

# Bernard Bailyn, historian of American colonial and revolutionary periods, 1922–2020

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13 August 2020

Bernard Bailyn, an influential and significant historian of the American colonial period, passed away last week at his home in Belmont, Massachusetts. The cause of death was heart failure. He was 97.

Bailyn's writing spanned 70 years. His first book, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, was published in 1955. His last book, *Illuminating History: A Retrospective of Seven Decades*, appeared last year.

In the course of his long academic career, all of it spent at Harvard University, Bailyn published dozens of books and articles. Bailyn guided the dissertations of many historians, several of whom themselves have made extraordinary contributions to knowledge of the colonial and revolutionary periods, foremost among them Gordon S. Wood of Brown University. Bailyn's most famous study, published in 1967, is *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, which demonstrated the extraordinary breadth of the political debate that ruptured the colonies' relationship with Great Britain. It won both the Bancroft and Pulitzer prizes for history.

Bailyn brought to his work enormous technical skills, vast erudition and the capacity to imagine the past as a time profoundly different from one's own, in which the actors lived, thought and struggled in the context of a historically-conditioned situation. Bailyn valued historians, as he explained it, who "sought to understand the past in its own terms: to relocate events, the meaning of documents, the motivations of historical actors in their original historical sockets."

Bailyn captured the drama of historical actors moving toward ends unknown to them, an approach that imbued his writing with literary quality. History, he wrote, imposed "limitations within which everyone involved was obliged to act; the inescapable boundaries of action; the blindness of the actors—in a word, the tragedy of the event." And further, "the essence and drama of history lie precisely in the active and continuous relationship between the underlying conditions that set the boundaries of human existence and the everyday problems with which people consciously struggle."

Wood, in a tribute to his mentor, noted that "George Eliot or Thomas Hardy or Henry James could not have described better what they were doing in their tragic novels."

This outlook brought Bailyn into conflict with anachronism in history-writing throughout his career. When *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* was published, it challenged

both the conservative "consensus school" of American history, sometimes called "Whig history," that dominated the 1950s and which saw the revolutionary period as unfolding to a predetermined, liberal, end. It also put him at odds with an ostensibly "left" history—falsely identified with Marxism—that interpreted the eighteenth-century politics of the revolutionaries as nothing more than hypocritical rationalizations for economic interests. This school of thought was associated above all with the progressive historian Charles Beard.

*The Ideological Origins*, through an analysis of hundreds of revolutionary pamphlets, revealed the broad scope and the intensity of the political crisis of the late colonial period—a crisis Bailyn saw as essentially a challenge to traditional, aristocratic and English authority taking place at the very fringe of the European world. The colonists' conspiratorial view that the British Parliament sought to strip them of their free-born liberties as Englishmen, so prevalent in the documentary evidence, could not simply be dismissed as propaganda, as many historians had done. The ideological worldview at the disposal of the colonists, largely derived from English radical sources, lagged behind the actual social conditions of the colonies, but this did not make their thinking unreal.

As Bailyn explains in the important chapter "The Contagion of Liberty," the politics soon swept over all forms of authority, challenging existing established order in government, churches and even plantations. Contrary to both the consensus and progressive historians, Bailyn therefore perceived that the American Revolution was a radical event.

Bailyn's work can certainly be criticized for its underestimation of the significance of class forces in the revolutionary period. Commenting on Bailyn's work in a letter to this writer, Gordon Wood observed: "He didn't like any suggestion of a class conflict." Nevertheless, Bailyn told the American Historical Association, in his 1981 presidential address, that "We are all Marxists in the sense of assuming that history is profoundly shaped by underlying economic or 'materialist' configurations and by people's responses to them."

Bailyn was born to a middle class Jewish family in Hartford, Connecticut. His wife, Lotte, was of German-speaking background, connected to emigrants who had fled Nazi Germany. In one of the few biographical comments he made in his academic work, he spoke of how these exiles from Hitler, often talented artists and intellectuals, were "the least parochial" people he ever

knew, and who viewed the United States as a “far outer Anglo-American periphery.” This clearly contributed to Bailyn’s own view of the British North American colonies, which he constantly presented as a sort of border rim that ran European cultural and intellectual life to its very edges.

Lotte Bailyn survives her husband. A longtime professor of management at MIT and herself a prolific author, Lotte assisted her husband in one of his early books, *Massachusetts Shipping, 1697–1714: A Statistical Study*. Published in 1959, it was one of the first historical studies to use computer technology to compile data.

Bailyn’s education was interrupted by World War II, in which he was assigned into the Signal Corps and trained to fluency in German, having already studied French. He entered Harvard graduate school in 1946, where Oscar Handlin, one of the first Jewish professors at the leading Ivy League university, was his mentor and later his colleague. Whatever challenges he may have himself faced in this environment notorious for its anti-Semitism, Harvard offered Bailyn one of the most sought-after tenure-track jobs in America in 1953, though he was a relatively young and unknown scholar.

Bailyn appears to have said very little about the political environment at the time. But anti-communism had exacted a terrible price among writers and artists, and on the American intellectual environment as a whole. It was in this shadow of McCarthyism that the conservative consensus school of American history held sway, whose foremost advocate was the Yale historian Edmund S. Morgan. Bailyn thus emerged as a major intellectual figure in the late 1950s in the immediate aftermath of the McCarthy period, but before the emergence of the New Left on the campuses just a decade later.

In the years immediately after the publication of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, entire new academic fields emerged: critical revisionist studies of political, diplomatic and labor history, as well as African American history, women’s history, Native American history, and many more. The new fields criticized what the late Howard Zinn called “establishment history” and brought forward the social history of the oppressed, who had often left behind little or no written record. This yielded fresh and significant results, and, for the colonial period, considerably widened the lens.

Yet the New Left historians tended to dismiss the American Revolution as an elite conspiracy—a position, ironically, that was first made by the Loyalists and the Tories during the imperial crisis—and began to label Bailyn as a consensus, or purely intellectual, historian.

By the 1990s, when Bailyn retired from the classroom, college history departments were becoming bogged down in the miasma created by the cross-pollination of identity politics with postmodernism, a philosophical tendency that rejects narrative in history and even the very effort to establish a factual or objective approach to the study of the past. At that point, the weaknesses and political confusion of the New Left-inspired history, there from the start, emerged as a destructive force aimed not at the revision of history, but at its destruction.

These reactionary intellectual tendencies for many years

appeared to be confined largely to the campuses and the university presses. And even though new identity politics-dominated academic history was richly fed, itself becoming a new establishment, Bailyn continued to win national prizes and awards, and appreciations regularly appeared in the major publications of American liberalism, including the *New York Times*.

This is no longer the case. The *Times* obituary to Bailyn, while it acknowledged the undeniable influence of his early career, insinuated that his recent work—his four-decades long study of immigration to the colonies entitled *The Peopling of British North America*—was outmoded. In line with its relentless promotion of racial conflict as the axis of American history, which is coupled with the libelous claim that white historians are incapable of understanding the historical role and contribution of non-whites, the *Times* made sure to devote a portion of the obituary to “the strong criticism from fellow historians for what they saw as inadequate or dismissive treatment of nonwhite people.” There is no merit to this criticism. It is a smear aimed to make the *Times* readership believe that Bailyn’s work is no longer relevant, and that he was a racist.

The last year of Bailyn’s life witnessed the publication of the *Times*’ promotion of a racist falsification of history, the 1619 Project. In a blunt, though unintended admission of the intellectually fraudulent character of this operation, Nikole Hannah-Jones—the public face of the Project—recently tweeted that “the 1619 Project is not a history.” It is, rather, “about who gets to control the national narrative, and, therefore, the nation’s shared memory of itself.” This is a retrograde conception that obliterates the distinction between history and myth, and legitimizes lies in the interests of a race-centered political agenda.

The 1619 Project’s central claim—that the American Revolution was a counterrevolution to defend slavery—rests on a series of falsehoods and distortions, up to and including basic errors of chronological order. This flagrant distortion of the past contradicts Bailyn’s career. The aged historian was not consulted for the project, and neither, it is clear enough, were his major books. His work, with its precision toward fact and its appreciation of the colonial world as it existed, was of no use to the *Times*’ exercise in historical falsification.

The effort to brush aside Bailyn will not succeed. The resurgence of social struggles in the United States will generate a renewed interest in the democratic ideals that inspired the great revolutionaries of the eighteenth century. In this intellectually healthier environment, the work left behind by Bernard Bailyn will be respected for its honesty and objectivity.



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