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A (New) Economic History of the American Revolution?

EMMA ROTHCHILD

THEY were “merchants, lawyers, planters and preachers,” Bernard Bailyn wrote of the individuals whose “ideas, beliefs, fears and aspirations” are the subject of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. They were “heavily engaged in their regular occupations”; they were individuals with economic lives.¹ But their ideas and fears were not, for the most part, economic ideas, and *Ideological Origins* is—at first sight—an assertively uneconomic inquiry.

Only at first sight. To look again, I would like to suggest, is to see that *Ideological Origins* can be the opportunity for a new sort of economic history of the American Revolution, or at least for a new history of economic life, in which life is taken to include ideas as well as interests. When Bailyn’s *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* was published in 1955, it was described in the *Journal of Economic History* as “good old-fashioned economic history”; an inquiry into “who the merchants were and how their interests and ideas grew,” with “provocative sidelights” on “politics and culture.”² In *Ideological Origins*, after fifty years, there is the prospect of a new-fashioned economic history, of ideas, interests, and expectations.



¹Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, fiftieth anniversary edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017) v, xxi, xxiv, 13–14 (hereafter cited as *Ideological Origins*).

²Robert A. East, “New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century,” *Journal of Economic History* 16 (1956): 74–76.

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The “sordid” or “paltry” character of the American disputes over the period with which *Ideological Origins* is mostly concerned—from the Stamp Act of 1765 to the Coercive Acts of 1774—was much discussed at the time, and has been an awkward truth for historians ever since. The “song for American freedom” that John Dickinson sent to James Otis in 1768, to be set to the tune of the naval anthem “Heart of Oak,” was an ode to fiscality, bathetic in the extreme:

Our Purses are ready,

Steady, Friends, Steady,

Not as SLAVES, but as FREEMEN our Money we'll give.³

Taxes, duties, regulations, and the organization of the customs service; these were the institutions about which the Americans had so many ideas, the outcome of which was political revolution.⁴ It all seemed so disproportionate. An “object of commerce” was transposed into “a matter of policy,” Lord North said plaintively in the House of Commons; “it was impossible for him to have foreseen.”⁵

The commercial (or the economic) was jumbled together with the political, the sordid with the lofty, and the self-interested with the ideal. “The paltry Sum of Three-Pence which is now demanded” was so trivial, Dickinson wrote in November 1773, at the time of the crisis over the East India Company's tea, and the ultimate cause was so mighty; “our Condition as Slaves or Freemen.”⁶ “So paltry a sum as three-pence in the eyes of a financier, so insignificant an article as tea in the eyes of a philosopher, have shaken the pillars of a Commercial Empire that circled the whole globe,” Edmund Burke

³Letter to James Otis of July 4, 1768, “A New Song,” in *The Writings of John Dickinson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1895), 1:421, 431.

⁴See Gordon Wood, “Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 23 (1966): 3–32.

⁵Debate of January 23 1775, in *The Parliamentary History of England* (London: T.C. Hansard, 1813–) vol. 18, cols. 175, 177 (hereafter cited as *Parl. Hist.*).

⁶“Letters on the Tea Tax,” in *Writings of Dickinson*, 1:460–61.

said in April 1774.⁷ There was an enduring (unjust) imputation, in Lord Acton's words, that "the dispute, on both sides, was an affair of sordid interest."⁸

It is this jumble that *Ideological Origins* evokes. For the merchants, lawyers, planters, and preachers had political ideas about economic life. Their philosophizing was an activity, or a pastime, amidst their "regular occupations." They had interests in not paying taxes, interests in their economic destinies, and interests in their own opinions. There was no evident or explicit distinction between the "economic" and the "political," in the period with which *Ideological Origins* is concerned, and no conception of an "economy." There was no sense that self-interest, or self-love, was expressed only, or even mostly, in the pursuit of economic advantage. As James Madison wrote in *Federalist* 10, in his Humean or Smithian way, "as long as the connection subsists between [man's] reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other; and the former will be objects to which the latter will attach themselves."⁹

Power and credit were incompatible, Burke wrote early in the crisis, in one of his contributions to the Anglo-American literary wars of the times; it was a response to a pamphlet by William Knox, the former agent for Georgia, which was itself a response to American writings, and in particular to John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer*. In the "new world of commerce" associated with the colonies and the trading companies, Burke wrote, "the spirit of an extensive and intricate trading interest pervades the whole, always qualifying, and often controlling, every general idea of constitution and government." The "principle" of the great companies was "distinct from, and in some respects contrary to, the relation between prince and subject";

⁷Speech, April 19 1774, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1981), 2:415–16.

⁸"The American Revolution," in *Essays in the History of Liberty: Selected Writings of Lord Acton* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 1985), 192.

⁹Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Classics, 2001), 43.

“the idea of power must as much as possible be banished from it.”¹⁰

But power was the enduring obsession of the Americans, in Bailyn’s account, and it was the “intricate” pervasiveness of commercial interest that inspired their most vivid fears. The “paltry” impositions and duties were seen as the beginning of a vaster encroachment of power; “the first kind of alteration leads to the last,” in Dickinson’s expression.¹¹ They were also, and more insidiously, considered to be evidence of the incipiently despotic intentions of the ministry—of the corruption of moral character for which the Americans were looking with such exquisite anxiety.¹²

The advent of the East India Company in America was so alarming, from this perspective, because it provided proof, at last, of evil intentions. The watchmen on their rounds should be instructed to “call out every night, *past Twelve o’Clock, beware of the East-India Company*,” Dickinson wrote, and the pamphlets of 1773–1774 were the object of intense interest in “economic” interpretations of the American Revolution, as they have been in recent histories of global connections.¹³ Dickinson’s and other writings served to demonstrate, Arthur Schlesinger wrote in 1917, that “fear of monopoly was the mainspring of American opposition,” having been “carefully planted and nourished by the beneficiaries of the existing business order.”¹⁴ They were the expression of “imprecise ideas of

¹⁰*Observations on a Late State of the Nation* (1769), in Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 2:194–95. The pamphlet by William Knox, *The Present State of the Nation: particularly with respect to its Trade, Finances, &c. &c.*, was in Burke’s description a “sort of droning panegyric upon themselves” on behalf of “this author’s friends”; merchants with opinions about commercial regulation “who were to merit in flatteries, and to be paid in contracts.” Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 2:103, 200.

¹¹*Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1768), in *Writings of Dickinson*, 1:347; and see the discussion of this passage in “The Influence of America,” in Acton, *Essays in the History of Liberty*, 202.

¹²We were “in such a state of anxiety,” Dickinson wrote in 1774, of American sentiments at the time of the repeal of the Stamp Act; “Letter to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies in America” (1774), in *Writings of Dickinson*, 1:480–81.

¹³*A Letter from the Country, to a Gentleman in Philadelphia*, November 27, 1773, in *Writings of Dickinson*, 1:462–63.

¹⁴Arthur Meier Schlesinger, “The Uprising against the East India Company,” *Political Science Quarterly* 32 (1917), 60–79, 73, 79. *The Colonial Merchants and the*

global commerce and connectedness,” or of a “jumble of empires,” in recent evocations of long-distance or global history.¹⁵

In the perspective of the 1770s, where individuals had ideas about economic life, indistinctly political, economic, and psychological (or psychological-historical), the advent of the East India Company was a sign, as in *Ideological Origins*, that the English ministry had become an impious empire. The pamphlets about the tea were full of the language of evidence and of anxieties fulfilled. “Can you have a more incontestable evidence” of the East India Company’s avarice and extortion, asked “Hampden,” in New York in October 1773, in the sequence of five pamphlets called *Alarm*. Was there not now “incontestable proof” of the effects of the Company’s “iniquitous monopoly”? “This is a proof with a vengeance” of English intentions: “Can you want a more incontestable evidence of her design to enslave you?”¹⁶ There was a “present Design of the Ministry, and the India Company to enslave America,” according to the “New York Sons of Liberty.” Unsated by “corrupting their Country,” Dickinson wrote, the East India Company had now “cast their Eyes on *America*, as a new Theatre, whereon

American Revolution, 1763–1766 (New York: Columbia University, Faculty of Political Science, 1917), 279–304, and “The Crusade against the East India Company,” in *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764–1776* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 164–82. On the destruction of the tea in Boston in December 1773, see Benjamin Woods Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), Francis S. Drake, ed., *Tea Leaves* (Boston: A.O. Crane, 1884), and Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁵Emma Rothschild, “The East India Company and the American Revolution” (working paper, Centre for History and Economics, King’s College, Cambridge, 2002), 13, and “Global Commerce and the Question of Sovereignty in the Eighteenth-Century Provinces,” *Modern Intellectual History* 1 (2004): 3–25, 6. See Philip J. Stern, “British Asia and British Atlantic: Comparisons and Connections,” *WMQ* 63 (2006): 693–712; Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010); Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 70–76; Russ Castronovo, *Propaganda 1776: Secrets, Leaks, and Revolutionary Communications in Early America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jonathan Eacott, *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600–1830* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), esp. Chapter 4; Ashley L. Cohen, “The Global Indies: Historicizing Oceanic Metageographies,” *Comparative Literature* 69 (2017): 7–14.

¹⁶[Hampden], *The Alarm* (New York, 1773), 1–5, no. 3, [1], no. 5, [4].

to exercise their Talents of Rapine, Oppression and Cruelty.” Rights were “swallowed up in Power,” and “the Monopoly of Tea, is, I dare say, but a small Part of the Plan.”¹⁷

The designs of the East India Company were evocative, in turn, of the colonists’ literary sources. The classical writers with whom the Americans were most engaged, in Bailyn’s account—Cicero, in the Verrine orations that were so popular in the House of Commons debates on East India policy, Sallust or Tacitus—were themselves preoccupied with the misuse of economic power in colonial governments, and with the consequent decline of imperial political life. Cicero’s indictment of Gaius Verres, on behalf of the people of Sicily, was concerned in part with the misuse of power (so much *imperium*, so much *auctoritas*) and in part with the details of wills, scaffolding, the price of wheat, and contracts for public works.¹⁸ Utica, the scene of Addison’s *Cato* (“Already Caesar / Has ravaged half the globe . . .”) was a colonial outpost in North Africa, filled, in Sallust’s description, with a great multitude of rapacious traders.¹⁹ “Was it not the sudden plunder of the East that gave the final blow to the freedom of Rome,” Burke asked in the House of Commons. The renegade East India Company official William Bolts compared the “cruelty of oppression” of the Company in Bengal to the “pro-consular ravages that were practiced in the Roman provinces . . . during the last, luxurious, corrupt, and rapacious stages of that once glorious, but then degenerated and sinking commonwealth.”²⁰

The idea of sovereignty was powerfully unsecular, in the years with which *Ideological Origins* is concerned, and the

¹⁷Dickinson, “A Letter from the Country,” 459–61.

¹⁸*Ideological Origins*, 25–26. Gaius Verres was the governor of Sicily, which he “devastated and ruined”; “countless sums of money, under a new and unprincipled regulation, were wrung from the purses of the farmers.” See Cicero, *The Verrine Orations*, trans. L. H. G. Greenwood (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) I.4–5, II.1.55–57, II.3.84, II.5.15, 1:79–81, 275–85, 2:239, 511.

¹⁹“The War with Jugurtha,” in *Sallust*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), LXIV, 5–6. On Washington, Jefferson, and Addison’s *Cato*, see Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 36, 57–60.

²⁰Debate of December 18 1772, in *Parl. Hist.*, vol. 17, cols. 672–73; William Bolts, *Considerations on India Affairs* (London: J. Almon, 1772), viii, 213; also quoted in *Monthly Review* 46 (1772): 239–41.

English ministry was considered to be impious, as well as corrupt.²¹ The East India Company was itself a longstanding object of morbid interest in puritan thought, and in the spoken, devotional word. Jonathan Edwards suggested rather confusingly, in a letter of 1747 to the Minister of Cambuslang in Scotland, that the effects of the pouring out of the 6th vial on the River Euphrates, and its eventual drying up, might be visible in the “almost ruining French East India trade” by “burning their stores at Port l’Orient,” and in the drying up, in Cape Breton, of the “supply of all popish countries with fish.” Of “silver, gold, jewels, and precious things, fetched from both the Indies,” Edwards said in Northampton, Massachusetts, “these things are such as God commonly in his providence gives his worst enemies, those whom he hates and despises most.”²²

The East India Company connection was explicit, too, in the “radical social and political thought” of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England that is the dominant source of the colonists’ ideology in *Ideological Origins*. The country polemicists were not proposing “economic reforms” in a nineteenth-century sense, but they were describing economic life.²³ The first instance of “hypocrisy or lying,” in *Cato’s Letters*, was the East India Company, after the French and Spanish wars, and ahead even of the South Sea Company; it was a “Confederacy of cunning Fellows, against fair and general Trading.” In Holland, Trenchard wrote, “the *East-India* Company governs the State, and is in effect the State itself; and I pray God that we may never see the like elsewhere!”²⁴ These were familiar lamentations, as the anti-Company pamphlets of

²¹The word “sovereignty” occurs fairly frequently in the titles of books and pamphlets published in the 1760s and 1770s, of which the large majority were works of theology, from Thomas Dixon’s *Sovereignty of the Divine Administration* of 1766 to John Wesley’s *Thoughts upon God’s Sovereignty* of 1777.

²²Jonathan Edwards to the Reverend William McCulloch, January 21, 1747, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 16:220; “Sermon Preached at Northampton in August 1750,” in *The Works of President Edwards* (London: James Black, 1817), 7:493.

²³*Ideological Origins*, 47, 283.

²⁴[John Trenchard], *Cato’s Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, And other important SUBJECTS*, 5th ed. (London: T. Woodward, 1748), 1:32; 3:211.

the 1690s were republished in the 1730s, and the old invective was taken down once more in the 1770s.²⁵ In New York, in 1773, the first *Alarm* pamphlet was a narrative, invoking Rapin's *History of England*, to show that the East India Company had represented the "Mammon of Unrighteousness" in 1694–1695, dispensing "immense bribes" in the House of Commons.²⁶

The "low" sources of information, during the crisis over the tea, confirmed the colonists' fears. In the summer of 1773, the young Boston bookseller Henry Knox, later Secretary of War, received a consignment from London—it was loaded on the *Dartmouth*, Captain Hall, which on its next crossing sailed into history as the first of the tea ships—that consisted of two hundred and thirty three copies of nine separate magazines for the month of March; magazines that were filled, obsessively, with news about the East India Company.²⁷ (The *Beaver*, whose tea was also destroyed in Boston harbor, was carrying the magazines for the month of August, and the *William*, which ran ashore with its tea at Cape Cod, carried Henry Knox's supply of magazines for the month of September).²⁸

The *Gentleman's Magazine*, which Knox ordered, serialized the minutes of the parliamentary committee of inquiry into Indian affairs—it was chaired by General John Burgoyne, later the anti-hero of Saratoga—in no fewer than nine consecutive issues, from July 1772 to March 1773.²⁹ There were five consecutive installments in the political reports of the *Town and*

²⁵In 1730, the attack on the Company "followed closely on the lines of those of the late seventeenth century; so closely, indeed, that it was thought worthwhile to reprint some of the pamphlets of that era"; Lucy S. Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1952), 29.

²⁶[Hampden], *The Alarm*, no. 1, [1–2].

²⁷"The following Magazines for March on board the *Dartmouth*, Capt. Hall. 80 London 20 Gentlemen 60 Town 4 Monthly Reviews 4 Everymans Mags. 15 Oxfords 12 Universal 4 Critical Reviews 28 Ladys 6 She Stoops to Conquer," Thomas Longman to Henry Knox, April 20, 1773. Shipping List, April 20, 1773, I–43, Henry Knox Papers, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

²⁸Christopher Brown of Longman's to Henry Knox, September 3, 1773 and October 4, 1773, in the Henry Knox Papers, I–73 and I–74.

²⁹*The Gentleman's Magazine, and Historical Chronicle* (1772), 42:301–303, 349–50, 418–19, 483–84, 532–33, 617–21, (1773), 43:35–37, 89–91, 140–42.

Country Magazine.³⁰ The *London Magazine* contained items about East Indian affairs in every issue from May 1772 to May 1773, including a report of the comments of General Burgoyne that the East India Company “is rotten to the very core,” and that “oppression in every shape has ground the faces of the poor defenseless natives.”³¹ In New York, the *Alarm* explicitly invoked the authority of the London press: “Have not the English Prints, for no short Time, been replete with the Accusations of base Delinquents, against each other? . . . This, and more than this, has been charged upon them in the Face of the Sun, in the London Papers.”³²

These were the magazines that reached Boston in the summer and autumn of 1773. There were sketches, plays, and reviews of poetry about the power of conscience; *The NABOB: or Asiatic Plunderers*, or “When ills are distant, are they then your own?”³³ The *Town and Country* published a sketch called *The Directors in the Suds*, in which the East India Company directors, “dismayed at the Ghosts of the Black Merchants,” lamented their inadequate attention to Lord North: “there has been a mistake somewhere . . . hush money properly applied might have done wonders.”³⁴ The *London Magazine*, “at a time when the nation in general is occupied in discussing East India affairs,” published a collection of East India Company jokes “to relieve a little the intenseness of thinking.”³⁵

Even the intricacies of the parliamentary drama over the East India Company seemed to confirm the conspiracies that the colonists so feared.³⁶ The comparison between America and

³⁰*The Town and Country Magazine or Universal Repository of Knowledge, Instruction, and Entertainment* (1772), 4:705–6; (1773), 5:156, 186–90, 240, 293.

³¹*The London Magazine: Or, Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer* (1773), 42:12.

³²[Hampden], *The Alarm*, no. 2, [1].

³³*The Gentleman's Magazine* (1773), 43:392.

³⁴*The Town and Country Magazine* (1772), 4:705–6.

³⁵*The London Magazine* (1772), 41:615–16.

³⁶Burgoyne's committee of inquiry was adorned with self-identified experts on American affairs. There was Isaac Barré of the Battle of Québec, who presented the remonstrances of Boston merchants in 1769; Barlow Trecothick, born either in Boston or at sea, rich war contractor and the hero of the repeal of the Stamp Act; Thomas Pitt, Pitt's nephew and a projector of the Grand Ohio Company; George Johnstone,

India was explicit in the English publications. Edmund Burke warned of “golden dreams of cockets on the Ganges, or visions of stamp duties on *Perwanna’s*, *Dusticks*, *Kistbundeas*, and *Husbulhookums*.”³⁷ Bengal was described as a “wealthy, populous and extensive country,” in a pamphlet of 1770 about “what the value of each of those two countries is to Britain.” It was inhabited by an “ingenious, industrious and frugal people possessing the knowledge of arts and manufactures”; America was by contrast a country of people “illiberally selfish, and sordidly attached to their own interest,” which “hangs like a wasting disease on the strength of Britain.”³⁸ Thomas Pownall, governor of Massachusetts and himself the grandson of an East India Company official, compared in great detail the characters of Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Virginia with British sovereignty in Bengal. Thomas Hutchinson compared the Massachusetts Bay Company to “the East-India and other great companies.”³⁹

who had been sent home in disgrace from West Florida, and moved the resolution about surplus tea in the General Court of the East India Company; Henry Conway, Secretary of State for the Southern colonies at the time of the repeal of the Stamp Act; Welbore Ellis, the Secretary of War responsible for the legislation of 1765 over quartering troops in America; Sir William Meredith, the brother-in-law of Barlow Trecothick, who presented Virginia’s petition during the Stamp Act Crisis; Frederick Vane, the brother-in-law of Sir William Meredith; Rose Fuller, who presented the petition of the Jamaica merchants against the Stamp Act; Edward Bacon, who arranged the civil settlements of East and West Florida; William Pulteney, the brother of George Johnstone, proprietor in Florida and Grenada, and owner, after the Revolution, of 1,300,000 acres in upstate New York: these were men with American interests and American correspondents, known in America and ready to discover American precedents and American omens. *Parl. Hist.*, vol. 17, cols. 463–64; Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1754–1790* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1964). On George Johnstone and William Pulteney, see Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires*; on Sir William Meredith, Rose Fuller, and Colonel Barré, see Michael Kammen, *A Rope of Sand: The Colonial Agents, British Politics, and the American Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968); on General Conway and Secretary Ellis, see Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

³⁷Burke, *Observations*, 174–75.

³⁸*The Importance of the British Dominion in India, compared with that in America* (London: J. Almon, n.d.), 9, 37, 57–59.

³⁹Thomas Pownall, *The Right, Interest, and Duty of the State, as Concerned in the Affairs of the East Indies* (London: S. Bladon, 1773), 15–24; Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay* (Boston: Thomas and John Fleet, 1764), 13.

The colonists' "best Bishop," Jonathan Shipley, described the famine in Bengal—in a mock oration that was reprinted in the course of 1774 in Salem, Boston, Newport, Hartford, Lancaster, New York, Philadelphia, and Williamsburg—as an experiment that might be imposed on America: England should be "content with the spoils and destruction of the East," having "in the space of five or six years, in virtue of this right [of taxation], destroyed, starved and driven away more inhabitants from Bengal, than are to be found at present in all our American colonies . . . My Lords, it would be too disgraceful to ourselves, to try so cruel an experiment more than once."⁴⁰

The East and the West, India and America, were jumbled together in colonial policy. English politicians, like the East India Company officials in India, were "multiform characters," as in William Bolts' widely studied *Considerations on India Affairs*; they were "Merchants, or Sovereigns," "all of which different characters they can and do assume, as occasion requires . . . [it would] be difficult to trace those gentlemen through their various metamorphoses."⁴¹ There was a "promiscuous tumult and confusion," Burgoyne said in the House of Commons, in which "the different functions and interests of merchants, and statesmen, and lawyers, and kings, are huddled together."⁴²

It was this frightening and Ovidian scene that the colonists evoked with such anxiety in 1773 and 1774, in the eventuality of a new victory of British sovereignty. Thomas Hutchinson was the embodiment of the multiple identities, political and commercial, that were characteristic of the mercantile global economy. He was responsible, as an officer of the crown, for the enforcement of customs duties and the interdiction of smuggling; he owned most of his private fortune in East India Company stock; his official salary was paid out of the revenue of

⁴⁰[Jonathan Shipley], *A Speech intended to have been spoken on the Bill for altering the Charters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay* (London: T. Cadell, 1774), 3–5, 34. Shipley was "the best Bishop that adorns the bench," John Adams wrote in one of his Novanglus letters in 1775; *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 2:250.

⁴¹Bolts, *Considerations on India Affairs*, 93–94.

⁴²Debate of April 13 1772, in *Parl. Hist.*, vol. 17, cols. 456–57.

the tea duty; his sons and their cousins were the principal consignees of the fatal tea.⁴³ As one of Lord Dartmouth's informants wrote from Boston in December 1773, "Governor Hutchinson has not appeared in this affair but in a Small Degree, the popular Suspicion is however strongly against him, from the Connection."⁴⁴

The colonists did not know the outcome of the struggle in which they were engaged, to make a quintessentially Bailynesque point; they did not know whether Thomas Hutchinson would return in triumph to Boston, the Lord Clive of the new empire, or whether the Coercive Acts would not, as Edmund Burke predicted in the House of Commons, "sentence to famine at least 300,000 people in two provinces" of New England.⁴⁵ It is easy to know, now, that Hutchinson did not return, that the Massachusetts revolutionaries were not sent for trial in London, and that there was not famine in New England. But it is not at all easy to know, or to imagine, what would have happened if Burgoyne, the nemesis of the East India Company, had been a more successful soldier; or if the instruction of the House of Commons of March 1774—to require of the town of Boston to "make good the damage to the East India Company"—had been obeyed.⁴⁶ It is easy to show that the fears of the early 1770s about the East India Company in America were unfounded; it is not easy to show that they were also unreasonable.

The elaborate economic analogy between America and Bengal was itself much less odd, in the world of the 1770s, than

⁴³Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 154, 259.

⁴⁴Thomas Danforth in Boston to the Earl of Dartmouth, December 28, 1773, DW 1778/11/1/758, Dartmouth Papers, Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford, UK.

⁴⁵Speech, March 6 1775, in Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 3:99. The revolutionaries did not know, although they may have imagined, that Thomas Hutchinson happened to meet the Lord Chief Justice at church in Highgate in August 1774 and fell to discussing whether it would be better to "sign a warrant for apprehending persons in Boston" ("things would never be right until some of them were brought over"), or to begin with "examples made here first for the like offences"; *The Diary and Letters of His Excellency Thomas Hutchinson, Esq.*, ed. Peter Orlando Hutchinson (London, 1883), 1:218–19.

⁴⁶Debate of March 14, 1774, in *Parl. Hist.*, vol. 17, col. 1166.

it seemed to be in the light of subsequent events. The Americans were ignorant of the future course of political history, and they were ignorant of future economic history as well. It has been known for a long time that America is rich and Bengal is poor; that America became independent of British sovereign power in 1776 (or 1783), and India 170 years later; that the people of Bengal, described in 1770 as “ingenious, industrious and frugal,” were considered by the English, within a generation, to be a childlike race, a “people aërially predisposed to indolence.”⁴⁷ But it was not unreasonable of John Dickinson to surmise, in 1773, that the East India Company had “now, it seems, cast their Eyes on *America*, as a new Theatre.” He was not ill-informed—his estimate was in fact far too low—in the surmise, about events in Bengal, that “fifteen hundred Thousand, it is said, perished by Famine in one Year, not because the Earth denied its Fruits, but this Company and its Servants engrossed all the Necessaries of Life, and set them at so high a Rate, that the Poor could not purchase them.”⁴⁸



The merchants, lawyers, and officials of the American Revolution were discoursing in the language of economic life in these disputes; like the *bourgeois gentilhomme* of a hundred years earlier, they were speaking “economic,” or “economics.” If the economy is defined ostensibly, as a subset of existence—as in M.I. Finley’s account of ancient economic life, “of course they farmed, traded, manufactured, mined, taxed, coined, deposited, and loaned money, made profits or failed in their enterprises”—then the revolutionaries and their

⁴⁷This was the Irish critic George Ensor’s summary of the views of Orme and other British theorists of the Indian empire; George Ensor, *An Inquiry concerning the Population of Nations: containing a Refutation of Mr Malthus’s Essay on Population* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1818), 396–97.

⁴⁸Dickinson, “A Letter from the Country,” 460. The most detailed account of the famine, by Sir William Hunter, estimated that 10 million people had died in the span of nine months; Sir William Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal*, 7th ed. (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1897), 34; and see Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

opponents were concerned, in the 1760s and 1770s, with economic relationships.⁴⁹ But these economic relationships were a constituent, in turn, of what Bailyn has described as the revolutionaries' "subjective, inner world." For "what people do bears some relation to what they think and feel and believe," and it is as true of economic life as of anything else that "the world is never perceived raw, pure and immaculate; it is filtered through human minds." Historical understanding, in Bailyn's account, is a process of trying to describe "the maps of political and social worlds [that individuals] carried in their heads," and how that inner life is "related to the external world of social and economic circumstances and political events."⁵⁰

The economic historians of the 1910s were close readers of the rhetoric of the American Revolution, in that they saw, as so many earlier historians had not, how intensely commercial were the colonists' writings. They saw, too, that the political writers of the times were economic men, merchants and planters in the new world of long-distance commerce, as well as individuals writing in words of sunlight. There are passages of the *Alarm* series that are little more than strings of numbers; "the annual loss to your Merchants will be 11561l. 18s. 6d."⁵¹ John Dickinson, with his library and his Sallust, his memories of studying in the Middle Temple and his faithful slave Cato, was a careful accountant of colonial interests. The acquisition of "the scorching sands of *Florida*," he wrote, is "greatly injurious to these colonies. Our chief property consists in *lands*. These would have been of a much greater value, if such prodigious additions had not been made to the *British* territories on this continent."⁵²

But the early twentieth-century opposition of ideas and interests—of "abstract political ideals" versus "concrete economic issues"—also served to limit the possibilities of economic

⁴⁹M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 21–22.

⁵⁰Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), xii.

⁵¹[Hampden], *Alarm*, no. 4, [2].

⁵²Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer*, 360–62.

history.⁵³ Economic life, as in the grand narratives of economic rationality of the later nineteenth century, was a world without ideas, a place of material interests and social forces. Individuals were considered to be “infinitely egotistical and infinitely farsighted,” and their interests were immediate, material, uninfluenced by their opinions.⁵⁴ There was the world of circumstance and the world of illusion, as in Marx’s distinction between “material” and “ideal” explanation; the repudiation of the importance of ideas in history, including economic ideas, as “not history but Hegelian *vieillesse*.”⁵⁵ In Schlesinger’s account of the “fear of monopoly” as against “violated rights,” as explanations for revolutionary events, the colonists’ anxieties about the East India Company (“its notoriously bad record in India”) were the ephemeral “flowering” of a more substantial “tree,” planted “by the beneficiaries of the existing business order.”⁵⁶

Histories of global connections have been concerned with the flowers more than the tree. They are cultural histories of economic life, without the material explanations of earlier economic history; evocations of revolutionary times, without the “why” of causal history. The American Revolution has been an exception, for the most part, to the sort of causal historiography, of revolutions and wars, that was characterized, in Christopher Clark’s description, by “the illusion of a steadily building causal pressure; the factors pile up on top of each other pushing down on the events; political actors become mere executors of forces long established and beyond their control.”⁵⁷ As the last bourgeois paradise on earth—“modern bourgeois from the very origin,” in Engels’ description—British North America was an unpromising subject for histories of “forces” and “factors” in

⁵³Charles A. Beard, *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy* (1915; repr. New York: Macmillan, 1949), 3; Schlesinger, *The Colonial Merchants*, 91, 273.

⁵⁴Letter of 1901 from Henri Poincaré to Léon Walras in Walras, “Économique et mécanique,” *Metroeconomica* (1960), 12:3–13.

⁵⁵Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), trans. C.P. Dutt and V. Chattopadhyaya (London: International Publishers, n.d.), 87–88; letter to P.K. Annenkov, December 1846, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 152–54.

⁵⁶Schlesinger, “The Uprising against the East India Company,” 73, 77, 79.

⁵⁷Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), xxvii.

comparative revolutions.⁵⁸ But the histories of oceanic revolution have avoided the “how” as well as the “why” of economic (and political) history; the “what really happened,” as well as the quantitative understanding of regulations, contracts, and exchanges.

The “challenge of modern historiography” is still recognizable, in this respect, in the possibility that Bailyn identified in the aftermath of *Ideological Origins*, of a “description of internal states of mind and their relation to external circumstances and events.”⁵⁹ The individuals who were the subjects of *Ideological Origins* had ideas in the course of their economic lives, which were also abstract ideas. They had ideas about economic change, which were also political. They were interested in the destiny of their landed property and in the destiny of their ideas. Adam Smith said of reading Thucydides that it is “these uneasy emotions that chiefly affect us and give us a certain pleasing anxiety,” and the Americans, too, seem to have found an uneasy pleasure in their own anxieties.⁶⁰ These anxieties—these fears of the East India Company, in 1773—were in turn so vivid, so lived, because they were so close to the exchanges of ordinary existence.

The experience of economic life—of the exchanges of money, individuals, and commodities that Bailyn described earlier in the *New England Merchants*, and later in *Voyagers to the West*—was itself among the circumstances of political thought. It is also an outstanding subject for economic-cultural history.⁶¹ For times are propitious, now, for a new history of economic life in the period of the American Revolution, which would also be a history of the economic ideas that are at the edge of the

⁵⁸It was “founded by *petits bourgeois* and peasants who ran away from European feudalism.” Friedrich Engels to Florence Kelley Wischnewetsky, June 3, 1886, and to Nikolai Danielson, October 17, 1893 in Marx-Engels Correspondence, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/>.

⁵⁹Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 1–24, 22.

⁶⁰Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, ed. J.C. Bryce (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 88.

⁶¹As Danielle Allen said at the fiftieth anniversary conference at Yale, “practical problems force theorizing,” and practical experience makes sense of abstract ideas.

horizon in *Ideological Origins*. The inheritance of nineteenth-century views of economic rationality is much lighter than it was when *Ideological Origins* was published fifty years ago.⁶² Modern micro-economic theory is filled with uncertainty, sentiment, and illusion. Marxism is filled with immateriality.⁶³ The causal history of revolutions—"a revolution of misery or of prosperity"—is long out of fashion.⁶⁴

The times are propitious, most of all, because of the new multiplicity of sources about eighteenth-century exchanges. Thomas Danforth, the informant who wrote to Lord Dartmouth about the suspicions of Governor Hutchinson's East India "Connection," described himself as a particularly useful source of information, because he was not in office; and "therefore can with more Ease mix with the People, and obtain their true Sentiments and Motives."⁶⁵ There is a poignant sense in Bailyn's writings, from time to time, that it is almost possible—but not quite—to mix with the people of colonial America, and to obtain their true ideas and sentiments. The "pattern of middle-level beliefs and ideas" that has been Bailyn's enduring subject is as elusive, now, as it has ever been.⁶⁶ But there is at least more evidence, or information, as the cultural histories of the global age of revolutions have shown.

⁶²The same time has elapsed between now and *Ideological Origins*, as between *Ideological Origins* and Schlesinger's *Colonial Merchants*, as Gordon Wood pointed out at the Yale conference.

⁶³"History is the struggle of men for ideas, as well as a reflection of their material environment," Eric Hobsbawm wrote against the "bourgeois" interpretation of the English politics of the 1760s, in which "ideals and movements are transitory and superficial, lobbying in some sense eternal and 'real'." "By retelling the story of politics without the issues, ideals, passions and movements which make up political history, it falsifies—and indeed denies—history." "Where are British Historians Going?" *Marxist Quarterly* 2 (1955): 14–26, 21–22.

⁶⁴"Plan de l'ouvrage," in C.-E. Labrousse, *La crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'ancien régime et au début de la révolution* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1943), unpag., xli–li.

⁶⁵Thomas Danforth, Boston to the Earl of Dartmouth, December 28, 1773, DW 1778/11/1/758, Dartmouth Papers.

⁶⁶Bernard Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 3–31, 10.

The vast availability of eighteenth-century newspapers, books, pamphlets, and ephemera has made possible new investigations of language and literature; the history of the book, the history of information, and the history of news have opened up new historical inquiries into the arcs of ideas; the genealogy industry has opened up a new prosopography of political life; there is a multitude of (unsordid) sources about economic life. There are important studies of the legal institutions of late-colonial America, and of the business connections between the West Indian and North American colonies.⁶⁷

The juxtaposition of the events of political (or extraordinary) and economic (or ordinary) life has been evident in relation to the lives of the “founders,” at least since the great twentieth-century editions of correspondence. In the spring of 1774, George Washington, who later corresponded about principles of commerce with Adam Smith’s eccentric Edinburgh friend, the Earl of Buchan, was engaged in correspondence about the importation of Germans to his lands on the Ohio; “be so good as to ask some of the Palatine Importers, what they would deliver two hundred Families (not much incumbered with children) at Alexandria for.”⁶⁸ It is also possible, now, with the vastly increased access to print and archival sources, to imagine a micro-history “seen from below,” or a collection of micro-histories, of many more of the participants in the American Revolution; and of the relationships, in their own lives, between economic experience and political choices.

The period of the American Revolution is a good subject for a new-fashioned economic history of this sort. There was no clear distinction between the economic and political; it was before the rise of nineteenth-century (bourgeois and materialist)

⁶⁷Justin du Rivage and Claire Priest, “The Stamp Act and the Political Origins of American Legal and Economic Institutions,” *Southern California Law Review* 88 (2015): 875–912.

⁶⁸Letter, February 17 1774, in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 3:185–87. The proposal was to request his correspondent in London “to send me a parcel of these people”; Washington’s intention, engagingly, was to “make things as easy and agreeable as possible to these emigrants”; letter, February 22, 1774, 187–88; letter, April 22, 1793, *The Writings of Washington*, 32:427–28.

rationality; the distinction between the “merchant” and the “sovereign” was an explicit subject of political dispute. But in the early twenty-first century, too, the economic and the political are intricately interconnected. Economic anxieties are the basis of political choices; political designs are presented as a prospect of economic redemption; public rationality is long-gone (and long-lamented.) It is a good time, half a century after *Ideological Origins*, for a history of “middle-level” economic ideas.

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