

Changing Interpretations of the American Revolution

1776 – 1876: George Bancroft

Bancroft argued that the American Revolution was a struggle over political and intellectual ideals. Despite the radical political nature of the Revolution, the Revolution was of a “tranquil” and conservative nature in other ways.

1909 -1920: Progressive Historians

Motivated by progressive reform movements in contemporary society, a number of historians began to investigate the social and economic factors which were involved in the Revolution. Arthur M. Schlesinger (1917) argued that the economic interests of wealthy merchants activated their revolutionary impulses. Other historians noted that the war assumed the dimensions of an American civil war, pitting the conservative sections of society against the radical. The victory of the radicals opened the door for changes and led to the democratization of the country, as well for as any number of hitherto unimaginable economic and social aspirations.

1950's: Edmund S. Morgan and Robert Brown

Responding to progressive historians emphasis on the social and political elements of the Revolution, these historians emphasized that the economic and class conflicts dividing Colonial American society at the time of the Revolution were not severe. Rather, colonial society was united by political beliefs that were widely held by white Americans regardless of social class.

1967: Bernard Bailyn

Bailyn continues the argument begun by Morgan and Brown, arguing that the political ideology motivating the colonists had deep and complex roots. This ideology, he argues, was not mere propaganda advanced in the pursuit of social or class conflicts. It was a genuinely held set of beliefs that served as the primary motivation for revolution.

From *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*

Late 1960's: “New Left” Historians

New Left historians returned to social and economic conflicts within American society that helped create a revolutionary environment. Scholars examined the growing economic distress in colonial cities and the role of popular mobs which evinced resentment of American and British elites alike.

1970s: Social Historians

Social historians have sought explanations or interpretations which avoid the dichotomy of interests vs. ideals, emphasizing that both interpretations have a role to play in gaining a complete understanding of the complex array of forces at work in the Revolution. Still some social historians have widened the debate by including the role of overlooked or marginal groups in society such as women, native Americans, and slaves.

1992: Gordon Wood

Wood points out the Revolution, regardless of its causes, was a radical event which had a transformative effect on large segments of American social and economic life. These factors may not have been motivations for revolution, but the ideals of traditional gender roles, deference, and patriarchy were radically altered.

From *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*

