

**T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* ©2004**

“By all odds the American Revolution should be remembered as a relatively minor event in the long history of the British Empire. After all, like the insurgencies of unhappy peoples from Ireland to India, rebellion in colonial America involved a staggering mismatch between the world’s most potent military power and ordinary subjects whose ideological passions often blinded them to the harsher realities of the contest. That the story of the Revolution did not end in crushing disappointment invites modern Americans to revisit a society that so spectacularly defied experience and history. Those who celebrate their achievement might well inquire how the colonists overcame local jealousies and mutual ignorance, profound fear and clashing identities, so that on the eve of the independence leaders of the rebellion could speak credibly to strangers scattered over a huge geographic territory about a common political vision.

It is easy, of course, to take popular mobilization for granted or to treat it as almost providential occurrence. From this perspective the rising of colonial Americans — at least, in sufficient numbers to make good on their challenge to British authority — acquired an almost miraculous character. It is a narrative of freedom-loving men and women coming effortlessly together under the banner of rights, inspired at every turn by brilliant leaders of the sort the country has not seen for some time . . . .”

“*The Marketplace of Revolution* explains popular mobilization from an entirely different point of view. In fact, it breaks with most previous accounts of this period, putting forward a new interpretation of what precisely was radical about the politics of the American Revolution. Instead of assuming the existence of political collectivities, it asks how such a dispersed population generated a sense of trust sufficient to sustain colonial rebellion. It explores how a very large number of ordinary Americans came to the striking conclusion that it was preferable to rise their lives and property against a powerful British armed force than to endure political oppression.”

“Over a decade of continuous experimentation, American colonists discovered a means to communicate aspirations and grievances to each through a language of shared experience. Between 1764 and 1775, they built a sense of mutuality slowly and tentatively, and in the process of reaching out beyond familiar boundaries of class and gender, they developed radically different inclusive structures of resistance. They created brilliant forms of collective and extra-legal political action, overcoming discouraging moments of alleged betrayal to bring forth an imagined national community unanticipated at the start of the revolutionary crisis.”

“What gave the American Revolution distinctive shape was an earlier transformation of the Anglo-American consumer marketplace. This event, which some historians have called a “consumer revolution,” commenced sometime during the middle of the eighteenth century . . .

[America] was surely not a society of self-sufficient yeoman farmers. People purchased items they most desired at local stores; they often demanded and received liberal credit. Each

year the volume of imports increased, creating by 1750 a virtual “empire of goods” . . . since Americans from Savannah to Portsmouth purchased the same general range of goods, they found that they were able to communicate with each other about a common experience. . . .

*Marketplace of Revolution* argues, therefore, that the colonists shared experience as consumers provided them with the cultural resources needed to develop a bold new form of political protest. In this unprecedented context, private decisions were interpreted as political acts; consumer choices communicated personal loyalties. Goods became the foundation of trust . . . Before this moment, no massive political movement had organized itself around the denial of imported goods. . . . Indeed, the boycott movement invited colonists traditionally excluded from formal political processes — the election of representatives to colonial assemblies, for example — to voice their opinion in a raucous, open public forum . . . It was an inspired strategy. Indeed, from this perspective we can see that national independence was no small measure the consequence of widespread political resistance within a new consumer marketplace.”

**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) According to Breen, should the American Revolution have succeeded? Why or why not?
- 2) What is it that is easy to take for granted about the Revolution? Explain this in detail.
- 3) What makes Breen’s argument so different? What does he not take for granted? What question does he ask instead?
- 4) What is his answer to this question? What does Breen argued caused the American Revolution?