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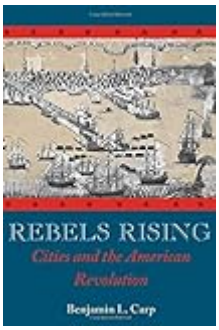

Benjamin L. Carp. *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 352 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-537855-9.

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Mobilizing the City

Carpâs book represents the most recent generation of urban history in colonial British America. Following on from the two giants of the field–Carl Bridenbaugh and Gary Nash–Carp sets out to explore the role of early mainland Americaâs five largest cities, Boston, New York, Newport, Charleston, and Philadelphia, in the Revolution.[1] The authorâs main achievement lies in his asking of the question: what was it actually about the urban form that prompted revolutionary action? Unlike previous studies, Carpâs avoids regarding the city as little more than a convenient backdrop to revolutionary action. Instead, he carefully considers how the peculiarities of the urban landscape influenced the course and nature of action and protest, seeking to understand how the urban form enabled political mobilization between the 1740s and 1776. The result is a three-dimensional history that triangulates people, places, and protest, to produce a ground-breaking narrative of the Revolution.

Selecting a different location in each of the five cities that he studies, Carp first turns his attention to Boston, where he examines how the New England townâs waterfront was the target of most British sanctions and the location of the majority of popular protests. The battle for control of this waterfront and its economy–a âcontested spaceâ (p. 23)–becomes a proxy for the battle for liberty from British tyranny. The eventual exile of British officials from the waterfront to the nearby Castle Island was also symbolic of the rejection of British rule, as was the deposit of a shipload of tea in the murky waters of the harbor.

In New York, in contrast, the story is one of sociability and conviviality in the cityâs taverns, which were more numerous than in any other colonial town of the era. These hostelries played host to the civic life and the conversations in which revolutionary ideas, political coalitions, and disagreements were thrashed out over a jug of strong liquor. Some of the cityâs more upstanding citizens deplored the importance of New Yorkâs taverns, and sought to separate drink, politics, and sociability. Their efforts, however, were fruitless, and by the 1760s inns were so embedded in New York City society that cartoons depicting the Sons of Liberty coming to blows

with British soldiers over the raising of a âLiberty poleâ showed the Sons holed up in a tavern, hurling insults out of its windows. New Yorkers had political disagreements in, and about taverns, but ultimately they became a key place that brought people together to protest the actions of the British.

Shifting from rum to religion, Carp then turns his gaze to Newport, asking how churches, and their congregations and ministers, participated in mobilization. In the Rhode Island townâs religiously plural landscape, their role turns out to be the least clear of all the spaces discussed in the book. Divisions between the denominations proved difficult to overcome, and ultimately Newportâs religious patchwork was âbad for politicsâ (p. 118). It was, however, in the context of the religious congregation that other groups of society–principally women and African Americans–felt the socially transformative aspects of the Revolution, even though, as Carp admits, this was very limited.

The household provides the unit of analysis for Carpâs examination of Charlestonâs role in the Revolution. Historians have explored in some detail the tendency for many revolutionaries to resort to the metaphor of the household to understand the breakdown in relations between colony and metropole after 1763. Carp combines an exploration of this metaphor with a consideration of the house itself, exploring how South Carolinaâs ruling planter-merchant elite sought to protect homes and households from the tumult of Revolution. Ultimately, however, just as Charlestonâs elite mansions endured the Revolution, so did the authority of the elite over the colony and its subordinate populations (and members of the household)–namely women and slaves.

In what is perhaps the most persuasive chapter of the book, Carp turns finally to the relationship between political mobilizations and public buildings in Philadelphia. Throughout the eighteenth century, the Court House, and later the State House, were the principal sites of conflict between the people âout of doorsâ (p. 173) and the ruling legislators indoors–or rather, behind closed doors. Carp illustrates wonderfully how Philadelphiaâs government tried hard to ignore the crowds of protestors who hammered on the door of the State House, and gathered in its yard. Despite their efforts, however, âout of doorsâ opinions eventually managed to influence the actions of Pennsylvaniaâs legislators who, for a long time, had shut out the voices and the opinions of the wider public behind the seven-foot brick wall that surrounded their imposing chamber.

Put together, Carpâs analysis of these private and public spaces, and of their role in revolutionary mobilization, adds an entirely new facet to our understanding of the importance of early Americaâs cities to the Revolution. In looking at them, he underscores for a new generation of scholars how, despite the fact that cities only contained a small percentage of the population in what was otherwise an overwhelmingly rural society, their physical character enabled them to punch above their weight when it came to the key political moments in the Revolution. What is more, Carp makes his case in pacey and readable prose that will not fail to keep undergraduates and general readers, as well as a scholarly audience, in its thrall.

However, there are a few ways in which Carp could have used his already original approach to make an even greater contribution to our thinking about the role of the city in early America. Even though his treatment of space is very new, many of the other ways he approaches his topic firmly conform to long-established narratives about colonial America and the Revolution. Carp selects one public space from each city–and in each case he chooses the one most suited to the âtraditionalâ story of that place and its colony. Taking Charleston as the example I know best, Carp embraces a long-standing narrative of South Carolina politics that stresses the power of the planter-merchant elite and their ability to maintain unusual âharmonyâ within their colony. Yet looking in more detail at the ownership and construction of the larger cityscape tells a different story. From the 1740s onwards Charleston harbored a white middling class, who had made money by trading in town lots, servicing the consumer economy, and finding employment in the townâs many public works projects. By the 1760s, this middle class was questioning the right of the elite to set the cultural and political tone of the colony, dominating the Sons of Liberty, and strongly disagreeing with the eliteâs vision of state government as laid out in its 1776 constitution. Thus, exploring the cityscape more holistically, we can see how the elite mansions discussed by Carp are transformed from symbols of continuing elite dominance, into refuges and retreats from an increasingly turbulent urban society over which planters had less and less control.

At the same time, Carp conforms to a traditional narrative of urban history that views the early American town mainly in the light of the Revolution. In Joyce Chaplinâs words, Carp sticks with an age-old âemphasis on the establishment of Creole societies in the British colonies and on the transformation of those so-

cieties into an independent republic.â[2] This is underlined by Carpâs omission of two of early Americaâs other great cities–Kingston, Jamaica (the fourth largest) and Bridgetown, Barbados. Both towns also belonged to a British Empire that was in revolt, yet they saw much less protest and thus remained part of that empire. By including these two places, and by thinking about the relationship between the urban landscape and political mobilization in a broader, British Atlantic framework, Carp may have been able to say more about what it was exactly about the dynamic between people and urban space in mainland British America that promoted revolution–rather than just angry dissent–in Boston, New York, Newport, Charleston, and Philadelphia. Overall, *Rebels Rising* is an excellent addition to the historiography of both the Revolution and the early American city, but it is one that should be considered as a starting point for a renewed, and much more extensive debate, about the role of the cities and their function as British Atlantic places.

Notes

[1]. See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt*: *Urban Life in America, 1743â1776* (New York: Oxford University Press,1955); Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[2]. Joyce E. Chaplin, âExpansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History,â *Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (2003): 1436.

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