**THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

Historiography is, essentially, the history of history, or, more aptly, the history of history writing. How have historians in different times and places interpreted the causes and character of the Revolution differently? Historiography is the lifeblood of academic historians; however, the general reader often has little familiarity with it. Perhaps no other topic in American history has been subject to so many differing interpretations as the American Revolution. What follows is a summary of the different ways in which historians have interpreted the causes and character of the Revolution. It encompasses a debate that is as old as the Republic itself.

An understanding of the way historians have interpreted the Revolution differently can enrich the general reader’s own perspective and open up questions that promote critical and historical thinking on the part of the reader. In your reading on the American Revolution, you may have come across terms like “Progressives” or “republican synthesis” or “neo-Whigs.” If you’ve read dozens of narratives and biographies but find yourself wanting to dig even deeper into the analytical history of the American Revolution, this article is designed to give you a crash course in the historiography of the American Revolution.

**Revolutionary Interpretation:**

The two major contemporary historians of the Revolution were David Ramsay of South Carolina and Mercy Otis Warren of Massachusetts. Ramsay, in his [The History of the American Revolution](http://archive.org/stream/historyofamerica02rams)(1789), told the story of how virtuous “husbandmen, merchants, mechanics, and fishermen” won independence from the corrupt British. He saw the Revolution as a constitutional crisis brought on by the irreconcilability of Britain’s imperial interests and the colonists’ experience in self-government. The first female historian of the Revolution, Mercy Otis Warren, in her [History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution](http://archive.org/stream/historyofrisepro01warr) (1805), described the Revolution as a “boon of liberty.” Being the sister of James Otis, Jr. and the wife of Dr. James Warren, she had been personally involved in the coming of the Revolution and saw the actions of the British in the 1760s and 1770s as attempts to establish tyranny over the colonies. Having been participants in the events of which they wrote, both saw their histories as a moral story and warned their readers against eschewing virtue for the vices and corruption of the British.

**Loyalist Interpretation:**

Prominent Loyalists, too, wrote a number of contemporary histories of the Revolution, though some were only published posthumously including Thomas Hutchinson, the former royal governor of Massachusetts, Jonathan Boucher, Peter Oliver, and Joseph Galloway, a former member of the Continental Congress.[[i]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn1) Unsurprisingly, these loyalist histories tended to focus on justifying British actions during the imperial crisis. Hutchinson was an exception. He believed that party politics in Britain contributed to the Ministry and Parliament’s discombobulated approach to the colonies. Galloway, however, believed that the disarray of imperial policy came largely from politicians and officials’ unfamiliarity with the colonies, its governments, and its people. All the Loyalist historians tended to agree that the creation of popular anti-British sentiment in the 1760s and early 1770s was the product of demagoguery by a small number of ill-designing men.

**Whig Interpretation:**

The Whig interpretation is best exemplified by a man whom Edmund Morgan called “the first great historian to deal with [the Revolution].”[[ii]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn2) George Bancroft, like a number of historians and antiquarians of the pre-academic 19th century, used the leisure time his wealth afforded him to travel the country collecting and preserving primary source documents and to produce a massive multi-volume history of the United States.[[iii]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn3)In the Whig interpretation, the underlying and unifying theme of American history was a Providential march toward liberty and democracy away from the tyranny and absolutism of the Old World. In the Revolution, “the Americans seized as their peculiar inheritance the traditions of liberty.”[[iv]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn4) This interpretation held sway through much of the nineteenth century.

**Imperial Interpretation:**

In the early part of the twentieth century, a number of historians began looking at the colonial period from the British perspective, or, more accurately, they began to think of colonial history as imperial history. Unlike the Whigs, the imperial historians did not see a tyrannical ministry and Parliament bent on restraining the liberty of the colonists through harsh policies. Rather, historians such as George L. Beer, Charles Andrews, and Lawrence Gipson, studied British colonial policy and saw Britain’s attempts to manage trade and seek revenue from the colonies as reasonable policies, especially considering Britain’s war debt and colonists’ relatively light tax burden.[[v]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn5)

**Progressive Interpretation:**

Also in the first decades of the twentieth century, a new interpretation arose in direct reaction to the Whig interpretation. The Progressive interpretation attempted to view the Revolution through the lenses of class conflict and economic interests. They also denied the notion that ideas had any real causal power and that the rhetoric of the revolutionaries was largely a cover for their own interests. In 1909, Carl Becker proffered his “dual revolution thesis,” writing, “The first was the question of home rule; the second was the question . . . of who should rule at home.”[[vi]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn6) That is to say, Becker thought that, at the same time as colonists were struggling with Great Britain, there was also a class struggle occurring internally. A few years later, Charles Beard published an extended essay––more ruminative than researched––in which he argued that individual economic and class interests shaped the decisions made by delegates to the Constitutional Convention and the subsequent ratification process. The interpretation reached its apex in the work of Merrill Jensen, a second-generation Progressive, who argued that the American Revolution was “an internal revolution carried on by the masses of the people against the local aristocracy.”[[vii]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn7) Progressives believed that the Revolution of 1776 was a radical, populist uprising and that the Constitutional Convention represented the elites’ attempt at counterrevolution.

**Consensus Interpretation:**

In the 1940s and 1950s, in reaction to the Progressives’ focus on conflict (and the rise of the Cold War), historians began looking for commonalities or consensus in the past. Louis Hartz found a broad scale consensus among colonists in the political philosophy of John Locke. Other consensus historians, like Daniel Boorstin, stressed the conservative nature of the American Revolution. Meanwhile, a few historians took on Progressive arguments directly including Forrest McDonald, who refuted Beard’s argument regarding economic interest and the Constitution, while Robert Brown tried to dispel the Progressives’ class conflict dynamic by arguing that a “middle-class democracy” had already existed before the Revolution.[[viii]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn8)

**Neo-Whig/Ideological Interpretation:**

In 1953, Edmund S. Morgan argued that colonists’ arguments about constitutionality were not only genuine but that they were central to the Revolution.[[ix]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn9) In a sense, Morgan’s work (as well as that of Douglass Adair) signaled to early American historians that it was okay to take ideas seriously (hence the somewhat derisive label, “neo-Whig”). One of the most definitive works of this new ideological interpretation was Bernard Bailyn’s [The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution](http://books.google.com/books?id=EjJHUVVzDR8C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false) (1967). Bailyn argued that colonists’ ideology had its origins in the so-called “radical Whig” republican tradition in England, which instilled in them a strong fear of tyranny and conspiracies against their liberty. This was meant to explain why colonists reacted as they did to Britain’s new imperial policies during the 1760s. Bailyn and others’ focus on “republicanism” (which together came to be known as the “republican synthesis”) was challenged by historians such as Joyce Appleby, who argued that the liberalism of John Locke was at least as, if not more, fundamental to the character of the Revolution. This “republicanism-liberalism” debate lasted for well over decade and, at times, became quite heated.[[x]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn10)

**New Left/Neo-Progressive Interpretations:**

In the late 1960s and 1970s, “social history,” which focused on the lives of everyday persons, became predominant. At the same time, the Civil Rights movement and the feminist movement helped provide a spark for a new generation of historians to study the history of race and slavery in early America, as well as women’s history. Around the same time, young historians––most notably Jesse Lemisch and Staughton Lynd––involved in New Left politics engaged in this “history from the bottom up” in an effort to recover the agency of laboring class colonists.[[xi]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn11) Similarly, Mary Beth Norton and Linda Kerber both published books in 1980 about the impact of the Revolution on women.[[xii]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn12) In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a resurgence of interest in class conflict and economic aspects of the Revolution. Neo-Progressive historians such as Gary Nash, Ed Countryman, and Woody Holton have combined the issues of the Progressive interpretation with the social history’s concern for non-elites.[[xiii]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn13) They’ve argued that ordinary Americans during the Revolution were quite radical and in pursuit of their own interests, thereby integrating them into the larger political narrative of the Revolution. While neo-Progressives continue to write important works, in the last twenty years there has been no dominant school or interpretation that has defined the study of the Revolution. Rather, there are many sub-fields such as imperial history, Native American history, history of the West, and religion, which are producing exciting works that are broadening our understanding of the Revolution and early America, in general.

**Founders Chic:**

“Founders Chic” is not a historiographical school; it is a pejorative term given to a number of popular histories of the founding that began appearing in the 1990s. In that decade, there was an explosion of interest among the general reading public for books about the founding. The works that resonated most––by authors such as David McCullough, Joseph Ellis, Richard Brookhiser, and Ron Chernow, among others––were often biographies or narratives that focused on the so-called “character” of both individual founders and the founding generation. One critic mockingly referred to these works as “Federalist Chic” because they tended to glorify Federalists like John Adams and Alexander Hamilton while portraying Republicans in a much more critical and darker light, particularly Thomas Jefferson. A number of academic historians––including Gordon Wood, Edmund Morgan, and John Ferling––wanting to reach a broader audience and upset that works by authors not trained in history were selling millions of copies while their books sold only a few hundred, published many solid works of both narrative and biography, but none found the kind of audience as McCullough or Chernow.[[xiv]](https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/historiography-of-american-revolution/#_edn14)

As we can see, the way historians have [interpreted the Revolution](http://allthingsliberty.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/historiography.png) has inevitably been influenced by the times in which they lived. The English historian, E. H. Carr, wrote, “Before you study the history, study the historian” and their own “historical and social environment.” This is true in all fields of history. Nevertheless, each of these interpretations made unique contributions to the ways in which we understand the Revolution today. For the general reader wanting to explore the historiography of the American Revolution further, I suggest: Alfred F. Young and Gregory H. Nobles, [Whose American Revolution Was It? Historians Interpret the Founding](http://books.google.com/books?id=xx1BcnyXdUMC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false) (2011), Alan Gibson, [Interpreting the Founding: Guide to the Enduring Debates over the Origins and Foundations of the American Republic](http://www.amazon.com/Interpreting-Founding-Enduring-Foundations-University/dp/0700617051) (2006), and Gwenda Morgan, [The Debate on the American Revolution](http://www.amazon.com/Debate-American-Revolution-Issues-Historiography/dp/0719052424) (2007).