Historiography of the American Revolution  
(HIS 392, Unique # 39605)  
Fall 2016  
Tuesdays 12:30-3:30, Gar 2.124  

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As the “founding” and, at least to my mind, the most important and complex event in American History, the American Revolution has inspired a large and vibrant scholarship. Since the beginning of “professional” history a century ago, scholars of the topic have produced thousands of pages and hundreds of books. To study the differing ways that historians have conceptualized the Revolution is therefore also to examine the history of the American historical profession itself and the ways that historians themselves act (write, think) within historic contexts. For the first half of this course, we will study the varied “schools” through which the American Revolution was interpreted in the 20th-century. The second half of the course will focus more upon the “state of the art.” Here, we will read monographs written in the past decade, to understand where the field of American Revolutionary studies currently stands, and to consider where it might profitably lead (perhaps with your help!) in the future.  

This course is a reading colloquium. Accordingly, my main requirement is that you carefully read and consider each week’s assigned readings in a timely manner and come to class prepared to discuss them at the relevant class meeting. Before each meeting, I ask you to prepare a brief (c. 500-700 word) review essay that encapsulates your own response to the readings for that week. (What I am after here is more of a think piece, than a book review or mere summary.) The response papers will be collected at the start of each class.  

All of the assigned books (in bold in the syllabus below) will be on reserve in the PCL. Other readings (chapters, articles, and book reviews) will be available to you either via the library’s “J-Stor” database, or a course site on PCL e-reserves (password: 1776). I have not ordered any books for the course at the Co-op. If you want to purchase copies of the assigned books for yourself, you should make arrangements to do so via the various on-line book emporiums — allowing time for shipping etc..
In addition to reading and writing response papers for our collective in-class discussions, you will each have the task of writing a longer (c. 3000 word) review essay on the recent historiography (i.e. three or four book, and as many articles) on a topic of your own devising (in consultation with me) that intersects, leads to, veers from, or parallels the American Revolution. You will present your findings to the class at our last meeting (and turn in your essays to me and to the rest of the class).

Course Schedule:

• 30 August –
Introductions, Requirements and Themes

• 6 September –
The “Imperial School”: Revolution as Unfortunate Accident


• 13 September –
The “Progressive School”: Revolution as Class Struggle


• 20 September –
The “Consensus School”: A Revolution without Conflict


- 27 September – Republicanism: Revolution as Ideology


- 4 October – Social History: Revolution as Irrelevant?


- 11 October – “Ethno-History”: Revolution as Ritual

  Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790, (Chapel Hill, 1982).


- 18 October – Market Mentalities: Revolution as a Consumer Choice


• 25 October –
The American Revolution and the other British Empire


• 1 November –
An Emotional Revolution: Revolution as Therapy?


From George III to George I?

• 8 November –
From George III to George I


William Liddle, “`A Patriot King or None’: Lord Bolingbroke and the American Renunciation of George III,” Journal of American History, LXV, (1979), 951-70; Richard Bushman, King and
People in Provincial Massachusetts, (Chapel Hill, 1985), 11-54;

• 15 November –
A Communication Revolution I


• 22 November –
A Communication Revolution II


• 29 November –
Evaluations, Conclusions, and Presentations of Historiographical essays.