Phil 176/276G: Historical Philosophers—American Philosophy

Professor: Aaron Zimmerman
Email: azimmerman@philosophy.ucsb.edu
Office Hours: M&W 5-6PM
Office: South Hall 5707

Handout #2: Preconditions of the American Revolution

Part I: Greene

I. Why did the Colonists Revolt?

Historians have assumed that prior to the Stamp Act Crisis in 1765 the British Colonists in North America were overwhelmingly loyal to the crown. Greene quotes Benjamin's Franklin's report to this effect, but proceeds to cast doubt on that assessment.

Greene's questions: (1) Were the colonists really as "happily British" prior to 1765 as Franklin claimed? (2) If the colonial arrangement really did benefit both the homeland and the colonies, why did the British institute the stamp tax and those other measures Jefferson would cite in the "Indictment of George III" section of his Declaration of Independence to justify revolution?

2. De Facto Independence before 1765

Greene's Thesis #1: The relationship between Britain and its colonies was an "uneasy connection" from 1660-1760. (For reference, Locke's *Two Treatises* was first published anonymously in 1689.) By this Greene primarily means that the colonists and the homeland British were largely independent of one another in seven important respects.

1. Local Political Leadership: By 1750, "all save the newest colonies of Georgia and Nova Scotia...possessed...virtually all of the conditions

necessary for self-governing states...By the middle of the century, there existed in virtually every colony authoritative ruling groups with great social and economic power, extensive political experience, confidence in their capacity to govern, and broad public support" (1973, 35-6). Evidence for this is their confidence in allowing (even encouraging) large groups of people to meet without worry of internal revolution or violence.

2. Robust State Institutions: small administrative centers and government buildings, "supplied the colonists with internal foci to which they customarily looked for political leadership and models for social behavior" (36-7). The most important of these were the Elected Lower Houses of Assembly in each of the Colonies: "More than any other political institution in the colonies, the lower houses were endowed with charismatic authority both because, as the representative of the colonists, they were thought to hold in trusteeship all of the sacred rights and privileges of the public and to be the sole giver of internal public law and because of their presumed—and actively cultivated—equivalence to the British Parliament, that emporium of British freedom and embodiment of all that was most scared to Englishmen everywhere" (37).

Question: How did the English come to regard representation in the law-giving body as a "most sacred" right? See Locke's articulation of this sentiment in his *Two Treatises*.

3. The Relative Inclusivity of these Institutions **The Demos**: Adult Men

Three Classes Within the Demos: (1) **The Elite** who held office or participated in political governance. (2) The "**politically relevant strata** or mobilized population" that regularly interacted with the Elite. (3) **The Politically "Disengaged"**: Slaves, those excluded for lack of sufficient property, and the politically indifferent.

Greene's claim of inclusivity: "Available evidence seems to suggest that by contemporary standards the first two groups were relatively large and the third group relatively small." The elite were 3%-5% of the population and the politically engaged were 60%-90% of the population.

(Compare that to the last US Presidential election where 50%-60% of eligible voters participated. Participation is much lower in legislative contests.)

Question: Why not place women in class (3)? Why does Greene exclude them from the Demos? And what about the native population?

4. Widespread Deference to these Institutions to Resolve Conflicts

While Greene allows that more study is needed, his hunch is that personal vendettas, vigilantism, blood feuds and duels were declining during the relevant period (1660-1760) as local courts and legislative bodies were increasingly used to resolve conflicts over life and property.

5. The Development of Competence in Non-Political or Semi-Political Spheres Those in this "white collar" class developed and competently managed: newspapers, schools, trade organizations, travel infrastructure, manufacturing, etc.

6. Growth in Population, Territory and Wealth

"The wealth of the colonies had become sufficient to give them a potential for economic and military resistance, while the sheer vastness of all the continental colonies, taken together, constituted a formidable obstacle to suppressing any large-scale or broadly diffused movement of resistance. Indeed, this condition may well have been the most important of all, because it is the only one of the five not shared to a large degree by the British West

Indian colonies, which did not revolt" (1973, 40).

7. Weak Institutions of British Imperial Governance

"The corollary of this impressive increase in colonial competency was the continued weakness of British power in the colonies. The bureaucratic structures organized, for the most part during the Restoration, to supervise and maintain control over the colonies had never been adequate for the tasks they were assigned...Within the colonies the situation was little, if any, better. Imperial administrative machinery was insufficient for the enforcement of imperial policy, and authorities in Britain had no effective controls over the machinery that did exist. The governors, the primary representatives of the imperial governments in the colonies, had almost no coercive resources at their command" (1973, 41-2).

This was especially true before the French and Indian War in the mid 1750s. And the colonists deeply resented the troops that stayed behind after that war was won. (Again, see the "Indictment of George III" section of Jefferson's

III. The Attitudes of Homeland British toward the Colonists

Greene's Thesis #2: Despite their relative independence the Colonies became increasingly important to the British economy during the period in question (1660-1760).

"Imports from the colonies...accounted for 20% of the total volume of English imports in 1700-1 and 36% in 1772-3, while exports to the colonies rose from 10% of the total volume of English exports during the former year to 37% during the latter" (1973, 44).

Greene's Thesis #3: During the ministry of Sir Robert Walpole (1721-1742), the independence described by 1-7 above was recognized by the crown

insofar as it permitted the colonies "a generous amount of de facto self-government and economic freedom...this accommodation represented something of a return to the old contractual relationship between mother country and colonies that had obtained during the first half century of English colonization" (1973, 45).

Greene's Thesis #4: Clash of Attitudes—British Paternalism v Colonial Perceptions of Equality: Though the colonists had achieved a great measure of independence during the period—1660-1760—and British policies allowed this to happen, the British people maintained "the dangerous illusion...that the imperial authorities actually did have the colonies firmly in hand." *The homeland British thought of the colonies as being controlled by them*, *the colonists thought of themselves as equals of the homeland British with a right to control their local affairs*. The homeland British thought of themselves as superior to the colonists and the colonists bristled at this. And it was this clash of attitudes—and *the colonists' instance on their equality to homeland British (as white, propertied, Englishmen)* that generated the events that led to war.

Factors contributing to the "illusion of homeland control": (a) Despite the unpopularity of the Navigation Acts and frequent violations of them, there was widespread compliance; (b) "Pride in the liberty-preserving constitution of Britain," which was thought to comply with the normative conditions for just rule Locke articulated in his *Two Treatises*. The British believed they were freer than any other people, and that the colonists retained the desire to retain these liberties. (c) Pride over the literary, commercial and military accomplishments of Britain and British subjects.

IV. The "Moralization" of British Industrialism, Cosmopolitanism, Etc.

Greene's Thesis #5: Greene follows Bernard Bailyn and others in recording

the degree to which the colonists attributed unpopular homeland policies to **corruption** within the Parliament and Monarchy.

The colonists compared the British Empire to the Roman Empire right before its fall. The colonists endorsed the view of Locke et al that (as Lord Acton was to put it in 1887) "absolute power corrupts absolutely." Bailyn's conclusions are based on his careful analysis of a large number of political pamphlets published and distributed during the period.

"Because all societies were thought to be highly susceptible to internal decay through moral corruption, any seeming rise in the incidence of hedonistic behavior, any sign of increasing luxury or vice, was a source of grave concern, a harbinger of certain decline and extinction" (Greene, 1973, 54).

And reports of life in England, gave the colonists plenty of reason to think its residents "morally corrupt" in the relevant sense.

V. The Idea that Protection of Individual Rights (including Economic or Commercial Rights) Should Enjoy Precedence over the Pursuit of Collective Goals or Wellbeing

Greene's Thesis #6: *The Colonists embraced* **Moral/Political Individualism** *to a much greater extent than the homeland British.*

"What emerges from an examination of colonial political behavior is an implicit conception of political society that is much less concerned with the primacy of the general welfare or the other classic imperatives of Anglo-American political culture than with the protection and facilitation of group interests and individual enterprise. What the actions of the colonists seemed to assume, in fact, is that political society was a human device not only, in the conventional sense, for the maintenance of orderly relations among the men who composed it and for the protection of its members from their own

and other's human frailties but also, and probably considerably more important, for the protection of the individual's property in his land, goods, and person, in which one's property in person included the right of striving, of pursuing (as well as protecting one's interests, of seeking to alter one's place on the scale of economic well-being, social status, or political power" (1973, 56-7).

Important Questions for us in our Search for a Distinctively American Philosophy: (1) What is Greene's evidence for his Thesis #6? **(2) If Thesis #6 is right, does it signify the emergence of a distinctively American sense of liberty or freedom—one that dismisses utilitarianism of even the weak Lockean variety in favor of a Kantian emphasis on autonomy and the exercise of the distinctively human capacity to endogenously formulate and willfully pursue some "life plan"?** (3) How does this form of individualism relate to Capitalism? How does it relate to Social Darwinism?

According to Greene, the colonists' sensitivities to this form of autonomy attuned them to the "possibility that [British] authorities might impose restraints that by striking at the colonists' autonomy as individuals would threaten their ego capacities (as defined by their ability to control themselves and manipulate their environment) and thereby call forth large-scale personal anxiety, shame, and feelings of inadequacy that could only be overcome by a manly resistance to those restraints" (1973, 60).

Greene argues that a series of measures instituted by the homeland British, beginning in 1748 (1973, 65) realized this feared, ego-undermining, anxiety-inducing possibility, which in turn led the colonists into a mindset supportive of revolution. When the seven years war left the colonists without the need for homeland protection from other imperial powers (i.e. the

Spanish and French), there was little to balance this desire to retain a sense of autonomy essential to the colonists' conceptions of themselves.

Question: How plausible is Greene's analysis?

Part II: Breen – Revolutionary Ideology

1. Historians are developing a Richer Explanation of the American Revolution and the Role that Political Philosophy (or Ideology) Played in Bringing it About

"Recent work fundamentally recasts how we think about the origins and development of American nationalism. And second, it provides new insights into the character of popular political ideology on the eve of independence, suggesting why the natural rights liberalism associated with John Locke had broader emotional appeal during this period than did classical republicanism or civic humanism" (1997, 15).

2. Britain changed a great deal from 1676-1776.

"However "spectacular" or "revolutionary" the new interpretations may have been, we still regard the eighteenth century as the period in which Parliament achieved undisputed constitutional sovereignty-the Glorious Revolution really did make a difference-and post-Namierite historians certainly do not seriously contest the ability of a landed oligarchy to maintain political dominance….No doubt, a good many fox hunting country gentlemen will survive. The monarch will surely remain a key political figure. But those characters must now share the historical stage with an articulate and powerful middle class. Instead of tracing the genealogies of the members of parliament, English historians examine topics such as the establishment of a vibrant consumer economy, the creation of a complex state bureaucracy, the rise of manufacturing towns and commercial pons, and the development of genuine ideological differences within the political community. Dynamism, growth, and modernity suddenly seem apposite terms to describe this not-so-traditional England of the late eighteenth century" (1997, 15-6).

Breen's Thesis #1: The colonists were not well informed about all these changes, but colonial complaints about corruption and lax morals in Britain may in part be attributed to them.

> **A. Growth of the Military and State Financial Bureaucracy**: "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 destablized other ancien regime 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."
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> **B. Growth of Manufactures Targeted at Aspiring Consumers**: "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 trade with."
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> **C. Greater Division of Labor and Inessential ("Luxury") Consumption**: "Even humble agricultural families redefined productivity; women and children, who had formerly made items consumed within the household, now more commonly worked in the fields, producing income that expanded the family's purchasing power. "A series of household-level decisions," writes de Vries, "altered both the supply of marketed goods and labour and the demand for market-bought products. This complex of changes in household behaviour constitutes an 'industrious revolution,' driven by Smithian, or commercial, incentives, that preceded and prepared the way for the Industrial Revolution,"
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> **D. Growth of a Consumer Identity or Measure of Self-Worth** "more men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions. Objects which for centuries had been the privileged possessions of the rich came, within the space of a few generations, to be within the reach of a larger part of society than ever before."

E. Rise of a Relatively Apolitical But Happy Middles Class

> "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. Fawtier 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 are at least potential sources for the colonial belief in homeland corruption or moral laxness.

But the Americans seemed just as commercial. Relevant to an assessment of how Lockean ideas of natural right were extended to property of the newly common sort: "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."[1]

3. The Rise of English Nationalism Excluded Non-English British in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and America - Forcing Them to Construct National Identities When It Became Clear They Would Not be Regarded

[1] Dan Foster, *A Short Essay on Civil Government, The Substance of Six Sermons, Preached in Windsor . . .* (Hartford, 1775), 30

as “Equal Britons” by the English

Breen’s Thesis #2: A dramatic rise in “British” nationalism was actually English in character alienating the Scottish, Welsh, Protestant Irish and colonial American British. “As Adams well understood when he wrote as Ploughjogger, 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” (Breen, 30)

“In an exhaustive survey of the contents of all colonial newspapers during the period immediately preceding national independence, Richard 1. Merritt discovered that ‘available evidence indicates that Englishmen began to identify the colonial population as 'American' persistently after 1763- a decade before Americans themselves did so.” (Breen, 30-1, quoting Merritt 1966)[2]

“Whatever label one wants to employ, it now seems apparent that 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…’ "it remains unclear why this resurgence of interest in matters patriotic occurred in so many different countries at the same time. The coming of war on a hitherto unprecedented scale, the growth of towns, the spread of printing and the increasing importance of that class we call the bourgeoisie must have all contributed to this widespread mood of national awakening’ (Coley, 86)… 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…Did being "British" mean that one was also “English,” or that people who did not happen to live in England could confidently claim

[2] Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols o f American Community,* 1735-1775 (New Haven, 1966), 58-59, 130-31.

equality with the English within a larger empire? Although each region brought different resources and perceptions to the conversation, we should appreciate that Scots, Irish, and Americans were in fact engaged in a common interpretive project, and however we choose to view the coming of the American Revolution, we should pay close attention to what recent historians of Scotland and Ireland have discovered about the construction of eighteenth-century imperial identities," (Breen, 20-3).

See here William Molyneux, The Case of Ireland's Being Bound by Acts of Parliament in England, Stated (1698).

"Irish Protestants relied increasingly on the rhetoric of natural rights; like the Americans of the 1760s, they had discovered that, in their efforts to gain a measure of freedom from England, arguments based on historical precedent had less persuasive force than did those derived from natural rights" (Breen, 26).

Evidence of Colonists Expressing Wounded Pride at Being Seen as Less Than English

(1) "We won't be their Negroes," snarled a young John Adams in 1765, writing as "Humphry Ploughjogger" 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" (Breen, 29 quoting Adams' writing in the Boston Gazette, Oct 14, 1765).

(2) "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?'"[3]

(3) "Arthur Lee encountered similar difficulty during a heated debate with "Mr. Adam Smith." The son of a wealthy Chesapeake tobacco planter, Lee

[3] James Otis Jr., *A Vindication ofthe British Colonies* (Boston, 1765), in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution,* ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), I, 568.

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.'"[4]

(4) "Silas Downer, a Rhode Island patriot who described himself simply as a 'Son of Liberty,' taunted the members of his audience with their loss of status in the empire. Speaking 'at the dedication of the Tree of Liberty;' Downer explained, ' is now an established principle in Great-Britain, that we are subject to the people of that country, in the same manner as they are subject to the Crown. They expressly call us their subjects. The language of every paltry scribler...is after this lordly stile, our colonies - our western dominions - our plantations - our islands in America - our authority - our government - with many more of the like imperious expressions.' Downer pointed out that, 'it would not be in any degree so humiliating and debasing' to be ruled by an absolute monarch 'as to be governed by one part of the King's subjects who are but equals.'[5]

(5) "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. 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 "Plough-jogger" when he protested in 1765 against how English officials regularly characterized American colonists. 'What a strange animal must a North

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[4] [ArthurLee],*An Essay in Vindication of the Continental Colonies of America, From a Censure of Mr. Adam Smith, in His Theory of Moral Sentiments . . . by an American* (London, 1764), 18-20.

[5] Son of Liberty [Silas Downer], *A Discourse, Delivered in Providence in the Colony of Rhode Island . . . At the Dedication of the Tree of Liberty, From the Summer House in the Tree* (Providence, 1768), 7-8.

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!"[6]

(6) "Although the anonymous author of *A Letter to the People of Pennsylvania (1760)* did not compare white colonists to Africans or Native Americans, he did ask hard questions about the nature of England's unprecedented abuse of Americans of European dissent. 'Can the least spark of reason be offered why a *Britisb* subject in *America* shall not enjoy the like safety, the same protection against domestic oppression?' he demanded. 'Are you not of the same stock? Was the blood of your ancestors polluted by a change of soil? Were they freemen in *England* and did they become slaves by a six-weeks' voyage to *America?"* The word 'slaves' catches our attention. It is hard to believe that in this context the author was using it as a political abstraction, to describe a people without rights. The complaint is about 'the blood of *your* ancestors;' and it clearly carried a message of racial debasement. Within this radically evolving imperial framework, the Stamp Act seemed an especially poignant reminder for the Americans of their new second-class status." (Breen, 32)

(7) "When he first learned of this statute, John Hancock, a Boston patriot and leading merchant, did more than denounce the Stamp Act as an economic burden. He insisted, 'I will not be a Slave, I have a right to the Libertys & privileges of the English Constitution. & as an Englishman will enjoy them'" (Breen, 34)[7]

Questions: How could British Americans resent English superiority without seeing how Americans of color resented them? Clearly they **did** see this resentment insofar as they complained of the injustice of their being treated

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[6] John Hampton [James Otis Jr.) to William Pym, *Boston Gazette,* Dec. 9, 1765. Daniel Dulany, *Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes in the British Colonies* (Annapolis, 1765), in *Pamphlets Of the American Revolution,* ed. Bailyn, l. 635,

[7] John Hancock to Barnard and Harrison, Oct. 21,1765, Letter book 1762-1783, p. 139, Manuscript Collection (Harvard University Business School Library, Boston, Mass.).

by the English as they were treating black Americans. So what did they think justified their denying equal respect to black Americans of the sort they demanded from the English? Was it a racist belief in the intellectual and moral inferiority of Africans and those with African "blood"? Does Breen's analysis place racism at the very heart of American philosophy? Does it suggest that Americans initially defined themselves in contrast with their slaves?

Breen's Thesis #3: 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 1760sthe colonists took up the language of natural rights liberalism with unprecedented fervor.

Against Thesis 3: (a) Bailyn, "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." (b) The ubiquitous character of "rights talk" on the eve of revolution seems even more curious since historians such as John Dunn and Isaac Kramnick have recently shown that for most of the eighteenth century neither American nor English writers expressed more than passing interest in John Locke's *Second Treatise* (1689).[8]

Breen's response: Locke's political writings took on special significance for people trying to resist the intrusive nationalism of the metropolitan state. As we have seen, they had played a similar role in Ireland. According to the historian Patrick Kelly, William Molyneux drew heavily on Locke's work to defend "the sole right of the Irish parliament to legislate for Ireland." In other words, it was in Ireland,

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[8] John Dunn, "The Politics of Locke in England and America in the Eighteenth Century," in *John Locke: Problems and Perspectives,* ed. John W. Yolton (Cambridge, Eng., 1969), 62, 69-75. On the sudden growth of interest in Locke during the 1760s, see Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, 1990) 4, 170-75. See also A. John Simmons, *The Lockean Theory of Rights* (Princeton, 1992); and Joyce Appleby, "Liberalism and the American Revolution," *New England Quarterly,* 49 (March 1976), 3-26.

not England, where people first began to appreciate the extraordinary mobilizing force of the natural rights discourse. Molyneux, Kelly continues, "reinterpreted Locke in a manner particularly applicable to the vexed problem of Ireland's relations with England in arguing that the natural right to consent to government meant that no one nation could have an exclusive right to dominate another."[9]

The colonists could and did appeal to a number of different political languages. They responded positively to some elements of civic humanism, especially to its powerful analysis of virtue and corruption. From the Protestant tradition they acquired a rich vocabulary of resistance to tyranny. But whatever utility those competing ideologies may have possessed, neither had much to say about human rights and equality, the two concepts that came to dominate colonial political writings after 1763. In such matters Locke served them well. … Within an empire strained by the heightened nationalist sentiment of the metropolitan center, natural rights acquired unusual persuasive force. Threatened from the out- side 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."79 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 anti-absolutist conceptions of political legitimacy away from history and toward a moral justification based on an appeal

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[9] Patrick Kelly, "Perceptions of Locke in Eighteenth-Century Ireland," *Proceedings of the Royal Insb Academy,* C (Dublin), 89 (no. 2, 1989), 17-21. Also see J. G. Simms, *Colonial Nationalism,* 1698-1776: *Molyneux's* The Case of Ireland . . . Stated (Cork, 1976), 9-39. For a rough index to Locke's political importance relative to other intellectual sources during the 1760s, see Donald S. Lutz, "The Relative Influence of European Writers in Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Thought," *American Political Science Review,* 78 (1984), 193.

to reason.[10]… However logical championing natural rights liberalism may have been, it was for the colonists a profoundly defensive move. Americans invoked 'trans-historical 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 eighteenth-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.'[11] 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 somewhat impressionistic. Although we can appreciate the echoes of classical republican thought and the inspiration of evangelical Protestantism, we most frequently encounter an angry, shrill, often nervous insistence on natural rights. During the 1760s and early 1770s, colonial writers repeatedly invoked the authority of John Locke, and even when the name of the great philosopher did not appear, his ideas still powerfully informed popular public consciousness" (Breen, 37)[12]

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[10] Ian Shapiro, *The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), 279.

[11] Canny and Pagden, eds., *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 273*.

[12] See, for example, John Phillip Reid, Constitutional History o f the America Revolution: The Authority of Rights (Madison, 1988), 90-93. A good deal of common sense is brought to the discussion of prerevolutionary ideology in Richard R. Beeman, "Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth- Century America," William and Mary Quarterly, 49 (July 1992), 401-30. See also Stephen Holmes, "Liberalism for a World of Ethnic Passions and Decaying States," Social Research, 61 (Fall 1994), 599-610.

Throughout prerevolutionary America, men and women responded to what they perceived as English arrogance with a truculent cry: we are as good as any English person. Shortly before his death, the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew gave a sermon to a Boston congregation that had just witnessed a violent riot against the Stamp Act. He told them that he spoke for "commonly-received opinions," for the "taken for granted." "In pursuance of this plan," Mayhew continued, "it shall n0W be taken for granted, that as we are free-born, never made slaves by the right of conquest in war . . . we have a natural right to our own, till we have freely consented to part with it, either in person, or by those whom we have appointed to represent, and to act for US."85 Or, as the Newport Mercury reminded its readers in September 1767, 'To enjoy our natural Rights and the Liberties of English subjects, is the supreme felicity of mankind. . . . Natural Rights, and the Liberty of English subjects undoubtedly belong to Americans.' Natural rights liberalism was so pervasive that a colonial town meeting could quickly transform itself into a public seminar on Lockean philosophy. On November 20, 1772, the Boston Town Meeting charged a committee of twenty-one persons 'to state the Rights of the Colonists, and of this Province in particular, as Men, as Christians, and as Subjects.' In due time the committee report received the approval of Boston freeholders and other inhabitants. They agreed that '"All Men have a Right to remain in a State of Nature as long as they please." No government could compel the subject to surrender his rights. On that central point the authors specifically cited Locke. From him, the Boston committee had learned that 'The *natural* Liberty of Man is to be free from any superior Power on Earth, and not to be under the Will or legislative Authority of Man; but only to have the Law of Nature as his Rule.' And finally, in a statement clearly intended to mobilize broad popular support, the authors of the report insisted that 'All Persons born in the British American Colonies, are by the Laws of GOD and Nature . . . entitled, to all the natural, essential, inherent, and inseparable Rights, Liberties and Privileges of Subjects born in Great-Britain, or within the Realm.' Whatever else this document may contain, its character does not seem particularly religious, nor, for that matter, the stuff of classic civic humanism. Like

so many other Americans of this period, the members of the Boston committee demanded inclusion within an empire that seemed to have become increasingly exclusive; they understood instinctively that historical arguments drawn from a shared British past would not have much purchase against the claims of a nationalizing mother country. A newly aggressive English state forced the Americans to leap out of history and to defend colonial and human equality on the basis of timeless natural rights" (Breen, 38-9).[13]

Task: Evaluate **Breen Thesis #3** in light of what you now know about Locke's theory of natural rights.

[13] Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, *The Snare Broken. A Thanksgiving Discourse* (Boston, 1766), in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era,* ed. Sandoz, 239-40; *Newport Mercury,* Sept. 14, 1767; *The Votes and Proceedings of the Freeholders and Othe rInhabitants of the Town of Boston. In Town Meeting Assembled, According to Law* (Boston, 1772), 2-11.