

# Fiction And Fission: Twentieth — Century Writing on The Founding Fathers

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In Australia, tribesmen trace their origins to a rain-making python who drowned a set of incestuous sisters because they polluted his watering place with their menstrual blood.<sup>1</sup> In Tibet, families derive their descent from a beautiful boy in a conch egg which came from the immense ovum exuded from the essence of the five primordial elements.<sup>2</sup> In Polynesia, islanders tell tales of the emergence of their clan forebears from holes in the ground.<sup>3</sup> And in every other quarter of the globe, other people proclaim other origin myths which are beyond reasoning but not without reasons.

The Algonkins account their ancestry from a great hare which commanded the animals on his raft to dive into the shoreless sea for the grain of sand from which he created the Indian earth.<sup>4</sup> The Iroquois exalt a hero who fell through the firmament to the water below, where she landed on the broad back of a tortoise and gave birth to a daughter who bore the twins who, amid matricides and liaisons, made the plants, the beasts, and the Iroquois.<sup>5</sup> The Achilpa nomads of the Arunta hallow their territory with a sacred pole fashioned from the trunk of a gum tree by a deity who anointed it with blood, climbed it, and disappeared into the sky.<sup>6</sup> The Oyo Yoruba speak of a rival god who got so drunk on palm wine that he failed to fulfill his divine assignment to devise man and

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instead brought forth hunchbacks, albinos, and other misshapen specimens until the Oyo god was summoned to carry out the commission and set the center of civilization at Ife.<sup>7</sup>

Such foundation fables appear in great traditions and little ones alike. The citadels of classical Western culture understood their inception in stories little less extravagant and scarcely less susceptible of substantiation. The ancient Athenians thought their city established under the aegis of the Olympian goddess of war and wisdom. The Romans believed their empire begun by fratricidal twins, born of a vestal virgin and an immortal divinity, who had been thrown to the Tiber, saved and suckled by a she-wolf, and raised by a humble herdsman.

In the nineteenth century, the citizens of that most modern of nations, the United States of America, felt few compunctions about concocting or subscribing to implausible and indeed preposterous fabrications of their own. Parson Weems' inexhaustible inventions about George Washington went through endless editions, and the cult of the creator-hero reached far beyond books. A sampler sewn by an ingenuous young lady in 1842 showed the general, in a characteristic equestrian attitude, crossing the Delaware: if the Son of God could walk on water, the Father of his Country could ride on the river.<sup>8</sup>

As the birth of the republic passed from the realm of memory to the dominion of myth, a legend of the Founding Fathers emerged. As "time dissipate[d] to shining ether the solid angularity of facts,"<sup>9</sup> an elaborate fabric of folderol evolved. In their need for an account of the nation's genesis that could confer a sense of shared origins and common character, masses of Americans set aside skepticism. By the end of the nineteenth century, every schoolchild in the country could recount the fable of the hatchet and the cherry tree and the boy who could not tell a lie.

But by then too, another notion of the uses of the past was stirring. Historical work which had once been done by affluent amateurs who aimed at the civic instruction of the multitudes began to be taken over by scholars ensconced in universities who aimed primarily at each other. These academic professionals scorned the gullibility of the genteel amateurs and their audi-

ences and "all the trash called tradition which cannot stand the test of historical criticism."<sup>10</sup> They and their twentieth-century successors valued scientific sophistication and scrupulousness more than romantic intuition. They sought steady technical proficiency rather than occasional eruptions of genius, and critical acumen rather than creative inspiration. And they accomplished their ends. Increasingly over the course of successive generations, they achieved the history to which they aspired; an austere history distrustful of the enthusiastic, an astringent history derisive of the heroic, an aseptic history dismissive of the mythic.

Just because they did, recent renditions of the making of the American nation now seem the more peculiar. Just because professional modes did dominate the elite historical enterprise in the twentieth century, exemption of the study of national foundations from those standards now seems the more intriguing. Just because stolid positivism did prevail so sweepingly, the problematic premises of the two most important modern accounts of the advent of American nationality now seem the more suggestive.

**An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States**, by Charles Beard, and **The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution**, by Bernard Bailyn, have between them held solid sway over the scholarly study of the Revolutionary era since Beard's book first appeared, three-quarters of a century ago.<sup>11</sup> **An Economic Interpretation** may, indeed, be the most influential monograph in American history in this century. Unchallenged in its own field for the better part of fifty years, it achieved an extraordinary audience beyond its field and beyond its discipline besides. A sizeable segment of the American intelligentsia, asked in 1938 about "Books that Changed Our Minds," cited it more often than any other book but **The Theory of the Leisure Class** and invoked Beard himself more often than Dewey, Freud, or any other thinker of the age but Veblen.<sup>12</sup> Bailyn's **Ideological Origins** has had no comparable impact outside professional historical precincts, but it did win the Pulitzer Prize and it has set the shape of academic discourse on the Revolution since its publication in 1967. Its application of the arcana of eighteenth-century republican ideology to the everyday realities of the radical movement

represents a legacy that promises to persist for years to come.

Yet Beard's epochal interpretation and Bailyn's alike fail to fit the professional formula. They are works of powerful and probing intelligence and arresting reconceptualization, to be sure. They richly deserve honor and acclamation. But so far from affording us the careful culminations of "thoroughly good second-class work" that the scientific model imagined would precede synthesis,<sup>13</sup> they each leap recklessly to their conclusions from their own researches almost alone. So far from furnishing definitive fulfillment of the patient, incremental investigation that positivism predicated, they each advance provocative hypotheses on patently partial evidence.

Of course, they each seemed more like syntheses than hypotheses when they first appeared, for they each appeared at a fortuitous time. Beard's book came at the crest of a dozen years of Progressive agitation and in the wake of seminal Progressive interpretations of Revolutionary New York and Pennsylvania by Becker and Lincoln. Bailyn's study emerged after two decades of Cold War discomfort with Progressive assumptions and in the wake of ground clearing critiques of Beard by Brown and McDonald.<sup>14</sup>

But even if the two treatises seemed summations at the instant of their appearance, they should not have seemed so for long. The social and scholarly contexts which conditioned their initial reception were not the social and scholarly milieus in which they subsequently made their way. The primed audience which provided the first flush of enthusiasm was not the audience which accorded them the continuing authority with which they each commanded the field. Beard's conception remained prepotent not only through the period of Wilsonian progressivism but also through the roaring twenties, the great depression, and the war-seared forties, when the nation rallied behind a military enterprise which Beard himself openly opposed. Bailyn's formulation matured in an era of Cold War conservatism, but it held its hegemony through the tempestuous protests of the late sixties, the narcissistic retreats of the seventies, and the mean free-marketeering of the Reagan years.

In short, the political and professional circumstances which prepared an appreciative hearing for these works at the outset can

not account for their sustained sway. Such external impingements altered often enough in subsequent decades to shake the favorable inclination of early readers and reviewers and to reawaken the disposition to doubt which is the characteristic posture of the modern historical position.

Critical concern once reinstated, it should have been obvious that **An Economic Interpretation** and **Ideological Origins** alike announce conclusions which are not and can not be warranted by the limited data and restricted research on which they rest. Skepticism once restored, it should have been evident that the very scope and salience of those conclusions demand an expansive effort to test the premises on which they depend and to augment the materials from which they derive.

But **An Economic Interpretation** was not put to such a test for nearly half a century, and **Ideological Origins** has still not been subject to similarly searching analysis. Each book enjoyed a magisterial status from the start. Each stood for years — Bailyn's stands to this day — as a finished synthesis rather than as a brilliant outleaping of its evidence and an inspired anticipation of studies still to be done.<sup>15</sup>

A sociology of knowledge seems insufficient to explain this attachment to these two constructs. Historians of very different social and political persuasions have exhibited the same disregard for the distance between arguments and evidence in Beard and Bailyn. Historians of distinct decades and generations have equally embraced the arguments as canonical rather than controversial. Such extraordinary immunities beg deeper understanding. And that deeper understanding may well begin in the mysterious imperatives attendant on national origin myths. The very readiness of scholars to bestow sanctity rather than scrutiny on these accounts of American beginnings at once establishes the enigma and intimates a clue to its unraveling.

Interpretations of the founding of the new nation possess a power which studies of subsequent epochs — the age of Jackson, say, or the Progressive period — do not. They afford historians peculiarly compelling images of the character of the country,

indelibly imprinted at its birth. It does not matter that successive images differ, so long as a single one dominates the discipline at any moment. It does not matter that Beard provides a parable of perennial conflict at the core of the culture and Bailyn a reassurance of shared values, so long as the historical community concurs first in one version and then in the next. It matters only that agreement obtain on the way in which scholars conceive this most crucial of times, so that the nation may know, in concert, how its emergence defines its existence.

In abstract design, **An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States** encompasses a dozen domains of action and intention. In methodological principle, it acknowledges the essentiality of a dozen others it does not develop. Its explicit argument is as capacious, and elusive, as the intelligence of its author. But in immediate impact, it springs almost wholly from a single source. Its felt force flows almost entirely from the meaning its author makes of some old inventories of the owners of the public securities of the early republic which he found in the Treasury Department in Washington.

When Charles Beard began poking around in the basement of the Treasury building, no historian had ever used the public securities registers which were moldering there. Few knew that they had ever existed, and none knew what remained of them after decades of decay and inadvertent de-accession. Just a few years before Beard undertook his investigations, a menial attendant had sold at least a cartload to a local junk dealer. And the records which were left were themselves barely accessible. As Beard later recalled, he could not use them at all until "a vacuum cleaner had been brought in to excavate the ruins."<sup>16</sup>

But after he disposed of the dust, Beard did use the documents it had shrouded. He got from them the core of his famous fifth chapter, on the economic interests of the framers. That chapter occupies fully a fourth of the entire text. It examines in elaborate detail the property holdings of the delegates. It canvasses their possessions in land and their moneys at loan, their

estates in slaves, their speculative investments, their mercantile and marital alliances, and their political affiliations. Above all, it appraises their position in public securities. For extensive ownership of public securities is the foundation on which Beard erects the inventive distinction between realty and "personalty" which constitutes, for him, the crux of the cleavage between the multitude of provincials in the countryside and the cadre of national-minded men who convened in Philadelphia.

This fifth chapter dwarfs, in scale and specificity alike, its counterpart seventh chapter, on the political convictions and concerns of the Founding Fathers. That chapter takes up only a third as much space as the one on economic interests, and even less of its author's real energies. In Richard Hofstadter's damning description, it is a "perfunctory pastiche of quotations" culled selectively and rather casually from the records of the Federal Convention.<sup>17</sup>

Beard's disinclination to draw deeply on the views recorded in Philadelphia is more than a little mystifying. Max Farrand had just published the minutes of the sessions, and nothing could have offered a more convenient compendium of the framers' opinions than those three valuable volumes. Farrand had even compiled an index.<sup>18</sup>

Beard aimed to understand the plans and purposes of the Fathers, yet he scorned to solicit seriously their own words. He sought to assess the minds and motives of the members of the Convention, yet he declined to address earnestly their own ideas and ideals, as they actually expressed them in 1787. He chose instead to infer their temper from his tally of the Treasury logs.

As he did, his very discovery became his vulnerability. In the heat of his excitement at the revelations in the Treasury records, he lost sight of the complexity of men's motives and reduced mental states to reflexes of material conditions. Flush with his findings on the depreciated paper holdings of the Revolutionaries, he forgot the intricate plasticity of economic interpretation and lapsed into a much cruder economic determinism.

Despite his denial in a 1935 edition that he had ever accused the men who met in Philadelphia of "working merely for their own

pockets" or their "personal benefit," he indicated again and again in the 1913 text that "the direct, impelling motive" behind the calling of the Convention was "the economic advantages which the beneficiaries expected would accrue to themselves first from their action." Despite his insistence in the second edition that he had suggested simply that the delegates represented "distinct groups whose economic interests they understood and felt in concrete, definite form through their own personal experience," rather than men operating solely "under the guidance of abstract principles of political science," he urged repeatedly in the original version that the impetus to the Constitution came from "a small and active group of men immediately interested through their personal possessions in the outcome of their labors."<sup>19</sup>

Beard's reliance on the Treasury registers came to constitute very nearly a caricature of his Progressive conviction that reality was mean and mercenary, dark and clandestine and not a little desperate. But given his conviction, it is hardly startling that he exceeded the entitlements of his evidence as he did. It is only amazing that his exceedings passed unchallenged by historians as they did. It is only remarkable that, by some "intellectual legerdemain," his thesis "came to seem all but axiomatic to a great many scholars of learning and integrity."<sup>20</sup>

Beard himself never claimed the axiomatic authority which his scholarly colleagues conceded the **Economic Interpretation**. His very first sentence pronounced the construction which would follow "frankly fragmentary." His opening paragraph acknowledged that the ensuing pages would not "treat the subject in an exhaustive fashion" but merely "suggest new lines of historical research."<sup>21</sup>

Such caveats were neither empty gestures nor calculated "anticipation of the criticism of reviewers." They were, rather, what Beard called them; unadorned "confession of fact." His inference from mammon to motivation had still to be proven rather than postulated. His blithe passage from the Philadelphia delegates to the state ratifying convention representatives to the Federalist electorate at large had still to be studied rather than stipulated. And Beard himself admitted as much. "No one," he confessed at the outset, "can appreciate more fully than I do how much of the work here outlined remains to be done."<sup>22</sup>



Friends and foes should both, therefore, have had their business before them. Nonetheless, for fifty years, neither camp commenced the work which would have been required to buttress Beard's meagre beginning or to undermine it. Antagonists scarcely deigned to engage his evidence at all, and advocates were barely better. When Beard essayed a reconnaissance of reactions, for the new edition of 1935, he could only report that the book had been "roundly condemned" by ideological adversaries reluctant to read it or wrestle with it and "praised with about the same amount of discrimination" by supporters eager to believe it. So far from embarking upon the research programme implicitly mandated by the book, so far from carrying on the enterprise Beard had confessed he could not himself complete, his followers had embraced his bare and brazen hypothesis as established fact.<sup>23</sup>

In much the way **An Economic Interpretation** capped a decade of disenchantment with genteel formalism, **Ideological Origins** culminated a generation of Cold War disengagement from New Deal materialism and a decade of deliberate assault on Beard's economic interpretation of the movement for the Constitution. Its insistence on the autonomy and efficacy of ideas and ideologies emerged in a time of continuing concern for alleged Communist advantages and advances in the protracted conflict between the nations of the "free world" and the countries behind the "iron curtain." Its emphasis on solidary sentiment arose in an age of mounting anxiety over the attenuation of American ideals and the exportability of the American ethos.

And in much the way Beard's book erupted out of his discovery of data that fit his predilections, so Bailyn's treatise emanated from his immersion in scarcely-studied sources congenial to his turn to intellectual history. What the Treasury lists were to Beard, the pamphlets of the American Revolution were to Bailyn. His reliance on them came to constitute very nearly a caricature of his post-Progressive conviction that reality was **not** as raw and reclusive as the Beardians believed.

It was no more remarkable that Bailyn's notion of reality was accepted in the sixties than that Beard's had been embraced a

half-century before. It was no more extraordinary that an ontology attuned to ideology seemed plausible in a period of virulent and even violent anti-Communism than that one attentive to secretive special interests had seemed sensible in seasons of muckraking and depression. It is only inexplicable that the professional historical community, espousing as it did a creed of resolute skepticism and requisition of evidence, should have become so enamored of conceptualizations so dependent on sparse sources. It is only unaccountable that the "personalty" of fifty-five men should ever have seemed adequate to establish the appropriateness of economic interpretation. It is only unfathomable that a few dozen pamphlets should ever have seemed sufficient to sustain the suitability of ideological interpretation.

Even if Beard's unconcern for the intellectual elements of motivation and Bailyn's indifference to the material aspects of ideation are set aside, deficiencies of data still preclude demonstration of their largest assertions. Even if both men's arguments are accepted on their own terms, such deficiencies still, indeed, entail violations of the very premises on which each man proceeds.

Beard's economic interpretation demands attention to people's pecuniary circumstances in any apprehension of their motives. His triumph is to have turned up among the members of the 1787 Convention an unsuspected interest in public securities whose worth was immensely enhanced by their handiwork in Philadelphia. But on just that account Beard cannot treat the delegates as proxies for the representatives to the ratifying conventions or the voters who elected them. Insofar as the propertied positions of the three groups differed, their interests and incentives were also, by Beard's logic, bound to differ, leaving him bereft, in the end, of any compelling explanation of the adoption of the Constitution.

Similarly, Bailyn's ideological interpretation requires systematic study of people's actual statements and suppositions in any understanding of their minds. His achievement is to have proven the power of a peculiarly provincial republican tradition to shape political awareness among the articulate as the Lockean liberalism which prevailed at the loftiest levels of eighteenth-century thought never did. But on just that account Bailyn cannot

consider the authors and audiences of the pamphlets representative of the rebels or posit continuity of consciousness across the culture. Insofar as other Americans operated at more insular levels than the pamphleteers, their worldviews were also, by Bailyn's logic, likely to be at variance from his preferred informants, leaving him lacking, at the last, any convincing exposition of the mobilization of the Revolution.

Beard and Bailyn both emphasized ideas and interests in the upper reaches of American society. They both examined behavior and belief among the most cosmopolitan, and they both extrapolated indefensibly to the rest. But two generations failed to find such preferences and procedures bothersome in Beard. A third still fails to find them problematic in Bailyn.

Few historians have marked with Merrill Jensen the fact that even the formal debate on opposition to the British "was carried on... in newspapers and broadsides," where the rhetoric "was not on the high level that characterized most of the pamphlets". Few have held with Harry Stout that newspapers and pamphlets alike allow scant access to "the depths of a popular revolutionary spirit that was oral and egalitarian rather than printed and elitist." And few have reckoned with Stout's reminder that, in any case, "the link between print culture and the people, between pamphlets and popular ideology, is assumed, not demonstrated," in Bailyn's formulation.<sup>24</sup>

Bailyn proposed to take the pamphlets as apodictic sources of ideology, and the ideology they disclosed as the cultural system of the colonists. Historians should have known better. On just his concept of ideology as a "map of social and political reality" which fuses the "values, attitudes, hopes, fears, and opinions through which people perceive the world and by which they are led to imposes themselves upon it," historians should have recognized that eighteenth-century America could not be comprehended so monolithically. At a minimum they might have recalled the acerbic observation of Patrick Henry, a patriot who sounded the depths and scouted the bounds of popular sentiment as surely as any scholar ever would, that "the middle and lower ranks of people have not those illumined ideas which the well-born are so happily possessed of."<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere, Bailyn has written evocatively of the "tragic" angle of vision, and of his aspiration to that "ultimate mode of interpretation" in which partisanship is put aside by historians who have "no stake in the outcome" and can consequently "grasp the wholeness" of events and "note the limits within which [all] men struggled." He has even declared his conviction that we are "approaching a maturity, fullness, and depth in our understanding of the Revolution that we have never had before."<sup>28</sup>

But the incautious rush to judgment which attended the appearance of **Ideological Origins** belies his fond anticipation. The reluctance to reconsider that first infatuation suggests something of the stake which students of the past still have in accounts of American beginnings. The unseemly eagerness for a new orthodoxy indicates something of the intensity with which even academicians of the twentieth century cling to accepted images of the birth of the republic.

American historians are, after all, Americans. They too cooperate in their culture. They too crave unifying conceptions of the nature of American nationhood. They too need to embed and embody that nature in notions of its origin. The unreflective readiness with which they embraced Bailyn, as they embraced Beard before, attests as much as anything the difficulty of ever attaining the scholarly maturity of which Bailyn writes so longingly.

And yet, slowly, such maturity does come. Criticisms accumulate. Consensus is corroded. In the case of **An Economic Interpretation**, censure scarcely surfaces for half a century and then it washes all before it in a torrent. In the case of **Ideological Origins**, the waters are just beginning to gather.

Professional historians are trained to take pride in exposing the exceptions which beset every generalization. They preen themselves on elaborating the complexities which escape every synthesis. They delight to tell the would-be theorist that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy. And they are now noticing how many individuals, and

communities, and even colonies, do not fit the dynamic Bailyn describes.

In writings of very recent years, prominent patriot leaders such as Paine, Franklin, and Hamilton are portrayed as avatars of commercial values more than as partisans of parochial virtue. They are seen as having "conceded the dominance of self-interest" and the limited ethical horizon it entailed, and the concession is taken to place them outside the moral precincts of civic humanism.<sup>27</sup>

Nameless and numberless patriot masses such as the militiamen are depicted as seekers after their own safety and the security of their families more than as ardent exponents of whig ideology. A "prudent, politically apathetic majority" of American males is seen as standing altogether aloof from the discourse of republicanism, its politicization a product of coerced military service rather than a contributing cause of the conflict.<sup>28</sup>

And entire colonies such as New York and Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Virginia, are shown to have traveled revolutionary roads of their own more than the path posited in **Ideological Origins**. In Virginia, it is asserted that expansionists whose ideas were rooted in self-interest offered a steadier and more radical opposition to the British than non-expansionists whose views were expressed in republican rhetoric. In North Carolina, it is argued that only the dissidents ever spoke of self-denial; the political system itself was predicated on corrupt self-seeking, and concern for the common weal seemed such a strange caprice that one planter called the Carolinians "a people into whose heads no human means can beat the notion of a public interest."<sup>29</sup>

These exceptions — if they are exceptions, and not, on closer calculation, the norm — are more than mere manifestations of the historian's propensity to nitpicking contrariety. They point to a multiplicity of social and political paradigms in eighteenth-century America, and such multiplicity is exactly what Bailyn is obliged to deny if the Old Whig vision he advances is truly to explain the origins of the American Revolution.

Bailyn postulates "a closed ideology" with a "grip on the colonial mind" so "absolute" as to cause common colonial responses

to imperial stimuli. If ideological pluralism prevailed, therefore, he cannot account convincingly for the provincial "perceptions and anxieties" which he believes made accommodation with the British "difficult and then impossible."<sup>30</sup>

Of course, it was always implausible in abstract logic that the republican reading of social reality should have held such exclusive sway. Soon after **Ideological Origins** appeared, Pocock warned that "a sophisticated, institutionalized, and highly factional 'language' such as the Country ideology" was "unlikely to be the only language in use within a given society."<sup>31</sup> And the warning that he offered theoretically has been borne out empirically in the last half-dozen years. Some scholars have shown the persistence of pre-modern modes of thought in early America.<sup>32</sup> Other have elucidated the importation of Scottish Common Sense philosophy.<sup>33</sup> Still others have elaborated a resurgent Lockean liberalism<sup>34</sup> or the ascendant Jeffersonian variant of Lockean doctrine which was destined to dominate a materialistic, modernizing nation.<sup>35</sup>

All of these authorities can accommodate a coexistence and even a conflict of ideologies which Bailyn cannot countenance. For all of them are primarily concerned to trace the conservation of older ways or the emergence of newer norms which they take to transcend the Revolutionary crisis. Most of them seek to study what Jack Greene calls a "broader social revolution" stirring in the colonies which "would have been completed with or without the American Revolution." Many of them consider that transformation "far more crucial to an understanding of the first two centuries of American life and far more worthy of scholarly attention" than the military or constitutional strife itself.<sup>36</sup>

Such assertions are symptomatic of a more serious assault on Bailyn's paradigm even than the demonstration of ideological diversity, for they challenge the centrality of the nativity of the nation in the epic of America. And they are exceptional only in their audacity and articulateness. A host of other historians who have not thrown down the gauntlet so openly have nonetheless addressed themselves to topics in the Revolutionary era which they believe more basic to American experience than the Revolution. They are taking exception to Bailyn's thesis primarily by taking

no notice of it.

A score of studies in an advancing array of fields fail to find — or even seek — any significant impingement of imperial politics or any meaningful divide at 1776. The recent exploration of the American landscape discovers a dynamic too deep to be touched by the political turbulence of the Revolution.<sup>37</sup> The current scholarship on the communities men and women established upon the land ranges across the Revolutionary years oblivious to the impact the conflict might have had on the pattern of people's lives together.<sup>38</sup> The emerging recognition of the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century dates that development from the middle of the century and therefore attributes to it a trajectory quite distinct from the movement for national independence.<sup>39</sup> The newest accounts of the family set their chronological caesuras a generation before the Revolution or a generation after, but essentially apart from it.<sup>40</sup>

Even in areas where some historians have seen a transforming radicalism in the Revolution, the weight of contemporary work now argues otherwise. A forlorn attempt to demonstrate an extensive alteration in women in the wake of wartime rhetoric and responsibilities falls before far more compelling evidence that the female lot was largely unchanged by the dispute with the mother country.<sup>41</sup> An old ascription of economic renovation in the aftermath of combat dislocations and loyalist dispossessions falls in the face of findings that shifts in productive activity and in the distribution of wealth were already in train well before the battle with Britain or awaited the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> A traditional supposition that independence must have occasioned a sea-change in American sensibilities recedes as more striking formulations suggest a very different and distinctly later break, between pre-modern and modern epochs, in which the intrusion of the Revolution was only epiphenomenal.<sup>43</sup>

This unconcern for the creation of the nation and this priority upon other arenas of experience are very nearly new things under the American sun. But in spite of their novelty, they are still not as unprecedented as Bailyn's own disconnection of the Revolution from all reckoning of American destiny.

Almost by definition, origin myths are about a past that is pertinent to the present and pregnant with futurity. The tales of primeval ancestries, divine rivalries, and sacred poles are telltales of current clan alignments, political antagonisms, and territorial entitlements. But in Bailyn the circle is broken. The Revolution appears as an episode essentially of the eighteenth century, devoid of subsequent significance. The resistance to imperial oppression becomes the product of a peculiar ideational configuration, outworn with the waning of its provincial context. Its intellectual matrix must be retrieved by ingenious historical reconstruction because it is no longer a living inheritance among Americans. Its premises and problematic are alien and inaccessible because they have been so long submerged by the liberalism which surfaced so swiftly upon the achievement of independence.

Whatever its shortcomings, **An Economic Interpretation** never neglected to tie its conception of the Founding Fathers to the issues of the twentieth century and to the larger contours of the country's history. However exquisite its attunement to the temper of an earlier time, **Ideological Origins** fails, finally, to address the dilemmas of its own day. It is therefore powerless to bind time — powerless to mediate past and present — and therefore no origin myth at all, even if some scholars still treat it as one for want of anything better.

For a century and a half, American historians knew themselves by their insistence on a fiction. Refusing to recognize the thinness of the "institutional web" which, in Robert Wiebe's words, "lay across the nation without integrating it," they wrote as if that "wisp of a nation" was the only appropriate focus of concern and commemoration.<sup>44</sup> Dismissing the diversity and localism of the disparate and parochial peoples all around them, they identified the legitimate course of the country with the assumptions and aspirations of its cosmopolitan classes. But it is by no means clear that they can or will continue to do so.

Historians since the sixties have been loath to allow a small, relatively homogeneous set of Americans to stand transcendently



for the whole society. They have grown skeptical, methodologically, of the supposition of a shared American experience even as they have grown skeptical, politically, of the concentration of control in Washington. They have turned their attention from the center to the peripheries and from the public sector to a proliferous host of private spheres. They have acknowledged and even attempted to enter worlds which their predecessors scarcely suspected were there. And their pluralization of the past has entailed an extensive abandonment of the traditional national narrative.<sup>45</sup>

For a few years, scholars of the era of independence resisted this fragmentation. As if cognizant of their responsibility as custodians of the nation's foundation lore, they clung the more ardently to Bailyn's construction as their colleagues in other areas unraveled the social fabric. But today students of the Revolution can no more sustain a substantive consensus than students in other fields. Indeed, they cannot even agree on the subjects most salient to their study or the temporal bounds most opportune. Their inability suggests at once a new sensibility at large in America and a decay of discourse in the historical community.

This collapse of cultural cohesion, and especially this attenuation of origin mythology, constitutes a considerable crisis for the historical enterprise in America. For American historians have never simply set themselves in service to the nation. They have actually defined themselves and their discipline by such service. It may be manifest that their disengagement from devotion to perceived patriotic duty has emerged explicably enough in a period of unprecedented mistrust of political authority and withdrawal into private gratification. But it is not at all apparent, in this era of decadent nationalism, what will become of a discipline whose very existence has, historically, been dedicated to the aggrandizement of that nation.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Clifford Geertz, "Religion: Anthropological Study," in David Sills, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), vol. 13, p.405.

- <sup>2</sup>Mircea Eliade, **Myth and Reality** (New York, 1963), pp.21-2.
- <sup>3</sup>Victor Turner, "Myth and Symbol," in Sills, **Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences**, vol. 10, p.578.
- <sup>4</sup>"Cosmogony," **Encyclopedia Britannica** (11th edition, New York, 1910-11), vol. 7, pp.215-7.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup>Mircea Eliade, **The Sacred and the Profane** (New York, 1961), p.33.
- <sup>7</sup>B.A. Agiri, "Early Oyo History Reconsidered," **History in Africa** 2 (1975), p.6.
- <sup>8</sup>Michael Kammen, **A Season of Youth** (New York, 1978), p.82.
- <sup>9</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in **Essays: First Series**, in **The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson** (Boston, 1903-4), vol. 2, p.9.
- <sup>10</sup>Jessica Austin, ed., **Moses Coit Tyler, 1835-1900: Selections from his Letters and Diaries** (Garden City, NY, 1911), p.209.
- <sup>11</sup>Charles Beard, **An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States** (new edition, New York, 1935; orig. ed. 1913); Bernard Bailyn, **The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution** (Cambridge, MA, 1967). **Ideological Origins** is a somewhat enlarged version of Bailyn's "General Introduction: The Transforming Radicalism of the American Revolution," vol.1, pp.3-202 of his **Pamphlets of the American Revolution 1750-1776** (Cambridge, MA, 1965).
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- <sup>13</sup>J. Franklin Jameson, **The History of Historical Writing in America** (Boston, 1891), pp.132-3.
- <sup>14</sup>Carl Becker, **History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776** (Madison, WI, 1909); Charles Lincoln, **The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania, 1760-1776** (Philadelphia, 1901); Robert Brown, **Charles Beard and the Constitution** (Princeton, 1956); Forrest McDonald, **We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution** (Chicago, 1958).
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- <sup>17</sup>Hofstadter, **The Progressive Historians**, p.247.
- <sup>18</sup>Marx Farrand, ed., **The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787** (New Haven, 1911).

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- <sup>20</sup> Hofstadter, **The Progressive Historians**, p.266.
- <sup>21</sup> Beard, **An Economic Interpretation**, p.xix.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.viii.
- <sup>24</sup> Merrill Jensen, **The American Revolution within America** (New York, 1974); Harry Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," **William and Mary Quarterly**, 3rd ser., 34 (1977), pp.535-6.
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- <sup>27</sup> Joyce Appleby, "The Social Origins of American Revolutionary Ideology," **Journal of American History** 64 (1978), p.951; see also J.G.A. Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century," **Journal of Interdisciplinary History** 3 (1972), 119-34; Eric Foner, **Tom Paine and Revolutionary America** (New York, 1976).
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- <sup>29</sup> Marc Egnal, "The Origins of the Revolution in Virginia: A Reinterpretation," **William and Mary Quarterly**, 3rd ser., 37 (1980), 401-28; A. Roger Ekirch, "**Poor Carolina**": **Politics and Society in Colonial North Carolina, 1729-1776** (Chapel Hill, 1981), p. . For New York, see Edward Countryman, **A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760-1790** (Baltimore, 1981); for Pennsylvania, see Deborah Gough, "Pluralism, Politics, and Power Struggles: The Church of England in Colonial Philadelphia, 1695-1789," Ph.D. diss., U. of Pennsylvania, 1978, ch. 10.
- <sup>30</sup> Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce," p.121; Bailyn, "The Central Themes," p.13.
- <sup>31</sup> Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce," p.122.
- <sup>32</sup> James Henretta, "Families and Farms: **Mentalité** in Pre-Industrial America," **William and Mary Quarterly**, 3rd ser., 35 (1978), 3-32; Gary Nash, **The Urban Crucible** (Cambridge, MA, 1979).
- <sup>33</sup> Garry Wills, **Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence** (New York, 1978).

- <sup>34</sup> Isaac Kramnick, **Republican Revisionism Revisited**, *American Historical Review* 87 (1982), 629-64; Ronald Hamowy, "Jefferson and the Scottish Enlightenment: A Critique of Garry Wills's **Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence**," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 36 (1979), 503-24.
- <sup>35</sup> Joyce Appleby, **Capitalism and a New Social Order** (New York, 1984); J.R. Pole, **The Gift of Government** (Athens, GA, 1983); Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce." For recent review essays which detail the "rediscovery that several ideologies coexisted in colonial America" and clashed in crucial ways, see Robert Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39 (1982), 334-57, esp. pp. 338-40, and E. Wayne Carp, "Essay Review: Up from Civic Virtue," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 108 (1984), 367-75.
- <sup>36</sup> Jack Greene, "The Social Origins of the American Revolution: An Evaluation and an Interpretation," *Political Science Quarterly* 88 (1973), p. 21.
- <sup>37</sup> E.g. John Stilgoe, **Common Landscape of America 1580 to 1845** (New Haven, 1982). See also Annette Kolodny, **The Lay of the Land** (Chapel Hill, 1975) and **The Land before Her** (Chapel Hill, 1984); William Cronon, **Changes in the Land** (New York, 1983).
- <sup>38</sup> E.g. Stephanie Wolf, **Urban Village** (Princeton, 1976); E. Digby Baltzell, **Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia** (New York, 1979); Richard Beeman, **The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry** (Philadelphia, 1984).
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- <sup>40</sup> E.g. Daniel Blake Smith, **Inside the Great House** (Ithaca, NY, 1980); Jan Lewis, **The Pursuit of Happiness** (New York, 1983). An account of family ideology that is keyed to the Revolutionary conflict - Jay Fliegelman, **Prodigals and Pilgrims** (New York, 1982) - is by contrast strained and unconvincing.
- <sup>41</sup> E.g. Joan Hoff Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in Alfred Young, ed., **The American Revolution** (DeKalb, IL, 1976), pp. 383-445; Linda Kerber, **Women of the Republic** (Chapel Hill, 1980). For the unconvincing argument to the contrary, see Mary Beth Norton, **Liberty's Daughters** (Boston, 1980).

- <sup>2</sup> E.g. Paul Clemens, **The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland's Eastern Shore** (Ithaca, NY, 1980); James Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," **William and Mary Quarterly**, 3rd ser., 22 (1965), 75-92; Kenneth Lockridge, "Social Change and the Meaning of the American Revolution," **Journal of Social History** 6 (1973), 403-39; James Lemon and Gary Nash, "The Distribution of Wealth in Eighteenth-Century America: A Century of Change in Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1693-1802," **Journal of Social History** 2 (1968), 1-24; Nash, **The Urban Crucible**; David Skaggs, **Roots of Maryland Democracy, 1753-1776** (Westport, CT, 1973); Gregory Stiverson, **Poverty in a Land of Plenty** (Baltimore, 1977); Jeffrey Williamson and Peter Lindert, **American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History** (New York, 1980); Alice Hanson Jones, **Wealth of a Nation to Be** (New York, 1980).
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- <sup>4</sup> Robert Wiebe, **The Opening of American Society** (New York, 1984), pp. 353-4.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Zuckerman, "Myth and Method: The Current Crises in American Historical Writing," **The History Teacher** 17 (1984), 219-45.