

Prelude to Revolution: American Colonists' Thought Before 1765

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Cohesion can scarcely exist among an aggregate of people unless they share some objective characteristics. Classic criteria are common descent (or ethnic affinities), common language, common religion, and most intangible of all, common customs and beliefs. But these features alone will not produce cohesion unless those who share them also share a self-consciousness of what they have in common, unless they attach a distinctive value to what is shared, and unless they feel identified with one another by the sharing. — David Potter¹

New York, July 15. On Wednesday last the Congress's Declaration of Independence of the United States was read at the head of each Brigade of the Continental Army posted in or near this city, and everywhere received with the utmost demonstration of joy. The same evening the equestrian statue of George III erected in the year 1770, was thrown from its pedestal and broken to pieces; and we hear the lead wherewith this monument was made is to be run into bullets. — *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 17, 1776.

In July of 1776 a group of angry New Yorkers dragged the equestrian statue of George III from its pedestal and dismembered the gilt lead likeness of the King. According to the newspaper reports of the event, the lead from the statue was “run into bullets” to be used to defend the colony from British troops.² Scholars and others who are interested in the American Revolution are familiar with this event, but rarely do they pause to question why that statue was erected in the first place. George III didn't build it to commemorate himself. It was the product of an outpouring of gratitude, loyalty and affection that New Yorkers felt for their king, who, in their view, had taken an active role in bringing about the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766, and in so doing, defending the liberty of his American subjects. Colonists had not always viewed their king as a tyrant and oppressor. Americans did not always characterize their king, even George III, as a “Royal Brute.” In fact, the notion that Hanovarian English kings were, and had always been, tyrants, came to Americans as late as 1776. This was one of the truly revolutionary concepts that grew out of the Revolution.

Historians understand the American Revolution to be both a defining event of colonial history and the seminal moment in the history of the United States. As a result they often tend to view colonial political culture through the narrow telescope of hindsight. Historians often place local colonial political crises and the arguments that surrounded them into a Revolutionary context, even though the actors in those distant political dramas were certainly unaware that American colonists would take up arms against their mother country to gain their independence

1 David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, edited and completed by Don E. Fehrenbacher, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 450.

2 “New York,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 15, 1776.

at some future date. Often, to view the Englishmen who lived in the colonies before the American Revolution as proto-Patriots leads one to forget that most of the resident of English North America *were* Englishmen, who thought and behaved much the same as their cousins did an ocean away.

Eighteenth-century colonists themselves viewed another revolution, that of 1688, as the seminal constitutional event in their own history, and particularly in the history of their relationship with England. In their interpretation of the Glorious Revolution, colonists claimed that they had allied with William of Orange to bring down a tyrant and to restore the ancient constitution both to their motherland and to their own colonies. The ideology and constitutional thought of the Glorious Revolution, as transmitted across the Atlantic during the spring of 1689, provided colonists with beliefs about kingship, religion and government that had a lasting effect on colonial political thought. Colonists agreed with the majority of the English people that Prince William of Orange had invaded England in order to defend their liberty, property, and Protestant faith against the tyranny of the Catholic James II. Once on the throne, William III and the rulers who followed him were viewed by colonists as protectors of the rights that they had secured by means of the Glorious Revolution.

William and his successors were also conceived of as protectors of English Protestantism. Although previous rulers of England claimed the title “Defender of the Faith,” the church that they defended was the Church of England. From the reign of Queen Elizabeth, English monarchs had often defended Anglican orthodoxy against the proliferation of Calvinist thought and other schismatic Protestant creeds that they viewed as a threat to the religious and political consensus in England, and ultimately to their own authority. William and his Hanoverian successors exhibited greater tolerance toward dissenting Protestant sects and were concomitantly portrayed by their supporters as bulwarks against the threat of Roman Catholicism. This view of the ruler as a model Protestant Prince who was the defender and protector of Englishmen of all Protestant religious persuasions made it possible for dissenters, both in England and in the colonies, to accept their nominally Anglican rulers as godly defenders of their liberty of conscience. Henceforth, Quakers, New England Puritans, Dutch Reformed Calvinists of New York, Presbyterians, Baptists, and members of other Protestant denominations could, with clear consciences, join with the Anglicans in praying for and praising their king. At the same time, they could stand firm and united with their ruler as allies against the threat of Romanism.

Colonists’ understanding of government was also affected by the political philosophy that grew out of the Glorious Revolution, and by the Whig political culture and discourse that followed the Revolution and continued to develop during the Hanoverian Era. They accepted the Whig premise that the first goal of government was the protection of the liberty and property of the subject from encroachment by any one element of the nation—be it king, peers, or the mob—and from foreign invaders. The post-Revolutionary interpretation of the English constitution cast off earlier notions of absolute kingship and divine right, replacing the former with the doctrine of the king in Parliament, and the latter with the idea that English rulers, though guided by God’s providence, nevertheless ruled by the consent of their subjects. Additionally, post-Revolutionary political thinkers claimed that the king’s first goal, in harmony with the duty of the peoples’ representative assembly, was the preservation of the liberties and property of his subjects. Colonists chose to believe that if the king ruled England through Parliament, then he must rule his colonies through their own representative bodies.

Colonists' acceptance of the political premises of the Glorious Revolution had several effects on colonial political thought, and on the constitutional relationship between the people of each colony and royal government. First, Americans' notion of the "king in assembly" brought the royal colonies into a more intimate relationship with the king than had heretofore been the case. Secondly, it made the position of the colonial governor precarious because, although he was the titular representative or agent of the Crown in the colony, he was not the king, but a servant, and while the king could do no wrong, the governor certainly could. A succession of colonial assemblies would claim that they represented the king's and the peoples' interests (which were one and the same) against greedy, corrupt royal governors, often even when the governors were attempting to carry out instructions that they had received directly from their royal master. Finally, colonial politicians embraced the ideas and mastered the language of Whig political discourse and its ideological conventions of Court and Country, the first dedicated to stable secure government, and the second employed in opposition to ministerial authority.³ In their local struggles with the representatives of the Crown, colonists practiced both Court and Country arguments and applied them skillfully at home and in their dealings with the government in London.

As the Whigs gained ascendancy during the reigns of the first two Hanoverian kings and came to view their party as the nation's only security against Jacobite plots and foreign invasion, their ideology changed from libertarian to authoritarian. They achieved political stability by becoming more authoritarian and conservative. They avoided the libertarian radicalism of Locke and other political theorists of the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution with their troublesome theories of social compact, popular sovereignty and the right of revolution. Instead, these institutional Whigs embraced the security of the Crown with its comforts of power, office and patronage, and enthusiastically assimilated from the Tories the maxim of government that political power should follow property. To a great extent under the Hanovers, establishment, or Court Whigs achieved a synthesis between the Tory commitment to property, prerogative authority and order, and the basic Whig premise that a mixed and balanced representative government best served to secure the peoples' liberties. This synthesis was, at least in part, made manifest as Court Whigs gradually reduced the franchise in England and increased the severity of laws that protected the property of freeholders. Interpreting John Locke to their own ends, Court Whigs argued that once the people had delegated their powers to the government, they were obliged to obey the unchallengeable authority of Parliament.

Without serious political opposition from any other English political movement, Whigs lost their cohesion and broke into factional groups based on both genuine political differences and competition for power and places in government. The earliest opposition to both William and to George I was couched in Tory terms. Post-Revolution Tories came to accept William's right to rule, but had considerably more difficulty accepting the Whig notion that the sanction for the powers of the Crown rested with the people. Fearing the threat of anarchy more than absolutism, they still supported the doctrines of divine right, non-resistance and passive

³ For the genesis of Court and Country political arguments in the second decade of the eighteenth century, as a discourse between the "ins" who employed arguments in support of the Court, and the "outs" who employed Country arguments and policies to rally support from Tories and country backbenchers in order to attain political power, to become "ins," see H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1977), 121-122.

obedience so long as the ruler was Anglican.⁴ Tories were “High Churchmen” who feared dissenters of all kinds, viewing them as anti-monarchical and a threat to the established order of church and state. They opposed any attempts by Whigs to promote tolerance of dissenting Protestant groups in the realm, or to reform the Church of England so that dissenters might be able to attend Anglican worship and thus meet the requirements of the various tests and oaths that were conditions for government service. Although Tories initially had the support of many English voters, especially the rural freeholders, their association with Jacobitism and with the “High Church” civil disturbances of the first years of George I’s reign damaged their credibility. The Whigs grew to dominate both the government and the political discourse under the Hanovers. Tory opposition, successfully equated by the Whigs with Jacobitism and Catholicism, virtually disappeared.

During the 1720s a primarily Whig opposition to the government replaced the Tories. This “loyal opposition” accepted the basic assumptions of the Whig constitution, supporting the king, the balanced constitution, and the protection of property as the first order of government. It also stood with the Court against Jacobitism and Catholicism. Since the language of Tory opposition had become tainted and was thus no longer an acceptable mode of criticism, Whig factions (and a few Tories), eager to acquire office from those Whigs who dominated the Court, employed Country political thought to criticize the government.

Country ideology contained components of several strains of English political thought. Its content was influenced by the country squires who as either Whig or Tory backbenchers in the Parliaments of William III and Anne had seen their independence threatened by Court politicians with their train of patronage and corruption. These Country gentlemen were also deeply troubled by a growing tendency to repose ever greater power within the executive. They were joined by the radical Whigs (also called Real Whigs or Commonwealthmen) who “developed a more positive ideology and offered a more coherent vision of the ideal society.”⁵ Libertarian visionaries, Radical Whigs offered a prescriptive analysis of current politics with a view toward restoring the “ancient constitution” to its pristine form: a mixed and balanced government with more clearly separated and independent branches. They alleged that corrupt courtiers and placemen had destroyed the separation between, and independence of, the three branches of the government, transforming the commonwealth into an oligarchy. They argued that the nation should not be guided by career politicians whose only ambition was to maintain their places and power, but by agrarian freeholders whose strict adherence to civic virtue made them ideal leaders for the nation.

Tories like Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke comprised another element of the Country party opposition. In the late 1720s they emerged from the political wilderness, or in the Viscount’s case the Stuart Pretender’s retinue in France, to claim membership in the opposition. These ex-Tories claimed that they held principles virtually identical to those of the Radical Whigs, but that there was no longer any need for party distinctions in any case since “the proper and real distinction of the two parties expired” in the age that followed the Glorious Revolution.⁶

4 Dickinson, 45-46.

5 *Ibid.*, 103.

6 Bolingbroke, cited in *ibid.*, 178.

By the 1720s many of the Country alliance joined with a growing Whig opposition whose chief goal was to attain power and places in the Court, and who found in Country criticism themes that evoked the Glorious Revolution and resonated among English freeholders.

In the summer of 1716, while George I was in Germany, Charles Townshend took advantage of the King's absence and a growing rift between the King and the Prince of Wales to form an opposition. He was soon joined by Lord Sunderland, Robert Walpole, and numerous other Whigs. Their "sole object was to embarrass their erstwhile colleagues" in the government.⁷ They employed "obstructionist tactics" and appeals increasingly couched in terms of Country opposition, to win the support of independent Country members of Parliament.⁸ They claimed to represent all honest Englishmen against the corrupt policies and practices of the ministry, and alleged that the overweening power of the Court threatened to bring down the balanced constitution. From the 1720s on, the Whig opposition promoted the reduction of the standing army, opposed new taxes, "and attacked placemen and pensioners with a vehemence that ill became men who had so recently quitted office, and whose sole desire was to force their way back into it."⁹

The transparently political use of Country opposition criticism of the government by Whig politicians whose only goal was to retake offices in government and the power and patronage that went with them, has led some historians to assume that the "country creed" amounted to little more than "camouflage for other interests."¹⁰ Sir Lewis Namier, in response to the self-interest that he found inherent in the opposition's use of Country criticism, proposed that the "ideas and principles of eighteenth-century politicians were merely rationalizations of selfish ambition and base motives."¹¹ Namier and his followers dominated the scholarship of eighteenth-century English history from the 1920s until the 1960s. Under their influence, English historians adopted a cynical approach to the study of political ideology, claiming that political behavior could only be explained if the facade of political arguments and declared principles were stripped away to expose the baser self-interests that drove politicians to seek power.

At about the same time American Progressive historians such as Charles Beard, Carl Lotus Becker, Merrill Jensen and Philip Davidson argued that American Revolutionary rhetoric, and indeed all political rhetoric, represented an effort by a self-interested minority in the colonies to delude fellow colonists by manipulating public opinion in their favor. For Progressives, political

7 John B. Owen, *The Eighteenth Century, 1714-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974), 12.

8 *Ibid.*, 13.

9 *Ibid.*

10 John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Press, 1990), 157.

11 Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 2. See also Gordon Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality and the American Revolution," in *In Search of Early America: The William and Mary Quarterly, 1943-1993* (Richmond, Virginia: William Byrd Press, 1993), 68; Lewis Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: MacMillan & Co., 1961), 131.

rhetoric was composed substantially of demagoguery and rationalization.¹² Like Namier, they believed that interest provoked action and ideas were rarely prime motivators. Those Progressives who, like Charles Beard and Philip Davidson, studied ideas, argued that rhetoric was the tool employed skillfully by the colonial economic/political elite to mold and control the behavior of the largely disenfranchised poorer elements of society in order to garner their support for independence.¹³ In the late 1960s and 1970s the Progressive interpretation gave way to Neo-Progressives, who took a more decidedly interest-based Marxian approach to historical interpretation, focusing on class conflict and the development of class consciousness in the colonies. Neo-Progressives, unlike either the Progressives or the Namierites, stressed the importance of approaching history from the bottom up in order to explain the “concerns of the common man and the inarticulate masses.”¹⁴ Neo-Progressives also largely discounted ideas as motivators of men or movements.

The patriotic euphoria of the late 1940s prompted a new conservative approach to American history. The “consensus historians” began to reassess the causes and results of the Revolutionary and Constitutional periods. Whereas Progressives had probably overstressed class differences during the period, the new nationalist historians largely ignored them. Historians like Robert Brown and Daniel Boorstin, argued that, in general, the defining factors of the period were social and economic homogeneity, and that free Americans had been united in their goals of achieving independence from Britain. Having succeeded, they established a nation in which they preserved the traditional rights of Englishmen.¹⁵ Most consensus historians stressed that although Americans’ intellectual, political and cultural roots were grounded in British traditions, there was a practicality about them, an aversion to ideology and an innovativeness spawned by exposure to the wilderness, that made Americans qualitatively different in these areas from their British cousins.

Interestingly, throughout the period of historiographical wrangling, the waters of intellectual history of the Revolutionary and Early Federal periods remained largely untroubled. The intellectual origins of Revolutionary thought and the development of a federal nation were placed generally within the framework of Enlightenment thought, and specifically at the feet of

12 Wood, 59-60. A few influential Progressive works include Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York: MacMillan & Co., 1913); Carl Lotus Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1922); Philip Grant Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941); Arthur Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (New York: Knopf, 1958). For a study that takes a similar approach to ideology and the Glorious Revolution in Massachusetts, see Viola Florence Barnes, *The Dominion of New England: A Study in British Colonial Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923).

13 Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*.

14 Gerald N. Grob and George Athan Billias, eds., *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (New York: The Free Press, Macmillan, Inc., 1992), 1:125. Grob and Billias provide a discussion of Neo-Progressives, 1:124-126.

15 See Robert Elton Brown, *Middle Class Democracy and the Revolution in Massachusetts, 1691-1780* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1955), and *Virginia, 1705-1786, Democracy or Aristocracy?* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1964); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958).

John Locke. Locke was viewed as a revolutionary thinker whose ideas on government had sprung up, virtually *ex nihilo*, to guide American Revolutionaries to their own independence. Here Whig historians found agreement with the Progressives who studied colonial thought: “The Declaration of Independence, it was argued, was pure Locke. As Carl Becker put it, ‘The lineage is direct, Jefferson copied Locke.’ For the historian Merle Curti, the ‘Great Mr. Locke’ was ‘America’s philosopher.’”¹⁶

By the mid-1960s, however, this historiographical tradition was beginning to come under fire. First British, and, somewhat later, American, historians began to search for the origins of eighteenth-century political thought, and began to find them in the political ideology of the English Commonwealthmen of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The historians who most influenced this turn in intellectual history were Bernard Bailyn, Caroline Robbins and J.G.A. Pocock. After studying Revolutionary pamphlets and documents, Bailyn asserted that the ideas that supported opposition to Britain predated the Enlightenment and had been in America since the 1730s, and at least in part since the turn of the eighteenth century. In *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Bailyn, following Caroline Robbins’ lead, traced the origins of American revolutionary thought to the Country opposition of the early Hanover governments, and from thence to the rhetoric of opposition to the Stuarts in the 1640s and 1680s, and finally back via the Renaissance republicanism of Machiavelli to classical republican thought. Revolutionary propaganda emphasized corruption as a historical process and civic virtue as a limited prophylactic against political corruption, and pitted the virtuous nature of agrarian republicanism against the corrupting influence of mercantile urban interests and government ministers and jobbers. For Bailyn, the American Revolution was an English Revolution fought in America by Whigs against a corrupt Tory government. This conclusion was a difficult pill for both the right and the left. Consensus historians were critical of Bailyn because his study made an “American exceptionalist” view of the Revolution untenable; in fact, for Bailyn, the American revolutionaries were more English than many of their British contemporaries. Since Englishmen of the late eighteenth century had sacrificed their republican concerns for domestic and European security and international mercantile dominance, Bailyn argued, the Americans could claim to be the true heirs to the traditions of the English Commonwealth and the “Ancient Constitution.” Other historians (especially Joyce Appleby) were perturbed, not so much that Bailyn focused on English political thought in order to find the origins of the Revolution, but that he focused on the conservative, even reactionary, country opposition ideology rather than on the liberal tradition of Locke and the Enlightenment. Historians on the left viewed the “republican thesis” as another attempt by the right to extol American homogeneity and to avoid focusing on social and economic diversity and class

16 Gordon Wood, “Virtues and Interests,” *The New Republic*; Feb.11, 1991, 32. Important works by Merle Curti include *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1943), and *Human Nature in American Historical Thought* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1968).

divisions.¹⁷ It may be added as a criticism of Bailyn that he was very selective in time and content in his choice of historical sources from which he framed his argument. Whereas Caroline Robbins traced a reasonably continuous line of English commonwealth thought and thinkers from Milton to Thomas Paine, Bailyn provided little evidence for a similar continuity in American colonial thought. Because few of the pamphlets that he used were written before the 1750s, and the few earlier works that he selected he often discussed without describing the context that inspired them, Bailyn gave the impression that Country ideology appeared rather suddenly in the American colonies just before the French and Indian War and was the only language that Americans who considered themselves Whigs employed in political discourse. It is one of the objects of this study to modify that conclusion.

To a great extent historians have divided into two camps. The first follows Namier, Marx and the Progressives, who argue generally that interest, in one form or another, is the primary determinant of action, and thus ideas should be largely discounted as significant agents of historical causation. The second group, generally labeled “Whig” historians and epitomized by Lord Macaulay, Bailyn and Robbins, largely discount interest, and stress the importance of ideas as the drivers of actions in history. Recently, several historians, in reaction to both Whig and Namierite interpretations of politics, have argued that ideas and interests exist side by side and interact, each often informing the other. H.T. Dickinson, Geoffrey Holmes, and John Brewer on the English side, and Gordon Wood and Joyce Appleby on the American, exemplify historians who study the interaction of interest and thought on the political stage.¹⁸ These historians have taken a more holistic view of political culture, focusing on the development of political ideas and political behavior over time. Americans’ political ideas were formed not only from their own special colonial circumstances, but also from ideas that made their way across the Atlantic from England. American colonists’ understanding of their relationship with the British government and how they fit into the British constitution had an effect on their own domestic politics and the political culture peculiar to each of His Majesty’s Colonies in North America.

Historians like Dickinson and Appleby note that members of society are motivated to some degree by self-interest and behave accordingly; but objects of self-interest and self-interested responses may take many forms, and thus, scholars need to study those specific objects and

17 See Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959); Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1967); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975); Joyce Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1978) and *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992). For a compilation of neo-Progressive scholars’ critiques of the “neo-Whig” point of view, see Alfred F. Young, ed., *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993).

18 See, Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*; Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1967); Brewer, *The Sinews of Power, and Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1992); Joyce Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology*.

responses that men take to specific stimuli. Do the actions that self-interested politicians take simply serve to further their own ends without regard to the social costs of their behavior, or do they make “principled” responses that serve the needs of the public as well as their own desires for power? Every society has its own set of cultural assumptions within which are included certain political ideals. These ideals motivate leaders to act in ways that the public will find acceptable, and even virtuous. Political principles differ from culture to culture, and may change over time in response to historical events and new intellectual contributions (which may include the propaganda engineered by leaders or parties in order to influence public opinion). Political behavior changes apace. Thus, for H.T. Dickinson:

The historian . . . must recognize those actions which that society is prepared to regard as admirable or “principled” and those actions which it will condemn or deplore. If he does not understand the political values of a particular society, then he will not understand the political agents of that society. To understand the political values he must examine the political rhetoric, the arguments, prejudices and assumptions of the age.¹⁹

The specific language that political actors employ to achieve their goals provides evidence that the society in which they act embraces certain broad values and principles; otherwise, there would exist no basis for principled rhetoric. Politicians’ actions are guided by intelligence and forethought; they use the themes that they think will work. They invoke the images and ideas that they hope will achieve the desired response from their listeners.²⁰

What images and ideas, then, resonated in the British political world of the eighteenth century? The evidence indicates that the broad constitutional principles that Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic confirmed and responded to positively after the Glorious Revolution were the concepts of mixed monarchical government, Protestant kingship, and the preservation of the peoples’ liberties, property and Protestant religion. Time and again, English and colonial writers employed these themes in their editorials, sermons, pamphlets and speeches. If these ideas were not intimately tied to the fabric of English political culture, self-interested politicians and other political actors would not have employed them in their rhetoric. The ideas had power when invoked because they held meaning to those who received them. The study of these ideas provides historians with a means of comprehending the politics and the events of the age.

It is thus appropriate to inquire into American colonists’ interpretation of the British constitution and their place in it. What had emerged by the reign of George II was an interpretation of the origin and nature of political society that was quite English in terms of its antecedents, and contained elements of both Court and Country political thought. When colonial thinkers inquired into the nature and origins of government, they appear to have been influenced by both Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. They agreed with Hobbes that men in a state of nature, or in a society unrestrained by some sovereign authority, would quickly slide into anarchy in which the stronger would inevitable prey upon the weak, and human institutions that required cooperation would dissolve into what eighteenth-century Englishmen called

¹⁹ Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, 5-6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

licentiousness—what John Phillip Reid called “the darker side of liberty.”²¹ Colonial thinkers were also influenced by John Locke and by the constitutional thought that grew out of the Glorious Revolution and the Whig ascendancy of the early Hanover period. They understood that government should be divided and balanced so that the various elements and interests of society were equally represented and could exercise restraint upon each other. Simply put, their notions of the origins and constitution of civil government were little different from the English Whig ideas of the same period that informed them.

Like other Britons, American colonists perceived the British constitution to be the most well-balanced, fair and enduring system of law and government in the world. They agreed that government was created by men for the purpose of preserving their liberty against anarchy at one extreme, and despotism at the other, and that the British constitution, and the form of government that grew out of it, best fulfilled those goals. Colonists viewed their own provincial governments as models based on the English system. Each had a representative assembly, a council (which they equated with a House of Lords), and an executive. Colonists who lived in royal colonies viewed the king, and not the royal governor, as their executive. This placed royal governors in an ambiguous position in so far as their duties to their royal master was concerned. If they suggested legislation to the provincial assembly at the behest of the king, and the assembly construed it as a threat to the welfare of the people, then the governor, and not his master, was accused of a despotic exercise of authority. The colonial assembly claimed the high ground on the issue, at once asserting that they were the defenders of the peoples’ liberty, and that their actions were taken out of loyalty to the king whose goal was identical to their own, namely to preserve and defend the liberties, rights and privileges of his subjects.

While colonial government institutions became increasingly independent and autonomous in the first half of the eighteenth century, under what is often referred to as British “salutary neglect,” American colonists still felt a strong attachment to the mother country. They felt a special relationship, a strong bond, between themselves and their Hanoverian rulers. They viewed the king as the linchpin connecting their distant provinces with Britain. The king was also a substantive part of their own individual colonial constitutions. Even in the proprietary colonies, where the constitutional link between king and colony was less distinct, colonists evinced support, loyalty and affection for the monarch. Indeed, some in the proprietary colonies looked upon the Crown as an essential counterweight to the abuse of power by the proprietors or their agents in the colony. Colonists viewed the king as their protector whose first goal was to preserve and defend their English religion, liberties and property. Thus, colonists believed that the king’s duty with respect to his subjects was in harmony with the professed aims of their own local popular political institutions.

American colonists gave evidence of their loyalty and devotion to the king and his family in many ways. They named counties, parishes, towns, colleges, taverns, inns, and ships after him and members of his family. They prayed for his continued health and prosperity. Colonial ministers of all denominations preached sermons explaining why the king should be loved, honored and obeyed. They extolled his virtues, calling him a providential ruler, a nursing father, the breath of his peoples’ nostrils. They celebrated royal events, birthdays, weddings, births, accessions, and military victories, and mourned the passing of their king and members of the

21 See John Phillip Reid, *The Concept of Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 32-37.

royal family. Ironically, although colonial political thinkers, like most of their English cousins, abhorred the notions of divine right and unlimited submission associated with Stuart monarchs, they often spoke of their rulers, especially George II, in terms that are, to modern readers, remarkably similar. Hanoverian kings were extolled as both chosen by the people, and anointed by God. Divine support was not given lightly, however; it was contingent upon the good behavior of the monarch. So long as rulers were considered good, exercising tolerance toward English Protestants, and jealously protecting the liberty and property of their subjects, they had the support of both the people and, according to two generations of American ministers, the Almighty. The good king's subjects were prepared to give freely and amply that loyalty that Stuart kings could only demand.

Hanoverian rulers were set in sharp contrast to Stuart monarchs, the former being the best of kings and the latter being the worst. This contrast became most stark on those occasions, like the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745 and the Atterbury Plot of 1722, when Whigs in England and America perceived themselves threatened by a possible Stuart restoration. American colonists made it clear in their newspapers, sermons and letters that they feared the Stuarts as much as their brethren in England did. And like English Whigs, Americans equated the Stuarts with Romanism and arbitrary government. Thus colonists claimed that a restored Stuart Pretender could only endanger the liberties, property and Protestant religion of his subjects, wherever they might reside. On the other hand, colonists viewed the Hanovers as the special friends of both orthodox Anglicans and English Dissenting Protestants. As the protectors of the Protestant religion, the Hanovers simultaneously became the protectors of English liberty. Protestantism and liberty went together in the minds of English political and religious thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic, in the same way that they linked Popery and slavery. Hanoverian rulers thus acquired a reputation as protectors and defenders of the civil liberties of their subjects. In fact, their reputation as rulers who were especially attentive to the liberty of their subjects was better in the colonies than it was in Britain, where, at least into the 1740s, a Jacobite minority and civil unrest threatened the Hanover Whig consensus. Colonial religious and political leaders characterized George II as an ideal English ruler—a benefactor to his subjects. If the Stuart Pretender was stereotyped as a model tyrant, Popish and arbitrary, then George II was most often characterized as the benevolent father of his country.

But what of the Country ideology in American colonial political thought before the reign of George III? It was frequently employed by one side or the other in local controversies, but very rarely in controversies with the government in London. The popular party in Massachusetts accused Royal Governor Jonathan Belcher of corruption and arbitrary rule when he stood against a paper money infusion in the colony in the late 1730s. And in that same colony, opponents of the new excise of 1754 copied the arguments against the taxes from Bolingbroke's *Craftsman* series of the 1730s to condemn the policy of the provincial assembly. In New York, the Presbyterian party leader, William Livingston, published *The Independent Reflector* to criticize the colonial government dominated by the Anglican party. He modeled his arguments after the English opposition *Independent Whig*, authored by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon.²² As often as not, however, until the 1760s, each side in colonial controversies mixed Country and Court rhetoric, alleging in the press and in memorials to London that their opponents' behavior was an act of disloyalty to the king and to his subjects in the colony. Country opposition rhetoric

22 Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 52-53.

was by no means the sole possession of the colonial assembly or the popular parties in the colonies. On more than one occasion royal governors borrowed from “True Whig” writers like Bolingbroke, Bishop Hoadly or Thomas Gordon when they responded to attacks from their provincial assembly. Governors employed Country opposition language to argue that annual salaries voted by the colonial assembly undermined the independence of the executive, unduly bound the office to the party that dominated the assembly, and thus unbalanced the colonial government. Peter Zenger attacked the popular majority in the New York Assembly, and was arrested for seditious libel for his troubles. He and his lawyer “turned for authority to Trenchard and Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters*” for grounds to defend the newspaperman against the charge.²³

In fact, the colonial political ideology of the age of the Hanovers was not very different from that of England. Political discourse in the American provinces was couched in Court and Country Whig terms as it was in the mother country; however, the difference was that in the American colonies there was no Court *per se*, and so the roles, and thus the language of Court and Country opposition, were not bound permanently to any set of government institutions or factions within any colony. Individuals and factions chose the language that might be used most effectively against their opponents, and mixed their rhetoric to suit their needs, but all sides continuously and enthusiastically claimed loyalty to the king.

From the accession of William III until the sixth year of the reign of George III, American colonists viewed their kings as active participants in the great work of governance—as protectors of their lives, liberties, and property, and the preservers of their Protestant faith. Colonists characterized their rulers as “nursing fathers,” benevolent and just, who employed their authority to protect and defend their subjects. This notion of English Protestant kingship was the wellspring of a powerful bond of allegiance between colonists and their kings that was not broken until the summer of 1776 when Americans perceived that King George III had forsaken them, had severed the connection between king and people, and had thus, in effect, separated the American colonies from the British Empire.

23 *Ibid.*

