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The Sons of Liberty from a Bottom-Up Perspective

Reviewing New Social Scholarship Fifty Years Later

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Abstract

New social history had a profound effect upon the nature of American historiography. Its bottom-up approach radically challenged the traditional historical narrative, producing a string of dynamic studies throughout the 1960s and 1970s. New social historians increasingly focused their studies on the localised experiences of marginalised groups, heralding in the highly influential cultural turn of the early seventies. Yet despite its resounding significance, scholars have a tendency to brush over the complexities and nuances of new social history. Rather, they simplify the school to a few corresponding traits, thus undermining the multifaceted character of this rich historiographical tradition. This dissertation intends to amend such misconceptions. A number of scholars have attempted to define new social history. Yet the school itself naturally evades precise definition. New social history was both individualistic and pluralistic. As such, any attempt to conceptualise the school renders a result riddled with deficiencies. This dissertation will examine how the new social historians approached a singular historical phenomenon, namely, the Sons of Liberty. By focusing solely on the Sons of Liberty, this dissertation will uncover a profusion of divergent interpretations that not only exemplifies the multifaceted character of new social history, but also enables us to appreciate the rich complexities of this historiographical tradition.

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Introduction

New social history of the 1960s and 1970s made a lasting impression upon the American historical profession. In universities across the country, a new generation of scholars were encouraged to examine the past in an entirely new manner. That manner was both broad and intricate, embracing localised studies while simultaneously conceptualising such phenomenon within wider societal patterns. Yet despite its resounding influence, historians have tended to brush over the nuances and complexities of the new social trend.¹ In his introduction to *Paul Revere's Ride* in 1994, David Hackett Fischer provided a sweeping evaluation of new social history within the context of American historiography:

‘Another more recent vintage is a broad prejudice in American universities against patriotic events of every kind, especially since the troubled years of Vietnam and Watergate. [...] As this volume goes to press, the only creature less fashionable in academe than the stereotypical “dead white male,” is a dead white male on horseback. [...] Path-breaking scholarship in the 20th century has dealt mainly with the social structures, intellectual systems, and material processes. Much has been gained by this enlargement of the historian’s task, but something important has been lost. An entire generation of academic historiography has tended to lose sense of the causal power of particular actions and contingent events.’²

In his appraisal, Fischer makes two broad assumptions. Firstly, Fischer suggests that the biographical narratives of ‘dead white males’ were largely overlooked by new social history. For Fischer, the new social historians studied the past from a bottom-up vantage, whereby ‘social structures’ and ‘material processes’ framed the portraits of history. Within these totalising conceptions, the volitions and aspirations of individual historical actors were rendered somewhat irrelevant. Secondly, Fischer implies that new social history was a

¹ P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 417-8.

² D. H. Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. xiv-v.

product of the time in which it was conceived. By emphasising the ‘troubled years of Vietnam and Watergate’, Fischer binds new social historiography with the socially turbulent years of the sixties and seventies. From this understanding, the contentious spirit of the politically-minded New Left shaped the new social trend, inspiring its historians with a radicalised agenda.³ While there are notable truths underlying Fischer’s evaluation, his appraisal also reduces new social history to a few overarching characteristics, thereby ignoring its multifaceted nature.

New social history drastically altered the way in which American historians examined the past. Approaching history from a distinct bottom-up vantage, new social historians sought to uncover the broad structures and patterns which underpinned societies. However, these structures were not totalising, nor did they occlude individual actors or contingent events. Rather, new social historians sought to elucidate the everyday narratives of historical actors, especially those that had been omitted from preceding histories. In an innovative manner, these historians explored the beliefs, aspirations, and cultural systems of their subjects, synthesising theoretical analysis with a narrative exposition. By narrowly focusing their studies on the localised experiences of marginalised groups, new social history broke new ground, heralding in the highly influential cultural turn of the early 1970s. That being said, their innovative and varied methodological approaches also engendered a plethora of conflicting and often contradictory interpretations. New social history was not a unified movement, but was instead multifarious and complex. As such, the historiographical school naturally evades coherent conceptualisation.

Furthermore, while new social history may have been influenced by the New Left, its agenda was not exclusively political. Rather, new social history was novel in its own regard,

³ There are certainly other historians who politicise the new social trend. See I. Unger, ‘The "New Left" and American History: Some Recent Scholarships in United States Historiography’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 72, no. 4, 1967, pp. 1237-63.

drawing from the traditions of progressive history, innovating with its own methodological tools, and formulating its own historical aims. Notably, new social history refuted the consensus scholarship which had preceded it. From the end of the Second World War to the late 1950s, a mood of acquiescence prevailed throughout American politics and academia. As a result, consensus historians rendered an exposition of the American past which was relatively void of social convulsions. Conversely, the new social historians emphasised class conflict and the radical activism of subaltern populations. Alongside women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalised groups, it was the labouring classes who constituted the heart of the new social scholarship. However, despite a few loose corresponding traits, there was nothing which collectively characterised the new social historians. They were instead individualistic, approaching history with their own specialised focus and their own methodological toolkit. The politics of the New Left did not necessarily dictate the direction of new social history. Rather, the new social historians directed themselves.

This dissertation will review the scholarship of new social history and situate the school within its historiographical scope. In doing so, it will emphasise the complexities and nuances of the new social trend which historians habitually overlook. Chapter 1 will explore the historical context of new social history and its links to the political turbulence of the sixties and seventies. It will also outline the key characteristics of new social history, laying particular emphasis on its inchoate and individualistic nature. Following on from this, Chapter 2 will analyse several texts from the new social trend. More specifically, it will examine how the new social historians have approached a singular historical phenomenon, namely, the Sons of Liberty.⁴ By focusing solely on the Sons of Liberty, this dissertation will uncover a

⁴ Only a small number of new social histories deal exclusively with the Sons of Liberty. See R. Champagne, 'New York's Radicals and the Coming of Independence', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 51, no. 1, 1964,

profusion of divergent interpretations that not only exemplifies the multifaceted nature of new social history, but also enables us to appreciate the rich complexities of this historiographical tradition. Furthermore, the Sons of Liberty will be utilised as a consistent point of comparison, illuminating the fundamental variations between consensus scholarship and the new social historians.

Considering the school's emphasis on subaltern populations, the Sons of Liberty proved a fruitful source for the new social historians. The most decisive usurpations against British rule from 1763-1776 were organised and implemented by the Sons of Liberty. More importantly, such activities were consistently supported by the colonial working classes. Artisans, labourers, and seamen constituted an overwhelming majority of the Sons of Liberty's ranks.⁵ The Stamp Act, Sugar Act, and the Townshend Duties all sparked reactionary boycotts of British goods; boycotts which only proved effective when sanctioned and supported by the colonial masses.⁶ Moreover, the processions and riots conducted by the Sons of Liberty were built upon long-standing traditions of working-class protest and

pp. 21-40; R. Champagne, 'The Sons of Liberty and the Aristocracy in New York Politics, 1765-1790', PhD Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1960; R. Walsh, *Charleston's Sons of Liberty: A Study of the Artisans, 1763-1789*, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 1959; P. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776*, New York, Knopf, 1972. Other studies discuss the Sons of Liberty, but only as a peripheral topic. See G. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979; D. Hoerder, 'Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds: 1765-1776', in A. F. Young (ed.), *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1976, pp. 232-71; J. Lemisch, 'Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1968, pp. 371-407; R. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1976; S. Lynd (ed.), *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1967; R. Isaac, 'Preachers and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia', in A. F. Young (ed.), *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1976, pp. 125-56; E. Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1980; E. Countryman, 'The American Colonies from the Seven Years War Through The Revolution', in M. Cayton, E. Gorn and P. Williams (ed.), *An Encyclopaedia of American Social History*, New York, Scribner, 1993, pp. 71-86; A. F. Young (ed.), *American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1976. Two conservative texts written in the 1970s address the Sons of Liberty from a viewpoint of authority. While not utilised in this investigation, they certainly deserve mention here. See H. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1970; B. Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1974.

⁵ E. Nellis, *The Long Road to Change: America's Revolution, 1750-1820*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 55.

⁶ J. Ferling, *A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003. pp. 35-6.

violence.⁷ From such an understanding, it was working-class activism which gave the Sons of Liberty its dynamic revolutionary character.

The new social historians viewed the Sons of Liberty from a variety of different perspectives. Numerous points of contention can be identified, as can inherent contradictions. Some historians perpetuate a consensus view of the Sons of Liberty, while others align their interpretation with the radical politics of the New Left. Simply put, this is because new social history was not directed by any coherent political agenda. Rather than abide to any totalising view of history, new social history was multiperspectival.⁸ As such, the Sons of Liberty could be understood in a multitude of different manners. It merely depended upon the unique perspective of the individual historian.

⁷ R. Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982. p. 93.

⁸ Young, *The American Revolution*, pp. 460-1.

Chapter 1: Consensus, Dissent, and New Social History

In 1967, Irwin Unger produced a survey on the state of American historiography.⁹ New social history, he argued, did not merely reflect the polemic character of contemporary American politics. For Unger, new social history was a political tool of the New Left. As he boldly asserts, ‘the concept of a usable past also suggests that history may serve as a political weapon. To the young Leftists the most obvious partisan use of history is to domesticate radicalism in America.’¹⁰ In Unger’s understanding, the new social historians wished to bridge the gap between politics and history. They wished to emphasise discord within the American past to legitimise the activist agenda of the present. Essentially, they wished to turn the past into a ‘usable’ political tool. There is no doubt that new social history reflected contemporary values and beliefs. Yet it also possessed a character of its own. New social history was distinguished by its own progressive traditions, its own interdisciplinary methodologies, and its own historical agenda. New social history was a broad refutation of the consensus interpretation which had preceded it. It focused its studies on class conflict, working-class radicalism, and the socioeconomic currents which underpinned past societies. More importantly, new social history studied the past from a bottom-up vantage, elucidating the everyday lives of subaltern groupings. However, notwithstanding these loose commonalities, the new social historians were not unified in any regard. They possessed no collective manifesto or methodological doctrine.¹¹ Instead, the new social historians were individualistic and diverse in their approach. The studies they produced throughout the sixties and seventies painted a mosaic picture of the past which was inclusive, comprehensive,

⁹ Unger, *The American Historical Review*, pp. 1237-63.

¹⁰ Unger, p. 1237.

¹¹ J. Henretta, ‘Social History as Lived and Written’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 84, no. 5, 1979, p. 1293.

multifaceted, and even contradictory.¹² That being said, new social history was both cumulative and developmental, fostering historical discussion and encouraging innovative investigations into the American past.

Preceding the rise of new social history, a climate of consensus overshadowed American society. From the mid-1940s to the late-1950s, national politics, the economy, and even academia were susceptible to the consensus trend.¹³ Consensus was characterised by three interwoven and self-affirming tenets: prosperity, confidence, and agreement. In national politics, the extreme Left and Right wing positions subsided while reconciliation was found in the centre.¹⁴ As John Higham clarifies, ‘When the liberal ideology lost its cutting edge, conservatives ceased to require an ideological shield.’¹⁵ Consequently, it appeared as if American politics had lost its polemic charge. In the intellectual arena, Daniel Bell prophesied ‘The End of Ideology’, whereby political ideologies would become largely redundant in the post-war period.¹⁶ Sensible Americans could instead agree that capitalism was driving them towards prosperity.¹⁷ For Bell, consensus was established on two foundational notions. The first was the threat of communism abroad and the necessity for national solidarity. The second was confidence in the American economy.¹⁸ Americans rallied in unison around these two concepts and were moreover convinced that social turmoil would mitigate as the nation became more prosperous. As Godfrey Hodgson aptly suggests, ‘Capitalism, after all, seemed to work.’¹⁹ Throughout the 1950s, unemployment levels

¹² L. Veysey, ‘The "New" Social History in the Context of American Historical Writing’, *American History*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1979, p. 5.

¹³ G. Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, Garden City, New York, 1976, p. 68.

¹⁴ J. Higham, ‘The Cult of the American Consensus: Homogenising Our History’, *Commentary*, vol. 27, no. 2, 1959, p. 99.

¹⁵ Higham, p. 99.

¹⁶ D. Bell, ‘The End of Ideology in the West’, in C. I. Waxman (ed.), *The End of Ideology Debate*, New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1968, pp. 87-105.

¹⁷ Bell, p. 102.

¹⁸ D. Bell, *The End of Ideology: On The Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, New York, Free Press, 1965, cited in G. Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, Garden City, New York, 1976, pp. 74-5.

¹⁹ Hodgson, *America In Our Time*, p. 76.

diminished considerably.²⁰ Affluence prevailed and so too did American confidence. Hadley Cantril conducted a survey in 1959 which discovered that Americans were the most self-assured people on the planet.²¹ In essence, the consensus climate fostered a distinct sense of American exceptionalism.²² Political agreement, financial prosperity, and national confidence all worked in dialectical unison to reaffirm the consensus climate, and the implications of this trend were markedly significant.

Consensus certainly had a profound effect upon the nature of American historiography. As Irwin Unger reflects, ‘Since the 1940’s something striking and significant had happened to the intellectual climate that surrounded the historians of America. They had abandoned the notion of struggle as the central theme of our past.’²³ Prominent historians like Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, and Edmund Morgan propagated an interpretation of the American past which emphasised national unity and downplayed domestic conflict.²⁴ Either the consensus historian trivialised such conflicts to the point of insignificance, or they discredited them altogether.²⁵ For John Higham, consensus scholarship was ‘carrying out a massive grading operation to smooth over America’s social convulsions.’²⁶ The school sought to refute the influential progressive scholarship of the early twentieth century. Led by Charles Beard, progressive historians emphasised economic competitiveness and class-conflict.²⁷ Conversely, consensus historians maintained that the American past was relatively

²⁰ Hodgson, p. 75.

²¹ Hodgson, p. 68.

²² L. Veysey, ‘Intellectual History and the New Social History’, in J. Higham and P. Conkin (ed.), *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, p. 3.

²³ Unger, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1240.

²⁴ R. Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, New York, A. A. Knopf, 1948; D. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience*, New York, Random House, 1958; E. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic: 1763-1789*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956.

²⁵ Higham, *Commentary*, p. 100.

²⁶ J. Higham, *Writing American History: Essays on Modern Scholarship*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1970, p. 214.

²⁷ E. Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd edn, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2008, pp. 335-6.

free from social convulsions.²⁸ In 1962, the consensus historian Richard Hofstadter attested that '[American] political society cannot hang together, at all, unless there is some kind of consensus running through it, and yet that no society has such a total consensus as to be devoid of significant conflict.'²⁹ For Hofstadter, there was no denying that America had a history of factionalism. But for the nation to prosper as it did, such divisions were consistently bridged. While consensus undoubtedly shaped the nature of American historiography, it was not without its critics. Dissenting scholars continued to resist the consensus trend, but their efforts were suppressed by the very institutions that paid their salaries.³⁰ Throughout the 1950s, universities censored controversial material and any educators unwilling to teach a consensus-based programme were dismissed from their posts.³¹ Thus, the climate of consensus was a homogenising force, enforcing uniformity and complacency even within the academic sphere.

For consensus historians, the Sons of Liberty constituted a cohesive organisation directed solely by the Revolution's political leaders.³² From their perspective, men like Sam Adams, Christopher Gadsden, and Patrick Henry utilised the Sons of Liberty as an effective means of rallying the masses. These political leaders were of paramount significance. Their emotive rhetoric and patriotism ultimately became the guiding force of the Revolution.³³ As Edmund and Helen Morgan clarify, 'The episodes of violence which defeated the Stamp Act in America were planned and prepared by men who were recognised at the time as belonging

²⁸ R. Hofstadter, W. Miller, and D. Aaron, *The American Republic*, vol. 1, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1959, pp. 149-58.

²⁹ R. Hofstadter, 'Letter from R. Hofstadter to E. Pole, April 30 1962' cited in E. Pole, 'Richard Hofstadter', in R. A. Rutland (ed.), *Clio's Favourites: Leading Historians of the United States, 1945-2000*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2000, p. 74.

³⁰ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, p. 325.

³¹ Novick, p. 325.

³² E. Morgan and H. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1953, pp. 233-5.

³³ A. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776*, New York, Knopf, 1958, p. 20.

to the better and wiser part.’³⁴ For consensus historians, the Sons of Liberty acted as a top-down organisational tool. Home rule was the exclusive agenda of the Sons of Liberty and class conflict was scarce within organisation’s ranks. Rather, its members exhibited a common deference towards both the Revolution’s political leaders and their patriotic ideals.³⁵ Such deference allowed the leaders to command the colonial mobs with unprecedented finesse. As Arthur Schlesinger attests, ‘history has never beheld a more superbly disciplined mob. Despite the intense excitement the vandals hurt no person abroad and were so respectful of private property that they even replaced a broken padlock.’³⁶ Thus, for the consensus historians, the popular activism of the Sons of Liberty was masterfully engineered by the Revolution’s political leaders. It was these men who proved themselves the lynchpin of revolutionary activity, uniting the Sons of Liberty under a common ideological banner of liberty and freedom. However, such an interpretation was soon to be rebuked.

Throughout the 1960s, social turbulence threatened the political and academic cohesion of the previous decade. Peter Novick summarises the sixties as:

‘a climate characterised by the decline of McCarthyism, frustration with the mindlessness of politics in the Eisenhower years, admiration for the emerging civil rights movement in the South, the first stirrings of opposition to the nuclear arms race, and the turmoil in the Communist movement occasioned by Khrushchev’s Twentieth Party Congress speech and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution.’³⁷

Rising poverty levels exposed widening class fissures while illusions of widespread prosperity fell through the cracks.³⁸ Unrest and uncertainty prevailed, and the foundational

³⁴ Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*, pp. 231-2.

³⁵ B. Bailyn, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution: 1750-1773*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1965.

³⁶ A. Schlesinger, ‘Political Mobs of the American Revolution 1765-1776’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 99, no. 4, 1955, p. 245.

³⁷ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, p. 418.

³⁸ B. Bernstein (ed.), *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1968, p. ix.

tenets of the consensus climate were thoroughly challenged. The politically-minded New Left revolted against centralised bureaucracy and sought to reform the institutional structures of society. An eruption of mass protests advocated for greater democracy, civil rights, university reforms, and an end to the Vietnam War.³⁹ In the 1960s and through to the 1970s, it appeared as if America was at war with itself. As Irwin Unger elaborates, ‘Rent strikers, peace marchers, and Vietnam protestors - all are deeply skeptical of the affluent society. Almost everywhere throughout the country [...] new journals, new movements are emerging, dedicated to restoring a radical voice.’⁴⁰ That ‘radical voice’ would likewise express itself in the manner with which historians approached the past.

That being said, new social history was not simply a manifestation of American unrest, nor was it a unified political movement. As Peter Novick claims:

‘The new, left-orientated historians who became visible within the profession during the 1960s came to be capitalised, reified, and often tacitly homogenized as “New Left historians.” This was a largely empty and misleading designation, lumping together individuals of the most diverse orientation, and often, innocently or maliciously, associating them with the most extreme wing of the student movement.’⁴¹

Rather, new social history was an autonomous entity. Its historical aims and foundational traditions were entirely distinct from those of the New Left.⁴² As such, it would be erroneous to categorise new social history as a simple expression of social discontent within America. Nevertheless, the contentious mood of the 1960s did imbue new social historians with the incentive to criticise their consensus predecessors.

Themes of national unity were simply not applicable to the turbulent atmosphere of the

³⁹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, p. 415.

⁴⁰ Unger, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1237.

⁴¹ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, pp. 417-8.

⁴² Higham, *Writing American History*, p. 242.

sixties. Thus, a new form of history was needed.⁴³ In a radical manner, the new social historians flipped history upon its head, approaching the past from a distinct bottom-up vantage.⁴⁴ As stated before, they sought to elucidate the everyday lives of marginalised groups who had been occluded from the historical narrative.⁴⁵ In the preface to his seminal work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson issued a clarion call which fell on receptive American ears:

‘I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.’⁴⁶

The new social historians focused their investigations on populations socially, politically, or ethnically oppressed by the traditional power structures in society. Alongside women, racial minorities, and other marginalised groups, it was the sizable working classes who needed liberating from the pages of consensus history.⁴⁷ The new social historians examined societal structures, socioeconomic currents, and the interactions of social groupings. More specifically, their studies tended to be class-based, categorising historical populations in terms of their socioeconomic and occupational profile.⁴⁸ New social historians like Alfred Young and Staughton Lynd emphasised the advantages of analysing history in terms of class

⁴³ Higham, p. 234.

⁴⁴ J. Lemisch, ‘The American Revolution Seen From the Bottom Up’, in B. Bernstein (ed.), *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1968, p. 6.

⁴⁵ P. N. Stearns, ‘Some Comments on Social History’, *The Journal of Social History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1967, p. 6.

⁴⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, p. 13.

⁴⁷ D. MacRaild and A. Taylor, *Social Theory and Social History*, New York, Palgrave, 2004, p. 143.

⁴⁸ Stearns, *The Journal of Social History*, p. 4.

and class consciousness.⁴⁹ Other scholars were more hesitant. For instance, Jesse Lemisch believed that colonial society was not sufficiently stratified to be studied in terms of class.⁵⁰ He instead labelled the colonial populace ‘pre-political’, emphasising their shared characteristics while denying any notion of conscious political cohesion.⁵¹ Peter Stearn would agree. In his eyes, ‘Social historians hasten [...] to go from a definition of a class or group to a statement of its political position. Yet, unless the group is very narrowly drawn indeed, generalisations about political attitudes seldom seem fit.’⁵² The fluid nature of colonial society thus proved problematic for the new social historians. It was the task of the historian to grapple with these deficiencies, all the while rescuing forgotten subalterns from the pages of history.

Progressive historiography of the early twentieth century certainly had a profound and lasting effect upon the new social trend. In a 1982 review, John Alexander accentuated the underlying similarities between new social history and the progressive school.⁵³ Essentially, progressive historians emphasised class-conflict, arguing that the American Revolution was a dual revolution, fought both to secure home rule from Britain and reform the internal power structures of society. For Alexander, new social history perpetuated this contentious tradition. As he summarises, ‘The works reviewed here support the resurgent progressive interpretation. They strongly suggest that class division and a desire to democratize society were vital aspects of late colonial and revolutionary America.’⁵⁴ Yet other scholars give a more nuanced account. Laurence Veysey attests that while new social history and the progressives shared common affinities, the new social historians took their analysis a step

⁴⁹ Young, *The American Revolution*, pp. 449-51; Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery*, pp. 20-1.

⁵⁰ J. Lemisch, ‘Review of Alfred Young (ed.), *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 82, no. 3, 1977, p. 738.

⁵¹ Lemisch, *William and Mary Quarterly*, pp. 406-7.

⁵² Stearns, *The Journal of Social History*, p. 4.

⁵³ J. Alexander, ‘Resurrecting the “Progressive” Interpretation of the Coming of the American Revolution: Committees, Crowds, and the Urban Crucible’, *Journal of Urban History*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1982, pp. 217-29.

⁵⁴ Alexander, pp. 227-8.

further. For Veysey, new social history ‘had for the first time glimpsed the true “bottom” layer of the society in a sustained way, and their standards of evidence and argument genuinely broke deeper ground.’⁵⁵ In other words, new social historians had unearthed the intricacies and complexities of class conflict which their progressive forbearers had missed. While progressives sought to pigeonhole societal groupings into simplified Marxist structures, the new social historians placed greater emphasis on the collective mentalities of subaltern populations.⁵⁶ For the latter, the progressive approach simply left no room for diversity.⁵⁷ New social history possessed some of the first scholars to recognise the fundamental cultural underpinnings of past societies.⁵⁸ As Alfred Young argues, the new social historians increasingly sought ‘the cultural history of those down below in America.’ They focus ‘on things that have to be read in a new way – the dynamics of crowds, the rhetoric of Thomas Paine, the “body language” at evangelic meetings. It is a line of scholarship much worth encouraging.’⁵⁹ Essentially, by uncovering and understanding the cultural practices of past societies, historians could better comprehend the society itself.⁶⁰ Although both the progressives and the new social historians emphasised class conflict, the latter took their analysis a step further, accentuating cultural undercurrents and the collective beliefs of historical actors.

New social history was not birthed in a national vacuum. Instead, it was built upon the foundations of two formative European schools: the British Marxists and the French *Annales*.⁶¹ Both schools approached history from a bottom-up vantage and each fostered interdisciplinary methodologies. Marxists and *Annales* scholars borrowed structural theories

⁵⁵ Veysey, *Reviews in American History*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ Veysey, *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Unger, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1258.

⁵⁸ Higham, *Writing American History*, p. 261.

⁵⁹ Young, *The American Revolution*, p. xii.

⁶⁰ MacRaid and Taylor, *Social History and Social Theory*, p. 146.

⁶¹ Henretta, *The American Historical Review*, pp. 1296-304.

from the social sciences to determine patterns within societies.⁶² A large proportion of their early scholarship employed quantitative techniques, whereby statistical data was analysed to illuminate demographic trends, population growths, death-rates, electoral patterns, and economic distribution.⁶³ As *Annales* scholarship matured, researchers began to focus their studies on the everyday mentalities of historical actors.⁶⁴ Similarly, the Marxist conception of class consciousness was not defined by dogmatic structures, but by social procedures and commonplace interactions.⁶⁵ As E. P. Thompson clarifies, class consciousness is the ‘way in which [productive relations] are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.’⁶⁶ As their name suggests, the Marxist historians were markedly political. Prominent scholars like Eric Hobsbawm and Christopher Hill personally identified with the subaltern populations they studied.⁶⁷ They approached the past with a class-centric agenda, exalted the individual agency of working-class labourers, and insisted that class antagonism and radicalism were the fundamental forces behind historical change.⁶⁸ A number of these foundational traditions were evidently adopted by the new social historians.

Two distinctive approaches of social history likewise deserve mention here. The first approach is theoretical and structural, emphasising underlying patterns which shaped the organisation of societies; the second is anecdotal, elucidating the everyday mentalities and beliefs of subaltern populations.⁶⁹ Both the anecdotal and the structural approach were employed within new social history. That being said, heralding in the cultural turn of the early 1970s, new social historians increasingly emphasised the study of mentalities above

⁶² P. Joyce, ‘What is the Social in Social History?’, *Past and Present*, vol. 206, no. 1, 2010, p. 214.

⁶³ MacRaid and Taylor, *Social History and Social Theory*, pp. 25-6, 62-3.

⁶⁴ MacRaid and Taylor, p. 118.

⁶⁵ MacRaid and Taylor, p. 119.

⁶⁶ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ D. Renton, ‘Studying Their Own Nation without Insularity? The British Marxist Historians Reconsidered’, *Science & Society*, vol. 69, no. 4, 2005, p. 560.

⁶⁸ Henretta, *The American Historical Review*, pp. 1301-4.

⁶⁹ Veysey, *Reviews in American History*, p. 6.

societal structures.⁷⁰ James Henretta would certainly argue this point. As he reveals, ‘objective structures and conflicts are subordinated to the subjected experiences of the historical actors; their “life-worlds” stand in the foreground.’⁷¹ For Henretta, new social history was distinguished by its narrative predisposition and its focus on individual actors.⁷² While new social history’s methodologies were markedly quantitative, a number of historians still employed literary evidence to assist the dramatisation of events.⁷³ Moreover, while quantitative analysis tends to overlook individual actors, new social history synthesised analytical and anecdotal approaches, thereby assimilating the everyday lives of marginalised groups within the historical narrative.⁷⁴ New social history was thus innovative in two regards. Firstly, above structural models, it fostered a cultural exploration of the past. Secondly, it employed a narrative mode of presentation which synthesised quantitative analysis with the utilisation of literary sources.

While several theorists have attempted to conceptualise new social history, it is important to note that the school itself naturally defies precise definition. New social history is too diverse and inchoate to categorise into a single paradigmatic model. As James Henretta notes, ‘No manifesto marked [new social history’s] advent, and no single handbook or work of scholarship decisively shaped its development.’⁷⁵ Jesse Lemisch, Lee Benson, and William Aydelotte provided insightful direction and gave the movement some theoretical form, but the school itself remained pluralistic and inherently indefinable.⁷⁶ As Barton Bernstein comments, ‘Though defying precise definition and lumping together those who believe in objectivity history with those who do not, the term [new social history] does denote a group

⁷⁰ Veysey, pp. 142-3.

⁷¹ Henretta, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1313.

⁷² Henretta, p. 1318.

⁷³ Veysey, *Reviews in American History*, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Henretta, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1319.

⁷⁵ Henretta, p. 1293.

⁷⁶ W. O. Aydelotte, ‘Quantification in History’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 71, no. 3, 1966, pp. 803-25; L. Benson (ed.), *Toward the Scientific Study of History: Selected Essays of Lee Benson*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1972; Lemisch, *Towards a New Past*, pp. 3-45.

of various “left” views – whether they be Marxist, neo-Beardian, radical, or left-liberal.’ For Bernstein, new social history was not driven exclusively by New Left politics, but by a myriad of political orientations. Moreover, the new social historians did not constitute ‘a new synthesis but rather a series of approaches and interpretations.’⁷⁷ Each historian of the new social trend formulated their own historical aims and employed a range of methodological tools with which to explore their unique case-studies. Quantitative techniques, social-scientific theories, and literary sources were used both individually and in tangent. Rather than follow any methodological protocol, the new social historians experimented with different concepts in order to yield the best results.⁷⁸ As John Higham elaborates, ‘Each endeavour moved away from the others – and away from any common body of questions.’⁷⁹ He, too, comes to the conclusion that new social history was not a cohesive movement, but one discordant and complex.⁸⁰ That being said, such disorder was not undesirable, but was instead entirely typical.⁸¹ For the new social historians, the past did not abide to any totalising historical truths. Instead, it was composed of many specialised and distinctive elements.⁸² For Laurence Veysey, new social history was comparable to a mosaic, whereby ‘each element in the mosaic must have an utterly separate history. [Moreover] there is little incentive to try to piece these histories together into a whole.’⁸³ In essence, new social history was multiperspectival. Each individual case-study was believed to be both valid and enriching in its own right. As John Higham elaborates, ‘In the absence of any authorities’ standard or any accepted scheme of priorities, nobody could claim that one discipline, field, or subfield was more promising or intrinsically worthier than any other.’⁸⁴ Taken under such considerations,

⁷⁷ Bernstein, *Towards a New Past*, p. x.

⁷⁸ Veysey, *Reviews in American History*, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁹ Higham, *Writing American History*, p. 249.

⁸⁰ Unger, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1258.

⁸¹ D. B. Rutman and R. F. Berkhofer, ‘Social History as Lived and Written: Comments’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 84, no. 5, 1979, p. 1324.

⁸² Higham, *Writing American History*, p. 238.

⁸³ Veysey, *Reviews in American History*, p. 5.

⁸⁴ Higham, *Writing American History*, p. 236.

it would be erroneous to make any overarching generalisations or reductively characterise the new social historians to a few corresponding traits. New social history was not a unified movement, but one imbued with a pluralistic spirit.⁸⁵

New social history was also cumulative and developmental. For Alfred Young, studies from a bottom-up perspective probed the conventional understanding of the past, thereby provoking new historical questions. As he summarises in his compilation of new social histories, ‘The purpose of this volume is to open discussion, not foreclose it, or perhaps to reopen discussion on some themes of the Revolution that somehow endure through all the shifting currents of scholarship.’⁸⁶ When establishing *Social History* in 1976, Janet Blackman and Keith Nield planned to create a forum in which social histories could interact with one another.⁸⁷ These studies could inform, complement, and also contradict. Moreover, by airing such contradictions, Blackman and Nield intended to highlight deficiencies in historical knowledge.⁸⁸ Darrett Rutman clearly supports this line of argument. From his perspective, new social history was a cooperative venture, whereby individual studies built upon one another. Such cumulative methods would ultimately render a richer understanding of the historical past.⁸⁹ Inconsistencies between individual studies were not problematic, but instead raised new historical questions to be answered by a future generation of scholars. In such a manner, new social history certainly engendered historical development.⁹⁰

To conclude, notwithstanding their bottom-up approach to history, there was not much which unified the new social historians. They were inchoate, pluralistic, and inherently individualistic. Nevertheless, as Darrett Rutman argues, there is nothing particularly wrong

⁸⁵ Higham, p. 240.

⁸⁶ Young, *The American Revolution*, p. 449.

⁸⁷ J. Blackman and K. Nield, ‘Editorial’, *Social History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1976, pp. 1-3.

⁸⁸ Blackman and Nield, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Rutman and Berkhofer, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1325.

⁹⁰ Veysey, *Reviews in American History*, p. 7.

with anarchy.⁹¹ Aroused by the social turbulence of the 1960s, the new social historians were markedly contentious. Considering its multifaceted nature, any attempt to reductively conceptualise the new social trend renders a result riddled with deficiencies. That being said, some corresponding traits do emerge. Firstly, new social history refuted the consensus scholarship of the previous generation. Secondly, new social historians approached the past from a distinct bottom-up vantage and sought to exalt marginalised groups who had been occluded from the pages of history. Beyond that, the new social historians trod their own individual paths, driven by their own historical agenda and wielding their own methodological toolkit. Considering the scholarship's lack of uniformity, contradictions in interpretation are bound to be expected. An examination of the Sons of Liberty will further exemplify this point, thus illuminating the multifaceted nature of this complex historiographical trend.

⁹¹ Veysey, p. 1324.

Chapter 2: The Sons of Liberty From a New Social Perspective

Two notable agendas distinguish the new social trend. The first is an exposition of past societies from a bottom-up vantage. The second is an attempt to liberate subaltern populations from the pages of consensus history. Yet beyond these primary tenets, the new social historians trod their own course, wielding their own methodological tools and formulating their own specialised investigations. Each investigation was susceptible to its own geographical and socio-political variables. A close examination of various texts that address the Sons of Liberty uncovers several divergent interpretations. Historians disagree on the organisation's constitution, its agenda, the effectiveness of its activism, and the degree of deference shown towards the Revolution's political leaders. From these points of contention, two general trends of interpretation emerge. The first portrays the Sons of Liberty as a top-down organisational tool which allowed the Revolution's political leaders to unify the populace under the patriotic cause. Such an interpretation perpetuates a consensus view of the organisation. The second sympathises with the radical politics of the New Left, portraying the Sons of Liberty as a bottom-up manifestation of working-class activism. There is no homogenous or politically consistent interpretation of the Sons of Liberty. Moreover, historians do not align themselves behind a single interpretation, but oscillate throughout the points of contention. Principally, this is because new social history was multiperspectival. Individual interpretations, though inconsistent and contradictory, were considered equally pertinent and valuable to the historical narrative.⁹²

Contingent variables have a significant impact upon manner with which new social historians perceive the Sons of Liberty. As discussed in the preceding chapter, new social

⁹² Young, *The American Revolution*, pp. 449-61.

history fosters a spirit of individualism. New social historians experiment with a range of different methodological tools and their studies are notably specialised. Naturally, each study is susceptible to its own geographical and socio-political variables. America in the eighteenth century was certainly a diverse place.⁹³ While agricultural Charleston was relatively affluent, the urban port cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York housed an expansive and underprivileged lower class, whereby many of the inhabitants lived on the threshold of poverty.⁹⁴ For urban-centric scholars like Dirk Hoerder and Gary Nash, the lower classes were the most active participants in the revolutionary cause. Conversely, provincial labourers were largely indifferent towards patriotic activism.⁹⁵ As Alfred Young elaborates, ‘such a response occurred in the countryside wherever there was a prior history of intense class antagonisms and where patriot leaders were from the elite.’⁹⁶ Evidently, geographical location played a significant role in the formulation of colonial radicalism. Likewise crucial is the social profile of a historian’s particular case-study. Each socioeconomic grouping was subject to its own societal pressures. For example, New York seamen lived in constant fear of impressment by the British Navy, whereas the artisans of Charleston suffered no such fate.⁹⁷ Additionally, Charleston’s city artisans were economically oppressed by British mercantilism, thus spurning them to revolt, while the New York seamen benefitted from the prolific trade which mercantilism fostered. Revolting against British rule would ultimately disrupt the flow of their business.⁹⁸ It thus becomes apparent that a countless number of factors acted upon different social groupings. As Roger Champagne acknowledges in his study of revolutionary New York, ‘What happened to these radical leaders, whether they continued to shape the future as they had the past, varied in each colony. The response of

⁹³ Young, *The American Revolution*, p. 450.

⁹⁴ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, pp. ix-x; Walsh, *Charleston’s Sons of Liberty*, p. 136.

⁹⁵ Hoerder, *The American Revolution*, p. 239; Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, p. 383.

⁹⁶ Young, *The American Revolution*, p. 451.

⁹⁷ Lemisch, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, pp. 386-7.

⁹⁸ Walsh, *Charleston’s Sons of Liberty*, pp. 19-22; Lemisch, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, pp. 397-8.

New York's radical triumvirate of Isaac Sears, John Lamb, and Alexander McDougall was perhaps uniquely different from developments elsewhere.⁹⁹ Moreover, the new social historians are certainly not consistent in their selection of case-studies. While Robert Gross examines prominent personages of provincial Concord, Staughton Lynd focuses solely on the mechanics of New York, whereas Gary Nash seeks ambitiously to conceptualise the entire working class of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.¹⁰⁰ With divergent factors acting upon each, it is no wonder that inconsistencies arise.

A first point of contention concerns how the new social historians view the Sons of Liberty's composition. While some historians portray the group as a bottom-up manifestation of popular activism, others believe it to be a top-down organisational force. Gary Nash argues that the populace comprised the backbone of the Sons of Liberty, and nowhere felt this more clearly than the urban crucibles of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.¹⁰¹ The urban environment fostered a shared working-class culture which was undoubtedly expressed in the Sons of Liberty.¹⁰² The organisation's activism was built upon long-standing traditions of mob protest and violence. When the colonials felt threatened by the British impositions they dissented in unison through the Sons of Liberty. As Nash explains, 'master artisans and petty entrepreneurs had organised powerfully in the Sons of Liberty [while] lower artisans and labourers of the South and North Ends had submerged their rivalry in the face of the threat of stamps.'¹⁰³ For Nash, the masses were indeed the radical spirit of the Sons of Liberty. Understood in this manner, it seems the Sons of Liberty were not directed from above, but instead formed around the popular activism of the working classes.¹⁰⁴ In comparison, Edward Countryman views the Sons of Liberty as an organisational force, entirely autonomous of

⁹⁹ Champagne, *The Journal of American History*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁰ Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery*; Gross, *The Minutemen*; Nash, *The Urban Crucible*.

¹⁰¹ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, p. viii.

¹⁰² Nash, pp. xi-iii.

¹⁰³ Nash, p. 306.

¹⁰⁴ Other new social historians likewise portray the Sons of Liberty as a manifestation from below. See Walsh, *Charleston's Sons of Liberty*, pp. 134-8; Champagne, 'The Sons of Liberty and the Aristocracy'.

working-class agency. As he argues, ‘The Sons of Liberty cannot be understood either as a vanguard of the lower classes or as domestic revolutionaries.’ Instead, they were an ‘organised and disciplined cadre.’¹⁰⁵ For Countryman, it was the politically-minded Loyal Nine who effectively controlled the Boston Sons of Liberty. Though the organisation instigated popular riots, it did not condone them all. The impulsive burning of Thomas Hutchinson’s house was seen as a disagreeable act, subversive to the organisation’s patriotic cause.¹⁰⁶ As such, the colonial labourers were not only segregated from the Sons of Liberty, but were even denounced by the organisation itself. In Countryman’s eyes, the Sons of Liberty were a top-down organisational tool, stirring up popular support for the revolutionary cause. When that support proved damaging, the Sons of Liberty severed its ties to the colonial populace.¹⁰⁷

Contention over the Sons of Liberty’s agenda likewise becomes evident. For many scholars, the American Revolution has long been considered a dual revolution. As Staughton Lynd aptly clarifies, ‘Contemporaries had no doubt that the War for Independence was accompanied by a struggle over who should rule at home.’¹⁰⁸ From this understating, the colonial drive for independence was consistently underpinned with the intent to democratise society and expand the socio-political standing of the lower classes.¹⁰⁹ On this point, the interpretations of the new social historians diverge considerably. More specifically, scholars disagree on the extent to which independence took precedence over questions of who should rule at home. For Gary Nash, the unruly activism of the Sons of Liberty reflected working-class aspirations to democratise colonial society.¹¹⁰ Nash’s thesis is built around the

¹⁰⁵ Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁶ Countryman, *An Encyclopaedia of American Social History*, pp. 78-9.

¹⁰⁷ Dirk Hoerder likewise emphasises the discordancy between lower-class demonstrations and political leadership. See Hoerder, *The American Revolution*, pp. 240-6.

¹⁰⁸ Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁹ Alexander, *Journal of Urban History*, pp. 217-8.

¹¹⁰ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, p. 294.

assumption of class conflict.¹¹¹ As such, he emphasises latent economic resentments which working-class labourers held towards the colonial elite.¹¹² Such resentments were most vividly expressed during ‘the rituals of detestation carried out on the nights of August 14 and 16 [which] marked the culmination of an era of mounting protest against oligarchic wealth and power.’¹¹³ For Nash, any procession conducted by the Sons of Liberty, though fronted with a banner of patriotism, ultimately harboured the democratic aspirations of the working classes.¹¹⁴ The Revolution was not merely an international conflict, but one which sought to revise the traditional power structures of society.¹¹⁵ Conversely, other historians emphasise the primacy of home rule. In his study of popular crowds in Virginia, Rhys Isaac demonstrates how the Revolution’s political leaders fashioned independence as the exclusive agenda of the Sons of Liberty.¹¹⁶ For Isaac, the aristocratic Patrick Henry infused working-class sentiments with the patriotic cause. The Virginia populace, accustomed to the sermons of local preachers, were easily overwhelmed by Henry’s emotive rhetoric.¹¹⁷ As such, Henry was able to bridge the societal gap between the elitist cause and the sensibilities of the commoner.¹¹⁸ For Isaac, questions of who should rule at home were mitigated and subsumed within the wider revolutionary struggle.¹¹⁹ Notably, Alfred Young synthesises these two conflicting interpretations. He suggests that historians should not ‘claim that the Revolution was a lower-class revolution – far from it – or that the struggle over who shall rule at home was as important as the conflict for home rule against Britain – although for some people it

¹¹¹ Nash, p. x.

¹¹² Nash, p. 310.

¹¹³ Nash, p. 299.

¹¹⁴ Nash, pp. 299-306.

¹¹⁵ Other scholars likewise emphasise the struggle for who should rule at home. See Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery*, pp. 90-7; Champagne, ‘The Sons of Liberty and the Aristocracy’.

¹¹⁶ Isaac, *The American Revolution*, pp. 125-56.

¹¹⁷ Isaac, pp. 150-2.

¹¹⁸ Isaac, pp. 153-4.

¹¹⁹ Other new social historians likewise argue that independence took priority. See Hoerder, *The American Revolution*, pp. 233-71; Gross, *The Minutemen*, pp. 30-69.

clearly was just that.¹²⁰ In Young's eyes, appeals to democratise society were but one small aspect of the wider revolutionary movement. Those appeals were undoubtedly expressed in the activism of the Sons of Liberty, yet the cause of home rule repeatedly took precedence.¹²¹ In essence, when discussing the notion of who should rule at home, the new social historians either centralise the theme's importance, eschew it altogether, or in the case of Young, straddle the fence.

A point of contention can also be found in relation to whether the Sons of Liberty were deferential to the political leaders of the Revolution, or whether the populace provided their own form of organisation and leadership. In his study of colonial Charleston, Richard Walsh insists that the artisans were not only the most radical members of the Sons of Liberty, but also took the initiative to organise and implement the scenes of resistance.¹²² The artisan class, caught in 'constant competition with the wares of British manufacturers [...] became the radical party of the Revolution.'¹²³ For Walsh, it was not the political leadership of Christopher Gadsden which organised the Charleston Sons of Liberty; rather, the artisans organised themselves. Gadsden was simply selected as their spokesman.¹²⁴ Similarly, Gary Nash emphasises the common shoemaker Ebenezer MacIntosh as the lynchpin of revolutionary activity in Boston. For Nash, 'It was Ebenezer MacIntosh who controlled the crowd, not Samuel Adams, James Otis, or any of the Loyal Nine.'¹²⁵ MacIntosh was apparently able to command the riotous mob with seamless control, as his modest position granted him the kindred respect of the working classes.¹²⁶ However, Dirk Hoerder fashions a different perspective. He concedes that crowd action in Boston propelled the colonials

¹²⁰ Young, *The American Revolution*, p. 450.

¹²¹ Young, pp. 450-61.

¹²² Walsh, *Charleston's Sons of Liberty*, pp. 36-8.

¹²³ Walsh, p. 135.

¹²⁴ Walsh, p. 136.

¹²⁵ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, p. 299.

¹²⁶ Nash, pp. 296-7. Roger Champagne likewise emphasises the lower-class leadership of Isaac Sears, Alexander McDougall, and John Lamb in New York. See Champagne, *The Journal of American History*, pp. 21-40.

towards independence, but the passionate agency of the populace was checked at every step ‘by the condescension of Whig leaders.’¹²⁷ In other words, the political leaders allowed popular passions to drive the crowd when it suited their cause. When the masses became too unruly, however, their enthusiasm was masterfully reined in.¹²⁸ As Hoerder concludes: ‘By the 1773 tea action, control over the crowd was sufficiently well-established, so that the whole riot became a “party”, with no danger to internal social cohesion.’¹²⁹ In Hoerder’s evaluation, the leadership of the Sons of Liberty never strayed from the Revolution’s political leaders, and the passions of the populace could be easily turned off and on again at whim.¹³⁰ It thus becomes apparent that while Nash and Walsh emphasise working-class leaders and stress the active agency of the populace, historians like Hoerder uphold the conventional leadership of the Revolution’s Whig politicians.

Be that as it may, the new social historians do not necessarily fall into two definitive camps of interpretation. For instance, Dirk Hoerder’s interpretation is both radical in some respects, thereby aligning him with the politics of the New Left, and conservative in others, thus perpetuating a consensus view. On the one hand, Hoerder insists that the contentious spirit of the populace was deftly managed by the Revolution’s political leaders.¹³¹ For Hoerder, the Sons of Liberty was evidently a top-down affair. That being said, Hoerder also argues that after being spurred into action, the populace ‘immediately turned to their own traditions of voicing economic and social discontent and opposition to authorities.’ Moreover, the crowd ‘achieved a momentum of its own that forced socially conservative leaders to take into account the popular radicalism.’¹³² For Hoerder, while the working classes exercised their own agency and employed their own riotous methods, such agency was exploited and

¹²⁷ Hoerder, *The American Revolution*, p. 266.

¹²⁸ Hoerder, pp. 240-1.

¹²⁹ Hoerder, p. 245-6.

¹³⁰ Rhys Isaac similarly emphasises the significance of conventional political leadership in Virginia. See Isaac, *The American Revolution*, pp. 125-56.

¹³¹ Hoerder, *The American Revolution*, pp. 265-6.

¹³² Hoerder, p. 265.

restrained by the revolutionary leaders. With such an example in mind, it is problematic to categorise new social historians simply into a conservative or radical camp. The new social historians were individualistic, oscillating between varied and conflicting interpretations, and moreover to varied degrees.

A final point of contention arises when one considers the effectiveness of working-class demonstrations. On the one hand, mob action is perceived as one of the Revolution's biggest detriments. As Pauline Maier attests, the Revolution's political leaders 'quickly learned that unrestrained popular violence was counter-productive. They organised resistance in part to contain disorder.'¹³³ Once unleashed, the mob was a stain which tarnished the revolutionary cause. Rather than harness the passions of the populace, political leaders were forced to suppress the radical activism of the Sons of Liberty.¹³⁴ Robert Gross likewise notes that in colonial Concord, official legislation was passed to abolish unruly patriotic activities.¹³⁵ Local mobs within Concord consistently harassed the town's wealthy inhabitants. Consequently, a Committee of Safety was formed to protect Concord from patriotic fervour.¹³⁶ In Gross' understanding, patriotism did not unite the inhabitants of Concord but instead created sizable societal rifts. Disorderly conduct was thus detrimental to the Sons of Liberty's cause, vitiating future revolutionary activities. Conversely, Roger Champagne insists that the Sons of Liberty were the 'radical arm of the revolution [...] more dramatic, and certainly more effective in terms of local politics,' than any Whig-inspired rhetoric.¹³⁷ For Champagne, working-class activism distinguished the Sons of Liberty and awarded it the dynamism to drive the revolutionary *zeitgeist*.¹³⁸ Straddling the fence between these two interpretations is Gary Nash. For Nash, revolutionary leaders became so dismayed by the

¹³³ Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, p. xv.

¹³⁴ Maier, pp. 98-9.

¹³⁵ Gross, *The Minutemen*, pp. 54-7.

¹³⁶ Gross, p. 57.

¹³⁷ Champagne, 'The Sons of Liberty and the Aristocracy', p. 2.

¹³⁸ Champagne, pp. 2-3.

disgraceful behaviour of the mob that they took direct actions to separate their cause from that of the populace.¹³⁹ The more riotous the mob became, the more political elites sensed the Revolution slipping from their grasp. As Nash explains, ‘crowd actions demonstrated the fragility of the union between protesting city dwellers who occupied places in the lower strata of the labouring community and their more bourgeois partners, who in the uninhibited attacks on property saw their control melting away.’¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Nash also emphasises the fundamental necessity of popular activism. In his eyes, ‘the American Revolution could not have unfolded when or in the manner it did without the self-conscious action of urban labouring people.’¹⁴¹ For Nash, the populace were both a detriment to the revolutionary cause and essential for its success. This inconsistency is awarded more clarity when one considers the work of Staughton Lynd. In *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution*, Lynd argues that ‘the popular elements in [the revolutionary] coalition – small farmers and city artisans – often clashed with their upper-class leaders, and fear of what the Declaration calls “convulsions within” and “domestic insurrections against us” was a principle motive for the formation of the United States constitution.’¹⁴² In Lynd’s eyes, ‘convulsions within’ were certainly damaging to the Revolution’s political cause, but those convulsions were also paramount in determining the outcome of the Revolution; so much so that they were afforded explicit mention within the Declaration of Independence.

Two general trends of interpretation consistently emerge from these various points of contention. However, these do not indicate any coherent political divide in the new social scholarship. Broadly speaking, the Sons of Liberty are portrayed as either a top-down organisational force or a bottom-up manifestation of working-class activism. While the former perpetuates a consensus interpretation of the organisation, the latter is more fittingly

¹³⁹ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, p. 309.

¹⁴⁰ Nash, p. 299.

¹⁴¹ Nash, p. 383.

¹⁴² Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery*, p. 10.

aligned with the radical politics of the New Left. The new social historians are not consistent in their interpretations and none can be exclusively labelled radical or conservative. Instead, their interpretations tend to oscillate. Gary Nash and Staughton Lynd certainly stand out as two of the most radical proponents of the new social trend. In his preface to *The Urban Crucible*, Nash personally propagates a new social agenda, making it his mission ‘to correct the hallowed generalizations made from the study of the select few upon which our understanding of history is primarily based.’¹⁴³ Nash ultimately seeks to combat the homogenising force of consensus and exalt the individual experience of the working-class labourer. The same can be said of Staughton Lynd.¹⁴⁴ Joseph Burke even criticises Lynd for being too partisan. In his review of Lynd’s *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution*, Burke contends that, ‘While making history is obviously more important than writing it, one wishes that the author of these essays had been able to find the time to do the research which his hypothesis clearly called for.’¹⁴⁵ Irwin Unger goes a step further, labelling Lynd ‘a talented New Left historian, [who] has been quite explicit about the need for a usable radical past to provide direction for the new radical community.’¹⁴⁶ Yet despite their radical agendas, Nash and Lynd both give balanced appraisals of the Sons of Liberty. As demonstrated above, when discussing the effectiveness of mob action, Nash and Lynd walk the middle ground between a radical and conservative interpretation. Evidently, the new social historians were not exclusively directed by their political affiliations.

The profusion of diverse interpretations uncovered in this study likewise exemplifies the multifaceted and pluralistic nature of new social history. As argued in the preceding

¹⁴³ Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, p. ix.

¹⁴⁴ Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery*, pp. 12-21.

¹⁴⁵ J. Burke, ‘Review of S. Lynd, *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution*’, *The Journal of American History*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1969, p. 861.

¹⁴⁶ Unger, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1243.

chapter, new social history encouraged localised studies and methodological innovation.¹⁴⁷ In turn, such specialised studies were subject to a variety of factors, all of which engendered highly divergent interpretations of a singular historical phenomenon. As James Henretta argues, ‘These premises lead directly to the conclusion that each historical case has to be treated on its own, as a unique constellation of specific conditions or events. The most general result that can be obtained is an “hypothesis,” but this must be “tested” with respect to each new case.’¹⁴⁸ New social history was a turbulent mess. As such, there is no homogenous or consistent interpretation of the Sons of Liberty. Each specialised study ultimately produced its own nuanced interpretation. Yet for the new social historians, such an outcome was both entirely expected and even desirable. As Alfred Young explains in his compilation of new social histories:

‘Taken all together, [these] essays may not add up to any interpretation of the Revolution at all; they certainly do not add up to any interpretation that can be easily labelled [...] the fact that none of the individual essays can be easily labelled and that the collection of the whole does not fall easily into any existing school of interpretation may well be one of the virtues of this entire exploration.’¹⁴⁹

New social history was multiperspectival, whereby each specialised interpretation enhanced the historical understanding of the past. As Young continues, the new social historians bring:

‘a sense of humility before a many-sided event not easily reduced to a single formula; an understanding that there is not one tradition, but that there are many traditions that come out of the Revolution; and an awareness that [...] the history of the American Revolution, as the history of the United States, is yet to be written.’¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Veysey, *Reviews in American History*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁴⁸ Henretta, *The American Historical Review*, p. 1308.

¹⁴⁹ Young, *The American Revolution*, p. xiv.

¹⁵⁰ Young, p. 461.

Each separate interpretation of the Sons of Liberty, whether radical or conservative, was equally valuable in its own regard. All added up to a mosaic portrait of the past which is inherently multifaceted, contradictory, but equally enriching.

When one takes into account the ranging interpretations of the Sons of Liberty, it becomes evident just how diverse new social history was. Two general trends of interpretation do emerge. The first is aligned with the contemporary politics of the New Left, portraying the Sons of Liberty as a bottom-up manifestation of popular activism and working-class leaders. The second trend is more conservative and seemingly perpetuates a consensus perspective. Regardless, the new social historians avoid falling into any conservative or radical denomination. Instead, their interpretations oscillate between the two camps. Each historian's perspective was influenced by countless environmental and socio-political variables. Nevertheless, despite their inconsistencies, each interpretation of the Sons of Liberty was also considered both valid and enriching. Multiperspectivalism characterised the new social trend. As such, there was no totalising historical truth. The Sons of Liberty could be understood in a multitude of different manners. It merely depended upon the unique perspective of the individual historian.

CONCLUSION

New social history certainly marked a turning point in the evolution of American historiography. While progressive scholarship conceptualised history in terms of broad overarching structures, the sixties saw the emergence of a new form of social history; one which welcomed localised studies and exalted the agency of marginalised groups. The new social historians increasingly focused their studies on the belief systems and mentalities of subaltern populations. In this manner, new social history heralded in the cultural turn which began taking shape in the early 1970s. Likewise novel was new social history's propensity for narrative exposition, infusing traditional structural theories with the employment of literary sources. Each historian was innovative, employing the anecdotal and analytical approaches to varying degrees. Rather than abide to any overarching manifesto, the new social historians were inherently individualistic. They personally experimented with their methodological tools and the focuses of their studies were both geographically and socially narrow. This is of fundamental importance when one examines how the new social historians portray the Sons of Liberty. Considering that each case-study was subject to its own set of variables, it is no wonder that interpretations fluctuate. A radical and conservative divide emerges, though historians consistently oscillate between these two perspectives. In essence, politics did not exclusively dictate the direction of new social history. Instead, the historians directed themselves.

For the new social historians, there was no totalising historical truth. Nor can a coherent conception of the Sons of Liberty be yielded from the new social scholarship. This was entirely expected. Multiperspectivalism characterised the new social trend, whereby each specialised study was considered both valid and enriching in its own right. It is impossible to adequately conceptualise the new social trend. Neither can one reconcile the unique and

discordant interpretations of the Sons of Liberty. While common patterns do emerge, the contradictions and nuances of each are too notable to simply ignore. Regardless, new social history celebrated such contradictions. It probed the conventional understanding of the past and fostered contentious discussion, thereby engendering a richer understanding of the American past.

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