

Stamp Collection



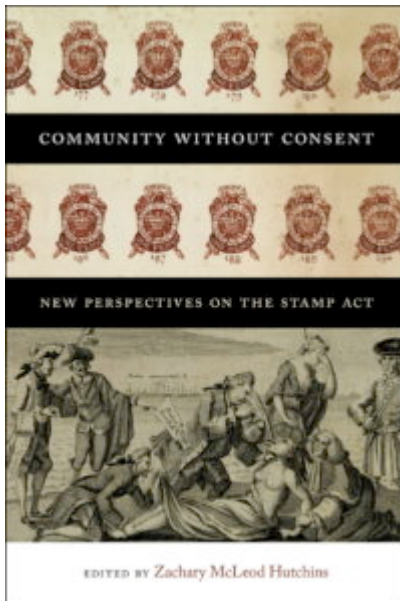
COMMUNITY WITHOUT CONSENT



NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE STAMP ACT



EDITED BY Zachary McLeod Hutchins



Zachary McLeod Hutchins, ed., *Community without Consent: New Perspectives on the Stamp Act*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, University Press of New England, 2016. 264 pp., \$40.

Whatever happened to the Stamp Act? Over the past hundred years, scholars have offered a number of explanations for its importance: it was a foolish imposition by metropolitan officials who didn't care enough about the colonies to formulate a better policy. Remonstrations against it articulated a consistent ideological objection to parliamentary authority that anticipated the Declaration of Independence. Crowd actions protesting it revealed class consciousness by urban workers at a moment of economic depression.

In the United States, the standard role of the Stamp Act in school curricula and college lectures is to mark a major turning point in the run-up to the American Revolution. Yet Zachary Hutchins and the authors in this collection want to extract us from a textbook timeline and encourage us to take "the transatlantic taxation debates of the 1760s" on their own terms (xiii). While the eight essayists still wind up discussing the origins of independence, the volume opens up new opportunities by making American nationalism a smaller part of the story.

This is a book that needed writing. While plenty of scholars have discussed the Stamp Act, only a handful of works treat the Stamp Act as their central concern. The year 2015 marked the 250th anniversary of the Stamp Act's passage, and while *Common-place* has done its part to commemorate the occasion with a [roundtable](#) about Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan's *The Stamp Act Crisis*, Hutchins was the only scholar with the foresight to publish a book on the subject.

The essayists include both literary scholars and historians, almost all of them early and mid-career academics. Their essays use a range of visual and textual evidence and a few different methodological approaches. Four pairs of essays are grouped under headings: "Ritual Responses," "The Poetics of Taxation,"

slavery, and Native Americans, and Hutchins frames these essays with an introduction and conclusion.

When considering a volume like this, the reader wants to know whether the essays cohere in a way that justifies their aggregation. Thankfully, the editor was meticulous in this regard: the authors refer to one another's essays, conveying an overall argument with multiple vectors.

Three of the essays are by historians with new vantage points on the politics of the moment. J. Patrick Mullins makes a nuanced argument that the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew's *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* wasn't the proximate cause of the destructive Boston crowd action on August 26, 1765, since Mayhew disavowed such protests. Nonetheless, Mayhew's political sermons fused with Boston's economic grievances, and so his ideas made an underlying contribution to the opposition.

Molly Perry analyzes Stamp Act protests as ritual performances with local and imperial audiences in mind, where the spectators were just as important as the ringleaders. The Sons of Liberty and their allies had to thread a needle delicately: they had to convince Parliament to see their side of the story, while intimidating their enemies closer to home. Participants in crowd actions weren't necessarily unified in their views—there were “disaffected” persons among the politically mobilized—but commenters did manage to rally around a definition of political legitimacy that excluded women, Indians, and blacks.

Alexander R. Jablonski shows how the Stamp Act debates forced a fracture in the ideas about “subjecthood” on both sides of the Atlantic. Opponents of the Stamp Act, “resplendent in their outrage,” insisted that subjecthood included the duty to resist tyranny, and any restraint on their political liberty was tantamount to slavery (150). Yet prior to the Stamp Act, many British metropolitans and colonists shared an understanding of a subject as having responsibilities as well as rights, wherein true sons of liberty decried licentiousness. Colonists were particularly anxious to draw upon their British heritage to distinguish themselves from enslaved blacks.

The majority of the essays are by literary scholars. Gilbert L. Gigliotti focuses on a neo-Latin poem that appeared in the *Boston Gazette* in May 1765. Full of allusions, the verses criticize colonial sycophancy as well as monarchical overreach, ultimately taking up a moderate call for more dialogue rather than a rousing cry for revolution. Caroline Wigginton and Hutchins evaluate two different textual responses to John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer*: one, “The Dream,” by Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson in 1768, and the other by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, begun in 1769 and published in 1782. By looking at moderate writers who eventually became Loyalists, Wigginton and Hutchins show how Americans debated the proper degree of obedience. Yet these texts were about more than formal politics: Fergusson was also making a case for women's participation in an orderly resistance, even though she was eclipsed by male radicals. Crèvecoeur's

letters, meanwhile, amount to a kind of slave narrative, which thereby scorned and resisted Dickinson's "equation of slavery and involuntary taxation" (140).

Todd Nathan Thompson examines Benjamin Franklin's responses to stereotypes about Americans in a pair of 1766 "Homespun" essays, and Clay Zuba looks at the uses of Indian figures in transatlantic debates. In Thompson's telling, Great Britain's attempt to symbolically reduce the American colonists to Indians (or otherwise "other") was leading the colonists instead to unify around an anti-metropolitan consensus. Zuba tells a similar story, using visual culture as well as texts: "the figure of the Indian registers a rupture in the compatibility of nation and empire" (219). In other words, metropolitan Britons, once they began differentiating themselves from creoles and Native Americans, made space for new (exploitative and racialized) national identities to develop.

The volume as a whole is occasionally playful; one author describes his own interests as "schizophrenic" (233); another uses the word "snarky" (191); while others seek out satires, parodies, and "tongue in cheek" moments to illuminate the past (98, 180). Hutchins even concludes the volume with an unforgivable pun, lending gravity to the standard apology for "linguistic infelicities" that survived the editorial process (x, 229).

Certain (more serious) themes also connect the essays, particularly the importance of race in the construction of Atlantic identities and the tensions inherent in ordered resistance. Hutchins concludes with a meditation on corporatism, which he says "animated collective action during the Stamp Act Crisis" (xix), and remains as "an alternative, largely forgotten tradition" alongside individualism (228).

While the essayists all bring fresh insights to the Stamp Act, the editor might have been bolder in his framing of the volume. This is the first book on the Stamp Act in a while, after all, and so a deeper engagement with past waves of scholarly literature would have been welcome. Rather than cite a politician like Rand Paul (xii) or even a jurist like Samuel Alito (225) to discuss American notions of liberty and corporatism (224), Hutchins might have profited from a deeper engagement with scholars (such as John Phillip Reid, Rowland Berthoff and John Murrin, Gary Nash, or Johann Neem) who explored early American understandings of such ideas. Tastes may vary, but I found Hutchins's references to twenty-first-century Supreme Court cases (*National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius* and *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*) to be superficial and distracting, and I worry that they will date a book that really deserves to endure as a contribution to our understanding of the Stamp Act Crisis.

New things *are* happening with the Stamp Act, in other words—and this volume should signal to a broad range of scholars that 1765 is a good year for deep thinking. This book shows how an interdisciplinary conversation can breathe new vitality into long-standing discussions.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.1 (Fall, 2016).

Benjamin L. Carp is the Daniel M. Lyons Professor of American History at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. He is the author of *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (2007) and *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (2010).