

# The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence

T. H. Breen

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## THE MARKETPLACE OF REVOLUTION

*How Consumer Politics Shaped  
American Independence*

T. H. BREEN

"The most original interpretation of how the American Revolution happened to appear in the last fifty years."—JOSEPH J. ELLIS,  
author of *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*

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**T. H. Breen : The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Well Written, Detailed, and Thorough View on the Revolution through an Economic Point of View By gloine36 T.H. Breen, William Smith Mason Professor of American History at Northwestern University sought to answer one of the pivotal questions that historians of the American Revolution have spent centuries trying to answer. Just why did the people of thirteen British North American colonies come together by 1776 in a generally united body to oppose what was considered the most powerful and richest nation in the world? It is thought by many that these colonists opposed taxation, but their own writing proves that this was not the case. They believed that taxation was something to be expected and to be willingly paid to provide for the common

good. What they opposed was taxation without representation. More specifically, they felt they were not represented in Parliament like they were represented in the colonial legislature or towns. Yet, what was being taxed that caused the rebellious demeanor of ordinary men and women to come into existence? Breen did a marvelous job in compiling a deep pool of primary sources from the ordinary people of the 18th century. Often people think of the men we call the Founders when they respond to the people of the Revolution. As modern historiography has been showing us over the last three decades, the American Revolution did not begin with the actions at Lexington and Concord, but rather with the reaction of the British colonists to Parliament's attempts at raising revenue in the colonies. This should be well known because the people of that era recognized that fact as well. John Adams stressed that point himself in multiple forms of correspondence. Breen's research into this reaction provided him with an illuminating view of how those ordinary people saw their world and their role in it change over a two decade period of time and precipitate the Revolution. What really stood out other than Breen's thesis are the words of the people in the sources he used. In quite a few cases, if the wording was adjusted to reflect modern speech, the words from the past would be the same as uttered throughout America regarding how people envision the "good old days." While that wasn't Breen's intent for positing his thesis, it is extremely poignant in demonstrating that successive generations have all experienced the same myopic nostalgic opinion of the past when compared to the present. Breen also used the words of the past to show how the people of the 18th century changed their views on the mother country and its manufactures from 1764 to 1775. In the process, Breen also shows that the real revolution took place among the people of the colonies. The people of the colonies experienced a significant cultural change which was among the first examples of consumerism to appear in history. Both the colonists and the British were dealing with a completely new phenomenon, and both had no clue what to expect from this new and extremely significant economic development. Breen's research shows how the colonists embraced the British manufactures willingly albeit with some grumbling from the more conservative elements of colonial society. He also showed how those same colonists slowly came to realize that their participation in this new consumerist exchange could also be used as a weapon against what they considered abusive government. As Parliament sought to increase revenue from the colonies to pay down the tremendous debt the British had incurred in the Seven Year's War, it blundered badly in the way it sought to do so. Despite these blunders, Parliament repeatedly backed down from its imposition of new taxes on the colonists twice although the attempts by the colonists to use the transoceanic commerce as a form of economic weaponry had also failed twice. What baffles so many historians is the tax that proved to be fatal to the British rule was a tiny, insignificant, but highly symbolic tax on tea. That tax proved to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back for the colonists. As Breen showed through the building up of the thesis through the primary sources and analysis of their meaning, the colonists came to see British manufactures and tea as symbols of tyranny because of the way those items were used in the taxation without representation argument. It was these items that formed a common bond between all colonists and these items that the colonists used as economic weapons to resist the British taxation. In the process, the non-consumption of these items or non-importation united the colonists to the point that they began to see themselves differently through their common use of the items. As Breen progressed through each chapter he made a deliberate effort to include gender in how the colonists viewed the issues as well as class. He definitely wrote the book from a social history perspective as a result. While the idea of the marketplace being heavily involved in the Revolution seems a bit Beardian, Breen's real conception of the era is that the marketplace was made up of individuals who made individual choices. His vision of the Revolution is that of a bottom up interpretation where it began among the common people. This is in line with much of current historical thought. Whereas Beard relied upon economic reasons for the Revolution to occur, Breen sees the economic situation as part of the overall Revolution. The people made the economy respond to them in causing the Revolution rather than the other way around. I was a bit disappointed that Breen didn't take this thesis one step further into the much larger context of the Atlantic World. I think he did a great job in developing this thesis and delivering the conclusion, but the colonies were also part of international trade albeit limited by the Navigation Acts. What I particularly liked the best was that if anyone wonders why tea became the sole item that seemingly triggered events that brought about the Intolerable Acts, this book answers that question quite well and uses plenty of primary sources in the process. As a result, Breen has delivered a good explanation of how the colonists used the marketplace during the Revolution to resist the taxation with representation issue. Rather than restate an economic interpretation of the Revolution, Breen has given us a well detailed explanation of how the marketplace became the battleground in the Revolution. I of 1 people found the following review helpful. Marketplace of the Revolution By Kim Burdick. T.H. Breen offers a consumer studies approach to the pre-Revolutionary War years. Breen focuses on the market between 1730 and 1770. Everything from pickles to paint, frying pans to fire engines, can be found on Breen's lists of British-made goods bought and sold in colonial America. Peddlers, vendues, and village shops and stores are all scrutinized. Breen's speculation that the recall of British soldiers after the French and Indian War led to tight market, financial crisis, and Parliament's assumption that the American colonists could perfectly well bear to pay increased taxes. The 18th century colonial boycott of British goods as an 18th century political maneuver makes perfect sense when seen through Breen's eyes. I read almost half this book before I realized Breen was not British. One of the reasons for this is his

comparison of the American colonial experiences with those of British citizens in other far-flung ports, including 19th century India and Kenya. I will recommend "Marketplace of Revolution" for book reports to business majors who take my American history courses. Definitely worth reading. Kim Burdick Stanton, Delaware 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Revolution through Consumerism By Blondie PhD As Joseph Ellis proclaims on the cover, Timothy Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* is one of "the most original interpretation[s] of how the American Revolution happened." Instead of following in the footsteps of Progressive or ideological historians, Breen examines the importance of consumerism in generat[ing] a sense of trust sufficient to sustain colonial rebellion" across "such a diverse [American] population" (xiii). Though Americans "aspired to economic independence," few were able to remain completely self-sufficient by the 1740s (70). This consumerism developed similarly throughout all of British colonial America with "choice in the consumer marketplace gradually merg[ing] with a discourse of rights" by the 1770s (151). Although material goods themselves were important, their implications on the formation of an American identity of consumerism were even more important. Breen contends that "the language and experience in the consumer marketplace...helped the successful mobilization of ordinary people" by emphasizing their commonalities, building a sense of trust among colonists from different regions (23). This "trust" made the boycotts of British goods not only worthwhile for the colonists but also an effective means of expressing dissatisfaction. *The Marketplace of Revolution* is broken into two parts: *An Empire of Goods* and *A Commercial Plan for Political Salvation*. In "An Empire of Goods," Breen describes the development of the 18th-century "consumer revolution" and explains how Americans became important consumers of British goods. By the 1760s both Britain and America saw colonial consumption as essential to the economic welfare of the nation. The second section, "A Commercial Plan for Political Salvation," reframes the political tensions of the 1760s and 1770s in terms of American consumerism. Breen, much like the methodology employed by Bernard Bailyn did in the first chapters of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, uses colonial newspapers to illustrate how "trust" was established among colonists in different geographic locations, creating solidarity against unfair British politics of trade and politics. Also much like Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, *The Marketplace of Revolution* ends just before the outbreak of the Revolution. By stopping here, Breen avoids having to explain the wavering patriotic zeal of American colonists during the war. It would have been interesting for Breen to provide more than just a reinterpretation of the Revolution's origins according to material goods, but possibly this was a strategic move intended to avoid circumstances that could undermine his overall thesis. To construct his argument, Breen uses an assortment of sources including travel narratives, museum collections, archaeological evidence, probate records, British customs records, and colonial newspapers. He is rather forthcoming about the limitations each of these sources pose and in doing so makes an important methodological observation. In order to make a convincing argument, one cannot rely solely on one type of source but instead on a large corpus of evidence, noting similar patterns and divergences. By ignoring the pamphlets, speeches, and sermons of this era, Breen is not only further emphasizing his rejection of an ideological or Progressive interpretation, but he is also deemphasizing the importance of typical Revolutionary figures in exchange for the experiences of "ordinary men." Breen claims that colonial newspapers are the most useful source of ordinary men's opinions because newspapers were not controlled by the upper classes. This may have been true to some extent, but newspapers do not reveal the true sentiments of the majority of people. Omitted are the typical marginalized groups of illiterate men, slaves, and women. While *The Marketplace of Revolution* certainly adds much to our understanding of pre-Revolutionary economics it does tend to make generalized statements, disregarding individual experience. This is paradoxical because Breen's argument relies on the assumption that consumerism encouraged freedom of choice which led to widespread individualism. By insinuating a shared, unified culture and experience across regional boundaries, Breen is actually undermining his assertion of the importance of individualism. His focus on the rise of the individual (and thus modernity) is also troubling both because it is teleological and because it assumes individual choice did not exist until the late eighteenth-century. Additionally problematic is Breen's assumption that Americans were conscious consumers, making a direct correlation between their buying patterns and patriotic unity. Were they being patriotic or just following a trend? Regardless of these problems, Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution* provides us with an highly original reinterpretation of the American Revolution. Scholars and non-scholars alike will enjoy his argument as well as the many detailed images accompanying them. Additionally, college students and graduate students will love this book as it provides a completely new interpretation of the American Revolution that they probably have not considered before.

*The Marketplace of Revolution* offers a boldly innovative interpretation of the mobilization of ordinary Americans on the eve of independence. Breen explores how colonists who came from very different ethnic and religious backgrounds managed to overcome difference and create a common cause capable of galvanizing resistance. In a richly interdisciplinary narrative that weaves insights into a changing material culture with analysis of popular political protests, Breen shows how virtual strangers managed to communicate a sense of trust that effectively united men and women long before they had established a nation of their own. *The Marketplace of Revolution* argues that the colonists' shared experience as consumers in a new imperial economy afforded them the cultural resources that they needed to

develop a radical strategy of political protest--the consumer boycott. Never before had a mass political movement organized itself around disruption of the marketplace. As Breen demonstrates, often through anecdotes about obscure Americans, communal rituals of shared sacrifice provided an effective means to educate and energize a dispersed populace. The boycott movement--the signature of American resistance--invited colonists traditionally excluded from formal political processes to voice their opinions about liberty and rights within a revolutionary marketplace, an open, raucous public forum that defined itself around subscription lists passed door-to-door, voluntary associations, street protests, destruction of imported British goods, and incendiary newspaper exchanges. Within these exchanges was born a new form of politics in which ordinary man and women--precisely the people most often overlooked in traditional accounts of revolution--experienced an exhilarating surge of empowerment. Breen recreates an "empire of goods" that transformed everyday life during the mid-eighteenth century. Imported manufactured items flooded into the homes of colonists from New Hampshire to Georgia. The Marketplace of Revolution explains how at a moment of political crisis Americans gave political meaning to the pursuit of happiness and learned how to make goods speak to power.