has never been as invisible or as despairing of inclusion as African American members of the American working class have been.49

Lester D. Langley took a hemispheric approach in 1996, studying the American Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and the Latin American wars for independence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He found that the American Revolution produced an inspiring ideology on which to base nationalism and further democratic change, although the Revolution itself resulted only in political rights for free white men. For this reason, he described it as a revolution from above. The Haitian Revolution instead freed the island from French control and simultaneously slavery, and newly freed men created a state for the first time. Langley called this a revolution from below. The Latin American rebellions, instead, were revolutions denied as they aimed to change government without changing the social and economic structures that supported the ruling class. In his analysis, Langley emphasizes the chaos of revolutionary violence, the "infuriating complications generated by" the conflict between "liberating ideas and traditional customs," and the social explosivity of meanings of race. Revolutions in the New World had an added charge of unpredictability that Langley argued historians have neglected.50

In summary, it should be noted that historians who have addressed themselves to the question of whether the Revolution was revolutionary or not must answer a number of related questions. Was American society truly democratic during the colonial period? Or was American society undemocratic during the colonial era, thus resulting in a dual revolution: a struggle to see who would rule at home as well as a fight for home rule? What was the true nature of the Revolution? Was there a radical ideological change in the ideas that most Americans held regarding their image of themselves and of their institutions? Or did most of the changes take place within the political and social sphere rather than in the world of ideas? Was the "republican synthesis," with its emphasis on republican ideology, a convincing interpretation of this cataclysmic event? What were the results of the Revolution for women? For Native Americans? For the poor? What motivated men to go off to fight in the Revolutionary War — was it materialism or idealism? The answers to these questions will determine the answer to the broader question of just how revolutionary was the American Revolution.

empire was real and substantial. Four new elements in particular influenced how the colonists imagined themselves within the Anglo-American world: the developing military strength of Great Britain, the spread of a consumer-oriented economy, the creation of a self-conscious middle-class culture, and, most significant for our purposes, the stirrings of a heightened sense of British national identity.

Recent English historiography reminds us of something that probably should have been obvious all along: the British not only waged almost constant warfare against France and Spain throughout the world but also usually emerged victorious. In other words, they were remarkably good at it. Unlike their continental adversaries, the British had learned how to pay for large-scale war without bankrupting its citizens and, thereby, without sparking the kind of internal unrest that frequently destabilized other ancien régime monarchies. British rulers discovered the secret of fighting on credit; along with innovative banking and financial institutions, legions of new bureaucrats (tax collectors and inspectors) appeared throughout the country, persons who served as constant reminders of what Joanna Innes has termed “an impressively powerful central state apparatus.”

A second element powerfully shaping the eighteenth-century colonial world was the rapid development of a new consumer marketplace. A flood of exports linked ordinary people living on the periphery of empire to an exciting metropolitan society. Few people understood the cultural, and therefore the political, impact of the burgeoning consumer trade better than did Benjamin Franklin. In his *The Interest of Great Britain Considered* (1760), he observed that the vast quantities of British imports had the capacity to influence how colonists imagined themselves within a larger empire. Sounding much like a twentieth-century anthropologist, Franklin announced that Americans “must know,” must “think,” and must “care,” about the country they chiefly traded with. . . .

Prosperous English men and women, much like their American counterparts, bought what they had seen advertised in an expanding commercial press. And, significantly, people of more modest means also participated in that vibrant marketplace . . .

Colonial Americans . . . too had tasted luxury and increasingly called it happiness. On the eve of independence one American clergyman even went so far as to insist that civil rulers had an obligation to defend subjects “in the quiet and peaceable enjoyment of their persons and properties, i.e. their persons and worldly goods and estates, &c. together with all their just advantages and opportunities of getting more worldly goods and estates, &c. by labour, industry, trade, manufactures, &c.”

A third element in the rapidly changing world of the midcentury colonists would almost certainly have been the activities of a new social group in Great Britain, the so-called middle class . . . While no one denies the existence of other middle classes in the development of other nations, British-historians make a strong and well-documented case for the invention of a distinct middle class in Georgian England. Educated, professional, and prosperous people with no claim to aristocracy established, for the first time, what Langford terms a “polite and commercial” society. “English society was given a basic fluidity of status,” explain Lawrence Stone and Jeanne C. Faviter Stone, “by the vigour, wealth, and numerical strength of the ‘middle sort,’ mostly rural but also urban, whose emergence between 1660 and 1800 is perhaps the most important feature of the age.” This burgeoning middle group industriously copied the manners of its betters, fashioning self in ever more colorful and elaborate ways, celebrating consumer fads, purchasing the novels now marketed in large volume, and populating the spas and resort towns; perhaps most remarkable, even as it redefined the character of English popular culture, the new middle class never seriously challenged the traditional landed oligarchy for the right to rule the nation. It was those men and women who entertained visiting Americans, English families headed by lawyers, merchants, and doctors, who regularly proclaimed that the freest nation in the world was also the most prosperous. For the colonists, it was an exciting and convincing display.

These economic, cultural, and social transformations fed what for the midcentury American colonists would certainly have been the fourth and most striking feature of the age, the birth of a powerfully self-confident British nationalism. . . . Some time during the 1740s English men and women of all social classes began to express a sentiment that might be described variously as a dramatic surge of national consciousness, a rise of aggressive patriotism, or a greatly heightened articulation of national identity. To be sure, during the period of the Armada English people took intense pride in the defeat of the hated Spanish, and distinguished Elizabethan writers celebrated their Englishness. But the Georgian experience was quite different. Even if the eighteenth-century development represents an intensification of an imaginative project with ancient roots, it nevertheless involved a much broader percentage of the population. It was now sustained by a new commercial press that brought stories about the empire to urban coffeehouses and country taverns . . .

If the social sources of a heightened sense of national identity are in doubt no one questions the character of the swelling patriotic movement. Ordinary people—laboring men and women as well as members of a self-confident middling group—who bellowed out the words to the newly composed “Rule Britannia” and who responded positively to the emotional appeal of “God Save the King” gave voice to the common aspirations of a militantly Protestant culture. Or, stated negatively, they proclaimed their utter contempt for Catholicism and their rejection of everything associated with contemporary France. . . . In time, . . . even members of the traditional ruling class came to appreciate the symbolic value of John Bull in mobilizing a population in support of war and monarchy. For most English people the expression of national identity seems to have been quite genuine. Indeed, by noisy participation in patriotic rituals, the middling and working classes thrust themselves into a public sphere of national politics. As Roy Porter reminds us, “English patriotism during
the Georgian century should not be passed off as nothing but hegemonic social control, the conspiratorial ideological imprint of the ruling order; rather it signified a positive and critical articulation of the political voice of the middle class."

Georgian historians have paid considerably less attention to the darker face of national identity: its powerfully exclusionary tendencies and its propensity to reduce the "other," however defined, to second-rate status. For persons of Celtic background, for example, the rise of "British" nationalism at midcentury drew attention to their own marginality. As P. J. Marshall remarks, British nationalism had an extremely adverse impact on men and women who did not happen to live "at home." According to Marshall, "The eighteenth-century experience... revealed that 'imagined communities' of Britishness were parochial. English people could perhaps envisage a common community with the Welsh and, often with much difficulty, with the Scots, but they failed to incorporate the Irish or colonial Americans into their idea of nation."

At midcentury, therefore, colonial Americans confronted what must have seemed a radically "new" British consciousness. It radiated outward from the metropolitan center, providing officials of a powerful, prosperous, and dynamic state with an effective vocabulary for mobilizing popular patriotism. It was in this fluid, unstable context that colonists on the periphery attempted to construct their own imagined identity within the empire. Although the process of defining identity had begun as soon as European settlers arrived in the New World, the conversation across the Atlantic Ocean changed dramatically at midcentury. Americans found that they were not dealing with the same nation that their parents or grandparents had known. Confronted with a sudden intensification of British nationalism, the colonists' initial impulse was to join the chorus, their loyalty to almost everything associated with Great Britain. Before the 1760s they assumed that popular British subjects who happened to live on the other side of the Atlantic. The colonists were slow to appreciate the growing conflict between nation and empire, between Englishness and Britishness. Like the Irish, they conflated those categories within a general discourse of "imperial" identity.

However much midcentury Americans knew about the politics of contemporaneous Scotland and Ireland, they too found themselves struggling to comprehend the demands of a powerfully self-confident imperial state. We must pay close attention here to chronology, to the different phases in a developing conversation with England as the colonist moved from accommodation to resistance, from claims of Britishness to independence. Like the Scots, the Americans initially attempted to demonstrate, often in shrill patriotic rhetoric, their loyalty to almost everything associated with Great Britain. Before the 1760s they assumed that popular British nationalism was essentially an inclusive category and that by fighting the French and Indians along the northern frontier, they had merited equal standing with other British subjects who happened to live on the other side of the Atlantic. The colonists were slow to appreciate the growing conflict between nation and empire, between Englishness and Britishness. Like the Irish, they conflated those categories within a general discourse of "imperial" identity.

A narration of the construction of identity within the British Empire properly begins in the 1740s. European settlers of an earlier period had, of course, struggled with some of the same issues, alternately celebrating and lamenting the development of cultural difference. But whatever the roots of the challenge, dramatic changes in English society, several of which we have already examined, forced provincial Americans for the first time to confront the full meaning of "Britishness" in their lives. The mother country in most alluring terms, indeed, as the most polite and progressive society the world had ever seen.
response was generally enthusiastic. They believed that the English accepted them as full partners in the British Empire, allies in the continuing wars against France, devout defenders of Protestantism, and eager participants in an expanding world of commerce. Inasmuch as Americans during this period spoke the language of national identity, as opposed to that of different regions and localities, they did so as imperial patriots, as people whose sense of self was intimately bound up with the success and prosperity of Great Britain. .

Consider a single example of this midcentury imperial patriotism. In 1764 the editor of the newly founded New Hampshire Gazette lectured his readers on the social function of newspapers. “By this Means,” he rhapsodized, “the spirited Englishman, the mountainous Welshman, the brave Scotchman, and Irishman, and the loyal American, may be firmly united and mutually resolved to guard the glorious Throne of Britannia. . . . Thus Harmony may be happily restored, Civil War disappointed, and each agree to embrace, as British Brothers, in defending the Common Cause.”

Many other Americans shared the New England editor’s assumptions about the inclusive character of the British; imperial identity. Some of them were quite distinguished. Appearing before the Committee of the Whole House of Commons in 1766, Benjamin Franklin argued for unity within the empire. When a member of Parliament pointedly asked him whether expanding the frontiers of the British Empire in North America was not in fact just “an American interest,” Franklin shot back, “Not particularly, but conjointly a British and an American interest.” The Reverend Jeremy Belknap, a talented historian and the founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, also captured the spirit of eighteenth-century colonial nationalism. Like Franklin, Belknap assumed that England and America were equals. The success of one contributed directly to the success of the other. Both found fulfillment in their common Britishness. According to Belknap, the brilliant leadership of William Pitt during the Seven Years’ War “had attached us more firmly than ever, to the kingdom of Britain. We were proud of our connection with a nation whose flag was triumphant in every quarter of the globe. . . . We were fond of repeating every plaudit, which the ardent affection of the British nation bestowed on a young monarch [George III], rising to ‘glory in the name of Briton.’ . . .

In point of fact, however, the Americans were not really “British Brothers.” As became increasingly and distressingly obvious during the run-up to independence, heightened British nationalism was actually English nationalism writ large. . . . To be sure, categories lower than free white colonists existed in this midcentury status hierarchy, but for the Americans such unflattering distinctions hardly mattered.

“We won’t be their Negroes,” snarled a young John Adams in 1765, writing as “Humphry Ploughjoggger” in the Boston Gazette. Adams crudely insisted that Providence had never intended the American colonists “for Negroes . . . and therefore never intended us for slaves. . . . I say we are as handsome as old English folks, and so should be as free.” Ploughjoggler’s shrill, uncomfortably racist response to the Stamp Act revealed the shock of rejection. The source of anger was not so much parliamentary taxation without representation as it was the sudden realization that the British really regarded white colonial Americans as second-class beings, indeed, as persons so inferior from the metropolitan perspective that they somehow deserved a lesser measure of freedom.

The substance, if not the tone, of Ploughjoggler’s bitter complaint echoed throughout the colonial press on the eve of revolution. To be sure, the popular print materials contained other themes—religious and constitutional arguments, for example—but in many cases, the raw emotional energy of the performance came from the American writers’ abrupt discovery of inequality. Like the anonymous writer of a piece that appeared in the Maryland Gazette—actually an essay originally published in a Boston journal—colonists throughout America found themselves asking the embarrassing question, “Are not the People of America, British Subjects? Are they not Englishmen?”

That the response to such questions was now in doubt became an issue of general public concern. Consider the defensive, pathetic, frequently querulous attempts by American writers during this period to demonstrate self-worth in relation to the men and women who happened to live in Great Britain. The Reverend Samuel Sherwood of Connecticut protested that colonists were “not an inferior species of animals, made the beast of burden to a lawless, corrupt administration.” Other Americans heard similar tales of alleged colonial inferiority. James Otis Jr., the fiery Boston lawyer who protested the constitutionality of the Stamp Act, responded with heavy-handed irony. “Are the inhabitants of British America,” he asked rhetorically, “all a parcel of transported thieves, robbers, and rebels, or descended from such? Are the colonists blasted lepers, whose company would infect the whole House of Commons?” The answer was more problematic than Otis would have liked. Arthur Lee encountered similar difficulty during a heated debate with “Mr. Adam Smith.” The son of a wealthy Chesapeake tobacco planter, Lee insisted that, whatever the great economist might think, the original founders of Virginia had been “distinguished, even in Britain, for rank, for fortune, and for abilities.” And yet, as Lee remarked with obvious resentment, despite superior family background, the Virginians of his own generation “are treated, not as the fellow-subjects but as the servants of Britain.”

As Adams well understood when he wrote as Ploughjoggler, the simple New England farmer, ordinary Americans were not particularly interested in crafting a separate identity, at least not in the mid-1760s. It was the English who had projected a sense of difference and inferiority upon the colonists. In other words, “American” as a descriptive category seems in this highly charged context to have been an external construction, a term in some measure intended to be “humiliating and debasing.” In an exhaustive survey of the contents of all colonial newspapers during the period immediately preceding national independence, Richard L. Merritt discovered that “available evidence indicates that Englishmen began to identify
the colonial population as 'American' persistently after 1768 — a decade before Americans themselves did so.” The full implications of Merritt’s pioneering work have largely gone unappreciated. Indeed, it was not until quite recently that P. J. Marshall again reminded us that “the rise of the concept of ‘American’ owed quite a lot to British usage.” The exclusionary rhetoric broadcast from the metropolitan center was a new development, a surprising and unsettling challenge to the assumptions of equality that had energized colonial nationalism until the Stamp Act crisis; since it came after an intense burst of imperial loyalty during the Seven Years’ War, the colonists felt badly betrayed. . . .

Shifting constructions of identity within the empire involved more than simple misconstruction. England’s assertion of its own Englishness shocked Américans, and the element of surprise helps to account for the strikingly emotional character of colonial political writing. Indeed, if one attempts to explain the coming of revolution as a lawyer-like analysis of taxation without representation or as an enlightened constitutional debate over parliamentary sovereignty, one will almost certainly fail to comprehend the shrill, even paranoid, tone of public discourse in the colonies.

Other historians have addressed this curious problem. In The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, for example, Bernard Bailyn analyzed the disjuncture between popular rhetoric and statutory reality. The American reaction to various parliamentary regulations seemed to him far more rancorous than one might have predicted on the basis of actual levels of taxation. Bailyn concluded that over the course of the eighteenth century Americans had borrowed a highly inflammatory strand of English political discourse, one that warned incessantly against corruption and conspiracy, the loss of civic virtue, and a restoration of Stuart despotism. When Parliament attempted to tax the colonists without representation, Americans assumed the worst. Events appeared to be fulfilling their ideological nightmares. And in this situation, they employed a strident “country” language employed originally by English politicians critical of “court” corruption to translate imperial regulatory policy into a dangerous plot against provincial liberty and property.

While that interpretation of the apparently irrational political rhetoric of the colonists is entirely plausible, it does not seem sufficient to account for the sudden sense of personal humiliation. The extraordinary bitterness and acrimony of colonial rhetoric requires us to consider the popular fear that the English were systematically relegating Americans to second-class standing within the empire. To be sure, the colonists may have found in the borrowed “country” rhetoric a persuasive language in which to express their emotional pain. That is certainly part of the story. What we tend to forget, however, is that they also complained that their “British Brothers” had begun treating them like “negroes,” a charge that cannot be easily explained as an American echo of English political opposition.

The racism that accompanied fear of exclusion appeared in the writings of several distinguished colonial patriots. Like John Adams, these were men who demonstrated that they could communicate successfully to a growing audience of unhappy Americans. Few were better at it than James Otis Jr. During the 1760s, he publicly lectured an imagined representative of English society: “You think most if not all the Colonists are Negroes and Mulattoes — You are wretchedly mistaken — Ninety nine in a hundred in the more northern Colonies are white, and there is as good blood flowing in their veins, save the royal blood, as any in the three kingdoms.” And Daniel Dulany, a well-educated Maryland lawyer, sounded a lot like “Ploughjogger” when he protested in 1765 against how English officials regularly characterized American colonists. “What a strange animal must a North American appear to be,” this enlightened gentleman explained in one of the most reprinted political pamphlets written before the Revolution, “from these representations to the generality of English readers, who have never had an opportunity to admire that he may be neither black nor tawny, may speak the English language, and in other respects seem, for all the world, like one of them!” . . .

Within this radically evolving imperial framework, the Stamp Act seemed an especially poignant reminder for the Americans of their new second-class status. . . .

As the constitutional crisis with Parliament evolved and as the possibilities for political reconciliation became less promising, the American sense of humiliation slowly transformed itself into bemused reflection on having been pushed out of an empire that once seemed to guarantee liberty and prosperity. Even at the moment of independence, the colonists still could not quite explain why the ministers of George III had decided systematically to dishonor a proud people. “Had our petitions and prayers been properly regarded,” the Reverend Henry Cumings preached in 1781 at the site of the Battle of Lexington, “and moderate pacific measures pursued, we should have entertained no thoughts of revolt.” This was hardly an expression of the kind of self-confident patriotism that one might have expected in that situation. But Cumings played on the theme of rejection. “It was far from our intention or inclination to separate ourselves from Great-Britain; and that we had it not even in contemplation to set up for independency; but on the contrary, earnestly wished to remain connected with her, until she had deprived us of all hopes of preserving such a connection, upon any better terms than unconditional submission.” . . .

If assertion of English national superiority forced colonists to imagine themselves as a separate people, it also profoundly affected the substance of American political ideology. During the 1760s the colonists took up the language of natural rights liberalism with unprecedented fervor. That they did so is not exactly a momentous discovery. In recent years, however, historians of political thought have discounted the so-called Lockean tradition in prerevolutionary America. According to Bernard Bailyn, for example, the liberal discourse of this period lacked persuasive impact. “We know now,” Bailyn insisted, "that Enlightenment ideas, while they form the deep background and give a general coloration to the liberal beliefs of the time, were not the ideas that directly shaped the Americans’ responses to particular events.” To some extent, Bailyn had a point. An earlier generation
of historians had treated natural rights claims as sacrosanct principles, as self-evident and timeless truths whose popularity required no social explanation. When the case for Lockean ideas was stated in such reverent terms, it was very hard to understand why ordinary men and women might have found the natural rights argument so emotionally compelling, indeed, why they would have risked their lives on the field of battle for such beliefs.

The explanation for the popularity of natural rights arguments in late colonial America now seems clear. Within an empire strained by the heightened nationalist sentiment of the metropolitan center, natural rights acquired unusual persuasive force. Threatened from the outside by a self-confident military power, one that seemed intent on marginalizing the colonists within the empire, Americans countered with the universalist vocabulary of natural rights, in other words, with a language of political resistance that stressed a bundle of God-given rights as “prior to and independent of the claims of political authority.” The Locke of the Second Treatise seemed to the Americans to embody common sense precisely because he abstracted consideration of human rights and equality from the traditional rhetoric of British history. He liberated the theory of politics from the constraints of time and custom, from purely English precedent. As Ian Shapiro, a historian of political thought, explains, “Locke shifted the basis of antiabsolutist conceptions of political legitimacy away from history and toward a moral justification based on an appeal to reason.” Those who still maintain that the republican ideology described in such detail in J. G. A. Pocock’s The Machiavellian Moment would have served the colonists just as well are hard pressed to explain how a fundamentally historical justification for the Ancient Constitution spoke effectively to the problem of preserving timeless human rights.

However logical championing natural rights liberalism may have been, it was for the colonists a profoundly defensive move. Americans invoked “transhistorical arguments of natural equity and human liberty” because, in the words of one student of Anglo-Irish patriotism, “they did not have much of a historical leg to stand on.” In their recent study entitled Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden came to a strikingly similar conclusion. The eighteen-century Americans, they declared, “could only make their demands in terms either of claims of some set of political traditions that they shared with the metropolitan culture or, as most were ultimately to do, of claims of a body of natural rights shared by all men everywhere.” What that suggests is that American liberalism may have owed much of its initial popularity to its effectiveness as a rhetorical strategy, as the political language of a colonial people who had not yet invented a nation and, therefore, who had not yet constructed a common history.

Everywhere in the public political debates, one encounters the language of rights and equality. Arguments for the dominance of a particular political discourse during any period, of course, are bound to be lair. By situating our interpretation of the run-up to revolution in the recent historiography of eighteenth-century England — we discover why the forgotten “Ploughjoggers” of colonial America were so angry and defensive, colonial liberals so fearful of rejection, and, above all, a people so profoundly confused by changing perceptions of identity within the British Empire. It was not until after the Revolution, when Americans confronted the exclusionary and racist logic of their own nationalism, that ordinary men and women had reason to be thankful that whatever their country had become, it had commenced as a society committed to rights and equality, radical concepts then and now.
"Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?" Thus wrote John Adams in 1815 to Thomas Jefferson, his old enemy but by this time his septuagenarian friend. "Nobody," Jefferson replied from Monticello, "except merely its external facts... The life and soul of history must be forever unknown."

Not so. For more than two centuries historians have written about the American Revolution, striving to capture the "life and soul" of which Jefferson spoke. We now possess a rich and multistranded tapestry of the Revolution, filled with engaging biographies, local narratives, weighty explorations of America's greatest explosion of political thinking, annals of military tactics and strategies, discussions of religious, economic, and diplomatic aspects of what was then called the "glorious cause," and more. Indeed we now have possession of far more than the "external facts."

Yet the great men — the founding fathers — of the revolutionary era dominate the reigning master narrative. Notwithstanding generations of prodigious scholarship, we have not appreciated the lives and labors, the sacrifices and struggles, the glorious messiness, the hopes and fears of diverse groups that fought in the longest and most disruptive war in our history with visions of launching a new age filling their heads. Little is known, for example, of Thomas Peters, an African-born slave who made his personal declaration of independence in early 1776, fought for the freedom of African Americans, led former slaves to Nova Scotia after the war, and completed a pilgrimage for unalienable rights by shepherding them back to Africa to participate in the founding of Sierra Leone. Why are the history books virtually silent on Dragging Canoe, the Cherokee warrior who made the American Revolution into a two-decade life-sapping fight for his people's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness? We cannot capture the "life and soul" of the Revolution without paying close attention to the wartime experiences and agendas for change that engrossed backcountry farmers, urban craftsmen, deep-blue mariners, female camp followers and food rioters — those ordinary people who did most of the protesting, most of the fighting, most of the dying, and most of the dreaming about how a victorious America might satisfy the yearnings of all its peoples.

In this book the reader will find, I hope, an antidote for historical amnesia. To this day, the public remembers the Revolution mostly in its enshrined, mythic form. This is peculiar in a democratic society because the sacralized story of the founding fathers, the men of marble, mostly concerns the uppermost slice of American revolutionary society. That is what has lodged in our minds, and this is the fable that millions of people in other countries know about the American Revolution.

This book presents a people's revolution, an upheaval among the most heterogeneous people to be found anywhere along the Atlantic littoral in the eighteenth century. The book's thrust is to complicate the well-established core narrative by putting before the reader bold figures, ideas, and movements, highlighting the true radicalism of the American Revolution that was indispensable to the origins, conduct, character, and outcome of the world-shaking event.

By "radicalism" I mean advocating wholesale change and sharp transformation rooted in a kind of dream life of a better future imagined by those who felt most dissatisfied with the conditions they experienced as the quarrel with Great Britain unfolded. For a reformed America they looked toward a redistribution of political, social, and religious power; the discarding of old institutions and the creation of new ones; the overthrowing of ingrained patterns of conservative, elitist thought; the leveling of society so that top and bottom were not widely separated; the end of the nightmare of slavery and the genocidal intentions of land-crazed frontiersmen; the hope of women of achieving a public voice. This radicalism directed itself at destabilizing a society where the white male elite prized stability because it upheld their close grip on political, economic, religious, sexual, and social power. This radicalism, therefore, was usually connected to a multifaceted campaign to democratize society, to recast the social system, to achieve dreams with deep biblical and historical roots, to put "power in the people," as the first articles of government in Quaker New Jersey expressed it a century before the American Revolution.

The pages that follow mostly view the American Revolution through the eyes of those not in positions of power and privilege, though the iconic founding fathers are assuredly part of the story. In reality, those in the nether strata of colonial society and those outside "respectable" society were most of the people of revolutionary America. Without their ideas, dreams, and blood sacrifices, the American Revolution would never have occurred, would never have followed the course that we can now comprehend, and would never have reverberated around the world among oppressed people down to the present day. Disintering these long-forgotten figures from history's cemetery, along with their aspirations and demands, along with the events and dramatic moments in which they figured so importantly, is offered as an antidote to the art of forgetting.
Many of the figures we will encounter were from the middle and lower ranks of American society, and many of them did not have pale complexions. From these ranks, few heroes have emerged to enter the national pantheon. For the most part, they remain anonymous. Partly this is because they faded in and out of the picture, rarely achieving the tenure and status of men such as John Adams and John Hancock of Boston, Robert Morris and Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay of New York, or Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and George Washington of Virginia, all of whom remained on the scene from the Revolution’s beginning to the very end. But, although they never rose to the top of society, where they could trumpet their own achievements and claim their place in the pages of history, many other men and women counted greatly at the time. “Lived inequalities,” writes the Haitian philosopher-historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “yield unequal historical power.” The shortness of their lives also explains the anonymity of ordinary people. It is safer to conduct a revolution from the legislative chamber than fight for it on the battlefield, healthier to be free than enslaved, and one is more likely to reach old age with money than with crumbs.

Even a casual reading of the reflections of those who occupy our national pantheon shows that these founders were far from reverent in their views of one another, and far from agreed on how to tell the story of the nation’s birth. They thought the story would be messy, ambiguous, and complicated because they had experienced the Revolution in just these ways — as a seismic eruption from the hands of an internally divided people, two decades of problems that sometimes seemed insoluble, a gnawing fear that the course of the Revolution was contradicting its bedrock principles, and firsthand knowledge of the shameful behavior that was interlaced with heroic self-sacrifice during the long travail. . . .

While those atop the social pyramid couldn’t agree on how to parcel out credit for the outcome of the American Revolution, or even to tell the story honestly, a few of them industriously published histories they hoped would serve to instruct the generations to come. In this effort, they were forerunners of a true people’s history of the Revolution because they understood how crucial the rank and file of American society were to the outcome. For example, David Ramsay, transplanted from Pennsylvania to South Carolina, where he served as a delegate to the Continental Congress, organized his *The History of the American Revolution* around the key notion that “The great bulk of those, who were the active instruments of carrying on the revolution, were self-made, industrious men. These who by their own exertions, had established or laid a foundation for establishing personal independence, were most generally trusted, and most successfully employed in establishing that of their country.” Ramsay also appreciated, even if in muted tones, the centrality of black and Native Americans to the Revolution. Publishing his account just a year after the ratification of the Constitution, Ramsay implored the new American generation — in two pages of advice at the end of his book — to “let the hapless African sleep undisturbed on his native shore and give over wishing for the extermination of the ancient proprietors of this land.” . . .

Mercy Otis Warren, wife and sister of two important Massachusetts patriots, also hoped that the readers of her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* (published in 1805) would find moral lessons in her three-volume account; and she harbored no doubts that this obliged her to dwell on the bitter as well as the sweet, the ordinary as well as the great. Giving considerable play to women’s importance in the Revolution, she wrote in detail about how ordinary Massachusetts plowmen and leather-apron men rose up in 1774 in “one of the most extraordinary eras in the history of man” — one that “led to that most alarming experiment of leveling of all ranks and destroying all subordination.” Indeed, Warren gave too much importance to lesser people and not nearly enough to John Adams, husband of her good friend Abigail — or so John told her. Adams was furious at her history. Putting the writing of his autobiography aside, he wrote ten long letters telling her why. Yet Warren’s was one of the accounts that, in paying attention to common people, anticipated Ralph Waldo Emerson’s plea four decades later in his famous essay entitled “The American Scholar,” where he urged those who would truly know their history to understand “the near, the low, the common.”

After the last of the revolutionary generation was in their graves, some began to worry that forward-looking Americans, many of them plunging west, were losing all memory of the American Revolution. Philadelphia’s John Fanning Watson in 1825 urged the newborn Historical Society of Pennsylvania “to rescue from oblivion the facts of personal prowess, achievements, or sufferings by officers and soldiers of the Revolutionary war” and to record “the recitals of many brave men now going down to the tomb.” Watson was passionately interested in the “great” men of the Revolution but also the “many privates ‘unknown to fame’ peculiarly distinguished by their actions,” for example, Zenas Macumber, a private in Washington’s bodyguard who had served through the entire war and survived seventeen wounds.

Watson’s fellow amateur historian Benson Lossing, orphaned at eleven and apprenticed to a watchmaker at fourteen in Poughkeepsie, New York, walked eight thousand miles in his mid-thirties to commute “with men of every social and intellectual grade” and sketch every part of the American landscape involved in the Revolutionary War for a hefty two-volume *Pictorial Field-Book of the American Revolution* (1850, 1852). While detailing every major battle of the Revolution, Lossing sprinkled his military history with vignettes about ordinary people: the poor shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes, who participated in the Boston Tea Party; the hardscrabble North Carolina farmers living in a region barren of printing presses, newspapers, and schools, who assembled to elect representatives from their militia companies who passed the Mecklenburg Resolutions that all but announced independence in May 1775, far ahead of the rest of the country; a frontier woman who beat off an Indian attack; and Pompey,
poor man’s war, one that he hoped would provide inspiration for mid-
nineteenth century labor reformers whom he admired and promoted. 
His stories in Washington and His Generals; or Legends of the American 
Revolution (1847) and Washington and His Men (1849) gave Washington 
his due, but it was the common man on the battlefield who was the true 
hero. “Let me make a frank confession,” Lippard told the City Institute 
in 1852, after millions had read his books. “I have been led astray. I have 
looked upon effigies and... bowed down to uniforms and done reverence 
to epaulettes... Gilt and paint and spangles have for ages com-
manded reverence, while men made in the image of God have died in 
ditch.” Lippard got more particular: “The General who receives all 
the glory of the battles said to have been fought under his eye, who is 
worshiped in poetry and history, received in every city which he may 
enter by hundreds of thousands, who makes the heavens ring with his 
name; this General then is not the hero. No; the hero is the private 
soldier, who stands upon the battlefield;... the poor soldier... whose 
skull bleaches in the sands, while the general whose glory the volunteer 
helped to win is warm and comfortable upon his mimic throne.” Lippard 
cautioned his audience to “worship the hero... [and] reverence the 
heroic; but have a care that you are not swindled by a bastard heroism; be 
very careful of the sham hero.”

Lippard gave polite history a bad name; but the public loved him. He 
became their cultural arbiter and provided their understanding of the 
American Revolution. In a separate book, Thomas Paine, Author-Soldier 
(1852), Lippard helped restore Paine’s reputation, which had gone into 
depth after Paine’s attack on Christianity in The Age of Reason, writ-
ten in the heat of the French Revolution. The Age of Reason left Paine 
an unattractive figure in polite circles and deeply offended churchgoing 
people. Yet Lippard’s interest in Paine led to new editions of the revolu-
tional radical’s many works, because Lippard rescued him as the 
unswerving herald of democracy who had more to say to the struggling 
mid-nineteenth century urban masses than all the revolutionary generals 
and statesmen. A year after Lippard’s death in 1854, at age thirty-two, the 
Friends of Universal Liberty and Freedom, Emancipation and General 
Ruction celebrated “St. Thomas” Paine’s birthday in Philadelphia... 

Lippard often dissolved the line between fiction and history in his rev-
olutionary tales. Having Paine convert to Christianity on his deathbed 
and having the traitor Benedict Arnold don his old Continental army uniform 
and recant in his dying moments were examples of the liberties he took. 
The story of the muscular Black Sampson of the “Oath-Bound Five,” who 
avenged the British murder of his white mistress by plunging into the 
Battle of Brandywine against the redcoats with Debbil, his ferocious dog, 
was pure fiction. So were other tales he told, though the historical events 
of which these vignettes were a part were accurate. Philadelphia’s Saturday 
Evening Post charged that Lippard had “taken the liberty to palter with 
and corrupt the pages of history.” Lippard retreated not an inch. He coun-
tered that in the hands of genteel historians, “The thing which generally
passes for History is the most impudent, swaggering bully, the most grace­less braggart, the most reckless equivocator that ever staggered forth on the great stage of the world." He embellished, he admitted. But a legend from his hand, he explained, was "one of those heart-warm stories, which, quivering in rude, earnest language from the lips of a spectator of a battle, or the survivor of some event of olden time, fill up the cold outlines of history, and clothe the skeleton with flesh and blood, give it eyes and tongue, force it at once to look into our eyes and talk with us!"

Even as Lippard was publishing his first stories about the poor man's America, radical abolitionists were taking up the same cause, but they were particularly concerned about how the contributions of free black people, and some slaves, were fading away. John Greenleaf Whittier, poet laureate of the abolitionist movement, took up his pen in dismay and anger after hearing July 4 orations in the nation's capital. Writing in 1847 in Washington, D.C.'s National Era, an anti-slavery newspaper, he expostulated on how "the return of the Festival of our National Independence has called our attention to a matter which has been very carefully kept out of sight by orators and toast-drinkers." Why, asked Whittier, does "a whole nation [do] honor to the memories of one class of its defenders, to the total neglect of another class, who had the misfortune to be of darker complexion?" For a half century, Whittier charged, "certain historical facts . . . have been quietly elbowed aside," that are of "the services and sufferings of the colored soldiers of the Revolution." "They have no historian," he continued. "With here and there an exception, they all passed away, and only some faint tradition of their campaigns under Washington and Greene and Lafayette, and of their cruises under Decatur and Barry, lingers among their descendants." . . .

The current generation of historians — a diverse group that looks more truly American than any preceding one — has scoured the records and posed new questions to take to the sources. In the last few decades a remarkable flowering of an American history sensitive to gender, race, religion, and class, which is to say a democratized history, is giving us an alternative, long-forgotten American Revolution. "Each generation," the English historian Christopher Hill told us several decades ago, "rescues a new area from what its predecessors arrogantly and snobbishly dismissed as 'the lunatic fringe.'" But "it is no longer necessary to apologize profusely for taking the common people of the past on their own terms and trying to understand them," Hill advises. This book responds to this advice.

The aim of this book is to capture the revolutionary involvement of all the component parts of some three million wildly diverse people living east of the Mississippi River. I could not have attempted such a study without changes in the historical profession over the past few decades — something akin to a tectonic plate shift. Clio, the muse of history, is hardly recognizable today in comparison to her visage of 1960. The emergence of a profession of historians of widely different backgrounds has redistributed historical property, and the American Revolution is now becoming the property of the many rather than the few. Even the best-remembered heroes are now seen with all their ambiguities, contradictions, and flaws. For example, it is no longer unpatriotic to read of Washington and Jefferson's tortured relationship to slavery, always mentioned in past biographies but usually soft pedaled and marginalized. Now one can choose from a stack of books with enticing titles on the founding fathers and slavery such as William Wiener's An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America; Lucia C. Stanton's Free Some Day: The African American Families of Monticello; or David Waldstreicher's Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution.

When historians fix their gaze downward or write a warts-and-all American history, they often offend people who cherish what they remember as a more coherent, worshipful, and supposedly annealing rendition of the past. In the history wars of the 1990s, many conservative-culture warriors called historians offering new interpretations of the American Revolution — or any other part of American history — "history bandits," "history pirates," or, sneeringly, "revisionists" intent on kidnapping history with no respect for a dignified rendition of the past. Yet the explosion of historical knowledge has invigorated history and increased its popularity. People who discover in accounts of the past figures like themselves — in color or class, religion, sex, or social situation — naturally find history more satisfying than when it is organized around a triumphalist version of the past in which the occupants of the national pantheon, representing a very narrow slice of society, get most of the play. Narratives of glory will always have a market, and some people will always prefer an uncomplicated, single-message history. But empathy with less than oversized figures, as much in history as in literature, has a market as well.

Unsurprisingly, those of the old school do not like to hear the question "whose history?" It is unsettling for them to see the intellectual property of the American Revolution, once firmly in the hands of a smaller and more homogeneous historians' guild, taken out of their safe boxes, put on the table, and redivided. Yet what could be more democratic than to reopen questions about the Revolution's sources, conduct, and results? And what is the lasting value of a "coherent" history if coherence is obtained by eliminating the jagged edges, where much of the vitality of the people is to be found? How can we expect people to think of the American Revolution as their own when they see no trace of their forebears in it? Historian Roger Wilkins writes: "Tales of the republic's founding — mythic national memories used to bind us together — are often told in ways that exclude and diminish all of us" (and thus, it might be added, keep us divided). In propagating this kind of simplified history "we ensure that our future will be rent along the same jagged seams that wound us so grievously today. There is much pain and loss in our national history, which contains powerful echoes of the pain and loss many of us feel in our daily lives."

A history of inclusion has another claim to make. Only a history that gives play to all the constituent parts of society can overcome the defeatist notion that the past was inevitably determined. Historical inevitability is a
The American Revolution: or Radical?

winner's story, excusing mistakes of the past and relegating the loser's story to a footnote. Is it not fitting in an open and generally optimistic society that we should portray a wide range of individuals who did not see themselves as puppets dancing on the strings of the supposed leaders? If the history we are making today is subject to human will, or what historians call human agency, then yesterday's history must have been fluid and unpredictable rather than moving along some predetermined course. If history did not unfold inevitably in the American Revolution, then surely a great many people must have been significant actors in its unfolding. Conscious of a complex past, readers today can embrace the idea that they, too, can contribute to a different future. Honest history can impart a sense of how the lone individual counts, how the possibilities of choice are infinite, how human capacity for both good and evil is ever present, and how dreams of a better society are in the hands of the dispossessed as much as in the possession of the putative brokers of our society's future.

The Constitution remains one of the most controversial documents in all of American history. Generations of Supreme Court justices have reinterpreted the document according to their own predilections when handing down constitutional decisions. Presidents and political parties in power traditionally have viewed the Constitution in the light of their own interests, pursuits, and philosophies of government; historians have presented conflicting interpretations of the Constitution and of the intentions of its framers. This changing outlook of historians has tended to coincide with changes in the intellectual climate of opinion within America.

From the Convention of 1787 to the close of the Civil War, the Constitution was considered a controversial document by historians because of the questions it raised about two opposing doctrines: states' rights versus national sovereignty, or a strict versus a loose construction of the Constitution. The outcome of the Civil War seemed to settle the issue in favor of the national theory of the Constitution.

Since the Civil War, however, six distinct groups of historians have arisen to offer differing interpretations of the constitutional period. The first, the nationalist school, emerged in the 1870s and 1880s; it approached the Constitution influenced by the intense nationalism marking American society in the Gilded Age. Around the turn of the century, there appeared the Progressive school that viewed the document and its framing in light of the Populist-Progressive reform movements of the 1890s and early 1900s. Charles A. Beard, the leading Progressive scholar, saw the Constitution as a document that was intended to protect private property and that reflected the interests of privileged groups in postrevolutionary America. Since World War II, three groups of historians — the consensus, the new intellectual historians, and the neo-Progressives — arose either to revise or to refine the Beardian interpretation. Then in the 1990s, another group arose, the new political historians who defined politics broadly to include conventional politics but also cultural manifestations with political meaning, and who studied a range of groups and offered perspectives on those "other founders" affected by the Constitution but left out of deliberations about it.  

1Saul Cornell, The Other Founders: Antifederalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999); Jeffrey Pasley, Andrew Roberson, and David Waldstreicher, Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004).