A letter from historian Steven Mintz on “The American Revolution and Its Place in History”

Steven Mintz
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The WSWS received the letter posted below from Steven Mintz, professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, on the webinar “The American Revolution and Its Place in History: From the War Against Monarchy to ‘No Kings.’” *A leading social and cultural historian, Mintz is the author of numerous published works, including* Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood *(2004), winner of the Organization of American Historians’ Merle Curti Award and the Association of American Publishers’ R. R. Hawkins Award for Outstanding Scholarly Book.*

I found the event extraordinarily powerful.

David North’s opening remarks, especially his reaffirmation of Gordon Wood’s argument that the American Revolution was a genuine revolution, could not have been more stirring. The same is true of his discussion of the far-reaching implications of the Revolution’s egalitarian and democratic ideals for the labor movement, abolitionism and the women’s rights movement.

His comments on the democratic and revolutionary backsliding we are witnessing today were equally compelling. They acquired even greater force from what he had already said about the Revolution’s radicalism.

The contrast was unmistakable: a revolution that shattered inherited hierarchies and vastly enlarged the language of equality, followed by a present in which democratic principles are being steadily weakened and abandoned.

What struck me about all the speakers was their willingness to describe the American Revolution clearly and unapologetically as a bourgeois revolution: a revolt against mercantilist trade restrictions, caste and ascribed status, aristocratic privilege, inherited dependence, and British efforts to restrict westward expansion.

To characterize the Revolution in this way is not to dismiss or belittle it. It is to understand its historical role and character. The Revolution elevated the principle of popular consent, challenged relationships grounded in inherited dependency, helped undermine indentured servitude, and profoundly destabilized the ideological foundations of slavery—even though it did not abolish slavery and even though many revolutionaries remained deeply implicated in it.

What the broadcast offered—and what so much supposedly “radical” history now lacks—was a serious Marxist understanding of historical development.

Marxist history was never simply an exercise in critique. It was not merely about exposing hypocrisy, deception, mystification, or the distance between professed ideals and social realities. It was genuinely historical. It understood societies as developing through stages or phases, with each social order creating new capacities, contradictions, and possibilities that could not be reduced either to moral progress or to unchanging domination.

It also understood ideology as the crucial mediating link among material conditions, social interests, political action, and ideas. Ideology was not simply false consciousness or propaganda. It was the language through which people interpreted their circumstances, understood their interests, justified institutions, and imagined alternatives.

I find it striking how rarely younger historians now speak about ideology in this fuller sense—the way historians such as Eric Foner and David Brion Davis

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did. Too much contemporary scholarship moves directly from material structures to discourse, identity, or power without adequately explaining how ideas acquire authority, how they mobilize people, or how they become forces in history.

That, for me, was one of the broadcast's greatest strengths. It treated the American Revolution neither as a sacred national myth nor as a hypocritical fraud, but as a historically specific and genuinely transformative revolution whose contradictions helped generate struggles far beyond anything its original leaders intended.

What you have been doing is precisely what the historical profession ought to be doing: bringing serious, informed, and genuinely historical perspectives to bear on urgent public questions.

I find it extraordinary that the AHA [American Historical Association] and OAH [Organization of American Historians] appear to have so little interest in this work—even at their annual meetings, which should be among the principal forums for sustained debate over the historical meaning of contemporary and past events.

It is equally telling that many of the scholars whom I and others regard as the very best are eager to speak with you. They recognize that serious scholarship flourishes through argument, criticism, and open exchange—not through professional caution or the avoidance of difficult questions.

That is what distinguishes your work. In sharp contrast to the major professional organizations, you take critique and conversation seriously. You make clear that Marxism, at its best, is not a vocabulary for ratifying current sensibilities or protecting a predetermined political line. Its purpose is to understand historical reality as truthfully and rigorously as possible—even when the conclusions are uncomfortable, unfashionable, or politically inconvenient.

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