The Road to Independence: Interpretations

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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.
• 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.
WHAT IS HISTORY?

EDWARD HALLETT CARR

"... a work of rare distinction which nobody can afford to miss."—Hans Meyerhoff, New York Times Book Review
…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.”
Past and Prologue
Politics and Memory in the American Revolution
MICHAEL D. HATTEM
HISTORY
OF THE
RISE, PROGRESS AND TERMINATION
OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION.
INTERSECTED WITH
Biographical, Political and Moral Observations.
IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY MRS. MERCY WAREN,
OF RUTLAND, [VOL. I.]

Vol. I.

Boston:
Printed by Manning and Loring,
For E. LARKIN, No. 47, Cornhill.
1802.
Neo-Whig interpretation

- 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 Whig radical tradition and the “country” opposition literature in England (Algernon Sidney, John Locke, Cato’s Letters).

- Baylin called this process the “contagion of liberty.”

- That does not necessarily imply that actors were not rational or did not pursue self-interest.

- Similarly, the neo-Whig interpretation does not deny the “radical” aspect of the revolution (importance of republican component against traditional patriarchal societies).
CATO'S
LETTERS
VOL. I.

Est lex Iustorum Injustorumque distinctis, ad iadem antiquissimam, et rerum omnium
principem, express, Naturam; ad quam leges hominum diriguntur, quae supplicio
improbos efficiunt, & tuentes bonos.
Cicero de Legibus.

LONDON:
MDCCXXIV.
Main contributions:


The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution

Bernard Bailyn

Fiftieth Anniversary Edition

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize
Neo-Progressive interpretation

• 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).

• Very influenced by the interpretation of the French Revolution.

• 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.
• 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.
Revolutionary Characters
WHAT MADE THE FOUNDERS DIFFERENT

Elegant...stimulating...absorbing essays from one of our leading scholars of the American Revolution...splendid.
• 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.
LIBERTY'S DAUGHTERS
The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800

Mary Beth Norton
ENJOY THE SAME LIBERTY

Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era

EDWARD COUNTRYMAN
WHOSE AMERICAN REVOLUTION WAS IT?

Historians Interpret the Founding

ALFRED F. YOUNG & GREGORY H. NOBLES
Understanding the Founding
The Crucial Questions

Alan Gibson
Second Edition, Revised and Expanded
Caveats III

• 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.