

Nature of the Revolution: Was the American Revolution a People's Revolt?

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Delegates from twelve states attended the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 because they believed that the Articles of Confederation had failed to resolve several pressing problems. Nearly bankrupt, the government had neither an effective currency nor the power to tax citizens. It could control neither foreign nor interstate commerce, and world powers regarded it lightly. The fifty-five delegates often disagreed about how best to deal with those vexing problems and about the kind of document that should replace the Articles. Yet, they were united on another more immediate concern. Almost all the delegates believed that the American Revolution had unleashed radical political forces that threatened the fabric of their society. These men of property and standing resolved to reverse the outcome of a genuine people's revolution. In the colorful words of Secretary of War Henry Knox, they had met to "clip the wings of a mad democracy."

Prior to the American Revolution, government on both the provincial and local levels had been securely in the hands of prominent men – planters, merchants, and lawyers. Voters ordinarily deferred to this elite group in elections. However, resistance to British imperial policies before 1775 and the warfare (with its accompanying egalitarian ideology) that followed dramatically changed all that.

Mobilizing an effective opposition to an imperial power required the combined efforts of elite leaders, popular organizations such as the Sons of Liberty, and urban mobs. Drawing upon the work of generations of English dissenting writers, authors from James Otis and Samuel Adams to John Dickinson and Thomas Jefferson crafted a rationale for opposition to royal policies by arguing in essays, pamphlets, and letters that the contemporary British regime was led by corrupt and power-hungry ministers

intent upon subverting liberty in America. By exposing what they saw as a conspiracy against freedom, these writers were attempting to prompt and sustain resistance to British policies. Sons of Liberty emerged in several towns to organize the resistance. Composed of intellectuals, artisans, shopkeepers, and merchants, these organizations successfully fused the anti-imperial arguments of the essayists with lower-class grievances to persuade mobs to take action against British targets.

Mob action, often in defiance of British authority, had long been a part of colonial urban life. There had been more than one hundred riots in the colonies by the mid 1760s. Sailors, apprentices, journeymen, poor workingmen, free blacks, and slaves dominated most mobs, although they often included middle-class types. Mobs took action when they concluded that community leaders could not or would not act in their best interests. They were particularly militant in opposition to British efforts at impressment or the collection of customs duties. It surprised few, then, when mobs prevented the successful implementation of the Stamp Act (1765), Townshend duties (1767), and Tea Act (1773) and compelled British authorities to remove troops following the 1770 Boston Massacre. The available evidence clearly supports historian Marcus Rediker's conclusion in an article in *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement*, edited by Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (1996), that urban Mobs "provided much of the spark, volatility, momentum, and sustained militancy for the attack on British policy after 1765."

While leaders of the resistance movement appreciated the effectiveness of mob action, they worried about the consequences of frequent rioting. In their anti-British efforts, members of mobs regularly betrayed their resentment of those in colonial society who had wealth and power. In 1765 a Boston mob ruined the elegant mansion of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson; a New York City mob destroyed Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden's expensive coach; and a Charles Town mob entered the home of wealthy merchant Henry Laurens, whom they "menaced very loudly" and handled "pretty uncouthly." By 1775 it was clear to worried wealthy Americans that the riots had contributed to an alarming decline in deference. According to Merrill Jensen in *The American Revolution within America* (1974), William Bull, lieutenant governor of South Carolina, explained that because of their increased participation in riots, the people "have discovered their own strength and importance and are not now so easily governed by their former leaders." mobs did not disappear when the war began, either. After 1775 there were several riots against merchants whom the people believed were engaged in price gouging and hoarding of basic staples.

Mass Meetings and boycotts also helped mobilize the people, giving many an opportunity to debate revolutionary principles and vote on resolutions. County meetings in New Jersey, Maryland, and Connecticut, for example, declared the Stamp Act unconstitutional. In December 1773 more than 5,000 people crowded into Old South meeting House in Boston to denounce the Tea Act. Thousands, including many women, joined the resistance by signing or supporting several nonimportation and

nonconsumption agreements. In 1774 the Continental Congress, in response to the Coercive Acts, formed a Continental Association to suspend all trade with England. In virtually all counties and towns, citizens elected committees (some 7,000 men) to monitor merchants to ensure compliance. All these activities accustomed ordinary people to engage in politics as never before, and their activism did not end with the beginning of warfare. About 232,000 men, or 40 percent of military-age white males, served in either their state militia or the Continental Army during the American Revolution. These men, motivated by the ringing words of the Declaration of Independence (1776) that "all men are created equal," insisted on being treated as equals. The enlistees and the officers they elected mixed freely, the former often debating with the latter about which orders to obey. Elite leaders contributed to this insubordination by frequently yielding to militia demands such as allowing the use of plain hunting shirts for standard uniforms. When recruits tired of service, many simply went home. By one estimate, nearly half of them deserted at least once. George Washington, who had little regard for the militia, concluded that men who served in these units were too "accustomed to unbounded freedom" to accept the "proper degree of Subordination."

...Patriot leaders, through a blitz of publications, sought to mobilize mass support for the Patriot cause by promoting the idea of equality. Many economically independent small farmers and artisans, who made up a majority of the population, eagerly adopted this egalitarian rhetoric. They demanded that governments not only rest on "the consent of the governed" but should also give more power to ordinary citizens. Residents of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, according to Jensen, instructed their delegates to the state constitutional convention to establish "a simple democracy, or as near it as possible" and to "oppose everything that leans to aristocracy or power in the hands of the rich." The anonymously authored pamphlet *The People the Best Governors* (1776) called for annual elections for all officeholders and argued that all twenty-one-year-old males should be eligible to hold office and to vote.

Even though the structures of the new governments in most states resembled those of their colonial predecessors, with governors and two-house legislatures, there were concessions to the people's demands for more power. For example, most executive, judicial, and legislative officials were elected rather than appointed, and they served short, limited terms. State constitutions, additionally, gave most political power to the lower houses of the legislatures, the branch most susceptible to popular influence. Indeed, voters rejected traditional elites and elected men more like themselves to serve in the lower houses. In a study of the composition of houses of representatives during the American Revolution, *The Sovereign States, 1775-1783* (1973), Jackson Turner Main concluded, "men from average families, of little education or political experience, became a majority." Gordon S. Wood in *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969) noted that Massachusetts governor James Bowdoin, at the end of the Revolution, was amazed that he could "scarcely see any other than new faces" in his state's government. James Kirby martin wrote in *men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders*

and the Coming of the American Revolution (1973) that to many men, such as Virginian Roger Atkinson, it was a pleasure to see their “new Assembly now sitting – under the happy auspices of the People only.” “I confess I am pleased,” Atkinson explained to a friend. While the assembly “is composed of men not quite so well dressed, nor so politely educated, nor so highly born as some Assemblies I have formerly seen ... upon the whole I like their Proceedings.” These were the “People’s men,” he concluded, “and the People in general are right.”

...The surge of activism culminating in a people’s revolution did not incorporate all Americans. The egalitarian rhetoric did not extend to Native Americans, blacks, and women. Most Indian tribes remained neutral during the conflict. About thirteen thousand Native American warriors fought with the British, while only a few sided with the Americans. However, the British-allied warriors chose badly. The victorious Americans seized ever more native lands. On the other hand, some slaves benefited from the egalitarian spirit of the Revolution. When the war began, slaves sought freedom in several ways: by filing lawsuits, enlisting in the army or navy, and, most successfully, by running away. Although thousands of blacks achieved freedom through military service and flight, gradual emancipation laws implemented in the Northern states scarcely changed the lives of the vast majority of blacks who remained slaves for the remainder of their lives. Likewise, women realized few gains. They participated in boycotts and food riots and occasionally raised money for the Continental Army. They also managed farms and businesses while their husbands were away serving in the military or in political office. For their efforts, women increasingly were esteemed as models and teachers of civic virtue, but they gained little more than greater access to education and divorce.

Despite the shortcomings of the People’s Revolution, contemporaries understood that they were living in a time of remarkable transformations. Those changes were frightening to men of wealth and standing. From their perspective, the state governments were too responsive to the popular will. The elite believed that common folk lacked the virtue and wisdom to rule and worried that they were unwilling to deal with threats to their property. In the 1780s, in several states where debtors faced foreclosure on their property, mobs intimidated judges into closing courts. Moreover, planters, merchants, and lawyers quickly grew tired of the need, as Patrick Henry explained it, to “bow with utmost deference to the majesty of the people.”

Virtually all the delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention expressed little faith in “the people.” Massachusetts delegate Elbridge Gerry spoke for many when he said that the people “are daily misled into the most baneful measures and opinions by the false reports circulated by designing men.” Roger Sherman concurred. The people, in his judgment, “should have as little to do as may be about the government.” As a consequence, delegates shifted the focus of power from the state governments to the national government, and in the process, dramatically diminished the political role of the people. Most officials in the new government gained virtual immunity from the

popular pressures faced by their counterparts on the state level. The chief executive would be chosen by an electoral college, members of the Senate would be selected by state legislators, and federal judges would be appointed for life terms. Only the members of the House of Representatives would face the challenge of winning a popular vote. The Founding Fathers were aristocrats deeply troubled by the radical thrust of the People's Revolution. They created a national government "of the people," but one largely removed from them. They had adopted a view brilliantly captured in an incongruous statement by New England clergyman Jeremy Belknap, who remarked: "let it stand as a principle that government originates from the people; but let the people be taught ... that they are not able to govern themselves."

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The decision to participate in the American revolutionary movement was often complicated. People chose to break away from England for a variety of reasons, some of which were associated with class interests. Increased poverty and frustration with British troops, for example, fueled many urban protestors, while unfair debt, fear of slave revolts, and laws prohibiting speculation in Western lands inspired many of Virginia's wealthy planters to oppose the British. Ultimately, though, the decision to revolt was personal. George Washington could have been thinking of the Crown's denial of his commission as an officer in the British Army when he decided to join the American cause. Additionally, Benjamin Franklin became a revolutionary while residing in England; his son became a Loyalist while living in America. Both were appalled by the abuses of the respective legislatures. Joseph Plumb Martin, who joined Washington's army as a teenager, signed on after a bitter fight with his grandfather. Thus, people from all classes joined the American rebellion for a variety of economic, social, political, and personal reasons. The elite could not have convinced the lower classes to join the Revolution anymore than they could have influenced the Loyalists of their own class. The elite did not control the herds; they were just heading in the same direction. Yet, it was often the elite who gave the Revolution its voice and direction. The real question is how much did deference by the lower sorts toward the traditional elite change over the course of the Revolution?

The coming of the Revolution had an out-of-door aspect to it. The perceived violations of American constitutional and natural rights by the British were often met with mob violence and popularly enforced economic sanctions. The lower orders therefore played an important part in the events leading to actual rebellion; in the process, they gained a greater sense of their political power. In his study of the urban masses in eighteenth-century Northern colonies, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (1979), Gary B. Nash found that factional fighting

among the elite in the decades prior to the Revolution facilitated the lower orders' realization of their political abilities. The creation of political organizations, the dissemination of republican-minded literature, and mob action all produced a culture that undermined deference. This declining deference affected Southern cities, too. In Charles Town, South Carolina, for example, twenty-three of twenty-six members of the Sons of Liberty were artisans. Only one merchant, Christopher Gadsden, belonged to the organization, and he served as its leader. Indeed, artisans in Charles Town played a variety of public roles: they joined fellowship societies, sponsored horse races, and nominated slates of candidates. Moreover, as the royal government became paralyzed over a bitter and protracted controversy involving the assembly's £1,500 donation to the English political critic John Wilkes, a de facto committee composed of fifteen artisans, fifteen merchants, and sixty-nine planters performed the necessary tasks of government. Thus, for the first time, craftsmen played a significant role in governing South Carolina. This political pattern prevailed throughout the states during the Revolution. By serving on political committees and participating in mob activities, the "middling sorts" managed to increase their political influence. But did the lower classes' increasing political participation undermine the elite's political dominance?

Stuart M. Blumin, in his study of the urban middle class, *The Emergence of the Middle Class, Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (1989), found no evidence that the middling sort wished to displace the traditional planter/merchant elite. The republican spirit of the Revolution diminished the people's deferential attitude toward the elite, but it did not eliminate it. In Charles Town, for example, the elite controlled the mob and the course of the Revolution in that state. The artisans who participated in the political process still deferred to merchants and planters. When urban artisans founded the Fellowship Society in 1762 to raise money for a public hospital, they soon deferred leadership positions within the organization to local merchants, who were eager to participate in such a worthy cause. During the Revolution, additionally, only a few local artisans held seats on important Patriot committees. Instead, the lower classes in Charles Town and other cities still allowed the elite to be their voice and give them direction. Even in Boston, the hotbed of unrest, urban protestors had Samuel Adams as their spokesman and leader. Likewise, the Sons of Liberty in Charles Town took their cues from Gadsden, a wealthy merchant whose obnoxious personality alienated him from those in his own class. Both Adams and Gadsden lacked an audience among their peers, so they used the lower classes to further their own personal agendas. Neither Adams nor Gadsden advocated social leveling; nor did the lower classes, for that matter. Gadsden believed in popular rights but with aristocratic leadership. Adams believed popular organizations served an important purpose in the resistance movement, but once an elected republican government emerged, popular uprisings were useless and dangerous. Since these groups chose spokesmen who still believed the elite should rule, it is unlikely that they questioned that idea themselves.

Not only did the lower classes' natural tendency to defer to their social superiors hinder them from augmenting their political power but division among themselves also

prevented them from developing a strong sense of class consciousness. As Nash pointed out, class consciousness among workers was inchoate. Divisions existed among ethnic groups, wealth levels, crafts, and within the workshops themselves between master and journeyman. The most politically active artisans were generally wealthy and did not really belong to the lower or middle classes. Only the wealthiest craftsmen had the economic independence necessary to pursue political careers.

The rise in political awareness and participation among the lower classes during the American Revolution did not last. After the war, political leaders discouraged the type of protests generally associated with the lower classes. Never a majority in legitimate political circles, “the people” could really only influence public policy through mass demonstrations. However, popular revolts such as Shays’s Rebellion (1786–1787) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1794) frightened political leaders, who saw them as a threat to the fragile and embryonic republic. When Charles Town artisans violently protested the lenient treatment of Loyalists after the war, the planter/merchant elite, in the *South Carolina Gazette and General Advertiser*, blasted their behavior as “indiscretion, folly and insolence.” And although several artisans had served on revolutionary committees, by the 1790s only two served in political office. Moreover, by placing extremely high property qualification for serving in political office in the 1778 constitution, the South Carolina gentry ensured the continuation of the ancien régime. On the other hand, elites in all states held high political office from the beginning of the revolutionary movement through the early national period. The same cannot be said for members of the lower classes, whose primary weapon, street violence, was no longer needed once the revolutionaries had suppressed the Loyalists and had overthrown British tutelage.

In the final analysis, the elite set the political agenda for the Revolution. The lower classes’ political motivations, if they existed at all, were usually narrowly defined and based on local issues. The elite articulated and defined the colonists’ complaints with the mother country. Ultimately, the American Revolution was a political contest between political leaders in America and Britain. The major issues that fueled the rebellion – Whitehall’s increasing placement of non-natives in colonial government and Parliament’s offensive economic and political policies – were primarily threats against the elite, not the lower classes. Patriot leaders did not seek independence to advance social leveling and political democracy; rather, through independence, they sought to preserve their political, social, and economic dominance. They recognized that the lower classes could help them achieve this goal and thus allowed them a secondary role in the American cause. The lower classes were more than willing to accept this role without questioning the authority of their local leaders.

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