

*The Archaeology of American Capitalism*, by Christopher N. Matthews,  
2010. University of Florida Press: Gainesville; ISBN 978-0-8130-3524-6.,  
hardback. vii+255 pp. 34 figs, 1 table.

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In *The Archaeology of American Capitalism*, Christopher Matthews explores the development of capitalism in the United States through the creation of individual subjectivity. In contrast to some post-modernists, Matthews does not accept the individual as a natural or authentic state of being. He argues that in capitalism, the individual is primarily an ideological expression of a specific sense of self and personhood rooted within capitalist social relations. Marx's concept of the abstraction of labour is the basis of Matthew's construction of the capitalist individual. In capitalism, workers are "free" in the sense that they have been stripped of all other means of production except their own labour power, which they must sell as a commodity in the market to capitalists. The abstraction of labour along with notions of private property define individuals as free agents who compete against others in the market based on self-interest. Thus, individuals are severed from traditional ties of kin and community.

Workers have no objective, rational interest in participating in this system and Matthews is concerned with why capitalist social relations were not more effectively challenged. He draws on Weber's work to provide part of the answer to this question. With the Protestant Ethic attributing success and failure to the individual, the system remains unquestioned. Abstraction, private property, and the Protestant Ethic all fed the creation of a sense of self and personhood rooted in the ideology of capitalism.

Matthews traces the development, expression, and consequences of individualism from the early colonial period to the corporate capitalism of the late nineteenth century using several classic historical archaeology studies. He focuses on the use of material culture to manifest individual identity within the capitalist market. Thus, material culture is an abstraction, since individual identity is a commodity created within capitalist ideology. His first example is the colonial Northeast, where he considers the clash of capitalist commodity relations with traditional Native American culture. The chapter focuses on the fur trade and a late seventeenth-century Narragansett cemetery in an examination of acculturation. He ultimately argues that however much Native Americans embraced capitalist culture and ideology, they were constructed as “other” by Euro-American society.

The following case studies concentrate on the expansion of capitalism in the Georgian period, nineteenth-century New York and the American West. The chapter on the Georgian order draws on classic work by Deetz and the Anapolis project on ceramics, architecture, and gardens. This chapter is a necessary prelude to what follows but does not break much new ground. Arguments regarding individuality embodied in ceramic place settings and the re-ordering of nature in Georgian gardens are widely known. Matthew’s synthetic overview links these components of Georgian culture to his central thesis on individualism.

Chapter 4 on “The Capitalist Metropolis” begins with the premise that urban spaces are where modern relations of individualism developed and subsequently spread out from these centers. While there is a strong association between urbanization and industrial capitalism, I am worried that this kind of diffusionist model privileges urban America by severing rural areas from this process. Ultimately, this reifies “common sense” notions of rural America as traditional and unchanging and ignores social relations that connected urban areas with rural producers and workers.

The discussion of nineteenth-century New York City finally engages issues raised by Matthew’s focus on individualism—specifically, how classes and class consciousness form in the face of ideologies of individualism. In Marxist tradition, class formation is rooted within the relations of production and division of labour. In a surprising move, Matthews applies V. Gordon Childe’s ideas of urbanization and craft specialization. I do not find it convincing or appropriate to use the concept of specialization to describe the capitalist division of labour and

the process of de-skilling workers. However, linking the formation of class consciousness to class-specific neighborhoods in urban spaces allows Matthews to connect this process to other important patterns of separation, including that between work and home.

The home/work separation is manifested in the segmentation of the city into discrete functional zones of residential, productive, and commercial activities. This created a landscape of individuals and individual families that were all equally responsible for their own reproduction. Capitalist ideologies of equality and individuality supplanted the more cooperative relations of the traditional home work-place. Conversely, residential segregation formed class-specific neighborhoods and class-consciousness, which were not solely rooted in individualism. Within the household, however, Matthews primarily sees the acquisition of individualism through the rituals of meals— an argument that reiterates concepts regarding the Georgian use of ceramics— and the use of toys.

The more controversial aspects of Matthews' interpretations of home life concern gender and ethnicity. Rather than viewing the creation of the home as a moral space in opposition to capitalism as evidence of women's agency, Matthews argues that this division of labour allowed capitalist men more freedom from the responsibilities of family, morality, and community that could be expended in the pursuit of profit. Ethnicity is viewed primarily as a strategy of capitalism through a division of labour that associated specific occupations with ethnic groups. Matthews draws on research on New York City's Five Points neighborhood to argue that ethnicity was not expressed within the household except in personal choices. He, thus, extends the public/private contrast to ethnic identity, arguing that ethnic identity was an imagined, public strategy within productive relations rather than an aspect of private, family life.

The last chapter of case studies traces the path of what Matthews' terms "victorious capitalism" where the focus on individuals extends to the maintenance and improvement of worker's bodies. Within this topic, he locates corporate paternalism, particularly in company towns, and various aspects of hygiene and sanitation. Case studies of company towns in this discussion include Lowell, Massachusetts and several towns in the American West. Lowell contrasts with the American West in its position within the core of capitalist production, although corporate culture in all of these contexts suppressed forms of community opposed to capitalism. The American West was also unique in the rapid pace at which corporate towns rose

and declined and the existence of satellite towns outside corporate control. More importantly, the company/satellite town contrast made worker's bodies either the product of the company or the responsibility of individuals. Matthews further considers individual responsibility through Purser's work on Paradise Valley and her babbitt metaphor. In this case, trends toward isolation and self-reliance are the babbitt for the broken community where shared production has been replaced with commodities and competitive labour relations. Broken communities through corporate culture, consumerism, and the loss of corporations and jobs are the result of "victorious capitalism".

The next two chapters attempt to re-dress the previous emphasis on capitalist ideologies of individualism, exploitation, and consumerism through a consideration of resistance. Case studies include Nassaney and Abel's work on wasters in a cutlery factory, domestic reform movements, and David Starbuck's work on Shaker communities. In general, Matthews concludes that these examples of resistance were not overly effective. Worker resistance at the cutlery factory was absorbed into the cost of doing business and averted more serious contests, domestic reform movements did not transcend the home/work divide that sustained capitalism or the power of patriarchy and Shaker communities only survived through significant involvement in the market. This raises issues of how effective resistance can be enacted.

One answer Matthews supplies to this issue is in Chapter 7 on African-American resistance. The construction of an ordered system outside of capitalism typifies much African-American resistance. Symbolism associated with colonoware, the color blue, and caches of objects are some examples of African-Americans' creation of a spiritual tradition that contested institutional racism. Objects within this system took on values and meanings other than their exchange value as commodities. Considering this chapter with his previous discussion of resistance raises several questions. Is a systematic, oppositional culture more likely to develop in groups who are less integrated in capitalist relations and is this likely to constitute more effective resistance? If so, what does this ultimately mean for developing sustained and unified opposition to capitalism that is truly revolutionary? This a question of the relative power of capitalism and how we view its consequences on exploited groups.

Matthews concludes his work on American capitalism with a discussion of archaeology's role as a middle-class practice that developed within capitalism, an idea already familiar to

Marxists and other radical archaeologists. He advocates an archaeology that is less jealous of its authority and more committed to various communities as part of a move away from this capitalist endeavor. While these are not new ideas, their realization should be a goal of all archaeologists.

*'The Archaeology of American Capitalism'* asks us to seriously consider the abstractions of labour, individual subjectivity, and community created within capitalist relations. This is a valuable endeavor, particularly if it develops new understandings of contradictions, power, and the dialectical interaction of abstractions with the reality of the material world. In contesting capitalism through new understandings of the past and new dialogues with contemporary communities, archaeology has much to gain.