On the Margins or at the Center?:
The Internal Revolution that Created the First
American Republic

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Studies of the American Revolution, written since World War II, have expanded our knowledge of the period, particularly in terms of political ideology, economic forces, and the participation of urban workers. Despite efforts by the most recent generation of professional historians, women and people of color remain peripheral to the story. At best, they are inserted as if by afterthought in separate sections that celebrate their bravery and bemoan their losses. At worst, they play no part at all. For example, in two recent general treatments of the Revolution intended for advanced undergraduate readers, the authors relegate women and non-whites to separate chapters or brief mention as if they had no impact on the overall shape or outcome of the main events of the period. Although Gordon Wood includes women and non-whites in scattered references throughout his sweeping analysis of the radicalism of the Revolution, he announces in his introduction his intent to exclude them from the center of the story by taking modern historians to task for highlighting what the Revolution did not do—significantly alter conditions for women and slaves. In a roundtable discussion published in the current issue of The Journal of American History, focusing on the role of deference during the Revolutionary era, the lead articles mention nothing about women or Indians, and one deals with African Americans by lumping them with other unfree laborers who migrated to North America. In the commentary that follows, only Kathleen

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M. Brown insists that gender and race make a difference, noting that
dereference for women and slaves was a matter of law as well as tradition,
and that individuals in these groups took greater risks if and when they
challenged the status quo. Her plea that we fail to understand the issue of
dereference as a whole if we fail to take well over half the population into
account, demonstrates the overall problem of rethinking and generalizing
about the American Revolution. The question remains, how should the story
of the Revolution be told if we consider that the presence and participation
of these groups is not marginal, but central to our understanding?  

On the eve of the Revolution, approximately 1.25 million colonists of
European origins lived between the Mississippi River and the Atlantic
Ocean, coexisting with at least 200,000 Native Americans and about 325,000
people of African descent. Each of these populations had by this point
nearly balanced sex ratios, meaning that almost 900,000 were female, nearly
one third of whom were also non-white. How did these people contribute
to the causes of the Revolution? How did they participate in the war?
What difference did they make in shaping the outcome? And, finally, how
did the forces of war and political change reshape their lives?

Among the causes of the American Revolution, historians customarily
recite an increasingly divergent political ideology, with disagreement focused
on power relations between the colonies and their mother country; the
impact of the Seven Years War on finanaces and military arrangements;
developing colonial economic autonomy; and in recent years, scholars have
also emphasized persistent rumblings from urban Americans impatient with
old-fashioned hierarchical social and political structures. Native Americans,
blacks, and women contributed to these causes both directly and indirectly.
For example, all three groups participated in the growing Atlantic economy
as both producers and consumers. Indians provided raw products such as
fish and furs and purchased European manufactures such as metal goods and
textiles. The Indian trade became a source of political as well as economic
power within the colonies since legislatures required trading licenses. African-American slaves provided substantial labor for commercial export

Martin’s Press, 1995); Bernard Bailyn, Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the