

## Review Essay

The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence. By *T. H. Breen*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. xviii + 380 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth, \$30.00. ISBN: 0-195-06395-3.

Reviewed by Edward J. Balleisen

“If you owe the bank ten thousand dollars, the bank owns you. If you owe the bank a million dollars, you own the bank.” So goes an old saw about the implications of debt for power relations in modern capitalist economies. During the last few years, some public commentators have updated the joke, increasing the monetary figures exponentially, and placing the American economy as a whole in the role of debtor, and one or another Asian central bank, usually China’s, in the role of creditor.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Marketplace of Revolution*, T. H. Breen applies this basic insight to another era in which American consumption far outran the capacity of Americans to pay—that of the American Revolution. His central contention is that a long, hard look at the origins of American consumer culture offers a fresh perspective on the Revolution’s timing, its organizational trajectory, and its successful creation of a truly continental political movement. In seeking to reshape a debate as old and as richly textured as that

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert Kaplan, “China Expands. Europe Rises. And the United States . . .,” *New York Times*, Week in Review, 26 Dec. 2004, 6; James Surowiecki, “In Yuan We Trust,” *New Yorker*, 18 Apr. 2005, 62.

over the causes of the American Revolution, Breen has set himself no small task. *The Marketplace of Revolution* largely delivers on what it promises.

Breen's purpose is not to reject the scholarly explanations for the Revolution that currently hold sway. He readily concedes that it depended crucially on pervasive understandings of political liberty, widespread economic grievances against the tightening of British mercantilism in the wake of the Seven Years War, and a deepening social experience of evangelical Protestantism, which facilitated challenges to prevailing structures of authority.<sup>2</sup> But he stresses that all these elements constituted necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the drive to independence. By themselves, he insists, these conditions did not ensure the development of a continental political community connected by sufficient bonds of trust to overcome provincialism and entrenched colonial social divisions, born of profound ethnic, racial, and religious differences, as well as widely varying systems of economic production. By the same token, he maintains, political ideology, economic grievance, and religious sensibility cannot by themselves account for the Revolution's *timing*—its outbreak in 1775, rather than in 1765, after the passage of the Stamp Act, or during the early 1770s, in the immediate aftermath of the Townshend Duties, or at some later juncture. Finally, these traditional explanations do not persuasively explain the novel strategies of political mobilization that created a revolutionary movement in America, strategies predicated on nonimportation and nonconsumption, or in more modern parlance, popularly enforced boycotts.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For seminal discussions of these causes of the American Revolution, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); Marc Egnal and Joseph A. Ernst, "An Economic Interpretation of the American Revolution," *William & Mary Quarterly* 29 (1972): 3–32; Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Breen's method shares a great deal with the approach adopted by practitioners of the "Political Development" school of political science, who are especially interested in explaining the timing and form of pivotal political events. For an introduction to the relevant literature, see Paul Pierson, "Increasing

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To flesh out his narrative of revolution, Breen turns to an increasingly powerful theme in the scholarship on the eighteenth-century North American mainland, and one that he has greatly helped to develop over the past twenty-five years: the creation of a modern consumer culture throughout the colonies.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he devotes nearly two-thirds of the book to a synthesis of that scholarship, arguing that material aspirations came to dominate the social and economic strategies of the colonies' free populations, which in turn drove the development of increasingly complex economic institutions and a burgeoning material culture that centered on the import of manufactures from Great Britain.

*The Marketplace of Revolution* marshals an impressive array of evidence for this materialism. British Customs statistics and American newspaper advertisements testify to a relentless growth in per capita consumption of British manufactures from the early eighteenth century onward, as well as an explosion in the variety of available goods and styles. Surviving documentation of the colonial distribution chain, which extended from urban importers, auctioneers, and retailers, to rural storekeepers and peddlers, indicates

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Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 94 (June 2000): 251–67, and the scholarship cited therein.

<sup>4</sup> Breen’s previous scholarship exploring these themes includes: *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton, 1985); “An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690–1776,” *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 467–99; “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 119 (1988): 73–104; “Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 50 (1993): 471–501. For leading statements of the view that this era was profoundly characterized by a communitarian, precapitalist economic culture, see: Michael Merrill, “Cash is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States,” *Radical History Review* 17 (1977): 42–71; James Henretta, “Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 35 (1978): 3–32. For pivotal scholarship that emphasizes the extent of capitalist social relations and cultural norms in early America, apart from Breen’s work, see: Carole Shammas, *The Preindustrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990); Winifred Rothenberg, *From Marketplaces to a Market Economy: The Transformation of Rural Massachusetts, 1750–1850* (Chicago, 1992); and Richard Bushman, “Markets and Composite Farms in Early America,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 55 (1998): 351–74.

that the cargoes of the ships arriving from British ports found ready buyers throughout the terrain of colonial settlement. And probate records, reports of contemporaneous observers, and excavations of colonial trash pits all point to a substantial democratization of desire. Taken as a whole, these sources show that town dwellers and farm families indulged in the shifting fashions of British textiles, the constantly improving quality of British ceramics and stoneware, and an ever-burgeoning array of other consumer conveniences, often taking on significant loads of debt in the process. Insolvency records—one of the few potential sources that Breen skirts—would almost certainly tell a similar tale.

In order to drive his point home even more forcefully, Breen takes pains to investigate the influence of consumer culture over those individuals who subsisted at the margins of society. Within colonial cities, thieves took great pride in their discernment of quality and fashion as they made public confession on the way to the hangman's scaffold. At the most isolated military outposts, militiamen drank imported tea in imported porcelain cups, a daily practice shared by the residents of the Philadelphia poorhouse, who demanded that the city include the drink in their daily rations. In the plantation districts, slaves often had access to secondhand ceramics, while ads for the return of runaways show that both indentured servants and slaves frequently possessed imported clothing of some quality. The colonial backcountry teemed with country stores and peddlers laden down with British ribbons and bric-a-brac, and its inhabitants regularly implored colonial assemblies to finance roads that would improve connections to rivers and seaports. In short, Breen concludes, dominant material aspirations throughout the

colonies reflected transatlantic sensibilities and a ready embrace of the commercial connections that made consumption of British imports possible.

All the while, colonials, and especially colonial women, placed an increasing primacy on developing consumer savvy—the ability to keep up with prevailing fashions, to distinguish degrees of material quality, to become cognizant of prevailing prices and terms, and to scrutinize merchants for evidence of fair dealing—as essential elements of informal education and socialization. Although Breen might have punctuated this element of his argument with an analysis of advice literature and familial correspondence, he shows that by the 1760s, colonial marketplaces were characterized by knowledgeable and fussy consumers. Like their counterparts in London or Liverpool, Americans made a habit of comparison shopping, insisted on variety and a rapid rotation of goods for sale, and spread demand for the latest European styles as quickly as prevailing modes of transportation and communication would allow.

Such an outpouring of consumption elicited a fair degree of anxiety, and Breen is careful to chart the various colonial critiques of consumerism that became prevalent by mid-century. Colonial elites frequently fretted over the growth of new distribution channels, like rural peddlers or urban auctions, as well as the seemingly endless injection of credit into the colonial economy. Sometimes such complaints focused on the prospect of economic instability brought on by chronically overextended households, or reflected the sour grapes of more entrenched mercantile competitors; sometimes they portrayed the “itch” or “contagion” of fashion as portending the disastrous onset of enervating and unrepublican luxury (p. 152), with a correspondingly excessive placement of social influence in the hands of women, or a corrupting sinfulness that endangered Protestant

souls. Almost always, they expressed a fear of social leveling, a worry that the rapid diffusion of calico patterns and silver cutlery might threaten the long-standing social hierarchy of American communities.

But Breen stresses that the most strident of these critiques, such as the 1743 plea of the evangelical preacher James Davenport for New Englanders collectively to burn their excessively fancy clothes, constituted little more than windmill tilting. Most prerevolutionary critics of consumerism sought only to foster moderation within a commercial framework, often in response to economic events that had cooled initial enthusiasm for the wondrous elixir of trade; and none of the criticisms did much to slow a relentlessly shrinking definition of luxury, as colonial consumers repeatedly came “to look upon the most superfluous things as the necessaries of life” (p. 185). Indeed, the critics increasingly found themselves drowned out by writers extolling the prospect of comforts as a crucial encouragement to hard work, or calling on Americans who found themselves swamped by consumption-related debt to redouble their efforts at generating income, so that they might pay down their debts. And as Breen notes, the pressures of indebtedness, brought on by the colonies’ chronic imbalance of payments, encouraged considerable entrepreneurial innovation in the mid-eighteenth century, from the development of markets in the West Indies and Central America, to the creation of the whaling trade, to the emergence of shipbuilding as a substantial American industry.

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At one level, of course, pervasive colonial demand for British manufactured goods yoked the North American colonies ever more tightly to British fashions, British credit, and British definitions of the good life, along with the British political culture and

economic policies that accompanied them. The thickening of such varied transatlantic bonds militated against any separatist or revolutionary politics. But even as the colonial consumerism of the mid-eighteenth-century reinforced links to England, Breen argues persuasively that it simultaneously pushed the free residents of British North America toward a more radical politics, and, perhaps most important, greatly facilitated the success of their waxing radicalism.

Through both direct and indirect channels, consumerism helped to generate the colonial grievances that fueled a separatist movement. Ever since the British surrender at Yorktown, historians have grasped that Parliament's efforts to squeeze revenue out of the colonies in the 1760s and 1770s sparked the political resistance that culminated in Lexington and Concord. Breen, however, emphasizes that the parliamentary fixation on more extensive colonial taxation partly resulted from the pervasive perception that the colonies had become so prosperous that they could easily absorb modest new levies, which would assist Whitehall in paying down war-related debt and in financing current imperial expenses. Such perceptions, Breen demonstrates, depended crucially on the extent to which the Seven Years War had fostered an economic boom on the North American mainland, as well as the tendency of colonial elites during the conflict to try to impress visiting Brits with their fashionable standard of living, which very much revolved around the purchase and display of British goods.

Equally significant, the colonists' deepening materialist expectations fueled their anger when they were confronted by new parliamentary consumption taxes. By the mid 1760s, Breen contends, colonials had come to expect an economic reciprocity in relations with Britain. Mercantilism was supposed to pay for *metropole* and hinterland alike, and

those perched at the seat of empire owed a certain degree of respect to the thousands upon thousands of American consumers who kept British workers employed and their employers extremely well fed. From the plantation colonies to New England, the maneuvers of the British government stung Americans into an awareness of their second-class status within the Empire, made all the more obvious because of the economic pain brought on by a long postwar depression. In the aftermath of the Seven Years War, vigorous participation in the marketplace of goods had left many Americans heavily indebted and wary of an imperial relationship that threatened to consign them to a perpetual state of dependence, which observers came to conceptualize as a form of enslavement.

Even more explosively, colonial consumerism fed a “liberating, even empowering . . . process of self-fashioning,” a set of daily social and economic practices that connected the emerging rhetoric of individual rights to lived experience, and that accordingly made this rhetoric attractive to colonials up and down the Atlantic seaboard. In essence, Breen identifies market-based consumption as an incubator of citizenship, a liberal complement to the civic republican emphasis on proprietorship as a crucial means of teaching individuals about the scope and content of liberty, and of preparing them for the responsibilities of self-government. In a culture where identity increasingly depended on the possession and display of store-bought goods, material culture mediated ideals for both the good life and the realm of politics, elevating the “pursuits of happiness” into a fundamental principle. As Breen puts it, “Choice in the consumer marketplace gradually merged with a discourse of rights, so that efforts by British Parliament that seemed to

curtail participation were interpreted not only as an annoyance, but also as an attack on basic human rights” (p. 151).

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Widespread discontent, of course, by no means translates ineluctably into effective political action. American anger toward taxes on public documents, paints, and tea did not have to lead to outright revolution. Indeed, in a particularly incisive part of his argument, Breen underscores the enormous difficulties facing any effort at political mobilization in the colonies, difficulties heretofore ignored or downplayed by scholars. Getting tens of thousands of colonials to act in concert, when they differed from one another in so many ways, when poor overland transportation dramatically limited their interactions, and when their chief point of connection was a shared identification with England, constituted no mean feat. Truly continental political mobilization also depended on a series of thoroughgoing political innovations. Even if a variety of colonial voluntary organizations furnished templates for the development of a politics of resistance, it took American Whigs time to construct a national vision of their predicament, as well as a set of political strategies that could mobilize dissent, and eventually support for a move toward independence, on a continental basis.

Such challenges partly explain the confidence that British policymakers possessed in their ability to control the political uproar occasioned by efforts to tighten parliamentary control over the Empire. They also help to account for the timing of actual revolution—not in the midst of the Stamp Act crisis, or the contention brought on by the Townshend Duties, but only after the closing of Boston Port and the implementation of the other Coercive Acts. The earlier conflicts led colonial political operatives to refine

their political vision, to learn from the limitations of their initial efforts at political mobilization, and to create a nationalist political movement.

Consumer culture, Breen insists, lay at the heart of these transformations. More than any other aspect of colonial life, that culture knit the free residents of the British mainland together, providing a basis for a new, continental political community in the face of tightening British imperial policy. After decades of expanding imports, the residents of British North America had come to understand, “without giving much thought to the matter . . . that distant strangers . . . were as dependent as they upon access to British manufactures” (p. 237). The seemingly unquenchable thirst for British products thus created the possibility of considerable political leverage—if colonials could find a way to curb the flow of all those British goods to America.

The simple recognition of such leverage was itself intimately connected to Americans’ immersion in the consumer economy. Having come to see individual consumer choice as a fundamental dimension of personal and political liberty, growing numbers of colonists responded to the hard times of the 1760s by envisioning a new kind of choice—to reject, individually and collectively, the impulse to import. Such abnegation could forestall impending American dependence and enthrallment. As one Bostonian commentator implored in 1767, “SAVE YOUR MONEY AND YOU WILL SAVE YOUR COUNTRY” (p. 208)—both by getting “America” out of debt, and by putting enough pressure on British manufacturers and their idled hands to force concessions from Parliament.

In calling for such economic sacrifice, and in making it a test of public virtue, Breen contends, most American Whigs did not mean either to turn their backs on the

world of capitalism or to encourage their fellow colonists to reject commerce altogether. The growing chorus in favor of a renewed frugality and industry was, on the whole, neither a Protestant plea to forsake sinful backsliding nor a civic republican jeremiad against the inevitable corruptions of luxury-laden commerce, though colonial political agitators certainly made numerous references to both of these cultural traditions. Instead, Whigs primarily advocated a moderation of consumption in order to reduce American indebtedness, redress the balance of power within transatlantic trade, and thereby restore the ability of Americans to make commercial relationships redound to their benefit. In short, the virtue trumpeted by America's revolutionaries was predominantly bourgeois virtue, not the virtue of Puritanism or of civic humanism.

In the final chapters of his book, Breen zeroes in on prerevolutionary nonimportation agreements as indispensable catalysts of revolution. To be sure, there were substantial barriers to meaningful boycotts of British goods. Together, the depth of American attachment to fashion and quality, the extent of sacrifice required from households, and the lack of a significant manufacturing base all greatly complicated initial efforts to persuade Americans to renounce British goods. Competitive dynamics among the merchants of different ports only heightened the difficulties, since local merchants invariably worried that if they forswore imports, their counterparts up or down the coast might take advantage of the situation, making a killing at their expense. And merchants, who initiated almost all the initial nonimportation agreements, in part to retain control over the politics of dissent in colonial seaports, were often reluctant to enforce agreements against individuals who refused to go along. Indeed, early nonimportation campaigns gained mercantile support in large measure because they allowed heavily

indebted businessmen and planters to gain some breathing room from their British creditors, to unload, in the case of the former group, old inventories that were not selling well, and thus to improve balance sheets. All these dynamics constrained early efforts at political mobilization.

But over the course of the decade from 1765 to 1775, American Whigs overcame these limitations, drawing on the resources of a society devoted to capitalist material culture. Turning to newspapers and networks of commercial contacts that had come into existence to facilitate the flow of British goods into American homes, they transformed sources of commercial news into conduits of political intelligence and mechanisms of political organization. This transformation in turn enabled Americans to follow the unfolding dynamics of nonimportation agreements not only in their own communities but along the entire Atlantic seaboard as well.

When stymied by the unwillingness of merchants to follow through on plans for extensive and long-lasting boycotts in the wake of the Townshend Acts, Whigs experimented successfully with new mechanisms of enforcement—nonconsumption agreements; subscription lists of ordinary colonists who pledged to abide by them; social ostracism of individuals who refused to do so; the creation of committees of public safety to monitor economic behavior, publicly identify boycott violators, and require public recantations by those individuals who originally bucked the policy of nonconsumption and then changed their minds; and most famously, ritual destruction of goods imported in violation of community agreements. These political innovations not only served as a sorting mechanism, allowing the opponents of imperial policy to identify supporters and opponents. They simultaneously forced fence-sitters to choose sides, gave ordinary

colonists, including women of all ranks, a significant say in the outcome of controversies over parliamentary political economy, and provided a platform for disseminating revolutionary political principles. They enormously facilitated the development of extralegal institutions of government and the invention of a new, substantially more democratic public sphere, both of which astonished the British military officers stationed in the colonies. And by furnishing extensive coverage to the new politics of nonconsumption, colonial newspapers greatly facilitated the emergence of a coordinated, continental movement, giving Whigs confidence that they could trust their far-flung counterparts to remain true to the demands of the new, fashionable discourse of sacrifice.

This last point is absolutely central to Breen's reassessment of the road to revolution. Doing without British imports, he points out, "gave palpable demonstration that one was willing to act for the public good. It gave force to high-sounding words that were easy to mouth and even easier to disavow when the going got tough." This dynamic initially played out within local communities, placing pressure on elites and commoners alike; but through newspaper coverage, it soon connected the politics of nonconsumption in one locale to places hundreds of miles away, allowing a diverse group of colonists to imagine themselves engaged in the same political fight, as part of the same "country of the mind" (p. 238). Without this process, Breen concludes, the residents of rural, isolated Harvard, Massachusetts, could never have responded to the 1773 arrival of tea in Boston by proclaiming the situation as constituting a grave threat "not only to this Town and Province, but to America in general, and that for ages and generations to come." Without, in other words, "the process by which imported goods invited colonists to think radical new thoughts about empire" (p. 299), the far-flung inhabitants of the American

colonies could never have joined in coordinated protests of a tax that actually lowered the effective price on tea; could never have viewed the closing of Boston Port as such a grave threat to their own futures; could never have pledged their lives and fortunes in a bid for national independence.

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One might certainly challenge some aspects of Breen's impressive reframing of revolutionary causation. Was the magnetic pull of British imports so dominant in those swathes of the colonial landscape that were located more than thirty miles away from navigable water, and thus less penetrated by the incessant flow of goods from British manufactories and kilns? Did pervasive fascination with the latest fashions and conveniences necessarily imply a thoroughgoing embrace of bourgeois values, particularly among the throngs of the urban poor and working classes who populated the urban crowds so crucial to revolutionary politics? Exactly which groups of Americans pressured merchants into creating the initial nonimportation campaigns, and then demanded vigorous enforcement of nonconsumption, and for what purposes? Did Virginia land speculators and the squatters of the southern backcountry rail against British rule less because of an increasingly onerous set of mercantilist policies concerning transatlantic trade, and more because of frustration at the British insistence to maintain the Proclamation Line of 1763, quashing efforts to gain legal title to land west of the Line? How many elites came to side with the Revolution not so much out of concern for the liberties and economic interests threatened by Parliament and King, but rather in the hope of restoring social order amidst a fractious populace stirred up by the political

conflicts of the early 1770s?<sup>5</sup> Pursuing such questions would not likely undermine the identification of consumerism as an essential ingredient in building revolutionary “structures of trust” (p. 297). But if Breen had concerned himself more with these lines of inquiry, he might have stressed more pointedly that the Revolution was forged by a political coalition, one that embraced independence from a variety of sometimes conflicting motives and aspirations.

Nonetheless, *The Marketplace of Revolution* stands as a remarkable achievement. It succinctly and comprehensively lays out the argument for the depth of commercialization in eighteenth-century America, noting that far-reaching disputes over paper money, the extension of credit, and the legitimate bounds of concentrated economic power could take place mostly among political antagonists who shared a basic commitment to capitalist production and exchange. (Herein lies a perspective worth the attention of historians who study the early American Republic and the antebellum period, as well as those scholars preoccupied by the colonial and revolutionary eras.) The book offers a truly fresh and compelling explanation for the coming of the American Revolution. In that effort, Breen’s account reminds us of the dramatic influence that economic culture can have on the transformation of political life—not simply through the determined campaigns of cohesive interest groups, or by suggesting novel concepts of social value and communal obligation that infuse new political movements, but also by creating commercial institutions and practices that furnish indispensable tools to those political innovators who recognize their potential. Finally, Breen’s narrative may hold

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<sup>5</sup> For scholarship that raises these kind of queries, see: Alfred Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (Dekalb, Ill., 1976); Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1999).

some significance for our own historical moment. The boycotts of British goods, after all, had the goal, until well into 1775, of convincing the British government to reverse course, to adopt a political economy more conducive to the interests of Britain's best customers and most substantial debtors. The failure of Americans in this particular effort suggests that, however considerable, the political leverage associated with indebtedness has its limits.

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