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## American Revolution: New Directions for a New Century

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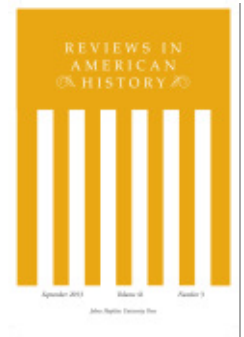
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## The American Revolution: New Directions for a New Century

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# *Reflections*

## THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR A NEW CENTURY

ANDREW M. SCHOCKET

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In 1909, Carl Becker pithily suggested that the American Revolution was not only a dispute over “home rule” but also over “who should rule at home.”<sup>1</sup> In the century since, that formulation has proved to be liberating in opening up scholarship to the many levels of conflict that any revolution entails, but it is also binding in that scholarship has been circumscribed by the hoary paradigms of the Revolution-as-independence-struggle or as-internal-struggle. In recent decades, historians of early America have replayed Becker’s division—one that he recognized as a false dichotomy—in increasingly starker contrast. Just as when Becker wrote, we still have a Whig school and a Progressive school, each with its recognized dons, deacons, dissenters, dominions, and detractors, arrayed in the academic equivalent of armed camps and trading barbs in conference papers and book reviews. The two significant deviations on these themes have been the historiographies of the Revolutionary War and of the Revolution’s imperial dimensions, but neither fully defines the Revolution.

After an explosion of pathbreaking work from the early 1960s to about 1980, most recent scholarship has elaborated on these inherently incomplete models, challenged some of their elements, or tried with limited success to amalgamate them. The exceptions, brilliant as some of them are, we take as outliers, difficult to place within existing historiography precisely because they do not fit in established lines of analysis. But there is hope. We now appear to be on the cusp of exciting new approaches to the American Revolution. This essay maps out the directions I believe we are going, gives examples of recent trailblazing work, and offers suggestions about how we might move forward as we enter another century of scholarship.

The first path, and perhaps most important step forward, is to consider the American Revolution not as an event, but as the process of challenging, redefining, and reconstituting the very nature of authority in the British empire and then the United States. That process centered geographically in the thirteen colonies that rebelled, but played out everywhere in the empire, from the Ohio River Valley woods to Jamaican plantations, and from Independence

Hall to Whitehall. It happened at different rates: it could have been in the quick succession of thoughts and feelings in the moments some colonists felt compelled to decide whether to be loyal to their beloved king or make up their hearts for independence, or in the long century during which the legitimacy of monarchy became gradually replaced by popular sovereignty. Every political institution had either to find some way to reassert its will under the new conditions or be swept away and replaced by a competitor. In many places, two or more sets of institutions existed at the same time before one established (or reestablished) broad legitimacy. People strove to reshape new institutions that reflected not only new ideas about how society and government ought to work, but they did so in a way that implicitly or explicitly acknowledged continuing differences in economic, political, cultural, military, and social power. Although this process was at its core political, it was political in the broadest sense of that term: not one merely of elections and governmental policy, but one that involved a challenge to the very nature of the relationship between Americans and the state, and by extension, with ramifications for every institution in America, for American culture, for relations between Americans, and for how Americans conceived of themselves.

Essential to this idea of the American Revolution as a process is that, to put it simply, people and institutions behave differently at various points of unrest than during more stable times. The loosening of authority, the chaos of war, the exhilaration of liberty, and the rage of revenge led people to do things that they never would have imagined doing just a few years, months, or even moments before. To some extent, revolution has an inherently acceleratory aspect to it. The process was far more complex than simply tit-for-tat or escalating retaliation, but prompted the improvisation of new modes of behavior that fit new conditions—especially as people and groups competed to assert power and authority in every realm of American society. Of course, some commonalities and restraints limited the extent and effect of the Revolution and presented bulwarks against revolutionary change. Perhaps, to coin a metaphor, the American Revolution was like a bungee jump. It required an initial plunge, after which society could not return to its original position. At the same time, the degree of elasticity and strength in prevailing gender norms, assumptions about race, and the persistence of various social and legal institutions, especially private property, served to restrain the Revolution's ultimate results. In between, though, American life moved at velocities and in jerks far beyond those of ordinary life. Revolutions all have a dynamic of their own, and it is that dynamic that I think is the next frontier of exciting discovery.

At any given place and time, the revolutionary process reached its highest pitch as people struggled to accomplish two interrelated but distinct tasks. The first was to rearrange political and social structures in a series of accom-

modations that reflected power once the empire and royalism were out of the picture. And the second was to establish the legitimacy of the structures they kept, modified, or created, because, during revolutions, legitimacy becomes the main lens through which all governmental actions and policies are measured and judged. Of course, the end of imperial rule was not the only change. For decades, the colonies had been growing at a furious demographic pace, both by natural increase and by voluntary and forced immigration, but political and social structures had changed little. During the Revolution, Americans tried to rebalance society on better terms for themselves. Slaves tested the ability of masters to keep them in line, and, often, to keep them at all. Wives and husbands worked out new relations to each other, to their children, and to work, as a large proportion of men went off to war, many never to return. When royalists lost political clout (and their property) and left in droves, other men scrambled to reform local government. States' representatives had to make deals with a broadening electorate—both geographically and demographically—to keep up the war effort. And delegates to the Continental Congress had to find ways to fashion compromises between the state's interests and the states' interests, figuring out how much to ask for and what was too much to ask. In that sense, what some historians (especially those investigating conflict from the 1780s on in outlying rural areas) have called the "revolutionary settlement" was actually an integral part of the Revolution itself. The working out of who would be represented and how, of the definition of private property, of the role of the government in the economy, of whether or how new areas would be incorporated into the new polity, and so on were integral elements of the revolutionary process. The process ended when new government structures (either resembling the old, like Connecticut, or new, like the federal government) became broadly recognized as legitimate, contained contention, and no longer competed with other institutions.

Thinking of the Revolution as a process rather than as an event affords us the opportunity to resist some of the teleological implications that have so warped the study and teaching of early America. We have been conditioned by the United States' relative internal political stability over the past nearly century and a half to think of stability as the norm and upheavals as momentary anomalies, the result of a long buildup of pressure finally coming to a head. Certainly the American Revolution only became possible because of a combination of long-term structural trends and the specific actions and events of the 1760s and 1770s. But rather than seeing those trends and events as culminating in the American Revolution, we can see them as a series of increasingly contentious moments, of which the American Revolutionary conflicts represented a crescendo with their own unique dynamics, and which would continue to fade but never disappear. In *European Revolutions, 1492–1992* (1993), Charles Tilly pointed out that in the early modern western world, contention was the

norm, not stability; he counted no fewer than 452 circumstances he defined as “revolutionary situations” in Europe alone from 1492 to 1791. Similarly, from 1645 to 1760 in British America, white colonists engaged in significant resistance with an eye to overturn colonial governments no fewer than eighteen times; enslaved blacks revolted or hatched major plots to do so at least seventeen times during the same period; and, depending upon how one defines the relationship between the Crown and various Indian nations and the nature of the various conflicts between colonists and Indians, one could count dozens of instances of Indian armed resistance to claims of Crown authority.<sup>2</sup> Thus the American Revolution represented both a continuity in that it was but one set of many contentions over the nature of political authority, as well as a break with the past in its pervasiveness and power.

A pair of recent books exemplify the possibilities of considering the American Revolution as the process of challenging and reconstituting authority. Nicole Eustace’s *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (2008) fits in none of the standard boxes that we’ve built for analyzing the American Revolution, playing with, but ultimately transcending, historiographic categories of ideology and social conflict. By considering the transformation of emotional performance, Eustace’s book offers a new way to conceive of the many profound ways that the Revolution involved inherent changes in the nature of not only political authority but also social, class, and cultural authority. Wayne Lee’s monograph *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War* (2001) analyzes the changing modes of violence in North Carolina over the course of the Revolution. Lee argued that the escalation of violence occurred as a result not only of a cycle of retaliation but also of fast-paced changes in commonly accepted behavior even during wartime. In other words, not only was there more violence because of the Revolution (which we knew), but the very nature of violence became transformed under Revolutionary conditions, and the process of restoring order required different strategies and solutions than the ones used to preserve order before the Revolution. These works, and other innovative recent takes on the Revolution, acknowledge and build upon previous contributions but ultimately move beyond our current stale debates, breaking new methodological ground to get us ever closer to the infinite ways the American Revolution was a transformative event for all who lived through it.

The second direction I hope that the study of the American Revolution will take is a greater use of metaphors and methodologies from the social and physical sciences. Over the past twenty years or so, the academic history and especially the study of early America has greatly profited from cultural and linguistic turns, and I hope that we do not lose sight of the gains we have thereby made. However, over the same period the field has suffered from a

relative neglect of the insights to be gained from other areas of inquiry. The possibilities are nearly endless: just as John Adams famously used the metaphor of the latest chronographic instrumentation to describe the revolution—thirteen clocks striking as one—there are many current methodologies and metaphors that we might employ fruitfully. To be fair, there is so much to read just to keep up the appearance of staying current that extensive outside reading in other areas can be difficult. But if we can do the reading, there's a lot that we can learn. Consider just a few of the metaphors or methodologies that we could put to greater use: chaos theory, network theory, conflict resolution studies, sociology on social movements, evolutionary economics, geographic information systems (GIS), and contextual data mining, to name a few.

Let me offer a couple of examples, one a scientific metaphor and the other an insight from current social science. Mathematicians and geographers have for three decades explored the phenomenon of fractals, that is, the ways in which complex spatial configurations repeat themselves in similar ways at various scales. As Benoit Mandelbrot—the thinker most credited with the idea of fractals—first put it, think of the shape of a jagged shoreline; looking at a rocky coastline through a microscope, on foot, from a helicopter, and from a satellite reveals recurring, nested patterns of jaggedness.<sup>3</sup> Economists and historians have used fractals as a metaphor to describe temporal patterns of events, such as the striking similarities in the movement of commodity prices—whether over the course of a day, a year, or decades—just as they have used it to describe concurrent phenomena on different scales. In one particularly striking example, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman's *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* (2000) details how dichotomies of "public" and "private" recurred at the personal, local, and national levels in communist-era Eastern Europe. Perhaps the most vivid analogy is that of a military campaign, in which we could observe hand-to-hand combat, skirmishing units, battling divisions, and the movements of various armies in an entire theater. The success of some soldiers in besting their opponents occurs as one unit routs another, as a battle turns, and as armies surround their foes. Each level of interaction has its own particularities, but repeating patterns emerge across scales, each informing the other.

Of the few historians to use the fractal metaphor, David Zeitlyn and Bruce Connell have provided the most explicit and elaborated example.<sup>4</sup> In their analysis of the emergence of ethnic identity in Mambila, an area that now straddles Nigeria and Cameroon, Zeitlyn and Connell looked at five different scales. For the most expansive scale, they panned over millions of people in an entire region over thousands of years. For the most constrained one, they zoomed in on a population of about 2,000 people over a century in a single village and its outlying area. By looking at one process, beginning with the grandest scale and bringing the focus into increasingly finer grain, Zeitlyn

and Connell could show the greater context in which change at smaller scales occurred and the distinctions between scales. To some extent, we can apply Zeitlyn and Connell's model to the American Revolution. At the broadest scale, it involved the redefining of the British empire and sovereignty from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and spanned the entire empire. And at the other end, it involved the decisions of individuals at very particular moments: to join or not to join an army; to escape or to stay; to ally with one side, the other, or to try to stay neutral; to sign or not to sign; and a thousand other little and large ways that people decided their own roles as citizens and as British or Americans, sometimes at a moment's notice. We need not inflexibly imitate Zeitlyn and Connell's correlation of geographic and chronological scales. After all, we have learned a great deal about the Revolution from studies of communities over a long term as well as from those of only a year or two at the national level. Regardless of how we do it, though, we can use the concept of fractals to be more conscious and deliberate in terms of defining what scales we are working with while being able to analyze the patterns of the Revolutionary process.

For any given phenomenon, we can see recurring patterns at various scales and note the similarities and differences across those scales. Imagine if we were to use the fractal metaphor to do the same more consciously, extensively, and explicitly at every level of contestation. We would then better see how the emergence of competition for civil authority at the colonial level in some areas (such as Rhode Island's declaring independence in May 1776) led to similar but broader challenges to imperial authority, and how local instability in other areas (rural Massachusetts, for example) undermined colonial authorities. Similarly, the reimposition of authority at one level could be used to reinforce stability on another, whether it be the county justices-of-the-peace buttressing state-level authorities or the newly strengthened federal structure clamping down on local-level unrest. A fuller awareness of the ways that society works differently at various scales can help us reconcile much existing scholarship. Soldiers, farmers, slaves, sailors, and women played the largest and most important roles at local, personal, more immediate scales; but, as we consider bigger spaces (both literally in terms of geography and figuratively in terms of political structures), then elites—and, indeed, the elites among elites—became increasingly more consequential as conditions at each level informed actions on all levels.

Among the many recent social science advances that could be of use to historians of the American Revolution, one in particular stands out as being directly useful methodologically and conceptually. The term "comparative historical analysis" refers to a particular kind of social science methodology that, with care, can be fruitfully applied to some of the main questions facing historians of the Revolution. Over the past several decades, social scientists



have come to understand better what we historians consider to be the most fundamental of insights: time and place matter. Reacting to, on the one hand, the overly generalized conclusions of large-scale statistical studies that have so dominated the social sciences, and, on the other, the tendency (far from universal) of cultural analysis to concentrate more on context than on causation, a number of social scientists have worked to find a middle ground that takes place, time, culture, and contingency into account in their work. Their studies are marked by several commonalities. First, for any given study they examine a small number of detailed cases, thereby rejecting the search for universalities in favor of explanations that fit specific situations. Secondly, they aim to find causality. They look to find similar causes across similar historical phenomena, noting as well the dissimilarities that would disprove possible explanations. Third, they tend to tackle big questions, such as the link between major economic transitions and state formation. In this way, although they come from different disciplinary backgrounds from historians, social scientists seek some of the same things: to find why things in the past happened the way they did, considering evidence of change over time. And one area in which comparative historical analysts have been particularly active is in the examination of revolutions.

The handful of historians who have placed the American Revolution in a comparative context were not trained as Americanists, and, with a few notable outliers, their analyses little influenced scholarly thought on the Revolution. Up through the late 1960s, some historians of the Revolution still referred to Crane Brinton's slim but strongly analytical work, *Anatomy of Revolution* (1938). The other exception was Robert R. Palmer's expansive, two-volume *Age of Democratic Revolutions* (1959–64), which was not systematically comparative and covered many revolutions while notably ignoring the Haitian Revolution. The main insights Americanists took from it came from Palmer's interpretation of the American Revolution on its own terms, rather than from comparison. Several observers have pictured the American and French Revolutions as siblings, those sympathetic to the French Revolution casting them as "sisters" and those less so characterizing the French Revolution as the American's evil twin. Lester Langley's *The Americas in the Age of Revolutions* (1996) examined the American Revolution ("revolution from above"), the Haitian Revolution ("revolution from below"), and those of Latin America in the first decades of the nineteenth century ("revolution denied"). His book has been little cited. Meanwhile, a new generation of sociological scholarship on revolutions arrived as the anticommunist revolutions of the late 1980s began captivating scholarly attention. This new wave of historically informed, highly nuanced works offers crucial insights into revolutions' causes, courses, and results fundamentally different from our current conceptions of the American Revolution, yet are consistent with the historical data that we have compiled.

While many works could be applied, for the purposes of this essay I will highlight one because of its originality and texture: Jack Goldstone's *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (1991). Examining the English, French, Ottoman, and Ming-Qing revolutions, Goldstone argued that the cumulative effects of demographic growth in these preindustrial societies led to pressures their governments could no longer contain. Goldstone's is no simple Malthusian model. Rather, he noted that demographic change affects different groups in a society differently. Economic growth could be a double-edged sword, in that more people might be wealthy, but the increase in the well-to-do might outstrip the number of positions conferring social status, thereby leading to anxiety for both up-and-comers and established elites. Thus, Goldstone's is a structural/institutional model that considers the interplay between demographics and culture. According to Goldstone, long periods of demographic growth resulted in a set of conditions ripe for revolution, especially when the following three conditions occurred: a state financial crunch caused by a gap between the funds a government can raise without political difficulty and its expenditures, especially on military costs; deep schisms among elites, including disillusionment with the government, caused by perceived insecurity and increased competition for status and positions; and broad popular dissatisfaction coinciding with large social groups holding the potential for mobilization. Usually, Goldstone continued, these three conditions entailed a fourth: previously fringe ideas challenging the status quo gained a new relevancy, energizing formerly marginal groups that led the charge against state authority. The societies Goldstone studied continued in revolutionary flux until a combination of institutional reordering and changes in demographics or rates of demographic growth resulted in another period of relative stability. Goldstone found that the ideological aspects of a revolution as much as its institutional upheaval set the stage for post-revolutionary change.

Goldstone's work offers us a potential solution to a much-understudied but essential question about the American Revolution: why did it end? Despite the war, the overall population in what became the first fourteen states continued to grow, from just over two million in 1770 to nearly four million in 1790, while the Indian population to the west declined further. But, as Goldstone found in the cases he examined, what caused unrest was not growth *per se* but the relationships between demographic change and social institutions. Americans' Revolutionary-era political experimentation greatly expanded the quantity and quality of white men's chances for public advancement through peaceful processes. The fleeing of about 100,000 loyalists, the broadening of the franchise, the adjustment of city governments to allow for more elected officials, the increased number of state-level legislative seats, and the establishment of a representative national government resulted in an explosion of political possibilities on local, state, and national scales. The states' cession

of western land claims to the national government and the establishment of a somewhat orderly process for further white colonization (especially the guaranteeing of eventual political equality to white male westerners) fed the early republic's extensive political and economic growth, albeit at the expense of Indians. Enterprising urban merchants founded corporate banks to fuel the young nation's capitalist expansion. The declining ratio of Indians compared to the rest of the population assured that their taking to the war-path could only temporarily delay further diminution of their lands. Fittingly, the rebelliousness of the enslaved and the desperation of Native Americans continued unabated. In sum, during the 1770s and 1780s Americans successfully revamped old structures or created new ones in such a manner (mostly though not always intentionally) that there was, for proportionally many more Americans, greater reason to be morally, politically, economically, and personally invested in the new government and social order. More research on every level, detailing the degree to which opportunity broadened in ways that lessened social tensions, would allow us to better test the application of Goldstone's thesis to the American Revolution.

While Goldstone's volume does not address the American Revolution, three recent historical works do hint at the profits to be gained through comparative thinking. For *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840* (2010), editors David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam gathered essays spanning the globe. Although nearly all of those pieces cover a particular country or region rather than employing a comparative mode, Wim Klooster's *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (2009) brings to bear many recent insights on the American, French, Haitian, and Spanish-American revolutions to consider them comparatively. Klooster argues for broad similarities in the degree to which, national post-revolutionary mythologies notwithstanding, resulting regimes were often more authoritarian than those they replaced. Contrasting with Klooster's emphasis on political and social structures, Leora Auslander's *Cultural Revolutions: Everyday Life and Politics in Britain, North America, and France* (2009) analyzes the intersections between revolution and the material culture of the English Civil War, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution. By looking at these revolutions together and in relation to one another, she shows how dress, food, and furnishings became politicized, reflecting the gendered natures of each of these upheavals. Auslander considers each revolution as central to the project of modernity, albeit each in distinctive ways as dictated by their particular place and time.

Auslander mines one particularly interesting area for comparative consideration, namely, how the entire process of revolution was gendered. Feminist scholar Valentine M. Moghadam argues that gender is integral to revolutions in their entirety: their causes, their processes, their closure, and their results. She has proposed two models. The "women's emancipation"

model characterizes revolutions in which women's freedom was essential to the project of revolution, liberating them for economic production and civic and political participation. By contrast, Moghadam's "woman-in-the-family" model describes revolutions in which the discourse of revolution "exclude[d] or marginalize[d] women from definitions and constructions of independence, liberation, or liberty."<sup>5</sup> In these revolutions, patriarchal conceptions of citizenship and nationality sufficed the entire venture, resulting not only in minimal legal and economic gains for women but also greatly affecting national culture on every level. Clearly, the American Revolution fits fairly well in the latter category. Rosemarie Zagarri's *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (2007) offers both the broader definition of political authority that I am suggesting and considers the gendered nature of that wider sphere, while noting that the Revolution began a process that did not end until the 1830s. As we go forward, I hope that we can look at the American Revolution alongside other "woman-in-the-family" revolutions, such as that of Peru, to provide insight into changes in women's roles, in the gendered language of politics, and in the persistence or change in the nature of gendered discourse at various sites of cultural production.

Even wider comparative thinking could open up all sorts of vistas leading to more original, rigorous, and thorough analysis of American Revolutionary disruption. Analogy to twentieth-century conflict has already yielded one provocative result: Sun Bok Kim's experience in the Korean War inspired his analysis of devastation leading to political apathy in New York's battered Westchester County during the American Revolution.<sup>6</sup> Many other possibilities come to mind, both historical and contemporary. Beginning with the First World War, psychologists have completed many studies investigating what they originally called "shell shock" and what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a category that would encompass both the experiences of soldiers and of civilians. With great care, of course, to note different historical contexts then and now, psychological research may help us peek into the tortured minds of Revolutionary-era Americans during and after the war, a vein that John Resch mined in *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (1999), but otherwise has been little tapped. The past century has witnessed millions of people worldwide being dispossessed and strewn into the winds of fate as refugees; perhaps studies of their experiences might illuminate the plight of the approximately 100,000 fleeing loyalists. Reportage of Afghanistan and other conflicts could yield inspiration for our analysis of how individuals and communities cope in the midst of chaos. Looking at areas like Bosnia might provide analytical models for understanding how Revolutionary-era communities resolved their differences, begrudgingly buried the hatchet, or turned to the ballot box in order to return to some degree of civility. Making such comparisons and contrasts

might be useful for historians to better explain the continuing relevance of the American Revolution to our students, who have no doubt been exposed to political figures and pundits drawing parallels between violence in Iraq or Afghanistan to violence during the American Revolution. Our using more recent events to help us understand the Revolution can aid us in making the American Revolution come alive for our students.

These new directions for study are not the only possibilities for revitalizing our understanding of the Revolution. Indeed, one additional line of inquiry already becoming an area of creative ferment is the examination of contemporary invocations of the American Revolution, especially in politics but also more broadly in American culture. Nor is what I propose easy, in that it requires us as historians to go beyond our accustomed intellectual silo to consider the historiographies of other places and times as well as the scholarly literature of heretofore alien disciplines. But moving in these directions holds the potential to explain more than any of today's reigning paradigms and incorporates more scholarship, helping us better account for beginnings, middles, and ends; emotions, ideas, and actions; agency, interaction, and structure; and personal, local, and national. This calls for the interpretation of all the sources available to us but without prescribing any one particular interpretation, and offers ample room for the huge amount of scholarly literature already compiled as well as the cornucopia of stories yet to be written. At the very least, if American historians move forward in these ways, we will be challenging ourselves, our students, and our readers to look with new eyes at the American Revolution, not only on its own terms but also in its relevance to the present.

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1. Carl Lotus Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (1909), 22.

2. See the essay "Violence and the American Revolution" in Richard Maxwell Brown's *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of Violence and Vigilantism* (1975), 44–46.

3. Benoit Mandelbrot, "How Long Is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractional Dimension," *Science* 156, no. 3775 (1967): 636.

4. David Zeitlyn and Bruce Connell, "Ethnogenesis and Fractal History on an African Frontier: Mambila-Njerep-Mandule," *The Journal of African History* 44 (2003): 117–38.

5. Valentine M. Moghadam, "Gender and Revolutions," in *Theorizing Revolutions*, ed. John Foran (1997), 137–67.

6. Sung Bok Kim, "The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York," *Journal of American History* 80 (December 1993): 871.