From Enlightenment to Insurrection: Tracing the Ideological Roots of the American Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ideological foundations of the American Revolution and considers how a natural-rights philosophy, English constitutionalism, classical republicanism, Protestant moral traditions, colonial political experience, and shifting imperial relations interacted to produce independence. It explores how arguments defending the rights of British subjects could be reinterpreted to challenge British Crown loyalty. This paper combines a qualitative historical analysis of influential political texts with a critical synthesis of extant historical scholarship to explore the cumulative nature of revolutionary ideology. Materials include Locke's account of political consent, colonial resistance writings, Thomas Paine's Common Sense, and the Declaration of Independence; interpretations of Bailyn, Gordon S. Wood, Pauline Maier, and other historians provide context and comparative analysis.

The paper argues that revolutionary ideology was cumulative in nature. After the Seven Years' War, disputes about taxation, representation, and imperial sovereignty in the colonies encouraged colonists to read British policies in terms of corruption and a threat to liberty. The Enlightenment provided a theory of legitimate government and the radical Whig tradition offered a narrative of the expansion of power, but republicanism emphasized civic virtue. Paine articulated related ideas as a rationale for rejecting hereditary monarchy and the Declaration transformed these ideas into a public statement about the independence grounded in equality, rights, consent, and the right of revolution. Yet the Revolution's universal claims needed to be balanced against slavery, indigenous dispossession, women's political exclusion, and unequal access to citizenship. The paper concludes that the American Revolution was an ideological rupture and a contested transformation: its principles legitimized independence but provided criteria for challenging the exclusions of the new republic. Understanding these tensions is important to understanding the Revolution's intellectual origins and legacy.

Keywords: American Revolution; Enlightenment; natural rights; republicanism; Declaration of Independence

INTRODUCTION

The American Revolution entailed not only a military conflict between the thirteen British colonies and the mother country but also a confrontation of ideas about the source, limits, and purpose of political authority. In the period from the Seven Years' War in 1763 to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, many American revolutionaries converted from upholding the rights of subjects of the Crown to proclaiming the right to independent governments. Such a transformation did not appear automatically and unanimously but was the outcome of disputes, pamphlets, local mobilization, imperial coercion, and reinterpretation of traditional political ideas. The ideological history of the Revolution, therefore, focuses on both the intellectual traditions available in the colonies and the political circumstances in which they gained prominence.

Although the Enlightenment plays a significant role in this narrative, it must not be exaggerated to a universally accepted ideology. Thus, the writers of the eighteenth century questioned the established authorities, utilized rational arguments, and discussed natural rights, consent, toleration, and other matters. Locke's description of the political society, particularly his assertion of the government's dependence on the

protected rights, offered a convenient formula for criticizing the misrule (Locke, 1988).[1] However, the colonial revolutionaries employed numerous other sources, including England's constitutional history, radical Whig or Commonwealth ideas, the republic's civic virtue, and the Protestant ethic. These intellectual traditions were interconnected, creating the foundation for interpreting each particular act of oppression as an attempt to restrict liberties (Bailyn, 1992; Wood, 1992).[2]

The immediate crisis of the empire provided the revolutionary ideas with a practical context. The French and Indian War concluded successfully for Britain, but it left the mother country with numerous colonies to control.[3] The Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend duties of 1767, and the coercive measures taken in response to the Boston Tea Party all provoked disputes about taxation, the army, and government's legitimacy.[4] The initial colonial resistance to these acts took the form of concessions rather than declarations of independence. Nevertheless, as the debates raged on, addressing such issues as representation, martial law, and the standing army, many Americans realized that the existing principles of the empire were incompatible with their liberties. The change in colonial attitudes was ideological, as a protest against particular actions transformed into a general belief in the right to revolt.

This paper explores how the discussed ideas contributed to the revolutionary change and asks a follow-up question about the sources of this ideology. In particular, it seeks to identify which intellectual traditions influenced the American colonists and how these ideas were modified by the political events. Finally, the paper will highlight the contradictions in revolutionary ideology and demonstrate its evolution. Thus, the synthesis created by the revolutionaries manifested itself in natural-rights theory, which explained the government as a product of consent and the right to rebel against the tyranny. The natural rights, however, were complemented by radical Whiggism with its anti-corruption rhetoric, the republican ideas of civic virtue, and the popularity of the printed word. The Declaration of Independence represented a combination of these traditions, forming a succinct statement of the colonial aims.

The originality of this paper lies in its attempts to avoid over-simplification while analysing the origins of the revolutionary ideas. On the one hand, it does not attribute the American Revolution to human nature or a particular ideology. Although the abstract principles influenced the colonists' attitudes towards the government, their actions were the result of concrete events identified by these ideas. On the other hand, the paper does not interpret the revolutionary doctrines as a transparent expression of the new regime's principles. Thus, while the Declaration proclaimed the equality of all men, women, Indians, and negroes, these groups were not granted corresponding rights. This analysis highlights the importance of the revolutionary ideals in subsequent reforms while demonstrating their limitations.

This paper analyses the qualitative historical materials which explore the eighteenth-century political theory. The paper will review the critical writings of that era in their historical context and evaluate how their meaning was interpreted by subsequent historians. Thus, the paper will proceed from the analysis of intellectual traditions to a discussion of the imperial crisis, public persuasion, the Declaration of Independence, and the Revolution's limitations. It will not claim to present any new archival research or quantitative data but will conclude with a synthetic interpretation of how the ideological traditions interacted under the pressure of political events.

[1] Locke, J. (1988). *Two treatises of government* (P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1689) [Ref. 4], *Second Treatise*, ch. IX ("Of the Ends of Political Society and Government"), §§ 123–131, where Locke grounds government in the preservation of "Lives, Liberties and Estates."

[2] Bailyn, B. (1992). *The ideological origins of the American Revolution* (Enlarged ed.). Harvard University Press [Ref. 1]; Wood, G. S. (1992). *The radicalism of the American Revolution*. Alfred A. Knopf [Ref. 9]. Bailyn stresses the radical Whig (Commonwealth) tradition, whereas Wood emphasises republicanism; both are discussed in the Historiographical Discussion below.

[3] The Treaty of Paris (10 February 1763) ended the Seven Years' War, known in North America as the French and Indian War; Britain gained Canada and the territory east of the Mississippi River and emerged with a heavy war debt.

[4] Stamp Act, 5 Geo. III, c. 12 (1765); Revenue (Townshend) Acts, 7 Geo. III, cc. 41, 46 (1767); the Coercive ("Intolerable") Acts of 1774 followed the destruction of tea at Boston in December 1773.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This study aims to (1) determine the main intellectual traditions that supplied colonial resistance; (2) establish how post-1763 imperial conflicts influenced colonial political thought; (3) examine the role of pamphlets, public debates, and the Declaration of Independence in promoting secession; and (4) analyse the ideological conflicts between revolutionary principles and the republic's social order.

The paper's research question: How did the Enlightenment and related traditions contribute to transforming colonial dissent into a claim to revolution? Among sub questions are: How did Locke's natural-rights philosophy combine with English constitutionalism? What were the impacts of radical Whig- and republican ideas on post-1763 colonial politics? In what way was Paine's Common-Sense revolutionary? Finally, was there a universal message in the language of the revolution?

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive approach to history. We are interpreting this study as an examination of political ideas that influenced revolutionary writing practices. Our reading of Locke's Two Treatises of Government is informed by questions about consent and resistance; Paine's Common Sense is seen as an appeal to popular opinion for pragmatic and moral reasons; and the Declaration of Independence is understood as a document that was crafted for a domestic and international audience. Each text is evaluated with consideration of relevant scholarly assessments of the political culture of the American Revolution, including Bailyn's reading of the pamphlet literature, Wood's discussion of republicanism, and Maier's analysis of the drafting and reception of the Declaration of Independence.[5]

The present study is limited to an investigation of British North America between 1763 and 1776, with consideration of texts and writings produced prior to the revolution and its immediate aftermath. The current project is necessarily constrained in scope, as the surviving written record consists predominantly of the writings of educated men. Additionally, our analysis draws a distinction between the ideals advanced by revolutionary politicians and the conditions experienced by the ordinary people who were the objects of their political decisions.

INTELLECTUAL INHERITANCE: ENLIGHTENMENT, RIGHTS, AND CONSENT

Natural rights and the social contract

Natural-rights theory was one of the ideological sources of the revolutionary changes that took place in the American colonies. According to Locke's political philosophy, individual rights are not contingent on the state, and the latter's power is manifested in the protection of these rights. Political power is subordinate to the people and can be renounced if authorities fail to perform their duty (Locke, 1988).[6] In other words, natural rights theory provided colonial Americans with philosophical ground to oppose their obedience to royal authorities as well as a certain set of logical assumptions for taking action. The Declaration of Independence later formalized these statements, proclaiming that governments "derive their just powers from the consent of the governed" and can be "changed or altered" if this consent is "in any manner a change" (Jefferson, 1776/1999).[7]

[5] Bailyn (1992) [Ref. 1]; Wood (1992) [Ref. 9]; Maier, P. (1997). *American scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*. Alfred A. Knopf [Ref. 5].

[6] Locke, J. (1988). *Two treatises of government* (P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1689) [Ref. 4], *Second Treatise*, ch. XIX ("Of the Dissolution of Government"), §§ 221–222, on the people's right to provide for their own safety when a trust is betrayed.

[7] Jefferson, T. (1999). The Declaration of Independence (original work published 1776) [Ref. 2]; authoritative transcription: U.S. National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration. The Declaration's second paragraph states that "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," and that when government becomes destructive of those ends "it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it." The authors should verify the quoted wording against the National Archives transcription.

To be clear, the text of the Declaration should not be interpreted as a mere paraphrasing of Locke's ideas. It had to secure the support of the majority of revolutionaries for the implementation of a broad agenda of fundamental change. Therefore, it is not surprising to find the phrase "the pursuit of Happiness" instead of the more conventional wording "life, liberty, and property."[8] However similar to Locke's view the Declaration may be, its publication was a distinct political act grounded in several ideological traditions and intended to promote revolutionary rhetoric.

English constitutionalism and radical Whig suspicion

When colonial Americans discussed the principles of liberty, they did not perceive themselves as subjects of a foreign country. They believed they were entitled to the same rights as all other English settlers, and, therefore, any attempt to restrict their freedoms was a violation of these rights. The events surrounding the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 served as reminders of the limitations imposed on the king and the mechanisms of their enforcement. In particular, the writings of radical Whigs reflected the colonists' fears of unconstitutional abuse of power and helped shape their understanding of liberty.[9]

According to Bailyn (1992), radical Whig or Commonwealth writings "embodied certain ideas which were to prove particularly relevant to American thought" (p. 57).[10] In particular, their authors warned against the tendency of power to expand beyond the limits counterbalanced by various checks and balances. The means of control are neutralizing the threat of tyranny by making rulers accountable for their actions. However, if a king, parliament, or another authority monopolizes patronage, military force, or civil service posts, it has the opportunity to impose its will on the people by gradually removing these checks and balances. As a result, liberty is compromised because individuals can no longer rely on the rule of law or free elections. One can see how the fear of standing armies resonated in the colonial consciousness and was transformed into a general suspicion of all manifestations of power.[11] Thus, the radical Whig views of liberty provided patriots with a rationale for resistance to all attempts to impose direct control from London.

Republicanism, civic virtue, and self-government

The third major ideological tradition informing the American understanding of liberty is republicanism. It was used extensively by colonial Americans to describe their views of society and guide their actions. Republicanism calls for a specific kind of virtue, the absence of which makes a free society vulnerable to oppression. According to the republican view, individuals should not pursue private interests at the expense of the common good, and state institutions should be designed in such a way as to prevent the emergence of tyrants, oligarchs, or their agents. Republicanism is not identical to modern liberal democracy because it presupposes active rather than passive citizenship.[12] Nevertheless, emphasizing the role of virtue and voluntary restriction of individual benefits for the sake of society, republicanism provided patriots with another ideological basis for revolution.

The colonial experience of self-government through town meetings and jury selections created the necessary awareness of liberty as a civic virtue among the colonists. Even though these institutions represented only a select group of citizens, their involvement in local decision-making processes shaped colonial perceptions of appropriate modes of governance. Consequently, the imposition of any form of control from London threatened not only the rights but also the self-governance of the people, thereby fuelling pro-independence

[8] Locke's formulation is "Lives, Liberties and Estates," which he collectively terms "Property" (*Second Treatise*, § 123) [Ref. 4]. Jefferson's substitution of "the pursuit of Happiness" is examined in Maier (1997) [Ref. 5].

[9] On the constitutional settlement after 1688, see the Bill of Rights 1689 (1 Will. & Mar. sess. 2, c. 2). On the transmission of Commonwealth and radical Whig writings to the colonies, see Bailyn (1992) [Ref. 1], ch. II.

[10] Bailyn, B. (1992). *The ideological origins of the American Revolution* (Enlarged ed.). Harvard University Press, p. 57 [Ref. 1]. (Original work published 1967).

[11] Among the writings Bailyn identifies as most influential are Trenchard and Gordon's *Cato's Letters* (1720–1723); see Bailyn (1992) [Ref. 1].

[12] See Wood (1992) [Ref. 9], which treats republicanism as a distinct set of assumptions about virtue, independence, and the public good that differed from later liberal democracy.

sentiments. In other words, the American rhetoric of liberty was based on political ideas and real social experiences upholding the colonial view of rights as privileges inherent in every free person.

Religion and moral language

Various moral values attributed to natural rights further enriched the ideological foundation of the American revolution. The beliefs deriving from the Protestant tradition of colonial America gave the rhetoric of resistance a distinctly religious tone. Sermons and pamphlets attributed the events unfolding in the colonies to the will of God and emphasized the moral duty of every Christian to stand by their principles. However, the religious rhetoric was not always explicitly scriptural, as different regions and congregations held diverging views on this matter. Nevertheless, the goal of most sermons and writings was to encourage congregants in their moral and patriotic duties so that they would remain steadfast in their endeavours to reform society. Thus, religion fortified the revolutionary resolve of the colonists who saw their quest for economic freedom as a righteous endeavour. One should note that appeals to natural rights and economic interests were not mutually exclusive, as the Declaration itself demonstrated. Natural rights were often predicated on the existence of a Creator endowed with infinite wisdom and power. As a result, rights were not seen as intrinsic to nature but rather as a divine gift, and the Declaration of Independence proclaimed the laws of nature and nature's God as the ultimate authorities over human institutions.[13]

FROM IMPERIAL REFORM TO REVOLUTION, 1763–1775

The postwar imperial crisis

The Seven Years' War concluded in 1763, and the British Empire was left with a set of pressing concerns regarding its continental colonies. Victorious but financially indebted, Britain attempted to both raise funds and maintain the status quo. Its critics, however, contended that the metropolis's right to levy direct taxes on the colonies was unsubstantiated, as the colonists did not have representation in Parliament. The Stamp Act crisis of 1765 saw pro- and anti-Parliamentary groups mobilizing throughout the colonies, demonstrating, petitioning, and mounting economic pressures.[14]

The slogan "no taxation without representation" summed up their argument succinctly – one that was not intended to prevent any and all forms of taxation, but to assert the rights of the local assemblies.[15] To the defenders of the Parliamentary authority, however, the Stamp Act was another example of the metropolis taking advantage of its perceived legitimacy to extract resources from the overseas territories with little regard for the locals' needs. Thus, the British were not wrong to advocate for their own rights in the matter, as they did not believe Parliament represented their interests either. The dispute was more about the definition of representation and who had the God-given right to decide the colonies' affairs, not just finances.

Escalation and the language of corruption

The repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766 failed to resolve the dispute, as the new ministry reaffirmed its right to tax the colonies through the Declaratory Act and proceeded to introduce a series of additional measures.[16] Townshend duties, the widespread monitoring of trade, and the imposition of martial law in Boston turned isolated incidents into a nationwide uproar. The Boston Massacre was used by the Patriots as a propaganda

[13] Jefferson, T. (1999). The Declaration of Independence (original work published 1776) [Ref. 2]; authoritative transcription: U.S. National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration. The opening paragraph invokes "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," and the second asserts that men are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."

[14] Delegates from nine colonies met at the Stamp Act Congress in New York in October 1765 and adopted a Declaration of Rights and Grievances; colonial merchants also entered non-importation agreements, and popular protests were organised by groups such as the Sons of Liberty.

[15] The colonists distinguished between Parliament's power to regulate imperial trade and its claimed power to impose internal taxes; British officials answered that colonists were "virtually" represented in Parliament. See Bailyn (1992) [Ref. 1] and Maier (1997) [Ref. 5].

[16] Declaratory Act, 6 Geo. III, c. 12 (1766), which asserted Parliament's authority to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." The Stamp Act was repealed by the same session of Parliament.

tool to depict the British as vicious and power-hungry, with both visual and verbal media[17] fuelling the fire. It is a mistake, however, to consider the events as a simple case of misinterpretation – in many ways, the Patriots' worldview was correct to perceive the British actions as a blatant power grab. Even beyond the direct acts of repression, such as the imposition of martial law, the colonial governments did not have an adequate representation in Britain, and they were unable to effectively challenge the unfair policies.

The Tea Act of 1773 and the Boston Tea Party soon led to the enactment of a series of punitive measures known as the Intolerable Acts.[18] Their passage showed the mainland colonies that the British did not consider them equal parts of the British Empire any longer – and if the locals continued to object, they would suffer individually. The First Continental Congress was a manifestation of the colonies' unified will, but it is clear that the delegates did not want to relinquish the rights they believed the British were promised to grant them.[19] Thus, the revolution was a reluctant necessity – but one that became inevitable due to the colonies' increasing frustration with the lack of representation and the direct threats to their liberties.

The movement from rights-bearing subjects to a people's movement

The evolution of the colonial sentiments was gradual – over the course of several years, and particularly in the late 1760s and early 1770s. The movement from a rights-bearing subject to a people's crusade occurred because the initial assumptions prove incorrect. In particular, although most Patriots still believed they were loyal to the British Empire, they realized the metropolitan government was ineffective, corrupt, and incapable of protecting the colonies' interests. Thus, the original goal of restoring the constitutional rights quickly transformed into a call for outright independence. This transformation was not universal, and it should not be considered inevitable – there were many Loyalists that believed the revolutionaries acted too rashly and without regard for the consequences. There were people that did not want to fight anyone at all, and those that were primarily concerned with trade and debts. The revolutionaries, however, did not want to abandon the idea of American exceptionalism – and they needed to convince everyone that independence was the only course of action that would preserve the rights the British guaranteed the colonies.

PRINT CULTURE AND THE RADICALIZATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

Pamphlets, newspapers, and political participation

The circulation of pamphlets and newspapers helped transform political philosophy into a public controversy. Print allowed arguments to spread beyond legislative chambers and elite correspondence and created a variety of settings for discussion: taverns, churches, reading groups, committees, and public meetings. Political writing frequently translated complex questions of sovereignty into claims about ordinary rights, civic duty, and the dangers of arbitrary power. The rapid reproduction of pamphlets also encouraged writers to respond to opponents and to present events as part of an unfolding crisis.

John Dickinson's Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania (1767–1768), for example, challenged parliamentary taxation while initially defending the imperial connection.[20] Such writings illustrate that opposition did not begin as a settled campaign for independence. It developed through disputes about the limits of imperial power and the constitutional status of colonial legislatures. The public sphere that emerged was energetic but unequal: literacy, access to print, property, gender, race, and social position determined whose voices carried authority. Nevertheless, political debate became a means of building intercolonial solidarity.

[17] The Boston Massacre occurred on 5 March 1770, when British soldiers, stationed in Boston since October 1768, fired on a crowd. Paul Revere's engraving of the incident was widely circulated.
[18] The Coercive Acts of 1774, including the Boston Port Act, closed the port of Boston until the destroyed tea was paid for and curtailed Massachusetts's charter government.
[19] The First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia from 5 September to 26 October 1774, adopted a Declaration and Resolves, and organised a boycott through the Continental Association.
[20] Dickinson, J. (1768). *Letters from a farmer in Pennsylvania, to the inhabitants of the British colonies*. Originally published serially in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, December 1767 – February 1768.

Thomas Paine and the Case Against Monarchy

Thomas Paine's Common Sense , published in January 1776, was a pivotal work that advanced the popular cause of independence. Common Sense excelled at taking up the cause of republicanism, arguing that hereditary monarchy was irrational and unjust, that a distant island had no right to govern a continent, and that reconciliation would merely lead to another war (Paine, 1776/2003).[21] It was a polemical piece that made extensive use of appeals to common sense and pragmatic arguments overtaxed with the ideas of self-interest and self-government for all.

For all that Paine wrote, his contribution was not so much new ideas but rather their effective packaging. He improved the public discourse about independence, making it more accessible, focused, and appealing. He made the case for independence sound like self-evident truth to anyone who cared to listen. Paine's purpose was to liberate the American colonies from the flawed institution of monarchy. His work went further in scope and impact than most contemporaries' would have managed because his publication built upon a wide range of ideas. The case for republicanism made in Common Sense was an extension of previous arguments, which claimed that British subjects had a right to resist tyranny (Paine, 1776/2003). However, Paine went beyond appealing to the self-interest of colonies by arguing that hereditary monarchy itself was the source of tyranny. In short, not only was reconciliation with Britain not in the best interest of the colonies, but monarchy itself was unjust.

Although Paine's publication was an important work, it would be misleading to overstate his role in advancing the ideas of republicanism and independence. The war had already begun, and in April 1775, the Continental Congress issued the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms.[22] Nevertheless, Common Sense provided a much-needed public relations and ideological boost to the independence movement by appealing to the self-interest of the colonists and reinforcing their natural rights under republicanism.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE: PRINCIPLES AND POLITICAL GOALS

A public justification for separation

Adopted by the Continental Congress on 4 July 1776, the Declaration of Independence served a dual purpose: it announced the separation of the American colonies from Britain and justified it. The Declaration accomplished this goal by appealing to natural law and the self-evident rights of mankind. It was composed in such a way as to suggest that these rights were universal, beyond dispute, and that their violation necessitated a revolution to restore them. The Declaration was primarily concerned with the theoretical justification for independence, followed by the specific colonial complaints about British rule. It worked through a logical progression: legitimate government is based upon the consent of the governed and the protection of natural rights; the British government has repeatedly violated natural rights; therefore, the colonies have the right to form their own government and are justified in taking whatever action is necessary to do so (Jefferson, 1776/1999; Maier, 1997).[23]

The goal of the Declaration was to announce and justify American independence. Its opening statements identified the new nation as one of principles and suggested that America's separation from Britain was inevitable. It created a new foundation for society that was based on natural rights and the will of the people rather than the divine right of kings. These ideas were not new; natural rights were commonly accepted, as was the notion that the government gained legitimacy from the consent of the governed. What was new was the idea that the government was subject to overthrow whenever it failed to protect or respect these rights.

[21] Paine, T. (2003). *Common sense*. Penguin Classics [Ref. 7]. (Original work published 1776). The pamphlet appeared anonymously in Philadelphia on 10 January 1776.

[22] The Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms on 6 July 1775, after fighting began at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. See The National Archives (n.d.) [Ref. 8].

[23] Jefferson, T. (1999). The Declaration of Independence (original work published 1776) [Ref. 2]; authoritative transcription: U.S. National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration; Maier (1997) [Ref. 5]. Congress voted for independence on 2 July 1776 and approved the final text of the Declaration on 4 July 1776 (The National Archives, n.d. [Ref. 8]).

Nevertheless, the authors of the Declaration of Independence also recognized the need to make concessions to popular opinion in the colonies and beyond. Thus, although the text proclaimed universal natural rights, it did not explicitly condemn slavery, which was an accepted institution throughout the colonies.[24] The Declaration stated that the king of Britain had encouraged Indigenous uprisings and American insurrections, which reflected negatively on him but did not detract from the overall argument.[25] The natural rights language of the Declaration served as a diplomatic tool that balanced the theoretical goals of the document with the political necessities of the situation. The Declaration of Independence was a statement of principles and an effective political document that served to unify the colonies in their purpose.

Authorship, collective agreement, and intellectual history

Although typically associated with Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration was the work of many people. It was a product of the Continental Congress, whose members debated and revised it before adopting it. Furthermore, many of the ideas contained within it had existed prior to its drafting. The most similar document was the Virginia Declaration of Rights, which listed the rights of citizens and prohibited acts that violated them (Library of Congress, n.d.).[26] Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to attribute the ideas of the Declaration to a single author or even to the entire Congress. The context in which the document was written suggests that it did not reflect the views of any one man or group in particular.

The importance of the Declaration of Independence also cannot be overstated. It was a bold statement of principles and one that could have been easily misconstrued. The natural rights it proclaimed were universal but extremely vague. They served to legitimize the actions of the Patriots while also providing a diplomatic justification for revolution. In short, it was a document rich in meaning that could be used to justify different actions by different people. According to Maier (1997), the Declaration was a living document whose meaning was decided by various groups when they used it.[27]

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LIBERTY: SLAVERY, GENDER, AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

For all its lofty ideals, the Declaration of Independence did little to improve the status of women, Indigenous peoples, or slaves. The new republic was conceived as a land of liberty and natural rights, but the rights were universal in name only. The institution of slavery was still firmly entrenched in colonial America and remained so for nearly a century after the Declaration was signed. Although the natural rights of all men were conceded, they did not extend to women or slaves. Slavery could scarcely be reconciled with the new republic's ideals, but it persisted well into the nineteenth century.[28] Similar to women and Indigenous people, slaves were people who had been treated as second-class residents in their own country.

Nevertheless, the ideology of the American Revolution helped to undermine established beliefs about slavery. If the natural rights of all people were conceded, there was no logical basis for slavery to still exist. Slaves and free blacks used the rhetoric of the American Revolution to demand their rights.[29] The ideas expressed in the Declaration of Independence did not end slavery but planted the conceptual seeds for its eventual demise. They exposed the hypocrisy of colonial society and demonstrated how slavery was incompatible with natural rights. If all people were created equal, then there was no logical basis for treating some as superior to others. One

[24] Jefferson's draft contained a passage denouncing the slave trade, which Congress deleted before adoption. See Maier (1997) [Ref. 5].
[25] The Declaration charges the king with having "excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages" [Ref. 2].
[26] Library of Congress. (n.d.). *The Declaration's promise: A revolutionary idea—Revolutionary mind* [Ref. 3]. The Virginia Declaration of Rights, principally drafted by George Mason, was adopted by the Virginia Convention on 12 June 1776.
[27] Maier (1997) [Ref. 5], tracing how later generations invoked the Declaration for their own purposes.
[28] Morgan, E. S. (1975). *American slavery, American freedom: The ordeal of colonial Virginia*. W. W. Norton & Company [Ref. 6], on the coexistence of slavery and liberty in Revolutionary-era Virginia. Slavery was abolished nationally by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865.
[29] For example, enslaved petitioners in Massachusetts invoked natural rights in petitions to the colonial and state legislatures in the 1770s.

hundred years later, these ideas were used to abolish slavery, although it took until the end of the Civil War for this to happen. The Revolution created a conceptual framework that allowed the abolitionist movement to flourish and for its arguments to be understood and at least partially accepted.

Women's participation in the revolutionary war effort was significant, but they were largely excluded from the new republic as defined by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. They did not have the right to vote or to hold public office. Their position in society remained much the same as it had been before the Revolution, if not worse. Nevertheless, women played a critical role in ensuring the success of the revolutionary cause. They contributed to the war effort in numerous ways, such as by boycotting British goods, raising and feeding soldiers, sewing uniforms, and spreading revolutionary literature. They used the rhetoric of liberty and equality to demand their own rights, which they were largely denied. These views were not widely accepted at the time, but they laid the foundation for future women's rights movements. Abigail Adams's letter to her husband John is just one famous example of a woman who understood the importance of women's voices in the new republic (Maier, 1997).[30] Her words were not heeded, but a century later women were given the right to vote.[31]

Indigenous people were not considered citizens of the new republic and, for all intents and purposes, were treated as subjects of the new empire. They were conquered enemies who had to be subdued by any means necessary. Some Native Americans fought on the side of the colonists, but they were few in number, and their support was not decisive in winning the war. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence did little to convince Indigenous people that they were being treated as equals by the new republic. The Revolution disrupted their lives, threatening their independence and way of life. It is therefore not surprising that they were among the biggest losers of the Revolutionary War.

Ideas of liberty and natural rights were used to justify the establishment of the new republic. These same ideas could have been used to argue for a more inclusive republic that did not discriminate against women, Indigenous people, or slaves. In fact, the very existence of such groups demonstrated the inability of the new government to live up to its own ideals. They were inconvenient truths that cast a shadow over the entire enterprise. Nevertheless, the Revolution represented a change from the old order, however hypocritical it may have been.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DISCUSSION

Historians have attempted to determine the forces that led to the American Revolution for a very long time. Bailyn's thesis states that the radical ideas of the Commonwealth men played a crucial role in the start of the revolution. Their belief was that society was decaying and that freedom could only be achieved through unrelenting struggle was interpreted by the colonists as an expression of Britain's designs to gain control over the colonies (Bailyn, 1992).[32] The author emphasizes the importance of the radical pamphlets that were written and distributed before the revolution started as they contain the best formulation of the ideas that were acted upon by the revolutionaries. In short, the author states that the colonial ideology equated with the concept of unceasing struggle.

Wood's thesis revolves around republicanism and its central role in fuelling the American Revolution. He states that republicanism was a dynamic idea that was particularly attractive to the revolutionaries because it signified the shift from monarchies to states with power distributed among the people (Wood, 1992).[33] It was a goal that seemed acceptable to almost everyone, although the revolutionaries were not united in other aspects of the republic. The author notes that republicanism was not applied consistently and that most republicans did not believe in equality for women, Native Americans, and slaves. The revolutionaries drew much of their

[30] Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776 ("Remember the Ladies"), Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society; discussed in Maier (1997) [Ref. 5].
[31] The Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, prohibited denial of the vote on account of sex.
[32] Bailyn (1992) [Ref. 1].
[33] Wood (1992) [Ref. 9].

strength from republicanism as it was a powerful motivating factor and gave them a sense of direction. It can be asserted that republicanism was the most potent single ideology that propelled the revolution.

Maier's thesis is concerned with the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the author evaluates the political intentions of the document. She argues that the Declaration of Independence was a practical statement that did not rely on the ideas of one man or one party as it represented a compromise by all sides.[34] It was a pragmatic act that aimed to promote the goals of independence while at the same time providing justification for it in the eyes of the public. In other words, the Declaration of Independence was a tool that was used to gain support for the revolution by winning over the hearts and minds of the people.

All three theses are excellent examples of ideological interpretations of the American Revolution. Each thesis describes in detail the specific set of ideas that influenced the revolutionaries and resulted in the start of the revolution. The authors discuss the origins of these ideas, the people that supported them, the impact that they had on society, and the role that they played in the revolution. It is evident that an ideological interpretation is particularly effective in this context because it helps to identify the forces that influenced the revolutionaries. It also aids in understanding the goals of the revolution and the reasons why it occurred. In essence, an ideological interpretation provides a solid foundation for determining the strengths of the revolution.

However, it can be argued that an ideological interpretation is not entirely sufficient when examining the American Revolution because it fails to consider several material circumstances that also contributed to the start of the revolution.[35] The ideas that were espoused by the revolutionaries would have remained mere words if they were not interpreted and popularized by certain groups of people. In other words, there were specific classes that played a crucial role in both creating and spreading radical ideas throughout society. The role of these classes can be described as instrumental in fuelling the revolution. Additionally, it is important to consider the political and social institutions that were involved in the process. Clearly, these factors cannot be ignored when examining the origins of the revolution. This is why an ideological interpretation of the American Revolution is useful but not entirely accurate.

DISCUSSION: FROM IDEAS TO INSURRECTION

The transition from ideas to action was not automatic. There was no single document, philosopher, or speech that ignited the revolutionaries' imaginations and spurred them to action. It was a gradual process that took place over several years. It began when the ideas of liberty and natural rights were introduced and were disseminated throughout the colonies. It continued as these ideas were incorporated into political thought and were used to justify colonial resistance to British attempts to impose its will on the colonies. The ideas were given form and substance in the Declaration of Independence, which signalled the beginning of the end for the thirteen colonies' status as British possessions.

There are three primary reasons why the abstract ideas of natural rights and republicanism took hold among the thirteen colonies and led to an organized movement to declare independence from Britain. First, these ideas were synthesized into a new system of thought, which served to justify society as it existed at the time while also providing a philosophical foundation for change. Natural rights, when applied to all, implied that society should be based on these rights. The principles of republicanism suggested that the best way to achieve this was through a republic that was based on popular sovereignty. The ideas of republicanism and natural rights were not new, but their synthesis and application to society at large was revolutionary.

Second, the new ideas received wide distribution and were popularized through pamphlets, newspapers, and other means of communication. This process took place thanks to the colonies' relatively free press, as well as the many writers and publishers who were willing to promote these ideas. The popularity of republicanism was

[34] Maier (1997) [Ref. 5].

[35] Economic and class-based interpretations associated with the Progressive historians include Becker, C. L. (1909). *The history of political parties in the province of New York, 1760–1776*. University of Wisconsin; and Beard, C. A. (1913). *An economic interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. Macmillan.

due in part to its appeal to the self-interest of the revolutionaries. They realized that an independent republic was in their best interest, and they promoted it accordingly.

Third, the ideas of republicanism and natural rights took hold because they were applied in practice. The early revolutionary measures served to demonstrate that these ideas had real-world applications. They also showed that Britain was willing to use repression and violence to resist any attempts to curtail its authority over the colonies. Thus, the revolutionaries found themselves in an unprecedented position: they were fighting not only for their rights as British subjects but for their very survival as a society.

Perhaps the most important lesson that comes from studying the origins of the American Revolution is that the ideas that seemed so obvious to the revolutionaries were not obvious to everyone. Natural rights and republicanism might have been self-evident to most colonists, but they were not universally accepted. Even the most obvious truths had to be discovered, debated, and defended. The revolutionary rhetoric did not automatically lead to action; it had to be reinforced with concrete examples, which is why the early revolutionary measures were so important. In short, the ideas of republicanism and natural rights had to gain credibility among the general populace before they could serve as the guiding principles of a new nation.

CONCLUSION

The origins of the American Revolution can be found in the ideas of the Enlightenment, particularly natural rights philosophy, English republicanism, radical Whiggism, and moral theology. These ideas provided an ideological foundation upon which a political movement could be constructed. Popular writers and thinkers, including Thomas Paine, played an important role in shaping colonial thinking about natural rights and independence from Britain. They did so by writing pamphlets and other works that promoted republicanism and criticized British attempts to impose its will on the colonies. The events of the seven years' war and subsequent British legislation ensured that these ideas resonated with the American colonists and that they were applied to current events. The combination of these factors explains why the American Revolution was able to happen when it did.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Ethical approval was not required because this study uses publicly available historical documents and published scholarship and does not involve human participants, animals, or private personal data.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no known conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

No original dataset was generated for this study. The analysis is based on publicly accessible primary documents and published scholarship identified in the reference list.

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