

# Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions *Once More* in Need of Revising

T. H. Breen

---

Inspiration for this essay came from an influential article that Edmund S. Morgan published more than forty years ago. "The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising" might best be classified as a "think piece," reflections on the current state of eighteenth-century Anglo-American historiography.<sup>1</sup> Morgan's observations—like those advanced here—were meant to have a speculative quality, the goal being to provoke constructive debate about major interpretive issues. In that spirit he readdressed familiar questions and challenged dominant orthodoxies, suggesting how people writing about colonial society on the eve of national independence might push the field in productive new directions.

In his review of the current literature, Morgan posited, among other things, that colonial American scholars had lost touch with a rapidly changing English historiography. Their basic assumptions about the character of the British Empire in the mid-eighteenth century relied on scholarship that had been completed more than a generation earlier. But during the postwar years bold new studies had appeared. According to Morgan, Sir Lewis Namier, then England's most distinguished political historian, had almost single-handedly transformed the interpretive landscape. Namier's iconoclastic writings depicted an empire governed by narrow-minded, complacent country gentlemen who defined politics almost solely as a scramble for patronage.<sup>2</sup> Morgan noted that if Namier and his followers had correctly described the mentality of the English ruling class, then historians of late colonial America might as well take up more rewarding research topics on this side of the Atlantic

T. H. Breen is William Smith Mason Professor of American History at Northwestern University. An earlier version of this essay was delivered at the Krefeld Historical Symposia in Krefeld, Germany (April 1996). The author wishes to thank three participants in that conference for their thoughtful comments: Hartmut Lehmann, Hermann Wellenreuther, and James Hutson. The author also received valuable suggestions for revision from James Oakes, Robert Wiebe, Jacob Lassner, J. G. A. Pocock, Lawrence Stone, Jack P. Greene, Jim Smyth, and John Murrin.

<sup>1</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, "The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 14 (Jan. 1957), 3–15.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis B. Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1961); Lewis B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1957); Lewis B. Namier, *Monarchy and the Party System* (Oxford, 1952).

Ocean. Morgan counseled them to concentrate on the experiences of ordinary Americans, on local politics and colonial institutions, on matters closer to home, instead of reconstructing a political world of scheming courtiers and bureaucrats. Although he praised the work of Charles McLean Andrews and the members of the "imperial" school, Morgan effectively shifted the focus of research from the metropolitan center to the colonial periphery, from a broad history of the British Empire to the social history of the American provinces.<sup>3</sup>

Morgan's revisions now stand in need of revising. What happened, of course, was that over the last four decades historians of eighteenth-century England reworked the entire field, and the men and women who followed in Namier's wake remapped British politics and culture. It is their work, an impressive list of publications associated with people such as Linda Colley and John Brewer, that invites colonial historians to rethink commonplace assumptions about the imperial connection and its impact on early American society.<sup>4</sup> If Namier's writings soured American historians on the society that produced George III and Lord Bute, the newer literature has had just the opposite effect. It draws attention back to Great Britain, to a highly commercial, modernizing North Atlantic world, and to a shifting relation between an expansive metropolitan state and a loosely integrated group of American colonies. More to the point, this scholarship invites juxtaposition of two separate topics, each of which alone has generated a rich and impressive literature, but that when brought together hold out the promise of a greatly revised interpretation of the coming of the American Revolution. First, the recent work fundamentally recasts how we think about the origins and development of American nationalism. And second, it provides new insights into the character of popular political ideology on the eve of independence, suggesting why the natural rights liberalism associated with John Locke had broader emotional appeal during this period than did classical republicanism or civic humanism.

Reappraisal of the construction of an American identity within the British Empire depends heavily on the work of recent English historians. As noted earlier, those are the men and women who revised much of Namier's scholarship, and although few of them have expressed keen interest in the colonies, their publications depict

<sup>3</sup> One should note as well that Andrews was fully aware of the need to integrate social and cultural history into the larger narratives of British imperial development; see Charles McLean Andrews, "On the Writing of Colonial History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 1 (Jan. 1944), 27-48. For a valuable discussion of Andrews's contribution to the field, see Richard R. Johnson, "Charles McLean Andrews and the Invention of American Colonial History," *ibid.*, 43 (Oct. 1986), 519-41.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven, 1992); Linda Colley, "Radical Patriotism in Eighteenth-Century England," in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Ralph Samuel (3 vols., London, 1989), I, 169-87; Linda Colley, "Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness," *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 113, 1986), 97-117; Linda Colley, "The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty, and the British Nation, 1760-1820," *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 102, 1984), 94-129. John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York, 1989); John Brewer, "The Eighteenth-Century British State: Contexts and Issues," in *An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1689-1815*, ed. Lawrence Stone (London, 1994), 52-71.

a metropolitan culture and society that is quite unlike the traditional early modern world that American historians have long taken for granted. Until very recently, in fact, it was still possible for someone writing about the American Revolution simply to ignore the English side of the story. After all, as one respected historian announced with assurance, eighteenth-century England remained a “traditional, conventional, and conservative” society in which “a static order stood in the way of change.”<sup>5</sup>

Generalizations of this sort are no longer tenable. An early hint of the changing interpretive climate appeared in a 1984 review of studies of eighteenth-century England in which Lawrence Stone called attention to an “astonishing surge of historical research.”<sup>6</sup> Georgian Britain had suddenly become a hot topic. Even scholars who took the lead in toppling the older historiography seemed amazed by the sheer quantity of exciting new work. In his *A Polite and Commercial People* (1989), for example, Paul Langford announced that he and others in the field had discovered a “transformation, social, cultural, religious, economic, which occurred between the 1720s and the 1780s [that] was nothing, if not spectacular.”<sup>7</sup> And a few years later in 1995, Kathleen Wilson declared, “Recent studies of popular politics, class relations, crime and the law have done nothing less than revolutionize the ways in which we view and interpret the expression and exercise of power in eighteenth-century English society.”<sup>8</sup>

Some revisionist claims have stood up better than others. However “spectacular” or “revolutionary” the new interpretations may have been, we still regard the eighteenth century as the period in which Parliament achieved undisputed constitutional sovereignty—the Glorious Revolution really did make a difference—and post-Namierite historians certainly do not seriously contest the ability of a landed oligarchy to maintain political dominance. Nevertheless, the interpretive shift is substantial. Whereas we once concentrated on elite political life, on the activities of unstable factions in court and Parliament, we now read of the development and maturation of an impressive fiscal-military state. No doubt, a good many fox-hunting country gentlemen will survive. The monarch will surely remain a key political figure. But those characters must now share the historical stage with an articulate and powerful middle class. Instead of tracing the genealogies of the members of parliament, English historians examine topics such as the establishment of

<sup>5</sup> Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (New York, 1982), 14, 21. Parochial claims continue to appear in the general literature in the face of frequent and persuasive calls for a larger, more comparative North Atlantic perspective. Some of the more cogent appeals are Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991); J. G. A. Pocock, “British History: A Plea for a New Subject,” *Journal of Modern History*, 47 (1975), 601–21; Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, “Reconstructing British-American Colonial History: An Introduction,” in *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Baltimore, 1984), 1–17; and Jack P. Greene, “An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution,” in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill, 1973), 32–80.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Stone, “The New Eighteenth Century,” *New York Review of Books*, March 29, 1984, pp. 42–48.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), 679.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 4.

a vibrant consumer economy, the creation of a complex state bureaucracy, the rise of manufacturing towns and commercial ports, and the development of genuine ideological differences within the political community. Dynamism, growth, and modernity suddenly seem apposite terms to describe this not-so-traditional England of the late eighteenth century.

We should remember that colonial Americans viewed those striking developments from afar. Distance alone deprived them of detailed information about many aspects of the English situation. Most were probably unaware, for example, of the stubborn survival of the Tories in some county communities until well into the Georgian era. Nor, for that matter, did ordinary Americans know much about how the remarkable growth of provincial towns was changing the landscape of Great Britain. The colonists experienced the transformation of mid-eighteenth-century England in gross outline, but for all of that, the impact of those changes on their sense of identity within the empire was real and substantial. Four new elements in particular influenced how the colonists imagined themselves within the Anglo-American world: the developing military strength of Great Britain, the spread of a consumer-oriented economy, the creation of a self-conscious middle-class culture, and, most significant for our purposes, the stirrings of a heightened sense of British national identity.<sup>9</sup>

Recent English historiography reminds us of something that probably should have been obvious all along: the British not only waged almost constant warfare against France and Spain throughout the world but also usually emerged victorious. In other words, they were remarkably good at it.<sup>10</sup> According to Langford, "In the mid-eighteenth century Britain became the supreme example in the western world of a State organized for effective war-making."<sup>11</sup> Spectacular military success owed little ultimately to the brilliance and courage of the fighting men. Rather, unlike their continental adversaries, the British had learned how to pay for large-scale war without bankrupting its citizens and, thereby, without sparking the kind of internal unrest that frequently destabilized other ancien régime monarchies. Although the process of strengthening and integrating local tax gathering had begun to accelerate during the seventeenth century—changes that one associates with the creation of modern states—it was not until Great Britain experienced a major financial revolution in the early decades of the eighteenth century that the nation found itself able effectively to defend and govern a worldwide empire. As Peter Dickson and John Brewer demonstrate, British rulers discovered the secret of fighting on credit; along with innovative banking and financial institutions, legions of new bureaucrats (tax collectors and inspectors) appeared throughout the country, persons who served as constant reminders of what Joanna Innes has termed "an impressively powerful central state apparatus."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party, 1714–1760* (Cambridge, Eng., 1982); P. J. Cornfield, *The Impact of English Towns* (Oxford, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Patrick K. O'Brien, *Power with Profit: The State and the Economy, 1688–1815* (London, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Langford, *Polite and Commercial People*, 692.

<sup>12</sup> Joanna Innes, "Review Article: Jonathan Clark, Social History, and England's 'Ancien Régime,'" *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 115, May 1987), 196. On war and finance, see Peter G. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution*

A second element powerfully shaping the eighteenth-century colonial world was the rapid development of a new consumer marketplace. A flood of exports linked ordinary people living on the periphery of empire to an exciting metropolitan society. Few people understood the cultural, and therefore the political, impact of the burgeoning consumer trade better than did Benjamin Franklin. In his *The Interest of Great Britain Considered* (1760), he observed that the vast quantities of British imports had the capacity to influence how colonists imagined themselves within a larger empire. Sounding much like a twentieth-century anthropologist, Franklin announced that Americans “must ‘know,’ must ‘think,’ and must ‘care,’ about the country they chiefly trade with.”<sup>13</sup>

Economic historians are quick to remind us that England had not yet entered an industrial revolution. Still, even without the benefit of major technological breakthroughs, small manufacturing centers managed to turn out consumer items in unprecedented quantities, and those alluring goods—the simple sundries of daily life—flowed from specialized production sites to scattered stores along newly constructed canals and turnpikes. Prosperous English men and women, much like their American counterparts, bought what they had seen advertised in an expanding commercial press. And, significantly, people of more modest means also participated in that vibrant marketplace.

A slight increase in real wages certainly helps to explain a general improvement in the quality of material culture, but there is more to the story. Human desire was the force that ultimately energized that economy. As Jan de Vries argues, even humble agricultural families redefined productivity; women and children, who had formerly made items consumed within the household, now more commonly worked in the fields, producing income that expanded the family’s purchasing power. “A series of household-level decisions,” writes de Vries, “altered both the supply of marketed goods and labour and the demand for market-bought products. This complex of changes in household behaviour constitutes an ‘industrious revolution,’ driven by Smithian, or commercial, incentives, that preceded and prepared the way for the Industrial Revolution.”<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps describing that sudden economic transformation as a “consumer revolution” overstates the case. Nevertheless, Neil McKendrick argues persuasively that “more men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions. Objects which for centuries had been the privileged possessions of the rich came, within the space of a few generations, to be

---

*in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688–1716* (London, 1968); Brewer, *Sinews of Power*; Stone, ed., *Imperial State at War*; Nancy F. Koehn, *The Power of Commerce: Economy and Governance in the First British Empire* (Ithaca, 1994); M. J. Braddick, *Parliamentary Taxation in 17th-Century England: Local Administration and Response* (Woodbridge, Eng., 1994); and Mark Greengrass, ed., *Conquest and Coalescence: The Shaping of the State in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Leonard W. Labaree and William Willcox, eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (31 vols., New Haven, 1959– ), IX, 85; T. H. Breen, “Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 50 (July 1993), 471–501.

<sup>14</sup> Jan de Vries, “Purchasing Power and the World of Goods,” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London, 1993), 107.

within the reach of a larger part of society than ever before.”<sup>15</sup> Josiah Tucker, dean of Gloucester during the late eighteenth century, would have readily accepted McKendrick’s conclusions about the changing character of English material culture. People of all classes, declared Tucker in 1757, “have better Conveniences in their Houses, and affect to have more in Quantity of clean, neat Furniture, and a greater Variety (such as Carpets, Screens, Window Curtains, Chamber Bells, polished Brass Locks, Fenders, &c., &c.) (Things hardly known Abroad among Persons of such a Rank) than are to be found in any other Country in Europe, *Holland* excepted.” In fact, Tucker believed “that almost the whole Body of the People of *Great Britain* may be considered either as the Customers to, or the Manufacturers for each other: A very happy Circumstance this.”<sup>16</sup> What Tucker reported about the buying habits of the English, others said about colonial Americans. They too had tasted luxury and increasingly called it happiness.<sup>17</sup> On the eve of independence one American clergyman even went so far as to insist that civil rulers had an obligation to defend subjects “in the quiet and peaceable enjoyment of their persons and properties, i.e. their persons and worldly goods and estates, &c. together with all their just advantages and opportunities of *getting more worldly goods and estates, &c.* by labour, industry, trade, manufactures, &c.”<sup>18</sup>

A third element in the rapidly changing world of the midcentury colonists would almost certainly have been the activities of a new social group in Great Britain, the so-called middle class. Whether the men and women who made up this group actually represented a self-conscious class or were merely a loose amalgam of economically successful people busy thrusting their way into the public sphere is not, for our purposes, of critical significance. Another interpretive problem demands fuller consideration. Since the middle class allegedly has been on the rise throughout recorded history—much like the growth of religious toleration or representative government—it may seem misguided to situate its arrival so confidently in mid-eighteenth-century England. But, on closer reflection, the issue turns out not to be all that perplexing. While no one denies the existence of other middle classes in the development of other nations, British historians make a strong and well-documented case for the invention of a distinct middle class in Georgian England.

<sup>15</sup> Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982), 1. For a sampling of the large and growing literature on the development of a consumer economy in Great Britain and colonial America, see Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Middlesex, Eng., 1982), 201–68; Frank O’Gorman, “The Recent Historiography of the Hanoverian Regime,” *Historical Journal* (Cambridge, Eng.), 29 (Dec. 1986), 1005–20; Brewer and Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods*; T. H. Breen, “An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America,” *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (Oct. 1986), 467–99; T. H. Breen, “Narrative of Commercial Life,” 471–501; Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, 1994); and Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Josiah Tucker, “Instructions for Travellers” (1757), in *Josiah Tucker: A Selection from His Writings*, ed. Robert L. Schuyler (New York, 1931), 245–46.

<sup>17</sup> T. H. Breen, “The Meaning of Things: Consumption and Ideology in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. Brewer and Porter, 249–94; and T. H. Breen, “The Meaning of ‘Likeness’: Portrait Painting in an Eighteenth-Century Consumer Society,” *Word and Image* (London), 6 (Oct. 1990), 325–50.

<sup>18</sup> Dan Foster, *A Short Essay on Civil Government, The Substance of Six Sermons, Preached in Windsor . . .* (Hartford, 1775), 30 (emphasis added).

Educated, professional, and prosperous people with no claim to aristocracy established, for the first time, what Langford terms a “polite and commercial” society. “English society was given a basic fluidity of status,” explain Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, “by the vigour, wealth, and numerical strength of the ‘middle sort,’ mostly rural but also urban, whose emergence between 1660 and 1800 is perhaps the most important feature of the age.”<sup>19</sup> This burgeoning middle group industriously copied the manners of its betters, fashioning self in ever more colorful and elaborate ways, celebrating consumer fads, purchasing the novels now marketed in large volume, and populating the spas and resort towns; perhaps most remarkable, even as it redefined the character of English popular culture, the new middle class never seriously challenged the traditional landed oligarchy for the right to rule the nation.<sup>20</sup> It was those men and women who entertained visiting Americans, English families headed by lawyers, merchants, and doctors, who regularly proclaimed that the freest nation in the world was also the most prosperous. For the colonists, it was an exciting and convincing display.

These economic, cultural, and social transformations fed what for the midcentury American colonists would certainly have been the fourth and most striking feature of the age, the birth of a powerfully self-confident British nationalism. Again, to quibble over analytic terms would be unproductive. Perhaps the Britons of this period did not experience the advent of a full-blown nationalism, surely not the type of romantic nationalism that one associates with nineteenth-century European states. Whatever label one wants to employ, it now seems apparent that some time during the 1740s English men and women of all social classes began to express a sentiment that might be described variously as a dramatic surge of national consciousness, a rise of aggressive patriotism, or a greatly heightened articulation of national identity. To be sure, during the period of the Armada English people took intense pride in the defeat of the hated Spanish, and distinguished Elizabethan writers celebrated their Englishness. But the Georgian experience was quite different. Even if the eighteenth-century development represents an intensification of an imaginative project with ancient roots, it nevertheless involved a much broader percentage of the population. It was now sustained by a new commercial press that brought stories about the empire to urban coffeehouses and country taverns.<sup>21</sup>

Why a sudden intensification of “Britishness” occurred at this particular moment has not been persuasively resolved by English historians. Linda Colley, the

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, *An Open Elite? England, 1540–1880* (Oxford, 1984), 408.

<sup>20</sup> Langford, *Polite and Commercial People*, 59–121. See also Nicholas Rogers, “Review Article: Paul Langford’s ‘Age of Improvement,’” *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 130, 1991), 201–9.

<sup>21</sup> For useful discussion of the changing historical contexts in which different peoples experienced a heightened sense of national identity, see E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991). For some splendid insights into the shifting intellectual frameworks in which various European nationalisms have found popular meaning, see Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1995). Less successful in dealing with these contextual issues is the ambitious comparative study by Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 27–87. See also Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago, 1992).



Between 1761 and 1763 Francis Hayman executed four historical canvases commemorating recent British military successes throughout the world. *The Triumph of Britannia*, now known only through this Simon F. Ravenet engraving (1763), depicts sea nymphs bearing the portraits of victorious British admirals. They follow in the wake of Britannia, who is seated majestically in Neptune's chariot. Thousands of ordinary Londoners saw Hayman's midcentury celebration of British nationalism.  
*Courtesy Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.*

person who more than any other has brought the subject of eighteenth-century nationalism to our attention, noted that "it remains unclear why this resurgence of interest in matters patriotic occurred in so many different countries at the same time. The coming of war on a hitherto unprecedented scale, the growth of towns, the spread of printing and the increasing importance of that class we call the bourgeoisie must have all contributed to this widespread mood of national awakening."<sup>22</sup>

But, if the social sources of a heightened sense of national identity are in doubt, no one questions the character of the swelling patriotic movement. Ordinary people—laboring men and women as well as members of a self-confident middling group—who bellowed out the words to the newly composed "Rule Britannia" and who responded positively to the emotional appeal of "God Save the King" gave voice to the common aspirations of a militantly Protestant culture. Or, stated nega-

<sup>22</sup> Colley, *Britons*, 86.



tively, they proclaimed their utter contempt for Catholicism and their rejection of everything associated with contemporary France. It is probably true, as Gerald Newman has argued, that English aristocrats initially greeted the spread of popular nationalism with muted enthusiasm.<sup>23</sup> In time, however, even members of the traditional ruling class came to appreciate the symbolic value of John Bull in mobilizing a population in support of war and monarchy. For most English people the expression of national identity seems to have been quite genuine. Indeed, by noisy participation in patriotic rituals, the middling and working classes thrust themselves into a public sphere of national politics. As Roy Porter reminds us, "English patriotism during the Georgian century should not be passed off as nothing but hegemonic social control, the conspiratorial ideological imprint of the ruling order; rather it signified a positive and critical articulation of the political voice of the middle class."<sup>24</sup>

English historians generally argue that national sentiment served to unify the British, in other words, to provide them with a common identity capable of reducing long-standing social and economic tensions. The claim may be valid. Nevertheless, for our purposes we should recognize that this literature often reflects a narrowly English perspective on the development of nationalism. Georgian historians have paid considerably less attention to the darker face of national identity: its powerfully exclusionary tendencies and its propensity to reduce the "other," however defined, to second-rate status. "Instead of histories of Britain," complained J. G. A. Pocock, "we have, first of all, histories of England, in which Welsh, Scots, Irish, and, in the reign of George III, Americans appear as peripheral peoples when, and only when, their doings assume power to disturb the tenor of English politics."<sup>25</sup>

For persons of Celtic background, for example, the rise of "British" nationalism at midcentury drew attention to their own marginality. "The most controversial, and the most corrosive, effects of English nationalism were felt at home," concludes Paul Langford. "Popular animosity towards the remaining nations of the British Isles was deeply entrenched."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it would serve no useful purpose to attempt a measure of "most controversial" or "most corrosive," but, as P. J. Marshall remarks, British nationalism had an extremely adverse impact on men and women

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740–1830* (New York, 1987).

<sup>24</sup> Roy Porter, "Seeing the Past," *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 118, Feb. 1988), 198. Also see Dror Wahrman, "National Society, Communal Culture: An Argument about the Recent Historiography of Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Social History* (Andover, Eng.), 17 (Jan. 1992), 61–62; and Kathleen Wilson, "Admiral Vernon and Popular Politics in Mid-Hanoverian Britain," *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 121, Nov. 1988), 74–109.

<sup>25</sup> Pocock, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," 603; John Morrill, "The British Problem, c. 1534–1707," in *The British Problem, c. 1534–1707: State Formation in the Atlantic Archipelago*, ed. John Morrill and Brendan Bradshaw (London, 1996), 1–38. Although we disagree on several points, there are valuable insights into the development of "British" nationalism in Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966* (Berkeley, 1975). See also Linda Colley, "Britishness and Otherness: An Argument," *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (Oct. 1992), 309–29.

<sup>26</sup> Langford, *Polite and Commercial People*, 323. See also Miles Taylor, "John Bull and the Iconography of Public Opinion in England c. 1712–1929," *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 134, 1992), 93–128; and P. J. Marshall, "The British Empire in the Age of the American Revolution: Problems of Interpretation," in *The American Revolution: Changing Perspectives*, ed. William Fowler Jr. and Wallace Coyle (Boston, 1979), 196.

who did not happen to live “at home.” According to Marshall, “The eighteenth-century experience . . . revealed that ‘imagined communities’ of Britishness were parochial. English people could perhaps envisage a common community with the Welsh and, often with much difficulty, with the Scots, but they failed to incorporate the Irish or colonial Americans into their idea of nation.”<sup>27</sup> The Jacobite rebellion of 1745, which was intended to put the Stuarts back on the throne, only made matters worse. As Kathleen Wilson explains, “The loyalist discourses of the moment . . . exhibited the exclusive nature of definitions of ‘Englishness’ that were always at play and in tension with the broader categories of ‘Britishness,’ or, to put it another way, the irreconcilable tensions between nation and empire.”<sup>28</sup>

At midcentury, therefore, colonial Americans confronted what must have seemed a radically “new” British consciousness. It radiated outward from the metropolitan center, providing officials of a powerful, prosperous, and dynamic state with an effective vocabulary for mobilizing popular patriotism.<sup>29</sup> It was in this fluid, unstable context that colonists on the periphery attempted to construct their own imagined identity within the empire. Although the process of defining identity had begun as soon as European settlers arrived in the New World, the conversation across the Atlantic Ocean changed dramatically at midcentury. Americans found that they were not dealing with the same nation that their parents or grandparents had known. Confronted with a sudden intensification of British nationalism, the colonists’ initial impulse was to join the chorus, protesting their true “Britishness,” their unquestioned loyalty to king and constitution, and their deep antipathy to France and Catholicism. As one American pamphleteer proudly announced, “Britain seems now to have attained to a degree of wealth, power, and eminence, which half a century ago, the most sanguine of her patriots could hardly have made the object of their warmest wishes.”<sup>30</sup>

With due respect to Edmund Burke—and to the many colonial historians who have echoed the phrase—“salutary neglect” fails utterly to describe the complexity of the changing American situation. Although the number of crown officials in the colonies was always small, Britain aggressively intruded into the colonial world of the mid-eighteenth century: the metropolitan center spoke insistently through the flow of consumer goods that transformed the American marketplace, through the regulars who came to fight the French and Indians along the northern frontier, through celebrity itinerants such as George Whitefield, who brought English evangelical rhetoric to anxious American dissenters, and, for most literate colonists,

<sup>27</sup> P. J. Marshall, “A Nation Defined by Empire, 1755–1776,” in *Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History*, ed. Alexander Grant and Keith J. Springer (London, 1995), 221. See also E. P. Thompson, “The Making of a Ruling Class,” *Dissent* (Summer 1993), 377–82.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 174; John Cannon, *Samuel Johnson and the Politics of Hanoverian England* (Oxford, 1994), 236.

<sup>29</sup> P. J. Marshall, “Empire and Authority in the Later Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (London), 51 (Jan. 1987), 105–23.

<sup>30</sup> James Parker, *The Power and Grandeur of Great-Britain* (New York, 1768), 3–4.

through a commercial press that depicted the mother country in most alluring terms, indeed, as the most polite and progressive society the world had ever seen.<sup>31</sup>

This revised perspective on eighteenth-century Britain, one that focuses on the dynamic character of the metropolitan center, has major implications for how we think of the colonies within the empire. First, the new literature suggests that we should situate the American experience firmly within a broad comparative framework, within an Atlantic empire that included Scotland as well as Ireland. People living in all three regions suddenly found themselves at midcentury confronting an England different from any that they had previously known. While London piped the tune, the outlying provinces and colonies accommodated themselves as best they could to England's heightened sense of national purpose. In each area the relationship raised hard questions. Did being "British" mean that one was also "English," or that people who did not happen to live in England could confidently claim equality with the English within a larger empire? Although each region brought different resources and perceptions to the conversation, we should appreciate that Scots, Irish, and Americans were in fact engaged in a common interpretive project, and however we choose to view the coming of the American Revolution, we should pay close attention to what recent historians of Scotland and Ireland have discovered about the construction of eighteenth-century imperial identities.<sup>32</sup>

The Scots spent much of the eighteenth century trying to explain to themselves the 1707 Act of Union, a merger of two kingdoms in which the Scots not only seemed to have lost a meaningful separate identity but also to have been demoted to the status of lesser partner. Union did, in fact, promote prosperity, and the flood of commerce into North Briton challenged even the most stubbornly chauvinistic Scots to rethink the nature of their connection with England, in other words, to

<sup>31</sup> Several studies that provide a broader, more complex analysis of the eighteenth-century imperial connection are Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Politics of the British Empire and the United States, 1607–1788* (Athens, Ga., 1986); Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 175; Bailyn and Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm*; T. H. Breen, "Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* (Oxford) (no. 119, May 1988), 73–104; Harold E. Selesky, *War and Society in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, 1990); Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Michael J. Crawford, *Seasons of Grace: Colonial New England's Revival Tradition in Its British Context* (Oxford, 1991); Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itineracy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, 1994); Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); and Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737–1770* (Princeton, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> The most persuasive interpretive framework for a broadly integrative history of early modern Great Britain—in other words, an interactive history that accounts for more than the development of the English core—was advanced in Pocock, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," 601–21. Frank O'Gorman recently reminded us that "the most fundamental weakness of the Hanoverian regime . . . was neither its corruption, nor the exclusiveness of its elite nor its antiquated representative system. Rather, it was its assertion of imperial control over its Celtic sub-nations. Chauvinistic self-regard disabled the rulers of Hanoverian England from identifying the reasonable and objective grievances of Scotland and Ireland": O'Gorman, "Recent Historiography of the Hanoverian Regime," 1014. A provocative recent collection of comparative studies is Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (Princeton, 1987). On the intellectual justification of European expansion and imperialism during the early modern period, see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France c. 1500–1800* (New Haven, 1995).

re-imagine their place within an expansive empire. The intellectual burden fell largely on brilliant figures associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, and the task was made considerably more difficult by the Jacobite rebellion in 1745. Leading writers attempted to stress Scotland's importance and loyalty within a powerful British system. By proclaiming their Britishness, they thought that they might somehow preserve distinctive aspects of a mythic Scottish culture. However, as the Scottish historian Colin Kidd argues, the eighteenth-century Scots lacked the cultural resources for such a demanding task. Their own regional history seemed to offer little more than an unappealing chronicle of feudal violence; it certainly provided a doubtful foundation on which to construct a viable independent identity for a modern, progressive people. After all, whatever their complaints may have been, the Scots had come to appreciate the virtues of constitutional monarchy and the benefits of world trade. With obvious disappointment, Kidd concludes that "it is important to note not only the inability of the Scottish whig tradition to sustain a strong sense of Scottish nationhood, but also its failure to contribute to a genuinely British identity."<sup>33</sup>

However imaginatively they struggled to discover a usable past, the Scots, at least those who took it upon themselves to speak for public opinion, ended up sounding a lot more English than British. The eighteenth-century Anglicization of Scottish culture has often made that nation's modern historians a little uneasy, for as Nicholas Phillipson observes, the Scottish Enlightenment "has always seemed to be connected with the commercialization of Scottish society, its incorporation into the English state and lost national identity."<sup>34</sup> However embarrassing accommodation may have been, eighteenth-century Scots not only seized upon the new market opportunities but also played second to none as English patriots. From a strictly military perspective, of course, the Scots really had no other choice. Once the British state mobilized its full armed strength, Scottish rebels faced certain defeat.<sup>35</sup>

The Irish did not respond to the intensification of English nationalism in the same way as did the Scots. A long history of English violence in Ireland as well as unresolved religious tensions help explain the difference. By the Irish, of course, we refer in the mid-eighteenth century to the representatives of the Ascendancy, to the members of a Protestant minority that oppressed a huge Catholic population. Whatever the dangers, the Protestants at this particular moment were reasonably optimistic. After decades of relative tranquillity in the countryside, the Cath-

<sup>33</sup> Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689–c. 1830* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993), 272.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Phillipson, "Politics, Politeness, and the Anglicisation of Early Eighteenth-Century Scottish Culture," in *Scotland and England, 1286–1815*, ed. Roger A. Mason (Edinburgh, 1987), 226. Also see Eric Richards, "Scotland and the Uses of the Atlantic Empire," in *Strangers within the Realm*, ed. Bailyn and Morgan, 67–114; and Ned Landsman, "The Provinces and the Empire: Scotland, the American Colonies, and the Development of British Provincial Identity," in *Imperial State at War*, ed. Stone, 258–87.

<sup>35</sup> The enthusiasm with which the late-eighteenth-century Scots became full-fledged "British" patriots is a major theme of Colley, *Britons*, esp. 101–93. For a reassessment of some of Colley's claims about Scotland in the empire, see Colin Kidd, "North Britishness and the Nature of Eighteenth-Century British Patriotisms," *Historical Journal* (Cambridge, Eng.), 39 (June 1996), 361–82. See also Daniel Szechi, "The Hanoverians and Scotland," in *Conquest and Coalescence*, ed. Greengrass, 116–31.

olics did not seem as great a threat to the domestic peace as they had in the past. Moreover, as the Irish economy became more commercialized and relatively more prosperous, the men who governed the island increasingly adopted what has come to be known as the language of "Protestant nationalism" or "Protestant patriotism." In other words, after a brief period immediately following the Glorious Revolution in which it proclaimed its "Englishness," the Ascendancy began countering the English intervention, especially on issues of trade and currency, by advancing an argument calling attention to the distinctiveness of local culture and tradition. Without directly challenging English political authority, Protestant rulers tried to distance themselves from London's control, imagining a relationship with the metropolitan center that accepted a measure of colonial independence.<sup>36</sup> From their perspective, being "British" meant that the Irish enjoyed all the rights of the English without thereby giving up a meaningful Irish identity. When challenged, the Irish protested that they were just as good as the English; indeed, they were in some measure political equals. This truculent spirit permeates the political writings of John Locke's Irish friend William Molyneux and those of Jonathan Swift. As S. J. Connolly notes, "When they [the Irish] first began to question what they perceived as the illegitimate intrusion of English government into Irish affairs, the basis of their argument was that they were being denied the constitutional rights of Englishmen."<sup>37</sup>

Tensions over Irish colonial identity grew more pronounced as the English made it clear that assertions of Britishness did not transform Irish Protestants into Englishmen nor make Irish culture especially worthy of London's respect. By emphasizing difference, the English forced the Irish to consider as they had never done before the full dimensions of their own Irishness. As Swift informed an Irish audience, in rhetoric remarkably like that of the Americans on the eve of revolution, "by the laws of God, of nature, of nations, and of your own country, you are and ought to be as free a people as your brethren in England."<sup>38</sup> The stress was always on rights and equality. The historian J. L. McCracken explains, "While claiming all the privileges of freeborn Englishmen, they [the Irish Protestants] regarded themselves as Irishmen entitled to control the destinies of the country that had become theirs by right of conquest. Any interference with their rights, any encroachment on their interests, was bitterly resented."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> On the cultural and economic development of eighteenth-century Ireland, see R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1988), 138–94. Foster is especially good on the efforts of the Ascendancy to distance itself from English political control. See also L. M. Cullen, *The Emergence of Modern Ireland, 1600–1900* (New York, 1981); and F. G. James, *Ireland in the Empire, 1688–1770: A History of Ireland from the Williamite Wars to the Eve of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

<sup>37</sup> S. J. Connolly, "Varieties of Britishness: Ireland, Scotland, and Wales in the Hanoverian State," in *Uniting the Kingdom?*, ed. Grant and Springer, 197.

<sup>38</sup> For Jonathan Swift's statement in *Drapier's Letter* (Number 4), see J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland, 1603–1923* (London, 1981), 166.

<sup>39</sup> J. L. McCracken, "Protestant Ascendancy and the Rise of Colonial Nationalism, 1714–60," in *A New History of Ireland*, vol. IV: *Eighteenth-Century Ireland, 1691–1800*, ed. T. W. Moody and W. E. Vaughan (Oxford, 1986), 106–8. Also see Joep Th. Leersen, "Anglo-Irish Patriotism and Its European Context: Notes toward a Reassessment," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin), 3 (1988), 7–24; Thomas Bartlett, "'A People Made Rather for Copies than Originals': The Anglo-Irish, 1760–1800," *International History Review* (Toronto), 12 (Feb. 1990), 11–25; Isolde

As even perfervid Irish patriots of the eighteenth century must have understood, Protestant nationalism had no real chance. So long as the Catholics remained outside the political culture, the Protestant ruling class desperately needed the English to preserve their own special privilege. For our purposes, however, it is significant to note that the midcentury wave of Anglo-Irish patriotism in Ireland developed in reaction to an English initiative, as a response to what were perceived as exclusionary policies emanating from the metropolitan core, and as a defense against a surge of nationalism more powerful than their own. As C. A. Bayly reminds us, "Irish nationalism arose from Ireland's perceived exclusion from empire, not her inclusion within it."<sup>40</sup> It is also important to point out that Irish patriots such as William Molyneux translated Irish political grievances into a Lockean language of natural rights. In the history of early modern political thought, this was an innovative move. Not surprisingly, Molyneux's influential essay *The Case of Ireland's Being Bound by Acts of Parliament in England, Stated* (1698) received a highly sympathetic reading in America on the eve of independence. Other Irish writers followed his lead, and after Parliament passed a Declaratory Act for Ireland in 1720—legislation that served as a model for the Declaratory Act of 1766 for the American colonies—Irish Protestants relied increasingly on the rhetoric of natural rights; like the Americans of the 1760s, they had discovered that, in their efforts to gain a measure of freedom from England, arguments based on historical precedent had less persuasive force than did those derived from natural rights.<sup>41</sup>

However much midcentury Americans knew about the politics of contemporary Scotland and Ireland, they too found themselves struggling to comprehend the demands of a powerfully self-confident imperial state. We must pay close attention here to chronology, to the different phases in a developing conversation with England as the colonists moved from accommodation to resistance, from claims of Britishness to independence.

Like the Scots, the Americans initially attempted to demonstrate, often in shrill patriotic rhetoric, their loyalty to almost everything associated with Great Britain. Before the 1760s they assumed that popular British nationalism was essentially an inclusive category and that by fighting the French in Canada and by regularly pro-

---

Victory, "The Making of the Declaratory Act of 1720," in *Parliament, Politics, and People: Essays in Eighteenth-Century Irish History*, ed. Gerard O'Brien (Dublin, 1989), 9–30; Sean Murphy, "The Dublin Anti-Union Riot of 3 December 1759," *ibid.*, 49–68; David Hayton, "Anglo-Irish Attitudes: Changing Perceptions of National Identity among the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, ca. 1690–1750," *Studies in 18th-Century Culture*, 17 (1987), 145–57; Martin S. Flaherty, "The Empire Strikes Back: Annesley v. Sherlock and the Triumph of Imperial Parliamentary Supremacy," *Columbia Law Review*, 87 (1987), 593–622; and Isolde L. Victory, "Colonial Nationalism in Ireland, 1692–1725: From Common Law to Natural Right" (Ph.D. diss., Trinity College, Dublin, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), 12. See also Jacqueline Hill, "Ireland without Union: Molyneux and His Legacy," in *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 271–96.

<sup>41</sup> Hill, "Ireland without Union."

claiming their support of the British constitution, they merited equal standing with other British subjects who happened to live on the other side of the Atlantic. The colonists were slow to appreciate the growing conflict between nation and empire, between Englishness and Britishness. Like the Irish, they conflated those categories within a general discourse of “imperial” identity.<sup>42</sup>

A narration of the construction of identity *within the British Empire* properly begins in the 1740s. European settlers of an earlier period had, of course, struggled with some of the same issues, alternately celebrating and lamenting the development of cultural difference. But whatever the roots of the challenge, dramatic changes in English society, several of which we have already examined, forced provincial Americans for the first time to confront the full meaning of “Britishness” in their lives. The response was generally enthusiastic; they accepted without much thought what the historian John Dunn once termed in a different context “a strenuous ideological fiction.”<sup>43</sup> They believed that the English accepted them as full partners in the British Empire, allies in the continuing wars against France, devout defenders of Protestantism, and eager participants in an expanding world of commerce. Inasmuch as Americans during this period spoke the language of national identity, as opposed to that of different regions and localities, they did so as imperial patriots, as people whose sense of self was intimately bound up with the success and prosperity of Great Britain. As John Murrin argues, “To the extent that the settlers were self-conscious nationalists, they saw themselves as part of an expanding *British* nation and empire. Loyalty to colony meant loyalty to Britain.”<sup>44</sup> And in a recent study of the shaping of British imperial policy, Jack P. Greene found no evidence of an “American national consciousness” developing before the revolutionary period.<sup>45</sup>

The American situation before 1760, therefore, was not dissimilar to that of the Scots. Like them, the colonists did not have a shared tradition capable of providing

<sup>42</sup> What I consider the most original and provocative insights into those tensions are provided in Jack P. Greene, “Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America,” recently reprinted in *Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities: Essays in Early American Cultural History*, by Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville, 1992), 43–173. More recently Greene has developed this important line of analysis, showing that colonial Americans thought of themselves as “British” and, in particular, claimed to share fully the rights and liberties of all British people. See also Jack P. Greene, *The British Revolution in America*, University of Texas at Austin British Studies Distinguished Lectures, No. 32 (Austin, 1996); and Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 43–46. A comparative perspective on identity formation within the empire is advanced in Jim Smyth, “‘Like Amphibious Animals’: Irish Protestants, Ancient Britons, 1691–1707,” *Historical Journal* (Cambridge, Eng.), 36 (1993), 785–97.

<sup>43</sup> John Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays, 1981–1989* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), 1.

<sup>44</sup> John Murrin, “A Roof without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity,” in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter III (Chapel Hill, 1987), 334–38. Also see John Murrin, “Escaping Perfidious Albion: Federalism, Fear of Aristocracy, and the Democratization of Corruption in Postrevolutionary America,” in *Virtue, Corruption, and Self-Interest: Political Values in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Richard K. Matthews (Bethlehem, 1994), 111–12.

<sup>45</sup> Greene, *Peripheries and Center*, 162–63; Greene, *The British Revolution in America*, 11–20. It should be noted that J. C. D. Clark rejects the argument that I advance in this essay and that Greene, Murrin, Colley, and others have supported. Clark asserts, “The dominance of Anglican, common law paradigms on both sides of the Atlantic leaves no room for an account of the American Revolution as a result either of nascent American nationalism or of American reaction to nascent English nationalism”: J. C. D. Clark, *Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 61. Whatever the merits of Clark’s transatlantic comparisons, on this point he overstates his case.

a common identity separate from that of Great Britain. They could draw only upon local histories, some of which were best forgotten. The concept of a larger imperial identity effectively masked differences, creating during the Seven Years' War at least a superficial sense of unity. Consider a single example of this midcentury imperial patriotism. In 1764 the editor of the newly founded *New-Hampshire Gazette* lectured his readers on the social function of newspapers. "By this Means," he rhapsodized, "the spirited *Englishman*, the mountainous *Welshman*, the brave *Scotchman*, and *Irishman*, and the loyal *American*, may be firmly united and mutually RESOLVED to guard the glorious Throne of BRITANNIA. . . . Thus Harmony may be happily restored, Civil War disappointed, and each agree to embrace, as *British Brothers*, in defending the Common Cause."<sup>46</sup>

Many other Americans shared the New England editor's assumptions about the inclusive character of the British imperial identity. Some of them were quite distinguished. Appearing before the Committee of the Whole House of Commons in 1766, Benjamin Franklin argued for unity within the empire. When a member of Parliament pointedly asked him whether expanding the frontiers of the British Empire in North America was not in fact just "an American interest," Franklin shot back, "Not particularly, but conjointly a British and an American interest."<sup>47</sup> The Reverend Jeremy Belknap, a talented historian and the founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, also captured the spirit of eighteenth-century colonial nationalism. Like Franklin, Belknap assumed that England and America were equals. The success of one contributed directly to the success of the other. Both found fulfillment in their common Britishness. According to Belknap, the brilliant leadership of William Pitt during the Seven Years' War "had attached us more firmly than ever, to the kingdom of Britain. We were proud of our connection with a nation whose flag was triumphant in every quarter of the globe. . . . We were fond of repeating every plaudit, which the ardent affection of the British nation bestowed on a young monarch [George III], rising to 'glory in the name of Briton.'"<sup>48</sup> Colin Kidd's work on eighteenth-century Scotland helps us to situate the American discourse within a comparative framework. He describes it as a form of "Anglo-Britishness." Like contemporary Irish and Scots, American colonists seldom missed a chance to brag that they had replicated "English freedoms in 'colonial' settings."<sup>49</sup>

In point of fact, however, the Americans were not really "*British Brothers*." As became increasingly and distressingly obvious during the run-up to independence, heightened British nationalism was actually English nationalism writ large; the aggressive assertion of national sentiment that Linda Colley traces so masterfully in *Britons* defined colonial Americans as "other," as not fully English, or as persons

<sup>46</sup> *New-Hampshire Gazette*, July 13, 1764.

<sup>47</sup> Labaree and Willcox, eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, XIII, 151.

<sup>48</sup> Jeremy Belknap, *The History of New-Hampshire* (3 vols., Dover, N.H., 1812), II, 246. Professor Laurel Ulrich recently brought to my attention a marvelous example of midcentury colonial nationalism. A young Boston girl embroidered into a beautiful sampler: "Sarah Silsbe is my name[.] I belong to the English nation[.] Boston and Christ is my salvation . . ."; Sarah Silsbe was ten years old when she completed her work in 1748.

<sup>49</sup> Kidd, "North Britishness," 377–82.



beyond the effective boundaries of the new national imagination. To be sure, categories lower than free white colonists existed in this midcentury status hierarchy, but for the Americans such unflattering distinctions hardly mattered.

"We won't be their Negroes," snarled a young John Adams in 1765, writing as "Humphry Ploughjogger" in the *Boston Gazette*. Adams crudely insisted that Providence had never intended the American colonists "for Negroes . . . and therefore never intended us for slaves. . . . I say we are as handsome as old English folks, and so should be as free."<sup>50</sup> Ploughjogger's shrill, uncomfortably racist response to the Stamp Act revealed the shock of rejection. The source of anger was not so much parliamentary taxation without representation as it was the sudden realization that the British really regarded white colonial Americans as second-class beings, indeed, as persons so inferior from the metropolitan perspective that they somehow deserved a lesser measure of freedom.

The substance, if not the tone, of Ploughjogger's bitter complaint echoed throughout the colonial press on the eve of revolution. To be sure, the popular print materials contained other themes—religious and constitutional arguments, for example—but in many cases, the raw emotional energy of the performance came from the American writers' abrupt discovery of inequality.<sup>51</sup> Like the anonymous writer of a piece that appeared in the *Maryland Gazette*—actually an essay originally published in a Boston journal—colonists throughout America found themselves asking the embarrassing question, "Are not the People of *America*, BRITISH Subjects? Are they not *Englishmen*?"<sup>52</sup>

That the response to such questions was now in doubt became an issue of general public concern. Consider the defensive, pathetic, frequently querulous attempts by American writers during this period to demonstrate self-worth in relation to the men and women who happened to live in Great Britain. The Reverend Samuel Sherwood of Connecticut protested that colonists were "not an inferior species of animals, made the beast of burden to a lawless, corrupt administration."<sup>53</sup> Other Americans heard similar tales of alleged colonial inferiority. James Otis Jr., the fiery Boston lawyer who protested the constitutionality of the Stamp Act, responded with heavy-handed irony. "Are the inhabitants of British America," he asked rhetorically, "all a parcel of transported thieves, robbers, and rebels, or descended from such? Are the colonists blasted lepers, whose company would infect the whole

<sup>50</sup> *Boston Gazette*, Oct. 14, 1765.

<sup>51</sup> On the intellectual complexity of popular political arguments during this period, see James T. Kloppenberg, "The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse," *Journal of American History*, 74 (June 1987), 9–33. More than thirty years ago, Paul A. Varg came to a similar conclusion about the reactive character of American national consciousness. "Nationalism," Varg argued, "as a self-conscious phenomenon was stimulated by the British challenge of the colonists' illusion of equal status and their confidence in their future role [in the empire]." After reading a large sample of prerevolutionary pamphlets and sermons, he decided that for the Americans "feelings involving pride and status suffered greater injury than did financial interests": Paul A. Varg, "The Advent of Nationalism, 1758–1776," *American Quarterly*, 16 (Summer 1964), 175–76. On this point also see Greene, *The British Revolution in America*, 16–20.

<sup>52</sup> *Maryland Gazette*, Aug. 8, 1765 (reprinted from the *Boston Gazette*, July 15, 1765).

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Sherwood, *A Sermon, Containing Scriptural Instructions . . .* (New Haven, 1774), vi.

House of Commons?"<sup>54</sup> The answer was more problematic than Otis would have liked. Arthur Lee encountered similar difficulty during a heated debate with "Mr. Adam Smith." The son of a wealthy Chesapeake tobacco planter, Lee insisted that, whatever the great economist might think, the original founders of Virginia had been "distinguished, even in Britain, for rank, for fortune, and for abilities." And yet, as Lee remarked with obvious resentment, despite superior family background, the Virginians of his own generation "are treated, not as the fellow-subjects but as the servants of Britain."<sup>55</sup>

Other colonists adopted more temperate language, but the substance of their grievance was not all that different from what Otis or Lee had to say. "The people in the colonies and plantations in America are really, truly, and in every respect as much the King's subjects as those born and living in Great Britain are," whined Connecticut's governor Thomas Fitch in words that exposed terrible doubt about whether contemporary English readers actually agreed.<sup>56</sup> What especially galled Americans was the thought that ordinary English men and women assumed superiority over the colonists. Disrespect from that group was more than the provincials could accept. The insult spoke directly to the ordinary people of America. It transformed political unhappiness into a personal challenge. Silas Downer, a Rhode Island patriot who described himself simply as a "Son of Liberty," taunted the members of his audience with their loss of status in the empire. Speaking "at the dedication of the Tree of Liberty," Downer explained, "It is now an established principle in *Great-Britain*, that we are subject to the *people* of that country, in the same manner as they are subject to the Crown. They expressly call us their subjects. The language of every paltry scribler . . . is after this lordly stile, *our colonies — our western dominions — our plantations — our islands in America — our authority — our government*—with many more of the like imperious expressions." Downer pointed out that "it would not be in any degree so humiliating and debasing" to be ruled by an absolute monarch "as to be governed by one part of the King's subjects who are but equals."<sup>57</sup>

As Adams well understood when he wrote as Ploughjogger, the simple New England farmer, ordinary Americans were not particularly interested in crafting a separate identity, at least not in the mid-1760s. It was the English who had projected a sense of difference and inferiority upon the colonists. In other words, "American" as a descriptive category seems in this highly charged context to have been an external construction, a term in some measure intended to be "humiliating and debasing." In an exhaustive survey of the contents of all colonial newspapers during the period immediately preceding national independence, Richard L. Merritt discovered that "available evidence indicates that Englishmen began to identify

<sup>54</sup> James Otis Jr., *A Vindication of the British Colonies* (Boston, 1765), in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), I, 568.

<sup>55</sup> [Arthur Lee], *An Essay in Vindication of the Continental Colonies of America, From a Censure of Mr. Adam Smith, in His Theory of Moral Sentiments . . . by an American* (London, 1764), 18–20.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Fitch et al., *Reasons Why the British Colonies in America Should Not Be Charged with Internal Taxes* (New Haven, 1764), in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, ed. Bailyn, I, 387–88.

<sup>57</sup> Son of Liberty [Silas Downer], *A Discourse, Delivered in Providence in the Colony of Rhode Island . . . At the Dedication of the Tree of Liberty, From the Summer House in the Tree* (Providence, 1768), 7–8.

the colonial population as 'American' persistently after 1763—a decade before Americans themselves did so."<sup>58</sup> The full implications of Merritt's pioneering work have largely gone unappreciated. Indeed, it was not until quite recently that P. J. Marshall again reminded us that "the rise of the concept of 'American' owed quite a lot to British usage."<sup>59</sup> The exclusionary rhetoric broadcast from the metropolitan center was a new development, a surprising and unsettling challenge to the assumptions of equality that had energized colonial nationalism until the Stamp Act crisis; since it came after an intense burst of imperial loyalty during the Seven Years' War, the colonists felt badly betrayed. "Nor could any thing more sensibly affect them [the colonial Americans], or be thought of with more regret," declared the Reverend Daniel Shute in a sermon delivered in 1768, "than to be rescinded from the body of the empire, and their present connections with *Great-Britain*."<sup>60</sup>

Shifting constructions of identity within the empire involved more than simple miscommunication. England's assertion of its own Englishness shocked Americans, and the element of surprise helps to account for the strikingly emotional character of colonial political writing. Indeed, if one attempts to explain the coming of revolution as a lawyer-like analysis of taxation without representation or as an enlightened constitutional debate over parliamentary sovereignty, one will almost certainly fail to comprehend the shrill, even paranoid, tone of public discourse in the colonies.

Other historians have addressed this curious problem. In *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, for example, Bernard Bailyn analyzed the disjuncture between popular rhetoric and statutory reality.<sup>61</sup> The American reaction to various parliamentary regulations seemed to him far more rancorous than one might have predicted on the basis of actual levels of taxation. Bailyn concluded that over the course of the eighteenth century Americans had borrowed a highly inflammatory strand of English political discourse, one that warned incessantly against corruption and conspiracy, the loss of civic virtue, and a restoration of Stuart despotism. When Parliament attempted to tax the colonists without representation, Americans assumed the worst. Events appeared to be fulfilling their ideological nightmares. And in this situation, they employed a strident "country" language employed originally by English politicians critical of "court" corruption to translate imperial regulatory policy into a dangerous plot against provincial liberty and property.

While that interpretation of the apparently irrational political rhetoric of the colonists is entirely plausible, it does not seem sufficient to account for the sudden

<sup>58</sup> Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community, 1735–1775* (New Haven, 1966), 58–59, 130–31. See also John M. Murrin, "War, Revolution, and Nation-Making: The American Revolution versus the Civil War," Assembly Lecture, Sept. 29, 1994, Grinnell College (in T. H. Breen's possession).

<sup>59</sup> Marshall, "Nation Defined by Empire," 220. Also see Eric Evans, "National Consciousness? The Ambivalence of English Identity in the Eighteenth Century," in *Nations, Nationalism, and Patriotism in the European Past*, ed. Claus Bjorn, Alexander Grant, and Keith J. Stringer (Copenhagen, 1994), 145–60.

<sup>60</sup> Reverend Daniel Shute, *An Election Sermon* (Boston, 1768), reprinted in *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760–1805*, ed. Charles Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1983), I, 129.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967). The same curious interpretive problem is raised in an important article by Gordon S. Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 23 (Jan. 1966), 3–32.

sense of personal humiliation. The extraordinary bitterness and acrimony of colonial rhetoric requires us to consider the popular fear that the English were systematically relegating Americans to second-class standing within the empire. To be sure, the colonists may have found in the borrowed “country” rhetoric a persuasive language in which to express their emotional pain. That is certainly part of the story. What we tend to forget, however, is that they also complained that their “*British Brothers*” had begun treating them like “negroes,” a charge that cannot be easily explained as an American echo of English political opposition.<sup>62</sup>

The racism that accompanied fear of exclusion appeared in the writings of several distinguished colonial patriots. Like John Adams, these were men who demonstrated that they could communicate successfully to a growing audience of unhappy Americans. Few were better at it than James Otis Jr. During the 1760s, he publicly lectured an imagined representative of English society: “You think most if not all the Colonists are Negroes and Mulattoes—You are wretchedly mistaken—Ninety nine in a hundred in the more northern Colonies are white, and there is as good blood flowing in their veins, save the royal blood, as any in the three kingdoms.”<sup>63</sup> And Daniel Dulany, a well-educated Maryland lawyer, sounded a lot like “Plough-jogger” when he protested in 1765 against how English officials regularly characterized American colonists. “What a strange animal must a North American appear to be,” this enlightened gentleman explained in one of the most reprinted political pamphlets written before the Revolution, “from these representations to the generality of English readers, who have never had an opportunity to admire that he may be neither black nor tawny, may speak the English language, and in other respects seem, for all the world, like one of them!”<sup>64</sup>

Although the anonymous author of *A Letter to the People of Pennsylvania* (1760) did not compare white colonists to Africans or Native Americans, he did ask hard questions about the nature of England’s unprecedented abuse of Americans of European dissent. “Can the least spark of reason be offered why a *British* subject in *America* shall not enjoy the like safety, the same protection against domestic oppression?” he demanded. “Are you not of the same stock? Was the blood of your ancestors polluted by a change of soil? Were they freemen in *England* and did they become slaves by a six-weeks’ voyage to *America*?”<sup>65</sup> The word “slaves” catches our attention. It is hard to believe that in this context the author was using it as a political abstraction, to describe a people without rights. The complaint is about “the blood of *your* ancestors,” and it clearly carried a message of racial debasement.

Within this radically evolving imperial framework, the Stamp Act seemed an especially poignant reminder for the Americans of their new second-class status.

<sup>62</sup> Varg, “Advent of Nationalism,” 169–81. Also see Jack P. Greene, “All Men Are Created Equal: Some Reflections on the Character of the American Revolution,” in *Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities*, by Greene, 236–67; and Jack P. Greene, “The American Revolution,” in *Interpreting Early America: Historiographical Essays*, ed. Jack P. Greene (Charlottesville, 1996), 505–9.

<sup>63</sup> John Hampton [James Otis Jr.] to William Pym, *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 9, 1765.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Dulany, *Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes in the British Colonies* (Annapolis, 1765), in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, ed. Bailyn, 1, 635.

<sup>65</sup> *A Letter to the People of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1760).

Of course, much of the colonial rhetoric directly addressed the constitutional issues raised by taxation without representation. But legal questions aside, Americans understood that they were being treated differently from ordinary men and women who happened to live in England. "What, my Lord [William Pitt]," asked the members of the Massachusetts Assembly, "have the colonists done to forfeit the character and privilege of subjects, and to be reduced in effect to a tributary state?"<sup>66</sup> As those provincial politicians knew, in peacetime Parliament would not have dared to burden the people of Great Britain in this manner.

Moreover, even within the empire they were not doing very well. The Irish Protestants at least had their own national legislature; the Scots sent elected representatives to Parliament. From the American perspective, therefore, the Stamp Act was viewed as a calculated insult, a clear declaration of exclusion, a denial of English rights to Americans. When he first learned of this statute, John Hancock, a Boston patriot and leading merchant, did more than denounce the Stamp Act as an economic burden. He insisted, "I will not be a Slave, I have a right to the Libertys & privileges of the English Constitution, & as an Englishman will enjoy them."<sup>67</sup> Benjamin Church stated the point powerfully in an essay published in 1766 entitled *Liberty and Property Vindicated*. Church explained that being called "Englishmen without hav[ing] the privileges of Englishmen, is like a man in a gibbet, with dainties set before him, which would refresh him and satisfy his craving appetite if he could come at them, but being debarr'd of that privilege, they only serve for an aggravation of his hunger."<sup>68</sup> And in his *The Nature and Extent of Parliamentary Power*, published in 1768, William Hicks insisted that "As a colonist, my most ambitious views extend no further than the rights of a British subject. I cannot comprehend how my being born in America should divest me of these. . . . If we are entitled to the liberties of British subjects we ought to enjoy them *unlimited and unrestrained*."<sup>69</sup>

As the constitutional crisis with Parliament evolved and as the possibilities for political reconciliation became less promising, the American sense of humiliation slowly transformed itself into bemused reflection on having been pushed out of an empire that once seemed to guarantee liberty and prosperity. Even at the mo-

<sup>66</sup> "The House of Representatives of Massachusetts to the Earl of Chatham" (Feb. 2, 1768), in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry Alonzo Cushing (4 vols., New York, 1904), I, 181. The argument advanced in this essay does not preclude other perspectives on the formation of an effective national identity. The public rituals associated with non-importation—and the communication of these market protests in the colonial newspapers—are a case in point. On the symbolic significance of the boycott movement and its impact on the Americans' ability to imagine a larger community, see Breen, "Narrative of Commercial Life," 471–501; and David Waldstreicher, "Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent: Celebrations, Print Culture, and the Origins of American Nationalism," *Journal of American History*, 82 (June 1995), 37–61.

<sup>67</sup> John Hancock to Barnard and Harrison, Oct. 21, 1765, Letter book 1762–1783, p. 139, Manuscript Collection (Harvard University Business School Library, Boston, Mass.).

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Church, *Liberty and Property Vindicated* . . . (Boston, 1766), 12. See also David S. Lovejoy, "Rights Imply Equality: The Case against Admiralty Jurisdiction in America, 1764–1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 16 (Oct. 1959), 459–84. The best general account of the organization of colonial American resistance to the Stamp Act is Edmund S. Morgan and Helen Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1953).

<sup>69</sup> [William Hicks], *The Nature and Extent of Parliamentary Power* (Philadelphia, 1768), ix.

ment of independence, the colonists still could not quite explain why the ministers of George III had decided systematically to dishonor a proud people. "Had our petitions and prayers been properly regarded," the Reverend Henry Cumings preached in 1781 at the site of the Battle of Lexington, "and moderate pacific measures pursued, we should have entertained no thoughts of revolt." This was hardly an expression of the kind of self-confident patriotism that one might have expected in that situation. But Cumings played on the theme of rejection. "It was far from our intention or inclination to separate ourselves from Great-Britain; and that we had it not even in contemplation to set up for independency; but on the contrary, earnestly wished to remain connected with her, until she had deprived us of all hopes of preserving such a connection, upon any better terms than unconditional submission."<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps an even more bittersweet articulation of the sense of rejection was Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, not the final published statement but the working draft he presented to Congress. Here Jefferson indulges in a rare demonstration of emotion. As at the conclusion of a failed marriage, the differences have become highly personal, more matters of the heart than of the head. One party is clearly at fault. It was the English who redefined the imperial relationship and who, as a result of their own heightened sense of national identity, denied Americans full equality within the British Empire. Now, after a series of inexplicable insults, Parliament dispatched mercenaries to butcher the colonists. This was the last and most intolerable demonstration of disrespect.

These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us to renounce for ever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them. . . . We might have been a free & a great people together; but a communication of grandeur & of freedom it seems is below their dignity. Be it so, since they will have it: the road to glory & happiness is open to us too.<sup>71</sup>

If assertion of English national superiority forced colonists to imagine themselves as a separate people, it also profoundly affected the substance of American political ideology. During the 1760s the colonists took up the language of natural rights liberalism with unprecedented fervor.<sup>72</sup> That they did so is not exactly a momentous discovery. In recent years, however, historians of political thought have discounted the so-called Lockean tradition in prerevolutionary America. According to Bernard Bailyn, for example, the liberal discourse of this period lacked persuasive impact. "We know now," Bailyn insisted, "that Enlightenment ideas, while they form the

<sup>70</sup> Henry Cumings, *A Sermon Preached at Lexington on the 19th of April* (Boston, 1781), in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730–1805*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis, 1991), 671.

<sup>71</sup> Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (26 vols., Princeton, 1950– ), I, 427. On Jefferson's debt to John Locke during this period, see Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore, 1990), 2–51.

<sup>72</sup> The powerful popular appeal of natural rights liberalism during this period is explored in detail in T. H. Breen, "Mr. Locke's Colonial Disciples: Restoring an American Public Philosophy," paper delivered at the conference "Republicanism as Anti-Monarchism," European Science Foundation, Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte, Göttingen, Germany, April 21, 1996 (in T. H. Breen's possession); and T. H. Breen, "Equality in the British Empire: James Otis's Radical Critique of John Locke," forthcoming.

deep background and give a general coloration to the liberal beliefs of the time, were not the ideas that directly shaped the Americans' responses to particular events."<sup>73</sup> To some extent, Bailyn had a point. An earlier generation of historians had treated natural rights claims as sacrosanct principles, as self-evident and timeless truths whose popularity required no social explanation. When the case for Lockean ideas was stated in such reverent terms, it was very hard to understand why ordinary men and women might have found the natural rights argument so emotionally compelling, indeed, why they would have risked their lives on the field of battle for such beliefs.

The ubiquitous character of "rights talk" on the eve of revolution seems even more curious since historians such as John Dunn and Isaac Kramnick have recently shown that for most of the eighteenth century neither American nor English writers expressed more than passing interest in John Locke's *Second Treatise* (1689).<sup>74</sup> To be sure, the colonists cited Locke's authority in discussions of religious toleration, paper currency, and pedagogy. But before the 1760s very few colonial commentators took up his arguments for political resistance, for the existence of natural rights antecedent to the formation of civil government, or for the equality of all people in the state of nature. "It was only in the second half of the century," Dunn explained, "when Locke's vast philosophical eminence conferred an intellectual stature on the work [*Second Treatise*] despite its low reputation, and when its practical implications became so hotly contested, that there was any great pressure to treat it with full intellectual seriousness."<sup>75</sup> The key words here are "practical implications." Locke's political writings took on special significance for people trying to resist the intrusive nationalism of the metropolitan state. As we have seen, they had played a similar role in Ireland. According to the historian Patrick Kelly, William Molyneux drew heavily on Locke's work to defend "the sole right of the Irish parliament to legislate for Ireland." In other words, it was in Ireland, not England, where people first began to appreciate the extraordinary mobilizing force of the natural rights discourse. Molyneux, Kelly continues, "reinterpreted Locke in a manner particularly applicable to the vexed problem of Ireland's relations with England in arguing that the natural right to consent to government meant that no one nation could have an exclusive right to dominate another."<sup>76</sup>

The Irish case helps us better to understand the logical link in prerevolutionary

<sup>73</sup> Bernard Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Kurtz and Hutson, 17.

<sup>74</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, Eng., 1988).

<sup>75</sup> John Dunn, "The Politics of Locke in England and America in the Eighteenth Century," in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. John W. Yolton (Cambridge, Eng., 1969), 62, 69–75. On the sudden growth of interest in Locke during the 1760s, see Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, 1990), 4, 170–75. See also A. John Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights* (Princeton, 1992); and Joyce Appleby, "Liberalism and the American Revolution," *New England Quarterly*, 49 (March 1976), 3–26.

<sup>76</sup> Patrick Kelly, "Perceptions of Locke in Eighteenth-Century Ireland," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, C (Dublin), 89 (no. 2, 1989), 17–21. Also see J. G. Simms, *Colonial Nationalism, 1698–1776: Molyneux's The Case of Ireland . . . Stated* (Cork, 1976), 9–39. For a rough index to Locke's political importance relative to other intellectual sources during the 1760s, see Donald S. Lutz, "The Relative Influence of European Writers in Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought," *American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984), 193.

America between England's newly aggressive nationalism and the dramatic popular appeal of natural rights liberalism. The colonists could and did appeal to a number of different political languages. They responded positively to some elements of civic humanism, especially to its powerful analysis of virtue and corruption. From the Protestant tradition they acquired a rich vocabulary of resistance to tyranny. But whatever utility those competing ideologies may have possessed, neither had much to say about human rights and equality, the two concepts that came to dominate colonial political writings after 1763. In such matters Locke served them well. His political philosophy, at least as the colonists interpreted it, was not simply a complacent defense of individualism and security of property. Much of what American historians think they know about eighteenth-century liberal thought is actually little more than a crude caricature, a projection back into late colonial society of a set of propositions about the individual and the state that the revolutionary generation would not have recognized.<sup>77</sup> Louis Hartz to the contrary notwithstanding, it was a commitment to rights and equality that made liberal thought a genuinely radical ideology, and those who want to replace liberalism with civic humanism or republicanism in our historical imagination might consider how successful those other languages have been in opening doors to politically excluded members of society.<sup>78</sup>

Whatever the modern history of liberalism, the explanation for the popularity of natural rights arguments in late colonial America now seems clear. Within an empire strained by the heightened nationalist sentiment of the metropolitan center, natural rights acquired unusual persuasive force. Threatened from the outside by a self-confident military power, one that seemed intent on marginalizing the colonists within the empire, Americans countered with the universalist vocabulary of natural rights, in other words, with a language of political resistance that stressed a bundle of God-given rights as "prior to and independent of the claims of political authority."<sup>79</sup> The Locke of the *Second Treatise* seemed to the Americans

<sup>77</sup> Ronald Hamowy, "Jefferson and the Scottish Enlightenment: A Critique of Garry Wills's *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 36 (Oct. 1979), 503–23; Ronald Hamowy, "Cato's Letters, John Locke, and the Republican Paradigm," in *John Locke's Two Treatises of Government: New Interpretations*, ed. Edward J. Harphram (Lawrence, 1992), 148–72. Also see H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1977), 127–99.

<sup>78</sup> Louis Hartz argued that the complete dominance of a "liberal tradition" in the United States had effectively drained public philosophy of radical possibilities. He was especially critical of the pressure to conform to the central tenets of liberalism—a near obsession with individualism, for example—in a society in which rival political discourses had either been silenced or never taken root. See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955). Although I appreciate Hartz's original interpretive project, I maintain that explosive debates *within* liberalism over rights and equality, over the fluid boundaries of meaningful political inclusion, and over the extension of citizenship did in fact give natural rights liberalism a continuing radical capacity that ideological alternatives such as civic humanism, communitarianism, and republicanism lack. It is important to remember that the liberalism of the prerevolutionary period was not that of the late nineteenth century. For an imaginative and constructive reappraisal of liberalism in modern American society, see Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989); and Bernard Yack, ed., *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar* (Chicago, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility*, 12, 13–15. See also Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited," *American Historical Review*, 87 (June 1982), 629–64; and Yuhtaro Ohmori, "'The Artillery of Mr. Locke': The Use of Locke's 'Second Treatise' in Pre-Revolutionary America, 1764–1776" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1988).



to embody common sense precisely because he abstracted consideration of human rights and equality from the traditional rhetoric of British history. He liberated the theory of politics from the constraints of time and custom, from purely English precedent. As Ian Shapiro, a historian of political thought, explains, "Locke shifted the basis of antiabsolutist conceptions of political legitimacy away from history and toward a moral justification based on an appeal to reason."<sup>80</sup> Those who still maintain that the republican ideology described in such detail in J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* would have served the colonists just as well are hard pressed to explain how a fundamentally historical justification for the Ancient Constitution spoke effectively to the problem of preserving timeless human rights.<sup>81</sup>

However logical championing natural rights liberalism may have been, it was for the colonists a profoundly defensive move. Americans invoked "transhistorical arguments of natural equity and human liberty" because, in the words of one student of Anglo-Irish patriotism, "they did not have much of a historical leg to stand on."<sup>82</sup> In their recent study entitled *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World*, Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden came to a strikingly similar conclusion. The eighteenth-century Americans, they declared, "could only make their demands in terms either of claims of some set of political traditions that they shared with the metropolitan culture or, as most were ultimately to do, of claims of a body of natural rights shared by all men everywhere."<sup>83</sup> What that suggests is that American liberalism may have owed much of its initial popularity to its effectiveness as a rhetorical strategy, as the political language of a colonial people who had not yet invented a nation and, therefore, who had not yet constructed a common history.

Everywhere in the public political debates, one encounters the language of rights and equality. Arguments for the dominance of a particular political discourse during any period, of course, are bound to be somewhat impressionistic. Although we can appreciate the echoes of classical republican thought and the inspiration of evangelical Protestantism, we most frequently encounter an angry, shrill, often nervous insistence on natural rights. During the 1760s and early 1770s, colonial writers repeatedly invoked the authority of John Locke, and even when the name of the great philosopher did not appear, his ideas still powerfully informed popular public consciousness.<sup>84</sup> The appeal to natural rights sounded not only in the labored

<sup>80</sup> Ian Shapiro, *The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 279.

<sup>81</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975). Pocock has recently reconsidered the character of popular ideology on the eve of American independence. He argues that the colonists systematically translated traditional "rights of Englishmen at common law" into "rights by a higher law." According to Pocock, "It was by this route that Americans came to believe that they enjoyed the rights of Englishmen in a higher and more perfect sense than that in which Englishmen enjoyed them, and were by nature that which Englishmen were merely by history": J. G. A. Pocock, "Empire, State, and Confederation: The War of American Independence as a Crisis in Multiple Monarchy," in *Union for Empire*, ed. Robertson, 336. See also H. T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York, 1992), 164–65.

<sup>82</sup> Leersen, "Anglo-Irish Patriotism and Its European Context," 21.

<sup>83</sup> Canny and Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World*, 273.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, John Phillip Reid, *Constitutional History of the American Revolution: The Authority of Rights* (Madison, 1988), 90–93. A good deal of common sense is brought to the discussion of prerevolutionary ideology in Richard R. Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 49 (July 1992), 401–30. See also Stephen Holmes, "Liberalism for a World of Ethnic Passions and Decaying States," *Social Research*, 61 (Fall 1994), 599–610.

pamphlets that learned university-trained lawyers seem to have written for other learned lawyers but also in the more popular journals and sermons. Throughout prerevolutionary America, men and women responded to what they perceived as English arrogance with a truculent cry: we are as good as any English person.

Shortly before his death, the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew gave a sermon to a Boston congregation that had just witnessed a violent riot against the Stamp Act. He told them that he spoke for “commonly-received opinions,” for the “taken for granted.” “In pursuance of this plan,” Mayhew continued, “it shall now be taken for granted, that as we are free-born, never made slaves by the right of conquest in war . . . we have a natural right to our own, till we have freely consented to part with it, either in person, or by those whom we have appointed to represent, and to act for us.”<sup>85</sup> Or, as the *Newport Mercury* reminded its readers in September 1767, “To enjoy our natural Rights and the Liberties of English subjects, is the supreme felicity of mankind. . . . Natural Rights, and the Liberty of English subjects undoubtedly belong to Americans.”<sup>86</sup>

Natural rights liberalism was so pervasive that a colonial town meeting could quickly transform itself into a public seminar on Lockean philosophy. On November 20, 1772, the Boston Town Meeting charged a committee of twenty-one persons “to state the Rights of the Colonists, and of this Province in particular, as Men, as Christians, and as Subjects.” In due time the committee report received the approval of Boston freeholders and other inhabitants. They agreed that “All Men have a Right to remain in a State of Nature as long as they please.” No government could compel the subject to surrender his rights. On that central point the authors specifically cited Locke. From him, the Boston committee had learned that “The *natural* Liberty of Man is to be free from any superior Power on Earth, and not to be under the Will or legislative Authority of Man; but only to have the Law of Nature as his Rule.” And finally, in a statement clearly intended to mobilize broad popular support, the authors of the report insisted that “All Persons born in the British American Colonies, are by the Laws of GOD and Nature . . . entitled, to all the natural, essential, inherent, and inseparable Rights, Liberties and Privileges of Subjects born in Great-Britain, or within the Realm.”<sup>87</sup> Whatever else this document may contain, its character does not seem particularly religious, nor, for that matter, the stuff of classic civic humanism. Like so many other Americans of this period, the members of the Boston committee demanded inclusion within an empire that seemed to have become increasingly exclusive; they understood instinctively that historical arguments drawn from a shared British past would not have much purchase against the claims of a nationalizing mother country.

A newly aggressive English state forced the Americans to leap out of history and to defend colonial and human equality on the basis of timeless natural rights.

<sup>85</sup> Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, *The Snare Broken. A Thanksgiving Discourse* (Boston, 1766), in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, ed. Sandoz, 239–40.

<sup>86</sup> *Newport Mercury*, Sept. 14, 1767.

<sup>87</sup> *The Votes and Proceedings of the Freeholders and Other Inhabitants of the Town of Boston. In Town Meeting Assembled, According to Law* (Boston, 1772), 2–11.

English national sentiment did not transform Americans into natural rights liberals, but it was a necessary catalyst. And by revising Edmund S. Morgan's revisions—in other words, by situating our interpretation of the run-up to revolution in the recent historiography of eighteenth-century England—we discover why the forgotten “Ploughjoggers” of colonial America were so angry and defensive, colonial liberals so fearful of rejection, and, above all, a people so profoundly confused by changing perceptions of identity within the British Empire. It was not until after the Revolution, when Americans confronted the exclusionary and racist logic of their own nationalism, that ordinary men and women had reason to be thankful that whatever their country had become, it had commenced as a society committed to rights and equality, radical concepts then and now.