REVOLUTIONARY REALPOLITIK: IDEOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Nicholas Dawes

“No taxation without representation!” This familiar rallying cry encapsulates two competing interpretations of the American Revolution: one constitutional, the other economic. Historians since the end of World War II have abandoned economic interpretations of the American Revolution, favoring instead an ideological argument that rests upon the rights-based rhetoric espoused by members of the Continental Congress. While the ideological struggles between capitalist democracy and communist totalitarianism during the Cold War may have motivated a veneration of American ideals and institutions, it seems curious that economic causes of the Revolution have fallen almost completely out of view. Charles A. Beard, a progressive historian, represented the last intellectual school that examined the potential economic motivations of the founding generation. The Consensus School championed the idea that the founders had responded to Parliament’s infringement on their constitutional rights. They idealized the narrative of the Revolution’s causes, placing it in an intellectual context completely removed from the economic exigencies of the mid-eighteenth century. In the last forty years, however, historians have hesitantly resumed investigating the role of economics in the Revolution. The Neo-Whigs readily accept that the American Revolution had economic effects on the fledgling United States, but they situate those effects within the founders’ changing political ideology, and they adopt Hofstadter’s analysis that the independence movement’s motivations were inherently disinterested. In the 1990s a variation on the Neo-Progressive school emerged that adopted Beard’s willingness to recognize the economic conditions that led to independence, but its perspective lacked explicit Marxist undertones of class conflict. The scholarship ought to continue to develop in this direction, toward investigations that illuminate the economic causes of the Revolution, and how society participated in and shaped the political economy of the Revolution.

In order to highlight the distinction between economic causes and effects in the Revolutionary period, it is necessary to outline what we mean by the phrase, “American Revolution.” We shall look at what historians mean when they discuss “classical republicanism” to see why applying that ideal to the founding generation might lead historians to remove, consciously or otherwise, economic motivations from the narrative. With these concepts clearly defined, we will approach a few prominent Neo-Whig authors to examine their treatment of the Revolution, and we will trace the evolution of that treatment from the 1970s to the early 90s. From there we can compare Neo-Progressive scholars’ work to their Neo-Whig antecedents and explore the current trajectory of the historiography. But first we must clarify what we mean by “American Revolution.”

Reviving Classical Traditions

The “American Revolution” covers so much time and so many topics that it sometimes can be troublesome to grasp precisely what historians mean by the phrase. For some historians the term corresponds with the twenty years of unrest and war from 1763 to 1783 and ends with the cessation of the Revolutionary War. And yet for others that period merely demarcates the commencement of the Revolution; Gordon Wood and others trace the Revolution’s ideas through to the 1820s. Most historians who discuss the period, however, focus on the years between 1780 and 1800, from winning independence and ratifying the Constitution to establishing Federalist precedents and electing Thomas Jefferson. For our purposes it will help to consider the Revolution as having two stages: the first stage being the move toward independence, 1763-1783; the second being the early national period, roughly from 1783 through Jefferson’s administration. This will enable us to look at how historians have treated (or ignored) both the pre- and post-war years and to distinguish the potential economic causes of the independence movement from the economic results of independence in the early national period. Much of historians’ discussions of the pre-war years focus on the idea of “republicanism.”

When historians discuss republicanism in the American Revolution, without further modifying republicanism with an adjective such as “American,” they almost always mean “classical republicanism.” Classical republican theory dates back to antiquity but was revived during the Renaissance. J.G.A. Pocock describes Florentine republican thought, which, he argues, heavily influenced the founding generation. In his book The Machiavellian
It can be shown both that the American Revolution and Constitution in some sense form the last act of the civic Renaissance, and that the ideas of the civic humanist tradition...provide an important key to the paradoxes of the modern tensions between individual self-awareness on the one hand and consciousness of society, property, and history on the other.\footnote{1 J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 462.}

The broader point seems relatively intuitive: that the rhetoric of the Revolution—preoccupied with rights, virtue, public goods—can be traced back to classical traditions. In this quote Pocock also points out a central tension that other historians elaborate on in an American context: self-awareness (or self-interestedness) versus public good. Republicanism can be understood as concerned with “the antithesis of ‘virtue’ with ‘corruption’—or ‘virtue’ with ‘commerce.’”

This dichotomy created, Pocock argues, “a basically hostile perception of early modern capitalism,” amongst republican thinkers.\footnote{2 Ibid., ix.} If classical republican values laud concepts like “society, property, and history,” to the exclusion of self-interestedness and “commerce,” then it follows that adherents to classical republicanism would attempt to excise interestedness from their deliberations. This is the logic that enabled Neo-Whig historians to overlook questions of economic motivations, which are inherently self-interested, when examining the words of the Continental Congress during the independence movement.

**Illuminating Ideological Idolatry**

Historians of the Neo-Whig school, like the Consensus historians before them, largely treat the Revolution as an effort to wrest the colonies from political dependence on Great Britain, and they emphasize the ideological and constitutional arguments made prior to the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. Any discussion of economics covers only the years after 1783, as a recognition of the change in American ideology after the war, leaving the idealistic, constitutional and rights-based narrative of the Revolution’s causes inviolate. In fact, this narrative seems so dominant that some historians skip the pre-war period altogether and jump right into the early years of the republic. Economics, for the Neo-Whig historians, only seem appropriate to discuss in the wake of the Revolutionary War. But of all the Neo-Whig historians, Drew McCoy comes closest to an economic interpretation of the Revolution’s causes.

In his book, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*, McCoy seeks to interpret the 1780s and 90s through the lens of political economy. This unique intellectual framework forces him to look at the economic circumstances of the period, even though he constantly rails against it in attempts to draw everything back to ideology. The first instance of economics emerges in his discussion of the founding generation’s concerns over British mercantilism. He argues that they perceived “British mercantilism as an economic system that reflected the tragedies of national corruption and ‘old age.’”\footnote{3 Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 49.} He uses the economic complaints of Franklin and Hamilton in the 1760s and 70s to illustrate what he feels are their larger ideological concerns of social virtue and republican government. McCoy writes, “A central element of the republican ideology derived from this tradition was its emphasis on the sensitive interdependence of government and society,” and he says men like Franklin believed that “constitutional and social decay festered most readily in societies where individuals had lost their economic independence and moral integrity.”\footnote{4 Ibid., 61.} So though McCoy recognizes the existence of pre-war economic concerns about mercantilism, he frames their significance in a “larger” context of ideological debate. Mercantilism itself, he argues, did not concern the founders so much as the social and moral decay it represented. Though McCoy continually uses political economy as his analytical lens, he focuses on the interplay between economics and ideology in the 1780s and 90s, as the nascent United States had to formulate its economic policies and institutions.
an “American republicanism,” as opposed to the classical republicanism of antiquity. He argues that the founders saw mercantilism as a sign of government corruption, and, since mercantilism restricted manufactures and trade, they supported commercial expansion as the antithesis of those corrupted policies. He says, “As the necessary spur to industry, productivity, and virtue, commerce was instead the lifeblood of a republican system.” This, juxtaposed with the classical republican view of commerce as a corrupting influence, marks a key development in American political economy. McCoy also recognizes another important development in the years immediately following the war: a resurgence in the 1780s of classical republican ideology. McCoy links the persistence of classical republicanism to economic downturn. After 1783, Great Britain and other mercantilist empires of Europe closed their doors on the United States. This caused a contraction in the U.S. economy, which McCoy claims is the origin of a resurgence in classical republican values that eschewed participation in foreign trade. He takes this one step further and says that people recognized that “an insular political economy of this sort would require either the introduction of new forms of manufacturing … or the acceptance of a very primitive, Spartan way of life that could easily degenerate into barbaric savagery.”

One of the goals of the Constitutional Convention was, therefore, to create a government “capable ofpressing foreign governments into giving up their mercantilist ways and lowering barriers to the republic’s commerce.” McCoy illustrates this by pointing to Madison’s desire for a discriminatory trade policy against England in the First Congress of the United States. McCoy associates the rise of this new American republicanism and free-trade philosophy that celebrates manufactures and commerce to the period’s economic realities.

In comparison to McCoy, Joyce Appleby charts how emerging forces and changing discourses shaped early Americans’ political ideology and economic policy. In *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s*, Appleby traces the development of a liberal ideology that created the foundation of a capitalist society. As the subtitle suggests, Appleby spends little time on the period prior to the ratification of the Constitution, though she does discuss it briefly as a setting for the main argument of her work. She follows the change in discourse that led to the decline of classical republicanism and the rise of an American republicanism that rests on liberal assumptions and democracy. She argues that early Americans, and Jefferson in particular, were not only part of the liberal economic tradition, but in many ways helped to create it. She says that Jefferson internalized the ideas of Locke and Smith — that man was independent, rational, self-interested, and seeking his own improvement. The notion of equality necessarily follows: that if all men share those characteristics, then only circumstance and environment creates differences between them. This logic “undermined traditional notions about authority.” Appleby continues, arguing that the republican acceptance of the “free and independent man” idea compelled them to promote a liberal economic policy. Smith’s invisible hand, which “was warmly clasped by the Republicans,” appeared to be a natural, self-regulating organism, and so republican hopes “for future economic development were tied to the belief in economic freedom.” According to Appleby, if men are rational and self-interested, and the economy regulates itself through markets, then government need not interfere. In this way the logic of Locke and Smith’s political and economic treatises that Republicans embraced during the independence movement, when followed through to conclusion, compelled Jefferson and Republicans to adopt a liberal, self-regulating view of the economy. This, in turn, required Jefferson to take steps toward making that economic ideal a reality. In short, Appleby interprets the economic and political theories of Smith and Locke as influencing republican political thought, which in turn shaped their economic policy once they came to power in 1800. While Appleby seeks to add nuance to our understanding of the character of the early national period, other Neo-Whigs reorient their arguments almost entirely.

Gordon Wood argues directly against the bulk of Neo-Progressive historians in his book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. He aims to

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5 McCoy, *The Elusive Republic*, 77.
6 Ibid., 97.
7 Ibid., 101.
8 Ibid., 103, 136.
demonstrate that the American Revolution as a whole can be seen as a radical social event without Marxist class conflict and economic maladies acting as catalysts. His goal is to restore “social character” and “social consequences” to the story of the Revolution.12 And while he departs from other Neo-Whig historians in his treatment of the pre-war years, insofar as he does discuss colonial social relationships and shows how they changed, he discusses the Revolution itself as the triumph of republicanism over monarchy.13 Economics do not factor heavily into Wood’s analysis until he discusses the 1780s.

The reason Wood largely ignores economics until the early national period is that he credits the Revolutionary War with releasing nascent economic energies. He claims, “The Revolutionary War and the reliance on American manufactures and craftsmen that it entailed meant that artisan interests became increasingly important…it brought new producers and consumers into the market economy, it aroused latent acquisitive instincts everywhere, and it stimulated inland trade as never before.”14 In Wood’s opinion the war was the defining moment in a transition to capitalism, when peoples’ demand for goods exploded, buoyed by American production rather than importation. Seeing a society of people intensely interested in participating in the market troubled the nation’s leaders. As Wood explains, “Too many were…too deeply involved in trade and moneymaking to think beyond their narrow interests or their neighborhoods and to concern themselves with the welfare of their states or their country.” He also traces a return to classical republican principles in this period, as McCoy did; in Wood’s estimation, the federal Constitution represents the ultimate expression of this conservative impulse. Wood claims, “the federal Constitution of 1787 was in part a response to these popular social developments, an attempt to mitigate their effects by new institutional arrangements…this new democratic society was very opposite of the one the revolutionary leaders had envisaged.”15 In keeping with his stated goal of returning a sense of social character to the American Revolution, all of Wood’s economic discussions occur in terms of cultural change—a rise in interestedness, the emergence of manufactures, and the creation of public associations—to highlight the way relationships between Americans changed in the pre- and post-war decades. While his emphasis on culture makes Wood different, he still treats the Revolution as having economic results, not causes.

These Neo-Whig historians all saw the Revolution as having economic results in the 1780s or 1790s, but they differed with which forces generated the change. Considering these books were published in the 1980s and early 1990s, their disparate emphases can be explained by the unique circumstances of each author, both their goals for writing and the historical moment in which they wrote. Joyce Appleby, writing in the early 1980s, sought to weigh in on a debate between liberalism and republicanism, to demonstrate how these two schools of thought, usually treated as antagonistic, had a common developmental root. She also suggested that Jefferson, despite his treatment as anti-manufacturing, was truly a proponent of the liberal economic tradition. McCoy has two closely related motivations that informed the emphases of his argument. For starters, he believes that contemporary Americans “all too often presume an unjustified familiarity with their Revolutionary forebears.” He not only introduces eighteenth-century political economy to try and dispel this undue familiarity, but also to promote political economy as a legitimate framework for historical analysis.16 In this way he is responding to a gap in the historiography in an effort to inject a deeper investigation into the economy of the period. It is also possible that his more economically focused analysis stems from living through the economically turbulent 1960s and 70s. This seems more plausible when comparing his analysis of the post-Revolutionary War rise in classical republican sentiment. He tied its resurgence directly to the economic crisis of the 1780s, which was a result of restricted trade with Europe’s mercantile empires. Classical republicanism treats commerce as corrupting, and poor commerce in the 1780s strangled the economy. Thus McCoy argues these ideas coincided with one another in the American consciousness. Compare that to Gordon Wood, who attributed the same upick in Spartan republicanism to aggressive democratic movements in society during those years.

13 Ibid., 169.
14 Ibid., 247-48.
15 Ibid., 229-230.
16 McCoy, Elusive Republic, 1.
For Wood, the resurgence of classical republicanism exerted a conservative influence on American society, expressed in the passing of the Constitution to temper and moderate democratic impulses. Both authors discuss republicanism and ideological frameworks, yet McCoy spends far more time preoccupied with economics. Wood signals a transition in the historiography. He still treats the independence movement as constitutionally focused, but larger segments of his analysis are concerned with American culture and society in the post-war years. His final words applaud a central feature of American society, a capitalist or entrepreneurial spirit. America became “a prosperous free society belonging to obscure people with their workaday concerns and their pecuniary pursuit of happiness – common people with their common interests in making money and getting ahead.” This belies a gradual move towards society, beyond the political elite, as a subject of analysis.

Reorienting American Republicanism

The 1990s saw a re-focusing of American historians’ attentions on questions of gender and culture that further removed political elite from view as historical subjects. This marked the emergence of a variant of the Neo-Progressive historians in this debate over what role economics played in the American Revolution. Neo-Progressives, unlike their Neo-Whig counterparts, look more at the economic causes of the independence movement, rather than strictly the early national period’s economic outcomes. They also look to move beyond the political elite in their analysis, tending toward an analysis that searches for internal social strife. Lawrence Peskin, T.H. Breen, and Staughton Lynd and David Waldstreicher look at the political and economic situation of the 1760s and 70s through the eyes of actors other than the Continental Congress. Even though Lynd and Waldstreicher talk about the founders, they also look at the other side of the economic debate: British pamphleteers and Parliament, who are largely ignored by other historians.

Lawrence Peskin, in his book *Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry*, seeks to reorient discussions of the Revolution around actual revolutionaries, in this case industrialists, rather than talking about the strictly intellectual debates over republicanism and liberalism. He traces the origin of a pro-manufacturing discourse to the 1760s, with its roots in the economic crises of that decade. He insists that the revenue-raising acts promulgated by the British Parliament “inaugurated America’s first sustained pro-manufacturing effort, and it was at this juncture that speeches such as the one delivered by Benjamin Rush to a group of Philadelphians promoting a small model project called the American Manufactory began to shape the discourse.” He draws a direct connection between a discourse of economic independence promoted by manufacturing interests and the political independence Neo-Whig historians emphasized in their histories. Peskin claims that historians overemphasize the years from the 1780s through the 1820s as a period when early industrialists took the economy into previously uncharted territory, when in actuality the discourses surrounding manufactures had been well-developed by that point. This conflicts with where Wood and McCoy placed manufactures in their histories – squarely in the early national period, not before. Peskin points to a 1767 Boston Town Meeting where colonists voted to revive linen manufacturing as an example of colonial interest in manufacturing: “The resolutions were passed at the end of a long and angry day during which several nonimportation, nonconsumption, and pro-manufacturing resolutions were passed,” and the elected managers of this linen manufacturing venture “were radical merchants involved in other anti-English protests.”

Like Wood, however, Peskin recognizes the crisis of war as a milestone in the pro-manufacturing movement. He argues, “Once independence—political and economic—was declared, the pressure of warfare, rather than abstract ideological principles, became the primary factor shaping the putative national economy.” Again, instead of focusing on the Congress, Peskin looks to local actors when discussing economic independence. He reveals that between April and July, 1776, towns and counties proclaimed their independence from the British months before the Congress did, and claims that the sentiments that led to those

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19 Ibid., 39.
declarations exposed a move “toward economic independence” well before the 1780s. Peskin’s analysis focuses on the discourses of manufacturing as a road to economic independence, and treats the economic as a precursor to political independence, which gives the independence movement the distinctly economic character that it has lacked for decades. But he still looks at a class of relatively elite economic actors with focused interests, where his contemporary, T.H. Breen, focuses more on society in the broader sense.

T.H. Breen published a materialist history in 1994 titled “Baubles of Britain,” which served as the foundation for his book The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence a decade later. In his book, Breen harnesses Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” to argue that the colonists of the independence movement felt a solidarity with each other, despite living hundreds of miles apart in separate colonies. He asserts that “Carolina farmers assumed almost reflexively that they spoke for a national community that in fact existed only in their own imaginations; in response to British oppression they construed an America that included Boston as well as Rowan County.” Colonists seemed to have built this community around goods. Breen disagrees with Wood in a number of ways, but primarily in that the Revolutionary War itself released “acquisitive energies” based on American production. Breen spends a good portion of his analysis demonstrating how British imports, which cascaded into American markets as early as the 1740s, fueled conspicuous consumption and helped generate this imagined community. “The flood of British imports,” he insists, “quickly transformed an entire material culture. For most Americans – for those upon whom a colonial rebellion would ultimately depend – the empire first entered their lives as ‘smole trifeles.’” He follows this community through the nonimportation movements of 1765, 1767, and 1773-1774 and examines how colonists mobilized and self-policed their populations in order to enforce these boycotts. The residents of one colony could trust that the others would follow through, Breen claims, based on participation in a common community founded upon British and American goods. Breen’s analysis is ideological, material, and discursive – showing the changing nature of virtue, and by extension understandings of republicanism. Virtue became “a function of liberal choice – in this case, of consumer decisions to forego private pleasures in order to advance the public welfare.” Breen styles this as “consumer virtue,” rather than classical republican virtue. Where Breen and Peskin reserve a place for ideology and discourse, Staughton Lynd and David Waldstreicher press for an even more directly material and economic interpretation of the Revolution that treats constitutional arguments as nothing more than a distracting smokescreen to hide colonists’ economic motivations.

Lynd and Waldstreicher published an article in The William and Mary Quarterly titled “Free Trade, Sovereignty, and Slavery: Toward an Economic Interpretation of American Independence,” which seems simultaneously revelatory and remedial. They boldly claim that the American Revolution had “fundamentally economic causes,” and that “it is not thereby demeaned.” They look at not only the writings of the Continental Congress, but at responses to their remonstrations in British pamphlets. The Continental Congress did not merely respond to the words and deeds of Parliament, but also British intellectuals who, like their American counterparts, weighed in on such issues and published their thoughts. Lynd and Waldstreicher claim that “the theme of economic interest comes out clearly in British Pamphlets on the American Revolution,” where British essayists regularly harangued colonials for being overly-motivated by property and money. The Molasses Act, American Duties Act, and Stamp Act get singled out as exemplars of colonial economic concerns, which Lynd and Waldstreicher accuse other historians of ignoring as “a kind of prelude” to the more central constitutional arguments. They also look directly at acts passed by the First Continental Congress for further evidence of economic motivations for independence, where they locate the non-import

20 Peskin, Manufacturing Revolution, 45.
22 Ibid, 147.
23 Breen, Marketplace of Revolution, 210, 263.
26 Ibid., 607.
tation, non-consumption, and non-exportation plans of 1774. These actions did not originate solely with the “rabble” that Breen focused on, but with a congress that also deemed them legitimate responses to what they perceived as undue economic intrusions into a formerly mutually beneficial arrangement. The facts themselves are not earth shattering, every student learns about the various taxes and duties levied upon the American colonies between 1763 and 1775. But the authors suggest that colonists embroiled in these trans-Atlantic economic debates shifted their rhetoric to constitutional concerns in each instance because the right to tax cleaved closely to questions of sovereignty.

Waldstreicher and Lynd, Breen, and Peskin all had motivations for writing what and when they did. As historians it is important to reflect on how contemporary concerns and events interact with written histories. There is a similarity between the period Peskin discusses in his book and the times in which he wrote. An economic boom predicated upon a new, revolutionary technology industry that restructured the entire economy typified the 1990s. The consequences of that restructuring also changed peoples’ relationship to each other and their work, much as the manufacturing industry shaped and changed the economy of the early nineteenth century. Breen, too, is a Neo-Progressive in every sense – he treats the American colonists as “oppressed” by the British. Rather than finding internal conflict between classes of colonists, he casts the colonists as a lower class to compete with the Parliamentary upper class. A correlation also appears between Breen’s analysis, focused on consumerism, and the culture of the 1990s. The last decade of the twentieth century saw a sharp increase in consumer culture: families increasingly owned more than one car, more than one television, computers, pagers, and a host of other gadgets. So it seems appropriate that historians would begin to examine consumerism and its social consequences. In this case Breen links consumerism to popular political movements and shows how consumption, normally thought of as a sign of self-interest and excess, can generate positive outcomes for society. Meanwhile, Lynd and Waldstreicher, the most recent proponents of starkly economic interpretations, wrote with current events firmly in mind. They state:

One of the goals of economic interpretations of the Revolution has always been to curb the excesses of national self-congratulation regarding our seemingly exceptional, benign revolution. Americans should find their own transition from colonies to neo-colony reflected in the experience of the developing world in the years since World War II...In the current climate of opinion, in which American revolutionaries are said to have simply rebelled against big government in favor of personal liberties, a renewed appreciation of the economic dimensions of independence can help call into question self-serving definitions of American political ideals that sever political history from political economy, including slavery.

Their clearly stated motivations for favoring an economic interpretation reside in refuting the blatantly partisan mythologizing of the American Revolution in popular political culture. Although Lynd and Waldstreicher have compelling concerns about ideological explanations of the Revolution, treating the founders’ constitutional concerns as disingenuous perpetrates the same crime against ideology that ideologically focused historians have committed against economic interpretations.

Conclusion

Both ideological and practical examinations of the American Revolution have a place in history, neither is more correct than the other. It bears noting, however, that taking one interpretation of the Revolution – or any period for that matter – to the exclusion of the other is folly. Exploring the economic conditions of a people and period can shed valuable light on how and why their ideology formed as it did, and provide the added benefit of potentially exposing incongruities between a person’s rhetoric and reality. His-

27 Lynd and Waldstreicher, “Free Trade,” 621.
28 Ibid., 609.
29 Lynd and Waldstreicher, “Free Trade,” 630.
tories that avoid looking outside of ideologies also tend to rely on forces as historical actors for change. Neo-Whigs discuss republicanism as doing things in a concrete way that ideas are incapable of achieving in the real world. At the same time, turning a blind eye to ideology avoids interacting with how people saw themselves and the world around them. Ideology can provide explanations for action, inaction, and reveal the nature and causes of disagreements. Wood argues that colonists realized that they and Parliament ceased to share a common idea of justice, public good, and the colonies’ role in the Empire – a fact he believes to reside at the heart of their disagreement. The emphasis on ideology, with the popular veneration of classical republicanism, has shielded the founders – and by extension their pre-war debates – from economic interpretations until recently. The conflation of classical republican ideology with the actions of the founders creates two problems. First, as Appleby and others have observed, it assumes that they could free themselves from interest when their own political economy states that “all men have interests,” and, secondly, this conflation superimposes the elites’ motivations upon society at large. Historians know from the letters of founders like Adams that these were indeed merely men, susceptible to vanity and vice like everyone else. While they could resist these temptations, no one is perfect, and so taking them at their word denies contextualization of those words. Perhaps they did have motivation to seem disinterested, as Lynd and Waldstreicher suggest, but without leveling a more critical gaze at the founders’ writings and examining them outside an ideological framework that context may elude us.

McCoy’s idea of using political economy as an analytical tool seems extremely useful, as it seeks to examine how society, economy, and government interact; this provides a more complete picture of a given period. His specific definition, however, is problematic. McCoy uses an eighteenth-century definition of political economy. Specifically, he defines it as “the operation of government upon its domestic resources independent of its external or foreign administration.” This top-down interpretation of political economy necessitates a top-down analysis of society, which would explain why he focuses so heavily on social elites. A more neutral understanding of political economy wherein the economy, society, and government interact with and influence each other would enable a broader view rather than seeing elites as promulgating their views upon society. McCoy uses political economy to explore what the elite thought, and how that affected their economic policies, but none of these authors uses political economy to look at regular economic actors. It may be useful to turn that lens upon the same subjects Breen examines to see how their understanding of the role of government and their own socioeconomic situation informed their actions and beliefs leading up to and through the Revolutionary War.

Many historians have examined the period from 1780 to 1800, but there seems to be far less scholarship on pre-war society and popular debates. Even Michael A. McDonnell admits in his article, “Men Out Of Time: Confronting History and Myth,” in *The William and Mary Quarterly* that “most scholars agree that hundreds of thousands of ordinary Americans mobilized in favor of, or against, the resistance movement for their own reasons and complicated it to no end…we need to know much more about the motivations of the many, rather than the anxieties of a few.” Peskin’s approach comes close to this kind of analysis, but he merely turned his lens from the established political elite to the emergent economic ones. Since neither the economic nor political elite could single-handedly prop up the entirety of the Revolution, let alone the Revolutionary War, it begs the question why a broad swath of colonial society would support this venture. An investigation into their understanding of government, economics, and their place in colonial society could potentially illuminate their motivation for taking up arms.

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Nicholas Dawes is a U.C. Davis alumnus, and a graduate student of U.S. History with doctoral aspirations. His research interests revolve around political economy in the American Revolution and Early Republic.

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