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The Social Origins of the American Revolution: An Evaluation and an Interpretation*

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Given the rich theoretical literature on revolution that has been published over the last decade with its heavy emphasis on the relationship between revolutions and the social systems in which they occur,[1] it is hardly surprising that historians of modern political revolutions have increasingly turned their attention to the wider social context in their search for an explanation for those events or that their discussions of the causal pattern of revolutions now give as much attention to social strain as to political and ideological conflict; to social dysfunction, frustration, anomie, and their indices as to weaknesses and tensions within the political system.[2] This enlarged frame of inquiry has yielded a much more comprehensive understanding of several specific revolutions.[3] The question of whether it will prove equally fruitful for all varieties of great modern political revolutions is raised by several recent efforts to apply it to the American Revolution.

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* An earlier version of this paper was presented at San Diego State College and San Jose State College on March 20 and 21, 1972 as the second annual lecture of the The California State University and Colleges Statewide Lecture Series to Honor the Bicentennial of the American Revolution.

[1] Especially Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Boston, 1966). But see also Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York, 1962); James C. Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *American Sociological Review*, XXVII (1962), 5-19; Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966); Henry Bienen, *Violence and Social Change* (Chicago, 1968); and Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, 1970).

I

The idea that the American Revolution may have had a social content—that is, social origins and social consequences—is hardly a new one. It has existed in a crude form ever since the Revolution, and between 1900 and 1930 a number of individual scholars—especially Charles H. Lincoln, Carl L. Becker, Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., Charles A. Beard, and J. Franklin Jameson—formulated an elaborate social interpretation of the Revolution.[4] Investigating various aspects of the internal political life of the American colonies between 1760 and 1790, they discovered what they took to be serious economic and social antagonisms underlying the major events of the American Revolution at virtually every stage of its development. Far from having been simply a war for independence from Great Britain, the American Revolution—as these men came to see it—was a *social* struggle by underprivileged groups against the special privileges and political dominance of the old colonial aristocracy.

The details of this interpretation are too well known to require lengthy discussion here. Colonial society by the middle decades of the eighteenth century was everywhere fraught with severe class conflict arising out of an ever greater concentration of wealth into the hands of the privileged few and an ever more rigid social structure, an increasingly aristocratic political system, and severe resentment among the masses who were more and more being deprived of any opportunity to realize their own economic and political ambitions. Not surprisingly, the resulting tensions among these antagonistic social groups came surging to the surface during the Revolutionary controversy between 1765 and 1776 and, as Merrill Jensen later argued, converted the Revolution from a simple movement for independence from Great Britain into a "war against the colonial aristocracy."[5] Assessing the results of this "internal revolution," Jameson explicitly argued that the American Revolution profoundly altered many features of colonial social and economic life and represented a significant advance toward a "levelling democracy" in the Revolutionary era.[6]

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[2] See, for instance, the influential translation of the recent theoretical literature for historians by Lawrence Stone, "Theories of Revolution," *World Politics*, XVIII (1966), 159-76.

[3] Two splendid examples are by J. W. Smit, "The Netherlands Revolution," and by Lawrence Stone, "The English Revolution," in Robert Forster and Jack P. Greene, eds., *Preconditions of Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Baltimore, 1970), 19-108.

[4] Charles H. Lincoln, *The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania, 1760-1776* (Philadelphia, 1901); Carl L. Becker, *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (Madison, 1909); Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr., *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776* (New York, 1918); Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1913); J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution as a Social Movement* (Princeton, 1926).

In origins as well as in results, the American Revolution thus came to be thought of as the product not merely of a quarrel between Britain and the colonies but also of deep fissures within colonial society and as a social upheaval equal to the French, if not the Russian, Revolution. Because of its obvious indebtedness to the liberal concept of American public life during the era from which it emerged, this view of the Revolution has subsequently been labeled the Progressive interpretation.[7] But it was elaborated by still other scholars during the 1930s and 1940s. So widespread was its acceptance that it continued well into the 1950s to be the orthodox interpretation of the Revolution.[8]

As is well known, this whole interpretation was shattered and deeply discredited by the research of a wide range of scholars between 1945 and 1965. A number of detailed studies of segments and aspects of the political life in virtually every colony as well as

[5] Merrill Jensen, *The Articles of Confederation: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution, 1774-1781* (Madison, 1940), 11

[6] Jameson, 18.

[7] A penetrating general discussion of the three leading Progressive historians is by Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York, 1968). For a more detailed analysis of the Progressive interpretation of the Revolution, see Jack P. Greene, *The Reappraisal of the American Revolution in Recent Historical Literature* (Washington, 1967), 7-17.

[8] Greene, *Reappraisal*, 13-17.

many of the concrete social changes emphasized by Jameson seemed to indicate that, far from being similar to the French Revolution, the American Revolution was a peculiarly American event in which there had been remarkably little social discontent expressed, no real social upheaval, and relatively few changes in the existing American social structure. Thus, in the decades after the Second World War, the American Revolution came to be interpreted as an event that had been almost entirely political with little specific social content and that could be understood, therefore, almost exclusively in political terms. Where the Progressive historians had gone wrong was, first, in reading the fundamental social conflicts of their own day back into the Revolution and, second, in using a conceptual framework derived from the French Revolution and later European revolutions to identify the questions they brought to the American Revolution—questions, the data seemed to indicate, that were obviously irrelevant to the American experience.[9]

Predictably, and happily, we had just begun to feel comfortable with this view of the origins and nature of the American Revolution when the new analysis itself came under assault. The most compelling call for a revival of interest in the social content of the Revolution came from Gordon S. Wood in 1966 in an extended analysis of Bernard Bailyn's book-length introduction to *Pamphlets of the American Revolution 1750-1776*.[10] Commenting on Bailyn's heavy emphasis upon the role of ideas in the coming of the Revolution, Wood argues that it is "precisely the remarkable revolutionary character of the Americans' ideas now being revealed by historians [such as Bailyn] that best indicates that something profoundly unsettling was going on in society." The "very nature" of the colonists' rhetoric, "its obsession with corruption and disorder, its hostile and conspiratorial outlook, and its millennial vision of a regenerated society," Wood argues, reveals "as nothing else apparently can the American Revolution as a *true revolution* with its sources lying deep within the social structure. For this kind of frenzied rhetoric," he contends, "could spring only from the most severe sorts of social strain."[11]

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[9] *Ibid.*, 17-79, discusses in detail the implications of post-World War II scholarship on the Revolution. A representative collection of this scholarship will be found in Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Reinterpretation of the American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York, 1968).

[10] Bernard Bailyn, introduction to *Pamphlets of the American Revolution 1750-1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965-), I.

As yet, Wood's call for "a new look at the social sources of the Revolution"[12] has not been answered by any systematic or comprehensive assault upon this problem. But there has been a wide assortment of specialized studies of various aspects of American social life between 1725 and 1775. Most of them have been, at the most, only implicitly concerned with explaining the American Revolution. But the data and conclusions they have provided may be used to construct and to evaluate some hypotheses about the possible relationship between social strain and the origins of the Revolution. The findings of these studies seem to lend themselves to one or the other of two central hypotheses. The first, which has never been explicitly formulated but has been gradually taking shape over the past fifteen years, is that colonial society underwent a dramatic erosion of internal social cohesion over the period from 1690 to 1760. The second, an updated and more sophisticated variant of the old Progressive thesis, is that over the same period, the social structure of the colonies was becoming more and more rigid and social strain correspondingly more intense.

II

The most impressive support for the first of these hypotheses is found in Richard L. Bushman's penetrating *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765*,[13] a case study of the various strains created by the rapid economic and demographic growth of that colony. But many other studies can also be used for its elaboration. According to this hypothesis, a great variety of developments combined to keep colonial society in a state of perpetual and disorienting ferment, a state that was both rapidly accelerating and increasing in intensity and extent in the decades just prior to the Revolution. Chief among these developments were, first, the rapid territorial and demographic expansion, including the influx of many previously unrepresented religious and ethnic groups, and, second, the extraordinary acceleration of the economy with an attendant increase in economic opportunity and abundance. But there were many other developments that contributed to the ferment: (1) the shattering of religious uniformity by that great spiritual upheaval known as the Great Awakening;[14] (2) the rise of towns and small cities with life styles and social dynamics that pointedly distinguished them from the traditional rural communities of colonial America;[15] (3) a quickening of the pace of social differentiation marked by the appearance of an increasingly more complex institutional and social structure and greater extremes in wealth;[16] (4) the intensification of the seemingly endemic factionalism of colonial politics as men competed vigorously and ruthlessly with one another in their quest for land, wealth, status, and supremacy.[17]

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[11] Gordon S. Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXIII (1966), 26, 31 (italics added).

[12] *Ibid.*, 24.

[13] Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

[14] See especially, Alan Heimart, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, 1966); C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* (New Haven, 1962); Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York, 1957); William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston, 1967), 1-109; and Bushman, 147-232. All of these works concentrate on New England. For the impact of the Great Awakening elsewhere one must still turn to two older works: Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, N.C., 1930), and Charles Hartshorn Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, 1920).

[15] The social impact of urbanization has not been systematically analyzed, but see the older study by Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America 1743-1776* (New York, 1955), and three recent studies of individual towns: Sam Bass Warner Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia, 1968), 3-45; George C. Rogers Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Norman, Okla., 1969), 3-115; and G. B. Warden, *Boston 1689-1776* (Boston, 1970).

[16] On the process of social differentiation, see, among other studies, Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York, 1970), 271-571; James A. Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXII (1965), 75-92; Kenneth A. Lockridge, "Land, Population and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790," *Past and Present*, No. 39 (1968), 62-80; James T. Lemon and Gary B. Nash, "The Distribution of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century America: A Century of Change in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1693-1802," *Journal of Social History*, II (1968), 1-24; and Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965).

[17] Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1968), 55-161.

Some of the potentially corrosive effects of this ferment have been noted by a number of scholars. The movement of people from older communities to newly opened regions greatly weakened the ties of authority or community.[18] Extremely high rates of upward social mobility threatened the standing of traditional elites by devaluing their status and confronting them with a seemingly endless series of challenges to their monopoly of social and political power. At the same time, their reluctance to share authority with new men created severe status inconsistencies in which the new men had wealth—the main attribute of elite status in the colonies—minus the political power and social position to go with it. To the traditional elite, the movement toward a more inclusive leadership structure appeared to be too rapid, while to the new men it seemed to be too slow. Moreover, as new men challenged traditional leaders or as elites splintered in their bitter contests for political supremacy, the political and social standing of the elite as a whole as well as its internal cohesion was seriously undermined.[19] In addition, the settlement of new areas put severe strains upon existing political structures at both the local and provincial levels, as older centers of power sought to extend their authority over distant areas with economic interests, social and political orientations, and ethnic and religious compositions that diverged sharply from those of the older centers. Those strains sometimes—in North Carolina, New Hampshire, and New Jersey in the late 1740s and early 1750s; in Pennsylvania from the late

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[18] On this point, see Bushman, 41-82, and Philip J. Greven Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970), 175-258. The character of life in newer communities may be surmised from Charles E. Clark, *The Eastern Frontier: The Settlement of Northern New England, 1610-1763* (New York, 1970), 111-267; Charles S. Grant, *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent* (New York, 1961); and, for a very different area, Robert W. Ramsey, *Carolina Cradle: Settlement of the Northwest Carolina Frontier 1747-1762* (Chapel Hill, 1964).

[19] See Bushman, 41-134; Edward Marks Cook Jr., "Social Behavior and Changing Values in Dedham, Massachusetts, 1700 to 1775," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXVII (1970), 546-80; John J. Waters Jr., *The Otis Family in Provincial and Revolutionary Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 76-161; Heimert, 27-236; and Jack P. Greene, "Changing Interpretations of Early American Politics," in Ray A. Billington, ed., *The Reinterpretation of Early American History: Essays in Honor of John Edwin Pomfret* (San Marino, Calif., 1966), 151-84.

1740s through the mid-1760s; and in both Carolinas in the late 1760s and early 1770s—resulted in the breakdown of government or even in open sectional conflict.[20]

Nor are these by any means all of the examples of the severe destabilizing effects of the rapid changes taking place in the colonies during the middle of the eighteenth century. The Great Awakening unleashed and mobilized widespread discontent with existing religious establishments from New England to Virginia. From this discontent emerged a militant evangelicalism that rejected many aspects of the traditional social as well as religious order of the colonies and demanded sweeping changes in the relationship between church and state.[21] Rapid urbanization also produced some unsettling effects. For one thing, it led to the appearance of an urban-rural dichotomy in many colonies. More important, by crowding together in a small area large numbers of not fully assimilated and sometimes impoverished people, it created for the first time in the colonies a potential for the emergence of intraurban class and group antagonisms within the cities themselves.[22] It might also be argued that the process of institutional differentiation that was taking place within medium-sized and

[20] Greene, "Changing Interpretations," 159-72; Lawrence F. London, "The Representation Controversy in Colonial North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XI (1934), 255-70; Donald L. Kemmerer, *Path to Freedom: The Struggle for Self-Government in Colonial New Jersey 1703-1776* (Princeton, 1940), 187-236; Brooke Hindle, "The March of the Paxton Boys," *William and Mary Quarterly*, III (1946), 461-86; Richard M. Brown, *The South Carolina Regulators: The Story of the First Vigilante Movement* (Cambridge, 1963); Hugh T. Lefler and Paul Wagar, eds., *Orange County—1752-1952* (Chapel Hill, 1952); and M. L. M. Kay, "An Analysis of a British Colony in Late Eighteenth Century America in the Light of Current American Historiographical Controversy," *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, XI (1965), 170-84

[21] Heimert, 1-236; Bushman, 147-232; and J. M. Bumsted, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy in Massachusetts: The Town of Norton as a Case Study," *Journal of American History*, LVII (1970-71), 817-31.

[22] In the absence of specific studies of the social impact of urbanization, see Warden, *Boston*, 102-73; Henretta, 75-92; Robert J. Taylor, *Western Massachusetts in the Revolution* (Providence, 1954); Richard D. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts: The Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Towns, 1772-1774* (Cambridge, 1970); Robert Zemsky, *Merchants, Farmers, and River Gods: An Essay on Eighteenth-Century American Politics* (Boston, 1971), 255-60, 264, 281; Warner, 3-21; G. B. Warden, L'urbanisation Americaine avant 1800," *Annales*, 25^{e} année (1970), 862-79; James T. Lemon, "Urbanization and the Development of Eighteenth-Century Southeastern Pennsylvania and Adjacent Delaware,"

large urban communities contributed to the attenuation of the traditional highly personal pattern of social relations by establishing institutional barriers between groups and thereby helping to bring about a significant depersonalization of the social system.[23] Finally, by whetting the social and economic appetites and increasing the material aspirations of men at all levels of society, the "profuse abundance" of the American environment seemed to have produced, in direct violation of inherited norms, a disturbing rise in several forms of hedonistic and anomic behavior and a corresponding decline in moral standards and devotion to the public good. What was even worse, at least in some quarters, such forms of behavior seemed to be gaining public acceptance, thus endangering the normative cohesion of colonial society.[24]

If the first hypothesis emphasizes the unsettled and chaotic state of colonial society during the mid-eighteenth century, the second argues that it was becoming too settled. Several case studies of communities as diverse in size and character as Boston and Chester County, Pennsylvania, strongly suggest that during the decades just prior to the Revolution, opportunity was declining and the social structure becoming less open in the older settled communities as a result of overcrowding brought on by a shortage of land, increasing social stratification, a greater concentration of wealth in the hands of the upper classes, rising numbers of

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William and Mary Quarterly, XXIV (1967), 501-42; Richard A. Ryerson, "The Revolutionary Committees of Philadelphia, 1774-1776: A Study in Crisis Politics" (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1972); Pauline Maier, "The Charleston Mob and the Evolution of Politics in Revolutionary South Carolina 1765-1784," *Perspectives in American History*, IV (1970), 173-96; and Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge, 1952), 54-196; and Rogers, 3-88.

[23] There has been almost no attention to this kind of problem in colonial America, but see the extremely suggestive analysis in Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (New York, 1965), 1-80, 150-99.

[24] Jack P. Greene, "Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History*, III (1970), 189-220; Perry Miller, "From the Covenant to the Revival," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion* (Princeton, 1961), 322-68; Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXIV (1967), 3-43; and Gordon S. Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality," 24-32, and *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969), 1-24.

poor, and a pronounced tendency toward political elitism. All of these developments, the argument runs, created deep frustrations for those who found opportunity constricting and their life prospects growing correspondingly dimmer. The supposed result was the creation of severe underlying tensions between the privileged and the unprivileged, landed and landless, masters and servants, even fathers and sons.[25] These studies are still too few to know whether the phenomena they describe were widespread. But Jackson Turner Main in his more comprehensive investigation *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* has speculated about the existence of a general "long-term tendency . . . toward greater inequality, with more marked class distinctions throughout the colonies on the eve of the pre-Revolutionary disturbances."[26]

III

Obviously, an enormous amount of further research will be required before we will know with some degree of certainty to what extent either or both of these two general hypotheses—the one emphasizing the destabilizing effects of rapid change and the other the frustrations created by a closing society—accurately represent some of the realities of mid-eighteenth-century colonial social development. On the basis of present knowledge, however, it is clear that at least three major questions need to be confronted.

The first is simply how to resolve a number of important ambiguities about the meaning and operation of several of these specific components of social strain we have just described. For one thing, there is an apparent contradiction between the two general hypotheses. How could colonial society have been becoming less coherent and more rigid at the same time? This contradiction might of course be explained in one of three ways. First, it is possible that there were significant spatial variations, that there was a tendency toward less coherence in some rapidly developing areas and more rigidity in other older and more stable areas. A less likely possibility is that a generalized long-term linear process was at work with a period of intense social and economic upheaval being followed just before the Revolution by a time of declining opportunity and greater stratification. Finally, it is possible, as P. M. G. Harris has recently suggested,[27] that this process was cyclical, with colonial society becoming more or less flexible according to population change, community growth, institutional development, and various contingency factors, though the cycles may not have been quite so regular as Harris has posited.[28] My own suspicion is that some combination of the first and third possibilities will probably turn out to provide the most plausible resolution to the problem.

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[25] See, especially, Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town. The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York, 1970), 139-85, and "Land, Population and the Evolution of New England Society," 62-80; Henretta, 75-92; and Lemon and Nash, 1-24.

[26] Main, 286-87.

But there are many other more specific problems with each of these hypotheses, especially with the first. Like many of the works which can be cited in its support, this hypothesis rests upon an obvious, though unstated, and relatively crude application of an equilibrium theory of society. As critics of such theories have pointed out, to the extent that equilibrium theories, first, assess the health or sickness of society in terms of whether or not the elements within it are in a condition of homeostasis and, second, view change as an essentially disequilibrating force, such theories are potentially distorting, for it is not at all clear that the invariable price of rapid change is social instability. Obviously, change can be so well institutionalized and so widely accepted as to produce stabilizing effects. Indeed, in the specific situation at hand, it can be argued that change—and increasingly rapid change at that—was at the heart of the colonial life experience and that the colonists had been forced almost from the beginning to come to terms with it. Moreover, the second hypothesis suggests that the slowing down of change rather than its acceleration created a potential for serious social disruption.

More particularly, it is not yet at all clear that the cost of rapid economic and demographic growth in combination with increasing social differentiation was always a loss of social cohesion; certainly, although there was everywhere an acceleration of the economy and the population, it does not appear that there was a movement from more to less social coherence in most of the colonies during the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century. In New England, where the early settlers were reasonably homogeneous and for most of the seventeenth century at least generally devoted to an explicit religious and "social synthesis" that had been worked out by the leaders of the first settlements, this thesis seems to work fairly well, and it is significant that most of the evidence for it comes from New England. But the colonies to the south, the provinces from New York to Georgia, had been settled by disparate groups and individuals with widely divergent backgrounds, goals, interests, and orientations; and the direction of social development there during the eighteenth century was clearly toward more rather than less coherence and homogeneity as the settlers fashioned out of diverse materials a social synthesis where none had been before.[29] Even with regard to the New England colonies, it may be argued that the breakdown of the old Puritan synthesis early in the eighteenth century was accompanied by the emergence of a new one that, while retaining a distinctly Puritan flavor, was not so dissimilar in form and character from those achieved at the same time by the colonies farther south.[30]

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[27] P. M. G. Harris, "The Social Origins of American Leaders: The Demographic Foundations," *Perspectives in American History*, III (1969), 159-344.

[28] See the criticisms made by Daniel Scott Smith, "Cyclical, Secular, and Structural Change in American Elite Composition," *ibid.*, IV (1970), 351-74.

And there are still other problems. One arises out of the uncertainty that the rapid upward social mobility, the accelerated movement toward political inclusion, or the Great Awakening functioned as destabilizing rather than stabilizing forces or that the kinds of conflict they engendered did not relieve as much social strain as they created. In addition, it is also possible that the widespread expression of concern about rising standards of consumption in the colonies was less an indication of fundamental discontent with existing modes of behavior than an appropriate —and necessary—device through which the colonists could fulfill an apparent need to preserve the *ideal* of a more static, coherent, goal-oriented, and instrumental social order without requiring them to alter their actual behavior.

[29] The point is obvious, but see, for example, Patricia V. Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York, 1971); Gary B. Nash, *Quakers and Politics: Pennsylvania, 1681-1726* (Princeton, 1968); and M. Eugene Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina: A Political History 1663-1763* (Chapel Hill, 1966).

[30] See, for instance, the intriguing suggestions in Zemsky, 69-74.

There are far fewer obvious problems with the second hypothesis. But it is entirely possible that, in terms of opportunity and career chances for individuals throughout colonial society, the shortage of land in older communities may have been more than offset not only by the opening up of new areas but also by new opportunities in nonfarm occupations created by the ongoing process of social differentiation and institutional development.[31] Moreover, from the evidence so far adduced, it is by no means certain that the decline in opportunity and the concentration of wealth were sufficiently general or intense to create serious social conflict, even in older settled areas.

A second major question raised by these two hypotheses is the extent to which there were significant variations in the nature of social development, not only from colony to colony, but also from region to region within the colonies and even from one segment of society to another within a given community. From what we already know, it is clear that the differences were enormous, and the extent of these differences suggests that it is improbable that either or both of these hypotheses can subsume all of them.

Finally, the third, and for the present discussion much the most important and pressing, question posed by these hypotheses is the precise relationship between the many manifestations of social strain they have described and the American Revolution. Several scholars, expecially Wood and Lockridge,[32] have asserted the existence of direct causal links. But these assertions have been accompanied by what Clifford Geertz has called "a studied vagueness" that conceals the fact that as yet no one has succeeded either in establishing the existence of such links or in specifying exactly what they may have been and how they may have functioned in the overall causal pattern of the Revolution.[33] To a large extent, this failure accounts for the perpetuation of the widespread conviction among students of the Revolution that no such links were present or that, if they were, they could not have been very important. This conviction has been reinforced by the obvious fact that the

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[31] Greven, 103-258, presents a considerable amount of evidence that would seem to support this suggestion.

[32] Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality," 24-32; Lockridge, *A New England Town*, 184-85.

[33] Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (Glencoe, Ill., 1964), 53.

American Revolution failed to generate a *societal* revolution. Note that I purposely use the term *societal revolution,* which connotes "a discontinuous process of structural innovation," rather than *social revolution,* which implies no more than some "quantitative increments" or qualitative changes within an existing structure.[34] Though the Revolution obviously helped to accelerate some longstanding tendencies within colonial society toward greater political and social inclusion and more individual autonomy and although incremental changes in patterns of social organization, institutional arrangements, and values may be observed in many sectors of American life during the Revolution,[35] there do not seem to be any sharp discontinuities that cannot be traced primarily to exigencies created by the separation from Britain. In other words we do not need to look for strain, frustration, and dysfunction within colonial society, but we must look to the political conflict between Britain and the colonies to find a plausible explanation for these discontinuities.

But the limited character of the internal social changes produced by the Revolution obviously cannot be taken to mean that these various components of strain had no causal relationship to the Revolution. That social context has an important bearing upon political events is a truism, and because these components were all present to one degree or another in colonial society at the time the Revolution occurred, it may be safely assumed that they had some effect upon the Revolution. The main question, then, is not whether a causal relationship existed but what kind of a relationship it may have been.

At least four possibilities immediately present themselves. First, from the evidence offered in support of the first hypothesis discussed above, we may surmise that the severity of social strain was so great—the anomie, disorientation, frustration, and friction so intensive and extensive—within colonial society as to make it exceptionally prone toward revolution by creating either a single social crisis of such magnitude that it cut across and through most segments and areas of colonial life or a complex multitude of inter-

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[34] See the useful discussion by Edward A. Tiryakian in "A Model of Societal Change and Its Lead Indicators," in Samuel Z. Klausner, ed., *The Study of Total Societies* (New York, 1967), 73.

[35] See, especially, Main, *Social Structure,* and Wood, *Creation.*

locking local, group, and personal crises that converged to produce severe disruption in many strategic sectors of colonial society. Something of this sort seems to be what Wood is implying.[36] Second, a corollary of this argument, suggested by Heimert and others, is that the Great Awakening and presumably the many other changes that contributed to the social ferment of the mid-eighteenth century prepared the colonists intellectually and emotionally for the rejection of British authority after 1763 by calling into question or otherwise undermining confidence in the authority of traditional religious, social, and political institutions and leaders.[37] On the other hand, the findings on which the second hypothesis rests can be marshaled in support of still a third argument which is a variant of the old formula of the Progressive historians: that declining opportunity and a rigidifying social structure created fierce resentments among the middle and lower classes against the elite that came surging to the surface of public life during the pre-Revolutionary years and these resentments merged with the protest against Britain to generate an internal revolution.[38] Still a fourth alternative is suggested by combining the two hypotheses: that, however upsetting it may have been to older members of the elite, the economic and demographic expansion and social ferment through the first five decades of the eighteenth century created rising economic and social expectations among the rest of society which were subsequently frustrated by a decline in opportunity beginning about midcentury. According to this formulation, which is merely an application of James C. Davies's general theory of revolution to the American Revolution,[39] the most critical element in turning American society toward revolution was not the erosion of social coherence or even the decline of opportunity but the frustrated expectations of a large segment of the population as a result of a general closing of society after a prolonged period of apparently becoming increasingly more open.

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[36] "Rhetoric and Reality," 24-32.

[37] See also the interesting suggestions about the relationship between religious revivals and societal revolutions by Tiryakian, 94-95.

[38] Summaries of the arguments of the Progressive historians may be found in Greene, *Reappraisal*, 7-17, and "Changing Interpretations," 153-56.

[39] Davies, 1-19.

Some or all of these theories may turn out to be appropriate vehicles for relating to the Revolution the various components of social strain in mid-eighteenth-century America. So far, we have been offered little more than a kind of superficial historicism that suggests that the behavior of the generation of the Revolution somehow emerged from or was conditioned by the social environment, a suggestion that is obviously "so general as to be truistic."[40] Before we will know which, if any, of these four theories are appropriate, we will have to be able to specify much more precisely than we can at present the ways in which those manifestations of strain impinged upon and affected the actual behavior of particular groups and individuals during the 1760s and 1770s; how, when, where, why, and to what extent the uncoordinated individual and group dissatisfactions that may have been produced by those strains merged into the collective opposition to Britain; and whether, in what sense, and by what sorts of psychological mechanisms those social strains actually did find "mitigation through revolution and republicanism," as Wood has contended.[41]

In the meantime, two different categories of existing studies provide some—but only some—help in this regard. By revealing, if in many cases only implicitly, the connection between political factionalism and particular sorts of social, economic, and religious strain, the rather extensive literature on political divisions within individual colonies between 1750 and 1776 and their relationship to the Revolution provides some general indications of what the answers to at least some of these questions may be for several colonies. In particular, this literature makes it clear that there were enormous variations from one colony to another and that virtually every colony had its own specific forms of social strain.[42] Recent studies of the many symbolic representations of internal social strains in Revolutionary rhetoric have confronted more directly the general question of the connection between such strains and the Revolution. They have shown how the colonists' fears about moral decline and the increase in self-oriented behavior in their own societies merged with the opposition to Britain to turn the Revolution into a "norm-oriented movement" that looked forward to the regeneration of American society and the restoration of traditional social norms.[43] There can be no doubt that this projection of American corruption upon Britain helped make it easier to reject the monarchy and the British connection and to accept revolution and republicanism. To what extent it also relieved Americans of the guilt produced by their own moral failures and thereby actually helped to mitigate an important source of social strain within the colonies is not so clear. Indeed, by turning them toward republicanism with its even higher and less attainable standards, it may actually have exacerbated such strains.[44] Moreover, in the absence of any systematic attempt to assess the *relative* importance of these fears of moral decline in mobilizing widespread popular support for the Revolution, it is extremely difficult to know what causal weight they may have actually borne.[45]

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[40] Geertz, 53.

[41] Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality," 30. For a persuasive argument on the necessity of providing precise answers to such questions, see James Rule and Charles Tilly, "1830 and the Unnatural History of Revolution," *Journal of Social Issues* (forthcoming).

[42] See the discussion in Greene, "Changing Interpretations," 159-72.

IV

Whenever and however these crucial problems are resolved, it is doubtful that we will be able to assign to any or all of the components of social strain so far discussed a major causal role in the Revolution. To do so we would have to show that the extent of strain was infinitely greater and the degree to which they impinged themselves on individuals and groups was much more powerful than anyone has so far suggested or than our present knowledge seems to warrant.[46] It is extremely doubtful that we will be able to say even that any or all of those components were a necessary cause of the Revolution, that is, that without them there would have been no Revolution. In all probability, we will be able to say only that these several components—for the most part, the regular concomitants of the normal processes of incremental change within colonial society—affected the Revolution in the same sense that they would have affected any other major political event that occurred in the context of which they were a part. Thus, they may be said to have "aggravated," perhaps in some cases even "intensely," "antagonism to the imperial system" and to have "fed into the revolutionary movement."[47] But they cannot be said either to have created the movement or to have been necessary for it to occur.

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[43] See, especially, Miller, 322-68; Morgan, 3-43; and Wood, *Creation*, 1-124. On "norm-oriented movements," see Smelser, 109-11, 270-312, and Tiryakian, 93-94.

[44] Wood's own evidence in *Creation of the American Republic* would seem to suggest as much.

[45] Heimert has attempted to show the existence of certain continuities between the intellectual and social divisions of the Great Awakening and those of the Revolution, but enough individual exceptions to his argument have been noted to raise serious questions about its general applicability. In particular, see Bernard Bailyn, "Religion and Revolution: Three Biographical Studies," *Perspectives in American History*, IV (1970), 85-172.

[46] If these strains had been a source of major discontent, we would expect to find a significant increase in the extent and intensity of such indices of social strain as crime, insanity, and both individual and col-

But this is not in any way to suggest that an understanding of the complex internal social, economic, political, and religious changes that were taking place within the colonies is not essential to a comprehension of many aspects of the Revolution or that it would be desirable either to relegate them to a residual role or to eliminate them from further discussions of the causes of the Revolution. On the contrary, existing knowledge suggests and future investigations will surely confirm that there was a direct relationship between the degree and special character of social malintegration and the particular configuration of the Revolution in each colony and that an understanding of the nature and intensity of internal strain within a given colony during the quarter-century prior to independence would enable us to predict what general shape the Revolution would assume in that state. If this suggestion is correct, then it is obvious that an analysis of the character and operation of various elements of social strain within the colonies is absolutely crucial to any comprehension of the many variations in the form and nature of the Revolution from one colony or one region to another.

For analytical and heuristic purposes, we might say, for instance, that only if every one of the components of strain so far identified and discussed as well as any that may subsequently be discovered impinged directly upon the Revolution in a given colony would we be likely to find the Revolution in its fullest and

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lective violence in the colonies. No systematic study has been made of this subject, and it is obviously an area worth intensive investigation.

[47] Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality," 27.

most extreme form. For simplicity, we can call this most extreme form of the Revolution *R*. It then follows that the absence of one or more of these components in another colony will result in something less than all of *R*. What we can finally say, then, about the causal importance of all of these strain-producing elements—perhaps all we can say—is that without any or all of them, we would not have all of *R*.

The larger point is that without the conflict between Britain and the colonies these components of social strain would not by themselves have produced a revolution. In any explanation of the causes of the Revolution, then, what one wants to know about such components is how they related to the Anglo-American conflict, how they may be used to illuminate the traditional and still central question of how and why the old structure of interests, institutions, and symbols—the sacred moral order—that had bound the colonies to Britain for the previous century broke down so rapidly during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. For that breakdown—as well as the frenzied rhetoric that accompanied it—can be explained largely by the anxieties deriving out of what the vast majority of both the colonial and British political nations took to be a series of fundamental violations of that sacred order by the other side, without invoking whatever frustrations or resentments may have arisen out of social strains within the colonies.

If these conclusions turn out to be correct, they raise serious doubts both about the argument—implicit in the theories of Chalmers Johnson, Neil J. Smelser, and other modern analysts of revolution—that "true revolutions," to quote Wood, must derive from "sources lying deep within the social structure"[48] and about the utility of such generalized themes of social change in explaining the origins of political revolutions. Certainly, the example of the American Revolution would seem to make it clear that social strain is a concept of limited value for explaining at least one variety of great modern political revolution. As James Rule and Charles Tilly suggest in a persuasive critique of these and other natural-history models of revolution, the central feature of any political revolution is "the seizure of power over a governmental apparatus by one group from another," and such a develop-

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[48] *Ibid.*, 26.

ment can usually be explained largely as a result of some conflict between two or more contenders within the polity over one or more issues of great moment. These issues may have social or economic, religious or cultural content, but they are invariably political because they are fought out in a political arena and involve questions of basic concern to the polity. What we need to know, then, to understand what caused a particular revolution is what specific conditions—short-term, intermediate, or long-term—led to (1) the appearance of rival contenders for authority and legitimacy; (2) the acceptance of the claims of the revolutionaries by a significant or strategic segment of the politically relevant population; and (3) the unwillingness or incapacity of the old regime to suppress its opponents. Usually, there is no special need to search for the existence of "anomie, strain, dysfunction or frustration" to explain these events. Wherever such evidences of disequilibration are present, they may well feed into the revolutionary situation; but, because they will usually be found to exist both before and after the revolution and at any number of intervening periods when no revolution occurred, they "fail to characterize situations that are distinctly revolutionary, and thus lack [much] explanatory power."[49] Not only can they not in themselves provide a sufficient explanation for many modern revolutions but in cases like the American Revolution they cannot even be said to have been necessary for them to occur.

The limited causal importance of the many evidences of social strain we have been discussing in this essay does not imply that we should abandon their study; but it does suggest that they should be approached from a different and considerably broader perspective. Whatever their relationship to the American Revolution, they were obviously manifestations of fundamental, long-term social changes taking place within the colonies. To the very great extent that those changes were in the direction of more rational and less traditional patterns of social, economic, and political relations, institutional structures, and values that put ever higher premiums upon individual autonomy, self-fulfillment, pursuit of self interest, and that thus emphasized economic returns, accumulation, achievement rather than ascription, functional spec-

[49] Rule and Tilly.

ificity of economic and social roles, and universalistic criteria for membership in the polity and society, these changes were part of what E. A. Wrigley has described as a "revolution of modernization,"[50] a sweeping social revolution that had been in progress in Western Europe since the middle of the fifteenth century and, by the time of the American Revolution, had been underway in the colonies for at least a century.

This broader social revolution, which in many respects is far more crucial to an understanding of the first two centuries of American life and far more worthy of scholarly attention than the American Revolution, would have been completed with or without the American Revolution, albeit perhaps at a different rate of speed and in a somewhat different form,[51] and it would be unfortunate if this broader revolution continues to be confused with the American Revolution. For however interwoven it may have been with the American Revolution during the brief span of time between 1760 and 1790, there is always the danger that an excessive concentration upon discovering and specifying the links between the two will not only divert attention from and obscure the nature of the broader social revolution but will also contribute to prolonging the unfortunate American tendency to view social history as primarily interesting for what it can tell us about politics.[52] As E. J. Hobsbawm has recently warned, the value of studies of "major transformations of society" may well be "in inverse proportion to our concentration on the brief moment of conflict." It is a commonplace, of course, that political revolutions, by bringing into the open and dramatizing "crucial aspects of social structure" that would remain hidden or obscure in normal times, provide a mag-

[50] E. A. Wrigley, "Modernization and the Industrial Revolution in England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History,* III (1972), 225-59. The definitions of *traditional* and *modern* implicit in my passages are derived from this article.

[51] Jackson Turner Main, "The American Revolution as a Social Incident," unpublished paper presented at the Symposium on the American Revolution, Williamsburg, March 10, 1971, p. 12, comes to a similar conclusion.

[52] Among several important recent works which attempt to break out of the prison of political history, see, especially, the general book-length essay by Rowland Berthoff, *An Unsettled People: Social Order and Disorder in American History* (New York, 1971), and the specialized study by Greven, *Four Generations.*

nificent window into the societies in which they occur.[53] But the particular phenomena thereby observed will only appear in their fullest meaning when they are fitted into the wider context of the long-term tendencies of which they are a part. Only when such a context has been established will we finally be able to understand the precise relationship between America's late eighteenth-century political revolution and its peculiar variant of the wider social revolution of modernization that, by the end of the eighteenth century, was sweeping through much of the Western world.

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[53] E. J. Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus*, C (1971), 39-40.