A Revolutionary Future

Scholarship on the American Revolution has long tried to answer two central questions. Were the men who moved toward revolution and the men who fought the war that accompanied it motivated primarily by ideology or self-interest? Was the post-colonial world that the Revolution created radically different from its colonial predecessor, or did most of society stay the same amid some reshuffling at the top? Of course, histories of the Revolution have always been subtler and closer to the reality of the past than these simple dichotomies imply. Still, historians who wanted to be in the forefront of Revolution scholarship needed to speak to these questions of large-scale motivation and result.

In recent years, historians have uncovered a world of subjects about and around the American Revolution that have made our old historiographic questions inadequate. Recent scholarship goes to new places and introduces us to new people. For example, in the work of Holly Mayer, we have learned of the thousands of white, black, and Native women who accompanied one or another of the armies and cooked, did the army's laundry, nursed the sick and wounded,

served the officers and their wives, made musket cartridges, and sold liquor and other goods to the soldiers. These women hardly chose war. Most of them followed an army out of fear that staying home would lead to worse forms of homelessness, hunger, and violence—a finding with parallels in many a war. Similarly, the Revolution's radical implications (or lack thereof) mattered in very narrow ways to camp followers, to enslaved North Americans as they made their way through wartime, or to the more than half a million Native people living west of the Appalachians who would soon face the reality of U.S. expansion.

The old questions of the Revolution's motivations and of radicalism or conservatism also fail to fit historians' increasing realization that many eighteenth-century changes did not happen *because* of the American Revolution but instead reflected larger trends of the era. Or that change over time is not always the most important story, as some historians of women and the family have argued.

Finally, military historians have pointed out that questions about origins and effects fail to give us a framework for understanding the war years themselves. Surely scholarship on the American Revolution should have something to say about the Revolutionary War.

When we historians change our central questions, we have two goals. The first is to shift the range and framing of dissertations, articles, and most of our books. What falls within American Revolution scholarship? To what larger questions and themes should our more focused work speak?

The "American Revolution Reborn" conference showed that historians have achieved this first goal and are taking full advantage of new areas of study. Revolution scholarship is more exciting than it has been in decades, and young scholars no longer shy away from a field in which it had seemed that all the work was done (although I think we might need to be more explicit about our new questions and larger range of subjects to encourage graduate students to call themselves historians of the American Revolution). Colonial and Revolution history have dethroned the central narrative of the coming of the nation-state. Following historians of colonial North American history, Revolution scholars have not only expanded across the Atlantic but begun to find ways to incorporate the Caribbean and the continent. We tell multi-perspectival stories of how people experienced and understood the war, tying local chronologies and local interests to larger themes. As in most cutting-edge history these days, we combine the questions and methodologies of multiple kinds of history: political, social, military, diplomatic, intellectual, cultural. And, at long last, we are *beginning* to stop lumping together people "left out" of the Revolution's promise—Indians, slaves, free people of color, all kinds of

women—as if they all wanted the same things. Indeed, most Indians did not want to be U.S. citizens at all, no matter what shape the republic took.

Historians' second goal in changing the terms of debate is to write new synthetic narratives, to tell the *whole* story differently. Can we create (and evolve) a central story out of our more focused work, a story that we might tell not only to our students but also to those who portray the Revolution in public history sites and popular history books? I will take a stab at one possible new narrative here, but of course there can be many versions.

I would start with the question of how North Americans on the eve of the Revolution expected the future to look. I think we would find startling agreement across North America, if we maintain a sufficiently broad focus. People expected multiple sovereignties to rule the continent, as had been the case long before Europeans and Africans arrived. The colonies of various empires would continue on the coasts and up some of the rivers, operating the ports that brought the products of the world to North America. A range of Native polities would continue to hold and contest power over the interior, which was most of the continent. Whether living in Native towns or colonial farms, most people would farm for their subsistence and center their lives on local communities and families but have connections to a global network of goods, people, and ideas. Slavery would continue, as most people believed it had throughout the world since the beginning of time, but few would have imagined either the huge scale of antebellum plantation slavery or the movement to abolish slavery altogether. People expected that whoever you were, in whatever kind of polity or culture, being born male versus female would probably determine your path in life more than any other single factor.

From that starting place, we might explore various paths through the Revolutionary War and beyond, keeping an eye on different people's visions of what the world should be like (a question inherently both self-interested and ideological) through the vagaries of a war that might change those visions and ambitions along the way. The punchline would be that almost all of these visions were wrong. The republican empire that came out of the American Revolution and early republic developed both a power over the continent that no one predicted and the kind of rhetoric and promise that attracted immigration from around the world. In some ways, I would argue, the most important story of the American Revolution is how the more likely nineteenth century failed to come about.

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