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**A “Revolution of the People”:  
Developing the Social Context of the American Revolution**

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The American Revolution looms in this nation's consciousness as a sort of origin story, a national epic which helped define its essential character and lay the groundwork for everything that has happened in its wake. As it remains such an integral part of the narrative, it has offered generations of scholars an opportunity for constant reinterpretation; to understand it, or at least make a concerted effort in some small way, is to gain better insight into the whole span of American history and to help place the United States within the much broader context of world history. Its story has undergone a number of significant reorientations over the past half-century, and perhaps the most important has been a dramatic expansion upon the social forces at work behind it. Beginning with a comprehensive study of the confusing and conflicting ideological foundation of the Revolution, subsequent historians have worked to establish both the long chain of social changes which characterized the eighteenth century and to afford greater importance to the whole gradient of American society which they affected. Emerging in the twenty-first century is an image of the Revolution drawn from the tumultuous developments of the eighteenth and driven largely by the concerns and widespread activism of the ordinary ranks of society.

Bernard Bailyn, along with the rest of the Neo-Whig historians, brought a fundamental challenge to past interpretations; his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* precipitated a profound historiographical shift, and no survey of recent scholarship can really be called complete without an appreciation of it. Working from a broad reading of revolutionary pamphlet literature, the chief medium of eighteenth-century American discourse and the most effective means of arguing topically and polemically, of responding quickly to important events or maintaining personal debate, Bailyn seeks the actual ideas at work around the Revolution.<sup>1</sup> He emerges, not with a simple tale of Lockean teachings or of an enlightened cadre of gentlemen

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Enlarged Edition)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, originally published in 1967), 4-6.

philosophers, but with one of complicated individuals, replete with their own cares and concerns, committed to a host of ideas drawn from an impressive array of historical and contemporary sources, often conflicting and somehow bound up in the language of the Whig opposition in English politics.

Though his approach focuses almost exclusively on the upper echelons of colonial society, those with the resources to disseminate their names in print, Bailyn firmly separates them from the pamphleteers of England and, in doing so, helps prompt later decades of scholarship aimed at defining the nuances of colonial society. These men were not members of some detached intelligentsia; they were, first and foremost, active members of their own communities, fulfilling other roles and adopting pamphlets as a means to express the concerns of those occupations. Theirs were not particularly artful pieces of literature—indeed, few approached the biting criticisms turned out by professional English writers—but, Bailyn contends, this was not their aim. Participatory members of society, they sought to instruct, to convince, and to explain as clearly as possible the position from which they argued and the legitimacy of their grievances. They wrote about issues that stirred them personally and affected their lives beyond the printed word. “The communication of understanding,” says Bailyn, “lay at the heart of the Revolutionary movement, and its greatest expressions, embodied in the best of the pamphlets, are consequently expository and explanatory: didactic, systematic, and direct rather than imaginative and metaphoric.”<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, with the revolutionary leaders and Founding Fathers understood first as “active politicians, merchants, lawyers, plantation owners, and preachers” deeply engaged in the issues of their own lives, the true insights of the Neo-Whig approach come in a discussion of the ideas which drove each of these men and the placement of such ideas at the heart of the

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<sup>2</sup> Bailyn, 19.

revolutionary movement.<sup>3</sup> The American Revolution becomes essentially an ideological and political movement, compelled by an eclectic, even conflicting set of sources. Many activists looked to the images of classical antiquity, to the deaths of glorious republics, which embodied “simplicity, patriotism, integrity, [and] a love of justice and of liberty,” under the crushing weight of corruption and tyranny; read correctly, these made ready analogies for the crisis of the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> These societies brought images of a virtuous citizenry, capable of putting the good of the whole before themselves and affecting a system of government based around the best of republican principles. At the same time, however, pamphleteers could also draw upon the religious revivalism of the First Great Awakening and hold high its increased focus on individual liberty and agency.

Most importantly, the Neo-Whigs look to English politics, and specifically a country opposition that developed, in the years following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, to protest alleged violations of the English Constitution. Left of the typical Whig sensibility, these Commonwealthmen, opposing in particular the parliament of Robert Walpole, brought a radicalized reading of the Constitution and “an independent view of politics” which derided dependence in any political sense and worked well in conjunction with the other sources of American ideology.<sup>5</sup> Though peripheral figures in English politics, given little effective voice or respect, Gordon Wood, a disciple of Bailyn responsible for his own influential reading of American ideology, argues that their writings found an appreciative audience in the colonies, distant from Great Britain and possessed of a unique intellectual climate which made these ideas engaging. Indeed, Commonwealth rhetoric presented a spectrum of criticisms against

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<sup>3</sup> Bailyn, vi.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787(with New Preface)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina University Press, 1998, originally published 1969), 15.

eighteenth-century English politics, and “the expressions of [independence and liberty] that Americans found most attractive, most relevant to their situation, were precisely those with the least respectability and force in England.”<sup>6</sup> By offering a lens through which to view the whole of modern British politics and a language of corruption and license to describe it, these writings provided a “harmonizing force for the other, discordant elements in the political and social thought of the Revolutionary generation.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Wood, the resulting framework spoke to a uniquely American “Whig science of politics” which cast the entire period in terms of the steady encroachment of tyranny and the consequent destruction of liberty.<sup>8</sup> The confluence of the various strains of American intellectual life under this banner of Whig radicalism established a decidedly revolutionary mindset which necessitated a break with England, if only in defense of virtue and constitutional principle. The various men of Bailyn’s description came to describe their world in these terms, and “they could not help believing—all the evidence, all the enlightened everywhere confirmed it—that liberty was fleeing the Old World entirely and ‘seeking an asylum westward.’”<sup>9</sup>

Tying their analyses so closely to the pamphlet literature of the Revolution, the Neo-Whigs maintain an image of it in relative isolation. Theirs is a necessarily limited focus and portrays the Revolution less as the apex of long-term historical developments than as the result of purposeful consideration and ideological conviction. During the 1970s, in the wake of Bailyn and Wood’s works, this depiction provoked a debate about the importance of a broader social context, most easily seen in the writings of Jack P. Greene and Joyce Appleby, which would help

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<sup>6</sup> Wood, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Bailyn, 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Wood, 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

set the tone for the next forty years of research into the realities of the eighteenth century and into the agency of colonists beyond the Founding Fathers.

Greene, a strong proponent of the Neo-Whig argument, approaches the Revolution from a methodical, sociological perspective. Taking his cue from theoretical insights into the nature and course of other revolutions, especially those which “give as much attention to social strain as to political and ideological conflict, to social dysfunction, frustration, anomie, and their indices as to weakness and tension within the political system,” Greene attempts to determine whether such a context may have been influential, or even necessary, in the formation of the American Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Ever methodical, he provides from the outset a number of hypotheses to work his way through before arriving at a conclusion: “The first is that colonial society underwent a dramatic erosion of social cohesion over the period from 1690 to 1760...The second is that over the same period, the social structure of the colonies was becoming more and more rigid and social strain correspondingly more intense.”<sup>11</sup> The former looks to a whole host of influences—population growth, immigration, invigorated rates of social mobility, rejection of inherited tradition in the wake of the Great Awakening—which could have created a society more open to individualism. The latter focuses upon the corresponding processes of increasing population density and dramatic polarization of wealth as the cause of internal tension and frustration. Weighing each, Greene works to determine whether such forces compelled the Revolution, whether or not they can be attributed direct responsibility, and he ultimately rejects them as “the regular concomitants of the normal process of incremental change within a colonial society.”<sup>12</sup> Certainly, he admits, such developments can “be said to have ‘aggravated,’ perhaps in some

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<sup>10</sup> Jack P. Greene, “The Social Origins of the American Revolution: An Evaluation and an Interpretation,” *Political Science Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (Mar., 1973): 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Greene, 18.

cases even ‘intensely,’” resistance to Great Britain, “but they cannot be said to either have created the movement or to have been necessary for it to occur.”<sup>13</sup> These processes belong to a much longer shift toward modernity, something which began before the Revolution and continued afterward; for the Neo-Whig, the Revolution itself was largely a unique political and ideological conflict composed of reactions to particular events, and these, not the modern revolution, provided both the instigation and justification for a break with Britain.

In firm disagreement, Joyce Appleby, a colleague of Bernard Bailyn at Harvard, seeks to place the features of this modern revolution at the very heart of the American story and, by combining the two hypotheses dismissed by Greene, to explain the conviction with which colonists expressed those ideas so clearly laid out by the Neo-Whigs. Without an appreciation for the social developments of the eighteenth century, Appleby cannot find a reasonable explanation for the vehemence with which so many colonists expressed their opposition, even to the point of taking up arms and shedding blood. “These are acts,” she says, “flowing from a revolutionary consciousness, a state of mind which accepts, almost embraces, a suspension of the normal rules of conduct and justifies nonordinary behavior by referring to the extraordinary nature of the times. There is no power in the Commonwealth tradition by itself to produce this response.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, she finds that rallying power in the tension created by a society, once “community-oriented” and “based on a “social order of due subordination,” rather suddenly over the first half of the eighteenth century shaken by fragmentation and the influence of a more liberal, individualistic outlook.<sup>15</sup> Traditional deference began to fall away as the distinction between dependence and independence solidified; characteristic of a liberal mentality, none wished to be labeled dependent and many sought ways to free themselves. Much of this desire

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<sup>13</sup> Greene, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Joyce Appleby, “Liberalism and the American Revolution,” *The New England Quarterly* 49, no.1 (Mar., 1976): 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

came along with the whole host of other developments of the eighteenth century: substantial immigration—“Philadelphia, a city of 12,000 in 1730, began receiving immigrants from Germany and Ireland at the rate of 7,000 per year”—growth in the slave population, increased economic competition, and religious revival that placed greater emphasis on the individual than on the community.<sup>16</sup>

Profound tension emerges in her depiction as the very same developments that promoted a need for personal independence failed to allow for any greater access to it. To reference Greene’s second hypothesis, society became in some ways more rigid and “neither vertical nor horizontal mobility increased with growth and prosperity during these years.”<sup>17</sup> Continually confronted by their own troubling dependency and driven to move beyond it, Appleby argues that many colonists harbored a deep sense of dissatisfaction which colored the crisis with Great Britain after 1763, and lent the movement its passionate rhetoric. Parliamentary acts became “menacing” and demanded “immediate and forceful repudiation”; acquiescence to British authority became quickly associated with the “imagery of subjugation, submission, and subordination [which coursed] through the literature that marked the way to Independence.”<sup>18</sup> And it is only within this context that ideological principles could be held so tightly and applied so broadly, that Wood’s “science of politics” could represent an all-consuming mindset. In her conception, the Revolution, however justified by a whole complex of intellectual influences, could never have moved beyond a simple legal dispute without a broader context to stir colonists’ emotions and move them to outright rebellion.

Taking a lead from Appleby, many historians of the late 1970s and 1980s sought to expand upon the social context of the Revolution, essentially to develop the nuances of a colonial

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<sup>16</sup> Appleby, 11-15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 20.

society in the way that Wood and Bailyn had ideological beliefs. Practically, this meant moving the story beyond an exclusive focus on the elite of society; it meant giving the “middling and lower sorts” of colonists more than a cursory glance, and it often revealed a society riven by internal division even as it mobilized to challenge external authority. Gary Nash, a major proponent of this shift, in a study of pre-war urban radicalism emphasizes the need to examine economic motivations alongside ideology; the former carried the same weight with ordinary colonists that the latter did with the gentry. In a 1976 contribution to a collection edited by Alfred F. Young, another driving force behind a focus on popular politics and activism, he seeks the roots a “popular ideology,” one that “dynamically interacted with the more abstract Whig ideology,” and he finds it in the rapidly changing economics of American cities.<sup>19</sup> Just as intellectual consideration had for those writing the pamphlets, practical concerns over economic uncertainty compelled politicization amongst urban workers. With the growth of urban populations came a hardening of divisions between social classes; wealth amassed at the top took the form of gilded carriages in the streets as the poverty of the bottom developed into a large class of dissatisfied urban poor. Additionally, a nascent middle class, composed largely of merchants and master craftsmen, faced economic instability which motivated both their protests against the punitive measures of Great Britain and their growing frustration with the colonial elite. According to Nash, the climate of colonial cities as they approached the Revolution was tense, characterized often by open hostility—in the form of published condemnations and public arguments—between the various social classes.<sup>20</sup> These divisions influenced the development of a “popular ideology” that could attack the position of the elites and urge a radical reorientation of

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<sup>19</sup> Gary B. Nash, “Social Change and the Growth of Pre-Revolutionary Urban Radicalism,” in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 6.

<sup>20</sup> Nash, 12.

society, based upon principles of economic equality, to accompany the Revolution; indeed, “these tensions shaped the ways in which different groups began to think about *internal* political goals once the conflict against *external* authority began.”<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Dirk Hoerder, in an analysis of these conflicts at work in Boston, marks a step toward shifting agency from the elites to the common folk by explaining the ways in which popular pressure, often at odds with gentry sensibilities, helped influence the tone of resistance and compel elite guidance in certain, radical directions. Hoerder characterizes Boston as strongly hierarchical, if not explicitly, then implicitly as a heavy polarization of wealth created obvious distinctions amongst the various residents. Few could actually vote, and many who could found their political voices limited by the handful who commanded dominating influence.<sup>22</sup> However, far from silencing the majority of the population, Hoerder argues that this helped highlight crowd action as a viable alternative. Especially in the wake of the Stamp Act and throughout the years leading toward the Revolution, vocal crowds became a fixture of Boston politics, necessitating accommodation and compromise by the elites leading other sorts of political or legal protests. Hoerder does not go as far as later authors in attributing leadership to the people of Boston; his is still a protest directed by elites, but it is now nuanced by substantial and formative pressure from below. He writes of an uneasy and tumultuous relationship between the leaders, who feared the perceived radicalism of the crowd, and the crowd itself, which “showed an independence of action and a rudimentary class feeling that carried it beyond the [relatively conservative] goals set by the Whig leadership.”<sup>23</sup> In doing so, Hoerder helps shift the discussion toward appreciating the range of views maintained by the

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<sup>21</sup> Nash, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Dirk Hoerder, “Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776,” in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. by Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 238-39.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

various constituencies of American society and the ways in which each influenced the others to create a sort of amalgamated whole.

Terry Bouton, in a recent study of revolutionary Pennsylvania and the shape of American democracy as it emerged from the Revolution, follows a similar line of investigation. With an eye to understanding the democratic limitations laced through the Constitution, Bouton returns to pre-revolutionary society and presents, in a way reminiscent of Appleby's analysis on frustrated liberalism, communities focused on the idea of independence and divided in their definition of it and the means by which to achieve it. The complaints of corruption and tyranny which many Whig activists leveled against the Crown and Parliament can be placed alongside the growing feelings of inequality and dependence amongst the "middling folk." For these colonists, from farmer to urban laborer, Bouton places land ownership at the heart of the growing tensions of the eighteenth century. This did not come from any overriding sense of materialism, but from a belief that land brought with it stability, independence, and the effective political voice lacked by the crowds of Hoerder's study: "At a time when most white settlers farmed for a living, the American dream centered on acquiring land, harvesting enough to keep the farm solvent, and passing down land to one's children...Landowners were thought to have been liberated from much of the dependency that characterized Europe."<sup>24</sup> As access to land and a real sense of independence dwindled through the eighteenth century, the "middling and lower sorts" of Americans found a cause for protest, both against Great Britain and the elites of their own society.

Economic equality became the rallying cry of ordinary Pennsylvanians who suffered the dramatic poverty of Philadelphia or the instability of rural communities. Though the genteel and

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<sup>24</sup> Terry Bouton. *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

middling agendas would ultimately diverge into radical and conservative aims during and after the war—this forms the second half of his book—Bouton emphasizes an extraordinary amount of cooperation and agreement, however uneasy and the result of necessity, between the various ranks in the late 1760s and early 1770s. The rebellion against Great Britain began idealistically, with both the gentry and the rest of society maintaining some level of commitment to the belief that “economic equality was what made political equality possible...that ‘the people’ would never have political liberty until citizens had the economic wherewithal to protect their rights.”<sup>25</sup> They agitated for a new, egalitarian society founded both on Whig ideology and desires for economic security. Expanding upon Hoerder’s analysis, Bouton maintains that the energy for this approach came from below, that the gentry were pressured to adopt such a radical vision by those beneath them and forced to sustain it in the interest of building a solid base of support against England. And, again like Hoerder, he characterizes the alliance as an uneasy one, complicated by different ideas about activism and protest: “The result was a struggle between gentry-led and popular resistance, in which the gentry attempted to restrain the protests of ordinary Pennsylvanians, who, in turn, pushed the gentlemen to take a more aggressive stance against Britain.”<sup>26</sup> Carrying on from the discussions of the 1970s and 1980s, Bouton contributes an image of revolutionary America composed of a whole range of vocal and influential, even conflicting, groups which helped compel and shape the aims of the Revolution. This was not a linear process, but a haphazard and chaotic one.

In his own recent contribution, T.H. Breen, long a proponent of a broader and more inclusive perspective, makes the case that the Revolution drew much of its strength from amongst the ordinary ranks of colonial society, from the people in the cities and across the

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<sup>25</sup> Bouton, 31-32.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

countryside who developed and participated in resistance against Britain. Much as Appleby found the source of revolutionary fervor in the series of eighteenth century developments, Breen sees it amongst the great mass of colonists who formed the base of resistance: “Without tens of thousands of ordinary Americans willing to set aside their work, homes, and families to take up arms in the expectation of killing and possibly being killed, a handful of elite gentlemen arguing about political theory makes for a debating society, not a revolution.”<sup>27</sup> Through a close examination of popular activism during the years which led up to the actual war, Breen presents the rapid development of a strong and passionate response to the various parliamentary acts after 1763, propelled even further by such formative protests as the Boston Massacre and the Tea Party. An image develops, centered initially on New England and specifically Boston, of a population broadly involved in the developing crisis, compelled not as much by ideological conviction as by physical reality, by actual stories and measurable impacts upon themselves and their fellow colonists with whom they felt a growing connection.

Resistance amongst ordinary folk developed along a continuum, with each step as important as the next in laying a foundation for more aggressive acts and establishing a context which made them appropriate. Simply refusing to drink tea, while not necessarily revolutionary in itself, helped establish a general tone of opposition to England and encourage more overt and violent protests. Continual communication of these activities, carried across the breadth of the colonies by newspapers and pamphlets, helped establish a broad sense of community which could inspire rage and compel aid with little regard to physical distance. Similarly, attacks upon one colony came to resemble attacks upon the increasingly interconnected whole; following the bloodshed at Lexington and Concord in 1775, Breen asserts that “significant in the realm of

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<sup>27</sup> T.H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 4.

public opinion was the belief that the men who died at Lexington did so not to defend their own small Massachusetts communities or a distinct New England way of life, but for an American cause.”<sup>28</sup> And, just as Hoerder and Bouton assert, Breen argues that the passionate and physical response resorted to by ordinary colonists pressured leading gentlemen, organized by now into the Continental Congress, to abandon a desire for reconciliation and embrace a much more radical break with Great Britain.

Begun with Bernard Bailyn’s reinterpretation of the ideological motivations behind the American Revolution, and his placement of those beliefs in the hands of a complicated and engaged elite, recent historiographic discussions have served to greatly expand upon a broad social context for the Revolution. Moving beyond an exclusive focus on either the gentry or on the role of ideas, but not disregarding their influence, historians after Bailyn and the Neo-Whigs have steadily developed an image of revolutionary America as composed of a whole range of influential social groups, each motivated by its own concerns and possessed of a unique understanding of the Revolution, that conspired in a variety of ways, even as they may have disagreed with one another, to put forward a relatively cohesive resistance against Great Britain. Through their work, the revolutionary movement truly becomes one of the people which, by virtue of its complexity and nuance, offers no easy answers of strictly linear narratives, but instead embodies the whole, diverse range of people who composed it.

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<sup>28</sup> Breen, 279.

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### Bibliography of Other Readings

Though this paper proved to be a useful exercise in expressing the sorts of historiographical discussions at work across decades and between generations of American scholars, the true value of this senior project has been in reading broadly and holding regular discussions with Professor Montagna about topics beyond those discussed here. I looked to this semester as an opportunity to do preparatory reading for graduate school and to help establish a good base of knowledge from which to work in the coming academic year. With that in mind, I have listed below the other publications that we covered in our discussions and which helped set the context for the specific debate that I outlined above:

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