



## What Kind of Book is *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*?

ERIC NELSON

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I first read Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* when I was a nineteen-year-old student in the Harvard History Department's sophomore tutorial. The text was assigned by my late friend and teacher Mark Kishlansky, who began our discussion of the book by posing the same deceptively simple question that he asked about each historiographical masterwork on the syllabus: "What *kind* of book is this?" I remember thinking rather smugly that, in this case at least, the question had an obvious and straightforward answer: surely, *Ideological Origins* was a work of intellectual history—and, more specifically, a contribution to the history of early American political thought. But it now strikes me that this answer, while not incorrect, was, and is, quite beside the point. Mark was not asking us a banal question about the genre to which Bailyn's monograph belonged, but rather a deep one about how Bailyn understood that genre. To present *Ideological Origins* as a history of political thought is, implicitly, to defend a particular conception of what sort of thing "political thought" is and what its history looks like. What, Mark wished us to ponder, *is* that conception?

I found myself asking this question with a renewed sense of urgency more than fifteen years later as I grappled with a

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puzzling feature of my own contribution to the history of early American political thought. *Ideological Origins* is standardly presented as the urtext of the radical whig, or republican reading of patriot political theory, and it was this account that I chiefly intended to challenge in *The Royalist Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> And yet, as I made (or tried to make) my revisionist case, I noticed something odd: while my disagreements with later whig historians were quite numerous, I only rarely found myself dissenting from Bailyn himself. Surprisingly few of my claims seemed to contradict his, and vice versa. Instead, our accounts seemed to be largely orthogonal to each other. We were not, I came to see, giving rival answers to the same question, but rather answering fundamentally different questions.<sup>2</sup>

I was proposing an answer to the question: “What did American patriots think about politics”? That is, what were their constitutional views and theoretical commitments about ideas such as representation, monarchy, rights, and prerogative? This is likewise the question that whig intellectual historians have taken themselves to be answering, albeit in a very different fashion. Bailyn, to be sure, is not uninterested in what patriots thought about politics. But in *Ideological Origins* he chiefly asks instead: “How did patriots think about politics”? In other words, what worldview and habits of mind caused them to interpret political events as they did? At issue here is the distinction between political theory and what we might call political consciousness—and once we get this distinction properly into view, we can begin to rethink the relationship between two great, and apparently rivalrous, historiographies on early American political thought.

Mahler is said to have remarked that, in music, there are only two: “Ludwig and Richard.”<sup>3</sup> I am not at all sure he was right

<sup>1</sup>See Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>It was Jonathan Gienapp who first called this fact to my attention in a serious way. His superb comments on a draft of *The Royalist Revolution* provoked many of the reflections that follow.

<sup>3</sup>See Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Knud Martner, trans. Basil Creighton (London: Cardinal, 1990), 239.

about this (Johann Sebastian? Wolfgang?), but I am certain that, in the history of early American political thought, there are indeed only two: McIlwain and Bailyn. Charles Howard McIlwain's *The American Revolution: A Constitutional Interpretation* (1923) initiated a tradition of scholarship that embraces the work of John Phillip Reid, the later J.G.A. Pocock, and a group of younger scholars amongst whom I would number myself.<sup>4</sup> These historians all begin by taking seriously McIlwain's insistence that, during the imperial crisis of the late 1760s and 1770s, "America's final constitutional position was not Whig at all: it was a position in some respects not merely non-Whig, but anti-Whig." Indeed, as McIlwain observed emphatically, "the American doctrine" was "really a new revolt against one of the main principles of 1688."<sup>5</sup> Bailyn's *Ideological Origins* emphasizes instead the degree to which radical whig and "country" opposition literature "was devoured by the colonists" and came to organize their political *mentalité*.<sup>6</sup> We seem, then, to have a contradiction. If American political thought during this period was really "anti-Whig," then how can

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, J.G.A. Pocock, "1776: The Revolution Against Parliament," in *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 265–88, and "States, Republics, and Empires: The American Founding in Early Modern Perspective," in *Conceptual Change and the Constitution*, ed. Terence Ball and J.G.A. Pocock (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 55–77; John Philip Reid, *Constitutional History of the American Revolution: The Authority to Legislate* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), *Constitutional History of the American Revolution: The Authority of Law* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), esp. 151–73, and *Constitutional History of the American Revolution*, abr. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), esp. 90–99. Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), esp. 249–66. Reid, however, argues that the final patriot position remained, in an attenuated sense, respectably "Whig," despite its embrace of the prerogative (see Reid, *Authority of Law*, 302–6). Other important contributions to this tradition include William D. Liddle, "'A Patriot King, or None': Lord Bolingbroke and the American Renunciation of George III," *Journal of American History* 65 (1979): 951–70; Paul Langford, "New Whigs, Old Tories, and the American Revolution," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 2 (1980): 106–30; and Richard R. Johnson, "'Parliamentary Egotisms': The Clash of the Legislatures in the Making of the American Revolution," *JAH* 74 (1987), 338–62.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Howard McIlwain, *The American Revolution: A Constitutional Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), 159, 160.

<sup>6</sup>Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 43.

it have been simultaneously “radical whig” and “country”?<sup>7</sup> The understandable tendency has therefore been either to regard these historiographical traditions as mutually exclusive, or to attempt to square the circle by suggesting that McIlwain and his disciples really ought to be regarded as legal historians, rather than historians of political thought.<sup>7</sup>

Neither of these approaches will do. Both McIlwain and Bailyn are undoubtedly historians of political thought, but their histories are not essentially in conflict with one another. McIlwain’s basic argument is that patriot political theory rejected parliamentary authority in the name of crown power: it rested upon “a clear-cut distinction between the King in Parliament and the King out of Parliament, and so as late as October 26, 1774, [patriots in the First Continental Congress] solemnly assured George III that they wished ‘not a diminution of the prerogative’.”<sup>8</sup> For McIlwain, the political and constitutional commitments of the American opposition, beginning in the early 1770s, should therefore be classified as “anti-Whig.” Bailyn’s argument, in contrast, is that the radical whig intellectual culture of British America produced an “articulated worldview” that “constituted in effect an intellectual switchboard wired so that certain combinations of events would activate a distinct set of signals—danger signals, indicating hidden impulses and the likely trajectory of events implied by them.”<sup>9</sup> Patriots were “hard wired,” for various reasons, to interpret the measures of the British administration as “evidence of nothing less than a deliberate assault launched surreptitiously by plotters against liberty both in England and in America.”<sup>10</sup> They had been taught to regard the political world as a site of conspiracy and corruption, in which the real intentions of government were rarely, if ever, publicly acknowledged. But this sort of political consciousness is, in principle, quite modular: it can be attached

<sup>7</sup>On this, see, for example, Jack P. Greene, *The Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), x–xiv.

<sup>8</sup>McIlwain, *The American Revolution*, 2.

<sup>9</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 22–23.

<sup>10</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 95.

to any number of different substantive views of what liberty *is* and what would in fact threaten it. A whig political consciousness is therefore perfectly compatible with anti-whig political principles. McIlwain and Bailyn can both be right—and, indeed, I shall suggest that both of them are. American patriots (or a great number of them, at any rate) thought *as* tories but *like* whigs.<sup>11</sup>

But if Bailyn and McIlwain do not contradict each other, they do nonetheless disagree about the primary sense in which the American Revolution can be said to have had “ideological” origins. For McIlwain, “the central problem of the American Revolution was the true constitution of the Empire”:<sup>12</sup> “stripped of its constitutional non-essentials the American Revolution seems to have been the outcome of a collision of two mutually incompatible interpretations of the British constitution, one held by the subjects of the British King in America, the other by a majority in the British Parliament.”<sup>13</sup> It was, on this account, a coherent, if controversial set of constitutional principles—views about freedom, representation, and monarchy—that caused the American opposition to “collide” with the metropolis. Everything else was “non-essential.” For Bailyn, in contrast, patriots were led to rebel because they were “the Cassandras of the age,” convinced that nefarious forces were plotting to enslave them.<sup>14</sup> But to be a “Cassandra” is not to have any particular political theory; it is rather to have an orientation, a set of organizing assumptions through which one interprets the world—in this case, a powerful sense that everything in political life is always in imminent danger of coming undone. Indeed, it would do violence to such background beliefs to put them in

<sup>11</sup>I am using the term “tory” loosely here, in much the same spirit that Boswell used it when he wrote to Johnson in 1778 that he supported the American cause because he was “a steady and a warm Tory” who wished the “power of the Crown [to] increase” (see *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 2nd ed., 6 vols. [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1964–1971], 3:221). As I argued at length in *The Royalist Revolution*, the American patriot position on the royal prerogative was more radical than that of virtually any contemporary British tory.

<sup>12</sup>McIlwain, *The American Revolution*, x.

<sup>13</sup>McIlwain, *The American Revolution*, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 46.

propositional form, because those who hold them do not experience them as propositions. They experience them, rather, as “the way things are.” To put it another way: the assumption that politicians always aim to deceive is not a “political belief” in the same sense that “the people can only be represented by a popular assembly” is a political belief—and not merely because the former is empirical or descriptive in character, while the latter is normative. Political consciousness is one thing; political commitments are another. The real question at issue between McIlwain and Bailyn is accordingly: which *sort* of political belief did the work of producing the Revolution?<sup>15</sup>

Seen from this perspective, the two historians are in fact continuing a dispute that has been going on since the 1770s. The first great champion of McIlwain’s view was, perhaps ironically, a figure whose definitive biography would be written by Bailyn himself: Thomas Hutchinson.<sup>16</sup> In his famous debate with the two houses of the Massachusetts General Court in 1773, Hutchinson began by asserting that “the Cause of the Disorder” gripping the colonies was perfectly “evident.”<sup>17</sup> It was simply a set of false beliefs about the British constitution, which had been spread by a confused and dangerous intellectual vanguard:

I know of no arguments, founded in reason, which will be sufficient to support these principles, or to justify the measures taken in consequence of them. It has been urged, that the sole power of making laws is granted, by charter, to a Legislature established in the province, consisting of the King, by his Representative the Governor, the Council, and the House of Representatives; that, by this charter,

<sup>15</sup>Compare Gordon Wood’s claim that Bailyn’s work helped to “purge our writing about the Revolution of its concentration on constitutional principles and its stifling judicial-like preoccupation with motivation and responsibility.” “Reason and Rhetoric in the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. 23 (1966): 3–32 (see esp. 23).

<sup>16</sup>See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

<sup>17</sup>*The Briefs of the American Revolution: Constitutional Arguments Between Thomas Hutchinson, Governor of Massachusetts Bay, and James Bowdoin for the Council and John Adams for the House of Representatives*, ed. John Phillip Reid (New York: New York University Press, 1981), 15.

there are likewise granted, or assured to the inhabitants of the province, all the liberties and immunities of free and natural subjects, to all intents, constructions and purposes whatsoever, as if they had been born within the realms of England; that it is part of the liberties of English subjects, which has its foundation in nature, to be governed by laws made by their consent in person, or by their representative; that the subjects in this province are not, and cannot be represented in the Parliament of Great Britain, and, consequently, the acts of that Parliament cannot be binding upon them.<sup>18</sup>

If these false “principles” are the cause of the disorder, it follows that one can only restore public tranquility by refuting them—and that is precisely what Hutchinson proposes to do when he engages the legislature in an unprecedented constitutional debate. “If my Principles of Government are right let us adhere to them,” he declares at the end of his initial address. “With the same Principles our Ancestors were easy and happy for a long course of years together, and I know of no reason to doubt of your being equally easy and happy. The people, influenced by you, will forsake their unconstitutional principles & desist from their irregularities which are the consequence of them.”<sup>19</sup> Since theoretical error is the poison, the antidote must be a better, more coherent theory.

Most patriot writers agreed with Hutchinson that Americans were driven to revolution by a set of constitutional principles; they simply argued that these principles were the correct ones. Writing in his *Notes on Virginia* (1781), Jefferson offered the following explanation for the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s:

In 1650 [sic] the parliament, considering itself as standing in the place of their deposed king, and as having succeeded to all his powers, without as well as within the realm, began to assume a right over the colonies, passing an act for inhibiting their trade with foreign nations. This succession to the exercise of the kingly authority gave the first colour for parliamentary interference with the colonies, and

<sup>18</sup>Reid, *The Briefs of the American Revolution*, 17–18.

<sup>19</sup>Reid, *The Briefs of the American Revolution*, 22.

produced that fatal precedent which they continued to follow after they had retired, in other respects, within their proper functions.<sup>20</sup>

On this account, the origins of the Revolution were to be found in the defeat of the seventeenth-century Royalist cause. Having murdered their king in 1649, the Rump Parliament usurped the rightful prerogatives of the Crown, particularly the monarch's prerogative to govern his overseas dominions. Even after the Restoration, Parliament had not "retired" behind its proper bounds in this respect, and the patriot movement was fueled by an insistence that it should so retire. Reflecting on the crisis years later in his *Autobiography*, Jefferson recalled that "in this I took the ground which, from the beginning I had thought the only one orthodox or tenable, which was that the relation between Gr[eat] Br[itain] and these colonies was exactly the same as that of England & Scotland after the accession of James & until the Union, and the same as her present relations with Hanover, having the same Executive chief but no other necessary political connection."<sup>21</sup> These were precisely the "unconstitutional principles" to which Hutchinson had attributed the "disorder" of the 1770s. They were likewise the commitments to which John Adams was referring when he famously wrote that the Revolution took place "in the minds of the people . . . before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington."<sup>22</sup> The history of the Revolution, on this view, is the history of "the steps by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of Parliament over the colonies."

But there was, from the beginning, a rival account of the way in which "ideology" had caused the imperial crisis: one championed most famously by Edmund Burke in his speech on "Conciliation with America" in March, 1775. The anatomy of the ideological origins of the Revolution given in this text is

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffelton (New York: Random House, 1999), 119.

<sup>21</sup>*The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, 12 vols. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904-1905), 1:14.

<sup>22</sup>Adams to Thomas Jefferson, August 24, 1815, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (1959; repr., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 455. Bailyn takes this quotation as his book's epigraph.

so strikingly similar to Bailyn's that it is rather surprising that the relationship between the two works has not (to my knowledge) been noted before. Burke begins by insisting that America was not to be governed "according to our own imaginations, nor according to abstract ideas of right; by no means according to mere general theories of government, the resort to which appears to me, in our present situation, no better than arrant trifling."<sup>23</sup> That is, Hutchinson had gotten it completely wrong. The imperial crisis, for Burke, had not been caused by false "general theories of government," nor could it be defused by the preaching of putatively correct, alternative theories. Rather, the conflict was to be explained by the "true nature and peculiar circumstances of America," and in particular by what he called the "temper and character" of its people.

In this *Character of the Americans*, a love of Freedom is the predominating feature, which marks and distinguishes the whole; and as an ardent is always a jealous affection, your Colonies become suspicious, restive, and untractable, whenever they see the least attempt to wrest from them by force, or shuffle from them by chicane, what they think the only advantage worth living for. This fierce spirit of Liberty is stronger in the English Colonies probably than in any other people of the earth; and this from a great variety of powerful causes; which, to understand the true temper of their minds and the direction which this spirit takes, it will not be amiss to lay open somewhat more largely.<sup>24</sup>

The American "temper" is "suspicious, restive, and untractable"—and therefore causes the colonists to interpret political events in highly specific ways, and to regard powerful institutions in a distinctive manner. These habits of mind, rather than

<sup>23</sup>"Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq., On Moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies" (March 22, 1775), *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Ian Harris (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 212.

<sup>24</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 221. Burke had been interested in the American "temper" since he and William Burke jointly authored *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757). There are clear echoes of this earlier text in the "Conciliation" speech, but Burke's account of the American "spirit" and its causes is substantially different in the later work. For the composition and context of the *Account*, see Richard Bourke, *Empire and Liberty: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 162–76.

any set of constitutional principles, fundamentally explain their behavior.

Burke proceeds to list the “powerful causes” that have shaped the American political “temper.” First, the colonies were planted during the seventeenth-century constitutional crisis, when the English obsession with liberty was “most predominant.”<sup>25</sup> And the liberty in question was not “abstract”: indeed, “Abstract Liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found. Liberty inheres in some sensible object; and every nation has formed to itself some favorite point, which by way of eminence becomes the criterion of their happiness.” In some states and cultures, “the right of election of magistrates” is the symbolic marker of freedom; in others, “the balance among the several orders of the state” is the salient issue. But, because of the seventeenth-century English pedigree of the colonies, “their love of liberty . . . fixed and attached on this specific point of taxing. Liberty might be safe, or might be endangered, in twenty other particulars, without their being much pleased or alarmed. Here they felt its pulse; and as they found that beat, they thought themselves sick or sound.”<sup>26</sup> Critics of the American opposition, such as Hutchinson, had been driven to distraction by what they regarded as the sheer unreason of the patriot claim about taxation: how on earth could one argue that Parliament had the authority, for example, to “prohibit” American trade with continental European powers, but not to impose a miniscule tax on paper? Gallons of ink had been spilt in the attempt to demonstrate the incoherence of this view—to persuade Americans that the argument simply didn’t work. Burke’s claim is that all of these critics have made a category mistake. The American obsession with taxes was not a matter of logic, but of symbolism. A tax for the colonists amounted to what we could now call a “trigger”; the colonists had been programmed by their history and culture to “feel the pulse” of liberty in this apparently arbitrary “object.” A deeper, latent mental world of meanings and associations was the culprit here—not political

<sup>25</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 222.

<sup>26</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 222–23.

theory—from which it followed that no amount of argument was going to change colonial minds.

Burke continues by offering an explanation of the “disobedient spirit in the Colonies”—that is, of the instinctively adversarial way in which Americans relate to political authority. Here the twin causes are religion and education. Addressing the former, Burke announces that “the people are protestants; and of that kind which is the most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion.”<sup>27</sup> While “all protestantism, even the most cold and passive, is a sort of dissent,” he argues, “the religion most prevalent in our Northern Colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the protestantism of the protestant religion.”<sup>28</sup> The “averseness” of these colonial dissenters to “all that looks like absolute government” is not “so much to be sought in their religious tenets, as in their history.” While the Catholic Church and the various state churches that emerged during the Magisterial Reformation had always enjoyed “the nursing care of regular government,” the “dissenting interests have sprung up in direct opposition to all the ordinary powers of the world.”<sup>29</sup> Such hyper-protestants have therefore absorbed a deep and pervasive suspicion of political institutions, a tendency to imagine the worst of them.

This adversarial posture is further aggravated by the education of the Americans, particularly their immersion in law. “In no country perhaps in the world,” Burke observes, “is the law so general a study. The profession itself is numerous and powerful; and in most provinces it takes the lead. . . . But all who read, and most do read, endeavor to obtain some smattering in that science.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Burke had heard tell that booksellers “have sold nearly as many of Blackstone’s Commentaries in America as in England.” The result of this distinctive intellectual formation is profound: “This study renders men acute, inquisitive,

<sup>27</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 223.

<sup>28</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 223–24.

<sup>29</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 223.

<sup>30</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 225.

dexterous, prompt in attack, ready in defence, full of resources. In other countries, the people, more simple, and of a less mercurial cast, judge of an ill principle in government only by an actual grievance; here they anticipate the evil, and judge of the pressure of the grievance by the badness of the principle. They augur misgovernment at a distance, and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze.”<sup>31</sup> Here we have the first major diagnosis of something resembling the “paranoid style.”<sup>32</sup> Because Americans think like lawyers, they are disposed to view seemingly innocuous measures as “the thin end of the wedge.” A tiny tax on tea is never simply a tiny tax on tea, but rather a precedent for hypothetical enormities—from which it is but a short step to the conclusion that the tax in question must be a connivance of sinister and usurping forces which intend to lay the groundwork for such enormities. The question is not “whether [this] spirit deserves praise or blame;—what, in the name of God, shall we do with it?”<sup>33</sup>

Burke’s ideological account of the Revolution, like its Hutchinsonian rival, was immediately picked up by contemporaries. Indeed, David Ramsay simply reproduced the relevant section of the “Conciliation” speech in his 1789 *History of the American Revolution*, when he turned to list the causes that “produced a warm love for liberty, a high sense of the rights of human nature, and a predilection for independence” among the colonists. First, again, came religion: “[Those who settled America] were chiefly protestants, and all protestantism is founded on a strong claim to natural liberty, and the right of private judgement. A majority of them were of that class of men, who, in England, are called Dissenters. Their tenets, being the protestantism of the protestant religion, are hostile to all interference of authority, in matters of opinion, and predispose to a jealousy for civil liberty.”<sup>34</sup> Ramsay likewise appropriated

<sup>31</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 226.

<sup>32</sup>The term was famously coined by Richard Hofstadter; see *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

<sup>33</sup>Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 227.

<sup>34</sup>David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1789), 1:29.

Burke's famous explanation for why the southern colonists shared this "spirit of liberty" despite their very un-northern Anglicanism. The paradoxical counterweight to southern ecclesiology was slavery:

All masters of slaves who enjoy personal liberty will be both proud and jealous of their freedom. It is, in their opinion, not only an enjoyment, but a kind of rank and privilege. In them, the haughtiness of domination, combines with the spirit of liberty. Nothing could more effectually animate the opposition of a planter to the claims of Great-Britain, than a conviction that those claims in their extent, degraded him to a degree of dependence on his fellow subjects, equally humiliating with that which existed between his slaves and himself.<sup>35</sup>

The second great cause of the spirit of liberty, Ramsay further agreed with Burke, was to be found in the education of the colonists:

The study of law was common and fashionable. The infinity of disputes, in a new and free country, made it lucrative, and multiplied its followers. No order of men has, in all ages, been more favourable to liberty, than lawyers. Where they are not won over to the service of government, they are formidable adversaries to it. Professionally taught the rights of human nature, they keenly and quickly perceive every attack made on them. While others judge of bad principles by the actual grievances they occasion, lawyers discover them at a distance, and trace future mischiefs from gilded innovations.<sup>36</sup>

Once again, Americans had been trained to ferret out the "future mischief" that a seemingly innocent, "gilded" principle might justify. They therefore "snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze," as Burke had put it—not *despite* the fact that no "actual grievances" are present, but precisely *because* of that fact. The calm now is part of the storm to come.

It seems clear to me that Bailyn is likewise an heir to this Burkean tradition. What Burke and Ramsay called "spirit" or "temper," Bailyn calls "ideology." For the latter as for the

<sup>35</sup>Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, 1:30. Compare Harris, *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 224–25.

<sup>36</sup>Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, 1:30.

former, colonists used the words “‘slavery’, ‘corruption’, ‘conspiracy’” so ubiquitously because “there were real fears, real anxieties, a sense of real danger behind these phrases.”<sup>37</sup> The radical whig Atlantic culture had produced a distinctive American cast of mind: one disposed to regard every act of the British administration as a potentially “fatal precedent” full of “drastic hidden meanings and implications,” and as evidence that colonists “were faced with a deliberate conspiracy to destroy the balance of the constitution and eliminate their freedom.”<sup>38</sup> “Once assumed,” this picture “could not be easily dispelled; denial only confirmed it, since what conspirators profess is not what they believe; the ostensible is not the real; and the real is deliberately malign.”<sup>39</sup> For Bailyn, as for Burke, this “configuration of attitudes and ideas” drew nourishment first and foremost from “Puritanism . . . and the epidemic evangelicalism of the mid-eighteenth century.” “From the establishment in New England, ever fearful of ecclesiastical impositions,” Bailyn observes, “came as strong a current of anti-authoritarianism as from the farthest left-wing sect.”<sup>40</sup> This “dissidence of dissent,” as Burke had called it, proved particularly potent when it interacted with the lawyerly terror of fatal precedents. Bailyn unforgettably reminds us that John Adams believed, to the end of his days, that the seemingly benign Stamp Act had been a malevolent Trojan horse: the administration, on his account, had hoped to elicit a colonial acknowledgment of parliamentary jurisdiction, so that “the Church of England with all its creeds, articles, tests, ceremonies, and tithes” could then be imposed on America on the basis of this precedent.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 22–23.

<sup>38</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 100–1, 146. For the view that the “paranoid style” should be regarded as a more broadly Atlantic, Augustan phenomenon (and less distinctively American), see Gordon Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century” in *WMQ* 39 (1982): 401–41. Interestingly, Wood does not mention Burke’s diagnosis of this pattern of thought or his suggestion that it was distinctively American.

<sup>39</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 95.

<sup>40</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 305–6.

<sup>41</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 257.

But Bailyn also emphasizes the way in which the adversarial, or anti-authoritarian, character of American political consciousness came to express itself in the distinctive language of "corruption." The colonists "viewed their circumstances with alarm, 'stressed the danger to England's ancient heritage and the loss of pristine virtue,' studied the processes of decay, and dwelt endlessly on the evidence of corruption they saw about them and the dark future these malignant signs portended."<sup>42</sup> It was corruption that explained, for these readers saturated in opposition whig literature, why political institutions could not be trusted (Ramsay too had stressed the colonists' immersion in "those fashionable authors, who have defended the cause of liberty. Cato's Letters and the Independent Whig, and such productions . . ." <sup>43</sup>). "Everywhere, they agreed, was corruption—corruption technically, in the adroit manipulation of Parliament by a power-hungry ministry, and corruption generally, in the self-indulgence, effeminizing luxury, and glutinous pursuit of gain of a generation sunk in new and unaccustomed wealth."<sup>44</sup> Americans began by accepting the maxim that the "natural prey" of political power, always and everywhere, "was liberty, or law, or right,"<sup>45</sup> and then identified wealth, debt, and bureaucratic offices as the bait. With this final element in place, Bailyn's ideological "switchboard" is fully operational.

## II

We have, then, political theory and political consciousness; Hutchinson and Burke; McIlwain and Bailyn. In which of the two proposed senses did the American Revolution have ideological origins? It should come as no surprise by now that my answer to this question is "both"—and I doubt very much that either McIlwain or Bailyn would dispute the

<sup>42</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 46.

<sup>43</sup>Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, 1:30.

<sup>44</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 51.

<sup>45</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 56.

point.<sup>46</sup> But I want to go further. To treat political theory and political consciousness as distinct, independent forces, and then to ask which of the two was more causally responsible for bringing about the Revolution, is to betray a conceptual confusion. Recall that there are two very different senses in which two agents or forces might be said to be jointly responsible for bringing about a state of affairs. On the one hand, if John and Jane each fill up half of a bucket with water, then they are jointly responsible for filling the bucket. But each has made a discrete, independent contribution to the result: i.e. John, all alone, filled up half of the bucket, and Jane by herself filled up the other half. On this model, it makes sense to ask which of two forces or agents is causally responsible for a larger share of the cooperative result. The answer in this particular case is “neither”; but if John had filled up 60% of the bucket, while Jane filled up the remaining 40%, the answer would plainly be “John.” But consider a rival scenario: in order to fill up the bucket, Brad turns on the tap and Amy holds the hose.<sup>47</sup> In this case, Brad on his own fills none of the bucket, and Amy on her own likewise fills none of it. It is only in interaction with each other that they are efficacious at all.

The way in which political theory and political consciousness can be said to have jointly caused the American Revolution is like the way Brad and Amy can jointly be said to have filled

<sup>46</sup>Ramsay, for one, explicitly incorporated both sorts of explanation. We have already seen that he paraphrased Burke’s account of the American “spirit” at the outset of the *History*, but he was equally happy to adopt the Hutchinsonian perspective: “This was the very hinge of the controversy. The absolute unlimited supremacy of the British parliament, both in legislation and taxation, was contended for on one side; while on the other, no farther authority was conceded than such a limited legislation, with regard to external commerce, as would combine the interest of the whole empire. In government, as well as in religion, there are mysteries from the close investigation of which little advantage can be expected. From the unity of the empire it was necessary, that some acts should extend over the whole. From the local situation of the colonies it was equally reasonable that their legislatures should at least in some matters be independent. Where the supremacy of the first ended and the independency of the last began, was to the best informed a puzzling question. Happy would it have been for both countries, had the discussion of this doubtful point never been attempted” (*The History of the American Revolution*, 1:136).

<sup>47</sup>This example is borrowed from Ned Hall, whose illustration of it is reproduced in Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Mirage of a Space Between Nature and Nurture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.

up the bucket. Political consciousness, on its own, has little, if any causal efficacy. It provides a template that needs filling in by political theory in order to be action-guiding. For example, political consciousness might say “expect the worst from those in power,” but what exactly *is* the worst? Until political theory answers this question, we have no idea what to expect. Likewise, the claim that the “natural prey” of political power is “liberty, or law, or right”<sup>48</sup> is inert until political theory makes these placeholders concrete by supplying a conception of what liberty, law, and right are—of what it is to honor or undermine them. Even the instinctive sense that to be taxed without consent is a uniquely awful infringement of one’s liberty cannot trigger a political response until we add a specification of what it *is* to be taxed without consent. And this we cannot do if we lack a theory of representation (i.e. an account of the conditions under which a law can be said to reflect our will), as well as an account of how this value is instantiated (or not) in the constitutional scheme under which we live. Political consciousness, I wrote earlier, is “modular,” in the sense that it can be paired with a range of political theories. I now add that it *must* be paired with some such theory (or more than one) in order to be capable of influencing political action in any serious way.

My basic claim is that, while whig political consciousness remained a constant feature of the American intellectual landscape throughout the imperial crisis and the Revolution, it came eventually to be paired with an anti-whig political theory. I cannot of course offer an adequate defense of this claim here, but I hope that the following example will at least make clear its general plausibility. Historians of American political thought have long been familiar with a famous letter written by Benjamin Rush to his friend Ebenezer Hazard in October 1768. Rush, then a tourist in London, had just visited the Houses of Parliament, and wished to share his impressions of the experience with Hazard. First, his guide had taken him into the House of Lords, in the midst of which stood the throne. Here, Rush reports, “I felt as if I walked on sacred ground. I gazed

<sup>48</sup>Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 56.

for some time at the Throne with emotions that I cannot describe.”<sup>49</sup> Rush presumed to “set down upon it,” at which point he “was seized with a sense of horror which for some time interrupted my ordinary train of thinking. ‘This,’ said I (in the words of Dr. [Edward] Young), ‘is the golden period of the worldly man’s wishes. His passions conceive, his hopes aspire to nothing beyond *this Throne*.’” But the case was very different when the tour reached its next stop:

From this I went on to the House of Commons. I cannot say I felt as if I walked on “sacred ground” here. This, thought I, is where the infernal scheme for enslaving America was first broached. Here the usurping Commons first endeavored to rob the King of his supremacy over the colonies and divide it among themselves! O! cursed haunt of venality, bribery, and corruption!<sup>50</sup>

The most immediately striking fact about this paragraph is that it embraces a profoundly anti-whig political and constitutional theory. Liberty, on Rush’s account, is guaranteed by the king’s “supremacy over the colonies,” and threatened by the “usurping Commons.” The royal prerogative is fully compatible with American freedom, whereas parliamentary authority is not. Moreover, it is clear in context that, when Rush mentions the occasion on which the Commons “first endeavored” to “rob the King of his supremacy over the colonies,” he has in mind, not the Stamp Act, but the Navigation Act of 1651. This act, passed (as Jefferson pointed out) by the Rump after the execution of Charles I, had represented the first successful attempt of the Commons to legislate for America. Rush characterizes the bill as a “usurpation” of crown power by encroaching parliamentarians. In doing so, he associates himself with the view of his ally and fellow Pennsylvanian James Wilson, who had written the same year that “it was chiefly during the confusions of the republic, when the King was in exile, and unable to assert his rights, that the House of Commons began to interfere in

<sup>49</sup>Benjamin Rush to Ebenezer Hazard, October 22, 1768, in *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 1:68.

<sup>50</sup>Butterfield, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 1:68.

Colony matters.”<sup>51</sup> Wilson and Rush, in other words, asserted that the Stuart monarchs who granted colonial charters, James I and Charles I, had *correctly* understood North America to be a private dominion of the Crown, to be dispensed with and governed according to the royal prerogative—and that this understanding was no less correct after the Glorious Revolution than it had been before. It was only “when the King [Charles II] was in exile,” during the republican interregnum that Parliament had been able to usurp his prerogative “rights” and “interfere in Colony matters” by passing the Navigation Act (note also that the exiled Charles is described, in high royalist language, as “King,” despite the fact that nine years would elapse before the Restoration). The Stuarts had been in the right, and Parliament in the wrong. It is hard to get less whig than this.

Yet a second look at the passage reveals that this deeply anti-whig political and constitutional theory cohabits quite comfortably in Rush’s letter with the whig political consciousness anatomized by Burke and Bailyn. It is not simply, for Rush, that Parliament had unjustly or illegitimately claimed jurisdiction over the colonies; rather, the Commons had devised an “infernal scheme for enslaving America.” The Navigation Act was the thin end of the wedge, a fatal precedent cunningly designed to justify predations to come. This is recognizably the whig language of conspiracy and tyranny; the difference is that “enslavement” is now defined, in anti-whig terms, as dependence upon Parliament, rather than the Crown. Likewise, the fact that the Commons attempted to “rob the King of his supremacy over the colonies” is given a familiar explanation: Rush assails Parliament as a “cursed haunt of venality, bribery, and corruption.” Here too the whig orientation is perfectly intact. “Corruption” and “bribery” remain the instruments of enslavement. But just as enslavement is no longer equated with subjection to the Crown, so too the “corruption” that plagues the House of Commons no longer has the king as its source.

<sup>51</sup>James Wilson, *Considerations on the Nature and Extent of the Legislative Authority of the British Parliament* (Philadelphia, 1774), 311n.

Rush imagines instead a corrupt parliamentary oligarchy using bribery to “usurp” the king’s rightful prerogatives.

He was by no means alone in this respect. The young Alexander Hamilton, writing in *The Farmer Refuted* (1775), endorsed an account of the English Constitution that only the most conservative Royalists of the 1640s had championed. He took issue with the loyalist Samuel Seabury’s claim that, within Great Britain itself, “the supreme authority is vested in the King, Nobles and People, i.e. the King, House of Lords and House of Commons elected by the people.”<sup>52</sup> This was a wholly uncontroversial statement of British constitutional orthodoxy—one that had even been accepted by Charles I himself in the *Answer to the Nineteen Propositions* (1642).<sup>53</sup> For Hamilton, in contrast, “the King is the *only* Sovereign of the empire. The part which the people have in the legislature, may more justly be considered as a limitation of the Sovereign authority, to prevent its being exercised in an oppressive and despotic manner: Monarchy is universally allowed to predominate in the constitution.”<sup>54</sup> There is, on this account, only one sovereign in each of the personal dominions of George III: the king himself. The “supreme authority” is not shared with the legislature, either in Britain or the colonies. The constitution, to be sure, places salutary *limits* on the sovereign power, but it does not *divide* that

<sup>52</sup>[Samuel Seabury], *A view of the Controversy between Great Britain and her Colonies* (New York, 1774), 9.

<sup>53</sup>[Charles I], *His Maiesties Ansver to the XIX Propositions of both Houses of Parliament* (London, 1642), 11–12: “There being three kinds of Government amongst men, Absolute Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy, and all these having their particular conveniencies and inconveniencies. The experience and wisdom of your Ancestors hath so moulded this out of a mixture of these, as to give to this Kingdome (as farre as humane Prudence can provide) the conveniencies of all three, without the inconveniencies of any one, as long as the Balance hangs even between the three Estates, and they run joyntly on in their proper Chanell (begetting Verdure and Fertilitie in the Meadows on both sides) and the overflowing of either on either side raise not deluge or Inundation. . . In this Kingdome the Laws are joyntly made by a King, by a House of Peers, and by a House of Commons chosen by the People, all having free Votes and particular priviledges.”

<sup>54</sup>[Alexander Hamilton], *The Farmer Refuted: or, A more impartial and Comprehensive View of the Dispute between Great-Britain and the Colonies* (New York, 1775), 16. My emphasis.

authority among king, Lords, and Commons.<sup>55</sup> The axiom that monarchy “predominate[s] in the constitution,” Hamilton assures his reader, is “universally allowed.” In fact, it was allowed by almost no one in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

Having defended this high Royalist constitutional heresy, Hamilton goes on to argue that dependence on the crown alone is consistent with American liberty. The British dominions require “some connecting, pervading principle; but this is found in the person and prerogative of the King.” The monarch “conjoins all these individual societies, into one great body politic. He it is, that is to preserve their mutual connexion and dependence, and make them all co-operate to one common end the general good. His power is equal to the purpose, and his interest binds him to the due prosecution of it.”<sup>56</sup> Subjection to Parliament, in contrast, amounts to unfreedom. This political and constitutional theory is, if anything, even more robustly anti-whig than Rush’s.

Yet Hamilton, like Rush, embeds his royalist principles in a recognizably whig network of background beliefs about politics. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a more paradigmatic instance of the “paranoid style” than *The Farmer Refuted*. “The present rigorous and unconstitutional proceedings against us,” Hamilton insists, “have chiefly originated in the calumnies of designing men” whose aim is to reduce America to a state of “bondage and misery.”<sup>57</sup> Parliament means to send “a large standing army, maintained out of our own pockets to be at the devotion of our oppressors.” The next step would be “the martial law, universally prevalent to the abolition of trials by juries, the *Habeas Corpus* act, and every other bulwark of personal safety.”<sup>58</sup> Last, “a numerous train of *court dependents* would

<sup>55</sup>This was, for example, the position defended by the High Church Royalist Henry Ferne; *A Reply unto Severall Treatises* (London, 1643), 17–18. For Ferne’s position on the far right (as it were) of Royalist discourse, see Corinne Comstock Weston, *English Constitutional Theory and the House of Lords, 1556–1832* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 23–24.

<sup>56</sup>Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted*, 16.

<sup>57</sup>Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted*, 11–12.

<sup>58</sup>Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted*, 12.

be created and supported at our expence,” ready to do the bidding of their corrupt, ministerial masters. Hamilton is aware that some might regard this prophecy as “a phantom of my own deluded imagination,” but he is persuaded that he is simply describing reality.<sup>59</sup> Once again, the discourse of enslavement and conspiracy retains its grip on the imagination; Parliament has simply replaced the king as the malign, plotting agency.

The Virginia lawyer and pamphleteer Thomson Mason (younger brother of George Mason) agreed straightforwardly with Rush and Hamilton, declaring that “the general opinion, that the great defect in the present Constitution of *Britain* is the enormous power of the Crown” ought to be dismissed as “a vulgar error.”<sup>60</sup> Quite the contrary, it was the failure of the British people to restore “the ancient independence of the Crown” after the two revolutions that had crippled the mixed monarchy. The Americans, unlike their brethren across the sea, recognized this defect, and accordingly they were in a unique position to rescue the Constitution, both in the colonies and in Britain itself: “Was our Sovereign, even now, to place a little more confidence in his *American* subjects, there are many amongst them whose knowledge of their country would enable, and whose affectionate loyalty to him would impel, them to point out constitutional modes of placing him in a very different situation from what a corrupt, selfish, *British* aristocracy wish to see; for, however humiliating the reflection may be to a *Briton*, it is the virtue of *America* only that can preserve *Great Britain* from becoming the prey of the most despotick aristocracy that ever yet was elected.”<sup>61</sup> The sovereign’s power must be restored so that an enslaving, corrupt Parliament may be tamed. Turning to his “countrymen,” Mason exhorted them in ringing tones to come to the defense of the beleaguered British monarchy:

If you think that your Sovereign ought to be considered as supreme Ruler of the whole Empire, providing for the welfare of his subjects

<sup>59</sup>Hamilton, *The Farmer Refuted*, 12.

<sup>60</sup>[Thomson Mason], “The British American” (1774), letter 6, in *American Archives: Fourth Series*, ed. Peter Force, 6 vols. (Washington, DC, 1837), 1:519.

<sup>61</sup>“The British American,” letter 6, in *Archives*, 1:521.

within the Realm, at the head of his *British* Parliament, and of those without, at the head of his *American* Assemblies, by laws adapted to the local situation, and suited to the emergencies of each, and by that negative with which he is invested by the Constitution, restrain the different states of his extensive Dominions from enacting laws to destroy the freedom or to prejudice the interest of each other; if you are satisfied that the independence of *America* upon the *British* Parliament is essentially necessary to check the growing power of aristocracy in *Great Britain*, and to restore your Sovereign to that weight in the National Councils which he ought to possess . . . and if reposing your trust in the Supreme Being, to assist a just cause, you are determined to unite firmly in asserting your native rights, coolly consider the second question: "What mode of proceeding will you adopt as the most rational and effectual to shake off the jurisdiction usurped over you?"<sup>62</sup>

When James Wilson recalled approvingly at the Constitutional Convention that, during the Revolution, "the people of America Did not oppose the British King but the parliament—the opposition was not against an Unity but a corrupt multitude," this was the tradition of thought that he plainly had in mind.<sup>63</sup> Along with many other patriots, Rush, Hamilton, Thomson, and Wilson had come to think as Tories, but like Whigs.

### III

If this characterization is persuasive, then we have need of an intellectual history of the American Revolution that integrates the legacies of McIlwain and Bailyn into a coherent whole. Political consciousness, no less than political theory, is part of the history of political thought. The two cooperate at every stage of social transformation, and yet the former remains radically understudied relative to the latter. Brigades of intellectual historians have spent the last several decades producing rich scholarly accounts of the normative political commitments defended by major and minor theorists throughout the early-modern period.

<sup>62</sup>"The British American," letter 7, in *Archives*, 1:543.

<sup>63</sup>Max Farrand, ed. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, 3 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1911), 1:65.

Yet the study of their background beliefs has languished.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps this fact reflects the general post-Marxist turn away from the theory of ideology: the notion that political communities share an underlying set of unarticulated, irrational beliefs inculcated by the society in which they live smacks too strongly, it may be, of the implausible view that these beliefs are generated by society *because* they serve to perpetuate it.<sup>65</sup> But one need not be at all drawn to this *Marxisant* mode of explanation to acknowledge that such beliefs exist, and that they exert a powerful influence on the societies in which we live.

The paranoid style—or what we might call “inference to the worst”<sup>66</sup>—is of course alive and well in our own politics, as is its less famous converse: “inference to the best,” or the (equally irrational) belief that agents tend to act rationally and/or benignly (“If X is acting in this way, then there must be a good reason for it”). There is an obvious temptation to banish these matters to the realm of social psychology: to say that there are simply certain faulty “priors” that even the most rational people are likely to bring to the analysis of social life, including those just mentioned (the conclusions drawn by patriots, after all, were not irrational given the premises from which they began: if ministers really *had been* intent on enslaving America, then it would have been quite sensible to worry that the Stamp Act was the thin end of the wedge). But if background beliefs of this kind are in fact naturally-occurring cognitive biases or psychological pathologies, we should expect to find them in roughly equal proportions in every human community (or at least in every similarly-situated community). Yet we plainly do not. In some

<sup>64</sup>A valiant exception is J.G.A. Pocock's remarkable work on early-modern conceptions of political time. See, for example, his *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), esp. 3–48, and “Time, History, and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes” in *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 148–201. See also the account of shifting understandings of social causation in Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style,” esp. 429–32.

<sup>65</sup>On this see Michael Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), esp. 258–75.

<sup>66</sup>I owe this phrase to Michael Rosen.

societies, we find the widespread supposition that those who exercise authority are fundamentally benign; in others, that such figures are corrupt and depraved. In many societies, people regard their political institutions as timeless and robust; in others, these institutions are imagined to be alarmingly fragile.

If, as I believe, the Marxist theory of ideology is mistaken, what accounts for this variation in political consciousness across societies?<sup>67</sup> Why do particular types of irrational background beliefs about politics emerge at some times and places, and not in others? Here I cast my vote with Burke and Bailyn. It is historical experience, both political and religious, that generates background beliefs, just as surely as it gives rise to distinctive commitments in political theory. Eighteenth-century Americans saw the political world as they did, not because their worldview served as an ideological support for their society or because some proportion of the human race just happens to think this way at any given time or under given circumstances, but because they were eighteenth-century Americans. The study of their way of seeing the world, and its rivals, has not yet taken its rightful place in the history of political thought. But when it does, much of the credit will rightly go to *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*.

<sup>67</sup>We find the same variety when we examine non-political background beliefs. Why do some human communities operate according to the default assumption that our sense impressions give us reliable access to the physical world, while others just as generally suppose that our senses are systematically misleading (radical skepticism is simply the “paranoid style” in epistemology).

Eric Nelson is Robert M. Beren Professor of Government at Harvard University. His books include *THE ROYALIST REVOLUTION: MONARCHY AND THE AMERICAN FOUNDING* (2014) and *THE HEBREW REPUBLIC: JEWISH SOURCES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EUROPEAN POLITICAL THOUGHT* (2010).