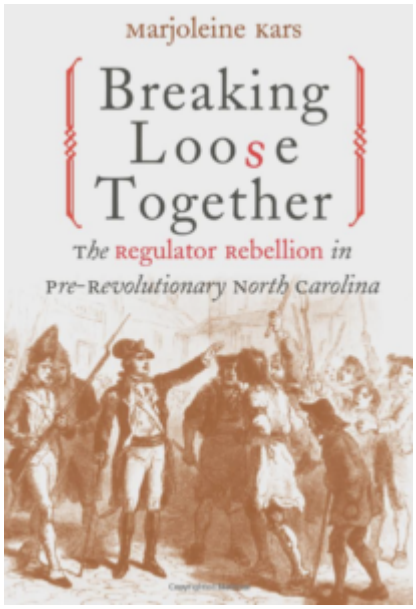
Bad Guys and Good Guys

Marjoleine Kars

Breaking Loose Together

The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina



Marjoleine Kars, Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 304pp., paper, $19.95.

If success can be measured by persistence, the transition-to-capitalism model is a classic. It has now been used continually for the better part of a century, deployed by a wide range of scholars to explain every imaginable type of change. Capitalism's emergence has been updated, downdated, located geographically in northern Europe, Italy, various parts of the Western Hemisphere, and in the Atlantic world as a whole. In the transition model, capitalism is always somehow understood as supplanting a more egalitarian past and preventing a more humane future, forced on unwilling populations by corrupt or power hungry elites.

In her study, *Breaking Loose Together,* Marjoleine Kars argues that the agrarian upheaval known as the North Carolina Regulation reflected "the slow separation of morality from economics that characterized (and enabled) the development of the emerging capitalist order" (6). Specifically, she sees the evangelical smallholders of the Appalachian piedmont who fought against government corruption in provincial North Carolina as champions of a different, less hierarchical society that was eventually overwhelmed by elites determined to participate in "the selfish and relentless pursuit of unlimited material gain" increasingly common in the eighteenth century (6). Her study thus raises an important question: does this time-tested model, and the updated corollaries to it, have anything left to tell us about late colonial and Revolutionary America?

The North Carolina Regulation grew from the confusion and conflict that defined the settlement of the province's interior. A massive, rapid immigration from the northern colonies after 1750, a land-tenure system made unstable by overlapping royal land grants, weak and partisan governmental institutions, religious tensions between evangelicals and Anglicans, and a host of land-hungry colonists led to decades of lawsuits, political turmoil, and collective

violence. Specifically, aggressive speculators who tried to manipulate the legal system came into conflict with squatters who claimed their property by a labor theory of value. The groups struggled for control of the interior for fifteen years. Political corruption and the lack of shared cultural terrain foiled the early efforts of yeomen crowds to "regulate" the behavior of the coastal elite with demonstrations and threats. In 1771, tensions built to a violent confrontation known as the Battle of the Almanace that involved thousands and ended with a victory for the royal government.

These sorts of conflicts were systemic to the early American countryside and have attracted considerable attentions from historians. Scholars who have examined them can be divided loosely into two schools: those who see the conflicts as driven by cultural and religious divisions and those who believe class conflict or structural injustices created the preconditions for unrest. The two approaches manifested themselves over sixty years ago in the work of Dixon Ryan Fox and Irving Marks, who both examined provincial New York's troubled land-tenure system. Fox saw the society's land-related problems as a result of conflicts between Yankees and Yorkers, whereas Marks saw them as a product of structural inequality and a grossly exploitative system of tenancy. A number of recent studies have tried to subtly balance these approaches to create a more thorough understanding of change in the countryside.

Professor Kars, too, tries to walk the path between cultural conflict and structural change, with limited success. *Breaking Loose Together* places a heavy emphasis on religion and religious life. Her heroes in this story are the evangelical smallholders who came to populate the Carolina interior in the twenty years after 1750. "I argue," she writes "that . . . many North Carolina farmers were inspired and sustained in their rebellion by popular religion . . . Inspired, too, by the unfolding protests against Britain, Regulator leaders like Herman Husband combined the Protestant insistence on one's own moral truth with radical Whig ideas about the right and duty of citizens to resist unjust government, to fuel and justify their rebellion" (5). That same moral truth, she believes, led them to resist the capitalist values of North Carolina's land speculators and political leaders who were trying to lock up control of the colony's land tenure system. The research design that underlies this framework is inadequate to sustain it, and in fact only serves to expose its contradictions and lack of explanatory power.

Breaking Loose Together, or at least the parts that address the yeomanry, is based in large part on Moravian archives, Quaker records, and the writings of agrarian spokesman Herman Husband. The appeal of these records is obvious—they are complete, which is unusual for pre-Revolutionary America's source bases that address agrarian issues. It would seem a bonanza for a scholar studying the North Carolina Regulation, except for two glaring problems. The Moravians, and many Quakers, sided with the government against the Regulators or remained neutral (121, 123, 170). The major source base thus does not speak to the major groups involved in the unrest, and what use these sources might have been in reconstructing life in provincial North Carolina is limited by Professor Kars's

approach. The majority of Regulators were Presbyterians and Separate Baptists, groups whose social, institutional, and theological dynamics are inadequately explored in this study.

These Presbyterians and Baptists shared a number of social and economic goals with the vast majority of migrants to the southern piedmont. They came from the north seeking upward social mobility, free markets for their crops, freehold property, inflated money supplies, decentralized credit markets, good or at least limited government whose local branches would be under their control, and the right to worship in their Protestant churches without interference. Some among them had qualms about finery and conspicuous display, and some in this period began to question slavery. But in most ways they look a lot like nineteenth-century America's petty agrarian capitalists, seeking advantage and land for their ever growing families. Professor Kars in fact describes them this way. "Their desire," she writes, "to create communities based on strict moral values led evangelicals and radical Protestants to attempt to regulate the behavior of their fellow Christians." These groups "supervised family conduct in such areas as childrearing, courtship, and marriage, as well as deportment in politics and business" (113). If there ever were a description of middle-class, Protestant American culture, that's it. Throughout the nineteenth century, white Protestant Americans, and indeed many free Protestant African Americans, would try with great success to make the entire country, indeed the entire world, over in this image. Such moral crusading, emphasis on good government, and material restraint was the very soil in which nineteenth-century American capitalist culture grew. The reality, for certain, was often quite different from the ideal, but the ideal continued to exist into the twentieth century.

A large part of the problem with *Breaking Loose Together* is the vocabulary used to sustain its argument. What is meant by "capitalism"? Are we to equate it with greed and abuse of power, as Professor Kars does? If so, it has existed in all complex societies at all times, since such abuses and desires are a shared aspect of the human condition. If by capitalism we mean industrialization, the force that ripped premodern society from its agrarian foundations, that change had yet to come and was not foreseen by anyone in North Carolina. Or does she mean possessive individualism? Is capitalism really as amoral as she maintains? What is meant by "radical"? Were the Quakers still "radical" in the late eighteenth century? Were the Moravians who professed their loyalty to Governor Tryon really radical? Such terms become even more confusing when applied to the Presbyterians and Quakers because some remained loyal to the government even as others supported the Regulation.

There seems to have been only two groups in provincial North Carolina that can be fit in any way into Professor Kars's variation on the resistance-to-capitalism model. Paradoxically, the congruence of these groups' behavior with the model illuminate the study's underlying problems. The first of these, unsurprisingly, is the Moravians. This pietistic German speaking sect originally settled in Pennsylvania along with a number of other German speakers

such as the Amish and the Mennonites. The Moravians believed in some group controls over commercial activities and feared the effects of unrestrained commercial behavior on the sect's cohesion. Groups of them began to go south in the 1750s during the first wave of migrations from the mid-Atlantic to the Carolina interior. They again set up inward-looking communities, passing rules against certain types of commercial behavior. When sustained violence erupted they remained loyal to the imperial government. And by then, Moravians in both Pennsylvania and the Carolinas had given up much of their plans to restrain economic activity.

The second group that fits the Kars model, it seems to me, was the society's leaders, the William Tryons and Edward Fannings, the very same people Professor Kars sees as the agents of capitalism. These officials and the circle of provincial gentry within which they moved had a vested interest in preserving a premodern, landed order tied to the British empire. They were greedy and they used their offices and connections to try to gain title to tens of thousands of acres. To do so was the norm in the eighteenth century, and in fact was normal behavior in most premodern societies. The political structure and the social structure were supposed to look alike; those in power were supposed to be the great landholders, men of money and means. People like this had a vested interest in keeping economic activity flowing in controlled channels that served their position. They were of course opposed in this by yeomen protecting their own interests and economic autonomy, but that conflict hardly makes one side or the other capitalist. Moreover, these leaders generally belonged to the Church of England, some of the ministers of which were, in the 1760s, preaching a form of divine-right monarchy and leading weekly prayers for the royal family. They, like the Moravians, come closer to fitting Professor Kars's resistance-to-capitalism model than those who supported or participated in the Regulation.

At heart Professor Kars is a structuralist and one senses that she would love to reduce evangelical religion, the Regulation, and some aspects of the Revolution to the struggle against capitalism in the best tradition of Christopher Hill and other English Marxists of his stripe. She quotes them a good deal and is an obvious admirer. But she has done real archival research and realizes that the Carolina backcountry was in a state of ferment that was simultaneously cultural, material, and political. The social components she looks at and the questions she asks are worthwhile ones, at the core of the Protestant, agrarian America that took shape in the eighteenth century. The Moravian and Quaker archives are important sources. But the transition-to-capitalism model, even the modified form she uses, is exhausted. It leads Kars into a good guys/bad guys format that blurs rather than explains the nuances and contradictions that are part of the fabric of change in human societies. Even her clear writing style cannot make the data she has work the way she wants it to.

The transition-to-capitalism model has been with us for almost a century, but in early American history it reached its greatest appeal in the 1960s and 70s.

Its champions, together with their contemporaries who created the republican synthesis and the neo-liberal framework, produced an unusually rich body of scholarship. The political ferment of those times, the opening of the field to new practitioners from social groups previously underrepresented, methodological innovations derived from interdisciplinary work, the increased financial support for archival research and writing, and the spread of the Evans microfilm/microcards to research libraries across the country helped to fuel this scholarly production, the intellectual legacy of which remains with us today in a number of contemporary schools of scholarship. And yet in paying this tribute, I cannot but think it is past time we came to understand these frameworks, even in their updated forms, archaeologically, as artifacts of a time that has passed. If we can put them aside, a difficult task in itself, perhaps we can then ask that world of 250 years ago new questions and look closely in the archival sources for the answers. In so doing, we will have broken loose ourselves from the legacies that have dominated our field for nearly forty years, and entered a frightening and exhilarating new world.

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