The Road to Independence:
Interpretations

Jesús Fernández-Villaverde\textsuperscript{1}
April 8, 2020

\textsuperscript{1}University of Pennsylvania
Carl L. Becker, The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776

“The first was the question of home rule; the second was the question . . . of who should rule at home.”
Going back to the basic questions

- Recall the three tightly-linked questions that early Americans asked:
  1. How responsive to popular majorities should governments be?
  2. How government power should be distributed among different territorial levels?
  3. To what extent and in what ways should government promote economic growth?

- These three questions become central to life in the colonies after 1763.

- The constitutional crisis spins out of control and ends up with a war, which few had foreseen, and with an independent federal republic.

- You should not underestimate how novel this political structure was.

- Or the global impact of the revolution.
Players

- Attempts at reforms of the British Empire are met by increasingly fierce resistance by colonial elites.

- British actions are followed by American reactions, with minor revolutionary threads.

- There is an exception: Massachusetts, with the toxic combination of Samuels Adams and Thomas Hutchinson.

- Boston, in particular, had always been a problematic city for the Empire.

- Indeed, the conflict in Massachusetts ends up engulfing most of the rest of the colonies.

- American Revolution is, therefore, fundamentally about constitutional questions created by imperial reform.
• Political-economic considerations are at the very center of the events.

• However, the fact that political-economic considerations are the center of the discussion does not mean we do not have alternative interpretations of the revolution.

• In particular, why did different players care so much about constitutional issues?

• We need to spend some time thinking about the historiography of the revolution.

• Historiography: study of how historians have thought, researched, and written about history.
“...if, as Collingwood says, the historian must re-enact in thought what has gone on in the mind of his dramatis personae, so the reader in his turn must re-enact what goes on in the mind of the historian. Study the historian before you begin to study the facts. This is, after all, not very abstruse. It is what is already done by the intelligent undergraduate who, when recommended to read a work by that great scholar Jones of St. Jude’s, goes round to a friend at St. Jude’s to ask what sort of chap Jones is, and what bees he has in his bonnet. When you read a work of history, always listen out for the buzzing. If you can detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog.

The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by what kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants.”
Interpretations of the revolution

- Being a central aspect of American life, there have been debates about the meaning of the revolution since 1776: David Ramsay, Mercy Otis Warren, Thomas Hutchinson, Joseph Galloway, George Bancroft, George L. Beer, Charles Andrews, and Lawrence Gipson.

- We cannot review all of them.

- Two important traditions:
  1. Neo-Whig interpretation.
  2. Neo-Progressive interpretation.

- Notice that nearly all authors recognize caveats and nuances to their interpretations (we will revisit this point later on). Many historians plainly dislike the idea of traditions or “schools.”
HISTORY
OF THE
RISE, PROGRESS AND TERMINATION
OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION.
INTERSPERSED WITH
Biographical, Political and Moral Observations.
IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY MRS. MERCY, WARREN,
OF BOSTON. (1761.)

VOL. I.

BOSTON:
PRINTED BY MANNING AND LORING,
FOR E. LARKIN, No. 47, CORNHILL.
1802.
• Ideas about constitutional issues are not only the proximate cause of conflict, but also essential to understand what happened.

• Highlights colonials’ emphasis on liberty and constitutional rights.

• These ideas were built on the radical Whig tradition in England (Algernon Sidney, John Locke, Cato’s Letters).

• That does not necessarily imply that actors were not rational or did not pursue self-interest.
CATO’S LETTERS

VOL. I.

Est lex Justorum Injustorumque distincta, ad ilam antiquissimam, & rerum omnium principem, expressa, Naturam; ad quam leges hominum dirigantur, que supplicio improbos efficiunt, & tuentur bonis.

Cicero de Legibus.

LONDON:
MDCCXXIV.
Main contributions:


The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution

Bernard Bailyn
Neo-Progressive interpretation I

- Ideas about constitutional issues are epiphenomena hiding more important economic struggles.
- Related, but not equal to the Marxist tradition of historical materialism (base vs. superstructure).
- Also, details of those struggles vary across authors (i.e., elite-guided vs. elite-reacted).
- Founders of the tradition ("classical" progressives):
  2. An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States by Charles A. Beard (1913).
  4. The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement by J. Franklin Jameson (1926).
• More recently: Gary Nash, Edward Countryman, and Woody Holton (among many others).

• Influenced by the “New Social History.”

• Emphasis on the tensions created by fast social change and growing inequalities.

• Mixed with many different themes, including the role of groups outside the elite.
THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

EDWARD COUNTRYMAN

"Fine exercise history . . . Better than any comparable treatment."
—Sean Wilentz, In These Times
The Unknown American Revolution

The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America

GARY B. NASH
Despite their names, the “political leaning” of each interpretation is ambiguous.

Also, discussions within each interpretation: Republican view of Bernard Bailyn vs. liberalism view of Joyce Appleby.

Related but separate debates regarding:

1. The degree of radicalism of the revolution.
2. The relation between the revolution and the constitution.

“Founders Chic.” Also, half-jokingly, “Federalist Chic.” My own view of this movement is more positive.
Scope of studies have extended dramatically over the last few decades:

1. Social groups.
2. With-in groups.

You probably want to spend more time reading and thinking about those interpretations.
WHOSE AMERICAN REVOLUTION WAS IT?

Historians Interpret the Founding

ALFRED F. YOUNG & GREGORY H. NOBLES
• If we had more time, I would assign some primary documents.

• Pamphlets play an extraordinarily important role in the Revolution.

• Structural reasons: widespread literacy + high disposable income.
The American Revolution
Writings from the Pamphlet Debate 1764-1776
GORDON S. WOOD

An empire divided. A nation born.