

T.H. Breen. *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. Pp. 347. Cloth \$27.00.

Historical analysis and scholarship concerning the American Revolution are voluminous, and focus largely on the intellectual contributions of the founders and framers of the American experiment. T.H. Breen, William Smith Mason professor of American History at Northwestern University suggests a different approach to understanding our nation's inception. In *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* he argues that "ordinary" men and women fueled the Revolution and pressured leaders to declare independence. Breen's conscious reference to embattled farmers as "insurgents" documents the term used by contemporaries, but he struggles to make the connection between the radical connotations of the concept then and now (4). Insurgency, in late-eighteenth-century America, does not resemble our current understanding because physical violence, the centerpiece of most revolutions, did not surface as a predominant feature of the American Revolution. Instead, these insurgents (or patriots) were motivated by their immediate passions amplified through fear, fury, and resentment and a host of emotions encouraged and supported by evangelical religion (11). This book posits that independence and revolution happened long before the stroke of a pen in 1776, and that "the people" through networks, committees of safety, and "schools of revolution" contributed to the narrative of the American Revolution.

Breen narrows his examination to a two-year period beginning in the summer of 1774 with the Coercive Acts that prompted insurgents to drive royal officials from their posts, to the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. His retelling of the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774 emphasizes the influence that thousands of New Englanders had on the Congress's decision to adopt the Suffolk Resolves, a far more radical set of resolutions than the delegates originally discussed. This book differs from other scholarship on the Revolutionary period largely because it argues that patriot communication networks had the strength to unite colonists throughout North America, despite regional differences. These networks or "committees of safety" formed what Breen calls "schools of revolution" and engaged in insurgent tactics that emphasized "civil excommunication" which silenced critics and denounced political offenders (186). Although Breen's work echoes the scholarship of Gordon S. Wood's 1992 *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, his biggest contribution is his recognition of Lockean political philosophy and its influence on "ordinary" people. Insurgents most likely had not read Locke's work, but his thoughts on the general principles of rights were understood and woven into the fabric of insurgent political ideology (19). Put another way, insurgents did not need the founding fathers to tell them they had natural rights. They were well aware of these rights and acted accordingly.

Breen relies largely on newspapers, sermons, and Matthew Patten's late-eighteenth-century journal which he claims bears witness to the extralegal processes that made the American Revolution (5). But Breen's challenge to the traditional narrative focuses exclusively on white men (as insurgents) in New England while missing an opportunity to bring African Americans, Indians, and women into the story. As the subtitle to the book suggests, we are led to believe that the *Revolution of the People* comprised a racially diverse group while most insurgents were convinced that the category of "the people" excluded non-whites. Breen only mentions in passing runaway

slaves, an issue that galvanized both insurgents and British loyalists as each side accused the other of inciting black resistance. In addition, Breen praises the insurgents for privileging alternative tactics over physical violence, but never discusses how those tactics most likely resonated as acts of terror.

Breen frames the Revolution as an emotional experience that swelled from the citizenry and challenges historians to look even deeper into the contributions of “ordinary” men and women. Graduate students and those interested in the American Revolution would benefit from a close reading of this book and its approach to understanding the political foundation of America and the formation of grassroots politics.

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