

Teaching the Age of Revolutions

HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2018 (Secondary)

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Week 2: To what extent did the American Revolution lead to a fundamental change in ideas about democracy?

For Week 2 of the online course Fellows began to look more in depth at particular revolutions in order to build their historical knowledge and continue to ask questions about the nature of the Age of Revolutions.

This week also saw the challenge of considering how the history of ideas should be included in secondary school history. The Fellows had previously discussed this as part of the residential and were keen to look beyond the usual 'events and nothing more' approach to looking at a topic like the American Revolution.

One of the immediate discussions points revolved around considering where we should 'fit' the American Revolution into our studies and how it continued the complex thinking about revolutions from the previous weeks.

- The American "Revolution" illustrates the chaos surrounding the term and the history of ideas more broadly. It was not a neat, homogenous sea change that saw the British out and "America" in. What was America? Colonists certainly could not answer this question at what was a tumultuous time in their history. The physical and ideological conflict between Patriots and Loyalists warns us of the dangers of seeing the "Revolution" as a war against Britain and the ideas generated as a progressive move forward for all
- 'Getting students to appreciate the subtleties of eighteenth-century society would be key. Langley (2017) suggests we look at the American Revolution from a 'hemispheric perspective' – such an approach would help students access the shift in political paradigm. Hofstadter (1948) argues that America in this period was a very 'middle class' world – comparing British and American incomes, titles and land ownership across different classes* would allow students to better appreciate the reasons why new ideas were able to flourish across the Atlantic. A study of cartoons from both sides of the Pond would also provide a useful point of comparison opening up class discussions about why ideas that were considered radical in Britain were not considered so in America.'

Others began to question how we should really view this period (who were the revolutionaries and what were they representing?) and what links it might offer to students considering how ideas about 'liberty' and 'rights' have developed over time.

- In Chapter 7 of Linebaugh's book title he emphasises that it was groups such as slaves (leading resistance against the Stamp Act and slavery) and sailors (protesting against British pressganging) that helped to destabilise imperial civil society and their actions were the start of revolution, hence he argues the revolution initially came from below. There was recognition that British pressganging and slavery was "pitting the rights of private property against the rights of common man" (p220). This crisis was capitalised upon by the patriots, but Linebaugh argues there was a "reactionary retreat from the universalistic revolutionary language" and clearly freedom from tyranny was not for all. Linebaugh says Thomas Jefferson 'acknowledged . . . this motley crew but feared its challenge to his own vision of America's future', thus Jefferson did not portray the revolution as a war between classes preferring to treat it only as a more straight forward war of nations.
- 'The key messages that Ben Marsh drew out are really important changes in ideas but they have become so normal to me. There was a real challenge to monarchy. Liberty was an important concept (used by sailors and slaves as well as elites). A new idea of government was suggested (with links back to antiquity and republican Rome? here my knowledge is limited). Religion was no longer a matter for the state, a truly radical idea given the religious division and wars in the preceding 200+ years in Europe. However, the absence of ideas about feminism (although the podcast references Wollstonecraft) and about slave rights (although Linebaugh and Rediker identify them as rebels in the 18th century) or real equality and human rights in the central works of Paine leaves the impression of a partial revolution. I was also interested in the concept of this being a model for decolonisation, given that it was about white colonists and their decedents rejecting the power of the British state and possibly more a model for Rhodesia than for Ghana.'

Some Fellows also began to relate these ideas directly to their teaching and how it could be developed...

- Another thing I would do for teaching the changes in ideas during the American Revolution is showing students how massively influenced the American politicians were by earlier English philosophers, like Locke, and Milton, as referred to in our book. Americans are not in a bubble – they are part of a longer development of 'idea making'. I really like the idea of using Common Sense as a teaching tool in the classroom – it's a key part of the spec for my department's GCSE, and yet, we don't actually show students any of the text (due to time constraints). I think it would be massively useful to try some of the activities and questions put forward in Understanding and Teaching the Age of Revolutions on the chapter of Paine. I would want to impress on students the nature of Paine's pamphlet is just as important as his actual content – as mentioned earlier, it would be similar to how social media radically altered how politics is done. His pamphlet was accessible to the average person and allowed them to consider his points in a language that made it more acceptable to them.

References

Core resources

- Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000). Especially Chapter 7.
- Marsh, B. and Rapport, M. (Eds.), *Understanding and Teaching the Age of Revolutions* (2017). Especially the chapters related to Paine and the American Revolution.
- Marsh, Ben, *Age of Revolution - Theme Summaries and Key Messages* (2018)
- HA podcast: Professor W.A. Speck, “The Life and Ideas of Thomas Paine”

Secondary sources

- Middlekauff, Robert, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789 (Oxford History of the United States)* (2007)
- Murrin, John M., “A Roof without Walls: The Dilemma of American National Identity.” on *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter III, 333-348. 1987. Online version at: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/history/dfg/amrv/murrin.htm>
- Taylor, Alan, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (2016)