

Interpretations of American Revolution

Seeking out the Particular

Dennis Beesley

Dr. Eve Kornfeld

History 532 Midterm

19 February 2009

Since the Treaty of Paris in 1783, scholars have been trying to explain the causes of the American Revolution. Initially it was argued that a moralist sense between right and wrong led the colonists to take up arms against their oppressors. Given the miraculous achievement of the colonists in defeating the British Empire, nineteenth century scholars like George Bancroft began to assert that fate and Divine Providence led the Revolutionaries to victory. In the twentieth century, however, three particular schools of thought emerged with their own interpretations. Imperialist scholars like Ian R. Christie argue that the British Empire simply miscalculated legislative moves while an expansive desire of the colonists motivated colonial resistance due to fear of British intrusion. Building upon the theories of early twentieth century Progressives, Gary Nash and other Neo-progressives view the American Revolution using the bottom-up approach. Looking specifically at how social divisions strengthened following the mid-century wars, Nash argues that the people exploded into violence against the local colonial elite who were officials of the crown. Finally, Neo-Whig scholars return to the argument of ideas and ideology. In *The Stamp Act Crisis*, Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan argue that colonial ideas about freedom and constitutional rights inevitably led to the resistance. Bernard S. Bailyn coupled this ideological approach with emotion to explain the explosive reaction of the colonists. All three schools of thought demonstrate the need to recognize “the *particular* and *varying* features of specific kinds of social structures and patterns of change.”¹ This includes studying ideas, lifestyles and actions of thousands of people who participated in the rebellion. As such, social and cultural historians are necessary in helping complete the picture of one of the most world-changing events in history. By examining these three interpretations, this essay will explain how each theory contributes to a better understanding of the American Revolution.

¹ Theda Skocpol, *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1.

The American Revolution was a rebellion against the controlling government and, like any other revolution in history, can be told from either the winning or losing side's perspective. For over a century, American scholars dominated the discussion outlining the strict regulations that Britain had imposed on the colonies. In the mid-nineteenth century, George Bancroft would often illustrate how oppression led the colonists to fight for their natural rights. According to Bancroft, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the colonists understood insurrection against tyranny as a duty to God.² Thus heaven and nature were linked to the colonial version of America's Revolution. In the first half of the twentieth century, however, scholars began looking at the colonies from the British point of view. Early scholars in the Imperial school were Charles M. Andrews, Herbert Osgood and George Louis Beer, who argued that the American Revolution was no more than the result of self-interested colonial behavior.

In *Crisis of Empire*, Ian R. Christie accepts the notion that the colonists were acting out of their desire for westward expansion. This argument is not unfounded either. In 1774, Ebenezer Baldwin responded to the Quebec Act as a violation of the "civil rights and privileges" of current settlers, "and all such as may settle any where within that vast extended province in future time."³ Future expansion was clearly on the minds of the colonists, and any legislation perceived as hindering that expansion could certainly lead to hostility. Christie saw the Quebec Act as "primarily an attempt to stabilize the frontier region, reduce the pressure on the Indians [...], maintain peaceable conditions for the fur-trade [...], and win the loyalty of the French frontiersman."⁴ Given the resentment that the Act produced among the colonies, Christie

² George Bancroft, *History of the Colonization of the United States*, Volume 2 (Boston: C.C. Little & J. Brown, 1841), 78.

³ Ebenezer Baldwin, "An Appendix Stating the Heavy Grievances the Colonies Labor Under," *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789*, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975 [1967]), 215.

⁴ I.R. Christie, *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies, 1754-1783* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966), 88.

ultimately views the American Revolution as “a story of the misjudgments and the inadequacy of British politicians.”⁵ This view was also held by British observers at the time of the rebellion. In his letter to the Marquis of Rockingham, Joseph Harrison wrote of his astonishment that “after the Warning and Experience of the Stamp Act Times; that any new Impositions should be laid on the Colonies, till the Powers of Government were strengthened.”⁶ In Harrison’s view, as well as that of many loyalists throughout the colonies, Britain maintained the cause of liberty while her leaders were not perfect. Although Imperial scholars may present their views as Anglophiles, their argument of the benevolence and rationality of the British Empire contribute substantially to the views of other theorists.

At the time Imperialists were shedding light on the opposing views of the Revolution, scholars in the Progressive school were pointing to another twofold analysis. Rather than looking at how British versus American thought was composed, scholars like Arthur Schlesinger began to analyze the economic factors that divided the goals of the people according to their class. Separating the elite from the people, progressives accepted Carl Becker’s proposition that the revolution was a question between “home rule” and “who shall rule at home.”⁷ Although Progressives were followed by neo-Whig and Ideological scholars, neo-Progressives in the latter part of the twentieth century sought to return to an emphasis of the “people”. This time, however, quantitative history allowed for the “people” to include not only workers, but women, Native-Americans, and African-Americans. This is exemplified in Gary Nash’s groundbreaking *The Urban Crucible*, wherein he explains how economic changes during and after the mid-century wars caused social and religious tensions that inevitably led to revolution. In a way,

⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁶ Joseph Harrison, “Opposition to the Customs Commissioners in Boston,” in Greene, 140.

⁷ Carl Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960 [1909]), 22.

Nash accepts the Imperialist interpretation that the colonial rebels were “governed by the Rabble.”⁸ This does not mean that those in the uprising were the most impoverished, as Nash recognizes the strength of the middle class throughout the rebellion. “The impoverishment of the lower quarter or third of society was important to these middling men,” Nash argues, “because the spread of poverty in the lowest laboring ranks, not simply among the aged and infirm, signaled sickness in the body economic as surely as corruption betokened putridness in the body politic.”⁹ Confirming the arguments of Imperial scholars, corruption was not exclusively had in Britain, as many colonists argued against their own representatives. In his “Remonstrance of the Back Country,” Charles Woodmason explained how “Representations of these Grievances and Vexations have often been made by Us to those in Power – But without Redress.”¹⁰

Woodmason’s statement not only confirms grievances against colonial politicians, but was written in response to “social and psychic dislocations caused by the Cherokee War of 1760-1761.”¹¹ Such evidence of social division in the colonies is supportive of Nash’s argument that challenges neo-Whig scholars who had argued that such divisions did not exist.

Although neo-Whig and Ideological scholars may need to accept the existence of certain class divisions throughout the colonies, their contributions also aid neo-Progressive and Imperial school arguments. The idea that “no taxation without representation” was solidified as an ideological right is itself an economic factor. Such a right, however, was not necessarily claimed merely because of economic changes during the mid-Century wars. In their collaborative work on *The Stamp Act Crisis*, Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan explain how “colonial protests

⁸ Joseph Harrison, in Greene, 141.

⁹ Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Abridged Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986 [1979]), 209-210.

¹⁰ Charles Woodmason, “Remonstrance of the Back Country,” in Greene, 100.

¹¹ Jack P. Greene, editor, *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975 [1967]), 98.

argued for the rights of Englishmen on a constitutional basis.”¹² While colonists used various slogans during the late eighteenth century to voice their concerns, these were based on their rights as Englishmen granted in the Magna Carta over five centuries earlier. To Morgan, colonists were simply acting out of fear of “being reduced to the status of slaves.”¹³ This argument is no different than the Imperialist version of colonial irrationality. It is also indicative of the class consciousness that existed in colonial minds. This does not suggest, however, that all of the people fought against class division. In a pamphlet written in 1765, Daniel Dulany acknowledges “the right of the superior to use the proper means for preserving the subordination of his inferior.”¹⁴ There certainly could have been revolutionaries fighting because of social division, but Dulany’s statement makes it clear that motivations can differ according to the individual.

Just as scholars are inclined to interpret human reaction to events differently than their peers, it seems only reasonable to suggest that eighteenth century colonial interpretations of British enactments were likewise individually distinguishable. In addition, historians must choose whether to focus on the microscopic characteristics of individuals or “macroscopic accounts of social change.”¹⁵ Regardless of the theoretical foundation scholars choose to argue, each school seems to contribute an important piece in the puzzle of the American Revolution. By further examining the particular, social and cultural historians are most likely to show a complex web of motivations, goals and beliefs that led thousands of colonists to fight in one of history’s most significant rebellions.

¹² Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995 [1953]), 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴ Daniel Dulany, “Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes in the British Colonies,” in Greene, 57.

¹⁵ Theda Skocpol, “Social History and Historical Sociology: Contrasts and Complementarities,” *Social Science History* 11, no. 1 (Spring, 1987), 20.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bancroft, George. *History of the Colonization of the United States*, Volume 2. Boston: C.C. Little & J. Brown, 1841.
- Becker, Carl. *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960 [1909].
- Christie, I.R. *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies, 1754-1783*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1966.
- Greene, Jack P., Editor. *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1975 [1967].
- Morgan, Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan. *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995 [1953].
- Nash, Gary B. *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Abridged Edition. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986 [1979].
- Skocpol, Theda. "Social History and Historical Sociology: Contrasts and Complementarities." *Social Science History* 11, no. 1 (Spring, 1987): 17-30.
- Skocpol, Theda. *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.