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Circles and Lines: The Shape of Life in Early America
(review)

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Circles and Lines: The Shape of Life in Early America. By John Demos
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. xi plus 98 pp. \$19.95).

Every once in a while it is refreshing to put aside detailed academic monographs in favor of shorter studies that are full of suggestive concepts and ideas. John Demos's *Circles and Lines* represents such a brief and provocative volume. His text is based on three lectures that he delivered in 2002 as part of Harvard University's William E. Massey Sr. lecture series in the History of American Civilization. Demos set as his objective an admittedly speculative exploration of the movement from what he describes as the circular (more traditional) to the linear (more modern) approaches to living. In doing so, he first focuses on circular life experiences that characterized the colonial period in English North America, then on the transitional years of Revolutionary America, and finally on the full emergence and enshrinement of linear life experiences in nineteenth-century America.

Demos contends that England's colonists constructed their lives around the cycles of nature, especially the four seasons and daytime and nighttime. Virtually all forms of human activity seemed to appertain in some way to these natural cycles, for example whether in regard to the timing of weddings and the conception of children or the pervasive fear of nighttime evils as linked to witchcraft and Satan. In the eighteenth century, these premodern folk, in an existential sense mostly controlled by natural cycles, began to give way to persons with a behavioral desire for newness and novelty. For Demos, Hector St. Jean Crèvecoeur came to represent the prototype of this more modern linear person when he asked: "What, then, is the American, this new man?" Writes Demos, "New, new, new, new: the melody is impossible to miss" (p. 40) in so many aspects of the Revolution. Forward looking, linear persons (think only of Benjamin Franklin) were anxious to bring about consequential political, economic, and social change, in the process fulfilling their ambitions for meaningful and productive careers. Once unleashed, linear types became so dominant that they seemed to push the new American republic forward in terms both of individual self-realization and of self-improvement as epitomized in the cult of the "self-made man" and the lyceum and Chautauqua movements. (Demos mentions in passing that the linear mode had little to offer women and African Americans when it initially emerged as the behavioral fashion.)

Deeply embedded in the author's analysis is modernization theory—the circular representing the traditional and the linear the modern. In seeking to validate the actuality of these two dominant types, Demos investigates diaries and autobiographies, the latter literary form coming into its own between 1780 and 1830. Circular diaries seemed to lack human personality; rather than telling a story, they were as God-centered in their range of interests as were the people who wrote them. By comparison, more modern autobiographies, from Benjamin Franklin forward, were full of the self. Their story lines emphasized the here and now and, quite often, how their subjects conquered various adversities to realize more satisfying lives for themselves and those around them. They were full of forward movement, of human progress, not the searching for "cosmic moral sig-

nificance" (p. 53) that characterized the more other-centered, God-worshipping circular diaries.

At the outset, Demos states that he has worked to fuse the concerns of more traditional intellectual history ("the study of high-level thought") with his "own approach" as "a social historian, concerned chiefly with the ground-level experience of Ordinary Folk" (p. x). In so doing, he has relied almost exclusively on New England sources and examples for his colonial findings, which likely has the effect of overstating the significance of circular forms of behavior in English colonial America. Should that be the case, then the transition from the circular to the linear may not have been as dramatic or dynamic as Demos suggests, especially in those areas (the Chesapeake, the Carolinas, the sugar islands) where self-aggrandizing commercial values held sway from the outset. In addition, there is the unavoidably narcissistic character of modernization theory, which assumes that life in modern (linear) times is somehow more fulfilling and rewarding than was the case with life in premodern (circular) times. This realization may help explain why Demos chose to conclude his lectures by pointing out his personal journey from urban, linear forms to more rural, circular modes of living. For those of us who have experienced life the other way around, we can only agree with Demos that "when all is said and done, with circles and lines—we must have *both*" (p. 83). Whatever one's personal life pattern, reading and thinking about the contents of this book will prove to be both a useful and rewarding experience.

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The Great Festivals of Colonial Mexico City: Performing Power and Identity. By Linda A. Curcio-Nagy (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. xiv + 363 pp.).

Reflecting growing scholarly interest in the civic and religious rituals that bolstered colonial rule in the Americas, this book examines five major festivals celebrated in Mexico City during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Linda Curcio-Nagy focuses on the city's most prominent events: the civic viceregal entrance, ceremony of allegiance to the king, the Royal Banner ceremony, and the religious festivals of Corpus Christi and the Virgin of Remedies. These festivals, she argues, represented through performance the ideal principles of good government in the colony; but they also revealed political disagreements over such principles over time.

Curcio-Nagy provides wonderful details of these spectacles: the Native Americans dressed "as ancient warriors" who "positioned their canoes along the causeways and bowed in deference to the new governor;" Afro-Mexican women dancing in accompaniment to a presentation of paintings portraying the viceroy as a phoenix rising to rule over them; a triumphal arch constructed by the silversmiths' guild covered in 102 silver panels illuminated by 400 votive candles placed on 40 chandeliers. She also examines counter discourses within and sur-