# An interview with historian Timothy H. Breen on popular mobilization in the American Revolution

**Tom Mackaman**
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*The* WSWS *recently spoke to Timothy H. Breen, William Smith Mason Professor of American History at Northwestern University. A specialist in early American history with a particular interest in political thought, material culture and cultural anthropology, Breen has held the Pitt Professorship of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University and the Harmsworth Professorship of American History at Oxford. His books, including* The Will of the People*;* American Insurgents, American Patriots; The Marketplace of Revolution; *and* Tobacco Culture*, have reshaped historical understanding of the American Revolution and the lives of ordinary people who lived through it.*

**Tom Mackaman:** Let me start by underlining a point about your work and its focus on what you call ordinary people, sometimes "middling types." One might say that we get a view in your work of the mass character of the American Revolution—it was a big revolution that pulled the entire society into its vortex. Can you tell us about your approach, this history-from-the-bottom-up view of the past that you turned to?

**Timothy H. Breen:** Yes, I'll be glad to give that a try. It is true that my work has focused on ordinary men and women using community records. My goal was to examine and better understand how ordinary people accommodated, rationalized, and interpreted what was, in their lives, one of the greatest political transformations you can imagine—leaving a colonial, aristocratic, privileged society for one that at least nominally stressed equality and political rights.

I've always felt that the dominant narrative, which focuses on the Founding Fathers, often endlessly and in detail, misses the energy, the excitement, the passions that drive revolutions. When you compare revolutions—the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the Russian Revolution—you see people in the streets, an outpouring of anger. Some of that degree of street violence didn't happen in the American Revolution, to be sure. But without ordinary people mobilizing and understanding what they were trying to achieve, there would have been no revolution.

I sometimes say glibly, and I don't mean to dismiss the fine work of great historians, that if the Founding Fathers had been the sole force driving the revolution, it would have amounted to little more than a book club at Harvard. You've got to have the people. It's hard to believe that the young farm boys marching to Bunker Hill were discussing the finer points of Montesquieu as they went into battle. So whatever it was that mobilized and energized people to sacrifice for political change has been my goal to find, book after book, looking at local records and memoirs to see the fabric of local society.

**TM:** I thought I'd share a passage from your book, *American Insurgents*, that makes the same points, and I think very powerfully:

> The patriots who are generally credited with mounting the revolution were in fact the beneficiaries of rebellious insurgents who initially sparked resistance. Without tens of thousands of ordinary people willing to set aside their work, homes, and families to take up arms—an expectation of killing and possibly being killed—a handful of elite gentlemen arguing about political theory makes for a debating society, not a revolution. Such reflections raise arresting new questions: how did it happen that so many Americans reached a point of mutual commitment to a cause? When did they do so? The answers, it turns out, were hiding in plain sight. During the two years that preceded the Declaration of Independence, Americans launched an insurgency that drove events toward a successful revolution.

Let me follow that with another question, one of particular interest for our readers, that comes across so clearly in both that book and in *The Will of the People*: the role of the proliferation of committees of ordinary people that sprang up across the colonies. They went by all sorts of names—committees of vigilance, committees of inspection—but the most common name, familiar to students of the French Revolution a decade later, is Committee of Public Safety. Can you tell us about these organizations? What were they? Who was on them? And most crucially, what role did they play in the revolution? Big question, I know.

**TB:** It's a huge question, and I've tried to interrogate the local committees as best I can. Other historians have done good work too, but by and large the committee structure has not been the focus of the dominant-narrative historians. The impulse of a local agrarian society was to focus their political concerns on where they stood in the community. So you have two problems. One is: how do you politicize a local community? The answer is complex, and it's going to be the subject of my next book, but largely it happened through ministers and local merchants—people who felt they were being disrespected in the empire, treated as second-class citizens—and they began to voice grievances.

This led to local organizations, at first largely around consumer politics. I wrote a book called *The Marketplace of Revolution*, and I want to emphasize: historians who praise the American Revolution often point to the three branches of government, the balanced constitution, maybe the opening of the franchise. These are all good things. But in fact, one of the great founding mechanisms of our revolution was the boycott—the weaponizing of the consumer marketplace. That's so important because it touched the lives of ordinary people. They bought tea or didn't buy tea. They bought British imports or they didn't. It was a visible act—if your family buys tea, I see you at the store: what are your political principles? It's a brilliant way of joining the politics of family and community life to larger networks.

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These committees were formed to discuss and monitor community political loyalties. But the second step—crucial if you're interested in the building of new political solidarities—is the ability to communicate the actions of one community to another. If you're just some outlying town in the middle of nowhere saying "the Parliament is mistreating us," that's magazine material. But if you can communicate that grievance to large numbers of other Americans thinking along the same lines, then you have the potential for revolutionary action.

And what was the mechanism? There would have been no revolution without the newspapers. They were absolutely central to turning grievances into revolutionary politics, and this has generally been underestimated. We're entering the world of Benedict Anderson and *Imagined Communities*. If you live in a small town in New England and you're prepared to resist the empire, but you're scared—bad things happen in revolutions, you might get killed—but then you read in the newspaper that total strangers in Maryland and Virginia and Georgia are doing the same thing, you suddenly realize you're not alone, that there is revolutionary potential in political action. That imaginative leap from thousands of local communities to a larger collectivity was the source of the energy that drove the revolution forward.

**TM:** What you're pointing out about the buildup of the newspaper industry—which Benjamin Franklin played a crucial role in, as well as the postal service—suggests there were material developments that helped prepare the way, alongside the consumer boycotts.

You pose the question, I believe in *The Will of the People*: What could have sustained this revolution that endured for years? After the dramatic episodes in Massachusetts in 1775, the war dragged on. As you know, it killed a higher share of Americans than any war but the Civil War—and that was a war where both sides were Americans. You answer that question by turning to these committees again, and the role they played in policing the loyalists, the Tories. I'd like you to elaborate, because I think one thing often missed in conservative treatments of the American Revolution is that there really was a civil-war aspect to it—as one historian put it, not only a war about home rule, but over who would rule at home. Your work shows how that played out at the local level.

**TB:** One problem is that historians treat the revolution as a set piece, a thing—you get independence, you're a new nation, it's a historical object. My writing stresses that revolution is a process, a constant sorting-out of options. Americans in 1765, even in 1770, were not revolutionaries. They were unhappy colonial subjects who felt their lawful government in Parliament was making bad decisions. They weren't screaming for the end of government, they were screaming for good, responsible government, which they felt they weren't getting. In organizing these committees and becoming politicized in a way that hadn't been true before, they discovered new possibilities in politics, new forms of equality. And as the revolution came, the challenges kept shifting.

After Bunker Hill and the Declaration, everyone was swept up—and this has led many historians and textbooks to adopt what I call the "leapfrog" approach to the revolution: the Stamp Act, then the Tea Act, then the Declaration of Independence, then the peace treaty. You think, we're missing some of the story along the way. That's what I tried to do, especially in *Will of the People*. After you declare independence and you're at war, there's what I call the "problem of the second day." All of us who've done political organizing know it: the initial impulse, everyone goes to the streets, you feel solidarity. Then you go home, and the next day—the second day—you think, what am I doing? I have a dog, I have kids to take to school. That's when you really find out whether you have a revolutionary action in play or just a mass protest that will sputter out. It didn't sputter out, in part because of the continuation of these committees at the local level.

The committees were an alternative police force. They enforced the revolution. There's a feeling among some "sunshine patriots," to borrow Paine's words, that revolutions are nice and friendly, like a yard sale where everybody's polite. Revolutions are tough—violent, angry, people get hurt. These committees sorted out revolutionary supporters from the faint of heart. This bothers many contemporary Americans who refuse to see our revolution in comparison with other rebellions and revolutions. Why should we adopt such an exceptional view—that our revolution was unlike any other, and yet one of the most important in world history? How can it be unlike them and yet absolutely determinative for questions of mobilization, solidarity, and revolutionary action? I put that to you.

**TM:** You titled your book *The Will of the People*—the title seemed a bit strange to me until I got into it, because it suggests a different way of looking at the extraordinary debate about sovereignty that raged during the revolution: a view from the bottom up rather than a constitutional history. I want to note that in his *History of the Russian Revolution*—one of the great histories ever written, in my view—Leon Trotsky introduces the concept of dual power, comparing it also to the French Revolution and the English Revolution of the 1640s. He's talking about the formation of alternate organs of power that emerge first side by side with the structures of the old regime, and then supplant that crumbling old order.

This brings me back to the committees. I think a whole book could be written on this question of sovereignty. You make a remarkable observation about how the committees of safety and the Continental Congress, the incipient national dual power, recognized each other's sovereignty through a largely forgotten body—historians rarely write about it—called the Association. You describe it almost as sleight of hand, "a miracle of circular logic," where each recognized the other's sovereignty. Can you talk more about that?

**TB:** I believe—and if I rewrote my book I might indulge in a little hyperbole here—that the Association, passed by Congress in the fall of 1774, was perhaps the first constitution of the United States. It set up what you call dual sovereignty: on one hand the states, and in the Association, the communities. All the elements we've been discussing were present. It was clear that the so-called leaders at Congress were trying to map out a process of revolution, but they were uncertain of their own legitimacy—who did they represent? Was it a viable claim to speak for the people? They recognized that the basis of the revolutionary surge was in the communities. The structure of the protest—the way to mobilize people and get Britain's attention—was through consumer action and, to some extent, action around certain crops.

You'll note that in the protocols of the Association, when a local committee found someone breaking the agreement by buying prohibited goods, that person would be shamed—publicly. The Association said: go to the newspapers, put their names in public view. It didn't say hang them up by their feet—it said engage in public shaming for the good of the revolutionary cause. It was, in my estimation, a brilliant move on both sides. The leaders were trying to control and contain revolutionary fervor, and they found a way to give the local committees a meaningful, determinative voice within a structure of revolutionary protest. These creative political acts of the revolutionary generation are, frankly, totally unappreciated. We spend too much time on battles, on what John Adams had for breakfast, or whether Jefferson was having sex. Fine, that's interesting—but that's not where the people were.

**TM:** I think this insight goes far to support your point about what really drove this revolution. The Continental Congress depended for its legitimacy on the power it gained from the revolution, with all these committees proliferating across the colonies—and in turn it granted legitimacy to their policing actions against the Tories. I don't know of any other historians who've given such persistent attention to these organizations.

**TB:** There haven't been many. One of my former graduate students, an extremely promising young man named Donald Johnson, who teaches in North Dakota, is now writing about this. There was an earlier book by a

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man named Ammerman[i] on the committees' reaction to the Coercive Acts. These are good works.

But by and large, for two reasons, I haven't been able to break through the dominant narrative—which concentrates on the Continental Congress and the leaders on one hand, and, on the other, the underside of that same narrative: that the revolution was a total failure, sustaining racism, sexism and violence against Native Americans, and shouldn't be celebrated. That's the counter-narrative to the hagiography of the Founders.

Navigating a middle ground is as dangerous for a historian as for a sailor. My interest isn't in the failures or heroics of certain people, but in how ordinary people—like most of us today—navigate politics through our own communities, friends, and neighbors, and come to understanding. I have a whole chapter in *Will of the People* about fear. All you have to do is read the newspapers today about Ukraine—how do ordinary Ukrainians get through their days? It's terrible, and one reason is shared fear—fear of losing, fear of the consequences.

Once you start a revolution, it's very dangerous to lose. People come to understand they have to sustain what they've started, even if they're a little lukewarm. Then I have a chapter on disappointment, a sense of betrayal. Most historians ignore this, but in 1779 and 1780 there was a growing feeling among the ordinary people who had sustained the revolution that a good number of so-called revolutionaries were profiteering from the war. This isn't unusual—every war produces profiteers—but we seldom see our own revolution in light of the question: if we're a republic fighting for the common good, how is it that some Boston merchants are making out really well while we're rationing food?

So the revolution is a process of discovery, a shifting of experience—people's reactions moving from elation to fear to a sense of betrayal. The last chapter is about revenge. Our revolution, strangely—and it's one of the first I've ever read about that managed to actually end—there were no White Russians, no French-style resistance in the countryside. The Americans more or less just stopped. I was amazed to find how many former Tories were elected to state legislatures in the 1780s and took political positions. I haven't fully answered this—historians like Gould are looking at the end of the war—but my contribution is to see the revolution as a fluid, ongoing, reactive process.

**TM:** Going back to the point about the revolution having a relatively clear chronological end—I think there's truth to that, and I agree. But there's also this incredible transformation of society that took place, and in that sense it doesn't quite end. As we've discussed in other contexts, the American Revolution and the Civil War are so intimately connected.

I wanted to circle back to the last iteration of these committees—you mentioned how they fought against war profiteering. That's a really interesting part of the book, and I think it challenges a capitalist myth about the American Revolution. On page 162, you write: "Indeed, to answer a question posed at the beginning of this book, what made the American Revolution truly revolutionary was the growing determination of newly empowered Americans to endorse a social contract based on community solidarity rather than unbridled individualism." And to listen to the dominant right-wing interpretation of the American Revolution, you'd think it was waged so there could be trillionaires like Elon Musk.

**TB:** Unfortunately, the 250th anniversary should be, for our country, an embarrassment. The achievement of independence from a colonial situation, the birth of a new republic—reducing that to cage wrestling and car racing in our capital should be an embarrassment to all ordinary people today. The current regime is determined to interpret a corporate past in ways that give legitimacy to capitalist greed and excessive power through wealth. I understand that. I'm trying to restore a revolution that should give confidence to people today who live in small communities like mine—that if they're true to basic principles of fairness and some sense of toleration, they can achieve political ends through cooperation and discussion. We did it once, and now we're badly fragmented.

But I'm not a historian of today, I'm a historian of then. One element of the American Revolution I think is badly understood is democracy. A lot of conservatives will say that was one of the goals of the revolution—create American democracy. It wasn't a goal of anybody. These committees never put in their minutes "we want to achieve democracy." In fact, that was kind of scary—it might lead to anarchy and free-falling individualism. They did not talk about democracy.

So how did democracy enter the revolutionary conversation? This is, again, my particular approach: it was in these committees—thousands of them—new men, new people who hadn't been allowed to come forward in politics before. They came forward in these committees. In Maryland, some committees had 150 people; in New England, some were elected, some appointed. Suddenly a large cadre of new people were introduced into the political forum, making decisions about their neighbors, policing the revolution, gathering arms, feeding the troops. They did not set out to create a democracy. But in the process of recruiting so many new people and giving them power, where equality of voice mattered, they created a democratic situation. They didn't want it, but they created it. That's a very important way to look at how political processes shape political outcomes.

**TM:** That's a really sensitive historical approach. Too often historians work toward a predetermined conclusion—so we wind up with B, and everything that comes before it, A, gets reorganized to explain that outcome.

I wanted to return to something you said at the beginning—this is a question of genuine curiosity. You made the point that the minuteman walking off to Bunker Hill isn't reading Montesquieu. But what is the relationship between the ideas of the Enlightenment and the American Revolution? Do these ideas escape the salons and debating societies and find their way to the masses, to these committees? If so, how? Or are we talking about two worlds operating entirely at a distance from each other?

**TB:** No one goes into a revolutionary situation and risks their life, separates from their family, without knowing what they're doing. A lot of American revolutionary history has treated ordinary people as mindless followers, waiting for enlightened words about the constitution of the empire and representation—as if they're sitting around saying, "wow, did you hear that idea about Bolingbroke? That's amazing." No—ordinary people, in their own way, and often a superior way from my political perspective, knew what they were doing by their own lights.

I've had disputes with two of the major historians of the American Revolution who've done their best to remove John Locke from the discussion. In the central book on any graduate program in the United States, the one book you must teach in seminar, there's only a passing, derogatory mention of Locke. My work, over and over—including my major address at Oxford—has tried to restore Locke. You'll find him in every sermon, every speech. How does this fit in? Locke complemented beliefs already present in American society: that government is a compact, a contract between the people and their leaders for the common good, and when leaders fail, when they become tyrants and oppressive, then and only then are the people allowed to rise to violence.

The first battle flag of the American Revolution outside Boston bore the slogan "An Appeal to Heaven." That's wonderful—it speaks directly to your question. The phrase comes from Locke's *Second Treatise*, where he lays out when an aggrieved people have the right to protest and use violence against their government: they must first go through all the channels, courts, and rulers, but when that fails, then they're allowed to make an appeal to heaven. By putting it in religious terms—and Locke was very religious, people forget that, he was a man of faith—it fed right into American society: "You talk Locke to me, I know where you're coming from, I heard that in a sermon last Sunday." That blending of religious tradition and political thought through a major figure like Locke mattered enormously—whereas more erudite sources, like Milton, whom I love, one

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of the greatest poets of all time—Milton's effect on the American Revolution was basically zero.

And by the way, as you've probably noticed, Breen is about as Irish a name as you can get. The adoption of Locke into Irish political protest in the early 18th century is very similar to what happened in America. Parliament passed the first Declaratory Act, not for America, but for Ireland, in 1719. There are interesting parallels, and some of my most interesting articles compare the Irish and American revolutions. It's a bit of a stretch comparing the Boston Tea Party to the Easter Rising, but I've managed it.

**TM:** I wanted to ask about your most recent book, *The American Revolution on Trial*. When I saw the title, I thought it might be something other than what the book actually is. Maybe you intended a double meaning here, but the title is relevant given recent years. Culminating in the 250th anniversary, the American Revolution has been "put in the dock," so to speak, in public debate. You've referred to the right-wing nationalist mythologizing, which increasingly has a disturbing racial or openly racist element. On the other hand, you have scholars on the "left," culminating in the *New York Times* 1619 Project, who dismiss the whole thing as more or less a counter-revolution waged to defend white supremacy. Oddly, the two sides actually agree on the revolution being essentially reactionary—which leaves work like yours completely out of the equation. I don't know if you want to elaborate on that, since you've touched on it already, or move into this fascinating book, which I think someone should turn into a movie script about this incredible trial.

**TB:** The title of my book, *The Revolution on Trial*, does have two meanings—and maybe you've introduced a third I hadn't considered. The first two: there's a bizarre actual trial, and I urge your readers—it's a good story. General Burgoyne surrenders 6,000 troops, half of whom don't speak English. They're in a prison camp after Saratoga, angry, believing they're going back to England as parolees rather than prisoners. A number of events occur, and Burgoyne demands that probably the most honored, genuine hero of the American Revolution, David Henley, be court-martialed for mistreating British troops.

I urge my readers to think about this: the American high command, especially General Heath, accedes to this bizarre demand. It's as if General Lee said to Grant at Appomattox, "the war's over, but some of your soldiers were mean to me—you should court-martial them." Grant would have told him to go to hell. Or if Göring had made the same demand of Eisenhower. But in 1778, with the war still hanging in the balance, the Continental Army agreed that a prisoner of war representing everything—the aristocratic privilege—they were fighting against, could demand a court-martial. Then the trial starts, and Burgoyne shows up and announces he's going to be the prosecutor—unheard of in a court-martial. And they say, okay, if that's what you want. They bend over backwards.

So there's a real trial. But what comes out in the trial is the second meaning of the title: what's at stake. In a sense it's a foregone conclusion that Burgoyne is overplaying his hand, but he keeps challenging the Americans—are you civilized enough? Are you just a bunch of rebellious savages? You could still come back, we were once brothers. Are you really supportive of the rule of law? He kept pounding on that in court, and the Americans were very sensitive to it. The war isn't yet won, but they're essentially saying: yes, that is what we do. We don't want to be a rebel nation, we want to be a civilized country recognized by other civilized countries as having the rule of law. That's why we're going to bend over backwards to treat you fairly in this court, even though you're a nutcase and an aristocratic jerk—we're going to show ourselves, as much as anyone else, that legal process is essential to proper government.

I want to come back to the third meaning you raised today. I hadn't thought of that, and I thank you for it. Readers today might ask: what's happened to this absolute appreciation of the rule of law as central to republican government? The burden of independence is: can we really behave as well as we claim we want to? That's what this show trial gets at.

But it does one more thing. I try to remind readers that the Declaration of Independence—the piece of paper from July 4th—is, in a sense, just one stage of the revolution. It's easy: you declare it, and hope the army will support it. It's a hope, an invitation, a stage. But there was another revolution this trial brings out that we overlook: a cultural revolution. The people fighting the American Revolution were raised as English citizens—their reading, their church, their entertainment, their relatives, their history, all centered in Great Britain. It took a while for them to sever those bonds, those everyday assumptions. I'm not claiming that by 1778 they'd become full-throated Americans in some chauvinistic way—they hadn't. But they were learning something else: in the midst of the war, facing a man who was obnoxious, aristocratic, a voice of everything they'd rebelled against, they were learning that whatever they were, they weren't that any more. They were learning to be un-British during the war. That cultural revolution was as important as the political one.

**TM:** You can just imagine the comedic scenes in this provincial courthouse, with this Tory aristocrat viewing everyone with utter contempt—I'm chuckling just thinking about it. I do recommend these books to our viewers and readers; they're fascinating and important. What are you working on now?

**TB:** My new book has some important points, which you've discovered by reading it, and I appreciate that. But it's been totally ignored by the reviewing press. It's had no impact. What are the American people reading instead? This big trilogy about battles and leaders. The *New York Times*, the Boston papers, the other magazines that still review books, have ignored it entirely. Not as a personal slight—it's just a piece of the puzzle that doesn't fit the assumptions behind what we're supposed to be celebrating.

It makes me sad, because I think what I'm saying could be uplifting for the American people—they could see that at the community level, in their renegotiation of political identity, they have power they overlook to determine their own political fortunes. It upsets me when I see so many liberal Americans today acting like characters out of Godot—waiting, waiting, waiting for some Washington or Lincoln to come save us from ourselves. That's not the way to think. We have to save ourselves. No semi-deity is going to come lead us out of the wilderness—we have to find our own way. That's really what most of my work is trying to do: give people confidence that, in small ways, they can do it, if they understand the will of the people. That's not exactly what you asked, but that's what you got.

**TM:** I think that's a great summation, and I share your assessment that it's an official political culture inhospitable to serious history. Serious history is difficult, as you said, they don't know where to put it, but it's also challenging. I think there's an audience out there for it, and that's why we have discussions like this.

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