

1. Introduction

What is Revolutionary in the American Revolution?

I.

Probably with the exception of the Civil War no other period in US-American history has received so much attention as the American Revolution. It seems that not only all heroes and anti-heroes but also all sniffles have found their chroniclers. A bibliography of the historiography of this truly vital epoch published at the time of the bicentennial covered two thick volumes;¹ and in the period since then no year has passed by that did not experience the publication of a number of substantial monographs and a plethora of articles that dealt with particular events of the American Revolution.

A number of battles have been fought. Back in the 1960s I grew up with the battle about the borderlines of the revolutionary era. Did it, as Lawrence Henry Gipson maintained, begin at the time of the Peace of Aix-La-Chapelle or, as others opined, with the Peace of Paris in 1763 – a view shared at least in retrospect by a significant number of Revolutionaries?² The argument for 1748 had some interesting implications. It linked the revolutionary process to the reform plans hatched by British politicians like the new president of the Board of Trade, George, earl Dunk-Halifax. The reforms were designed to create a new British Empire in which the imperial government controlled colonial politics much more tightly. The thesis about the beginning of the revolutionary period in 1748 shifted the emphasis from the Stamp Act as a meas-

¹ Cf. Ronald M. GEPHART (comp.), *Revolutionary America, 1763-1789: A Bibliography*, 2 vols., Washington, DC 1984. I will refrain from annotating my statements in this short essay. Readers interested in particulars are invited to consult any of the numerous general histories of the American Revolution or, should they read German, my *Ausbildung und Neubildung. Die Geschichte Nordamerikas vom Ausgang des 17. Jahrhunderts bis zum Ausbruch der Amerikanischen Revolution 1775 (= Geschichte Nordamerikas in atlantischer Perspektive von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart. Eine Darstellung in sieben Bänden*, ed. N. FINZSCH, U. LEHMKUHL, H. WELLENREUTHER, vol. 2). Münster and Hamburg 2001.

² Lawrence Henry GIPSON, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution*, 15 vols. New York 1939-1970.

ure that arbitrarily taxed the American colonies and the efforts to enforce the Acts of Trade and Navigation with the help of the British Navy to a reform package that had found at least the support of a substantial number of colonial politicians. This shift directed attention to a period where many colonial politicians felt that colonial egotism coupled with the weak position of the English Crown in America endangered the British Empire's chances in the inevitable showdown with the arch-rival France that all were convinced would soon be staged.

From Lawrence Henry Gipson's perspective the English government and monarch did not plan to enslave the North Americans but reform the Empire and make it stronger. In its process the North Americans would be freed from the French threat. That colonists would contribute to such an achievement was but fair considering the profits they would reap from the strengthened empire. For Gipson, American reactions to the Stamp Act and the Townshend duties were unreasonable as well as motivated by selfish concerns. For Gipson as well as for Massachusetts' Governor Thomas Hutchinson, colonies and Britain were united in a relationship in which the mother country provided protection for which the grateful colonies would make adequate contributions to the wellbeing of the mother country.

The imperialists' school prompted others to subject colonial political behaviour and thoughts to a closer analysis and seek the "ideological origins of the American Revolution" as well as the "the origins of Colonial politics".³ Their inquiries resulted in another important shift: Historians now argued that the colonists' political concepts and behaviour were propelled by the wholesale rejection of executive corruption of Royal governors that was primarily fuelled by Commonwealth ideology and Republican thought derived from Florentine political theories transmitted via James Harrington to North America and by increased political consciousness in the colonies.⁴ Feeble efforts by a handful of historians who pointed out that elitist political thought and behaviour represented but one root for revolutionary behaviour, while material interests of workers, craftsmen, and mechanics in the colonial towns represented another powerful cause for revolutionary behaviour were brushed aside.⁵ Increasingly republican

³ Bernard BAILYN, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA 1967; THE SAME, *The Origins of American Politics*. New York 1968; Caroline ROBBINS, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealth Man. Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II Until the War with the Thirteen Colonies*. Cambridge, MA 1959.

⁴ BAILYN, *Ideological Origins*; ROBBINS, *Eighteenth-Century Commonwealth Man*; J. G. A. POCOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton, NJ 1975.

⁵ Cf. Gary B. NASH, *The Urban Crucible. Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA 1979; Stoughton LYND, *The Tenant Rising at Livingston Manor*. In: *The New York Historical Society Quarterly* 48, 1964, p. 163-177. Edward COUNTRYMAN, *A People in Revolution. The American Revolution and Political Society in New York*. Baltimore, MD 1981, and the highly influential collection of essays by Alfred F. YOUNG (ed.), *The American Revolution. Explorations*

concepts, be they derived from Machiavelli in Florence, from James Harrington or John Locke, as well as revolutionary ideas were identified as the engines that drove the revolutionary processes after 1765. With the publication of Gordon S. Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic*⁶ that perception of the revolutionary process became the received orthodox wisdom.

This concept of the American Revolution has strengths as well as weaknesses. To its strengths belong first that they offer an intellectual framework within which the revolutionary documents from the writings of John Dickinson and Thomas Jefferson to the Declaration of Independence can be embedded and interpreted within a European intellectual tradition. Second, linking American Revolutionary thought to British and European intellectual traditions helped to balance earlier nationalist interpretations of the American Revolution, that dated back to George Bancroft's writings. The weaknesses of seeking the origins of the American Revolution exclusively in European and British intellectual traditions are equally obvious, although only few historians have hitherto focused on them. First, joining European intellectual concepts to North American reality tended to ignore the fact that both were dependent on very specific social contexts. To name but one problem: The term "freeholder" has dramatically different meanings within seventeenth-century political thought and mid-eighteenth-century American political concepts, simply because land was very expensive in England and Europe but cheap and available for most in North America.⁷ Second, this intellectual approach to the revolutionary process has sidestepped the issue of how colonists, intellectuals as well as craftsmen, clergy as well as farmers, became revolutionaries. The assumption that they miraculously all had read the key pamphlets against British policy, imbibed its implications, and then had spontaneously turned out to support the measures against the British legislation has been made by implication but no scholar has seriously argued that this represents the essence of the revolutionary process. While at least for parts of the urban population such a case could be made, accomplishing it for the rural freemen and freeholders has not even been attempted.

in the History of American Radicalism. De Kalb, IL 1976; I have discussed some of these concepts in Hermann WELLENREUTHER, Labor in the Era of the American Revolution: A Discussion of Recent Concepts and Theories. In: Labor History 22, 1981, p. 573-600, which was answered by, Gary B. NASH, Billy G. SMITH, , Dirk HOERDER, Laboring Americans and the American Revolution. In: Labor History, 24, 1983, p. 414-439.

⁶ Gordon S. WOOD, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787*. Chapel Hill, NC 1969.

⁷ I have discussed these differences at some length in Hermann WELLENREUTHER, A View of the Socio-Economic Structures of England and the British Colonies on the Eve of the American Revolution. In: Erich ANGERMANN, Marie-Luise FRINGS, Hermann WELLENREUTHER (eds.), *New Wine in Old Skins. A Comparative View of Socio-Political Structures and Values Affecting the American Revolution*. Stuttgart 1976, p. 14 – 40.

In order to lend elitist revolutionary thought the force to sway the colonial population and turn good guys into rabid revolutionaries, it would be necessary to show that key pamphlets reached the farms as well as the plantations and were read by and to those who shaped rural political opinion. Aside from simple problems posed by the infrastructure, the distributive systems for print media, the literacy level at least in the middle and Southern colonies would probably have seriously limited the effects these writings had outside colonial urban centres. In short: The “intellectual origins of the American Revolution” certainly help us to understand the concepts that guided elite Revolutionary politicians and authors, but they utterly fail to explain the behaviour of the common man.

It could be argued that the Revolution was an inevitable process regardless of whether the common man would have shared its aims. Such an argument suggests that colonial political structures were totally divested from its larger populist basis and were able to function without the cooperation of freemen and freeholders. The many studies of colonial political rhetoric as well as of elections and patterns of communication between electors, elected, and legislative institutions clearly speak against such an assumption. Nor is it possible to distill the debate between England and the colonies into an elitist intellectual framework as the intellectual-origins-concept suggests. From the beginning of the acrimonious debate between England and North America political strategies in the colonies consciously employed mass demonstrations to force concessions. Of equal importance were trade boycotts whose economic effects could only be achieved with the wholesale cooperation of the craftsmen, the farmer, the day labourer, and their wives. There is precious little intellectual debate in these vital processes between 1765 and 1771.

If there was little intellectual debate that propelled urban mechanics and workers to action what did propel them? Some historians have suggested that poor working conditions, exploitation, and poverty were the agents that lured the common man into the street. Conscious of their own interests and prescient of what decades later Karl Marx would declare to the world they fought their own socialist battle within the American Revolution. I have elsewhere voiced serious doubts about this interpretation partially because at times of boycotts the profiteers were the same groups these historians described as the impoverished crowds of urban societies.⁸

Recently, Timothy Hall Breen has suggested an alternative solution that steers clear of imagined social needs but is solidly grounded in contemporary consumption culture. Breen argued in his *Marketplace of Revolution* that the common folks of North America were mobilized and radicalized in the trade boycott movements. For these, so he argued, not only touched the life of the elite, but more narrowly affected that of

⁸ cf. n. 5.

the urban and rural freemen and freeholders, their wives, and their families. Mobilized and united in a new politicised consumption culture they became vital agents in a reshaped political world that transcended elitist politics and linked its essence with the material interests of all colonists.

Breen's results change the framework for much of the work that has been written on revolutionary activities in colonial cities.⁹ For now the crowds are not only the result of the skilful manipulation and manoeuvres of a handful of Revolutionary politicians like Gadsden in Charlestown and McDougall or Sears in New York. Instead those who marched in Boston's, New York's, Philadelphia's, and Charleston's streets, who tarred and feathered defenders of English politics and ostracised breakers of the boycott acted on their own convictions as consumers of homemade goods. Not only "tea" or "stamped paper" became political arguments but homemade furniture or homespun garments, too, became pre-national political symbols that expressed pride and a new self-consciousness. Such an argument has dramatic consequences for our understanding of the nature of the American Revolution: If this new work holds up to further scrutiny as I believe it will it will substitute a rather simple explanatory model of what is revolutionary in the American Revolution with a rather complex one.

Before I continue this line of argument I have to explain what I mean with the term "revolutionary". To me the term implies first and foremost a set of intellectual constructs as well as simple straightforward slogans and terms. Imagine a crowd that carried on large banners Thomas Jefferson's *Summary Rights of the British Colonies* down Philadelphia's Market Street. In March or April 1776 they more likely shouted "down with the crowned ruffian", a phrase Tom Paine had coined in his *Common Sense*.¹⁰ Equally unlikely is that demonstrators would chant passages from John Dickinson's disquisitions as "Pennsylvania Farmer", when they could more convincingly shout the sterling phrase "Britons never, never, never will be slaves" from the song *Rule Britannia*.¹¹ Revolutionary political culture, in other words, rests on the longwinded complex argument but derives its revolutionary force, its denunciatory vehemence, and its fo-

⁹ Richard Alan RYERSON, *The Revolution is Now Begun. The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765-1776*. Philadelphia, PA 1978; Charles G. STEFFEN, *The Mechanics of Baltimore. Workers and Politics in the Age of Revolution 1763 – 1812*. Urbana, IL 1984; Roger J. CHAMPAGNE, *Alexander McDougall and the American Revolution in New York*. Schenectady, NY 1975; Dirk HOERDER, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765-1780*. New York 1977; THE SAME, *Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds 1765-1776*. In: Alfred F. YOUNG (ed.) *The American Revolution. Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*. De Kalb, IL 1976, p. 235-271; E. Stanley GODBOLD, Jr., Robert H. WOODY, *Christopher Gadsden and the American Revolution*. Knoxville, TN 1982.

¹⁰ Thomas PAINE, *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America, Philadelphia 1776*: In: Philip S. FONER (ed.), *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*. 2 Bde., New York 1945, vol. 1, p. 3-46, here p. 16.

¹¹ The song *Rule Britannia* had been composed on the occasion of George II anniversary in 1740. The text had been composed by James Thomson, the melody by Thomas Arne, Claudia SCHNURMANN, *Vom Inselreich zur Weltmacht. Die Entwicklung des englischen Weltreiches vom Mittelalter bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*. Stuttgart, 2001, p. 153.

cus from the simple, rhetorically catchy slogans that were easy to remember. It is, if this simple definition holds, simply not sufficient to define the intellectual underpinnings. Of equal importance is isolating those factors that produced denunciatory vehemence, focused issues as well as people's perspectives, and energized them into efforts necessary to sustain a revolutionary movement.

II.

The three essays in this little collection as well as the documents are the results of our dissatisfaction with the explanatory models of the revolutionary process between the passing of the intolerable acts and the first meeting of the Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence. While I tried to understand the activities of the Committees of Inspection and Observation and its larger implications, Marion Stange concentrated all her energy on the texts of the Associations, their meanings and their significance for the revolutionary process, and Maria Gehrke systematically collected and analyzed the advertisements inserted into New England newspapers by Committees of Inspections and Observations. Some time early this year it occurred to the editor that it would not make much sense to just publish the essays without the supporting evidence. We had, however, by then collected more material than could have been conveniently included in one handy volume. I collected fifteen protocols of Committees of Inspection and Observation – only two of which have thus far been printed. They alone would fill a fat volume. Maria Gehrke on the other hand had by then diligently searched all the New England newspapers that had survived the ravages of the times and were available in Germany. Again, reprinting the adds in all of them would have taken up more space than we thought sensible. Marion Stange had put together additional material designed to buttress her thesis. In the end we agreed on the compromise published here. It will provide what we hope will be accepted as sound analysis together with enough supporting evidence to enable the readers to form their own judgments.

The general thesis of what follows is simple: We believe that the revolutionary movement in the years between 1774 and 1776 was the work of the Committees of Inspection and Observation; each township and each county had one; they all were watchdogs not only over the Association agreed to by the Continental Congress in October 1774, but quickly expanded their concerns to most other moral, political and ideological fields relevant in the struggle with the mother country. Our analysis runs on two levels: In examining the semantics of the texts we will suggest the contents of what we believe is the essence of revolutionary thought watered down from the high scriptures to the man in the street. No one was allowed to ignore the meanings of what these Committees held to be the essence of the struggle with England and the

essence of what they termed “the liberties of America”. All had to sign, to abide by and live by the Association and if they broke the rules they were declared “enemy of American liberty”. Focusing on the texts of the associations themselves Marion Stange searches and finds in them “the language of patriotism”. On a second level my contribution describes the decisions of the Committees and their implications for the spreading of revolutionary thought and rhetoric on the one hand and dividing American society into supporters of and enemies to what they called American liberties. This not only shaped revolutionary culture but, equally important, infringed on key concepts of American culture of rights. The third essay approaches the same topic from the perspective of the sermons delivered between 1774 and 1776 and beyond that in the year 1783. Comparing the protocols of the Committees of Inspection and Observation, their advertisements in the papers and their other activities with these sermons reveal the supplementary nature of both. The committees and the clergy share key concepts; at the same time the clergy support the revolutionary process with a vision not only of English politics but, more importantly, with the future of the America as the great nation to be.

The essays suggest a new understanding of the American Revolution. The focus on the Committee of Inspection and Observation reveals that the revolutionary process was not only carried on by the colonial elite and the urban mechanics and labourers but was essentially in town and country the concern of *all* colonists. No one could escape the attention of these committees, no one could sidestep the question whether he should sign the association or declare himself loyal to his king. No one was outside the supervision of the Committee; and if she or he bought, sold or drank tea, denounced the revolutionary cause, defended the King’s government he or she was hailed before the committee and made either sign a recantation or declared “an enemy”. The committees enforced the decisions of the Continental and Provincial Congresses, bent the rights to allow them to persecute Tories or Loyalists, enforce the new morality and virtue as part of revolutionary ideology and kept an eye on all other practical concerns that had been the focus of the collapsed colonial governments. They as well as the clergy provided guidelines as well as the hope so necessary for people living in a world where old values crumbled before the onslaught of new visions. Both, the texts of the associations, the activities of the Committees of Inspection and Observation and the sermons provide us with a richer understanding of the nature and quality of the revolutionary process.