

WSWS webinar on the American Revolution: The historical significance and contemporary relevance of 1776

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On the eve of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the *World Socialist Web Site* convened a significant global webinar, “The American Revolution and Its Place in History: From the War Against Monarchy to ‘No Kings.’” The event was co-moderated by David North, chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, and Eric Lee, a federal civil litigator who has played a major role in the fight to defend democratic rights.

The webinar brought together leading historians of the American Revolution and Civil War. James Oakes and Sean Wilentz are among the foremost scholars of slavery, emancipation and American democracy—Oakes, a two-time Lincoln Prize winner and author of *Freedom National*, and Wilentz, the Bancroft Prize-winning author of *The Rise of American Democracy*. Richard Carwardine, former president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, is a biographer of Lincoln and himself a two-time Lincoln Prize winner. Adam Hochschild, the renowned author of *King Leopold’s Ghost* and *American Midnight*, and labor historian Thomas Mackaman of King’s College, who conducted the WSWS’s 2019 interviews with historians on the 1619 Project, also took part.

The WSWS webinar stands as the only serious discussion held with leading historians on the causes, implications and enduring relevance of the American Revolution during this critical anniversary. This itself speaks to the disinterest and indeed hostility of the entire political establishment and official media to the bourgeois democratic traditions of the United States itself.

From workers and youth, however, the webinar has drawn a powerful response. Viewership has passed 2,000 as of this writing, and readers across the world have written in, many expressing enthusiasm at finding a defense of the American Revolution mounted from the left.

The webinar could not be more timely. North opened with the warning that the anniversary “unfolds amid an escalating assault on democratic rights and the foundations of American democracy.” Trump, he noted, “has spoken openly of dictatorial rule.” After losing the 2020 election he “attempted to overturn its result and block the peaceful transfer of power.”

His return to office in 2024 marked “not only a breakdown of democratic institutions but also a profound erosion of democratic consciousness.”

It is precisely this turn toward dictatorship, North explained, that makes the study of the revolutionary traditions of the United States a political necessity. The Declaration of Independence was revolutionary, he said, because “it indicted the existing social and political order and called for its overthrow in the most sweeping and universal terms,” and its principles “transcended the objective limitations imposed upon it by its own time.” It was, he said, “both of its time and of the future,” and for that reason its defense is inseparable from the defense of democratic rights today.

The Revolution must be studied critically as, in North’s words, “an opportunity to ask what was revolutionary in the Revolution, what was limited, what was betrayed, what was carried forward and what remains unresolved.”

The webinar took up that task. It addressed an enormous breadth of political, intellectual and historical issues that ranged across two-and-a-half centuries.

The panel examined the society from which the Revolution sprang, and it traced the Revolution’s global reach. Wilentz declared, “you can’t understand any of the other revolutions without understanding the American Revolution,” while Hochschild traced the abolitionist networks that carried the famous British diagram of a slave ship to Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia and to Lafayette in Paris. The international thread ran on into the Civil War: Carwardine recalled the grief in British cities at Lincoln’s assassination, and Mackaman noted that Marx, writing for the International Working Men’s Association, helped turn the British working class against the Confederacy.

The webinar followed the enduring strength of the Declaration’s principles down through American history. Oakes observed that the labor radicals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “repeatedly invoked the Declaration of Independence,” as had the movements for abolition and women’s suffrage before them. And the panelists examined the relentless assault upon those principles as the class struggle

sharpened and American imperialism emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Drawing on his book *American Midnight*, Hochschild reconstructed the repression during and after the First World War, and Wilentz drew the line to the present, noting that the one Alien and Sedition Act still on the books is the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, the statute “upon which Donald Trump has seized in order to do his mass deportations.”

But the question to which the discussion repeatedly returned, and the one that gave the webinar its central purpose, was the revolutionary character of the Revolution itself. Oakes spoke to the universalism of the Declaration, whose assertion of universal human equality “establishes an entirely new revolutionary standard by which every social movement from that point on is evaluated.” Carwardine described it as the formal end of “a world of ascribed status,” in which a person’s place was fixed by birth and rank.

Wilentz drew out the two revolutions, one against monarchy and aristocracy, the other against slavery that would culminate in the Civil War, and the radicalism of an upheaval that overturned a social order founded on inherited rank. Mackaman stressed the importance of the Declaration’s proclamation of the right of revolution and the principle of equality, “the most powerful idea” not only in American but “in world history.”

This was a direct answer to the campaign to deny that 1776 was a revolution at all. Mackaman confronted the claim, advanced by Gerald Horne’s *The Counter-Revolution of 1776* and, above all, by the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, that the rebellion was no revolution, or even a counter-revolution to protect slavery. “In its time,” he noted, “nobody, including its enemies, thought it was anything but a revolution.” This denigration of 1776, he argued, is a systematic campaign waged from the milieu of the Democratic Party, employing a racist falsification of history to recast the Revolution as a reactionary defense of slavery.

Both Mackaman and Wilentz identified its method as “presentism” and “anachronism”—the past judged by the standards of the present and great events reduced to moralistic condemnations of the individuals involved. Against this the panel counterposed a defense of reason and the Enlightenment.

What predominates in academia today, North argued, is “a petty-bourgeois view of history” that substitutes race for class. “History cannot be understood through moral denunciation,” he insisted, for it “has no explanatory power,” and the racial outlook rests on “a perverted zoological conception” with “no application to social history.” Oakes drew the corollary: The universalist principle of human equality is “seriously antithetical to identity politics,” which “breaks people down into subgroups.”

Throughout, the panel insisted on the Declaration’s living relevance. Hochschild read its indictment of George III—the military rendered “superior to the civil power,” people “transported beyond seas” for “pretended offenses,” domestic insurrection incited—and observed that the charges read as if

they “were written this morning” in answer to the Trump administration. Lee pointed to the Supreme Court’s 6-3 decision handed down the same day stripping rights from immigrants and to the fact that the organizers of the January 6 coup walk free, while protesters at ICE detention camps face prison sentences of 30, 40 and even 50 years.

In his closing remarks, North returned to the critical theoretical questions involved in an analysis of the American Revolution. History matters, he argued, because “it adds complexity to our understanding of the present” and lets us place the moment within a far broader trajectory. He quoted Lincoln, “our occasion is piled high with difficulty,” and observed that things look most impossible “at the point in which the greatest change is in the offing.”

From this came a revolutionary optimism in the face of the rampaging reaction of the oligarchy. “To be an optimist is to see not only the difficulties but contained within those difficulties the possibility of renewal.” North ventured a prediction, that “the America and the world of 2036 will look vastly different from the world of today,” pointing to the revolutionary potential within the international working class, a globalized society, and growing social opposition. The greatest challenge of the present, he concluded, “is the fight for a historical consciousness.”

The fight over the meaning of 1776, North concluded, is a fight over “the political consciousness and perspective required for the future.” The defense of the most basic democratic rights will not be carried through by any faction of the ruling class, which has repudiated the defense of democratic rights. The task falls to the international working class and is inseparable from the fight for socialism.

The issues raised in this webinar are not matters of mere academic interest. They bear directly on the political struggles now unfolding. The WSWs urges its readers to study this discussion closely, to watch it in full, and to circulate it as widely as you can among co-workers, academics, students and youth.



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