Prefatory note to seminar participants: This paper is a chapter from a book I am writing tentatively titled, The Money Question: Currency in American Political Culture, 1700-1900. It is the second of two chapters on paper money and the problem of circulation in provincial New England, and it refers back at times to the previous chapter, on the Puritan minister John Wise, a leading advocate of paper money. Together, the two chapters explore how the concept of circulation helped to set the ideological stakes of struggle over paper money. I realize this paper is longer than many papers for the Business History Seminar, so please feel free to skim or read selectively; the chapter comprises three main sections, on medicine, natural history, and political economy, and it would be fine to read either of the first two sections along with the third in order to get the gist. I’ll discuss the book project of which this is part at the seminar, and I’d be grateful for any comments, criticisms, or suggestions.

The conflict over public finance in New England arose along with an equally searing controversy over public health. In the spring of 1721, just when John Wise was joining the rising debate over paper money, smallpox arrived in Boston by ship from the West Indies. The most dreaded disease in the North American colonies had struck eight times in the previous century, but the latest outbreak elicited a novel response. A group of Congregational ministers led by Cotton Mather were inspired by recent reports on the experimental practice of deliberately infecting people with smallpox in order to give them a mild case of the disease that would immunize them against a more deadly attack. The inoculation of several hundred Bostonians amid the devastating epidemic of 1721-1722 sparked furious resistance, particularly from a few physicians led by an aristocratic recent arrival from Scotland, William Douglass (1691-1752). Championing the exclusive prerogatives of “doctors of medicine” with scientific training, Douglass accused the ministers of violating the providential authority of nature itself. “The Determination of this as a Case of Conscience, I refer to Divines,” he wrote, “how the trusting more the extra groundless Machinations of Men than to our Preserver the ordinary course of
Nature, may be consistent with that Devotion and Subjection we owe to the allwise Providence of G O D Almighty.”

Douglass’s faith in the “ordinary course of Nature” and its sanction for new forms of power and privilege formed the abiding principle of his subsequent career as a leading American physician, natural historian, and political polemicist. It shaped his pathbreaking studies of epidemic disease and advocacy of colonial medical reform, his prodigious collection of botanical specimens and copious reporting of meteorological, geological, and astronomical phenomena, his landmark historical and geographical surveys of British North America, and his final role as the foremost critic of paper money in provincial New England. Through his writings on the related problems of contagion, classification, and credit in the colonial world, Douglass articulated an influential vision of healthy and unhealthy circulation in the physiological “œconomy of spirits,” the biological “œconomy of nature,” and the political economy of currency alike.

Commerce and Contagion in Colonial Medicine

Douglass was born in Gifford, Scotland, the second son of a small landowner or “laird” who served as the financial agent for a politically prominent nobleman, the Marquess of...
Tweeddale.² He was a scion of the capitalist alliance of landlords, merchants, and academics that directed the transformation of the Scottish lowlands from feudal villages into large commercial farms in the eighteenth century, especially in the rich southeastern region from which he came.³ His older brother, who became a surgeon, inherited the family estate, so Douglass joined the growing ranks of privileged but untitled Scottish expatriates who found their calling as teachers, ministers, merchants, overseers, officers, and physicians in the British Empire following the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707, when he was 16. He entered a migrant gentry for whom university degrees served as titles to a new kind of portable patrimony, staking their status within the spiraling network of commercial and intellectual exchange around the Continent and across the Atlantic. This was the professional circuit, neither metropolitan nor provincial but cosmopolitan, that shaped Douglass’s perspective on an emerging market society charted by the early modern discourses of medicine, natural history, and political economy, to which he critically contributed.⁴

Those three closely connected fields found a shared philosophical framework in the concept of circulation, which received its classic exposition in the founder of modern physiology William Harvey’s 1628 treatise, De Motu Cordis et Sanguinis, “On the Motion of the Heart and


the Blood.” Circulation was to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries what evolution was to
the nineteenth and twentieth, a widely shared explanatory paradigm for a broad range of natural
and social phenomena. From bodily fluids, contagious diseases, celestial bodies, oceanic
currents, and electrical charges to colonists and commodities, handwritten letters and printed
publications, and currency and credit instruments, the paradigm of circular movement within a
self-enclosed system provided the pattern for many of the “laws of motion” found to govern both
nature and society in the early modern British Atlantic. “But of all the modern discoveries, wit
and industry have made in the œconomy of human nature, the noblest is that of the circulation of
the blood,” wrote Joseph Glanvill, spokesperson for the Royal Society of London for Improving
Natural Knowledge.\(^5\) Circulation, writes the historian Joyce Chaplin, represented “the first
element of an idea within the modern sciences becoming a metaphor or even model for the
human world.”\(^6\)

Douglass’s formal understanding of circulation arose from his training as a physician. At
Edinburgh University, he learned from the renowned Scottish anatomist and occasional poet and
satirist Archibald Pitcairne, founder of the British school of “hydraulic iatromechanism.” Based
on the increasingly conventional premise that “life consists in the circulation of the blood
produced by motion of the heart and arteries,” as Pitcairne wrote, his philosophy conceived the
human or animal body as a machinery of “Canals of diverse kinds, conveying different sorts of
Fluids,” much as William Harvey had modeled his depiction of the cardiovascular system on
hydraulic engineering. Pitcairne described disease as “the circulatory Motion of the Blood too
much increased or diminished,” and he further proposed that health depended on “the Secretions

William Harvey and His Age: The Professional and Social Context of the Discovery of the Circulation (Baltimore:
Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), 122.

\(^6\) Joyce E. Chaplin, The First Scientific American: Benjamin Franklin and the Pursuit of Genius (New York: Basic
Books, 2006), 78.

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being duly made from the Blood” according to the laws of Newtonian mechanics. “For the
Circulation of the Blood is not more necessary for the Preservation of Life, than its perpetual
Supplies of the Secretion of abundance of Fluids, and its Disposal of them into different Parts;
and the Causes of most diseases are to be look’d for in the Disorder of this Secretion,” Pitcairne
wrote, articulating the hydraulic physiology that informed much of Douglass’s theory and
practice.⁷ Douglass continued his studies at the University of Leiden in Holland, under the
tutelage of the preeminent Dutch botanist, physicist, and physician Hermann Boerhaave, then
got on to train in Paris, in Flanders, and back in the Netherlands at the University of Utrecht.
There he wrote his doctoral dissertation entitled Animalium Hydraulisin, on circulation as the
essence of animal life, as if reflecting his peripatetic graduate career.⁸

After a brief sojourn in the mercantile hub of Bristol, England, Douglass migrated to its
American counterpart in Boston, where he set up a thriving practice as the sole physician with a
university medical degree. Joining a generation of Scottish “medical missionaries” to the
colonies, he arrived in a region with no schools or hospitals where aspiring physicians could
receive specialized training in anatomy and physiology as they could abroad. Most colonial
practitioners learned their trade through a more general apprenticeship in the healing arts, but the
primary professional healers were clergymen who ministered to both body and soul along with
locally trained midwives and self-taught “empirics.” A faithful if irreverent Anglican, Douglass
moved to the head of a small group of local physicians contesting the popular power of the
Congregational church over the “body natural” as well as the “body politic,” possibly influenced

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by his former mentor Archibald Pitcairne’s Jacobite disdain for the Presbyterian establishment in Scotland. The anti-inoculation campaign that he soon came to lead represented “the most outspoken, the most snarling, wave of antiministerial sentiment New England had yet witnessed,” according to Perry Miller. “To be more or less Book learned, is not a sufficient Qualification for a Physician,” Douglass wrote in 1722. “... A very eminent modern Physician says, That many Gentlemen of universal reading, and old Women by long Nursing, know as much of Physick as to kill themselves and Neighbours when sick, by the preposterous indiscreet Use of some noted Medicines.”

Beyond Boston and Salem, the ill and the injured generally depended on exchanges of carefully accounted care-giving among neighbors and relatives, though the wandering poor and the very sick were forced to turn to poor relief or hired help, as the historian Ben Mutschler has shown. In the same way, most New Englanders relied when possible on informal accounts of “social credit,” along with paper currency controlled by townships and assemblies, in reckoning and reconciling their exchanges of other goods and services within their communities. Douglass aimed to supplant this communal market in care and credit based on local relations of trust with a cosmopolitan market in medicine and money based on the imperial connections of university-educated physicians and transatlantic merchants. When colonial critics called him an “abject”

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10 Miller, New England Mind, 347.

11 Douglass, Abuses and Scandals, 8.

“stranger” or exile from abroad, he tellingly retorted, “Our Governours and other King’s Officers from home, are they to be branded with the Appellation STRANGER?”

Seeking to reproduce the institutional structure of guilds, medical schools, and medical societies that had developed in Britain along with the hierarchy of royally licensed physicians, apothecaries, and surgeons, Douglass campaigned unsuccessfully for the regulation of local practitioners by a board of doctors, tried but failed to endow a chair of medicine at Harvard and launch a medical journal, and briefly established the first professional medical society in the colonies, paralleling the Anglicizing efforts of colonial lawyers and merchants with close ties to their counterparts in London. Medicine, like money, was not rightly the province of provincial authorities, according to Douglass. It required an active membership in the transnational society of physicians, with their uniquely wide knowledge of human nature and the natural order.

Nature as Douglass and his colleagues conceived it was resistant to the universal rules, regimens, and panaceas peddled by parochial healers who mistook local peculiarities for general principles. Authoritative understanding of health and illness could only emerge inductively from wide-ranging experience and communication among scientifically trained observers. Not all of his European-trained peers in the colonial medical profession agreed; the Scots-born Maryland physician Alexander Hamilton derided Douglass as a member of “the clynicall class of physitians, [which] crys up empiricism, and practices upon grounds which neither he himself nor any body for him can reduce to so much as a semblance of reason.” But for Douglass and his Boston disciples, studies of the epidemic diseases that were seen to spread with the extension of trade routes must be cautiously reported in the kind of case-by-case narratives of divergent

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13 Douglass, Abuses and Scandals, 5.
15 Hamilton, Gentleman’s Progress (10 Aug. 1744), 137.
symptoms, stages, and remedies that he provided in his accounts of a variety of colonial distempers, focusing on observable characteristics and practical results while eschewing theoretical speculation and generalization. “Observations reduced to Method and Analogy from thence is all we know or can learn in any Distemper,” he wrote in his aptly titled Practical Essay Concerning the Small Pox (1730).16 As he explained in his 1736 “practical history” of scarlet fever, considered by medical historians “the first—and the best—description of the disease in English,” “A Speculation that is a novelle might have been composed sooner, but not a real History, for as among Naturalists, many repeated observations and experiments are requisite to form established truths or conclusions; so it ought certainly to be in the practice of Medicine.”17

In their exhaustive attention to the diversity of forms with which common illnesses presented themselves in different individual and environmental “constitutions,” such strictly empirical chronicles of the course of epidemics testified to what Douglass called the physician’s distinctive “genius” for diagnosing and treating diseases in all their multifarious manifestations. Disavowing “zealously bigoted” faith in particular therapies, he insisted on the disparate evidence of trial and error, or what he called “the Experience of the juvantia and ledentia,” as the sole reliable means “to prevent, alleviate, or remove the various disturbing Symptoms” of diseases in different countries and conditions, if not to cure or eradicate them once and for all.18

“There are so many inequalities” among patients, Douglass wrote, “as not to admit of any fixed rules.”19 Medical expertise relied instead on the enlightened practitioner’s

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16 William Douglass, A Practical Essay Concerning the Small Pox (Boston: D. Henchman and T. Hancock, 1730, iii.
17 Douglass, Dr. Douglass’s Practical History of A New Epidemical Eruptive Miliary Fever, with an Angina Ulcusculosa, Which Prevailed in Boston New-England in the Years 1735 and 1736 (Boston: Thomas Fleet, 1736), ii.
19 Douglass, Practical Essay Concerning the Small Pox, 6.
“circumspection”—literally, the ability to “look around” the particular positions and conditions or “circumstances” bearing on each individual case in order to form a general conception of the underlying ailment, or the singular perspective gained from reviewing multiple superficially dissimilar incidents of the same basic malady, which only physicians could truly discern. Their exclusive stock in trade, as Douglass described it, derived not just from their intensive education, but from their extensive circulation, enabling them to follow the movements and metamorphoses of disease much as Atlantic merchants traded on their peculiar ability to distill the commensurable exchange value from a swirling multitude of colonial commodities. Hence the facility with which Douglass identified medical with mercantile pursuits, referring to Boston in a letter to a friend as “no better than a factory [i.e., a colonial trading post] as to my interest, for here we have a great trade and many Strangers with whom my business chiefly consists,” or noting that he had not yet had time “to reduce my loose observations to any distinct method fit for communication, finding it more natural to begin by reducing my small-pox accounts into bills and notes for the improvement of my purse.”

Douglass’s financial and clinical accounts of the smallpox epidemic that launched his American career signaled a new departure in the centuries-old association between commerce and contagious disease. Beginning with the spread of the Black Death along the silk road from Asia in the fourteenth century, European political, religious, and literary authorities had commonly attributed the rise of pestilence to the growth of long-distance trade and the expanding sphere of activity of urban merchants, while describing the plague in Biblical terms as divine

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punishment for commercial corruption.\textsuperscript{21} They had responded with increasingly systematic efforts to restrict the movements of persons and goods both across borders, through the quarantine of merchant ships in ports and the exclusion of travelers suspected of carrying contagion from country towns, and within commercial cities, through the confinement of infected individuals and their possessions in boarded-up houses or in segregated hospitals, as the Massachusetts General Court did in passing “An Act for the Better Preventing of the Spreading of Infectious Sicknesses” in 1699 and in constructing a pesthouse on Spectacle Island in Boston Harbor in 1717, the year after Douglass’s arrival.\textsuperscript{22} Like similar efforts to confine market transactions to designated times and places and to impose strict limits on foreign exchange, however, measures to contain contagion had emerged alongside a host of regulations designed to sanitize rather than segregate commercial activity. Targeting the rising refuse of so-called “noxious” or “nuisance” trades such as those of tanners, brewers, and butchers, sanitary laws were based on the theory that infection arose not from market exchange per se but from its byproducts of sewage and squalor—or not from contact with traders and their tainted wares, but from the “corruption” of commodities due to inadequate provisions for their growing trade.\textsuperscript{23}

On the eve of the smallpox epidemic of 1721-1722, the increasingly conventional view that illness stemmed from the corruption of commerce rather than from commerce itself found expression in two parallel commentaries in the \textit{Boston News-Letter}, the first continuously published newspaper in British North America. The first, more metaphorical consideration of contagion came in response to the collapse of the South Sea Bubble in 1720, in an essay

\textsuperscript{22}Blake, \textit{Public Health}, 10, 32-36.
reprinted from a London monthly called *The Political State of Great Britain* decrying the “Pestilential Phrenzy” that had “seize[d] the Dealers in all Kinds of Stocks” and thence contaminated the market economy more broadly. “The Public Stocks, and the large Premiums, Divert Mens Thoughts from entering upon the Principal Business of Navigation and Commerce,” the anonymous author wrote, counterposing the “Mysterious Springs, and artful Machines” of financial chicanery to the “Arts, and Sciences, and Trade, the Main Springs that uphold a Kingdom, or a State, like the Great Axis of the Globe, which keeps the earth in a continued regular Motion.” Once the feverish “Traffick . . . in scraps of Paper” had broken, a healthy trade could resume, “our Manufactures set to work, the Poor every way imployed, Tradesmen and Artificers find Business, and Money circulate in every Country, City and Town.”

This figurative portrayal of speculation as a sickness of circulation appeared in tandem with an extended excerpt in the Boston paper from the English physician Richard Mead’s *Short Discourse Concerning Pestilential Contagion* (1720), occasioned by the last great European outbreak of the plague, which arrived in Marseilles, France, the same year that the South Sea Bubble burst. Invoking classical conceptions derived from Hippocrates and Galen, Mead found the original source of infection in the *lack* of circulation that created “miasmas” of stagnant water, fetid soil, and foul air, which he associated chiefly with hot, tropical countries where the climate was relatively constant and “the Winds (the use of which is by Motion, to purify the Air) do not shift and change so often as they do in Northern Climates.” Drawing on the hydraulic physiology that he, like Douglass, had learned from Pitcairne, Mead explained that “Malignant Fevers, especially Pestilential Ones” created a “Fermentation” in those afflicted, causing them to “throw off a great Quantity of active Particles upon the several Glands of the Body, particularly

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upon those of the Mouth and Skin, from which the Secretions are naturally the most constant and
large.” In still water and putrid air, the “Infectious Matter” secreted by sick and dead bodies grew
“much more active and powerful, and likewise more durable and lasting,” whence it lodged in
“Goods of a loose and soft Texture” such as cotton, silk, linen, and wool, “which being packed
up, and carried into other countries, let out, when opened the imprisoned seeds of Contagion.” In
this way, previously endemic diseases came to be conveyed over long distances by infected
sailors, soldiers, clothes, and commodities. While Mead endorsed measures to quarantine
contagious ships and prevent the “Clandestine Importing of Goods,” he cautioned that efforts to
isolate or separate the sick often reproduced in European cities the miasmatic environment that
bred infection in Asia and the Near East. “For nothing approaches so near to the first Original of
Contagion, as Air pent up, loaded with Damps, and corrupted with the Filthiness, that proceeds
from Animal Bodies,” he noted—and these were precisely the conditions created by confining
sick people in their houses or in overcrowded hospitals, prisons, and poorhouses. The modern
means of preventing the spread of disease, according to Mead, was not segregation but
integration, especially ensuring the flow of clean water and fresh air through congested dwellings
and districts.25

If the circulation of people and products bore the “seeds of contagion,” it also carried the
remedy. Nothing so starkly conveyed this lesson to contemporaries as the spread of smallpox, the
great scourge of the early modern Atlantic as the plague had been of the late medieval
Mediterranean, and nowhere was it illustrated more brutally than Boston. For the saving grace of
smallpox was that it conferred immunity on those who survived it, so that in places where it
became a more or less constant presence, like England and its Caribbean colonies, the vast

25Richard Mead, from A Short Discourse Concerning Pestilential Contagion: and the Methods to Be Used to
Prevent It, excerpted in Boston News-Letter 6-10 July 1721 and 17-24 July 1721.
majority of victims were children young enough not to have been previously exposed. The New England provinces, however, were distant enough from their trading partners and sufficiently effective in quarantining ships and travelers so that smallpox virtually vanished for extended periods, only to strike with greater ferocity a population left vulnerable by its lack of exposure, much as native peoples were repeatedly decimated by the European disease.

Nearly twenty years since the last case had been reported in Boston, a man soon found to be suffering from smallpox disembarked from a British warship leading a fleet of merchant vessels from the West Indies in 1721. The ensuing epidemic, which afflicted more than half of the town’s 10,000 residents and claimed 844 lives, occasioned the first extensive test of the emerging theory that contagion itself could offer the best means of prevention when properly managed. Just as the concept of contagion developed within early modern medicine out of the preventive measures long taken by magistrates and town dwellers, so the idea of inoculation arose in the early eighteenth century from a spate of published accounts of the folk practice of purposely acquiring a low-level infection, which reportedly dated back many centuries in Asia, Africa, and rural communities in various parts of Europe. Commonly called “buying the smallpox,” the custom was typically described as a purchase of immunity, as when families paid a small sum for a few pustules from someone with smallpox, or when slave-traders reportedly infected their female chattel to see if they survived without being unduly disfigured and therefore would “bear a good price,” as Douglass wrote in his own account. By April 1721, when smallpox reappeared in Boston, the practice of injecting infected pus into a healthy person was

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attracting growing interest among medical writers across the Atlantic, who called it “inoculation” or “variolation,” from the Latin for smallpox, variola. That same month, the first recorded inoculation was reported in England on the daughter of the British ambassador to Turkey, whose wife, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, had witnessed the practice in Constantinople, and within a year there were several more trials, including the inoculation of two daughters of Princess Caroline.29

In New England, however, such attempts to marshal the means of contagion, like related efforts to control the means of commerce, were undertaken by local town and church leaders instead of the likes of the royal family and the Royal Society. Therein lay the main problem as Douglass saw it with colonial experiments in preventive medicine as in paper money.30 It was Cotton Mather, having read the recent reports from the Near East, who joined with several other ministers in avidly promoting inoculation from the outset of the epidemic in Boston. Douglass, meanwhile, swiftly expanded his competing medical practice to serve the sudden demand. “[B]y lucky-chance my first [smallpox] patient was an intricate case and her recovery gained me some credit so that at present my hands are full,” he wrote to his fellow physician and former Edinburgh classmate Cadwallader Colden in July 1721, noting that he had assumed a “large share” of the burgeoning market.31 In allying with other medical men to form what they dubbed the Society of Physicians Anti-Inoculators, his immediate aim was “to maintain the Practitioners

29William Douglass, A Dissertation Concerning the Inoculation of the Small-Pox (Boston: D. Henchman and T. Hancock, 1730), 1-2; Emanuel Timonius and John Woodward, “An Account, or History, of the Procuring the Small Pox by Incision, or Inoculation; As It Has for Some Time Been Practiced at Constantinople,” Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London 339 (1714): 72-82; Perrot Williams, “On the Method of Procuring the Small Pox, in South Wales,” Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London 375 (1723), 262; Richard Wright, “A Further Account of Buying the Small Pox,” Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London 375 (1723), 267; Williams, Angel of Death, 53-61; Blake, Public Health, 53-54; Muse, “William Douglass,” 43-44.

30“The basic procedure [inoculation] was simple and quick, which presented a problem for medical professionals. If peasant women could do it, as they did in the Ottoman Empire, how could physicians claim that they needed to perform and supervise the operation, and how could they charge a substantial fee for it?” Peter McCandless, Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011), 163.

31Douglass to Cadwallader Colden, 28 July 1721, in “Letters from Douglass to Colden,” 166.
in their *Rights and Privileges*” against provincial pastors who “exceeded their Bounds, and wrote practically on a *medical* Subject,” as Douglass contended in an open letter to a London “M.D. & F.R.S.” (Fellow of the Royal Society) published as a pamphlet in 1722. Ministers, he wrote, “should cease pretending to *Physick*, there being Practitioners sufficient in Number and Qualifications to supply the Place.”

Broader principles were at stake in Douglass’s early opposition to “unbounded inoculation,” if not to inoculation itself, as he explained in two longer treatises based on his experience with smallpox in 1721-1722. Recklessly administered by unqualified “quacks,” inoculation upset the natural rhythms of both urban commerce and human health, he argued, reflecting the circulatory logic of the essays on public finance and public hygiene in the *Boston News-Letter*. He denounced his opponents for “propagating the Infection in the most Publick Trading Place of the Town,” in a manner “of pernicious consequence to populous and trading Towns by spreading Infection and damping their Trade,” and he dedicated his *Dissertation Concerning Inoculation* (1730) to the royal customs collector in Boston, “the Darling of all fair Traders.” Yet even in the midst of the epidemic, Douglass privately acknowledged that smallpox “seems to be somewhat more favourable received by inoculation than received in the natural way,” and by 1730 he was comparing inoculation to earlier examples of popular nostrums that were initially “opposed by the generality of the Faculty” but eventually “proved to be the best of Medicines.” “How mean or rash soever the beginning of the Practice of Inoculating the Small Pox may have been,” he wrote, “. . . nevertheless if in the Event by repeated experiments it prove useful, it ought to be embraced.” The point was that unlearned practitioners were often the first to stumble upon effective treatments, but it took higher medical

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33Philanthropos [Douglass], letter to editor, 3; Douglass, *Dissertation Concerning Inoculation*, 20, n.p.
expertise to extrapolate reliable remedies from the welter of anecdotal evidence and irregular procedure, much as broad commercial experience was required to refine popular modes of payment into sound policies controlling currency and credit.

What enabled physicians to transform “buying the smallpox” and “unbounded inoculation” into scientifically proven practice was their understanding of the fundamental physiological processes of health and disease, based on the theory of circulation. Thus Douglass recognized in various symptoms of smallpox—sweating, swelling, and salivating, along with hemorrhages, discharges, and diarrhea—the signs of an essentially “colliquative” disorder, or in other words, of an “inflammatory fever” characterized by “melting and dissolving.” From this diagnosis of the disease Douglass drew his approach to its treatment, which relied on fostering the body’s self-healing systems of circulation and secretion to fight off the infection. He warned against both “hot” and “cold” regimens, observing that “hot medicines” known as “alexipharmicks” tended to fuel the fever, while “Coolers so retard the Circulation, that there may arise a Sort of Ferment from Stagnation.” He advised instead that “the Patient ought to be kept in a moderate natural Temper,” and that “the more perspirable the Body (I do not mean Sweating, which is a Colliquation) the better.” Do not confine patients in cramped, stuffy rooms behind blanketed windows and drawn bed curtains, he cautioned, “for the Spring of the inspired Air is the continued cause of the Circulation in our bodies.” He condemned the indiscriminate use of bloodletting, emetics, cathartics, and other forced evacuations, which “disturb[ed] the course of nature” and patients’ peace of mind. “Avoid Grief, Study, intense Thinking, and the like,” he advised those ailing, for “they hinder Perspiration, and all other Tendencies to the Surface or ad. extra. of the Body.” The best prevention lay in maintaining a robust diet while avoiding gluttony and inebriety, “which are Violence done to Nature.” “When the Vessels are
impregnated with rich Food, and generous Liquor, . . . we are less liable to receive the Injuries of the circumambient Air, as in catching cold, Epidemical contagious Distempers, &c.,” Douglass wrote. “. . . Thus the Poor suffer most in Times of a Plague,” he added, suggesting that his medical model of the “œconomy of spirits” reflected a broader philosophical conception of “œconomy” in nature and society, informing a new, naturalistic view of class relations.35 He found the frame for that economic understanding in the emerging field of natural history, with its comprehensive taxonomies of the animal, vegetable, and mineral “kingdoms” as well as the expanding dominion of merchants and moneyed men.

Class and Classification in Natural History

Though the systematic study of plants and animals had ancient roots, natural history first emerged as a distinct discipline in sixteenth-century Europe, devoted to the discovery, description, and naming of a rapidly multiplying panoply of natural species in the age of exploration. Its institutional foundation was laid in seventeenth-century England, with the first formal organizations of botanists and apothecaries seeking to catalog and categorize the herbs, oils, salts, spirits, and other “simples” from which medicines were made.36 Physicians became the masters of the new discipline, distinguished by their specialized training in “physic” (from the Greek for “nature”) based on systematic study of specimens from elaborate botanical gardens, herbaria, and “cabinets of curiosities” as opposed to the common knowledge derived from animal husbandry and horticulture. ““The word Physician . . . is plainly and fully rendered

35Douglass, Essay Concerning Small Pox, 5-8, 11-12, 15, 16-20. On the common practice of confining smallpox patients in congested quarters, see Miller, Adoption of Inoculation, 39.

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by the word *Naturalist*, (that is) one well vers’d in the full extent of Nature, and Natural things,” as a contemporary English physician explained.\textsuperscript{37}

What made medicine and natural history together “the ‘big science’ of the early modern period,” as the historian Harold Cook has written, was the broader project of identifying, measuring, mapping, counting, collecting, and classifying the eclectic range of animal, vegetable, and mineral resources to which European empires laid claim in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Anglo-American naturalists played more than a peripheral part in the development of the natural and social sciences as well as the closely related exploration and exploitation of the colonies. Knowledge and power did not simply emanate from England in the expansive domain that natural history charted and inventoried. Surveys, studies, and specimens rather circulated around the British Atlantic along with authority and expertise.\textsuperscript{38}

Douglass’s far-flung community of naturalists cultivated a sensibility of connoisseurship and “curiosity” akin to that of antiquarians and art collectors. They prized peculiarities and outstanding features of individual natural objects while classifying them according to their externally observable characteristics such as foliage, flower, and fruit as well as their social utility, aesthetic appeal, or commercial value.\textsuperscript{39} Much as the explanatory power of early modern medicine stemmed from its ability to assimilate the bewildering variability of health and illness in different people and places, so natural history staked its capacious claim on its command of the enormous variety of natural species in the widening Atlantic world. While scientific medicine was based on studies of various diseases in specific settings, the new composite science of life


more generally entailed “natural histories” of particular regions—narrative accounts comprising systematic surveys of native plants, animals, landforms, waterways, and climates, modeled on works such as Robert Plot’s *Natural History of Oxford-Shire* (1677) and Robert Boyle’s *General Heads for the Natural History of a Country* (1692).  

Douglass began compiling the material for such an encyclopedic study soon after arriving in Boston, drawing on his extensive knowledge of the work of pioneering European naturalists including Joseph Pitton de Tournefort of France, whom he called “the prince of botanists,” and John Ray, Hans Sloane, and Mark Catesby of Britain, among others. He eventually collected more than one thousand botanical specimens, particularly plants of medicinal or commercial value. He created voluminous records of the winds and weather patterns, geological features and astronomical events, as well as the crops and manufactures, imports and exports, and tribes and treaties of his adopted country, while continually exchanging intelligence with correspondents elsewhere in the colonies and in London. “I have minutes of all these as they from time to time fall under my own observation, or from very good vouchers,” he wrote to Cadwallader Colden in New York in 1721. “I expect from you returns of the same nature.”

The ultimate objective of such inquiries was to derive from the diverse data of natural history an empirical understanding of the natural order that governed the new world of science and empire. In the medical theory of circulation, naturalists found a new basis of structure and stability within the very multiplicity and fluidity they described, providing the paradigm through which they interpreted a wide range of physical, chemical, biological, and social circuits. William Harvey’s model of the circulatory system set the pattern for reconceiving the basic processes of revolution and transformation and the “subtle fluids” of light, heat, magnetism, and

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40 Whitaker, “Culture of Curiosity,” 82; Cook, “Natural History,” 99-100.
41 Stearns, *Science in the Colonies*, 481.
especially electricity, a central subject of experimental science in eighteenth-century England and America.\textsuperscript{43}

By the centennial of Harvey’s work and the beginning of Douglass’s, circulation appeared increasingly central to a new conception of the cosmos as a self-organizing, self-regulating system: the “œconomy of nature.” Natural historians drew on the classical notion of an “œconomy,” traditionally associated with the cohesive order of a well-governed household, to envision the whole of creation as a harmonious ecosystem enclosed by the hydrological cycle uniting the fertile earth with the sheltering sky. In the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus’s taxonomic treatise, \textit{Oeconomia Natæra} (1749), the leading model of an “economy” in the age of the Physiocrats and Adam Smith, each species of plant, animal, and mineral was integrated with every other in an intricate series of cycles of nutrition, growth, and decay.\textsuperscript{44} “Is there a system, an order, an economy of things, by which matter can preserve that perpetual agitation which seems essential to it, and yet maintain a constancy in the forms which it produces?” wrote the Scottish philosopher David Hume in the mid-eighteenth century. “There certainly is such an economy; for this is actually the case with the present world. The continual motion of matter, therefore, in less than infinite transpositions, must produce the economy or order.”\textsuperscript{45}


\textsuperscript{45} David Hume, \textit{Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, And Other Writings}, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 59. Quoted in Schabas, \textit{Natural Origins}, 4. Hume began writing the \textit{Dialogues} around 1750, though the work was not published until 1779. The quoted passage is spoken by Philo, the persona in the dialogues generally considered closest to Hume’s own views.
Such ideas formed the intellectual environment for Douglass’s progression from medicine into natural history. “There are Philosophers who would say that Matter and Motion are inseparable, that there is a continued Flux and Circulation thro’ the whole Globe of Earth and Seas, that change and pass into different Forms and Appointments, as they were primarily ordain’d by the Omnipotent,” wrote a correspondent in 1744 in the Boston monthly, The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle (where Douglass originally intended to publish his serialized history of British America two years later). Considering in turn the “perpetual Revolution” of the blood in the body, the “perpetual Motion” of “Animal and Vegetable Life,” and the “continual flow” of “inanimate Substances,” the article concluded with a somber reminder that “Power and Wealth” were increasingly subject to a “short Circulation” as well.46

In several seminal works composed in the 1740s, Douglass articulated in his own fashion these corresponding conceptions of circulation in the human body, in natural bodies more generally, and in the body politic. He produced a popular provincial almanac and a model regional map, together drawing the temporal and spatial dimensions of colonial New England, and he authored an historical and geographical survey of the British settlements from Nova Scotia to Virginia since the fifteenth century, situating Anglo-American society within a grand astronomical and geological scheme. As they traced the patterns of “matter in motion” in the heavens, the earth, and the empire, Douglass’s almanac, map, and history provided the natural framework for his writings on currency and commerce in these same years, moving from the challenge of classification to the problem of class in a world of mercurial fortunes.

The first of these works was an almanac fittingly entitled Mercurius Nov-Anglicanus (New England Mercury), published in 1743 under the pseudonym, “William Nadir, Student in

46 “Perpetual Motion in Matter, Exercise and Temperance necessary to Health, and Virtue necessary to Happiness,” The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle (June 1744), 1.
the Mathematicks and a Lover of his Country.” Douglass’s pen name suggested the broad parallel between the laws of the universe and the laws of New England that formed the main theme of the volume, grounded in the mathematical sciences of magnitude in general and astronomy in particular, which early modern writers understood as the study of “magnitudes in motion.”

An epigraph from *Hudibras*, Samuel Butler’s seventeenth-century poetic satire of religious enthusiasm, announced Douglass’s aim of reducing natural history and human history to a common calculus:

From the Stars—

*Some calculate the hidden Fates*
*Of Monkeys, Puppy Dogs and Cats:*
*Some take a Measure of the Lives*
*Of Fathers, Mothers, Husbands, Wives.*

So too, the list of contents on the title page, arrayed in two columns—on the left, the days of the week and the month along with the times of the rising and setting of the sun and the moon, of the tides, and of eclipses; on the right, the civil courts of Massachusetts, the monarchs of Europe and of England, and the festivals and fasts of the Church of England—neatly aligned the celestial order with the social order. The “remarkables” or historic events that Douglass listed for each day of the year likewise commemorated the coronations, proclamations, and discoveries of monarchs, nobles, and scientists along with historic fires, earthquakes, eclipses, comets, and storms.

Between the months, Douglass inserted mathematical notes on various forms of matter and motion, demonstrating the regularity of the movement of sound, the daily rotation and yearly

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47 “In European schools and universities from late antiquity to the early modern period[,] the four mathematical sciences . . . were linked by a concern with number or magnitude, arithmetic dealing with magnitudes as such, geometry with immovable magnitudes, astronomy with magnitudes in motion, and music with the relations of different magnitudes to one another.” “Quadrivium,” *Oxford English Dictionary.*

orbit of the earth, the distance between the sun and other stars, and other natural relations, while offering similar summations of industrial and mercantile activity. One such note described the recently opened silk mill at Derby, England, quantifying its commotion like a force of nature:

*There are 26,586 Wheels. 97,746 Movements. 73,728 Yards of Silk wound every Time the Wheel goes round, which is three Times every Minute. 318,504,960 Yards of Silk in one Day and Night, and consequently 99,378,547,550 Yards of Silk in a Year. One Water Wheel communicates Motion to all the rest of the Wheels and Movements, of which any one may be stopped separately and independent on[sic] the rest. One Fire Engine conveys Air to every individual Part of the Machine, and one Regulator governs the whole Work.*

In Douglass’s depiction of an industrial automaton seemingly operated by air and water rather than labor and capital, nature itself implicitly appeared as a cosmic perpetual-motion machine, regulated by the steady circulation of its gears.49

He concluded the volume with three lengthy tables, identifying the naturally ordained cycles of the almanac with the inexorable extension of English rule. A “Table of the Kings and Queens of England” listed royal births, deaths, and years of reign, from the ascension of William I following the Norman Conquest in 1066 to that of George II in 1727. A “Table of Latitudes” subjected the sprawling sphere of commerce and conquest from Acapulco to Rotterdam to a uniform geographical matrix. Here Douglass appended “An Explanation of *Old and New Style*” dates in an effort to reconcile the Julian calendar of Great Britain with the Gregorian calendar observed by other nations, affording a universal time frame to go with the globe-spanning grid. (Britain converted to the Gregorian calendar in 1752.) Finally and most strikingly, a “Table of Interest at Six per Cent,” designed “so that it is fitted to the meanest Capacity,” enabled lenders and borrowers to determine how much was owed on a given sum, from five shillings to one hundred pounds, after one, two, three, six, nine, and twelve months. Along with the lines of royalty and the latitudes of empire, the schedule of interest imposed its own mathematical rule on

49 [Douglass], *Mercurius Nov-Anglicanus*, 9.
At the same time that Douglass was creating his New England almanac, he was also completing a definitive map of the region, setting the standard for subsequent maps—particularly the British cartographer John Green’s celebrated *Map of the Most Inhabited Part of New England* (1755), which was largely modeled on Douglass’s work—and establishing the dominant graphic vision of the four northernmost colonies until after the American Revolution. Having long exchanged cartographic texts with his correspondents elsewhere in the British Atlantic, he was well read in the contemporary theory and practice of map-making, a vital dimension of imperial knowledge and power. When it was posthumously published in 1755, his *Plan of the British Dominions of New England* marked a qualitative advance in size and scale over earlier efforts to define the region geographically (Fig. 1).

As the geographer Matthew Edney has shown, Douglass deliberately depicted New England as a unified, “natural” territory, not merely an artifact of British rule, based on a carefully contrived presentation of the map itself as the product of direct, unmediated observation, much like his earlier medical treatises. Douglass styled the work not a symbolic “map” but an empirical “plan,” “Composed from actual Surveys,” meaning a large-scale compilation of numerous small-scale governmental surveys of townships, districts, and proprietary claims from the preceding half-century. Indeed, he gave his “plan of New England”

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50 “The Interest is calculated at 6 per Cent, but if any one desires to know what the Amount of a Sum is at 8 per Cent, it is but adding one third Part more and you find it. . . . Observe the same Rule at 10 per Cent, only instead of one third add two thirds.” [Douglass], *Mercurius Nov-Anglicanus*, 19.

the extraordinary appearance of a single, high-resolution land survey of the entire region, as if from the perspective of a giant surveyor capable of physically viewing and plotting it all at once, as opposed to a conventional low-resolution map based on the latitudes and longitudes of key points within a large area, though he understood that smaller plans charted at different times and places could not simply be stitched together in this way without considerable artifice.\textsuperscript{52}

Purposely spare in its use of symbols so that no legend was required to read it, the map appeared as a largely unadorned patchwork of parcels stretching from the vacant “lands not appropriated” of northern New England to the prime real estate along Massachusetts Bay and Long Island Sound. Originally intended for public display in the offices of township and district clerks, it represented less a transparent image of the region at the time it was drawn than an idealized vision in which property lines extended across the landscape with the stability and universality of Euclidean geometry, forming the natural basis of a cohesive colonial order.\textsuperscript{53}

In reality, the political and social terrain of New England was shaken violently in the years when Douglass was charting it from above and below. The resumption of inter-imperial warfare in Europe set off a series of colonial conflicts in which Boston and its hinterland provided the bulk of the British soldiers, ships, and supplies, ending the long period of peace since Douglass’s arrival in America. By Douglass’s own estimate, nearly twenty percent of the able-bodied men of Massachusetts were killed in campaigns against Spanish bases in the Caribbean and French outposts in Canada between 1739 and 1748, leaving behind a large

\textsuperscript{52} Edney, “New England Mapped,” 168, 170.
\textsuperscript{51} “I have composed the actual surveys (as upon record) of each township and district in the four colonies of New-England, into a plan of about three and a half feet square, by a scale of five miles to one inch. This plan, of many years collecting, and perfected at a considerable charge, is a free gift, for a public benefit to the provinces of New-England; each township or district is to have a copy gratis, to be lodged in the town clerk’s office.” William Douglass, \textit{A Summary, Historical and Political, Of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements, and Present State of the British Settlements in North America}, vol. I (Boston: Rogers and Fowle,1749-51), 404n. Douglass never actually executed this plan. After his death, his nephew and executor of his estate Cornelius Douglass tried but failed to sell the manuscript map to the Massachusetts government, after which he had it engraved and printed in London. Edney, “New England Mapped,” 171-172.
number of impoverished widows and children and a critically weakened commercial economy. The ranks of recipients of public relief swelled, while the tax rolls dramatically declined as many became too poor to pay. Faced with skyrocketing expenses, the Massachusetts legislature increased poll and property taxes, which rose more than 40 percent per capita, while issuing an unprecedented volume of bills of credit to pay soldiers and suppliers, resulting in a drastic depreciation in the value of the paper currency.  

The poverty and social unrest of the 1740s prompted Douglass’s efforts to classify the human subjects of empire as well as its natural objects, with money serving as the new basis of class distinctions. The creation of such a social taxonomy formed the underlying project of his survey of the history of British America and the implicit point of his writings on currency as well. Before discussing those works, however, a brief consideration of his own social status and his related role as a founder of American philanthropy will illuminate his ideas about class and classification more generally.

Douglass expressed his sense of his class position in a letter requesting a tax abatement from the Boston town assessors in 1747, in which he enumerated his annual income from various sources—a noteworthy basis of argument in itself, since there was no income tax. He reported earnings from his medical practice the previous year totaling £500, considerably less than the £715 he had received from the tenants of his various rental properties and from those to whom he had loaned money at interest, and only half the value of the “outstanding debts” owed to him, which he estimated at £1,000.  

“I contract the business of my Profession,” he wrote candidly, “because considering long outstanding debts and bad pay, it is an affair of more labour than


profit.” As the petition indicated, much of Douglass’s wealth lay in the substantial real estate he had acquired since the 1720s, including several houses and lots in Boston and Roxbury as well as lands in Middlesex, Worcester, and Hampshire Counties, later appraised at more than £3,000. His extensive acquisitions surely influenced his map of New England as a large-scale land survey.56

Unlike most early Americans, however, Douglass was interested in real estate mainly as a financial asset, as a means of generating rents and increasing the value of his estate rather than a means of production and support for a family and household. He invested in neither agriculture nor industry, and he never married. His primary residence in Boston, which he purchased in 1743, was the Green Dragon Tavern, a prominent example of the rising institution of the “public house” or “pub,” which served as a sort of surrogate household for migrants, sojourners, and single men in late colonial New England. Cash formed the means of a new kind of kinship within commercial establishments such as his, affording access to room and board along with care and companionship, much as Douglass made his living as a physician selling services otherwise provided largely by family members and neighbors. Like the commodification of medicine that he helped to lead, the proliferation of taverns and inns serving a transient clientele represented a challenge to the role of local Congregational churches as overseers of such domestic services, as a rising chorus of lamentations by Puritan preachers attested.57

Douglass took a preeminent part in the emergence of another eighteenth-century alternative to the seventeenth-century commonwealth of households and churches: he was a longtime leader of the Scots Charitable Society in Boston, one of the first organizations of its

kind in colonial America and a model for future philanthropies. Founded in 1657 as a mutual-aid society of Scottish immigrants and prisoners of war transported to New England under Oliver Cromwell, the group arose alongside but distinctly apart from the efforts of the Puritan establishment to promote its own charity schools, “societies for the suppression of disorder,” and “young men’s associations” ministering to a growing multitude of itinerant laborers and propertyless people in the countryside and port cities. The ecclesiastical organizations were designed to mobilize the increasing wealth of New England merchants under the aegis of an older religious ideal that received its classic statement in John Winthop’s “Modell of Christian Charity” (1630), updated for the new era in Cotton Mather’s Bonifacius (1710). But Winthrop’s original model of charity had been premised on an immutable, divinely ordained hierarchy of magistrates and subjects, masters and servants, heads of household and wives and children, “knitt more nearly together” in Christian love by paternal benevolence and grateful obedience. By contrast, Mather’s later notion of “doing good” concerned the more fluid relations between the monied rich and the cash-poor in a nascent market society in which “liberality” served as an avowedly self-interested investment. In this changed context, discriminating donations to new “outdoor” institutions engaged in systematic, organized philanthropy demonstrated the gentility of the ascendant commercial classes and the subservience of the rising ranks of indigent sailors, soldiers, migrants, orphans, widows, and the seriously sick or disabled, for whom older forms of parish-, township-, and household-based relief proved increasingly inadequate.58

Taking its example from the Scottish Corporation of London, which was chartered in 1665 to assist “poor Natives of North-Britain, who are not entitled to any parochial Relief in England,” the Scots Charitable Society in Boston was among the earliest organizations to take the “business of benevolence” out of the church and into the hands of merchants and shopkeepers themselves. Such avowedly commercial as well as philanthropic associations were modeled on the rise of the joint-stock corporation in England and inspired by the new discourse of political economy as much as by Christian piety. Douglass joined the Society soon after arriving in America and became vice-president in 1721. Just a few years later, Benjamin Franklin famously fled his apprenticeship at the Boston Courant, the organ of the anti-inoculation and anti-clerical faction led by Douglass, and founded a mechanics’ society in Philadelphia called the “Leather Apron Men,” which is commonly considered the origin of American philanthropy. 59

As vice-president and later president, Douglass made the Scots Charitable Society more businesslike by diversifying its investments, instituting annual audits, and shoring up its finances, at the same time that he broadened its mission to provide pensions for Scottish war veterans and regular assistance to the wandering poor, the elderly, the widowed, the orphaned, and the ill as well as recent immigrants. By the crisis of the 1740s, he had found in philanthropy an alternative to the family and household in more ways than one, endowing institutions that provided both social welfare services for the poor and cultural credentials for the rich, while

preserving his estate in the absence of legal heirs. “[H]aving no family to provide for,” as he wrote to the Boston assessors, he aimed to invest his savings “by dooing charities in my life time by donations and bounties.” His largest such endowment was a gift of thirty acres of land and £500 for the establishment and maintenance of a free school in the western Massachusetts town of New Sherburn in 1746, along with a promise of £50 per year for seven years to support the ministry there (“though quite a portion of these pledges was never received,” according to a local historian), in exchange for renaming the town “Douglas” as his legacy.

Douglass’s *Summary, Historical and Political, Of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements, and Present State of the British Settlements in North America* (1747-1752) brought the scientific perspective that he had developed in his previous work to bear on the growing concerns about class relations that guided his philanthropy. Originally issued as an irregular series of more than sixty pamphlets and subsequently collected as a two-volume set, it was quickly acclaimed as the first comprehensive American history of the British colonies. With its careful attention to provincial boundaries, topographical features, and cities and towns as well as its detailed chronicle of political and military events from the fifteenth century to the

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present, the work drew extensively on Douglass’s experience in designing the almanac and the map. “Geography and chronology, are the two most considerable elements of History,” he wrote.64 Like his “practical histories” of contagious diseases, the aptly named Summary was presented as a matter-of-fact synthesis of findings from firsthand observation, a study in “true solid Philosophy and natural History” as opposed to “pedantick metaphysical Jargon.”65 It was written in the rambling, “miscellaneous” style favored by contemporary naturalists, which Douglass deemed “more agreeable by its variety and turns, than a rigid dry connected account of things,” and which was meant to demonstrate the author’s patrician curiosity and exquisite discernment much as his composite portraits of disease displayed, as he put it, a refined “imagination” more often associated with “poets and painters.”66

Its literary style reflected the central question of the Summary, which was how and where to draw new lines of class distinction and social authority at a moment of profound instability, as New Englanders found themselves on the frontlines of Britain’s escalating imperial conflict with France. “The FRENCH are the common Nusance and Disturbers of Europe,” Douglass warned in the opening paragraphs of his magnum opus, “and will in a short time become the same in America, if not mutilated at Home, and in America fenced off from us by Ditches and Walls.” At the same time, he feared the consequences of the widening war for the fraying social fabric of the British colonies themselves. A “small country” such as Britain must be careful “not to run upon Discoveries and Conquests, beyond what they can well improve and protect,” he wrote, “because by over-stretching, they weaken or break the Staple of their Constitution.” The first essays of the

64 Douglass, Summary of Settlements, I, 392.
65 Douglass, Summary of Settlements I, 231, 214.
66 Douglass, Summary of Settlements I, 310; vol. II, 383-384. “His [Douglass’s] style is hurried, slipshod, irregular; his materials jumbled together in the hotchpotch manner; he flits from topic to topic as the gust strikes him; . . . he delights to exhibit his polyglot proficiency, and covers his pages with specks of quotations from foreign languages, especially Latin and French.” Tyler, History of American Literature, vol II, 154. On the “miscellaneous” style in natural histories, see Whitaker, “Culture of Curiosity,” 84.
Summary appeared on the heels of a massive attack by New England soldiers and sailors on the French fort of Louisburg in Nova Scotia in 1745, in which Douglass lamented the “loss of about 3,000 robust, labouring young men.” As the historian Gary Nash has written of the Louisburg campaign, “Ironically, the expedition had triumphed but in succeeding brought such human and financial devastation that the victory was lamented for years thereafter. The glory of bringing French Catholic power to its knees was slight comfort for hundreds of Boston families, for they had to reflect upon the victory in homes that were fatherless, husbandless, and dependent on charity for food and fuel.” Douglass’s major concern was what the acute loss of men would mean for a colonial economy dependent on their labor. “It not only retards or stunts the growth of a colony, but in fact, minorates them, and pushes them backwards,” he wrote of the military adventure. “[T]his is the general complaint of the country; extravagant price of labour, and want of labourers.”

“Extravagant” was a keyword of Douglass’s writings, appearing in his repeated criticisms of the “extravagant claims” of unqualified medical practitioners and his frequent denunciations of “idle and extravagant” debtors. In contemporary usage, it meant “straying” “out of bounds” or “roving beyond just limits,” and was thus of a piece with his complaints about ministers “exceeding their bounds” and promoting “unbounded inoculation,” and with his rigorous efforts in both the map and the Summary to draw clear property and province boundaries. The “extravagant price of labour” did not simply signify that the loss of manpower made labor excessively expensive for men like Douglass, who described himself as engaged in “an almost continued employ of tradesmen and labourers.” It suggested that the scarcity of labor blurred

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70 Douglass, Letter to Assessors, 538.

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class lines much as quack medicine and debtor relief did, threatening the social position of prosperous merchants dependent on hired hands as well as that of poor widows and children dependent on charity.

In seeking to redraw the internal boundaries of colonial society along with its external borders, Douglass outlined a natural history of class relations ultimately based on currency and credit. Like the types and ranks of natural history more broadly, emergent eighteenth-century categories of race and class were expressly predicated on the empirical evidence of travel narratives and historical accounts, intended to reflect the flux of new social relations instead of the old fixed hierarchy of estates. Offering a materialist account that evidently influenced Adam Smith’s conjectural history of commercial society in *The Wealth of Nations*, Douglass aimed to anatomize what he called the “political constitution” of the colonies, by which he meant not just their system of government but the class structure on which it was presumed to rest.71 “The Political Constitution, like the Human, is ticklish,” he wrote. “[T]here are but few who understand politic Health and Sickness.”72 Following contemporary political theorists such as Montesquieu and earlier James Harrington, Douglass contended that the health of the body politic depended on the maintenance of a “balanced constitution” in which monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements were harmoniously integrated. Leading European naturalists found analogs for such a class system among animals and plants, in the elaborate division of labor within ant and bee “colonies” and in Linnaeus’s depiction of mosses, grasses, herbs, and trees as the peasantry, yeomanry, gentry, and nobility of the “polity of nature.”73


Douglass began his own taxonomy of colonial peoples with the “Aboriginal Americans,” whom he described in keeping with contemporary European conventions in almost entirely imaginary terms—a glaring exception to his general allegiance to empirical observation—as “the most barbarous and least polished People upon Earth,” virtually devoid of agriculture or industry, government or culture. “Like the wild Irish they dread Labour more than Poverty,” he wrote, in a nod to the proto-racial political arithmetic of William Petty and other architects of the commodification of land and labor in Ireland, though he allowed that “Many of our intermixed Indians are of good Use as Servants.”74 Among the English colonists, Douglass wrote that the first settlers included a handful of “ambitious adventurers” along with a much larger mass of criminals as well as “The Malcontents, the Unfortunate, the Necessitous,” “the Disaffected and the Vicious.” From these motley origins had arisen by Douglass’s day “four Sorts of People”: 1. Masters that is Planters and Merchants. 2. White Servants. 3. Indian Servants. 4. Slaves for Life, mostly Negros.”75

Conspicuously absent from this schema were the great majority of settlers who were neither servants nor masters, but small farmers or artisans and their families. Douglass regarded such petty proprietors as an essentially unnatural class whose outsized presence in the colonies upset the “balanced constitution” required for social stability and advancement. Lamenting the colonial practice of partible inheritance, he endorsed the laws in Britain for maintaining landed estates, like his father’s in Scotland, in an argument worth careful consideration:

Intestate real Estate divided among all the Children or Collaterals, and in the next Generation subdivided amongst their Children or Collaterals; will render a Colony for ever poor, because [such smallholders,] depending upon a small pittance of land, scarce sufficient to produce to [sic] the necessaries of life, and being under no absolute

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74 Douglass, *Summary of Settlements* I, 153-154, 161, 156.
75 Douglass, *Summary of Settlements* I, 206-207
necessity of using further industry, they continue idle and miserable for life; whereas the younger children, if, instead of being freeholders, they become tenants[,] as a public good[,] they must be more industrious, and raise, besides a mere subsistence, a sufficient rent for the landlord, and acquire a habit of industry: some of their male children will become a nursery for the public land and sea service; as for the female children, their want of real estate will not disqualify them from being good breeders, but incite and oblige them to accept of husbands when they offer. 

Like the relative scarcity of labor exacerbated by losses in warfare, the comparatively broad distribution of land nurtured the growth of a stubbornly autonomous yeoman class engaged in subsistence farming, Douglass reasoned, following contemporary British economic writers such as Petty. Indivisible inheritance, by contrast, would consolidate property in the hands of large landowners, provide them with a ready supply of dispossessed tenants compelled to produce a surplus of staple crops in order to generate sufficient income to pay market rents, and replenish the pool of willing soldiers, sailors, and mothers, bolstering the authority of commercial landlords and long-distance merchants over laboring men and women alike. Yet while it was critical that those working the land be impelled to produce more than a “mere subsistence,” it was equally vital that they not reap in higher wages the surplus they sowed. For only by lowering the “extravagant price of labour” could “our merchants . . . afford in foreign markets to under-sell the merchants of other countries,” Douglass contended. “[B]esides,” he continued, “let us suppose, their employers in generosity and beneficence to allow more wages than are merely sufficient to provide them the necessaries of life, perhaps, some few of them, may lay up this surplus, and, in a short time, aspire higher than this their mean labour, thus their labour is lost.” If farming families earned enough from paid labor for some to become self-employed smallholders, their labor would be “lost” as surely as it was through partible inheritance; hence Douglass’s call for the prohibition of “all combinations and agreements,

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between workmen concerning wages.” The same logic informed his support for the establishment of three newly engineered industrial households in every colonial county, designed to direct the accelerating movement of labor automatically, like the circulation of air and water in a textile mill: workhouses “to oblige and habituate idlers to some work,” almshouses for those too aged, ill, or feeble for productive labor, and especially “orphan-houses” for children whose parents were dead or unable to provide for them, and who were “not to be brought up to idle learning (reading and writing excepted) but to trades and labour: generally these poor children may be bound to proper masters, as apprentices or servants.”

Douglass’s proposals for altering the laws of inheritance and the system of poor relief were part of a broader blueprint for restructuring colonial politics and property relations in the image of the English “mixed government” of King and Parliament and the ascendant class triad of rent-seeking landlords, commercial tenant farmers, and hired laborers. Representing “the quintessence of Douglass’s political philosophy,” as the historian John Bumsted has written, the “Scheme for the better regulating these colonies” formed the thematic centerpiece of the Summary, which was largely devoted to demonstrating that the British colonies were naturally suited for such a sweeping set of reforms, much as his precedent-setting map imagined New England as a perfectly laid plan of properties and provinces. Indeed, Douglass envisioned the American settlements themselves as interlocking units of a great colonial works, governed by a single sovereign “Regulator” and powered by the carefully channeled circulation of labor throughout.

He proposed vacating all remaining proprietary and corporate colonial charters and reconstituting all the colonies as royal provinces, “all Governments of the Colonies to be vested

78 Douglass, Summary of Settlements, I, 257, 256.
79 Bumsted, “Douglass’s Summary,” 245.
in the Crown”; creating a uniform code of “general Laws for all the Plantations,” to be drafted by a Board of Trade empowered to levy taxes and quitrents; paying the salaries of colonial governors from Westminster, rendering them independent of the provincial legislatures; granting a veto over the elected assemblies’ laws to the royally appointed governors as well as to a council of the “hereditary Lords of large Manors . . . appointed by Royal Patents,” i.e. owners of estates of three thousand acres or more; and removing all civil power from the clergy, establishing instead a system for licensing ministers, assigning them to permanent pulpits, and treating itinerant preachers—like, Douglass hoped, unlicensed physicians—as “idle and disorderly Persons, Vagrants and Vagabonds.” In justification of this last proposal, he noted that “vagrant enthusiasts” had distracted from their proper callings “poor deluded Tradesmen and Labourers (whose Time is their only Estate),” estimating that each of the touring evangelist George Whitefield’s sermons in Boston had wasted roughly £1,000 in hours that might otherwise have been profitably employed.  

The reform he advocated most assiduously, however, concerned control over the circulation of money itself. In the Summary and in a series of extended essays on finance and trade in the 1730s and 1740s, Douglass became the leading critic of colonial paper currency in a period when the stock of outstanding bills nearly quintupled in New England. Authorized by elected assemblies in which men of small means and deepening debts exercised far more power than their counterparts across the Atlantic, paper money came to epitomize for Douglass the danger of commercial circulation spinning out of the control of monarchs, merchants, and

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81 Hammond, Banks and Politics, 16; Rabushka, Taxation in America, 577.
money-lenders, much as the administration of the likewise novel instrument of inoculation by clergymen and “quacks” had signified twenty years earlier.\textsuperscript{82}

**Currency and Credit in Political Economy**

Like many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English writers, Douglass viewed money as the “lifeblood” of the market economy that they conceived on the model of the human body or the “economy of nature.” Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) thus described money as “the Sanguification of the Common-wealth,” “Nourishing (as it passeth) every part thereof,” while William Petty called it the “Fat of the Body-politick, whereof too much doth as often hinder its Agility, as too little makes it sick,” much like proverbial notions of money in constant motion, a “great traveler in the world.”\textsuperscript{83} Daniel Defoe’s *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726) similarly depicted “the circulation of trade within ourselves, where all the several manufactures move in a just rotation from the several countries where they are made, to the city of London, as the blood in the body to the Heart.”\textsuperscript{84} Leading theorists of preclassical political economy including Hobbes, Petty, John Locke, and Nicholas Barbon trained in anatomy, physiology, and related fields, from which they drew the understanding of circulatory processes that they brought to their writings on commerce and currency.\textsuperscript{85} “In nature everything is intertwined,” wrote the French physician and Physiocrat François Quesnay, “everything runs through circular courses which are interlaced with one another.”\textsuperscript{86}

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\textsuperscript{82} Rabushka, *Taxation in America*, 577.
\textsuperscript{83} Valenze, *Social Life of Money*, 63-65, 70.
\textsuperscript{86} Schabas, *Natural Origins of Economics*, 42.
\end{flushright}
For early modern economic writers, circulation represented the quintessentially modern conception of a self-regulating system in which power emanates from the mutual relations among constituent parts rather than from a central authority designing and directing the system as a whole. Smith’s “invisible hand” of the market, ostensibly arising without deliberate design or concerted effort as the result of countless independent actions by a multitude of competing individuals, exemplified a general pattern taking shape within such varied fields as political theory, mental and moral philosophy, Newtonian mechanics, vitalist physiology, and natural theology. Classical political economy, in particular, was predicated on the ideal of a market society in which essentially fixed, coercive, and bilateral relations of dependence between sovereigns and subjects or masters and servants gave way to fluid, contractual, and multilateral relations of interdependence among producers and consumers, bondholders and taxpayers, landlords and tenants, employers and employees—in other words, monetary relations mediated by new networks of impersonal, interchangeable credits and debts.

The political economy of credit and currency was never far from the surface of Douglass’s *Summary*. He took every opportunity to inveigh against “depreciating Money-making Ass----lies,” which trampled on the exclusive “Prerogative of the Crown” (or rather of the King and his Parliamentary allies among English commercial landlords, financiers, and colonial planters) and, along with other “Acts for the Relief of Debtors, hurt Creditors and the Credit of the Country very much.”

87 Anticipating by several decades a core argument of the Federalist Papers, in which paper money issued by the newly independent states exemplified the need for constitutional reform to protect propertied interests from the “tyranny of the majority,” Douglass denounced the “fallacious and designed cheat of a plantation government public Paper Currency.” “I have observed that all our Paper-money-making assemblies have been legislatures

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of debtors, the representatives of people who from incongitancy, idleness, and profuseness, have been under a necessity of mortgaging their lands,” he wrote. Decrying “the vast incredible damages that personal estates have suffered in New England, by depreciation of denominations from the multiplying of a nominal Paper Currency,” he estimated that whereas £100 in silver coin exchanged for £140 in colonial paper in 1711, by 1748 the same amount of specie exchanged for £1,000 in New England notes.\(^8\)

Adam Smith emphatically agreed in 1776, drawing deeply on the American example in discussing the vital importance of a stable means of payment and standard of value, or of what he called “the great wheel of circulation,” “by means of which every individual in the society has his subsistence, conveniences, and amusements regularly distributed to him in their proper proportions.”\(^9\) Citing Douglass’s critique of depreciated colonial paper, Smith wrote, “To oblige a creditor, therefore, to accept of this as full payment for a debt of a hundred pounds actually paid down in ready money was an act of such violent injustice as has scarce, perhaps, been attempted by the government of any other country which pretended to be free. It bears the evident marks of having originally been, what the honest and downright Doctor Douglas [sic] assures us it was, a scheme of fraudulent debtors to cheat their creditors.”\(^10\)

Douglass felt the sting of this scheme personally, not only because he earned a growing share of his income from lending money at interest, but because his medical practice depended on credit as well. “I have here practice amongst four sorts of People,” he explained in a 1721 letter to Cadwallader Colden, classifying his patients according to their means of payment.

“[S]ome families pay me five pounds per annum each for advice sick or well, some few fee me


\(^10\) Wealth of Nations, section II.2.100 [need full cite]
as in Britain, but for the Native New-Englanders I am obliged to a keep a day book of my Consultations advice and Visits, and bring them a bill; others of the poorer sort I advise and visit without any expectation of fees.”91 The third and probably largest group—those whom Douglass billed after advising or treating them—roughly corresponded to the stratum of self-employed but cash-poor households that troubled his taxonomy of colonial classes in the Summary. Their unpaid bills accounted for the “long and outstanding debts” of which he later complained to the tax assessors, rendering his occupation by then “an affair of more labour than profit.”

As with his campaign against “unbounded inoculation” in the 1720s, however, Douglass’s opposition to the deluge of paper money in the 1740s reflected more than his immediate self-interest. It manifested his understanding of the uncertain and shaky authority of New England’s ascendant landlord and merchant elite, in a region where real property remained comparatively widely distributed and relatively few families yet paid rent, worked for wages, or relied primarily on the production and sale of staple crops. In such a society of smallholders, as the historian John Brooke has pointed out, the main leverage that leading gentry families possessed lay in their jealously guarded control of the cash and credit that those with little liquid wealth but increasing ambition required in order to buy and develop new land.92 The latter class of enterprising debtors, including a wide range of farmers, artisans, shopkeepers, and merchants serving local and regional markets, formed the backbone of the “land bank” movement of the early 1740s in Boston and more than sixty counties and towns in eastern and central Massachusetts, spurred into action by heightened royal restrictions on provincial bills of credit and the prospect of a drastic contraction in the money supply. Going beyond previous attempts to issue currency backed by land and goods rather than specie, this latest financial venture aimed to

provide credit and a kind of cash in the form of transferable notes to small farmers who
mortgaged their property and deposited their surplus produce with a newly formed private bank,
which would take responsibility for marketing the goods on the borrowers’ behalf. The Land
Bank of 1740 was vociferously opposed by the royal governor and his council, who blocked its
charter and prohibited provincial officials from accepting its notes, and it was soon suppressed
by Parliament. But the resulting controversy sparked a popular insurgency leading to a series of
large new emissions of public bills of credit, drawing Douglass into the fiercest struggle over the
money question in fifty years, the climax of the currency conflict in provincial New England.93

Douglass joined in an emerging school of thought associated in the colonies with big
transatlantic merchants and large landowners with investments at interest, and with close ties to
the Board of Trade and the Crown. Such colonial critics of paper currency were profoundly
influenced by British mercantilist writings on trade and by English exponents of the metallic
standard and the “intrinsic value” or “natural value” of money such as John Locke, who helped
to formulate the ideological basis for the English financial revolution.94 Their ranks in
Massachusetts included Paul Dudley, attorney general for the colony in the first two decades of
the eighteenth century and son of Joseph Dudley, one of the members of Edmund Andros’s
governing council that had tried John Wise; Thomas Hutchinson, later governor of
Massachusetts in the years leading up to the Revolution; and the clergyman and Harvard divinity
professor Edward Wigglesworth.

As early as 1714, when the currency question was first emerging in American political discourse, Paul Dudley argued that colonial issues of paper money egregiously violated the sovereign prerogatives of the Crown, illicitly establishing an “independent Government, which like a Fire in the Bowels, will Burn up and Consume the whole Body.” While a true “Money-bank” must be founded on “the true or common Current Money of the country,” i.e. gold and silver coin, Dudley contended, one founded purely on fiat or common agreement would “Alter and Destroy the very Nature of Money.” “So that instead of Answering all things, as it has always done, and ought to do, it will now Answer nothing, and be worse than every thing else,” Dudley wrote. “For that which really makes the Value of Money, among other things, is its Rarity: So that upon the whole, the Remedy proposed by these Projectors, will be much worse than the Disease.” Arguing that the real reason for the scarcity of metallic money in the colonies lay in a bad balance of trade, to be redressed by restricting imports of British luxuries, Dudley echoed Douglass’s rhetoric of “extravagance” as opposed to “circumspection,” bemoaning “the great Extravagance that People, and especially the Ordinary sort, are fallen into, far beyond their circumstances, in their Purchases, Buildings, Families, Expences, Apparel, and generally in their whole way of Living.” 95 Other writers sounded this call for greater thrift and less spending in a more republican key, arguing that imports of costly luxuries like silk stockings, fine china, and rum were corrupting the body politic along with the domestic economy, calling for the colonists to be “more Frugal” and more “diligent and laborious to raise, produce, make as much as we can for our own support,” instead of engaging in speculative schemes of improvement and expansion. “WE in the Country think,” wrote an anonymous pamphleteer in 1719, “that Plotting

95 [Paul Dudley], Objections to the Bank of Credit Late Projected at Boston. Being a Letter upon that Occasion, to John Burril, Esq.: Speaker to the House of Representatives for the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay, in New-England (Boston: T. Fleet, 1714), 14, 20, 22, 24.
heads, Proud hearts, and Idle hands, will never maintain a People; and that a close following the Wheel within doors, and the Plough without are much better and stronger Politicks.⁹⁶

This was the tradition to which Douglass signally contributed in his main writings on the currency question: An Essay Concerning Silver and Paper Currencies (1738), A Discourse Concerning the Currencies of the British Plantations in America (1740), A Letter to -- -- Merchant in London (1741), and A Second Letter to -- -- Merchant in London (1741). Douglass did not oppose paper currency per se. He supported government issuance of bills of credit as a means of short-term finance in anticipation of future taxes, so long as such bills were retired reliably and quickly, were not declared legal tender for the payment of private debts, and did not become a general medium of exchange, inflating the money supply. His case against the large, inflationary issues of provincial bills, declared legal tender, and with long or delayed expirations, came down to three main sets of arguments. The first concerned his vision of the marriage of sovereignty and capital, or public authority and private investment. The second concerned his understanding of the nature and advantages of circulation, as opposed to direct exchange of commodities or barter. The third concerned his conception of the capitalist transformation of political and class relations, particularly those between creditors and debtors; more broadly, it concerned the relationship between popular sovereignty and commercial capitalism. In all three of these areas, Douglass shared with his opponents, such as John Wise, a common set of assumptions that set the stakes of struggle over currency and banking in early America.

Douglass began each of his major works on the currency question with a tribute to the union of sovereignty and capital entailed in the English financial revolution. Much as Wise sought to enlist merchants on behalf of provincial bills of credit, Douglass contended that the

⁹⁶ Anon., The Present Melancholy Circumstances of the Province Consider’d, and Methods for Redress humbly proposed, in a Letter from one in the Country to one in Boston (Boston: B. Gray and J. Edwards, 1719), 9, 11-12.
essence of the partnership between crown and commerce lay in the rise of the hard-money silver standard. He wrote that the long history of rulers debasing the coinage had finally come to an end in Holland, France, and England over the past century and a half, as commerce had become increasingly central to statecraft and empire. Merchants had long favored silver and gold coin as a medium of trade. Only in modern times, however, had merchants become partners with monarchs, bringing an end to debasement of the currency. “The Credit of Merchants in the commercial World is become more sacred, than the Probity of Ministers in the civil Administration, and is a Check upon them,” Douglass wrote.97 Or, as he put it elsewhere, “A general Stop has been put to those notorious publick Frauds ever since Trade began to flourish; the civil Governments becoming more polite, found it their Interest in Affairs of a Medium of Trade, to be advised by the more knowing and experienced Traders.”98 The “most glorious” aspect of the Glorious Revolution, Douglass declared, had been the reminting of the English coinage in milled-edge coins that could not be shaved or clipped and that contained the full amount of silver matching their face value. The recoinage of the mid-1690s, combined with Master of the Mint Sir Isaac Newton’s declaring the intrinsic value of the silver coins of all countries with which England traded a few years later, founded the financial strength of the rising British Empire firmly on the silver standard, which safeguarded the interests of moneyed investors and large import-export merchants who joined hands with the reformed English state.99

Thereafter, every nation that engaged in international commerce had to base its own currency on the money standard agreed on by the ascendant transnational mercantile elite, namely silver. “The universal trading Part of the World, as one tacit Confederacy have fallen into

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98 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 5.
99 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 61.
some general Rules, which by Custom of Merchants are become as Fundamental,” Douglass wrote. “One of these is a Silver Medium of Trade, that all Contracts . . . are understood to be payable in this Medium, being always of the same fixed Value.”100 A trading nation like Britain might thenceforth authorize banks to issue notes that could circulate among merchants as a convenient substitute for coin, but such paper promises must be payable in silver. Indeed, as he explained, “A Paper Credit well founded and under good Regulations, and not larger than what the Silver Specie Currency will bear; has been found to be a very good Expedient in Business, and it leaves the Silver Species at more Liberty to be used as Merchandize, and for petty Occasions.”101 In order for the notes to be as good as the silver that backed them—to trade with silver “at par” or at a premium—they had to bear interest, making up for the fact that otherwise a promise to pay in silver in the future was generally not worth as much as the silver itself immediately in hand. And the volume of notes in circulation must be constrained by the amount of silver in which they were payable, in order to avoid the kind of depreciation that the metallic standard was meant to prevent. “If Paper Credit exceeds a certain Proportion of the concomitant Silver Currency, its Effects are bad, and ruinous; by its precarious Loss of Value,” Douglass wrote.102

While the French, Dutch, and British governments had thus made inviolable the compact between the Crown and the commercial gentry, according to Douglass, they had foolishly allowed their American colonies to violate that sacred bond. The colonies had debased the currency and defrauded creditors by issuing paper not backed by silver at all, but by future tax revenues—paper that should have been limited to short-term financing of government expenses, not long-term circulation as a medium of trade—and thereby saddled future generations with a

100 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 4.
102 Douglass, Essay Concerning Silver and Paper, 6.
mounting burden of debt. “As it is a natural Instinct in Animals to provide for Posterity, it must be deem’d very unnatural and wicked in us, instead of doing so, to contribute to their future Misery,” Douglass wrote. “. . . So much paper as is current in a Province, so much really is that Province in Debt; for the Funds Part, the Publick is in Debt; for the Loans Part, private Persons are in Debt: It is a Contradiction to assert that a Country may grow rich by (Paper Money) running in Debt.” 103 The colonies had made their bills of credit non-interest-bearing, which insured that they would circulate at a discount, worth less than their face value in silver. Worst of all, they had declared such depreciated paper legal tender for the payment of private debts. “To make a Bill or Note bearing no Interest, and not payable till after a dozen or score of Years, a legal Tender . . . in Payment of Debts, is the highest of despotick and arbitrary Government,” Douglass wrote, in terms that strongly resembled Wise’s countervailing critique of “despotism” and “arbitrary government” several decades earlier. “Our Paper Money Colonies have carried the Iniquity still further,” he continued. “[T]he Popular or Democratick Part of the Constitution are generally in Debt, and by their too great Weight or Influence in Elections, have made a depreciating Currency, a Tender for Contracts done many Years before; that is, they impose upon the Creditor side in private Contracts, which the most despotick Powers never assumed.” 104

By making their paper bills legal tender, the colonies not only irresponsibly piled up public debt and interfered with the sanctity of private contracts, according to Douglass. They also forced into circulation an unnatural medium of exchange, instead of trusting in the natural medium that markets supplied and merchants preferred. Far better, he contended, to trust that “Trade will find its own natural proper Medium, viz. Silver and Gold.” 105

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104 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 20.

dynamics of international trade would automatically redress any imbalances if left to their own operations: too little coin in a country would tend to reduce imports, improving the balance of trade, and hence drawing in specie from abroad. “It is therefore vain and inconsistent to make Provincial or Municipal Bills of Credit, for a Medium of general Trade,” he wrote. “Merchants know how to find their own Tools or Medium of Trade, better than any Civil Administration can prescribe.” In this regard, Douglass drew explicitly on his understanding of the self-regulating “economy of nature,” on his criticism of “heroic” medical therapeutics that proved more harmful than the maladies they were supposed to cure, and on his previous writings on matter in motion more generally. He likened the popular demand for more and more paper money to “Thirst in a Dropsy, which by endeavoring to satisfy with Drink, increases the Distemper.” And he likewise compared the self-sustaining inflationary cycle “to natural oscillatory Motions,” observing that “when got to their Extent on the one Side; they must return gradually and in the same Path to the other Side.”

The second main set of arguments that Douglass advanced against the colonial paper currency regime concerned what kind of currency would circulate most speedily and widely. Like Wise and other supporters of the provincial bills, he presumed that the main object of the means of payment was “to avoid the inconveniencies of barter.” But whereas Wise maintained that metallic money naturally tended to be hoarded or exported, while paper money tended to remain in circulation, Douglass argued that “paper Currency in large Quantities does not answer this End; because of its Fluctuation, or rather progressive less Value; which obliges the Merchant at length to return to Barter again, as being safe and better.” And of course, while legal-tender

106 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 27.
107 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 55-56.
109 Douglass, Essay Concerning Silver and Paper, 6-7
provisions could compel colonial merchants and creditors to accept paper currency in payment of local debts, they could not make such currency circulate across the Atlantic. Nor could they force moneyed men to extend credit in the first place. A depreciating currency and the broader damage it did to the sanctity of debt contracts pressured lenders to tighten the reins on their borrowers—to collect debts more frequently and assiduously for fear of losing what they had lent. “People choose rather to hoard it up, and wait for better Times, than put it out and not be able to recover it again, but after an unreasonable Length of Time and much Trouble,” Douglass wrote, noting that “Money hoarded up, is the same as if not in being, as to Currency.”

As a result, metallic money and short-term credit, by protecting the interests of creditors and thus encouraging them to lend, fostered a higher volume of transactions, making the available stock of currency go further by heightening its velocity of circulation. “Ready Money and short Credit, give a quick Circulation; the quicker the Circulation, the less Quantity of Medium is required to carry on the same Trade and Business: long Credit, and insensibility of Discredit, have the contrary Effect,” Douglass wrote. In this way, overissue of paper bills had the seemingly paradoxical result, in his view, of reducing the real money supply even as it increased the nominal supply. Like Wise, Douglass staked his argument in part on a case for priming the pump of investment and economic growth; but whereas Wise contended that easier, cheaper money would fuel this virtuous cycle, Douglass insisted that the way to foster economic growth was to protect the hard-money interests of wealthy creditors, trusting that they would return the favor by lending to industrial, agricultural, and commercial entrepreneurs.

While the depreciation of colonial paper thus actually constricted real economic growth, Douglass maintained that it fueled, in the short term, a kind of unreal, speculative boom. The two

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110 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 30.
111 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 30.
things went together: paper currency and “long credit” fostered extravagant spending, reckless expansion, a false sense of prosperity, even as they diverted men’s energies from patient, honest industry and productive labor into gambling pursuits and frivolous consumption, bringing in train an inevitable decline of fortunes over the long run. He thus found a way to explain both what he deemed the excessive overtrading and overbuilding of the first two decades of the eighteenth century and the downturn and doldrums of the next thirty years, during which Douglass made his career in Boston. “Long Credit occasions the unthinking of all Conditions and Occupations, to involve themselves,” Douglass wrote. “A Merchant over-trades himself, a Shopkeeper buys more Goods, and at a greater Advance than he can afterwards comply with; the Countryman buys and Mortgages Lands, to his final Ruin.”

The third and most fundamental set of arguments that he articulated concerned the ways in which the monetary system restructured political power and class relations. The reason for the colonies’ wayward embrace of depreciated paper bills was plain to see for Douglass. It lay in the rising ranks and increasing power in provincial assemblies of that middling class of freeholders who were neither servants nor masters:

In many of our Plantations of late Years, by bad Management and Extravagancies, the Majority of the People are become Debtors, hence their Elected Representation in the Legislature have a great Chance to be generally of the Debtors Side: or in other Words, the Representatives being generally Freeholders, and many of them much in Debt; by large Emissions their Lands rise in Denomination Value while their Debts become really less, and the Creditor is defrauded in Part of his Debt. Thus our Colonies have defrauded more in a few Years, than bad Administrations in Europe have formerly done in some Centuries.

Or, as he candidly explained in an open letter to a London merchant:

In Great-Britain, the Landed Interest consists generally of Gentlemen very rich, with valuable Rent-Rolls; Our Freeholders generally are labouring Men, who earn less, and fare worse, than many in Boston, and without any Rent-Rolls. The Debtor part of the

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112 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 29.
113 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 30, 20-21.
Country (which is vastly the most numerous) are contriving to baulk their Creditors by reducing the Denominations of Money (by their huge and ill-secured Emissions) to a small or no Value; that they who have laudably acquired Fortunes by Industry and Frugality, may reap no Benefit thereof, but be upon a level with the Idle and Extravagant.  

The challenge that such men posed to the nascent power of private financiers in partnership with royal authorities began with paper money schemes, which challenged the exclusive control of moneyed elites over the supply of currency and credit. “In other Countries, the Opulent, the Honest, the Men of Credit, become Bankers,” Douglass wrote. “[H]ere the Indigent, the Debtors, the Fraudulent, set up for Bankers.” In a second open letter published the same year, he drew the inescapable conclusion: “When poor People can have present Money (tho’ only nominal) on so easy Terms, . . . can it be supposed that they will be assiduous in Labour to increase our Produce and Manufacture? No, they will become Idlers and Extravagant.”

The ramifications of such an experiment with popular rule over the means of payment extended beyond labor relations. For the logic of paper money issued by an elected legislature encouraged the dangerous delusion “that common Consent, or the Humour of the Multitude, ought to be the Ratio Ultima in every thing and particularly in Currencies; whereas not only according to the Constitution of Great-Britain, but of all polite Governments, Money or Currencies are the Prerogative of the SOVEREIGNS, and have followed the universal Custom of Merchants, whereby Silver from its own natural Qualifications, could not avoid becoming the universal Medium of Trade.” The leveling spirit quickly expanded to encompass all manner of

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115 Douglass, Letter to Merchant, 10.
lax enforcement of contracts, “which seem[s] to encourage this insensibility of Discredit in Debtors,” including “too general Laws for the relief of insolvent Debtors, whereby the Fraudulent, the Idle, and the Extravagant, when sent to Gaol are too soon, at too easy a Rate turned loose to follow the same Courses.”¹¹⁸ It spurred the “most destructive and wicked Principle,” “that every Landed Man . . . has a Right to make Money.”¹¹⁹ It led inexorably toward riot, redistribution, and revolt.

Douglass feared in particular the rising power of what he tellingly called “the Mobility” or “mob,” an epithet that gained currency in his lifetime in reference to collectivities or crowds of common people in England, often taking extralegal action to resist various forms of engrossment, extortion, and usury by commercial farmers, traders, and money-lenders.¹²⁰ “Our Province in a peculiar Manner . . . requires some more severe Acts against Riots, Mobs, and Tumults. The least Appearance of a Mob (so called from Mobile Vulgus) ought to be suppressed, even where their Intention in any particular Affair is of it self very good; because they become Nurseries for dangerous Tumults,” he wrote in the Summary.¹²¹ But in the social context of the colonies, “the mobility” took on a broader significance, referring to the masses of men effectively challenging the rule of wealthy merchants and landlords in the colonial legislatures. “[B]y the Vulgar and Populace,” Douglass wrote in his Discourse Concerning Currencies, “I always mean the unthinking Part of Mankind, who are not capable of consulting their own Interest; the Mobility who do not reason for themselves; but are tossed about with every Wind of designing ill Men.”¹²²

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¹¹⁸ Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 31.
¹²² Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 50.
Douglass found the seed of the trouble in the notion that money, like politics, should be governed by majority rule. In this sense, what was ultimately at stake in the money question was nothing less than the relationship between the rule of capital and popular sovereignty. “If common Consent were to take Place, all the Effects in the Province would be equally divided amongst the People, because we are all born equal,” Douglass explained. “After some Time the Idle and Extravagant becoming empty handed, while the Frugal and Industrious become rich, common Consent would divide again. Our depreciating Paper Currency by taking from time to Time, Part of the Estates of the Creditors in Favour of the Debtor has the same Tendency: Is this to encourage Industry? Who would labour in Produce and Manufacture to be thus stript of his Earnings?”

At bottom, his was a vision of medicine, natural history, and political economy rooted in a fixed order of society and nature, a great chain of being extending from the natural into the social realm. Yet the accelerating circulation of people, goods, and money, which offered new possibilities for colonial gentry and natural philosophers like Douglass, also posed new challenges of contagion and popular unrest.

Douglass lived to see his leadership in the colonial campaign for the silver standard triumph over the supporters of fiat paper currency. Boosted by a reimbursement of £180,000 in specie from Parliament for the costs that the Bay Colony had incurred in King George’s War with France, the Massachusetts legislature called in much of its paper currency and replaced it with coin in 1749, and after 1750 all debts and contracts were declared legally payable only in silver. A year before Douglass died, Parliament effectively put an end to the province’s radical experiment with paper money begun in 1691, the year he was born. Responding to the demands of transatlantic merchants and creditors, the Currency Act of 1751 prohibited the provinces of

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123 Douglass, Discourse Concerning Currencies, 51.
Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut from issuing any paper currency except short-term notes redeemed within two years, and from designating any of their bills legal tender for the payment of private debts.\textsuperscript{124}

Nevertheless, the half-century trial in New England—“the longest and most bitter fight over economic policy in British North America prior to the Stamp Act Crisis,” according to the historian Elizabeth Dunn—created an enduring political constituency and intellectual rationale for popular control over an elastic supply of currency and credit.\textsuperscript{125} The long debate over paper currency helped galvanize the regional opposition to other aspects of British taxation and regulation of colonial commerce in the Revolutionary Era and provided support for the brief return of irredeemable bills of credit, backed solely by government fiat, issued by state legislatures under the Articles of Confederation. The U.S. Constitution permanently prohibited state governments from printing money or “mak[ing] any thing but gold and silver coin a tender in payment of debts.” Yet long after the new nation came to follow the British model of state-sponsored commercial banking and the specie standard, successive grassroots movements of farmers and workers continued to resist the encroachments of the “money power.”

From its colonial beginnings, that lasting challenge depended on several assumptions that defined the parameters of public debate over what should serve as money, who should control its creation and circulation, and which principles should govern its supply. Both sides of the conflict over colonial money embraced the novel merger of finance and statecraft—whether in Boston or Westminster, on the basis of bank notes or treasury bills, backed by private assets or public faith. As they staked out a new terrain of class struggle, they rooted their competing claims in a shared understanding of the underlying laws of commerce on which the monetary superstructure was

\textsuperscript{124} Newell, \textit{Dependency to Independence}, 230-232; Rabushka, \textit{Taxation in America}, 579.
\textsuperscript{125} Dunn, “Grasping at the Shadow,” 54.
supposed to rest. The early modern concept of circulation, founded on the religious precepts of
natural law and the scientific principles of natural history, formed the first framework for that
enduring conflict. For Douglass, the unchecked authorization of irredeemable paper currency
upset the natural circulation of credit and commodities much as “unbounded inoculation”
disrupted the “ordinary course of Nature” amid the perpetual motion of the British Atlantic.
Figure 1. William Douglass’s *Plan of the British Dominions of New England* (1755)