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Private Interests In The Public Sphere:
The Evolution Of Private Interest Before And During The American Revolution

Jensen Alexander Humphrey

Abstract

From the mid-1600s to the mid-1700s, mercantilism was the dominant economic doctrine practiced in the politics of the English Empire. To balance foreign trade in favor of exports and bolster the national wealth, however, mercantilists argued in favor of centralizing private commercial interests in the public realm, effectively redefining the public interest as a composition of narrow merchant interests. Restrictive mercantilist policies directed at the American colonies worsened over time, and colonists turned to the theories of John Locke to argue that English mercantilism prohibited colonists from fully realizing their rights to liberty and property. This association of mercantilism with oppression was solidified in the post-7 Years' War economic depression of the 1760s as England doubled down on efforts to extract wealth from the colonies. Seeing the productive potential of America held back by mercantilist practices and feeling the threat to their liberties posed by the Crown, colonists, increasingly open to the arguments of smugglers with longstanding anti-mercantilist sentiments, thus argued for free and uninhibited trade in the colonies. Free trade practices would alleviate the oppression that mercantilism became associated with and redefine the public interest as the sum of private interests competing in the marketplace. As the conflict between the Crown and the colonies came to a head, colonial thinkers eventually abandoned free trade ideals in favor of reviving republican ideas of the role of private interest in the public sphere, purporting for the success of the mounting revolutionary war effort that it was necessary to subjugate all private interests to the public good for the duration of the war while holding a place in the future for mercantilist or free trade conceptions of private interest.

Introduction

Tantamount in any understanding of the organization of the American revolutionary effort is an analysis of the interaction of events and ideas. Many scholars have put forth a great diversity of explanations and justifications for the revolution, outlining wildly differing schools of thought all meant to address the question of why the effort was sustained. Generally speaking, attitudes on this question can be organized into four categories, as outlined by Staughton Lynd and David Waldstreicher: first, the revolution was a fight for constitutional rights, second, a struggle for economic independence, third, a democratic revolution similar to the French Revolution, and fourth, a colonial independence movement different than the French Revolution.¹ Between these separate general schools of thought exists a great deal of overlap and collaboration.

The study of American Revolutionary history, as historians J. N. Rakove et. al. so deftly point out, has been pervasively influenced by the doctrine of Progressive historians who briefly, but significantly, overtook the economic school of thought.² This interpretation of the revolution purported that it was a result solely of class interests and economic conflict, construing ideas as having been curated specifically to garner support for a revolution that was in the best interest of an economically advantaged few. This framework, with regards to ideology, begins from the position that concepts such as “liberty” and “tyranny” were at once defined and abused by colonial elites with the intention of solidifying their political rule in the American colonies.

¹ Staughton Lynd and David Waldstreicher, “Free Trade, Sovereignty, and Slavery: Toward an Economic Interpretation of American Independence,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2011): 597-598, doi: 10.5309/willmaryquar.68.4.0597.

² Jack N. Rakove et. al., “Ideas, Interests, and Credible Commitments in the American Revolution,” (2000): 10-11.

Such an approach to the American Revolution may prove attractive in the contemporary sphere with a push toward interpreting history through the lens of political economy. Yet, if it were the case that the American Revolution was pushed by a ruling class with the intention of bolstering their own power and necessarily their own economic advantages, the revolution would have done better to use rhetoric and implement practices geared at upholding the role of private interest in the face of the public good; as I will argue, this was very much not the case. It cannot be emphasized enough that a strict adoption of this framework in the study of the American Revolution is grossly reductive and dismissive of a wealth of grand developments in the realm of political theory. Both in the revolution itself and in its aftermath exists a great compromise between the notions purported by the Progressives of an explanation rooted in material fact and an understanding of the central nature of deeply held and highly inspiring ideas. Progressives are correct in underlining the necessity of material events in culminating the revolution, but misguided in their belief that the theoretical underpinnings of the revolution were weak or a product of manipulation; colonial political ideology was not only consistent but grounded in traditions of existing political thought. The question of our time is whether we are equipped, with such contemporary understandings of political economy in hand, to explain the power of ideas, both in the particular context of the American Revolution and in the grand scheme of modern events.

Ideas regarding the true role of private interest with regard to the public interest underwent major transitions in English political thought prior to the revolution. The view of interest coined “traditional”³ by Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf was a consequence of republican ideals, appropriated and popularized in England as an outlet for frustrations at the new social and

³ Cathy Matson and Peter Onuf, “Toward a Republican Empire: Interest and Ideology in Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 37 no. 4 (1985): 498, doi: 10.2307/2712579.

political order following the Glorious Revolution. The “traditional” view consisted to varying extents of the idea that private interests in a well-ordered republic (by name or in practice) belonged in a state of subjugation to the public interest. Republicanism gained popularity in the English monarchy between three and four decades after the economic theories of mercantilism did. Mercantilism was an economic theory purporting the benefits of emphasizing exports over imports in the balance of trade, and the rise of mercantilism in England saw a justification of private interest in the public sphere both unprecedented and majorly impactful in the years to follow in the form of reidentifying the public interest with the narrow private interest of commercial venturers and evolving to a view of national prosperity as defined by national wealth. A study of the American Revolution makes clear that for the great deal of ideas circulating, material changes were the spark that ignited the flame of commitment to those ideas. Changes in the economic interactions between England and the American colonies encouraged a closer critique of English policy and an indictment of the grander frame that those interactions worked within: mercantilism. Directly prior to the American Revolution, the period after the end of the 7 Years’ War saw a constricting of the colonies via mercantilist means. Colonists reacted by associating mercantilism and the role of private interest it purported with oppression, opting instead to argue far and wide for a policy of free trade that would allow for a free competition of private interests in the marketplace un beholden to the public interest. The beginning of an organized revolutionary effort outlined to colonists how impracticable both mercantilism and free trade were in sustaining the war effort. In response, a great revival of republican ideals commenced.

The oppression of colonists in the thick of major changes in the colonies was channeled as both anger and hope into a massive assertion of rights and liberties as Englishmen and as

universal beings, a movement of ideas notably attractive and unifying in a historical situation where specific agreements were few and far between. Whether the majority of Americans would have eventually agreed on a just rate of taxing tea or stamps is unknowable (though, if 250 years of American politics may offer any insight, unlikely), but by the height of the revolution, the vast majority of Americans could agree on the fact that regardless of this outcome and regardless of the political mechanisms that would allow them to get there, they were owed the right to influence such a decision.

Chapter 1

Mercantilism and English Republicanism, 1660-1760

Over the few centuries prior to the era of the Glorious Revolution, questions and policies of trade had been “gradually working [their] way through the crust of political and religious controversy,” coming at the close of the 17th century to majorly influence international relations in northern and western Europe.⁴ In fact, says historian Charles M. Andrews, “behind every diplomatic, military, and naval operation a trade motive could generally be found.”⁵ After the 1640s, England had suffered a great economic depression; as a means of protecting the nation from foreign exploitation and ruin, England enforced self-serving monopolies on trade in order to cut the flow of wealth out of the nation, contributing a subjection of individual and group interests to the overall economic prosperity of the state. The restrictions on foreign trade posed by these monopolies eventually gave rise to a great wealth of mercantilist literature and thinking. England was unable to divorce itself entirely from the need to trade with foreign countries; in response, a growing population of individuals argued that if the state was unable to divest itself from trade with foreign countries, it may as well organize to control this trade in a way that would most benefit the national wealth. Mercantilists believed that the economic prosperity of the British empire depended not on isolationist practices and the development of a sheltered economy, but necessarily on a perfectly configured ratio of exports to imports, with the scale

⁴ Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, Vol. I., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 319.

⁵ *Ibid*, 319.

tipped clearly toward exports in order to give England the profitable advantage in competition with her neighboring states.⁶ By putting the majority of the governmental energy into promoting exports and cultivating the foreign taste for English products and craftsmanship, England could bolster the national economy with the profits by increasing the national wealth. This balance, the mercantilists believed, relied on a trade policy intervention that focused on international trade and allowed domestic trade to develop as it might. In promoting it, they implored the state to centralize commercial interests. Necessarily, the centralization of English mercantilism that would come in the foreign trade policy of the 1660s-1760s was the product of a great reconfiguration of the role of private interests in the public sphere.

Though there existed in the debates of the mercantilists, as with any debate, an immense collection of disagreements and differing opinions, mercantilist thinking was united in agreement that trade was central to the economic prosperity of the nation and that commercial interest was central to the prosperous character of trade. Their public aim was to promote and enforce a self-sustaining economy for England through becoming a highly competitive source of production for foreign nations, encouraging other countries to rely on English goods while enforcing that reliance domestically.⁷

The critique of the post-Glorious Revolution commercial order espoused by the mercantilists centered on the longing for private trading ventures and commercial competition.⁸ Liberty, to the mercantilists, necessarily relied on the extent to which the commercial trade endeavors of private individuals were permitted by the government. As John Dickinson put it in

⁶ Andrews, *The Colonial Period*, 321.

⁷ Victor L. Johnson, "Fair Trade and Smugglers in Philadelphia, 1754-1763," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 83, no. 2, (1959): 126.

⁸ Matson and Onuf, "Toward a Republican Empire," 502.

Letters to a Farmer From Pennsylvania, “trade and freedom are nearly related to each other.”⁹ A focus on balancing foreign trade would permit, and further, encourage, the engagement of merchants and traders in the marketplace, and therefore expand their ability to introduce new commodities to English consumers.¹⁰ They believed that trade connected the nations of the world and fundamentally transformed the basis on which they were related, tying them together on a scale large enough to minimize their distinctions as separate nations and instead forcing them to relate on what may be construed as an equal playing field. Dudley North in his 1691 essay *Discourses on Trade* draws an analogy between the relationship of nations in the foreign trading marketplace and the relationship between citizens in a country. “The whole world as to trade,” he says, “is but one nation or people, and therein Nations are as persons.”¹¹

The conception of nations so connected by trade serves, too, as a reflection of the natural rights theory posed by John Locke, the author of some of the most influential pieces of Enlightenment rationalist thinking impactful to the thought of colonial leaders. Locke based his theory of governance on the understanding of what he refers to as the State of Nature, a theoretical state of being situated before organization into political society in which people are perfectly free and enjoy a state of pure equality.¹² Individuals in the State of Nature are restrained and liberated by the Law of Nature guided by reason such that no person in the State of Nature should make war upon the life, liberty, health, or possessions of another. Subordination

⁹ Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: Writings From the Pamphlet Debate*, Vol. I, 2 vols. (New York, NY: The Library of America, 2015), 382.

¹⁰ Richard Campbell, *The London Tradesman*, (London: David & Charles, 1969), 284-286.

¹¹ Dudley North, *Discourses Upon Trade*, ed. by Jacob H. Hollander, (Baltimore, MD: The Lord Baltimore Press, 1907), 13.

¹² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, prepared by Rod Hay, (London: McMaster University Archive of the History of Economic Thought, 1823), 117.

and hierarchy of power or right do not exist in the State of Nature, and to harm the natural rights of another is to assert that their life exists at the disposal of other individuals rather than at the disposal of God, by whom Locke supposes we are all created and for whose ends we are meant to serve. Each party seeking to serve and protect their interests (for people, the natural rights of life, liberty, health, and property; for countries, the national wealth and consequently the national power) finds themselves in a state of equality, a combination of right and duty, with other interested parties.

The practice of mercantilism in politics during the late 17th and early to mid-18th centuries bolstered the national wealth and was associated by mercantilists with the general prosperity of the empire. Centralizing the private interests of those with commercial aspirations could improve the material conditions at many levels, most notably for the impoverished class. Even as mercantilism necessarily favored incredibly low wages as a means of cutting costs, its rise in English policy was accompanied by connected social policies, cash allowance systems in particular, meant to provide relief for the poor.¹³ The increasing circulation of wealth brought about by emphasizing exports and therefore emphasizing income stimulated the English economy and provided relief from the poverty that necessarily plagued the region owing partially to the various wars of the previous century. This provided for a context in which mercantilists would continue accumulating massive amounts of capital without worrying about an accompanying rise in social unrest.¹⁴

Mercantilists also claimed that promoting private commercial interests in this way afforded prosperity and power in the international context to England, as private interests were

¹³ Cosma Orsi, "Poverty and Subsistence: The Mercantilist Point of View," *History of Economic Ideas* 21, no. 3 (2013): 20-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

increasingly conceived of as a chief motivation of the interaction between people and their society. One great example of such an argument lies in William Livingston's January 25, 1753 entry into the *Independent Reflector*, a journalistic commentary on the political affairs of England. Here, considering the devaluation of merit and virtue in the English political system, Livingston ponders on the extreme difficulty it poses for the common man to find inspiration outside of his own private interest to promote the wellbeing of his country, though he concedes that all certainly ought to.¹⁵

In republican theory, some certainly had. Persisting in political thought to some extent since its inception, republicanism gained notable popularity in England as a response to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. To call for its implementation as a governmental system was certainly forbidden, assuming that those who purported its ideas would think it adequate enough to support the purposes of the modern state—and yet, owing in part to the fact that England's constitution was widely praised for its republicanism,¹⁶ English intellectuals and societal critics again and again invoked republican ideals in seeking to make positive changes to their monarchy.¹⁷ Republican sentiments regarding the relationship of private interest to public interest as invoked by English thinkers would later provide American colonists, inheritors of this thought tradition, with valid foundations upon which to criticize their contemporary conceptions of the role of private interest in the public sphere.

¹⁵ Scott J. Hammond et. al., *Classics of American Political and Constitutional Thought*, Vol I, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 140.

¹⁶ Paul W. Adams, "Republicanism in Political Rhetoric Before 1776," *Political Science Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (1970): 398-399, doi: 10.2307/2147877.

¹⁷ Gordon S. Wood, "Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 66, no. 1 (April 1990): 14.

The theory of classical republicanism generally posited that those comprising the governing bodies of the republic were to be virtuous individuals who were both men of leisure and men of liberal education.¹⁸ Virtue, in this context, signified that governmental leaders be free from dependence on others as well as from marketplace interests; “Any loss of independence and virtue,” says Gordon S. Wood, “was corruption.”¹⁹ The virtue of a citizenry was realized when those comprising it were willing and able to subject their own private interests to that of the common good; an expression of this in governmental leaders was a willingness to serve in public office without desire of reward or income.

It becomes clear that this set of ideals regarding who amongst the citizenry may stand qualified to serve in public office glaringly privileged those of a certain social and economic class. After all, to be a man of leisure (and only a man; as noted by Wood, women were considered wholly dependent and incapable of possessing the characteristics appropriate of a republican representative)²⁰ was to be an individual able to maintain one’s affairs without the burden of an occupation, and to be a man of liberal education in an era where education was neither compulsory nor accessible was necessarily to be a man of immense privilege.

Republicans well knew that these characteristics also predisposed their potential leaders toward political tyranny and despotism, making a deep concern with the character traits of individuals seeking public office as representatives all the more important.²¹

¹⁸ Wood, “Classical Republicanism,” 23-26.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 23.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 23.

²¹ *Ibid*, 28.

The centralization of the common good in the republic and the submission of private interest was not a burden solely levied on those meant to comprise the elite class of citizens constituting the republic's government. Classical republicanism requires from the people both a sense of public virtue and an eagerness to uphold it at the expense of their prudence, frugality, and industry. In this way, republicanism as a political theory exacts upon the members of the republic the great burden of disinterestedness. The term "disinterested" came to stand in, over the course of 18th century republican thought, for the civic virtue of the people.²² It emphasized linguistically the great threat that private interest posed to the common good and the interest of the public while simultaneously underlining that a good citizen capable of being a representative is necessarily capable of casting aside this private interest.

Mercantilist doctrine was incredibly concerned with the trade policies of the American colonies. In order to achieve the balance of trade so often encouraged by mercantilist thinkers, Britain would have to maintain a higher volume of exports than imports; what better source of exports than the prosperous American colonies? In the coming years, much of English trading policy would be explicitly concerned with the colonies, and many traders in the American colonies would eagerly consume these mercantilist justifications for seeking out personal gain via private trading ventures.²³

Trade in the American colonies was, without a doubt, the subject of strong monopolization by English policy; however, the control exercised over the colonies was not exercised to the same extent or with the same practices in all colonies equally. Generally speaking, British mercantilist policy in the colonial period can be split in genre between policy

²² Wood, "Classical Republicanism," 23-24.

²³ Matson and Onuf. "Toward a Republican Empire," 503.

exercised on the South and plantation colonies, and that exercised over the Middle and New England northern colonies.

The development of the Southern plantation colonies after 1665 was very much in line with the interests and aims of mercantilism; a number of the goods produced natively in the southern colonies provided a great source of income for mainland England, and the southern colonies provided a rich and eager market for English merchants to sell their wares.²⁴ The trade between England and the southern colonies was meticulously balanced, of course in favor of the parent country, and English law affirmed this.²⁵

Owing to the immense source of income originating in the southern colonies, many of the enforcements and new policies of Britain were aimed at their economic control. The Navigation Acts of 1651 and 1660 serve a great expression of this goal, “reserv[ing] all commerce between the colonies and Europe to British citizens (which included therefore the colonists themselves).”²⁶ In other words, this set of acts stipulated that exports from the southern colonies be sold solely in England and excluded foreign merchants from colonial trade. Enforcement of the Navigation Acts in the commercial interest of English mercantilists almost immediately cut the profits of southern planters, incentivizing them to find other areas in the course of production where costs could be cut. An obvious area to cut costs was in paid productive labor, leading to a great uptick in the level of production labor completed by people enslaved to plantation owners.²⁷ All the better did this work out for Britain, for another

²⁴ Johnson, “Fair Trade,” 125.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 126.

²⁶ Larry Sawers, “The Navigation Acts Revisited,” *The Economic History Review* 45, no. 2 (1992): 262-263, doi: 10.2307/2597623.

²⁷ Curtis P. Nettels, “British Mercantilism and the Economic Development of the Thirteen Colonies,” *The Journal of Economic History* 12, no. 2 (1952): 110.

mercantilist policy levied upon the colonies was an English monopolization on the import of enslaved Africans.²⁸

The focus on slavery as a productive force in mercantilist policy was highly reflective of an integral attitude of mercantilism generally: that prosperity could be extracted from an eternal chain of economic subjection and exploitation. The colonies were a productive force serving for the benefit of the English Empire, and the exploited labor of enslaved Africans became a productive force serving for the benefit of both. Mercantilist policies economically advantaged a significant amount of people within the scope of the English Empire; circulating wealth brought about by mercantilist policies offered a greater chance for previously impoverished populations to benefit from the bolstered national wealth, this much is certain. However, mercantilism necessarily built this wealth and prosperity on the backs and out of the labor of an oppressed and enslaved class of Americans.

So too did the Staple Act of 1663 limit the external market goods available to southern colonies, this time through terms stating that southern planters must purchase the majority of their manufactured goods from English markets.²⁹ The Staple Act served two great purposes: the first, to provide security to British manufacturers and ensure their continued existence and prosperity, and the second, to discourage domestic manufacturing by the colonists that could potentially come to rival British manufacturing.

In the Middle and New England northern colonies, on the other hand, the native raw production consisted of only staples that the English mainland already had in abundance.³⁰ In

²⁸ Nettels. "British Mercantilism," 109.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 109.

³⁰ Johnson, "Fair Trade," 126.

contrast with the nature of Southern colonial production, it offered no benefit to the English Crown to circulate an even greater abundance of these northern goods in domestic markets; in fact, to do so could potentially have overwhelmed the domestic markets enough to degrade the profits of English merchants. To take care of the surplus production of the northern colonies, England permitted exportation of these surplus goods to foreign markets.³¹

The English Crown quickly realized the overwhelming privilege that the ability to freely export offered to the northern colonies. The northern colonies had come to trade their goods far and wide; they developed interests and investments in the Wine Islands, Southern Europe, Africa, and the foreign West Indies, amongst other places.³² This trade connection had the unintended consequence of stacking onto the northern colonies an immense mercantile interest—immense enough to develop the trade interests of the northern colonies into being incredibly competitive with the trade interests of England.³³ This configuration proved incredibly unsatisfactory to British mercantilists, who worried that the northern colonies could eventually come to overtake their parent country in terms of competitiveness and ambition in the foreign market.

So too was this situation unsatisfactory to the merchants of the American colonies. During times of war, in which England found itself often during this time, American convoys of colonial-produced goods had no protection on the open water following their trade routes to other markets.³⁴ The disruption of a destroyed or appropriated convoy of goods not only

³¹ Nettels, "British Mercantilism," 111.

³² Johnson, "Fair Trade," 125.

³³ Nettels, "British Mercantilism," 111.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 111.

disastrously deprived the goods' producers of their foreign profit, but deprived American merchants the ability to travel to English markets with the intention of purchasing English goods to resell in the colonies. The absence of English goods encouraged the American colonists to take matters into their own hands and produce the missing goods on their own. The production ability of the northern colonies in these times terrified English mercantilists, for whom the self-sustainability of the colonists proved a "fatal danger,"³⁵ completing the circle of dissatisfaction and contributing to what was an unsatisfactory situation for all parties involved.

Regardless, the sharp rise of mercantilism in the public domain during this era represents a justification of private interests setting the agenda of public politics like never before. Mercantilism allowed the private interests of the few merchants to define the public good itself rather than overtake it; perhaps it was the middle ground offered by mercantilism between a sole focus on the public good purported by republicans and a sole focus on private interest that made it so attractive to England during this time period.

American economic interests were, owing to protective and controlling British colonial policies, intrinsically connected to the health of the English economy and dependent on imperial prosperity. Even so, the benefits received by the colonies within the mercantilist framework could not hide from plain sight the "subordinate, dependent status" of the colonies in relation to the parent state.³⁶ It would be misleading to describe the relationship between the American colonies and England as a wholly parasitic one for the entirety of the colonial period—after all,

³⁵ Nettels, "British Mercantilism," 112.

³⁶ Matson and Onuf, "Toward a Republican Empire," 508.

many colonial industries did benefit, to some extent, from the exclusive trade policies conferred onto them by English mercantilism.³⁷

Of course, the dependent status of the colonies was no mistake—that England could exploit its unique ability to cut foreign imports by supplying the mainland with goods from the controlled colonies and giving English merchants an undepletable supply of customers was a key prop-up for mercantilism’s success. England used the colonies in this mercantilist framework to the advantage of the mainland empire at every corner; in exporting from England, they treated the colonies as a foreign nation, and in importing from the colonies, as a domestic region. New industries within the colonies were actively suppressed by England with the intention of supplying the void of goods with English manufacturing in order to add to the national wealth and increase England’s power in the international market. As William Wood explained in 1718, the American plantations are a “vast Advantage to us in the *General Ballance of Trade*...since *they work for us, and their Treasure centers all here.*”³⁸

At this point, American colonists who would later become revolutionary leaders saw everywhere in the history and political thought of the 17th and early 18th century English Empire increasing justifications for private interest in the framework of public politics. As the national wealth grew, so too did the confidence in the association of commercial interests with the public interest. The effect that this would have on colonists became clearer as anti-mercantilist sentiment grew in the colonies. Though strains of opposition to mercantilism rose and fell throughout this period, mercantilism was generally accepted and remained unchallenged on a grand scale until the postwar period of the 1760s.

³⁷ Nettels, “British Mercantilism,” 111.

³⁸ William A. Wood, *A Survey of Trade in Four Parts, Together With Considerations on Our Money and Bullion*. (London: J. Walthoe, 1722), 135.

Chapter 2

Anti-Mercantilism: Locke and Free Trade

Between 1660 and 1760 when mercantilism was a popularly accepted vein in which to practice English politics, many arguments were yet made against it. Opposition was distributed across many types of political groups who generally did not favor the balance-of-trade theory purported by mercantilism, calling instead for freer allowances of trade.³⁹ At various times over the century, these oppositionist arguments garnered enough recognition and support to become notably influential. Even so, the period between 1660 and 1760 never saw opposition to mercantilism nor to the construction of commercial interest as a stand-in for public interest gain the amount of support needed to pose a real challenge.⁴⁰

However, as mercantilist policies became increasingly burdensome to the American colonies following the 7 Years' War's end in 1763, colonists became much more susceptible to arguments against it. Acts and laws that further restricted and controlled colonial trade were passed in order to help England recover the war debt by turning the colonies into a more profitable asset. To the colonists, however, these restrictive regulations represented violations of their rights to liberty and property by the English government. Through the language of Locke and arguments of free trade, American colonists came to criticize increasingly controlling mercantilist practices in the 18th century.

³⁹ Jonathan Barth, "Reconstructing Mercantilism: Consensus and Conflict in British Imperial Economy in the Seventeenth Centuries," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2016): 277, doi: 10.5309/willmaryquar.73.2.0257.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 277.

John Locke's affinity for liberty and individual rights was doubtlessly popular among colonial thinkers. Though impacted heavily by the entire wealth of Enlightenment rationalist thinking, no other piece of writing presented as centrally to colonists' arguments as Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. Here, Locke puts forth an exhaustive theory on the origins of political power and the origins of legitimate government that proved incredibly useful to colonial thinkers in criticizing the Crown and the increasingly oppressive practices of mercantilism. The language of rights and freedom and liberty is present everywhere in these political pamphlets; at times, references to Locke are somewhat misleading in the same way that references to the political thought of antiquity were. What follows is an explanation of Locke as those colonists who read him carefully would espouse.

Remarkable about Locke's theory and significant in considering its attractiveness to revolutionary colonists is the fact that, as previously mentioned, Locke derives natural rights from universal principles in the form of God as a higher power rather than from a tangible political or social constitution. In fact, the concept of rights reevaluated through this liberal lens proved very attractive to both the American colonists as extensions of England and to the proper mainland English people themselves. Though the Magna Carta of 1215 explicitly confined the exercise of government to the written law of the land, these practices were understood not as extensions from any universal principle or ultimate Truth, but as provisions provided for and thereafter protected by the letter of the Magna Carta. Locke challenged this for his own purposes in his own time, and the colonists found themselves benefitting from his roadmap of universal law.

Locke claims that it is from natural reason which imbues in us the ability to make use of the world for our best advantage that the right of property ownership, the protection of which is

one of the chief ends of government, takes root. In the undeveloped State of Nature, natural limitations dictate that individuals may appropriate from the world given to humankind in common only as much as they can use without spoilage.⁴¹ To rectify this limitation placed by nature on the appropriation of property, humankind creates money and sets agreements on monetary exchange.⁴² As money symbolically replaces the material goods individuals wish to appropriate from nature, its invention rationalizes the hoarding of materials and gives rise to vast inequalities of property ownership; because he has already asserted such ownership to be a natural right, Locke's theory justifies excessive accumulation. In this stage, property relations become more confusing, and the defensive concern with self-interest makes it difficult to rationally determine when and how individuals have infringed upon each other's natural rights. This confusion, paired with the desire of property-holders to protect their natural right to property in the face of growing inequality, leads to the development of and entrance into a civil society.

Reflections of this Lockean State of Nature are overwhelmingly present in the pamphlets and political writings of colonial thinkers, even utilized by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense* to found his more controversial ideas on the nature of government. Regarding the State of Nature, Paine claims that individuals united in a State of Nature very reminiscent of Locke's conception will be most concerned with organizing a civil society and that "a thousand motives will excite them thereto," a primary excitement being that "the strength of one man is so unequal to his

⁴¹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, prepared by Rod Hay, (London: McMaster University Archive of the History of Economic Thought, 1823), 117.

⁴² *Ibid*, 120.

wants, and his mind so unfitted for perpetual solitude, that he is soon obliged to seek assistance and relief of another, who in his turn requires the same.”⁴³

Revolutionary as well is Locke’s theory of how such a civil society comes to form in the first place. He posits that the people, so interested in the protection of their property, combine their individual powers to vest them in a commonwealth (the English translation of the Latin *res publica*, or republic, as noted by author M.N.S. Sellers).⁴⁴ The commonwealth itself is born of the consent of the people, all unifying their individual shares of political power to serve the best interests of all, and the protection of the natural rights to life, liberty, and property is the chief end of this commonwealth.

Key among the consequences of Locke’s theories is a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between the King or sovereign and their subjects. Whereas previous theories of government placed the people in a state of divine subjection to the authority of the king, Locke emphasized that the power of any legitimate government first originated as the power of the people, unified and transferred to a governing body in common when the people choose to form a political society. Should the government put itself into a “State of War” with the people by transgressing their natural rights, this power is therefore forfeit, and the people are therefore free from the bonds they put themselves into in the compact out of the State of Nature, and the power they vested in the government returns to their hands.⁴⁵

This aspect of Locke’s theory is perhaps among the most relevant and influential when dealing with the organization of the American revolution. Locke’s theory empowered the

⁴³ Thomas Paine, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, prepared by Moncure Daniel Conway (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), 70.

⁴⁴ M. N. S. Sellers, *Republican Legal Theory: The History, Constitution and Purposes of Law in a Free State*. (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 17.

⁴⁵ Locke, *Two Treatises*, 202.

common people against the British Crown and legitimized their claims to reparation. Not only did this give the people ammunition to fight for their rights within the context of English law and as subjects to the British empire, but also legitimized their struggle as human beings who maintain a claim to natural rights by definition. Locke's theory outlines the right of the people to rebel against their government should they find in its practices a breach of their natural rights, around which Locke's theory supposes government is organized in the first place.

Worth pointing out from Locke's theory on the relationship between the people and their commonwealth is the immense power he relegates to the consent of the people; that no governance should be exercised over the people without their consent proved incredibly important for American colonial thinkers both in arguing for their right under English law to be governed by the same laws that applied to English people of the mainland and in arguing against arbitrary governance over them should the English no longer consider the colonies a part of the empire proper. Ebenezer Baldwin, in a pamphlet meant to provide information about the concerns of many American colonists regarding the intentions of the English government and the danger they perceived their liberty to be in, argues very much in the vein of Locke that the compact of civil government is undertaken with one intention being the advancement of protection for individuals' property. However, he says, the English Crown transgresses this protection of property in addition to the law of the English Constitution when they entrust in the King the power to levy taxes on the colonies.⁴⁶

Locke's conception of natural rights offered, in theory at least, an additional avenue for colonists to criticize British imposition in the colonies by way of anti-slavery sentiment. Locke posits, of course, that individuals retain a special group of inalienable rights whose violation,

⁴⁶ Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: Writings From the Pamphlet Debate*, Vol. II, 2 vols. (New York, NY: The Library of America, 2015), 324.

both in the State of Nature and in civil society, brings about major consequences for the violator. Slavery is a fundamental violation of the natural right to liberty, or freedom from the dominion of any other person's will.

Though interpersonal controversies implicate Locke in a litany of dealings with regard to his profiting off of slave-trading companies,⁴⁷ it proves safe to assume that the majority of colonists likely did not look far enough into the details of John Locke as an individual man to know or understand these controversies that we as contemporary scholars have the luxury of considering in depth. They preferred instead to regard Locke as the author of the roadmap they identified in *Second Treatise* and a major contributor toward the Enlightenment Rationalist thinking they were so fond of.

Arguments in favor of slavery were the same arguments put into action in favor of absolute monarchy; in this context, pro-slavery advocates claimed to identify in enslaved Africans unique traits that they believed could somehow justify their subjection to the wills of individual people. Montesquieu, for example, put forth the claim that Anglo-American chattel slavery was uniquely justified owing to a litany of qualities unique to African people.⁴⁸ Of course, Montesquieu's justifications stem from deeply racist beliefs and attitudes, but would not have to originate in such an explicitly bigoted place to be at odds with Locke's natural rights theory; to follow through on the claim that an individual may for whatever reason be the subject of another's tyranny would be to violate their natural rights and would serve as an affront to God,

⁴⁷ For more information on this controversy, see: William Uzgalis, "John Locke, Racism, Slavery, and Indian Lands," *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race* (2017); Holly Brewer, "Slavery, Sovereignty, and 'Inheritable Blood': Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery," *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (2017): 1038-1078.

⁴⁸ Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu*, (London: T. Evans and W. Davis, 1777): 270-271.

whether the end of that violation was the absolute tyranny of the sovereign or the absolute tyranny of the individual.

Decades of mercantilist colonial policies and the English monopoly on colonial slavery relegated the colonies to a state of economic dependence on slavery. Mercantilism and the institution of slavery were indivisible from each other as the latter had proven itself an extensive source of free income for the former. As free American colonists came over time to feel the weight of oppressive mercantilist policies, the rhetoric of slavery was appropriated to describe the relationship between the English Empire and the American colonies.⁴⁹ Colonial thinkers did see themselves as victims of restricted liberty and freedom, the consequence of the mercantilist tendency to follow through on any venture with the chance of turning a penny in favor of the national wealth. Instead of recognizing the hypocrisy of this comparison and popularly rallying behind the expulsion of slavery from the colonies, however, colonial leaders took advantage of widespread fear of British tyranny to convince the public that the English were enlisting both enslaved Africans and Native Americans in the effort to subdue the colonies.⁵⁰ A significant contemporary movement in the study of the American Revolution points toward the central role of racial prejudice and the construction of the white identity in culminating support for the American Revolution, particularly in the use of the imagery of slaves and Natives as British-allied “boogymen.”

Locke’s theories on the origin and legitimate extent of government would prove incredibly useful as English mercantilist policies regarding the colonies intensified. Colonists

⁴⁹ David Waldstreicher, *Slavery’s Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 31-34.

⁵⁰ Robert G. Parkinson, “Chapter 3: Merciless Savages, Domestic Insurrectionists, and Foreign Mercenaries,” *The Common Cause*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), especially 229-231.

came through the late colonial period to understand more sharply the flaws in the association of commercial interests with the public interest and the centralization of the narrow interests of the merchant class in setting the agenda for what would constitute the common good. Even as it was clear throughout the period that the American colonies were subordinate to England, it was not of dire concern until much later in the colonial period that England-centric mercantilist policies were effectively slowing the economic development of the colonies and serving reflections of a flawed relationship between the King and his subjects. The English monopoly on the Southern plantation colonies prevented planters from engaging in a competitive market and denied them the opportunity to appropriate their manufactured goods from cheaper foreign markets.⁵¹ The result was a steep curbing of the development of domestic American manufacturing, and an indictment of the practices of the English government that would define the era.

The colonial economies grew steadily into the regulations passed by Parliament to limit them, but encountered a deep tension at the critical point where regulation effectively served as the only barrier to further growth. It had been made clear early on in the colonial period that American goods could compete in foreign markets—abundantly so, if England’s strict regulatory reaction to their successes were to serve as any indicator. If England would set trade free and do away with the self-serving regulations regarding America, colonial markets could reach their full maturity and provide benefits to America that were as yet being pooled into the English national wealth. Yet, if England was to set trade free, the colonies could come quickly to overtake England in the foreign market and challenge its mother country’s foreign trade power. Thus, a combination of the industrial maturation of the colonies and the growing clashes between the

⁵¹ Nettels, “British Mercantilism,” 109.

best interest of colonial markets and English desires gave new enthusiasm and credibility to the arguments of free trade.

The period following the end of the 7 Years' War and preceding the beginning of the revolutionary war effort saw a post-war economic depression that further underlined the American need to control its own trade as well as a worsening of the conditions posed to colonists by mercantilist policies. The Molasses Act, meant to curb American consumption of French sugar island products in favor of British sugar island products, was amended by the Sugar Act, an act which lowered the 6 pence-per-gallon tariff to a 3 pence-per-gallon fee.⁵² This act famously appeared to American colonists to be a tax levied with the intention of English profit, and the English justifications for it support this conclusion. Gordon S. Wood, for example, explains in his introduction of Thomas Whately's pamphlet *The Regulations Made Lately With Respect to the Colonies Considered* that the 6-pence tariff imposed by the Molasses Act encouraged privateering and smuggling and deprived Britain of both money gained by the paying of that tariff and income gained by colonists purchasing British products instead.⁵³ To turn the tariff into something resembling a tax would divert profit back to England instead of to her rivals in the foreign marketplace.

Wood was precisely right about the consequences of the Molasses Act, yet American colonists would widely disagree with the solution that Whately attempts to justify in this pamphlet. Having only a virtual representation in Parliament, they believed that the lowering of this fee to compete with smuggling bribes and divert income to England rather than to foreign marketplaces too closely resembled a tax, for which the colonists legendarily had no

⁵² Allen S. Johnson, "The Passage of the Sugar Act," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1959): 511.

⁵³ Wood. *Pamphlet Debate* Vol. I, 157.

representation to oppose. Thus ensued a grand fight over whether Americans were citizens or subjects of the English Crown, what rights the British governance had over them in either case, and what rights the American colonists had against England.

The fight over the Sugar Act of 1764 represents a much larger movement of the post-war period in tune with the economic depression coming on the heels of the 7 Years' War's end.⁵⁴ As generations of mercantilist politicians serving in Parliament and a grand focus in England on mercantilist policies had generated a deeply entrenched dependence of colonial prosperity and general wellbeing on the status of the English economy, the economic depression following England's closing of the war was experienced on both sides of the Atlantic. Already dire economic conditions paired with new policies highly reminiscent of taxation worsened American tensions with English governance and pushed Americans further away from mercantilism.

The period after the close of the 7 Years' War and preceding the beginning of the revolution saw a major uptick in criticisms of both merchants and mercantilist policies. The anonymous writer "Cato," one of the most influential writers on the colonial plight against Britain, stated in a 1765 pamphlet in no uncertain terms that merchants are, by definition, incapable of contributing to genuine questions and concerns having to do with trade and the development of commercial manufacturing in the colonies. This is because, as "Cato" says, merchants are "so engrossed by the Gain or Loss of their own particular Branches, that it is impossible for them to perceive the Hurt or Benefit of the whole Body."⁵⁵ A centralization of the merchant interest to "Cato" and his ideological proponents did not equate to a centralization of

⁵⁴ Willard L. Thorp, "Postwar Depressions," *The American Economic Review* 30, no. 5 (1941): 352.

⁵⁵ Wood, *Pamphlet Debate* Vol. I. 36.

the public interest; instead, “Cato” argues, they are not only separate entities in themselves, but the public interest is in fact damaged by the commercial interest.

One side-effect of the success of mercantilism in encouraging moderate consumption was the new exposure American colonists gained to items previously considered luxuries, and the growing dependence on them fostered by thwarting English trade restrictions. Products like spice, for which the colonists’ consumption was criticized in England, became a necessity.⁵⁶ The exposure of colonists to foreign goods through England gave them a taste for the possibilities in a world of circulating commodities forever beyond reach owing to the regulations and rules posed by paternalistic trade restriction; it was of course only natural that colonists would eventually call for the relaxation of such regulations. Colonists were eager to realize in practice Locke’s justifications of the accumulation of property and wealth, and American manufacturing and production had proven their potential to be a prosperous source of national wealth.

Contributing as well to the mounting popularity of anti-mercantilist ideology was the inability of colonists, after a certain amount of time with mounting trade restrictions, to pay for English imports via legal means. At every corner, English mercantilist policies restricted the profits of American industries. In the north, trade patterns with the French Caribbean island markets had been officially halted since the steep tariffs imposed on foreign sugar, rum, and molasses by the Molasses Act of 1733, which effectively forced colonists to pay between 25%-30% more for British products.⁵⁷ Prior to the Molasses Act, American colonists sold their surplus staples in the French sugar island markets in exchange for purchasing molasses.⁵⁸ It was the

⁵⁶ Matson and Onuf, “Toward a Republican Empire,” 510.

⁵⁷ Johnson, “Fair Trade,” 126-127.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 127.

profit from these sales that had provided the northern colonies with the needed financial resources to buy finished English products that British mercantilism expected them to buy; the inability of colonists to pay England steep tariffs for importing from the French sugar islands disrupted the clear-cut exchange pattern that had already been forged.

The response to this transparently prohibitory tariff was to relocate the pattern of trade to the outside of English law. Colonists resorted to smuggling in order to provide themselves with the needed profits for their surpluses as well as to access products of the sugar islands at a cost much lower than the British islands could provide.⁵⁹ It was most often the case that smugglers' bribe fees were astronomically lower than the tariff fees imposed by the English—according to Whately, these bribes could at times cost as little as 3 half-pence per gallon, far more attractive than the English 6 pence tariff.⁶⁰

Smugglers, though they had existed for virtually the entire history of trade regulation, became a crutch in this specific time period, and were an obvious population of free trade supporters. Providing the only affordable option for colonists to access foreign goods, smugglers held a deep private interest in free trade policy that would legalize their trade ventures, legitimizing their occupation and enriching them. It was firmly in their interest to sell the idea of free trade to the American colonists, who were increasingly expressing disdain at mounting mercantilist policies. “Cato” reflected many of their sentiments when he stated that “an exclusive Trade preserved by Force against the Inclination of the People concerned, cannot be carried very far, and cannot continue very long.”⁶¹ Already susceptible to anti-mercantilist thought, American

⁵⁹ Johnson, “Fair Trade,” 127.

⁶⁰ Wood, *Pamphlet Debate* Vol. I, 202.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 31.

colonists were supplied by free trade arguments the necessary tools to formulate an organized and sharpened argument for tearing down restrictive mercantilist policies.

Many free traders argued that to set trade free would produce a distribution of wealth and prosperity most in line with the public interest. The domination of private interests in the marketplace, some would argue, would foster a distribution of society's stock reflecting the best interests of all.⁶² In free trade rhetoric, the public interest would no longer be defined through an identification of commercial interests as the public good, as in mercantilism, nor through a complete subjection of private interests as in classical republicanism; instead, the prevailing private interests in the unrestricted and unregulated free marketplace would define the public interest.

The endorsement of private interest offered by mercantilist pamphleteers appears almost cautious in the face of these flagrantly self-serving arguments offered by free traders. Mercantilism expressed the familiar republican notion of a clear public interest while challenging the idea that it could only be realized through a subjection of private interests, instead identifying the private interest of merchants as the key to realizing the public interest. Free trade, on the other hand, defined the public interest as the sum of a competition of private interests in a free, uninhibited marketplace.

⁶² Society of Arts, Agriculture, and Oeconomy of New York, "The Commercial Conduct of the Province of New-York Considered, and the True Interest of That Colony Attempted to be Shewn," *A Letter to the Society of Arts, Agriculture, and Oeconomy: [Two Lines From Aurengzebe]*, (Oxford Text Archive, 2005, <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12024/N08289>), 11-12, 18, 20.

Chapter 3

The Close of the 7 Years' War: Reigniting Republicanism

Free trade had gained colonial support as a response to the negative effects of mercantilism on the colonies; thus, the beginning of the organized revolutionary effort necessarily grappled directly with these ideas first. Free trade arguments transparently aimed to permit any individual willing and able to engage in commerce to do so in the pursuit of their private interests without the burden of rules or regulations. American colonists had already seen the way that free traders operated in times of political crisis throughout the 7 Years' War and understood by and large that the license to pursue self-interest at any cost to the public good was incompatible with the personal and collective sacrifices required to sustain a war effort. Free trade offered a way for colonists to critique mercantilism as it became more and more associated with oppression; it was attractive because of the function it served in the context of this time period. Even so, it was a private-interest-serving, costly, and inevitably short-lived philosophy of trade that came under heavy scrutiny as the American revolutionary war effort picked up.

By what medium did colonists come to reject free trade ideals in favor of a sustainable war effort? They had inherited great traditions of political thought and had amongst them various ideas and responses to the ideological movements of the time. However, prevailing above all in the rejection of free trade's centralization of private interests in the political sphere was a plea, to some extent, for a return to the classical republican subjection of the private interest to the public interest and a pedestalization of disinterestedness. Indivisible from revolutionary thought is the ideology of oppositionism—and who better to look to than those who emphasized republican

ideals in response to previous ills of the English empire? Their inheritance of classical republican thought encouraged American revolutionaries to reject these self-serving, private-interest-centered ideals in a time of such immense collective need. The republican undercurrent of their thought undermined the era of focusing on centralizing self-interest that free traders had introduced.

Revolutionary literature contains a volume of references and appeals to traditions of ancient political thought. Some of these references can be attributed to the focus of colonial education, in which the classics and ancient history were subjects of major interest, in combination with the fact that many pamphleteers and colonial leaders were educated to some degree.⁶³ Despite this education, displays of classical literature and theory within their arguments were, at many times, incredibly deceptive. For many of them, their knowledge was extensive but superficial; in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Bailyn describes their presentations of ancient thinkers as a sort of window dressing to their arguments intended to increase the weight of their claims in the eyes of their readers.⁶⁴

It is true without a doubt that many colonial thinkers were guilty of attributing concepts or ideas to the wrong authors to further their own arguments. A great example of this sort of misrepresentation lies in John Adams's "Novanglus," a pamphlet addressed to the people of the Massachusetts colony in 1775, in which Adams claims that the principles of the revolutionary effort were an expression of the principles of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, among others.⁶⁵ The

⁶³ Mary A. Yost, "Classical Studies in American Colonial Schools 1635-1776," *The Classical Outlook* 54, no. 4 (1976): 40-43; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1967), 30.

⁶⁴Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 30.

⁶⁵ Charles F. Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations*, Vol. IV, (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 15.

principles he references are plainly the principles of Locke: that people are rendered equal by nature, that the sovereign derives authority from the consent of the people, and that the people maintain the right to reclaim this power should they ever find themselves in a situation where it is used against their best interests. Even a rudimentary reading of Plato's *Republic* illustrates how gravely misguided Adams's association of such liberal principles with ancient political theory is. Nevertheless, the presence of such names stood to gain his writing credibility amongst educated readers.

Other more genuine and logically consistent appeals to the ancients can be attributed to the failure of English law and politics to provide colonists with a basis on which to assert and demand the recognition of their rights. Assertions of the rights of American colonists as Englishmen can be found in abundance within the literature of the revolution, and yet, appeals to the Crown for the protection of these rights were woefully unsuccessful. Colonists turned toward the universal principles of the ancients and a "law which transcended all human contrivances"⁶⁶ when attempts to justify their rights within English contrivances failed them.

Colonial thinkers had on hand a rather extensive knowledge of the history of republican thought owed to the centuries-long influence it had on European politics,⁶⁷ made apparent in appeals to Roman republican history within the argumentative writing of this era's pamphleteers. Colonial leaders writing on behalf of the ideals of the revolutionary movement appropriated the language and, at times, names of Roman republicans for this very purpose in order to invoke the sense that revolutionaries were the inheritors of the antiquated tradition. This tactic held a not-insignificant amount of power in terms of inspiring and imbuing revolutionaries with the idea

⁶⁶ Charles F. Mullett, "Classical Influences on the American Revolution," *The Classical Journal* 35, no. 2 (1939): 95.

⁶⁷Sellers, *Legal Theory*, 17.

that their plight was an extension of the plight of the Roman senate against Julius Caesar and his successors, a plight against the scourge of despotism.⁶⁸ The great American diplomat Josiah Quincy, in a memoir published by his son, explicitly asked of the colonists: “Is not Britain to America what Caesar was to Rome?”⁶⁹

Indeed, the reverence of a number of founding fathers for the writers of old was, to an extent, a product of their education on the political demise of Rome, opposition to the despotism that Julius Caesar represented to them, and their identification of his tyrannical government with that of the British Crown. William Henry Drayton, a colonial planter and lawyer angry at the exercise of certain laws over American colonists that were not being exercised over members of the parent country, provides a great example of an appeal to this common displeasure at Roman tyranny. Angry at what he perceived to be a vesting of power by the English parliament into a King who acted “Sovereign to Magna Charta,” or beyond the law, Drayton draws a parallel with the extension by the Roman Legislature of unconstitutional power unto Julius Caesar, claiming this extension of authority as a grand facilitator of Caesar’s overthrowing of the Roman constitution and effecting of military despotism.⁷⁰

It is in this vein that John Dickinson, former member of the Pennsylvania Assembly, compared the ruin of liberty in the Roman empire to its ruin within the colonies. Serving as orator of the response in the colonies to the imposition of the Townshend Act, Dickinson raised alarms at the potential that, having the Townshend Act as a precedent, “a new servitude may be

⁶⁸ Sellers, *Legal Theory*, 16.

⁶⁹ Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Josiah Quincy Jun. of Massachusetts: By His Son, Josiah Quincy*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Cummings, Hilliard, & Company, 1825), 435.

⁷⁰ Wood, *Pamphlet Debate* Vol. II, 151.

slipped upon us, under the sanction of usual and respectable terms.”⁷¹ This “servitude” he referenced was plainly the imposition of taxes on the colonies for the sole purpose of raising revenue, with the “respectable terms” being its disguise as simply another tariff meant to influence the flow of trade. It is by the weight of this servitude so disguised that the grand Roman despots ruined the liberty of Rome, and it is by the weight of this servitude that Dickinson believed James II was attempting to “deceive the dissenters into destruction.”⁷²

There exist countless other references to Caesar, the Roman despots, and the grand fall of true republicanism in Rome within the political pamphlets of the revolutionary era, and everywhere a sense that the American colonists had an opportunity to avenge the liberty so destroyed by the compounding mistakes of Rome’s republic. These parallels drawn between the fall of the Roman Empire and the plight of America were meant, in part, to garner support for what began as an attempt to work within the system of English politics to liberate America from the increasingly oppressive policies levied upon trade. By appealing to the fall of an ancient empire so interesting to and revered by the educated class of American colonists and explicitly drawing lines between the fall of Rome to the despotism of Caesar and the fall of America to the despotism of the English Crown, revolutionaries wanted Americans to “[see] themselves as the farmer-republicans who sought to prevent the establishment of Caesarism.”⁷³ They attempted to imbue in the thought of American colonists an image of the revolutionary movement as the inheritor of the fight for true republican ideals lost by the Romans to military despotism and a gross abuse of powers.

⁷¹ Wood, *Pamphlet Debate* Vol. I, 385.

⁷² *Ibid*, 385.

⁷³ Mullett, “Classical Influences,” 96.

For as much as colonial pamphleteers liked to reference the fall of Rome, the actual practices of the Roman Empire were of much less concern, and the hold that they had on colonial thinkers was by no means absolute nor consistent. The seeming obsession with Rome in the writings of many colonists was much less about the empire's actual governmental setup, exemplified by a demonstrably miniscule number of positive references to it, and more about the awe-inspiring ideals supposedly serving as its end. One of many reasons for this lies in the unavoidable fact that Rome ultimately did fall to political despotism, even if it survived a relatively great deal of time beforehand.⁷⁴ It should be noted that for as often as colonists referenced ancient Roman institutions and the spirit of the empire when talking about the current state and potential future of America, key founding fathers such as John Adams and James Otis were much more keen on the real political setup of the ancient Greek city-states in any case.⁷⁵

Thomas Hobbes, interestingly enough, seems to hit upon one of the major issues with pre-Enlightenment republican theory directly in *Leviathan*. He saw in the political theory of republicanism something he considered a dark threat to settled institutions; though he was specifically referencing the institution of divine political right and arbitrary authority (both ideas that colonists would very gladly threaten), his claim that political actors raised with education about the republican doctrine of Cicero and other Roman thinkers had appropriated the habit of "...licentious[ly] controlling the actions of the Sovereigns; and again of controlling those controllers..."⁷⁶ references the perception that Roman republicanism encouraged a domination of the people over the government regardless of who comprised it or the form it took. His critique

⁷⁴Sellers, *Legal Theory*, 18.

⁷⁵ Mullett, "Classical Influences," 92-104.

⁷⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Hobbes's Leviathan: With an Essay by the Late W. G. Pogson Smith*, prepared by W. G. Pogson Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 166.

of republicanism is transparently based upon his distaste for any governmental form not practicing monarchy, though he does offer a valuable criticism of the tendency of the “popular” governments of the ancient world to consider their people any freer than those in a monarchy. Regardless, his critique here represents what was a problem of theory for colonists: the idea that the republican form of governance was too weak to counterbalance what would otherwise be the passing passions of an organized people to undermine the government on otherwise illegitimate grounds.

Luckily, the great reignition of interest in republican theory brought about by the Italian Renaissance encouraged new developments in republican thought more becoming of the age. Thus began the gradual birth of a new form of republicanism known now as the classical republicanism that colonists particularly favored.⁷⁷ Built into this classical republicanism was a direct response to the problem Hobbes proved so fond of espousing with regard to the republicanism of old. To the problem of republicanism as a theory calling for the domination of the people over the sovereign(s), classical republicanism reworked the relationships comprising the spiderweb of the republic and called for a full subjection of the individual interest to the betterment of the community.

As Montesquieu diagnosed in his very influential 1747 book *The Spirit of the Laws*, and as many key colonial leaders would agree, a main contributing factor to the fall of Rome’s republican form of government is that the republic became so large in geographical size that its form of governance could simply no longer support it, leading to a sharp uptake in the corruption of political mechanisms.⁷⁸ Montesquieu, for as many criticisms were levied at him for his strict

⁷⁷ Wood, “Classical Republicanism,” 19.

⁷⁸ Montesquieu, *Complete Works*, 61, 78, especially 157.

and at times painfully detailed theories on best practice for a republican government, presents a description of the republicanism so interesting to members of the English Empire on both sides of the Atlantic both unprecedented and exceptionally organized. An avid reader (and at times hypocritical follower)⁷⁹ of Cicero's works, Montesquieu's definition of the republic notably expanded to include governing systems in which "a small part of the people...have seized sovereign power for themselves."⁸⁰ He presents a sort of guide for weighing the positives and negatives of monarchy and republicanism, with a harsh rejection of despotism as a style of governance, and describes in detail the forces that held the societies in each type of government together.

For colonial thinkers like Thomas Paine, the legitimate end of republicanism conceived in this new sense (at times referred to as "civic humanism") was a government focused on the common good and the balance of individual and communal interests. Built into the theory of republicanism was a stark resistance to absolute monarchy and the exercise of a single political will over all others; in its stead, as historian David Waldstreicher would say, classical republicanism replaced the form of governance by which kings exercise their will on all subjects with one in which the political powers of a master class are upraised while a place for slavery and other kinds of dependency are retained.⁸¹

The elite class purported by classical republicans was not arbitrary, nor was it necessarily hereditary. Combining classical republican sentiments with his Lockean ideas regarding liberty, Thomas Paine would elaborate in *Common Sense* to ponder on the hereditary character both of

⁷⁹ M. N. S. Sellers, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: Republicanism, Liberalism and the Law*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press LTD, 1998), 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 61.

⁸¹ Waldstreicher, *Slavery's Constitution*, 18.

the Peers who he believed expressed the remnants of aristocracy and of the King who he believed expressed the remnants of monarchy. He considered the English Constitution as placing both powers “independent of the people,” rendering them therefore non-contributory toward the freedom of the State in a constitutional sense.⁸² Paine explicitly contrasts these two hereditary-focused governmental systems enshrined in the English constitution with the third power of republican materials founded in and reliant upon the common people, claiming that this third republican power was the only of the three upon which protection of the freedoms of the English rested.⁸³ The distinction away from a law-enshrined hereditary inheritance of privileged status in the political aspect of society stood contrary to the practices of English governance overall and heightened the revolutionary character of republicanism both as a set of values and as a governmental practice.

Setting aside the valid problems associated with a purely republican form of governance, this particular inheritance from English political thought gave colonists the necessary context in which to consider the possibilities of government organized around the common good in which private interests were subjected to the public interest rather than reconfigured to express it. The idea of representation so central to republican theory became a widely shared political aspiration whose absence was felt sorely by American colonists, who would of course later proclaim the injustice of taxation absent representation in parliament. In the history of the decay of the Roman Empire, many thinkers identified analogies for the political atmosphere of their contemporary times, and found in republicanism an answer, however partial, to their problems.

⁸² Paine, *Writings Of*, 72.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 72.

Chapter 4

A View of Private Interest Fit For Revolution

If the rejection of free trade doctrine was anything, it was not a reactionary measure; by the time arms were drawn in support of the revolution, colonists were no longer advocating for a return to the less restrictive mercantilist policies present prior to the closing of the 7 Years' War in 1763, nor for a reconciliation of the American colonies with the British Empire founded on mutual agreement. Those arguments had retained a much more notable sense of importance and credibility prior to England's attempt at exercising further mercantilist control in the post-war depression of the mid-1760s, yet it was this constriction of mercantilist policy that gave rise to a new era of free trade arguments that irreconcilably pushed colonists from mercantilism. The finality of the revolutionary effort is made very clear in Paine's *Common Sense* with the assertion that "Arms as the last resource decide the contest; the appeal was the choice of the King, and the continent has accepted the challenge."⁸⁴ Even if colonists realized that free trade was not a sustainable answer, its premises had imbued in them the irreversible identification of mercantilism with oppression.

The traditions of thought inherited and exercised by American colonists had come to include an irremovable emphasis on commercial prosperity; any ideas about the role of interest and public virtue would necessarily require a recognition of mercantilist and free trade practices. At the outset of the revolution when colonists were desperately trying to figure out both how to sustain the war effort and how to envision the new nation they were creating, they needed to find

⁸⁴ Paine, *Writings Of*, 84.

a way to coordinate commercial prosperity and their republican ideals successfully. What followed from this realization was nothing short of a strategic reorganization of classical republican thought, mercantilist ideas, and free trade arguments. The solution was based on two widely shared agreements: that unbridled self-interest would “subvert military mobilization and civilian morale,”⁸⁵ and that American colonists would find long-term success if they could square sacrificing personal interests in the present in order to enjoy private interest when the nation’s individuality was secured by the revolution.

The new uptake of the view that self-interest would jeopardize the emerging American national interest was based on a transparently republican interpretation of American patriotism and an emerging republican sense of nationalism. Calls for patriotism mirrored republican ideals in the necessary self-denial and sacrifice with which individuals were burdened; as classical republicanism called for disinterestedness in the citizenry out of a shared reverence for virtue and the public interest, so patriotism called for a tampering of private interests in order to promote and protect an emerging national interest.

Appeals to American patriotism and the popular support of patriotic, self-denying ideals allowed the passing of a number of non-importation agreements regarding Great Britain. The first rounds occurred early in the period following the close of the 7 Years’ War, triggered by the implementation of the 1765 Stamp Act. Evidenced by an anonymously authored yet widely popular newspaper article published by *The Philadelphia Gazette* on October 31, 1765, this agreement was initially cultivated in a general meeting of merchants in New York with regard to colonial trade with Great Britain.⁸⁶ The resolutions directed merchants to halt all exports to

⁸⁵ Matson and Onuf, “Toward a Republican Empire,” 514.

⁸⁶ “No Stamped Paper To Be Had,” *The Philadelphia Gazette*, (October 31, 1765, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.34604500/>).

England and refrain from buying products shipped from Britain, binding merchants' dealings and making a resumption of trade contingent on the repeal of the Stamp Act.⁸⁷ Boston and Philadelphia soon followed suit, and the pressure of the united passive resistance encouraged Britain to repeal the Stamp Act, but not before a major reassertion of the rights of the English Parliament to tax the American colonies communicated via a Declaratory Act.⁸⁸ The Townshend Acts of 1767, advanced by their namesake Charles Townshend following the repeal of the Stamp Act, faced similar opposition upon implementation. The three years following the implementation of the Townshend Acts were rocky; while some parts of Boston and New York resumed non-importation following the frameworks set up by their previous response to the Stamp Act, other regions were not so quick to follow. However, by 1769, non-importation had become a signature of the colonies, supported widely by those who believed that colonists had rights against external taxation.⁸⁹ A final wave of organized non-importation struck the colonies in 1774 as a protest of various new acts and policies of parliament, stirring action on both sides of the Atlantic as Great Britain's businessmen were "galvanized into sudden activity by the realization that the American Association was closing their chief markets to them."⁹⁰ The non-importation agreements of 1774 proved generally successful, yet were met with harsh response by England and required no small sacrifice from American colonial merchants, producers, and consumers.

⁸⁷"No Stamped Paper."

⁸⁸ Glenn C. Smith, "An Era of Non-Importation Associations, 1768-1773," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1940): 84, doi: 10.2307/1920668.

⁸⁹ Robert J. Chaffin, "The Townshend Acts Crisis, 1767-1770," in *A Companion to the American Revolution* ed. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (2000): 143-145.

⁹⁰ Arthur M. Schlessinger, *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776*, (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1957), 536.

American merchants knew of the fortune to be made in engaging with the British empire in trade; the widespread support for non-importation agreements among revolutionaries shows that classical republican arguments realized through the language of patriotism were convincing enough to encourage the subjection of private interests in favor of a rich national interest. These non-importation agreements exemplified, too, the newly realized incompatibility of free trade with the emerging American national interest. Free traders had shown in British history again and again their willingness to pursue private interests in the foreign marketplace at any cost by engaging frequently and flagrantly in trading with the enemy throughout the course of the 7 Years' War and the admittedly repressive Molasses Act beforehand.⁹¹ Implementing non-importation measures functioned for colonial revolutionaries to draw a line between those who stood for the values of the revolution and those who simply stood against mercantile limits on trade. Being remotely tuned in to the political atmosphere of the colonies and having basic literacy with regard to the ongoing discourses on trade would have given supporters of non-importation the necessary context regarding free traders' methods of dissent. Free traders, especially smugglers and privateers, had not attempted to hide their willingness to bypass the law in order to execute their private trading ventures; those more concerned with freeing trade than freeing the colonies would inevitably transgress the non-importation agreements and continue trading with Great Britain. Explicitly associating non-importation measures with the revolutionary movement drew a conclusive, sharpened line between which interpretations of private interest would represent the revolution and which would plainly not.

For as integrous as revolutionaries believed non-importation agreements to be, the problems of such burdensome calls for sacrificing private interest made themselves known

⁹¹ Matson and Onuf, "Toward a Republican Empire," 511.

quickly. Throughout the period of non-importation, various regions intermittently disengaged or “cut around” the sacrifices that non-importation called for. An example of this lies in both Philadelphia and New York’s hesitance to join the non-importation agreements that had developed as a response to the Townshend Acts of 1767. Instead, the colony’s merchants began the process of over-trading with Great Britain, stockpiling resources before ultimately joining the agreement in 1769.⁹²

Philadelphia and New York’s practices in this situation show that while the purpose of the non-importation agreements was recognized and supported, the sacrifices required by them were too unattractive for merchants to accept on the heels of two major economic doctrines that, albeit to different extents and in different tones, centralized private interests in the public sphere. Even those who firmly believed in the classical republican stance regarding the importance of disinterestedness understood that mercantilism and free trade were, in part, responses to the volatile reality that nations required wealth in order to exude power. These ideologies had altered the conversation of interest so fundamentally that raw appeals to the republican view of interest could and were easily be reasoned against in favor of commercial prosperity, whether from a position of principle or a position of pragmatism. John Adams makes this point well in 1776, pointing to the lack of public virtue in America and attributing it in part to the “Rage for Profit and Commerce among all Ranks and Degrees of Men.”⁹³ He voices his fears and doubts with regard to the ability of America to support a republican form of government even as he admits to considering himself “so tasteless as to prefer a Republic.”⁹⁴

⁹² Peter D. G. Thomas, *The Townshend Duties Crisis: The Second Phase of the American Revolution, 1767-1773*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press 1987), 186.

⁹³ “Founders Online: From John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 8 January 1776,” National Archives and Records Administration, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-03-02-0202>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Non-importation agreements serve as a glaring example of the types of sacrifices that colonial revolutionaries knew the war effort would require and provide a great example of colonists operationalizing the republican conception of private interest in relation to the common good. However, disengaging in trade with Britain as an expression of republican virtue was economically harmful enough to pose a real threat to the management and financing of the war.⁹⁵ Violations of the non-importation agreements were not reflective of an unwillingness to conceive of private interest in the republican way, for as contrary to this traditional view as the popular economic doctrines of the previous century were. The sacrifice called for by non-importation was, at times, a brand of sacrifice detrimental to the actual war effort itself. The soberness of the real danger that nonimportation posed to the war effort encouraged John Jay in 1775, for example, to suggest an amendment that would allow for strategic smuggling of ammunition for the American army.⁹⁶

However, for as genuinely burdensome as non-importation was on the colonies, they also represented the hopeful and future-oriented notion that to sacrifice private interests for the time being, colonists may enjoy the fruits of interest and commerce after the close of America's political crisis with England. The complicated placement of private interest exemplified by non-importation agreements represented hope for a future in which America could operate independently of Britain and be self-reliant, economically speaking. The fact that such policies were met with general support and rocky success is significant. Though strict non-importation proved impossible at times, domestic reliance encouraged colonists to envision a post-revolutionary future in which their dreams of realizing America's full productive potential could

⁹⁵ Matson and Onuf, "Toward a Republican Empire," 513.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 513.

become reality; by sacrificing private interests for the time being, colonists may enjoy the fruits of interest and commerce after the close of America's political crisis with England. This complicated balance of ideas and hope effectively encouraged classical republican pedestalization of public virtue in the present while leaving the door open for a more private-interest focused interpretation of the public good in the future, the image of which reflected a combination of mercantilist and free trade economic practices.

Conclusion

To sustain the revolutionary effort, colonial revolutionaries utilized the thread of republican thought inherited from their English traditions in combination with mercantilist, Lockean, and free trade ideas to reinterpret and redefine the role of private interest in society. The growing popularity of mercantilism in the 17th century challenged previous conceptions of the role of private interest while the revival of republicanism in response to major social and political changes following the Glorious Revolution embedded in English political thought a thread that American colonists would later pick up. By the mid-1700s, mercantilism had presented a freer justification of private interest in the public sphere than the traditional view could offer. As time went on and the English perfected the balance-of-trade doctrine central to mercantilism, mercantilist practices in the northern and southern colonies greatly intensified to combat the prosperity of American manufacturing and trade in the international sphere, encouraging colonists to seek out anti-mercantilist ideologies in their eagerness to throw off the yoke of controlled trade and realize America's full potential in the marketplace. The more intense arguments for free trade became, the more England feared America's ability to develop competing interests in the foreign marketplace, and the more intense mercantilist policy became. In the middle of rising tensions, the end of the 7 Years' War brought about an economic depression that, for England, necessitated further profits organized from the colonies. A slew of acts and measures came out in order to turn a profit off of colonial imports, along with a harsh monopolization of colonial trade. This solidification of mercantilist oppression paved the way for free trade arguments to gain their necessary momentum, espousing a view of the public interest as the result of a free competition between private interests in an unregulated market. As the

revolutionary effort was established, colonists quickly came to realize how incompatible such a centralization of private interests was. American colonists revived republicanism to combat such an inappropriate centralization of self-interest. Thus ensued a rejection of free trade, mercantilist, and purely republican interpretations of the role of private interest in relation to the public interest in favor of a conclusion that synthesized them. Colonists called for a subjection of private interests in favor of the immediate need to sustain the war effort with an insistence that by sacrificing now, they would be able to enjoy great commercial successes later.

It must be underlined, after everything, that the conclusion reached by American revolutionaries regarding the relationship between private interests and the public good was insulated to this specific historical moment; the role given to private interest in the revolutionary effort was not permanent, and would go on to change considerably over the course of time. Multiple attempts at ratifying a constitution, a civil war, the development of foreign policy, and a wealth of empirical expansions certainly affected the role to which Americans relegated private interest over the coming centuries. For now, however, it was placed gingerly in subjection to the public good of sustaining the war effort, representing a clear revival of republican sentiments propped up by the allure of promised mercantilist and free trade prosperity in the future.

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