

The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives

Jacob Bruggeman

***The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives.* Simon, Bryant. New York: The New Press, 2017. 440 pp. \$26.95 Hardcover. Ebook available.**

Histories are most powerful when they are rooted in real places and real lives. All too often historians lose sight of the complex communities, individuals, and interactions that constitute the basis of their histories in abstractions about the past. Sacrificing the nuance inherent in any diligent and detailed investigation of the past at the altar of theory is a cardinal sin in the study of the *long durée*, a dangerous tightrope upon which many fail to balance the concrete and the conceptual.

Temple University history professor Bryant Simon provides a model for walking this tightrope in *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives*, an accessible and incisive book about a fatal 1991 fire at a chicken processing plant in North Carolina. The fire broke out at Imperial Food Products in Hamlet, a facility without functioning fire sprinklers in which 25 people died because a hose came loose, gushing a flammable liquid, and a flame consumed it as fuel. When employees tried to escape from the breakroom, they were met with a door locked from the outside; when employees fled to the loading dock, they were met with a door

blocked by the owners to keep flies out. Still, others hid in an industrial cooler only to be killed from carbon-monoxide poisoning.

Hamlet is the real place, and these are the real lives that are the basis of Simon's history. "Hamlet's layered town life," its associations, economy, race relations, and its peoples' habits, are the bedrock of the book (26). Indeed, Simon assiduously records and conveys the features of Hamlet's community. So thorough is Simon's research in *The Hamlet Fire* that a sense of rootedness permeates it. Notes on annual holiday fetes, businesses such as Fox's Barber Shop, notable pool rooms and movie theaters, banquets, classrooms, sports rivalries, and local history give readers a sense that Simon has access to that illusive and mysterious thing: local knowledge. Simon is an historian who can aptly and superbly tie his histories to places. One of Simon's other books, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America*, also benefits from a sense of rootedness in place.

A year before the fire in 1990, Hamlet won the designation of "All American City" from the National Civic League, yet awards such as this did not stop the city's general "economic slide" (31). "As jobs, industry, and talent gravitated toward urban centers and interstate highways" in the late 20th century, "Hamlet [...] started to die a slow death" (27). This fate was not unique to Hamlet: globalization, "grumb[ings] about taxes and social programs and who deserved government support and who didn't" (35), and the increasingly popular belief that "what's good for business is good for society" (52) were combined in the 1970s and 1980s business progressive community as a counterpoint to New Deal's social bargain. Between the 1930s and 1970s, presidents both democratic (FDR, Truman, LBJ) and Republican (Eisenhower and Nixon) operated within the New Deal consensus. There was "little disagreement," wrote historian Bruch Shulman, over "the fundamental principles for organizing American life," and within those set of principles taxes were recognized as necessary for the New Deal's safety net, benefits and good wages of average American workers were laudable policy goals (34).

In the late 20th century, businesses began searching for cheaper labor, politicians revolted from the New Deal consensus, questioning its social outcomes. In the south, "boosters, businessmen, and commentators" picked up Tar Heel politicians' legacy of labor hostility and cultivated a myth that the south was anti-union in an effort to attract industry (35). These pro-business "men of the New South" took aim at regulation, organized labor, and taxes, and they "built state structures that prioritized business growth and job creation ahead of protecting the vulnerable and providing social security" (51).

Amid this late 20th century revolt against the New Deal consensus, businesses, communities, and individuals began "survi[ing] on the cheap" (28). Imperial Food Products, owned by Emmet and Brad Roe, must be seen within this move to cheap. Leading up to the Hamlet fire, Ronald Reagan lamented on *60 Minutes* in 1976 that America was overregulated, he quipped that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), signed into law by President Nixon while the New Deal consensus still reigned, wanted to "make a worker completely safe by taking away his

job” (173). This attitude trickled down to the states. North Carolina’s OSHA inspectorate was weakened, and enforcement was on the decline in the decade leading up to the fire (179). Astonishingly, three quarters of OSHA’s informational signs in North Carolina in 1991 listed a disconnected phone number; when dialed, even a forwarding number was not provided (181).

Cheap government abounded at the behest of business interests. Given the lack of robustly funded regulatory and supervisory agencies, it is not surprising that tragedies like the Hamlet fire occurred. Cheap government allowed for them to happen; opportunity after opportunity for prevention slipped through its poorly funded fingers. In the early 1980s, several small fires broke out in the Imperial plant. Hamlet’s Fire Chief, asked later if he ever returned to inspect the building for new sprinklers, responded that “It wasn’t our job” (60). As Emmet Roe increased the size of Imperial’s operation in Hamlet, officials in the city government and citizens alike did not inquire about the company and its operations. “Twenty years after the fire,” Simon records, “residents of Hamlet said again and again that they didn’t know much about the place or didn’t even know it was there” (61).

Emmet and Brad Roe would eventually face criminal charges and civil lawsuits, but criminal accountability or financial compensation could in no way account for the true cost of cheap: the destruction of human lives. The Hamlet fire and the deregulatory, pro-business, and generally neoliberal era of which it was a part are only recent history—many of those whose lives were irrevocably changed because of the fire are still with us, doubtless fighting day-to-day battles with grief and anger at the thought of cheap’s true cost. Indeed, Simon notes that “drugs took over the lives of a few survivors” (218). Today, American consumers still demand cheap goods and ever-lower prices. The facilities in which those products are produced, and those prices are made possible, have predominantly been shipped out to other countries, but their human cost is no less than it was in Hamlet. Our contemporary world works as much off of profit-driven labor exploitation as did the world of the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, the society described in Simon’s book is *our* society: an American built on consumption and careless about its true costs.

Works Cited

- Simon, Bryant. *Boardwalk of Dreams Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America*. University Press, 2004.
- . *The Hamlet Fire: A Tragic Story of Cheap Food, Cheap Government, and Cheap Lives*. The New Press, 2017.