

Exploding Colonial American History: Amerindian, Atlantic, and Global Perspectives.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Exploding Colonial American History: Amerindian, Atlantic, and Global Perspectives

Ian K. Steele (bio)

Scholars have wonderfully expanded colonial America during *Reviews in American History's* first generation, confirming the saying that "No one has changed the course of history as much as the historians."¹ There is both pleasure and puzzlement in attempting to discern trends within this rich and disparate new literature. Any historiographical sketch is bound to categorize complex and subtle arguments, and to dissolve quickly in the continuing flood of new work.² If scholarship involves the testing of explanations, the dismantling of those found inadequate, and the offering of new hypotheses, colonial American history has been well served on the first two counts, but seems unlikely to be reassembled except within a much larger field.

These tumultuous changes in perceptions of early America are more than entertainment for historians and their readers. The United States of America is defined and redefined by its "heritage," even more than countries more coterminous with a language group or an ancient ethnicity. Americans, descended from immigrants, became "American" by reacting to foundation myths and sacred texts, most of which concern the American Revolution rather than the colonial period. Conflicts between professional historians and custodians of "heritage" have only intensified with the growing professional interest in social history, local history, excluded communities, and material culture, all of which coincide with the unprecedented popularity of museums and with the growing appreciation for folk and family heritage.³ Changing views of America's origins certainly owe much to genuine academic curiosity and the quest for accuracy and variety, but recent renovations of that history may also be in response to new realities. Exceptionalism,⁴ an essential aspect of American culture long after the twentieth-century brought ambivalence towards isolationism, has become a very mixed blessing. Perhaps an increasingly multicultural society at the center of a global economy can appreciate more of its diverse colonial roots, and even be reassured by discovering a long pedigree for the cultural complexity of the present.

What follows sketches only a few themes evident from recent

scholarship in colonial American history, emphasizing first the explosion of “new social [End Page 70] history.” New work on Amerindian history illustrates how attention to marginalized groups has affected perceptions. A great deal of other new scholarship reasserts an Atlantic context for colonial America. Work on the British Atlantic empire, on early modern capitalism and consumerism, and on the history of migration and religion all contribute to a growing Atlantic perspective. Competing Amerindian and Atlantic aspects juxtapose uniqueness and replication, environment and heredity, as well as frontier and imperial history.

Much recent scholarship has pulverized what is referred to as “consensus” colonial history, and uses rich description and statistical precision to reveal a wide variety of life in colonial towns and counties.⁵ Many historians support a broader revolt against what might be called “the history of power.” Women, people of “the common sort,” and people of diverse origins and ethnicities are being studied in detail, with emphasis on the mutualities of power relationships. However, it is hard to know to what extent early modern people were preoccupied with seeking individual autonomy or social status. Thanks to God, in a variety of guises, and to a host of community loyalties and dependencies that were then deemed worthy, people could have lives of meaning and happiness without relentlessly seeking or achieving individual “freedom,” material equality, or social power. Some social historians have also consciously rejected the “intellectual history” associated with Perry Miller’s classic work on New England religion. Acceptance of the extremely useful anthropological definition of culture has enhanced our understanding of the symbolic function of goods, and has also encouraged considerable study of colonial religion as the sociology of church.⁶

Community studies imply that life for most people was lived face-to-face, and that previous historians overlooked, suppressed, or distorted this reality. Recent community studies include some concern for external connections and imperatives, involving Amerindian and Atlantic features of European colonial life.⁷ New England Puritans may have regarded

unconverted Amerindians and Europeans as alien and morally corrupt, but now they are all part of the same enlarged story...



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