chapter 5, “Keeping the Shop,” we see Pratt as a taste-maker: shopkeeper, purveyor of things and knowledge, nexus in an international web of commercial relations. This role brought some power and much trouble, evidenced by Pratt’s legal imbroglios with clients and kin. In Chapter 6, I reflect on the Genteel Revolution and its legacies.

This study introduces the idea of “partible refinement” and offers something different from the foundational considerations of the Consumer Revolution from T. H. Breen, Richard Bushman, Cary Carson, and Neil McKendrick and John Brewer (in history) and James Deetz, Mark Leone, George Miller, Charles Orser, and Suzanne Spencer-Wood (in historical archaeology). It is not an inquiry into capitalism as a structural system but, rather, into social practices that entrenched genteel values as part of status identities. It focuses explicitly on middling consumerism and on the first half of the eighteenth century. During this early period, genteel values were manipulated as they were created, becoming taken-for-granted elements of respectable American culture by later Revolutionary, Federal, and Industrial periods. The modern American middle class – with its bourgeois values, consumer predilections, and social formalities – was not inevitable. Its foundational early history is ripe for interrogation. Middling gentilities of the eighteenth century, when society was organized not by upper-middle-lower “classes” but by more fluid categories of “sorts,” provide new perspectives on the formulation not only of resilient eighteenth-century consumer cultures, but also of the later American middle class.