

Rethinking the Intellectual Origins and Causes of the Revolution,
or “Can We Please Prove Jack Rakove Wrong?”

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First, I would like to thank all of my fellow participants for agreeing to take part in this panel. I regret that I cannot be there in-person today, but, at this very moment, I am in a hospital in New Haven awaiting the birth of my third child (and first daughter). I have been following the conference on Twitter from the hospital, which only increases my regret as it looks to have been a very enlightening and entertaining conference. But on to the topic at hand...

I want to talk just a little bit about my perceptions of the current place of intellectual history within the field of early American history, particularly regarding the Revolution. While other fields within American and European history are experiencing something of a renaissance (or, more accurately, a rebirth) of intellectual history, the same cannot be said for early America. Hence, the title of the panel. After all, think about how ridiculous a panel entitled, “Is There Still a Place for Ideas in European History?” would seem to most Europeanists. Therefore, it would seem that early Americanists find themselves to be outliers at the current moment in this respect.

Despite initially contributing to a resurgence of the origins and causes of the Revolution as a topic of study within the field, the extended (read: endless) nature and relative volatility of the republicanism/liberalism ideological debate actually ended up contributing to its decline as well over the last 20 years or more. Of course, at the same time, intellectual history remained a part of the field in various subfields, including early American gender history and the history of race and slavery. However, I would like to focus my remarks on the intellectual history of the Revolution,

particularly regarding its origins and use that to say something broader about the state of early American intellectual history.

In the last few years, numerous calls for papers and conference programs have pointed out the Revolution's scholarly doldrums and attempted to address the situation. Yet, none of the papers from those two major conferences sought to consider the Revolution as a whole, only a small percentage addressed the period of the imperial crisis, and only a select few could be described as "intellectual history."

Our current understanding of the Revolution's origins and causes as being largely constitutional and ideological is derived from scholarship written nearly half a century ago. Think about that for a moment. As an undergraduate, I took three "American Revolution" courses 5 and 6 years ago taught by three very different professors and two of them assigned Bailyn's *Ideological Origins*. In a graduate readings course on early American history, it was assigned for the one week devoted to the Revolution. Ed Morgan's *Stamp Act Crisis* is not assigned at all anymore, but its interpretation, combined with Bailyn's ideological interpretation, still formed the core of the explanation of the causes of the Revolution in all three of those courses I took as an undergraduate, *as well as* the Revolution course for which I was a teaching assistant in graduate school. In how many other fields is that the case? We all know the infamous Jack Rakove quote about how his generation solved the questions of origins and causes for good. We all laugh a bit snidely whenever someone recites it—supposedly because of the Rakovean hubris of the quote—but the fact of the matter is that for all intents and purposes the field acts as though what he said is true. We seem to be content with an understanding of the origins and causes of the Revolution developed over a half a century ago.

Earlier this year, I wrote a piece for *The Junto* on Eric Nelson's recent book, *The Royalist*

Revolution. There is no doubt that this is probably the most important intellectual history of the Revolution in a few decades. Of course, there have been important intellectual histories regarding specific aspects of the consequences of the Revolution. But I am referring to works that either consider the Revolution writ large or ask “big” questions, e.g., what were the origins and causes of the Revolution? While I found Nelson’s book to be a profitable read, there is no denying that it is a very old-school form of intellectual history. Indeed, he admits as much in the book’s introduction. We all know what I mean when I say “old-school form of intellectual history.” A lot of explicating of rarefied ideas written by elites and a lot of attempts to identify similar threads of thought among other elites and call it “transmission.” As I said, I enjoyed Nelson’s book, because I am the kind of person who can still enjoy reading intellectual history for intellectual history’s sake. But from a historiographical perspective, the main thought I had throughout reading it was, “This book could just as easily have been written in 1965.” Or, perhaps, even earlier. That thought then begged the question: What does that say about the state of the intellectual history of the Revolution?

Think about Nelson’s book compared to that of Pauline Maier’s *From Rebellion to Revolution*. To my mind, the latter represented the promise and potential of the ideological interpretation because it took the ideas identified by Bailyn and Caroline Robbins and constitutional context of Morgan and looked to see how they played out “on the ground.” In many ways, Maier’s book, now more than forty years old, is the more modern of the two, and, for me, still remains an example of what intellectual history should be. After all, intellectual history that is solely about ideas themselves, for their own sake, can only be produced nowadays in the kind of historiographical vacuum provided by Political Science. The following suggestion may seem blasphemous at this specific conference, but the best intellectual history is, by

necessity, cultural history. Ideas matter to us as historians primarily insofar as they had an impact on the culture and politics of a given period (e.g., what Rosie called “popular understandings” in *Revolutionary Backlash*). Grounding ideas in historical contexts and events to uncover the tangible impact of ideas and the motivations and intentions behind specific uses of those ideas is intellectual history at its most exciting and its most relevant. Work of that kind is not missing from the conversations surrounding the consequences of the Revolution. But we are not even really having a conversation about the origins and causes of the Revolution. Why is that?

Nelson’s book at least attempted to do “the unthinkable,” i.e., to reconsider the history of the Revolution writ large from an intellectual perspective. In a blog post that responded to mine, Ann Little made a salient point when she concluded her post by listing a number of important works on the Revolution from the 1970s and 1980s and then said of her own perspective as a graduate student, “What was left for a young scholar to say in the 1990s after that embarrassment of riches? I think it will take a fresh generation with no memories of the 1970s to revolutionize studies of the American Revolution.” While many of her examples leaned more toward the social end of the methodological spectrum, her point is just as valid for the intellectual history of the Revolution, if not more so.

The constitutional/ideological interpretation is a longstanding monolith but it is not bullet proof. Historians (and graduate students) have been critiquing *Ideological Origins* sharply and relentlessly for decades now. But, in terms of the historiography of origins and causes, early Americanists have tended to resemble John Adam’s characterization of Thomas Paine, i.e., we’ve been much better at tearing things down than building them up. With each passing decade, as alternatives to the constitutional/ideological interpretation of the origins of the Revolution fail to materialize, it seems to become harder to even imagine possible alternatives. I do not believe

Jack Rakove's generation solved the questions of the origins and causes of the Revolution, not even its intellectual origins and causes. Rather, I would argue that those questions are completely wide open since any new intellectual approach to those questions would necessarily and unavoidably be informed and enriched by the contexts provided by cultural histories of "revolutionary America" over the last thirty years. We just have to be bold enough (or, perhaps, sufficiently naïve) to think we can actually do it. Therefore, my answer to the question in the panel's title is an unequivocal "yes." And my question to the field is: Can we PLEASE prove Jack Rakove wrong?