

The Prospect and Challenges of Rewriting the History of the American Revolution



Every revolution is a civil war. But the American Revolution was peculiar, because it has been deemed a civil war in so many senses. A civil war within the British Empire between English people on both sides of the ocean. A civil war in the colonies between the Patriots and the Loyalists. A civil war among the Patriots to determine "who shall rule at home." And now, in the new scholarship, a civil war between Americans who chose sides and those who refused to choose sides unless and until they were forced to do so. It is this last sort of civil war that has long escaped the sight of historians.

As Hannah Arendt remarked, revolutions in modern times have usually been related to war, and war has usually released violence destructive not only of life and property but also of social relations and psychological stability. For those not voluntarily involved in such civil strife, the devastation might have been especially severe and hazardous. For them, the very meaning of the

Revolution might not have been what it was for partisans on either side.

In the past forty years or so, historians such as Jesse Lemisch, Alfred Young, Gary Nash, T. H. Breen, and Woody Holton have done much to probe the roles that ordinary people and marginalized groups played in the Revolution. But we still need to know more about the many, many people who were neither Whigs nor Tories. [The papers at hand make fruitful efforts to depict the ordeals and sufferings of those people and to interpret the significance of their experiences in multi-dimensional contexts.](#)

These presentations reinforce our belief that “the transforming hand of revolution” did indeed transform many things. We are always told that the Revolution promoted changes in the political structure and the social order, lifting some prominent people to historical positions and crowning them “Founding Fathers.” These papers tell us that the Revolution also altered and remolded the lives of tens of thousands of ordinary Americans and that many of them were [distressed, frustrated, and even forced into exile during the war.](#) The Revolution created divisions, tensions, and resentments in families and communities across the continent. The consequences of these conflicts left imprints on the social fabric that await exploration and explanation. In other words, the legacies of the movement for independence were much more complicated and diversified than we used to imagine.

[New narratives of the Revolution will undoubtedly address issues of loyalty and apathy as illustrated by Michael Zuckerman and Aaron Sullivan.](#)

While reflecting on such matters, I cannot help thinking about the historiography of the Chinese revolutions of the twentieth century. It is well known that China went through a number of uprisings and revolutions in the past hundred years. Those rebellions were genuine civil wars, which had a profound impact on the lives and the social relations of hundreds of millions of people. Chinese historians have only recently begun to touch such topics: the experience of ordinary Manchu people after the Qing dynasty was overthrown in the revolution of 1911, the attitudes of peasants toward the land reforms of the 1940s and 1950s, the tribulations of anti-revolutionaries after the revolutionary Party’s takeover of China in 1949. And this new research has not yet been incorporated into the mainstream of the scholarship on the Chinese revolutions.

My impression is that the turn of attention to the uncommitted not only provides new and different lenses to see the meaning of the American Revolution but also indicates possibilities of rewriting its history. The past is often portrayed in ways that celebrate the victors, and we are all familiar with versions of history that function as propaganda for those who hold power. If we focus on the disaffected, the neutrals, the losers, and all those others who

were “in but not of the Revolution,” and if we reveal the destructive effects of a constructive rebellion, we may deconstruct some of the many myths that have enveloped the struggle and achieve a more balanced and nuanced picture of it.

Nonetheless, I think there are great challenges in this kind of rewriting. First, our understanding of the past is restricted primarily by survivals from the past. If there are not good sources, there are not good histories. The scarcity of evidence pertaining to commoners in the Revolution may entice us to say more on the basis of less. Even if we unearth some individuals for whom there are substantial records, we may still have difficulties reading the meaning of their lives in wider social and historical contexts.

Second, it is unclear how to encompass ordinary Americans and the founding elite in the same framework of interpretation. Were these groups always antagonistic in the Revolution? Were the elites always the less moral ones when they were in conflict with commoners? The leaders of the rebellion surely had aspirations, disillusionments, anxieties, and fears that were different from those of the lower and middling ranks, but the difference was not necessarily to their disadvantage. When Daniel Shays and his fellows mounted their protests in western Massachusetts, their primary concern was probably their own distress in the aftermath of the winning of the war. When the framers gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 to deliberate on a new form of government for the United States, they probably cherished their own interests too. But the men who met in that constitutional convention were also aware that their newborn nation had come to a complicated and dangerous pass, and they believed they had a duty to steer it safely through. The result of their assumption of such a mission turned out to be somewhat constructive for the young republic in terms of political order, socio-economic development, and national security. An empathic understanding of those Revolutionary leaders is still meaningful and significant.

Last, there are methodological factors that do matter. In dealing with the personal, social, and psychological dimensions of the Revolution, we may need to employ a variety of approaches and perspectives, such as those of social history and the new cultural history. In any case, we need to think about the overlaps and differences in the history of the American Revolution and the history of revolutionary America. We need to ask some basic questions: What was the American Revolution? What is the American Revolution now? What are the bounds, if any, of the American Revolution? Whose experiences must be incorporated into narratives of the American Revolution? And in all of this, we need to be careful. If we extend the reach of the Revolution too far, we risk fragmenting it or imposing on it a burden beyond its power to bear.

This article originally appeared in issue 14.3 (Spring, 2014).

Li Jianming is a professor of history at Peking University.