

Joyce Appleby, "Liberalism and the American Revolution" ©1976

“The specific problem confronting historians of the American Revolution is to explain that event without relying upon the assumptions embedded in the revolutionary legacy. The heirs of a revolution are at a disadvantage, for they have received the revolutionary tradition as a set of unexamined assumptions. The fact that men would resort to the violent overthrow of their government for personal liberty is such an assumption. The preeminent place which the founding fathers gave to individual freedom has been accepted as natural, and if the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence have not always been taken as self-evident truths, they have rarely been approached as radical ideas requiring explanation. . . .”

“By taking seriously the colonists’ expressions of purpose and motive, Edmund Morgan [and] Bernard Bailyn . . . have moved with historical imagination to recapture the way the revolutionaries themselves perceived their situation. In their view, the English Commonwealth literature furnished colonists with a model of republicanism and a critique of government power. The Neo-Whig interpretation is idealist, emphasizing the role which colonial assumptions and values played in determining behavior. As Wood said of Bailyn, he found that ‘ideas counted for a great deal, not only being responsible for the Revolution but also for transforming the character of American society.’”

“The concept of ideas transforming American society, however, should be examined as a logical proposition. . . . According to their interpretation, colonial society had diverged slowly from British norms thorough the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This imperceptible process of differentiation became clear in the turbulent years after the French and Indian War and explains the aggressive behavior of the colonists when new British policies were laid down. Intellectual developments in the decade before Independence, Bailyn has written ‘led to a radical idealization and conceptualizing of the previous century and half of American experience.’ Such an interpretation necessarily understates the risks, social tensions, the skewed relations and personal anxieties generated when legitimate authority is challenged. It also leaves unanswered why the particular conception of personal liberty and government legitimacy set forth in the revolutionary literature should have seized the American imagination and carried sober men to violent protest and the resort to arms. . . .we . . . need to explain the nature and origin of their anxieties and the circumstances which made extralegal violence in the interest of a radical theory of individualism tolerable.”

“The characteristic colonial society of 1700 subordinated the individual to the group and regulated his activities in accordance with traditional purposes usually defined by the local church or the ruling class. Prosperity, new economic opportunities, immigration, population growth, and the pressures of war undermined efforts to perpetuate this social pattern. . . . The middle decades of the eighteenth century brought challenges to the political authority and deferential social structures in the colonies, created choices of religious loyalties, including the possibility of not belonging to a church at all, forced young adults from the protective control of their families, and added thousands of black and white aliens to the native populations, these

changes, however, did not expand the range of personal opportunities. Neither vertical nor horizontal mobility increased with growth and prosperity during these years.”

“If we can accept this picture of qualitative changes in colonial society before the Revolution, and can entertain the idea that the removal of traditional social restraints would make the categories of free and unfree people crucial to personal satisfactions, then it is possible to see how British imperial reforms could be viewed as menacing acts demanding immediate and forceful repudiation.

“Rapid and diversified population growth strained the system, the controversies over the Great Awakening undermined the consensual basis for religious discipline, Economic opportunity beckoned to the ambitious. . . . Perhaps the prosperity and economic growth of the middle decades provided the possibility of a new order which would minimize social control and maximize the individual ambit of choice and responsibility. In such a context, any threat to the expectations generated by a liberal vision of society could induce panic and encourage violence. Such threats could also be widely accepted as tyrannical, unjust, unnatural, and unacceptable.”

Tomorrow in class you will need to present the answers to these questions in class. Be prepared to write them on the board and to take questions from your peers on this document. You are the expert!

Reading Questions

- 1) Appleby says that people coming after a revolution are at a disadvantage. What is that disadvantage?
- 2) According to Appleby, Historians Edmund Morgan and Bernard Bailyn say that was responsible for the Revolution. What was it?
- 3) Does Appleby think we should accept their explanation of what caused the Revolution? Why or why not.
- 4) What do we still need to understand as heirs of the Revolution?
- 5) According to Appleby, what caused the Revolution?