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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the role of Philadelphia as a hotbed of revolutionary activity directly preceding and during the American Revolution. By exploring primary documents, Skeggs attempts to piece together the path to the radical changes in government structure and civil liberties in Pennsylvania. By doing so, she shows that both ideology and action played integral roles in shaping the transformation of Philadelphia from a conservative area to a center of radicalism.

The Translation of Radical Ideas into Radical Action: The American Revolution and Revolutionary Philadelphia

By Angela Skeggs

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Introduction

The battle for the independence of the American colonies has been attributed to many competing motives and factors. Within the vast array of literature on the subject, different schools of interpretation have formed. Progressive-era historians focus on economic motivations underlying the American Revolution. They study the actions of those in the colonial era and attempted to determine what self-interested economic motives were behind the revolution. Within this school of thought, historians explore possible class conflict and the social ramifications of the revolution.¹ An opposing school of thought arose in opposition to the progressive historians. This faction, The Neo-Whig school of thought, places a higher value on constitutional principles and ideas during the American Revolution.² Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* is a prime example of a Neo-Whigs interpretation of history. For Neo-Whigs, ideas and ideology are of utmost importance. These two schools of thought helped to shape much of the argument surrounding the interpretation of the American Revolution. At the core of the debate between the two is the question of which was more important: actions (progressives) or ideas (neo-Whigs)? The answer to this question can determine how one interprets the revolution and its results.

A hybrid of these two models proves to be more useful. Though ideology and ideas are important, the actions, which result from ideas, are more important. Progressive era historians may have be correct when interpreting actual events, but are wrong in not attributing some of those actions to ideas. Conversely, neo-Whigs emphasize the important role of ideas, but do not give due credit to action which resulted from the ideas. When attempting to assess the political nature of the revolution one should look for the relation between ideology and action, and attempt to discern where radical thoughts led to radical action.

When one views the actions and ideas that manifested during and after the American Revolution, one can begin to assess whether or not the revolution was indeed radical. Out of a society deeply entrenched in the moral superiority, the innate goodness of subservient hierarchy, and monarchical values arose a people who dared to question their rulers. The push for a more representative and democratic government was a truly radical notion during the late 1700's. Historically, members of English society had questioned and tried to limit the power of

¹William H. Nelson, "The Revolutionary Character of the American Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 4 (July, 1965), 1000.

²John W. Tyler, *Smugglers and Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 5.

monarchy, but the American colonists were the first to fully reject the legitimacy of this "oppressive" form of government.³ Various pamphlets and newspaper articles helped to give a more powerful political voice to the emerging middle class and provide evidence that American revolutionaries challenged notions of social hierarchy. More specifically, one finds radical expressions of the revolution in several intense loci of action. Philadelphia was one of these areas of intense radical expression, and provides one with an example of where radical thought led to radical action. One finds the American Revolution was radical because of its radical political ideology *and* the practical implementation of that ideology, found specifically in places like Philadelphia

Trends of radicalism, as expressed through republicanism and the push for democracy, could be seen throughout the colonies. From New York to Charleston, the call for liberty could be heard from diverse people.⁴ Boston is probably the most well-known city of the revolutionary era. Many are well aware of the famous Boston events (the Boston Riot and Boston Massacre and of Bostonian leaders (e.g. the Sons of Liberty, Samuel Adams, and Paul Revere) who contributed to the revolutionary cause. The city of Philadelphia has likewise been studied, but fewer historians appreciate its unique radical nature. Unlike Boston and other important loci of action during the revolution, Philadelphia was where one could see the ideology of republicanism and participatory democracy enacted.

The city of Philadelphia was home to one of the most radical and influential thinkers of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine. It was in Philadelphia that Paine observed American life and rubbed shoulders with elites like Benjamin Franklin and artisans like David Rittenhouse. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (published in January of 1776) inspired the colonists and was the first popular document to outright denounce the legitimacy of monarchy. Paine's work was a catalyst in creating support for a complete break with England.

The work of radical thinkers like Paine was important, but how people acted on these radical ideas was more important. The workers of Philadelphia embraced Paine's ideas and found their political voice at the dawn of the revolution. The artisan class eventually overthrew the elite Pennsylvania government and established their own constitution. The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 embodied the radical spirit of the American Revolution. The new form of government created by this document gave more power to the middle class. Therefore, Philadelphia gives a good example of a place where radical thought led to radical action.

Studying the revolution on micro and macro scales helps one to decide the political and social nature of the revolution. It is impossible to assess what everyone believed, especially through the study of newspapers and pamphlets, but one can make some conjectures based on

³The English began a long history of revolt with the beheading of King Charles I, and the Long Parliament. After the restoration of the monarchy, the people still demanded more control over the power of the King. The Glorious Revolution led to the people disposing of another king (albeit in a less violent manner), because he did not align with their religious beliefs. This shows a history of skepticism about the power of the King, but reverence for the legitimacy of monarchy still prevailed. See *This Realm of England, 1399-1688*, ed. Lacey Baldwin Smith (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 2001 for a good basic history of England through the Glorious Revolution.

⁴This diverse set included merchants in the north-Atlantic colonies, artisans, elites of society, and even the North Carolina Regulators.

arguably limited evidence. To say the American Revolution was radical is a broad claim to make, but evidence has shown that attitudes about society and politics became different as a result of the revolution. When one focuses on Philadelphia one finds a compelling case that radical ideas did not exist merely in the realm of theory, but actually influenced action. One also finds a case where both progressive era and neo-Whig historical interpretations of the revolution can be helpful. Beliefs translated into action during the revolution and helped to change forever what people believed to be justifiable rule.⁵

Models and Interpretations of the American Revolution

The Progressive and Neo-Whig interpretations of the American Revolution are highly influential, but there are also claims that the American Revolution was not a true revolution. Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution* posited this exact claim. Brinton did not interpret the American Revolution as radical because he based his model of revolution upon the French Revolution. Brinton's analysis was interesting because it proposed a cyclical formulation of revolutions. He broke down periods of revolution into five phases (each inspired by the French Revolution): First Stage, Rule of Moderates, Accession of Extremists, Reign of Terror, and Thermidor. Using this model, Brinton had difficulties classifying the American Revolution among other revolutions. Unlike the French revolution, Brinton wrote, "The American Revolution was predominately a territorial and nationalistic revolution . . . we must always remember that the American Revolution was as a social revolution in a sense an incomplete one."⁶ Brinton supported the notion that the American Revolution was about political upheaval but that there was no real change from the status quo.

Brinton was not alone in his conservative interpretation of the American Revolution. Historian Cecelia Kenyon echoed Brinton's sentiments of the revolution when she said, "It was a limited revolution, and it was primarily a political movement."⁷ Kenyon and Brinton effectively denied that any social change really took place as a result of the revolution. What might be missing in their interpretations is a linkage of ideas to action and outcomes.

One piece that might be more consistent with the notion of radicalism during the revolution is Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. As mentioned before, Bailyn's analysis is part of the school of Neo-Whig interpretation. He contended the ideology of the revolutionary generation was radical, but his analysis did not go beyond analyzing ideology. In his forward Bailyn stated that "the American revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between

⁵The more immediate effects can obviously be seen in Western Europe. French peasants were clearly inspired by the American Revolution and made Tom Paine a hero (at least for awhile). The American Revolution also gave hope to other colonial nations seeking to tear away from oppressive monarchs.

⁶ Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 24.

⁷Cecelia M. Kenyon, "Republicanism and Radicalism in the American Revolution: An Old-Fashioned Interpretation," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 19 (April, 1962):181.

social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy.”⁸ Stating the revolution was grounded mostly in ideological claims did not give due attention to actions that emanated from ideology. Believing and discussing an idea is not enough--living in the land of rhetoric cannot help those in the real world. Going beyond mere ideology, one must find some evidence that beliefs led to action. Philadelphia affords us a rare opportunity to see where radical ideas led to radical action. Many studies of the revolution focus either on ideology or events; rarely do they focus on both. To understand how radical ideas affected colonial society, one must find where ideas directly affected or created action.

Radicalism: A Note about Defining the Term

It is important to keep in mind that radicalism may have had a different meaning during the colonial era. Pauline Maier pointed out that “The word itself [radicals] is an anachronism, since it was first applied to political groups only in the nineteenth century.”⁹ I am attempting to place a modern label on ideas and events of the colonial era. This is not an entirely fruitless exercise, but it must be performed with due caution. Notions of what a revolution means in the modern world should be set aside and one’s mind opened to the world of the American colonists who were under the oppressive thumb of monarchy and an unresponsive parliament. Only then can one understand what radicalism would have meant to the colonists.

Keeping these barriers in mind, a definition of radicalism for the American Revolution can be created. Radical ideology embodied beliefs in republicanism and democracy. A government that exercised these two ideologies would be far different from anything in the world at that time. Turning away from monarchy and accepting the legitimate rule of the people was actually a rather enormous leap to make. Part of this definition of radicalism presupposes the view that pre and postcolonial life were very different. Ideas and events *during* the revolution helped to fundamentally change the colonists. Gordon Wood touched on some of the social and political changes that came about as a result of the revolution in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.¹⁰ What is key about the revolution, according to Wood, is that “it made the interests and prosperity of ordinary people—their pursuits of happiness—the goal of society and government.”¹¹ The revolution helped to bring about ideas and actions that would support the notion that government was supposed to serve the people. I build upon his premises, but would like to emphasize radicalizing forces during the revolution, not just after. The radical ideology involving republicanism and democracy was emergent even before the end of the revolution.

⁸Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1967), vi.

⁹Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), xviii.

¹⁰Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution: How a Revolution Transformed a Monarchical Society into a Democratic One Unlike Any That had Ever Existed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 8-9.

¹¹Ibid. 9.

Other conceptions of radicalism come from diverse sources such as Alfred Young and Gary B. Nash. Both historians explored the social changes during the revolution and have adopted the radical mantle. They contended there was social strife in the colonies and the revolution was about more than politics as usual. Social change, as a component of radicalism, could be found in the colonies. As important as it is to show the radicalizing forces of republicanism, it may be more important to show how these ideas led to some social change. Societal factors helped to push the “lower sorts” towards supporting the revolution and in turn helped to politicize this oft forgotten class. Radicalism during the American Revolution thus embodied both republicanism (political) and this component of societal change. Common people awoke to political consciousness and held a higher stake in political power, while they expressed ideas of liberty and greater democracy. All of these components helped, I believe, to make the American Revolution truly radical.

Competing Ideologies in Pre-Revolution Colonial Life

To understand the dramatic changes that took place during the revolutionary era, one must have some notion of life before. Like any complex society, colonists struggled to define the public good and proper government. Some clung to Old World values like hierarchy and monarchy, while others challenged these values. In particular, the elites of society had a stake in maintaining the status quo and keeping the emerging middle class down. Others were inspired by English history to question the power of the king and the entire hierarchal structure. Concern with virtue led many to question the morality of the excesses of monarchy and elites. People of colonial society debated these ideas and helped to shape the national argument about revolution.

Some colonists were still very much attached to medieval, Old World values. The ruling elite of colonial society clung to hierarchy and monarchy as their paradigm. Gordon Wood’s study showed how dependent some of the colonists were on the idea of hierarchy and, consequently, monarchy. Some people in colonial society tended to be very attached to their monarch and ascribed to the belief in the “great chain of being.” Starting from God, this “great chain of being” determined every person’s proper place in society: some were born to be rulers, others to be ruled. This type of society, though at first glance oppressive, may have actually been comforting. Wood asserted, “The inequalities of such a hierarchy were acceptable to people because they were offset by the great emotional satisfactions of living in a society in which everyone, even the lowliest servant, counted for something.”¹² Even those at the bottom of the hierarchy had a place in which to exist in society. Equality would have been unheard of by the elite of society. Elites would have felt they were meant to rule, while those below were meant to be ruled. Prior to the revolution, the acceptance of elite power was almost tacit, and it would take revolution to change popular opinion.

One finds a peculiar example of the adoration of hierarchy in a newspaper article discussing the funeral of a noble.¹³ The article has an extensive list of everyone in the funeral procession and was written in pictograph form. From the Knight Marshal down to the yeoman guard, the funeral procession contained a mini-hierarchy of all the attendants. The fact that the colonists printed this in a newspaper attests to the fact that they were very interested in hierarchy.

¹²Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 19.

¹³*Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Post-Boy*, Monday, April 1772. The noble person was the Princess Dowager of Wales.

Of course, it is difficult to determine the intended audience, but the fact that it was published in a newspaper lends some proof to the idea that hierarchy was important and comforting to people.

Approval of hierarchy may also be seen by how much the American elite aped the nobility of England. There was no structure of nobility in the American colonies, but this did not prevent the wealthy from creating a makeshift type of their own. A gentleman class of elites grew in the colonies that looked very much like an aristocracy, or gentry.¹⁴ The distinction of being called a gentleman belonged to the upper tier of society (similar to distinctive titles used by the nobility). Gentlemen were not supposed to gain their wealth through any sort of manual labor or the selling of goods. Ideally, they earned their wealth through land ownership or banking ventures. They were able to afford the luxury of reading political books and staging philosophical debates. Economically, they created a large demand for luxury items, especially anything popular in English fashion.¹⁵ Up until the eve of the revolution, the upper class used the English system as a model for proper and dignified living. In their eyes, their place atop the social ladder was appropriate because they were the most learned, and they actually aided the lower sorts by providing them with the work of manufacturing or transporting luxury goods.¹⁶ Though the elite may have felt they were helpful to those below them, their actions and opulent tastes may have cultivated moral abhorrence toward them. On the eve of the revolution, luxury was often linked with lack of virtue.

Luxury versus Virtue: Another Worldview

While there was great deference towards the King and hierarchy, there was also great concern about the corrupting nature of power and luxury. Much colonial rhetoric and writing centered on themes of virtue and vice in relation to power. One can see this theme throughout different types of colonial writings, from elegant political pamphlets to bawdy broadsides. A contemporary writer of the time "confesses that he is greatly concerned for our virtue, lest we should be cajoled, deceived and corrupted."¹⁷ Loss of virtue was tied to bad government and even the downfall of great civilizations. What was important about this concern with virtue was how closely it was tied to criticism of the grandiose expenditures of the wealthy. One interesting piece of evidence that showed disdain for the wealthy came from a Philadelphia source. This particular person complained about the wealthy and exalted the working class: "The first class consists of commercial projectors: those who make enormous gains of public confidence;

¹⁴According to one estimate "the proportion of taxpayers [in Philadelphia] designated as 'gentleman' or 'esquire' tripled between 1756 and 1774." Billy G. Smith, "Inequality in Philadelphia," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41 (Oct., 1984), 645.

¹⁵Wood, *Radicalism*, 33-35.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 35. This notion, however, is debated by Billy G. Smith in his article "Inequality in Philadelphia." He makes the point that "the demand for luxuries created few new jobs for unskilled workers or lesser artisans, the majority of the city's inhabitants." (643) The items desired by the wealthy could only be created by skilled craftsmen and thus did not really help the poorest in colonial society.

¹⁷*Pennsylvania Gazette* (#2465), "Cassandra to Cato" (James Cannon wrote as Cassandra), March 20, 1776.

speculators, riotous livers, and a kind of loungers.”¹⁸ So, while there was a certain amount of awe for wealth and hierarchy, there was also plenty of resentment. Colonial society rested uneasily upon this tension between admiration for those above and the desire to topple them. Wealth could bring power, but it could also destroy virtue.

In the developing, bustling world of colonial American society, many traditional ideals did not die quickly. During the early stages of the revolution, people still publicly supported the King and largely blamed the corrupt Parliament for all their woes.¹⁹ People believed Parliament was ignoring their remonstrance and had become a corrupt body.²⁰ Despite this, cherished beliefs of hierarchy and monarchy were still imbedded in the minds of the colonists, and many did not want to believe that the British government was entirely without virtue. Such an attachment to the homeland may lead us to wonder how a group of dependent colonists dared to defy the royal motherland. Ironically, English history and political traditions provided reasons and logic for the American Revolution.

Influences on the Revolutionary Generation

Events that occurred in England in the 1600's and early 1700's greatly influenced the way the American colonists felt about government. The beheading of King Charles I, the Long Parliament, and the Glorious Revolution all generated radical thinkers and radical literature. The fall of Charles brought about the Levelers and the New Model Army, both of which bred radically democratic ideas.²¹ Once the monarchy was restored, radical elements dissipated a bit until the Glorious Revolution of 1688. King James II's forced descension from the throne by the people and Parliament further demonstrated the people's power to dictate who should rule them. It is from these two generations of strife that one finds most literary and political influences on the colonists. Some of the most important influences from these generations were: the politics of the Whigs, the writings from *Cato's Letters*, and John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*

¹⁸ Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 51. To help fully understand this quote, one must understand the deep-seated resentment many colonists had of “speculators”, who often bought great quantities of land for cheap, and sold them far above their value.

¹⁹ Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 208. Maier argues that it was not until the colonists believed the King participated in their oppression that they were fully willing to revolt against him. For a contemporary example see *The Boston Evening Post*, Monday, October 28, 1771. A man who writes the King a public letter says “Wicked and Designing Men” are swaying the King's decisions on matters. The work of the ministry, not the King, is at fault.

²⁰ The story of John Wilkes in England made many believe that the Parliament was corrupt. Wilkes was elected several times to the House of Commons, but he was denied his seat each time due to a prior conviction of seditious libel. See Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 162-163.

²¹ We see in the revolutionary literature references especially to the New Model Army, who proposed more democratic ideals in the army, like the election of officers. For more information on the New Model Army and Levelers see Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books), 1972.

The Whigs

The Whigs in England helped to bring about a national discussion on liberty and freedom and questioned the power of absolute monarchy. The Whigs rose to prominence during the late 1600's and the Exclusionary controversy in England.²² During the Exclusionary crisis, the more radical elements of society wanted to "exclude" James II from ascending the throne. He was a known Catholic, and his beliefs chafed against those in society who were afraid of popery and the evils of Catholicism. The Whigs' struggle to keep James from becoming king ultimately failed, but this defeat did not silence them. During the years leading up to the Glorious Revolution the Whigs took part in a "war of words" against Tories and other loyalists who supported the Crown.²³ Many of their arguments published in newspapers and pamphlets were of the mudslinging nature, but they also wrote important pieces about liberty and the proper role of government. The eventual downfall of James led to a lull in radical action by the Whigs, but their contributions to the Glorious Revolution, and to the later American Revolution, cannot easily be denied.

The Glorious Revolution was the golden age for the Whigs. In the years after, they reflected upon it as their ultimate victory in the political arena. As Maier pointed out, "Real Whigs were in fact the staunchest defenders of England's eighteenth century establishment, the legitimacy of which rested on the people's right to replace tyrannical monarchs as practiced in 1688."²⁴ During the revolutionary era, the Whigs looked to this golden age as a template for proper political rule and change. If the people once joined together to depose a monarch they did not want to live under, then they could do so again a hundred years later.

One's initial reaction to this backward orientation might be that the Whigs sound rather conservative. After all, conservatism often revolves around returning to some "golden age." It has even been pointed out that the colonists "revolted not against the English Constitution but on behalf of it."²⁵ The Americans wanted to preserve a document that had been known for its protection of individual liberties—liberties that Parliament and the king were denying to the people. Despite this adulation of the past, the ideas espoused by the Whigs did help to make the revolution radical. The ideas promoted by Whig ideology were very different from traditional conservatism. The Whigs may have been looking toward some better age in England's history, but they were using lessons from the past to help create a better government for the present.

The Whig party itself had a rather complicated ideology about government and revolution. People had a right to revolt, but only after all measures were taken to reconcile the government and the needs of the people. Inherent in their belief was resistance to revolt (hence the title of Maier's book). The colonists seemed to follow Whig logic through their cautious attitude towards revolution. Though they were cautious, it is clear through various pamphlets

²²Melinda S. Zook, *Radical Whigs and Conspiratorial Politics in Late Stuart England* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 4.

²³Zook, *Radical Whigs*, 6.

²⁴Maier, *From Radicalism to Revolution*, 29.

²⁵Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic: 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 10.

and papers that the colonists felt they had exercised every possible outlet for reconciliation with the British government. The laundry list of complaints against the King in the Declaration of Independence is an example of how the people used every means available to reconcile the disputes. The British government had been unresponsive to the needs of the people, and the people had tried their best to gain its attention. The Americans were ripe to latch onto Whig ideology, or as Wood said, "ideas of radical Whiggism with their heightened language of intense liberalism and paranoiac mistrust of power were found to be a particularly meaningful way of expressing the anxieties Americans felt."²⁶ The Americans viewed the Whig ideology as justifying and supporting their revolt against England. One sees here the foundation not only for the justification for revolt, but also for democratic rule. The colonists, following Whig ideas, demanded a more responsive government. Whig ideology permeated many of the sources the colonists turned to for inspiration, including some very influential literary pieces.

Literary Influences

Following in the vein of Whig thought, is *Cato's Letters*. The origin of *Cato's Letters* is quite humbling after considering how important they were in shaping the minds of the revolutionaries. Fifty years before the first shots of the American Revolution were fired, two British journalists challenged the king and Parliament through numerous newspaper editorials.²⁷ Collectively, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon wrote these pieces under the pseudonym Cato. The chief subject of the letters was the importance of guarding freedom and liberty. It was perhaps their fiery yet logical rhetoric that attracted the interests of the colonists in America. Their discussions of public virtue, the corruption of government officials, and the need to defend essential liberties rang true with the colonists.

It is sometimes difficult to ascertain the degree to which people were affected by political writings. One way to gauge the effectiveness of a message is to determine how widespread the idea was published and generally disseminated among the common population. Bernard Bailyn, an authority in colonial pamphlets, said that *Cato's Letters* were "quoted in every colonial newspaper from Boston to Savannah, and referred to repeatedly in the pamphlet literature . . . Trenchard and Gordon ranked with the treatises of Locke as the most authoritative statement of natural liberty."²⁸ The validity of this claim may be contested, but the point is clear that the colonists were influenced by *Cato's Letters*.

The *Letters* probably served two functions for the American colonists. For one, they would have reassured them that they were not merely paranoid about corruption in England. "Cato" cited numerous instances of corrupt officials having undue influence over the king and of the increasing degradation of British society. The *Letters* would have also served as a battle cry

²⁶Gordon Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 17.

²⁷Most of the letters were written from 1720 to 1724. *Cato's Letters* began as a series of comments about a financial scheme involving the South Sea Company. Apparently the company had gone bankrupt for questionable reasons, and the government covered the company's ill moneymaking schemes from the public. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato's Letters or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and other Important Subjects*, Vol. 1, ed. Ronald Hamowy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), xx.

²⁸Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 36.

to fight for their liberty and freedom. These two thoughts together would have inflamed the minds of the colonists. Through the *Letters*, the colonists may have believed that England was too corrupt to see how oppressive its measures were. The only option was to fight to prevent the "virtual enslavement" of the people.

Many of *Cato's Letters* called for people to stand up against ministers who misled the country and king. Letter No. 13, "The Arts of Misleading the People by Sounds," resonated with this theme. This letter gave historic examples of kings misled by plotting ministers. Charles I was deceived by the Earl of Stratford and Archbishop Laud, Charles II by pensionary parliaments, and James II by popish influences and sycophants.²⁹ This reveals a pattern of ministers misguiding their monarch in recent British history. At the time of the American Revolution, this idea would have rung true with the colonists who believed that ministers (like Grenville) were responsible for the oppressive acts forced upon them by the Parliament and the King.

The most important portion of this letter began when the author stated the people's duty to check corrupt officials. It is argued in the *Letter* that "every private subject has a right to watch the steps of those who would betray their country."³⁰ Furthermore, it is the judgment of the people which counts more than judgment of higher officials: "In short, the people often judge better than their superiors, and have not so many biases to judge wrong."³¹ These statements would have lent support to the colonists who revolted against corrupt ministers in the colonies and would have justified their criticism of the English government. One more theme is found in this letter that is of some importance: the author claimed that people do not tend to rebel unless they are given reason to.³² This statement placed the blame for revolt squarely on the government, not on the people. It was the duty of the people to judge their government and to try to oust corrupt officials. This theory was probably very attractive to the American colonists as they were attempting to justify their revolt.

Cato's Letters, though important, were only one of many radical influences on the colonists. Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* was also highly influential. Modern readers might interpret Locke's ideas as being rather conservative, but at the time they could be interpreted quite radically. Within his treatise, Locke actually defended the right of the people to revolt against a government that does not suit the needs of the people. Locke wrote:

Whosoever therefore the *legislative* shall transgress this fundamental rule of society; and either by ambition, fear, folly or corruption, *endeavour to grasp* themselves, or put into the hands of any other an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people; by this breach of trust they *forfeit the power*, the people had put in their hands,

²⁹John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato's Letters or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and other Important Subjects, Vol. 1*, ed. Ronald Hamowy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), 101.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 103.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*, 104.

for quite contrary ends, and devolves to the people, who have a right to resume their original liberty.³³

Locke essentially said that people have the right to take power away from a government if it did not fulfill the mandate of the people. As events leading up to the revolution accelerated, the colonists may have felt that the English government had "transgressed" its proper bounds of power. Powerful words, as noted above, may have made the colonists feel that their revolt against the monarchy was justifiable.

Another key component to Locke's *Treatise* was his emphasis on property rights. Locke maintained that the government's chief role was to protect property. If a government did not serve this purpose, it could ultimately be overthrown. This was Locke's chief justification for the right to revolution, and the colonists embraced this notion. The colonists could have easily seen this parallel in their own lives, where various taxes were depriving them of their property without their consent. Locke's influence can be seen in the elite of revolutionary society, but to test its influence on society as a whole, one must find evidence of others subscribing to his tenets.³⁴ Though the evidence is sketchy, one does find some evidence of Locke's influence in the Pennsylvania Constitution and even in the writings of Thomas Paine.³⁵

Various British sources helped to shape the rhetoric and minds of colonists. However, this point should not be overstated. It is difficult to assess how far these sources were spread in common society. What was studied and believed by a set of intellectuals in society did not always dictate what the majority of common people believed as well. There is evidence that *Cato's Letters* may have been published in a variety of colonial newspapers, and thus may have reached a broad audience with its message about corrupt English society. What was most important about these pieces was that they gave colonists reason to revolt. A tradition of revolt had existed in England for the preceding hundred years, which helped to pave the way towards more democratic government. Republicanism was a logical next step from these sources of inspiration. However, political ideology was not the only force that guided people towards action. The realities of life for those in the lower and middle classes helped to shape another dimension of radicalism during the American Revolution.

Social Unrest

Thus far I have focused mostly upon some literary influences and the experience of the well-off in American colonial society. The acceptance of hierarchy and paternalism, as

³³John Locke, "Second Treatise of Government," in *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 378.

³⁴The elite influence can be seen more obviously in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. He uses Locke's "Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Property," and changed it to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Throughout the document, he makes overt claims about the importance of protecting property rights.

³⁵The Pennsylvania Constitution stated "That the government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection and security of the people." (Section V, see p.33 for full citation). Paine stated similarly that "here to is the end of government, viz. freedom and security." *Common Sense*, 6. (See p.29 for full citation).

discussed by Wood, was mostly a construct of the elite in society. As long as the poor “knew their place” in society, the wealthy could be content to promote the status quo. The revolution had the effect of politicizing the “lower sort.” There is ample evidence that the growing gap between rich and poor in colonial society strained relations within cities and may have aided the bitter anger exhibited during various riots. It is down here, in the lower levels of society, that the revolution can be seen as more than a mere exchange of power.

Exact figures on the proportion of rich to poor in colonial society are difficult to find. There was no established poverty line or agencies to record those who lived below it. Gary B. Nash, in his essay “Social Change and the Growth of Prerevolutionary Urban Radicalism,” used tax records and the rate of poor houses built to help determine the disparity of wealth in major colonial cities. For example, in Boston the number of “taxable” citizens declined from 3,600 in 1735 to less than 2,600 in 1771. This meant that one-third of Boston’s population was too poor to pay taxes on the eve of the American revolution.³⁶ This decrease in the number of taxable people was not due to population changes or migrations, but was attributed to the worsening economy.³⁷ We see this trend continuing into the revolution. In February 1776, the Overseers of the Poor in Philadelphia urged the Assembly to increase taxes from three-penny to six-penny to fund poor houses.³⁸ This trend can be seen in most major cities throughout the colonies. The poor and the middle class were becoming worse off, and as Nash says,

Understanding that the cities were becoming centers of frustrated ambition, propertylessness, genuine distress for those in the lower strata, and stagnating fortunes for many in the middle class makes comprehensible much of the violence, protest, and impassioned rhetoric that occurred.³⁹

The frustrating condition of poverty or class stagnation may have fueled the fires of revolt and made some of the riots more violent.⁴⁰ It may be contested that the riots did not carry any particular class-based tone, but it is hard to ignore the fact that there was a large body of disaffected people living in colonial society.⁴¹ It was not a monochromatic, classless paradise as

³⁶Gary B. Nash, “Social Change and the Growth of Prerevolutionary Urban Radicalism”, in *The American Revolution*, ed. Alfred Young (DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press), 9.

³⁷Billy G. Smith, “Inequality in Late Colonial Philadelphia: A Note on its Nature and Growth” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 51 (Jan. 1994), 642.

³⁸Petition to the Assembly, Tuesday, February 20, 1776, *Early American Imprints*, #14999.

³⁹Nash, “Social Change,” 11.

⁴⁰Barbara Clark Smith, “Food Rioters and the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 51 (Jan., 1994): 17.

⁴¹See *From Resistance to Revolution*, 12-13. Maier does not believe that riots were particularly class-based, especially since elites often rubbed shoulders with and led the poor and middle class in protest and revolt.

Louis Hartz and his followers have proposed.⁴² However, proving that poor people existed in colonial society is not enough to show that their poverty led to a revolutionary impulse. Other sources help to show how being poor may have led to bitterness and violence against the status quo.

The exact reason why there was such a disparity of wealth in the colonies is difficult to assess. Billy G. Smith explores one dimension of this issue in his essay, "Inequality in Late Colonial Philadelphia." Like Nash, Smith used various tax records to help assess the wealth of the citizens of Philadelphia. He used these figures to fight assertions that the wealth gap was due to immigration of poor people to the city and the emigration of the rich to the country. The increase of wealth among the rich was mostly due mostly to boosts in commercial sales leading up to the revolution. This increase in wealth allowed the elite of society to purchase land, which was the most stable commodity in colonial America. As Smith pointed out, "a small segment of the citizenry acquired ownership of a greater part of the community's resources during the final two decades of the colonial period."⁴³ This was a situation where the wealthy owned a disproportionate share of property and resources in the colony. In such conditions, it is not an enormous leap in logic to believe that the poor and middle class may have been resentful toward the powerful and wealthy elite in their society.

The unequal distribution of goods and land led to occasional shortages of food. This led to further economic distress and inequality among the poorer sections of society. Several food riots occurred as a result of this disparity in wealth and the anger caused by unfair trade practices.⁴⁴ These riots occurred mostly in urban areas, where supply and demand did not always meet. Food riots were commonplace in the colonial era, but they became more politicized through the revolution. For instance, demands for fairer prices often coincided with boycotts of British goods.⁴⁵ Though the riots were attended by a large cross-section of the community, by the late 1770s many were fueled by lower-class needs.⁴⁶ The riots became a venue for the lower and middle classes to become politically involved and identify themselves with the patriot cause. As Barbara Smith explained, "Their actions map an immediate experience of economic distress and articulate popular ideas about economic exchange, its meaning, and the crucial issues of who might claim jurisdiction over it and through what political forms."⁴⁷ This process of demanding fair prices and more equality in the marketplace politicized these lower classes in American society. The exact role and power of the poor in society is contested, but their presence cannot be denied. Whether they came by their own accord or were used as pawns by elites, they joined

⁴²Louis Hartz, "American Political Thought and the America Revolution" *American Political Science Review* (June 1952): 334.

⁴³Billy G. Smith, "Inequality in Late Colonial Philadelphia," 634.

⁴⁴One estimate says that there were over thirty riots from 1776 to 1779. Barbara Clark Smith, "Food Rioters and the American Revolution," 3.

⁴⁵Barbara Clark Smith, 6.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 4.

the national discussion through riots and protests. The politicization of this stratum of society helps to shape a more radical interpretation of the revolution.

Summary of the Colonies In General

The dizzying array of influences and ideologies that shaped the American Revolution can make it difficult to come to concrete conclusions. When discussing ideology, it is important to realize that broad generalizations are sometimes necessary. There is no way to prove how people of the 1770s thought, but written records provide important clues. From the popular and oft quoted selections from *Cato's Letters* and Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* one gains a sense of the colonists' enthusiasm for liberty. Records of protests also provide evidence of the concern for liberty and freedom. Through protest and rioting, even the lower classes of society gained a voice they had not possessed before. The American Revolution helped to change old-world views about the importance of hierarchy and deference and brought the term equality into the national vocabulary. This trend of politicizing the common people helped to bring a radical tone to the American Revolution. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the bustling city of Philadelphia.

Philadelphia and the Rise of Artisans

The years leading up to the Revolutionary War helped to fundamentally change society in Philadelphia. In the span of only one year (1775-1776), the Pennsylvania state government became the most radical of any of the colonies. Artisans defeated the elites of the Penn family and other prominent Quakers to become the leaders of their society. Part of their inspiration was the disaffected Englishmen Thomas Paine. The story of the shifting society in Philadelphia is intimately linked with the writings of Paine, so they share much of the same story. Following Paine's ideas, and developing a type of radical egalitarianism, the citizens of Philadelphia were able to demonstrate how radical ideas could be transformed into radical actions.

Before one can understand how the new government was radical, one must understand what the old regime was like. William Penn established the colony of Pennsylvania in 1681, and his family was still very powerful up until the time of the revolution. The state itself was run by the Assembly, but it became increasingly obvious that the average person would not have a say in the state's functions. As Foner described it:

The Assembly, in which an inequitable distribution of seats gave control to the commercial farming counties surrounding Philadelphia while vastly under-representing the swiftly growing back country to the west, was dominated by the Quaker party.⁴⁸ The farming communities often had more say in the government despite the fact that Philadelphia had a higher percentage of inhabitants. However, circumstances leading up to the revolution caused a shift away from the Quaker power structure. Part of the Quaker faith was a strong disapproval of war and violence. They could not consciously support the fight for revolution and instead fought for reconciliation with England, which proved to be unpopular.

The voice of the elites can be seen in a set of newspaper debates. One such newspaper campaign was launched by a man who called himself Cato (not to be confused with Trenchard and Gordon). Cato was especially adamant against writings like *Common Sense* that advocated a

⁴⁸Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 57.

break with England. Though his identity is debatable,⁴⁹ one can tell through his writing that he sided with the elite Quaker party when he said "I am bold to declare and hope yet to make it evident to every honest man, that the true interest of American lies in *reconciliation* with Great-Britain, upon *constitutional principles*, and I can truly say, I wish it upon no other terms."⁵⁰ He called for reconciliation, while insisting that the colonists uphold the English Constitution. This individual was probably not a Tory⁵¹, but he did not believe fighting in a war was the best solution. Cato and others like him probably fell out of favor because their beliefs no longer agreed with those of the rising artisan class in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia was one of the more diverse cities among the colonies. As a port city, it attracted immigrants from Europe and the other colonies, and it was a temporary home to sailors, sea merchants, and escaped slaves from the south. Free Blacks lived in the city and evidently appeared in some of the same social circles as white people.⁵² The vast diversity of the city was also created by the many types of religion that could be found within the city, which ranged from Quaker, to Scots-Irish Presbyterian, to Anglican. It was indeed this variety of people who contributed to the fight for a more representative state government and supported America's independence. The Scots-Irish Presbyterians were especially important because a large segment of them were artisans. They were also the most wary of English power and did not hesitate to vocalize their complaints. One source described the Scots-Irish Presbyterians as "the most God-provoking Democrats on this side of hell."⁵³ Their beliefs helped to influence the artisan class in general.⁵⁴ Philadelphia was not entirely unique for having a great mix of people, but few colonial cities had such diverse ethnic or religious makeups. The mingling of different ideas and worldviews added different dimensions of radicalism to the American Revolution.

There was a power shift in Philadelphia during, and as a result of, the revolution; but who brought about the change in government? Thomas Paine's work was incredibly influential, but one must not forget the band of radicals who resided in Philadelphia and worked by his side.

⁴⁹One author has identified Cato as Dr. William Smith of Philadelphia. See "Thomas Paine's Political Theories" by C.E. Merriam, *Political Science Quarterly* 14 (Sep., 1899): 389.

⁵⁰*Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 13 1776.

⁵¹I believe that he is not a Tory because he does in fact demand a change in British government. He is actually adopting the moderate stance that the colonies should not have fought for independence, but for the restoration of the English Constitution.

⁵²One of the radical leaders in Philadelphia was Timothy Matlack. He had a sullied reputation, and was prone to fighting. After a fistfight with a prominent Quaker, a broadside was published to defame his name. It said, "Your hapless babes oft' wanted bread;/ While you, unfeeling, idled time/ With Negroes—Cuff and Warner's Prime." Though this is an obvious attack on Matlack's character, it does show that blacks were probably in contact with white circles of society, even the radical elements. See Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 111.

⁵³Eric Foner, "Tom Paine's Republic: Radical Ideology and Social Change", in *The American Revolution* ed. Alfred F. Young, 203.

⁵⁴Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 58.

Foner identified eight men who helped to shape the Pennsylvania government: Benjamin Rush, Timothy Matlack, Christopher Marshall, James Cannon, David Rittenhouse, Owen Biddle, Thomas Young, and Charles Wilson Peale all. What is so interesting about this group of men is how very different they were in their personal lives. Benjamin Rush, for example, was a devout Presbyterian, while Matlack was thrown out of the Quaker church for failure to pay debts and other immoral behavior.⁵⁵ Despite their differences, they all played an important role in helping to politicize the artisan and working classes. For instance, James Cannon often wrote, under the pseudonym Cassandra, in defense of American liberties. In a rebuttal piece written by the aforementioned Cato, Cannon (Cassandra) said he was "always ready to defend his rights at the risk of his life, and prefers present war to future slavery, being conscious that a great continent will be much happier with the one than the other."⁵⁶ Here Cannon defended his beliefs, and the beliefs of other radicals, in a public forum. These leaders were often in the company of artisans or were artisans themselves.⁵⁷ They spoke for artisans' needs (like encouraging home manufacture) and helped to crystallize them as a political entity.⁵⁸ The growing power of the artisans helped to bring about the dramatic change in Pennsylvania's government.

The story of how the power change took place is rather complicated. As discussed before, many citizens of Philadelphia felt under-represented in their state government. It was controlled by elite Quaker farmers and was not very responsive to workers in the city. By April 1776 the demand for a different governmental regime began to spill out into newspapers. Paine, writing as "The Forester," defended a change in Pennsylvania's Constitution when he said:

The Constitution of Pennsylvania hath been twice changed through the [illegible] of former proprietors; surely, the people, whose right, power and property is greater than that of any single man, may make such alterations in their mode of government as the change of times and things require.⁵⁹

With the aid of Paine's writings (*Common Sense* had been published earlier that year), the radicals in Philadelphia were able to fight for a new governmental body. By June 18, 1776, Philadelphia radicals created the Committee of Safety and essentially took over as the governing body. The Committee had several goals, one of which was to increase the pool of enfranchised people within the city, including members of the militia. From there, the committee supported a new constitution, just as Paine had advocated. This constitution had an intimate tie to Paine because it was based on a model he proposed in *Common Sense*. Perhaps some discussion of Paine and *Common Sense* is necessary before one can fully understand the unique government that was created in Philadelphia.

⁵⁵Ibid., 109-112.

⁵⁶*Pennsylvania Gazette* (#2464), March 13th 1776.

⁵⁷Rittenhouse and Cannon were both watchmakers, and Dr. Rush had a large clientele of artisans.

⁵⁸Foner, *Tom Paine*, 117.

⁵⁹*Pennsylvania Gazette* (#2467), "Letter I to Cato," April 3, 1776.

Tom Paine, *Common Sense*, and Philadelphia

My Motive and object in all my political works, beginning with *Common Sense*, the first work I ever published, have been to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and false principles of government, and enable him to be free.

-Tom Paine

One would only have to read a few paragraphs in *Common Sense* to understand how deeply Paine must have felt about rescuing man from tyranny and other evils of absolute government. He had experienced the oppression of the Crown while living in England for the first thirty-seven years of his life. Before writing this seminal piece, he had lived a rather difficult life in England. Paine was born in a household of minimal means, but he was still able to obtain a few years of formal education. His first profession was in his father's trade as a staymaker (corset maker). Later in his life he traveled to London and surrounding areas and became an excise officer.⁶⁰ In this position he witnessed governmental corruption and felt the brunt of the people's anger and anxiety about paying hefty taxes. Paine said that his position gave him the opportunity to "see into the numerous and various distresses which the weight of taxes even at that time occasioned."⁶¹ While living in the city, he was able to attend scientific lectures and meetings, which were usually popular with those of the artisan class. It was in this social circle that Paine became acquainted with Benjamin Franklin and most likely developed some of his ideas about scientific rationalism.⁶² Before he departed for America, Tom Paine wrote his first pamphlet entitled "The Case of the Officers of the Excise", in which he essentially complained about poor wages and work conditions for excise officers. In the wake of a failed marriage, and the loss of his job, and with a letter of introduction from Ben Franklin, Paine left England and arrived in Philadelphia in 1774. The lessons he learned while struggling through the ranks of English life profoundly affected his worldview and added an element of raw anger in his plea for complete independence of the colonies.

Common Sense was published two years after Paine arrived in America. It only took him that short amount of time to establish himself as an editor of one of Pennsylvania's newspapers and to become well acquainted with his fellow artisans. He befriended many of the radical men discussed earlier, especially Rush, who urged him to write *Common Sense*, and Rittenhouse, who was probably one of the few people to read the original manuscript. The events at Lexington and Concord seemed to have pushed Paine to argue for a complete separation of the colonies from England (not just to censure Parliament). As Paine said, "No man was a warmer wisher for a reconciliation than myself, before the fatal nineteenth of April, 1775, but the moment the event of that day was made known, I rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England."⁶⁴ It is certainly debatable whether Paine really changed his mind only because of Lexington/Concord, but it does help to give a certain sense of reasonableness to his argument (in

⁶⁰Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 2-7.

⁶¹Ibid., 4.

⁶²Ibid., 14-15.

⁶⁴Thomas Paine, *Common Sense in Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1969), 25.

an argument that is often punctuated with passionate statements). Some key points from *Common Sense* should be understood because they proved to be popular among the people and helped to shape the form of government in Pennsylvania.

Those who supported the crown would have been outraged to read *Common Sense*. It passionately denied the power of the king with biblical and worldly arguments. There was an argument to fit anyone's worldview. Paine, though most likely a deist himself, uses passages from the Bible to show how monarchy was abhorred even by God.⁶⁵ In this way he was able to draw in some of his religious audience to the revolutionary camp. He also appealed to the diverse people living in the colonies. As Paine aptly pointed out, not everyone in the colonies was from England, so it was absurd to call it a Mother nation to everyone. This idea would have especially appealed to those in Pennsylvania, where a large number of citizens were of German, Scotch, and Irish descent.⁶⁶ Paine was able to appeal to different groups in the colonies and gain support for his chief purpose: to show that the king (not just the ministry) was despotic, and that the colonies could survive and thrive without England.

As noted by other scholars, the colonists were reluctant for a long time to blame the King for the growing conflict between England and the colonies.⁶⁷ The transition from purely blaming a corrupt ministry to blaming the King and monarchy was especially difficult. Even in the midst of the growing conflict in Boston in 1770, one author wrote "Maxims for Patriots" that included "A determination to support his present majesty and his family, against the pretender and all his adherents."⁶⁸ Here one can see the author blaming problems on a "pretender," which was probably the ministry. Six years later, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* one can find popular support for Paine's disdain of kings and monarchy. Paine was completely unambiguous about his opinion of the monarchy. A complete break with England was necessary, not just an admonishment of the ministry. Paine passionately stated, "but if the whole continent must take up arms, if every man must be a soldier, 'tis scarcely worth our while to fight against a contemptible ministry only."⁶⁹ Any partial break with England would not be enough and would put the colonies in a weakened position. It was perhaps Paine's bold assertion on this point which made him popular with many colonists.

What was less supported by the colonists in general (excluding Pennsylvania) was Paine's design for the ideal government. His proposal for a unicameral government offended the

⁶⁵Paine discusses the story of the Jews demanding a King to help judge and rule over them. Samuel refused to become King because God was supposed to rule over all people (God said to Samuel "they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, THAT I SHOULD NOT REIGN OVER THEM.") This is supposed to show that God disapproves of monarchy. Paine, *Common Sense*, 11.

⁶⁶Paine claimed that "Not one third of the inhabitants, even of this province [Pennsylvania], are of English descent. Paine, 20.

⁶⁷Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 208.

⁶⁸"Maxims for Patriots", from the *Massachusetts Spy*, Tuesday, August 7, 1770.

⁶⁹Paine, *Common Sense*, 24.

sensibilities of many of the revolutionary leaders, including John Adams.⁷⁰ In *Common Sense*, Paine gave some recommendations as to how the colonists could organize their governments. According to Paine's plan, the people would elect representatives to a single body legislature. There was no upper or lower chamber, only a singular body which was truly representative of the people. The President of the nation would not be directly elected by the people but would be chosen by members of the congress instead. In a round-robin fashion, each colony (or state) would take turns having a representative serve as President.⁷¹ In this way, no one colony could dominate others and the power of the government could be checked by the people.

Paine showed his distrust of government in general when he made sure to point out that part of the government's function was "Securing freedom and property to all men, and above all things, the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience."⁷² The government was supposed to protect property (a very Lockean notion) and freedom of religion (for Paine this probably meant the freedom to practice no established religion as well). He also reiterated that America was to have no king; Law would be the rule of the land. This perception of government was met with mixed reaction and helped to give Paine the reputation for creating powerful rhetoric, but not being very good at creating plausible governing bodies. Despite this perception, Pennsylvania took the bold step in modeling its state government on Paine's ideas. Here we can see ideas not only accepted by elite scholars in society, but by the middle class as well. Going beyond ideas, the Pennsylvania Constitution was an example of how radical ideas translated into actions.

Returning to Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776

A short detour into Paine's most celebrated work leads one to analyze the new government created in Pennsylvania and how radical thoughts permeated society. The Quaker party had a firm grasp on the state government up until the battles at Lexington and Concord. This obvious sign of aggression made many unsympathetic to the state government's stance of supporting reconciliation over fighting. However, the ruling party did not disappear without a fight. As a last ditch effort, it even attempted to support the Continental Congress and provisionally support the war against England.⁷³ By spring of 1776, however, the people of Pennsylvania began to support the extra-legal entity of the Committee of Safety in Philadelphia. Radical forces were overcoming even moderate forces in the city. John Dickinson, author of the famous *Farmer Letters*, was the leader of moderates in the Assembly before they lost power. His continual support of reconciliation and monarchy proved to be out of touch with what the

⁷⁰Foner, *Tom Paine*, 79.

⁷¹Paine, *Common Sense*, 28. Of course, this brings up objections to the overall radicalism of Paine's ideas. Why was it that he did not trust the common people to elect a president? There are no easy answers, but at the time that idea may have been just out of reach—even for the most radical in society.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 29.

⁷³Charles Henry Lincoln, *The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia, 1901), 191.

people believed to be a righteous cause.⁷⁴ September of 1776 brought about the end of the Assembly and the construction of the new Pennsylvania Constitution. The elements of this constitution help one to see where Paine's brand of radicalism helped to influence the actions of radicals in Philadelphia.

The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 was either highly praised or given the worst damnation. Its opponents called it called a "Villanous Constitution" and a "Damned constitution." A number of citizens met on November 2nd and voiced their disapproval of the constitution noting, that "By our preference of a mixed and tempered legislature to that established by the Convention, we declare, that we wish for a government that shall not suffer the poor and the rich alternately to be the prey of each other."⁷⁵ This is an interesting comment because it shows a certain social tension inherent in the new constitution. Opponents also called for a "mixed" legislature in this statement, not the unicameral structure implemented by the new constitution. The constitution itself was partially written by Cannon and Rittenhouse, so the radical influence upon the document outweighed the more moderate or conservative. It is not difficult to understand why the Pennsylvania Constitution was unpopular with the entrenched elites and even the moderates in the colony.

It is quite clear that the model of government proposed in the Constitution closely echoed what Paine wrote about in *Common Sense*. Pennsylvania's Constitution called for one body of representatives (not divided into different houses) to represent the people. It also proposed a rather complex way of deciding on the executive body of the state. Members of the supreme executive body (there would be twelve members on the committee) would rotate every three years to include citizens from all around Pennsylvania. As the Pennsylvania Constitution stated: "By this mode of election and continual rotation, more men will be trained to public business."⁷⁶ This would, arguably, lead to a more diverse governing body. It is also very similar to what Paine advocated in *Common Sense*. He also called for a single legislating body and the rotation of power to elect members of the executive branch. As Paine said:

Each congress to sit and to choose a President by the following method. When the delegates are met, let a colony be taken from the whole thirteen by lot, after which let the Congress choose (by ballot) a President from out of the delegates of that province. In the next Congress, let a colony be taken from a lot of twelve only, omitting that colony from which the president was taken in the former Congress, and so proceeding on till the whole thirteen shall have had their proper rotation.⁷⁷

⁷⁴Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and "Lower Sort" During the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 84.

⁷⁵Samuel Howell, and Jonathan B. Smith, "At a Meeting of a Number of the Citizens of Philadelphia, and the Philosophical Society's Hall, November the 2nd," *Early American Imprints Collection*: #15019.

⁷⁶*The Constitution of Pennsylvania*, Section 19, *Early American Imprints* #14979.

⁷⁷Paine, *Common Sense*, 28.

This was a rather confusing system, but it was exactly what the framers of the Pennsylvania Constitution chose to implement as their model of governance. One sees here an explicit link between a radical pamphlet like *Common Sense* and actions of those who created a more radical government in Pennsylvania.

Beyond choosing this model of government, the Pennsylvania Constitution was also noteworthy for its concern for the needs of the middle and lower classes. Indeed, it was a direct blow to the ruling Quaker elite when the preamble to the Constitution said that the state would rule "without partiality for or prejudice against an particular class, sect or denomination of men whatever."⁷⁸ Some might say that this statement could actually go against the lower classes (no class was supposed to be preferred), but in the context of 1776 Pennsylvania, it was probably supposed to be leveled against the ruling elite. The Constitution also addressed one of the key concerns of the middle or lower class: the right to vote. The new constitution widened suffrage considerably. The only requirements were that the persons were freemen who were twenty-one, had resided in the state for one year, and paid public taxes. Even this tax requirement could be bi-passed because the "sons of freeholders . . . shall be entitled to vote although they have not paid taxes."⁷⁹ These provisions still left some elements of society disenfranchised (like women), but taking away property restrictions created a larger pool of voters. Pennsylvania thus took a step toward creating a more representative government and espoused the type of ideas that helped to make the revolution radical.

A discussion of the Pennsylvania Constitution would not be complete without acknowledging parts where radical ideas were not incorporated. Some of the more radical people, like those in the army, wanted to insert a clause about the harmfulness of accumulating too much land. Steven Rosswurm stated, "accumulations of too much wealth would be destructive of the material basis of the independence and liberty of most in society."⁸⁰ Though the emerging middle class had been leaders in the radical movement, they could not carry their argument to the logical end of egalitarian politics. This shows the limits of the radical cause in Philadelphia. Despite this setback, the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 proved to be one of the most radical and forward thinking models of government in the colonies. It was largely inspired by artisans, the middle class, and the Associators. The common people were given a greater say in the formulation of their government.

The Pennsylvania Associators

Radicalism in Philadelphia, along with the Constitution of 1776, would not have been popular if not for the Associators. The Associators were the men enlisted in the Pennsylvania militia. A militia may not seem to be a fertile place for the cultivation of democracy,

⁷⁸*The Constitution of Pennsylvania*, Preamble, 4.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, Section Six, 11.

⁸⁰Rosswurm, *Arms and Country*, 106. The clause was "the government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation or community; and not for the particular emolument or advantage or any single man, family, or set of men, who are part only of that community; and that community hath an indubitable, unalienable and indefeasible right to reform, alter or abolish government in such manner as shall be by that community judged most conducive to the public weal."

republicanism, and egalitarianism, but in fact all these ideas flourished among the Associators. The militia in Pennsylvania was actually quite reminiscent of the New Model Army in England. Both military bodies created loose models of governance and fought for wider suffrage.⁸¹ Consequently, both armies also proved to be more egalitarian than mainstream society was prepared for. Not all measures supported by the Associators were adopted, but they still held a great influence over the political situation in Pennsylvania.

The Associators was a group comprised of diverse members of the Philadelphia community. Some were of the upper strata, but the majority was from the middle and lower classes.⁸² By the end of January 1776 the "average wealth of the committee [The Committee of Privates, the elected ruling body of the Associators] dropped and the number of artisans increased."⁸³ The artisans managed the Associators and helped to bring the concerns of the poor and middle class of society to the state government. Concerns of the poor in society were able to receive attention through the militia.

One way the Associators influenced the Pennsylvania government is through its demand of suffrage for its members. Within the Associators' internal structure they removed property restrictions on voting and even allowed immigrants to vote. These ideas influenced the creation of the Pennsylvania Constitution and led to fewer property restrictions in that piece. Taking away property restriction in army and state elections made it possible for a wider pool of people to vote. Democratic action within the Associators even affected the type of clothing they wore. A rule created early in the formation of the Associators stated that they would wear a plain "hunting shirt." This shirt could be afforded by even the poorest members and "would level all distinctions" in the ranks.⁸⁴ Even style of dress was democratized by members of the Associators.

In an interesting Petition written by the Committee of Privates, one can see further influence and concern of the lower sorts. It reads, "your petitioners [Associators], do pray this Honourable Board to appoint or recommend none [as officers in the Continental service], but such as have signed the articles of association . . . the association is principally composed of tradesmen and others, who earn their living by their industry."⁸⁵ Here, the author was making

⁸¹The Associators created committees of elected officers, which petitioned the Assembly (until its demise) and drafted letters of concern and complaint to local newspapers. The election process within the Associators was more democratic than the general election rules prior to the new Constitution. The New Model Army of England, similarly, created committees (of elected officers), and issued their own directives for the new government. See *The Head of Proposals* for a documentary source of the New Model Army. Also see Christopher Hill: *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1972) for further accounts of the New Model Army and a possible Leveler influence.

⁸²Rosswurm, *Arms and Country*, 50.

⁸³Ibid., 64.

⁸⁴Ibid., 52.

⁸⁵"To the Honourable Committee of Safety of the Province of Pennsylvania: The Petition of the Committee of Privates of the Association, belonging to the City and Liberties of Philadelphia", *Pennsylvania Gazette* (2460), February 14, 1776.

sure to identify the Associators as members of the working or artisan class and was also suggesting that only those in this group should be promoted to officer. This is stepping away from a common view that officers should only be of a highly educated class. The Associators fostered this idea of greater equality among their ranks and translated this idea into demanding a more powerful voice in the government.

One area that one can clearly see the Associators influencing the Pennsylvania Constitution is in a section pertaining to the taxing of Quakers and other conscientious objectors of the war. The Associators argued that those who did not fight to protect Pennsylvania and the colonies should have to pay a tax to help support the militia and their families.⁸⁶ Because of their influence, this idea was placed inside the new constitution. Section VIII states that "Nor can any man who is conscientiously scrupulous of bearing arms, be justly compelled thereto, if he will pay such equivalent."⁸⁷ This allowed those who, for religious reasons, could not fight in the war to still aid in the conflict. Though this is but one small example, it shows how a group of common men were able to influence the government. By being responsive to the Associators, the new Pennsylvania government showed its dedication to the principles of democracy and greater representation of the people. Incorporating the needs of the common people into government served as a component of radicalism in Philadelphia.

Concluding Remarks About Radicalism in Philadelphia and in the American Revolution

Like no other colony, Pennsylvania embodied radicalism in both the realms of theory and practice. Radical thinkers like Paine inspired the "lower sorts" within the colony to support both the American Revolution and the internal revolution of Pennsylvania. The events in Philadelphia give one a unique glimpse of how ideas led to actions. This dual revolution was not found in the other colonies, and thus they did not have the same level of radical tendencies. From Philadelphia, one is also reminded that the revolution was supposed to be an ongoing process. As Benjamin Rush reflected upon the revolution in 1786, "Most of the distresses of our country, and of the mistakes which Europeans have formed of us, have arisen from a belief that the American Revolution is over. This is so far from being the case that we have only finished the first act of the great drama."⁸⁸ The revolution, begun in the 1770s, had to continue for years to come. The fight against England was not seen just as a war, it was a catalyst for on-going social and political change.

The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 showed an intriguing link between radical thought and radical action. As proposed by Paine, the model for the legislature was adopted by Pennsylvania. Its provision for a one-house legislature did not place representatives above the common people, but instead made them one with the people. Ideals of democracy and republicanism influenced the creation of the Constitution and thus made it a quintessential piece of radicalism during the American Revolution.

⁸⁶Rosswurm, *Arms and Country*, 59.

⁸⁷*The Constitution of Pennsylvania*, Section VIII.

⁸⁸Benjamin Rush, "Letter to Richard Price, May 25, 1786" in *Letters of Benjamin Rush: Volume I: 1761-1792*, ed. L.H. Butterfield (London: American Philosophical Society, 1951), 388.

In Philadelphia and the other colonies, the people were inspired to act by many different sources. An important tradition of mob action and wariness of absolute power was inherited ironically from England. Literary sources from the time of the Glorious Revolution affirmed the colonists' views that their fight against the Crown was justified. Even those who were less literate were able to access some of these ideas from newspapers and pamphlets. From the sources available, one begins to see a picture of a society in major flux, not just one breaking bonds from an oppressive government. The articulations of freedom and liberty were not just hollow rhetoric--they were radical ideas that could not exist before the bulwarks of hierarchy and monarchy were torn down. Radical ideas led to radical action and helped to make the American Revolution truly revolutionary.

Note About Philadelphia Sources

The literature available for studying colonial Philadelphia (including the Associators) is quite diverse. The primary source I found the most useful for the study of colonial Philadelphia is the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, from 1775 through 1776. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* is ideal because it had a wide circulation and published writings of both radicals (i.e. Paine) and conservatives (i.e. Cato). It contained the interesting exchange between the Forester and Cato about what type of government was best for Pennsylvania and America. Cato began writing a series of letters to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in the spring of March of 1776 in opposition to *Common Sense*. The anonymous writer criticized every part of Paine's pamphlet--from its unicameral legislature to its interpretations of religion. In a particularly bold statement, Cato states, "I am confident that nine-tenths of the people of Pennsylvania yet abhor the doctrine."⁸⁹ Paine did not let Cato's letters go unchallenged. Writing as the Forester, Paine defended *Common Sense* and the Pennsylvania Constitution and fought for a complete break away from England. In addition to these (and many other) political exchanges, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* also contains petitions from Associators and various legal proceedings of the local government.⁹⁰ If one needed to find information about nearly any aspect of colonial Philadelphia life, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* would be an invaluable resource.

The other most useful primary source was Tom Paine's *Common Sense*. As other authors have noted, Paine is easy to read and appeals to a broad audience. Paine steered away from using fancy prose or flowery language and made his writings accessible to more than just the educated elite. The fact that it was re-published numerous times throughout the revolutionary periods shows how popular it was. Even George Washington noted in correspondence, "I find that *Common Sense* is working a powerful change there in the minds of

⁸⁹ "Letter II," *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 13, 1776 (#2464). It should be noted that appearing on the page directly following this particular letter there is along statement urging American to remember what England had done to them. The dramatic pleas of "Remember the Shrieks and Cries of the Women and Children"; and "Remember the Act for screening and encouraging your Murderers" would have evoked powerful emotions in the reader. This statement may have been placed directly after Cato's Letter on purpose to help draw the reader back into the cause against England.

⁹⁰ The only problem with using this source was the difficulty of finding readable copies on the microfiche form. The articles were transcribed using the utmost care, and I attempted to keep all the old spelling and punctuation found in documents from the 1770's.

many men.”⁹¹ Its popularity with a broad class of people and its forceful message against monarchy makes it particularly suitable when discussing radicalism in the colonies, and in Philadelphia.

Historical monographs proved to be invaluable to the study of revolutionary Philadelphia. For this section, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, by Eric Foner; *Arms, Country and Class* by Steven Rosswurm, and *The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania* by Charles Lincoln were particularly useful. They each give thorough accounts of the events that unfolded in Philadelphia. Among these three books, however, are slightly different attitudes towards those who fought for the new Constitution of Pennsylvania. Rosswurm and Foner praise the democratic ideals that came out from the artisans, working class, and militia. Lincoln, however, seems to disapprove of the radical forces. Throughout the book, he makes claims about what could have happened if the conservative, Quaker establishment would have done one thing or another to stay in power. As Lincoln says, “The one thing needed was adequate leadership, and by neglecting this opportunity the moderate Whigs opened the door to radicalism and bigotry, a condition worse than the oligarchy of early years.”⁹² By making such a statement, Lincoln shows himself as being biased against the radical forces that took over in Pennsylvania. The other two sources, however, may be too forgiving of their actions for the sake of promoting radical thoughts and democracy during that era. By comparing the sources, we can perhaps go beyond some petty biases, and see more clearly the events that took place to radicalize the government and people of Pennsylvania.

⁹¹Philip Foner, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 (editor’s note).

⁹²Charles Lincoln, *The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania*, 206.