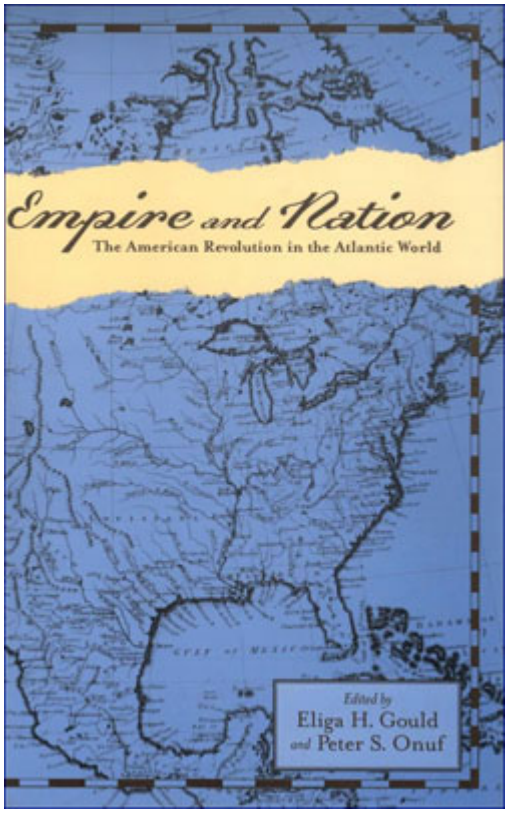
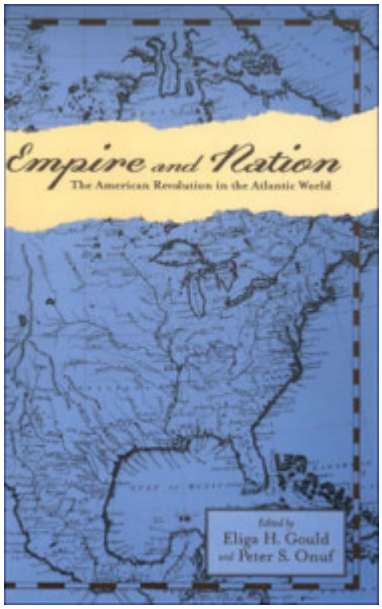
The Revolution Heard Round the World





Empire and Nation: The American Revolution in the Atlantic World

Scholars have long rejected the view that the American Revolution was a limited and staid affair. Indeed, it was profoundly disruptive and belongs in the pantheon of great western revolutions. The American Revolution provoked a series of developments crucial in the move from the early modern to the modern world. The essays in *Empire and Nation* contribute to this view by situating the events in the thirteen colonies in their broader Atlantic-world context.

Arguments that began over taxation and the proper interpretation of the British Constitution ended up, either directly or indirectly, altering political, social, economic, and cultural values and relations around the globe.

The five essays in part 1, “Reconstituting the Empire,” explore how British statesmen unwittingly provoked the colonists and how independence led to significant changes in American political and legal culture. Eliga Gould contributes to a growing scholarly sense that British policymakers were reformers struggling to manage their dizzying success. The misunderstandings of the 1760s and 1770s resulted from the complexities of imperial management and the difficulty of absorbing new and diverse territories.

The remaining essays in part 1 explore the directions Americans headed as they refashioned their political and legal institutions and culture. David Hendrickson shows how determined Americans were, after declaring independence, to allow only the weakest national government. Donald Higginbotham describes how the logistical nightmare of war taught many Americans the benefits of nationalism and a vigorous national state.

Though the Constitution provided a far more centralized government than Americans could have imagined in 1776, Richard Alan Ryerson explains that it was acceptable because Americans ratified it in a climate where politics and law were becoming more democratic. Ryerson closely examines the political thought of John Adams and reveals how quickly American political thought was changing during these years. Adams sought to protect the many from the few, but he always viewed democracy as a distinct social order rather than a mode of government. By the late eighteenth century, Americans were well on their way to understanding democracy as a process, really *the* process, for pursuing politics.

This sense held implications for jurisprudence, as Ellen Holmes Pearson shows. British common law was far too entrenched and vital for Americans to fully declare their independence from it. Yet, as the sum of immemorial custom, it coexisted uncomfortably with a political culture of popular sovereignty that was determined to continue democratizing. After the Revolution, what a democratic polity wanted trumped tradition as the determinant of lawfulness. States molded common law to their needs. Common law remained significant, but present needs always shaped understandings of what common law meant. Thus common law was more likely to be invoked to alter rather than maintain the status quo.

The six essays in part 2, “Society, Politics, and Culture in the New Nation,” explore how the lives of ordinary people changed with independence. The Revolution gave meaning to the Mason-Dixon line and contributed to the rise of multiethnic politics, which in turn shattered an older commonwealth faith in a unitary public good. It also began a process that democratized the public sphere, while establishing a boundary between the legitimate concerns of voluntary societies and the business and responsibility of governments

empowered by popular sovereignty.

In a close examination of the Appalachian valley in Pennsylvania and Virginia, Mary Schweitzer describes how the Revolution divided what had been an integrated backcountry society where colonial borders were once largely irrelevant. This essay shows how slowly but surely Appalachian Pennsylvanians and Virginians became northerners and southerners. Maurice Bric and Stephen Sarson also suggest the growing significance of the Mason-Dixon line. Bric explains that after the Revolution northern cities such as Philadelphia grew increasingly diverse. A new era of ethnically based and interest-group politics challenged the traditional notion that unified elites could articulate and pursue one public good meaningful to all. Sarson shows that the Revolution did not significantly transform the Chesapeake. It remained committed to tobacco and slavery, and, as the North gradually abolished slavery, living with it in the South contributed to the growth of a southern white male identity that appealed across class lines.

The remaining essays in this section build on the themes of democratization and the growing sense of the need for union as the survival of slavery portended troubles. Melvin Yazawa shows that the violent political speech of the 1790s and afterwards must be viewed in a context where all involved considered union preferable to disunion, which lessened the danger of incendiary talk. Yazawa suggests that southerners continued to prefer union to disunion for precisely as long as they considered slavery and union compatible. Marc Harris explores how the Revolution made the public sphere more democratic. But the public sphere itself became more complicated after 1776 since governments now drew their authority from popular sovereignty. After the Revolution, Americans had carefully to delineate which concerns were the proper business of their relentlessly voluntary and egalitarian public sphere and which obligations and duties belonged to their governments alone. Closing part 2, Robert Calhoun describes how religious denominations made themselves compatible with republican political theory and objectives. As with law, religion had to accommodate a democratizing culture. Thus by the 1820s mainstream denominations reinforced growing northern and southern divisions over slavery and, by doing so, strengthened each region’s faith in its own righteousness.

Part 3, “The American Revolution in the Atlantic World,” brings the British Empire front and center. The four essays show that the American Revolution also had a profound impact on the empire Americans left behind. Keith Mason discusses how the Revolution dispersed tens of thousands of loyalists throughout the empire and, in particular, swelled the empire’s free black population. Rapidly after 1780 it was better to be black in the British Empire than in the republican United States. James Sidbury explains how the first slave narratives appeared, why there was a market for them, and why their authors knew to look to the empire for a hearing and not the United States.

Edward Cox situates the development of British abolitionism within the broader Age of Revolution. The American and especially the French Revolutions spread

ideas to the Caribbean that made once stable slave societies increasingly ungovernable. Haiti became a symbol of a better future. As the British began to reconsider slavery, they were driven in part by slaves who were forcing the issue. In the volume's final essay, Trevor Burnard argues that, with regard to slavery, the American Revolution placed the British Empire and the United States on sharply divergent courses. The Revolution threw slavery into sharp relief in the United States and led to its gradual abolition in the North. Yet in South Carolina between 1780 and 1800 the slave population increased, and southerners made it quite clear that the rise of the republic did not mean abolition.

Yet Burnard shows that idealism and the British conviction that the empire cared deeply for liberty meant that British abolitionists could find a hearing. After the Revolution, imperial statesmen concluded that their authority depended on gaining greater control of colonial elites. As slavery became embarrassing and as slaves embraced revolutionary ideas and became harder to govern, imperial managers found that defining British liberty as fully antislavery simultaneously centralized imperial power and provided a deeply appealing moral position. Between 1800 and 1840 slavery declined and was abolished within the empire while it flourished and became central to the development of the United States. Burnard thus poses the provocative question: whose was the empire of liberty?

Taken together, the essays in *Empire and Nation* show that the American Revolution transformed the Anglophone world and had vital consequences for the cultures that those who spoke English encountered. More particularly, the essays join a literature that connects the American Revolution to the democratization of virtually every facet of American life and that highlights the centrality of slavery and racial prejudice in the history of the United States.

Further Reading:

For general context P.J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1999) is superb. Jack P. Greene, ed., *The American Revolution: Characteristics and Limits* (New York, 1987) examines the Revolution and its implications from multifarious perspectives. Michael A. Morrision and Melinda Zook, eds., *Revolutionary Currents: Nation Building in the Transatlantic World* (Lanham, Md., 2004) contrasts the American Revolution with the era's other revolutions; the article by John M. Murrin is the best concise statement about the American Revolution that I have read. Gordon S. Wood's *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004) explores why the British Empire mattered so much to colonists and how, rather suddenly, they came to loath it. T.H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution* (Oxford, 2004) shows how the desire for independence emerged from increasingly intimate connection to the empire, not the other way round.

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