"As Serves our Interest best":
Political Economy and the Logic of Popular Resistance in New York City, 1765–1776

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During the imperial crisis of 1765 to 1776, New York acquired the reputation of a "Tory," or loyalist, colony. This characterization arose from the colony's apparent reticence toward independence and the continued control of the same pre-crisis elite leadership in the final years before independence. Yet, the inhabitants of the city of New York undertook actions during the Stamp Act crisis that were as "radical" as any in the other colonies. Indeed, Pauline Maier once wrote that the "worst apparent threat of anarchy" during the colonial Stamp Act resistance "occurred at New York."[1] Hence, historians of colonial New York have long been left to wonder: Why were a people so riotous in the fall of 1765 during the Stamp Act crisis unwilling to lend similar support to the radicals in 1774? How are we to understand this seemingly paradoxical shift in the behavior of colonists in New York City? When and how did New York go from a city of radical Stamp Act protestors to a city of moderate patriots and outright loyalists?[2] This article argues that, in fact, colonial New Yorkers' response to the imperial crisis remained consistent throughout.

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1. Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765–1776* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1972), 67.

2. Most recently, Joseph Tiedemann has attempted to answer this question about the nature of New York's progression during the imperial crisis. Tiedemann, like this article, eschewed the post-consensus, class-conflict interpretation by Progressives and Neo-Progressives. Ultimately, he found an answer in the city and colony's diversity of interests and the obstacles it posed to achieving consensus, effectively turning city politics into a "multidimensional chess game." To date, Tiedemann's work remains the most in-depth rendering of the on-the-ground politics of the imperial crisis in New York City. See Joseph Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: New York City and the Road to Independence, 1763–1776* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 26. More recently, Benjamin Carp has argued for the importance of

Historians and contemporaries alike saw New York City as a loyalist stronghold that failed to heed "the united voice of America" and suffered from "a want of spirit in the cause of freedom."[3] Some historians, such as Roger J. Champagne, saw popular support for elite leadership throughout the imperial crisis as the product of a deferential political and social culture dominated by the elite.[4] Alternatively, neo-progressive historians, including Edward Countryman and Gary B. Nash, viewed common New Yorkers in this period as radical proto-democrats engaged in a separate struggle with the colony's elite over the "democratization" of "politics and society."[5] Neither interpretation consistently explains New Yorkers' political behavior throughout the entirety of the imperial crisis. Surely, the people's riotous and violent behavior during their rebellion against the Stamp Act in 1765 was anything but deferential.[6] Yet, their support for the moderate, elite leadership, who were in no way committed to independence in 1775, hardly seems reconcilable with the picture of a radicalized populace seeking a "democratic revolution" ten years earlier.[7] Both interpretations stem from a fundamentally ideological approach and, therefore, take for granted that New Yorkers were primarily concerned with political ideology. However, the seemingly varying popular response in New York City becomes not only reconcilable but also logical when one looks at the

taverns as spaces of "democratic social mixing" that "helped revolutionaries to overcome a civic impasse by bringing together the pluralistic urban community." See Benjamin L. Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 97, 63.

3. "Letter from the General Committee of Charlestown, S.C., to the New-York Committee, Expressing Their Disapprobation of the Course Pursued by the Assembly of New-York, and Their Determination to Adhere to the Resolutions of the Continental Congress," March 1, 1775, in *American Archives,* 4th Series, ed. Peter Force (6 vols., Washington, 1837), 2: 1–2.

4. Roger J. Champagne, "The Sons of Liberty and the Aristocracy in New York Politics, 1765–1790" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1960).

5. Carl L. Becker, *A History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1909), 5. Becker's Progressive interpretation is based on the "dual-revolution" thesis, which viewed the American Revolution as "the result of two general movements" seeking to resolve both "the question of home rule" and "who should rule at home." For the neo-progressive interpretation, which has focused far more on the latter question, see Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760–1790* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

6. The author acknowledges that the term drastically downplays the diversity of the city population, but, for the purposes of this article and to avoid repetition, the terms "the people," "plebeian," "common New Yorkers," and "freemen" will be employed as a shorthand for those colonists who were politically active, including freeholders, freemen, and even those without the franchise that took part in the political process in other ways, including collective actions such as public demonstrations or shows of support for the popular agenda, street violence, and attendance at openly called meetings.

7. Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, xiii.

economic circumstances surrounding the major turning points during the imperial crisis.

Rather than a microhistorical focus on a single event, this article looks broadly at the entirety of the imperial crisis in New York City refracted through the lens of political economy–i.e., the intersections between politics and economy–and suggests a new perspective on the city's popular resistance. The abstract ideas behind imperial policy and colonial resistance mattered far less to many colonists than the immediate effects such policies and resistance had on their daily lives and their immediate prospects for social mobility. Therefore, an ideological interpretation alone is simply too narrow an analytical category to fully understand the processes and events occurring in pre-revolutionary New York City. Historians have largely ignored how New York's self-interested commercial culture influenced popular politics, especially during the imperial crisis. They seem to have understood the elite political culture of self-interest and popular political culture as distinct and isolated from each other. Indeed, the historiography of colonial New York in the last forty years has focused on the colony's divisive features such as factionalism, class conflict, and diversity.[8]

These interpretations, however, have obscured underlying unifying factors, particularly the economy's interconnectedness between classes, which meant that common New Yorkers' own economic prosperity was directly tied to that of the city's elite. Studies have shown that income distribution in the Middle Colonies was much more level than it is today. In 1774, the top 1% of households earned only 6.4% of all annual income. The 21st through 60th percentiles earned 40.1% of annual income. And the degree of difference in annual income was much less because the average income level for the top 1% of households was only about six times higher than that of the 21st through 60th percentiles and less than twenty times higher than the bottom 40% of households. This broad distribution of income meant that all of society benefited from a growing economy and suffered from a depressed economy rather proportionally.[9]

8. For the factional interpretation, see Champagne, "The Sons of Liberty," and Patricia U. Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). For the class conflict interpretation, see Becker, *A History of Political Parties*; Nash, *The Urban Crucible*; Countryman, *A People in Revolution*. For the diversity interpretation, see Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*.

9. These numbers come from a working paper from the Global Price and Income History Group at UC-Davis. See Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "American Incomes, 1774–1860," < http://

Since Charles Beard's work in the early twentieth century, the idea of "self-interest" as a causal factor has often been perceived as crass and reductionist. Common New Yorkers, however, had learned through their own political experience of banding together to achieve economic goals on the municipal level that their own "self-interest" and the interest of the city as a whole were interrelated. By the onset of the imperial crisis, New Yorkers had already developed a conception of enlightened self-interest that would become more common in the nineteenth century, in which the public good came from the sum of the individual's pursuit of his or her own interests.[10] As one New Yorker wrote in *The New-York Gazette, or the Weekly Post-Boy* in 1765:

> *Self-interest* is the grand Principle of all Human Actions; it is unreasonable and vain to expect Service from a Man who must act contrary to his own Interests to perform it. . . . And the publick Happiness is then in the most perfect State, when each Individual acts the most agreeably to his own Interest. This ought to be the model of all Human Government.[11]

This is not to discount the role of republican ideology in this period and its stress on the "public good," as developed famously in the work of Bernard Bailyn, Pauline Maier, and others in response to Beard and other Progressive historians. However, as Patricia Bonomi has argued, broad ideological arguments tend to break down when dealing with the political minutiae of a single colony or city. More importantly, Bonomi noted this rise of "self-interest as a public concept" as the "sharpest single innovation of colonial politics."[12] In rethinking the coming of the Revolution, there has to be a way to think about the intersection between politics and eco-

emlab.berkeley.edu/users/webfac/cromer/e211_f12/LindertWilliamson.pdf> accessed September 3, 2013. Lindert and Williamson were building off the earlier, pioneering work of Alice Hanson Jones, *American Colonial Wealth* (3 vols., New York: Arno Press, 1977).

10. Studies of Enlightenment thought in America have described this form of enlightened self-interest—that is, the idea that the greatest good for society comes when each individual pursues their own interest—to have been a late eighteenth-century development following its popularization by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations*, which was not published until 1776. Yet, in New York City, we find this idea in practice decades before.

11. *New-York Gazette; or, the Weekly Post-Boy*, April 4, 1765. As Joseph Tiedemann has noted, "Indeed, given New York's diversity, acting out of self-interest was becoming a legitimate form of political behavior." Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 265–6.

12. Bonomi, *A Factious People*, 280–2.

nomics in a way that does not devolve into the neo-Progressive class conflict binary, acknowledges the multitude of local contexts in which resistance occurred, and attempts to reconcile what Gordon S. Wood referred to as the "rhetoric and reality" of resistance.[13]

In the specific context of New York, the city's self-interested commercial culture, the economic interdependence among classes, the interrelationship between self-interest and the public good, the popular political experience forged at the municipal level, the colony's post-war economic depression, and the political economy of the various moments of the crisis are all critical to understanding the character of the popular response in the city to the imperial crisis. When we take them all into account, the seemingly inconsistent popular response throughout the imperial crisis appears rather consistent. Common New Yorkers operated within the same self-interested political culture as the colonial elite. Through their political engagement at the municipal level throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, common New Yorkers showed that to them politics and economics were not as distinct from each other as they are to many contemporary historians. And they carried those assumptions with them into the 1760s and the imperial crisis.

Historians' interpretations of the role and allegiance of common New Yorkers have ignored a crucial fact of imperial crisis politics. In the early twentieth century, Carl L. Becker defined the political dynamic in New York City during the imperial crisis as a contest between conservatives, later to become Tories, and radicals, who represented the popular will throughout the decade preceding independence. In the 1960s, Roger J. Champagne interpreted the political dynamic as a contest solely between the elite De Lancey and Livingston factions, minimizing the role of common New Yorkers. Later, Neo-Progressive historians such as Gary B. Nash and Edward Countryman sought to portray a linear, evolutionary develop-

13. In the last few years, a number of major national conferences were held to forge new directions in the study of the Revolution by the Newberry Library, McNeil Center for Early American Studies, Massachusetts Historical Society, and Huntington Library. Yet, of the dozens of papers and presentations given over those numerous conferences, very few addressed the coming of the Revolution directly. It was a reminder that the basis of our current understanding of the origins and causes of the Revolution is at least three generations olds. Gordon S. Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 23, no. 1 (1966): 3–32. Wood also referred to this false dichotomy as being between "idealism" and "behaviorism." For a succinct explication of this historiographical dynamic regarding the American Revolution, see Alan Gibson, *Understanding the Founding: The Crucial Questions* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 93–100.

ment of democratic popular politics throughout the eighteenth century.[14] Nash argued that the "working class" in colonial urban centers "came to perceive antagonistic divisions based on economic and social position; they began to struggle in relation to these conflicting interests; and through these struggles they developed a consciousness of class."[15] However, Nash's stressing of "antagonistic divisions" and "conflicting interests" between the elite and those below them did not apply to New York as well as it might have applied to Boston and Philadelphia. In fact, common New Yorkers did not perceive their relationship with those above them in a fundamentally antagonistic manner. The interdependence of the economy in New York City was such that the artisans, day laborers, shipbuilders, and sailors could not prosper without prosperous trade by merchants, large and small. These interdependent economic relations meant that when merchants prospered, so did the city's laboring classes. This crucial fact renders the contour of popular resistance during the imperial crisis more intelligible and logical.

Contrary to Becker and Nash, the popular majority actually aligned themselves with the merchant class throughout most of the crisis due to their shared interests, abandoning them only when the merchants became openly subversive of colonial resistance. Throughout the crisis, common New Yorkers' political actions intended to maximize their own interests, which, more often than not, were shared between classes. Their decisions, therefore, were neither the reactions of deferential, manipulable tools of the elite nor of class-conscious radicals seeking to cast off their aristocratic shackles in search of political democracy. Instead, they were the product of interrelated political and economic circumstances and calculations. With these factors in mind, a look at the ebb and flow of the popular political response during the imperial crisis shows that at each juncture, common New Yorkers consistently acted in a manner that they deemed best to serve their interests and, by extension, those of the city as a whole, and that what has previously been interpreted as ideological inconsistency is, indeed, politically and economically consistent.

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14. Gary B. Nash, "The Transformation of Urban Politics, 1700–1765," *Journal of American History* 60, no. 3 (Dec. 1973): 605–32.

15. Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, xxii.

Two groups in direct, contentious competition with each other dominated the colony's economic and political life. The factious political environment produced two centers of influence that functioned as prototypical political parties: the De Lancey and Livingston families. While southern merchants generally favored the De Lanceys, large, upstate landholders tended to favor the Livingstons. Supporters of both factions attempted to use their political positions and influence for their own economic benefit, often at the direct expense of the opposing interest. This direct competition between landowners and merchants produced a political and social culture far more factious and more openly driven by self-interest than most other colonies.[16] At every level of society, the colony was full of men "on the make" seeking to take advantage of the colony's social mobility by increasing their fortunes and raising their social status.

The lack of a hereditary aristocracy and the colony's focus on commerce meant that colonists of British America had the potential for an unusual degree of social mobility. The drive to improve one's social standing through economic success permeated much of colonial life in New York, and nothing provided more opportunity than war.[17] The city experienced unprecedented economic growth during the Seven Years' War, which lasted from 1756 to 1763. Merchants, especially those with imperial connections, profited immensely from war contracts with Britain's military forces.[18] However, artisans of all types also benefited as all sectors of the city's economy grew during the war, including home and shipbuilding, sea-based trades, food production, and personal goods production such as shoes and clothes.[19]

The primacy given to self-interest defined the social, economic, and political lives of colonists of all ranks and created a fluidity in New York's social and political alignment unlike the other colonies. Because the colony's political culture was not primarily defined by ideological differences,

16. For accounts of the development of interest-based partisan politics unique to the region, see Alan Tully, *Forming American Politics: Ideals, Interests, and Institutions in Colonial New York and Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Benjamin H. Newcomb, *Political Partisanship in the American Middle Colonies, 1700–1776* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1995).

17. Gary B. Nash, "Urban Wealth and Poverty in Pre-Revolutionary America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6, no. 4 (1976): 554.

18. Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 148–9. Nash estimates British expenditures "for the entire war likely topped £5 million."

19. Benjamin A. Guterman, "The 'Ancient' Freemen of New York City: Artisans and the Development of Urban Society, 1664–1776" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1994), 286–7.

the De Lancey and Livingston factions were free to pursue their own interests, and, more importantly for our purposes, so were the rest of the colonists. Diverse groups with diverse interests aligned themselves politically with whichever faction afforded them the greatest potential for maximizing their own interests at any given moment. As a leading figure wrote, "We Change Sides as Serves our Interest best."[20]

An examination of popular political participation in the decades before the imperial crisis shows that urban freemen and freeholders were far more consistently involved in municipal rather than provincial politics throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. There are two reasons for this. First, the municipal government was more accessible to common New Yorkers, and some freemen even represented their own wards on the city's Common Council. Secondly, the municipal government proved far more responsive than the colony's General Assembly to the immediate needs of the populace, especially in economic matters. New York City was chartered as a legal corporation, which allowed the municipal government to exercise far greater control over economic issues than its counterparts in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston.[21] The city's Common Council was responsible for instituting price controls, such as maintaining assizes, which regulated the price at which necessaries could be sold.[22] The city also prosecuted offenders of its economic policies and decided which types of businesses could operate in different areas of the city.[23]

Because the municipal government had so much control over economic matters, entrepreneurs and workers alike consistently petitioned the city for redress of economic grievances.[24] When bakers felt the assize on bread was too low, they banded together politically as a proto-interest group based on their occupation. When the municipal government proved

20. Phillip Livingston to Jacob Wendell, October 23, 1737. Livingston Papers, Museum of the City of New York.

21. Ernest S. Griffith, *History of American City Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 51–74. The city's official name in ministerial documents was "The Corporation of the City of New York."

22. All of the New York City newspapers included underneath their head-masts the current assize on bread as well as the "Price-Current, in New-York," which reported the prices determined by the City Corporation for such items as wheat, flour, sugar, molasses, beef, pork, salt, tea, and nut wood.

23. Guterman, "The 'Ancient' Freemen," 213.

24. Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), 193–204.

unresponsive, direct protest proved more effective.[25] For example, in the 1730s, country butchers flooded into the city, taking up a majority of the available market stalls. Because they were not freemen, or members of the Corporation of the City of New York, they were not bound by the restrictive regulations placed on city butchers and could take up the stalls without having to pay the corresponding fee. City butchers petitioned the Common Council for new, protective regulations to protect their economic interests. After many confrontations between butchers in the city markets, the Council acquiesced to the butchers' demands and regulated the stalls.[26] Beginning in 1736, city butchers were given the right to lease the newly-numbered stalls from the city by paying "such reasonable Rents, as they, in their Discretions, can [agree on]."[27] Through the economic turmoil of the 1730s, freemen "gained a fuller awareness of their collective power and the need to protect their unique socioeconomic concerns."[28] At the municipal level, freemen were actively engaged, politically self-motivated, and, like the self-interested elite, they used politics as a tool to either protect or further their own interests.

The Stamp Act of 1765, however, posed a direct threat to freemen's economic interests.[29] While New York City had profited immensely from the Seven Years' War, the end of the war (and, hence, the end of British military contracts) brought on a severe economic depression. In fact, the war

25. *New-York Weekly Journal*, April 20, 1741. For example, in 1741, "there was a general Combination of the Bakers not to Bake, because Wheat is at a high price, which occasioned some Disturbance, and reduced some, notwithstanding their Riches, to a sudden want of Bread."

26. Guterman, "The 'Ancient' Freemen," 193–4.

27. *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675–1776*, ed. Herbert L. Osgood (8 vols., New York: Dodd, Mead, 1905), 4: 293.

28. Guterman, "The 'Ancient' Freemen," 209. Guterman wrote that freemen, especially artisans, increasingly "took collective action to petition the government," insisting on recognition of "their own needs and the responsibility of government to protect them."

29. So much of the literature on the American Revolution in the last fifty years has focused on the ideological and constitutional aspects, particularly the print debates, of the resistance to imperial reform. See Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967); Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Even some of the most prominent work on the popular resistance has been done with ideology foregrounded. For example, see Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*. There have been a few exceptions of historians really seeking out the experience and perceptions of non-elites during the crisis, most notably see Jesse L. Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 25, no. 3 (1968): 371–407. Most recently, see Staughton Lynd and David Waldstreicher, "Reflections on Economic Interpretation, Slavery, the People Out of Doors, and Top Down Versus Bottom Up," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 68, no. 4 (2011): 649–56.

proved so costly to Britain that it was forced to borrow money to cover just under half of its total expenditures during the war.[30] The Stamp Act was largely an attempt at "defraying the Expenses of defending, protecting, and securing, the British Colonies and Plantations in America" by imposing a duty on legal documents, newspapers, playing cards, and other printed matter.[31] The Act required colonists to pay all duties in specie, or hard currency, and many colonists feared that it would drain the colony of silver, which was already in short supply. A lack of currency would adversely affect the city's internal economy, its trade with the West Indies, and its trade balance with Britain.[32] Merchants would pay heavily because all bills of lading would need to be affixed with a stamp. The Act upset landholders and lawyers because all court documents and land deeds would require stamped paper. Common New Yorkers, such as artisans and seaman would also be adversely affected in their frequent interactions with merchants. The Stamp Act posed a direct and immediate threat to New Yorkers' economic interests and, hence, "an abridgment of opportunities" for social mobility.[33]

Because the threat was so direct and immediate, many people in the city violently acted out their dissatisfaction without the direction of the colonial elite. This took the elite by surprise, and they scrambled to rein the people in. Tension built throughout the summer and fall of 1765. It finally erupted upon the arrival of the stamps on October 23. With the Stamp Act due to go into effect on November 1, over "200 principal merchants" signed an agreement "not to buy any Goods, Wares, or Merchandizes of any Person

30. David Stasavage, *Public Debt and the Birth of the Democratic State: France and Great Britain, 1688–1789* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Stasavage states, "By the end of the conflict total outstanding British public debt was equivalent to 13.5 times annual revenues. . . ."

31. "An act for granting and applying certain stamp duties, and other duties, in the British colonies and plantations in America, towards further defraying the expences of defending, protecting, and securing the same," in *American History Leaflets, Colonial and Constitutional*, ed. Albert Bushnell Hart and Edward Channing (New York: A. Lovell and Co., 1895).

32. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 26. Becker writes, "The more important ground of opposition to [the Stamp Act] was economic rather than political." The colony's supply of silver currency "had never been more than barely sufficient to pay the English balances."

33. William Dunlap, *History of the New Netherlands, Province of New York, and State of New York, to the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (2 vols., New York: Printed for the author by Carter & Thorp, 1839), 1: 422; Bernard Friedman, "The Shaping of the Radical Consciousness in Provincial New York," *Journal of American History* 56, no. 4 (1970): 800. Friedman artfully argues that the protestors favored proto-liberal policies and rejected ideological arguments. But Friedman was removing the ideological chains of eighteenth-century republicanism only to replace them with those of nineteenth-century liberalism and, thereby, falls into the same teleological trap as the Progressives and Neo-Progressives.

or Persons whatsoever that shall be shipped from Great-Britain after the first day of January next unless the STAMP ACT shall be repealed."[34] At the same time, the crowd put up "Placharts in the Merchants Coffee House & on the Corners of the Streets,"[35] that read:

PRO PATRIA
The first Man that either distributes or makes use of stampt paper, let him take care of his house, person, and effects.
Vox Populi
We dare.[36]

While the elite were busy framing their constitutional arguments throughout the summer of 1765, anger in the city over the act's effects on the city's trade reached fever pitch.[37] On the evening of November 1, the people issued death threats to the acting governor, Lt. Gov. Cadwallader Colden, should he attempt to enforce the Act.[38] A large gathering of more than two-thousand inhabitants, led by former privateer captain Isaac Sears, dragged effigies of Colden and the Devil through the streets.[39] They also broke into Colden's carriage house and carried away his "chariot, a single

34. "No Stamp'd Paper to be had," broadside, Philadelphia, November 7, 1765.

35. Cadwallader Colden to Secretary of State H.S. Conway, New York, November 9, 1765, in "The Colden Letter Books," *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* X (1877), 61.

36. Colden to H.S. Conway, New York, October 26, 1765, in *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York: Procured in Holland, England, and France* (hereafter referred to as *DRNY*), ed. Edmund B. O'Callaghan (15 vols., Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., Public Printers, 1857), 7: 770. Colden included one of the handwritten bills in his letter. *Pro Patria* is Latin for "on behalf of the country," and *Vox Populi* translates to "the voice of the people."

37. Word had arrived in New York of the Stamp Act's passage on April 11, 1765.

38. Colden had succeeded Robert Monckton as acting governor until the arrival of Sir Henry Moore on November 13, 1765. Because this article is primarily concerned with the interrelationship between the local political economics and the imperial reforms, I have foregone discussing the important court case, *Forsey v. Cunningham*, taking place in New York prior to the Stamp Act. In that case, Cunningham had lost without error, leaving him no grounds on which to appeal. However, in contradiction to the common law, Lt. Gov. Cadwallader Colden issued a stay because Cunningham had instructions from the King that would allow the Governor or Lt. Governor to do so. The justices and lawyers understood the issue as one primarily concerning the common law, while Colden insisted it was a matter of royal prerogative. In the year before the Stamp Act, this case was widely debated in public prints. Just as the local political actions and behavior of Thomas Hutchinson and Gov. Francis Bernard in the years before the imperial crisis had shaped the response to imperial reforms in Boston, the *Forsey v. Cunningham* case shaped the treatment of Colden and the virulence of the imperial debate over the Stamp Act in New York City. On the local and imperial implications of *Forsey v. Cunningham*, see Daniel J. Hulsebosch, *Constituting Empire: New York and the Transformation of Constitutionalism in the Atlantic World, 1664–1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 118–20.

39. Philip Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 15–6; "The Montressor Journals," *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* XIV (1881), 337; Lustig, *Privilege and Prerogative*, 130.

horse chair, and two sledges." The mob made its way down Broadway to Bowling Green across from Fort George, which served as the Governor's residence and which Colden had been fortifying for possible mob attack for weeks. Further angering the people, he called for a British artillery regiment to protect the stamps and himself. Inside Fort George with Colden was Major Thomas James, who had famously, and regretfully, threatened to "cram the Stamps down their throats." After hanging Colden's effigies from a gallows and burning them with his carriages, they made their way to James's unprotected mansion uptown, destroying everything but the frame. Later, an anonymous letter addressed to Colden was left at the fort's gate:

> Sir,
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> The People of the City and Province of New York have been informed that you bound Yourself under an Oath to be the Chief Murderer of their Rights and Privileges, by acting as an enemy to Your King and Country, to Liberty and Mankind, in the enforcement of the Stamp Act, which we are unanimously determined shall never take place among us so long as a Man has life to defend his injured Country.
>
> [. . .]
>
> We have heard of Your Design or Menace, to fire upon the Town in case of disturbance, but assure yourself that if you dare to perpetrate any such murderous Act, you'll bring your grey hairs with sorrow to the grave, You'll die a martir to your own villainy, and be hanged, like Porteis upon a Sign Post, as a memento to all wicked Governors, and that every man that assists you shall be surely put to death.
>
> Signed, New York [40]

40. Colden to Conway, New York, November 9, 1765, in *DRNY,* 7: 773–6. Colden enclosed a copy of the anonymous letter, of which these are the first and last paragraphs, in his packet to Conway. "Porteis" [sic] refers to John Porteous, a Captain of the Edinburgh City Guard who ordered his men to fire on a crowd during a disturbance at the hanging of three men convicted of smuggling in April of 1736. He was convicted but when the people began suspecting that the death sentence might not be carried out due to intervention from London, they stormed the jail, dragged him out, and hung him themselves. The mention of Porteous was a nod to Colden's Scottish background and also a threat that, if Colden chose to use force, the Fort alone would not protect him.

Shocked, Colden issued a timorous, placatory statement to the crowd that he would "do nothing in relation to stamps, but leave it to Sir Henry Moore, to do as he pleases on his arrival."[41] Major James left the following morning on a boat for London having lost everything. Still, the violent atmosphere did not subside, and Colden reluctantly turned the stamps over to city officials. When Sir Henry Moore arrived at Fort George eight days later to take over the governorship, he found Colden, still frightened and locked inside.[42]

The level of mob violence and, especially, their inability to control it disturbed both elite factions.[43] However, the different responses to the riots by the De Lancey and Livingston factions reflected increasingly divergent political priorities. Both factions were shocked at the violent and incorrigible nature of the riots, especially the seemingly wanton destruction of private property. Robert R. Livingston made numerous unsuccessful attempts in the early evening of November 1 to break up the gathering.[44] For the landholding and lawyer-dominated Livingstons, the destruction of property was extremely disturbing on both a personal and political level. However, having lost power in the Assembly in 1760 and seeking to curry favor with the electorate, the De Lanceys did not attempt to rein in the mob. Rather, they joined in, albeit not as violent participants.[45] The De Lanceys' merchant interests were more directly tied economically to the groups of artisans, mechanics, seamen, shopkeepers, and journeymen on the street that night. Because of their conspicuous public presence during the riots and later resistance, the De Lanceys had positioned themselves as the new "popular party" ahead of the next Assembly election.

A radical leadership emerged from the Stamp Act riots, composed of former ship captains who had used the modest fortunes they had made from profiteering during the Seven Years' War to become low-level mer-

41. "No Stamp'd Paper to be had," November 7, 1765.

42. Lustig, *Privilege and Prerogative*, 133.

43. Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 3–68; Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 27, no. 1 (1970): 4–35; Gordon S. Wood, "A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 23, no. 4 (1966): 635–42.

44. Robert R. Livingston to Robert Monckton, New York, November 8, 1765, in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 4th Series (1871), 10: 563–4.

45. The reader should be aware that there is a historiographical debate regarding the political machinations in the city during the imperial crisis, particularly regarding the behavior of the De Lanceys during the Stamp Act. For a summary of that debate, see Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 263–5.

chants. Two groups, both referring to themselves as the Sons of Liberty, emerged from the Stamp Act resistance. Isaac Sears and John Lamb chose to align their group with the De Lancey leadership, while Alexander MacDougall and his much smaller group aligned with the Livingston faction. Though the factions never had complete control over the groups, they did exert influence on the radical leaders, and the Sons of Liberty were effectively incorporated into the wider, overall resistance movement.[46] The De Lanceys and Livingstons both sought the support of small merchants like McDougall, Sears, and Lamb, who in turn tried to direct "the mob." The fact that the radical leaders were self-made merchants with connections and credibility among the mechanics and sailors allowed them to assume their roles as coordinators, "effectively bridg[ing] the distance between aristocrats and the populace."[47]

In the New York assembly elections of 1768 and 1769, the De Lanceys and their merchant constituency finally had a chance to spend the political capital that they had accumulated for their role in the Stamp Act resistance. More importantly, freemen had their first opportunity to extend the influence they gained in the Stamp Act resistance into the electoral sphere. New Yorkers were still reeling from the postwar depression when Parliament passed the Townshend Acts in 1767.[48] Designed to gain revenue through duties on imports, they merely exacerbated the financial problems of the city and further antagonized the colonists. The Currency Act, passed in 1764 to prohibit the colonies from printing their own paper currency, now also became a major issue over the three years after its passage.[49] With currency in short supply, the colony's "business had all but stopped for want of money" as New York's trade deficit continued to grow.[50] The Livingston-

46. Roger J. Champagne, "Liberty Boys and Mechanics of New York City, 1764–1774," *Labor History* 8, no. 2 (1967): 115–35.

47. Ibid., 118–19. Champagne writes that the factions "had to work through, and hence were to a degree dependent upon, the efforts and leadership of lower-ranked men—men more closely identified with the commonalty by birth, occupation, or past political experience."

48. Peter D. G. Thomas, *The Townshend Duties Crisis: The Second Phase of the American Revolution*, 1767–1773 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

49. On the effects of the Currency Act of 1764, see Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 65–71; Joseph Albert Ernst, *Money and Politics in America, 1755–1775: A Study in the Currency Act of 1764 and the Political Economy of Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 252–70.

50. Champagne, "Family Politics," 63; Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 67–9, 68n, 73. Becker's tabulations of the colony's trade with Britain, in McPherson, *Annals of Commerce*, show that annual trade balances went from an average deficit of £200,000 from 1761–1763, the final years of the war, to £395,000 in 1768.

controlled Assembly had been locked in a stalemate with the Ministry over a new issuance of paper currency since 1766, when all paper money was recalled.[51] Therefore, New York's merchants were more than happy to go along with the non-consumption and non-importation plan proposed by a Boston committee in late 1767 as way to deal with the colony's economic problems, especially the unprecedented trade balance with Britain.[52]

With the colony's economic depression moving into its seventh year, the De Lanceys' campaign efforts focused on the economic state of the colony. They stressed the common interests of the "industrious Merchant and Mechanick" and pitted them against the largely Livingston-aligned urban "lawyer interest":

> As a Maritime City, our chief Dependence is upon Trade, for which Reason Merchants (who are well acquainted with the commercial Interest of the Colony) are the properest Persons to represent us in the Assembly; not Lawyers, whose sole Study it is, not to increase the Wealth of the State, but to divide the Gain of the industrious Merchant and Mechanick if possible among themselves; and to rise from upon the Ruin, and Distresses of the rest of the Community; by extorting from them . . . the Price of their Labour, Sweat and Toil.[53]

Like any incumbent who held office during an economic crisis, the Livingstons were in a disadvantageous position. The De Lanceys were keen to stress their role in the Stamp Act resistance by minimizing that of the Livingston lawyers, of whom "not one of their whole Body, (in this Province) employed even his Pen in Defence of its Rights, when they were so evidently invaded, at that memorable, and truly alarming Time,

51. Henry Moore to Lords of Trade, New York, March 28, 1766, in *DRNY*, 7: 820. Moore wrote that the colony was "left without any medium of commerce" and "greatly distressed for want of a paper currency."

52. Champagne, "Family Politics," 61–3. A non-importation agreement followed on April 8, 1768. The non-importation agreement, however, did not go into effect immediately. New York merchants' acceptance of the agreement was contingent on the adoption of the agreement in Boston and Philadelphia. *New-York Journal; or, the General Advertiser*, April 14, 1768. In August, the merchants reaffirmed their support by strengthening the agreement, publishing "A Copy of the Resolves subscribed by the Merchants in New-York, dated the 27th of August, 1768," *New-York Journal; or, the General Advertiser*, September 8, 1768.

53. Philanthropos, "To the Freeholders and Freemen of the City and County of New-York," broadside, New York, [February] 1768.

when the arbitrary, and unconstitutional Stamp-Act, was in Agitation."[54] William Smith, Jr., a member of the Livingston triumvirate, noted, "James De Lancey [Jr.] would probably get into the Assembly now as he was among the Sons of Liberty."[55]

Following "one of the most intense and acrimonious [campaigns] in the province's history,"[56] thirteen of the Livingston-dominated Assembly's twenty-seven members were replaced, and the De Lanceys won three of New York City's four crucial seats.[57] Accusations of fraud abounded in the wake of the election.[58] After another Assembly election in 1769, the De Lanceys finally regained the Assembly majority they had lost in 1761 by winning all four New York City seats by a significant margin.[59] The electorate had chosen the merchants over the lawyers and large landholders.[60] The De Lanceys' victory in these two elections was attributable largely

54. Philanthropos, "To the Freeholders. . . ." The Livingstons attempted to counteract the De Lancey propaganda assault by reverting to assertions of the De Lanceys' collusion in establishing an Anglican bishopric in the colonies. Also see, "A Political Creed for the Day," broadside, New York, [February] 1768.

55. William Smith, Jr., *Historical Memoirs from 16 March, 1763 to 25 July, 1778*, ed. William H. W. Sabine (2 vols., New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1969), 1: 33.

56. Both sides made public accusations of vote purchasing; but, in fact, this was a common practice used with a seemingly reckless abandon in 1768 due to the importance of the election for the two factions. Peter Livingston wrote of the necessity for "good management of the votes" and of his being "so immerged in Election Jobing." See Peter R. Livingston to Philip Schuyler, January 16, 1769, Philip Schuyler Papers, Box 23, New York Public Library; Peter R. Livingston to Oliver Wendell, New York, January 19, 1769, Livingston Papers, Museum of the City of New York, qtd. in Bonomi, *A Factious People*, 252. For an alternate interpretation that argues that the vehemence of the election campaigns signaled the weakness of the elite-led factions and marked a turning point away from elite-led factional politics, see Bernard Friedman, "The New York Assembly Elections of 1768 and 1769: The Disruption of Family Politics," *New York History* 46, no. 1 (1965): 3–24.

57. Colden to Lord Halifax, New York, April 25, 1768, in *The Colden Letter Books*, Vol. II, Collections of the New-York Historical Society (1877), 8: 167–8; Bonomi, *A Factious People*, 239–46. Only Philip Livingston retained his seat.

58. Bonomi, *A Factious People*, 250. For just one example out of many of the vicious factional strife that developed around the campaigning for the election of 1768, see, "To the Freeholders and Freemen of the City and County of New York," *New-York Journal*, February 25, 1768. It was part of a debate occasioned by another letter in the *New-York Gazette*, February 15, 1768, which famously proposed seventeen queries in support of the lawyers and their character. The author claimed to have ventured into a "dram-shop," in which "every Freeholder or Freeman, who was willing to part with his vote, might there meet with a purchaser." There he found "a considerable number of my fellow citizens greatly heated with passion, and intoxicated with liquor. The question under their consideration was, 'Whether a Lawyer could possibly be an honest Man?' The majority were of opinion he could not."

59. *New-York Journal*, February 2, 1769. Poll results showed 61% of the total votes cast were for the four De Lancey candidates.

60. Champagne, "Liberty Boys," 124–29. Through investigating the 1771 census and the poll lists for the 1768 and 1769 elections, Champagne concluded there were "about 4,023 white males over twenty-one . . . in the city and county of New York." Out of that number, 2,763, or 68.6% had the franchise. Of those eligible to vote, at least 1,349 were identified as mechanics. As others have also asserted, the mechanics, or laboring class, comprised almost 50% of those voting.

to their role in the Stamp Act resistance, which won them the support of the populace and radical leaders, Isaac Sears and John Lamb, and to their direct campaigning among the freemen.[61]

The imperial crisis and the Stamp Act, in particular, provided a new way for freemen to become engaged in provincial politics while pursuing similar ends to those they had agitated for on the municipal level for decades. In a sense, they were transferring, or extending, their municipal action to the provincial and, ultimately, imperial arena. Just as they had expected the City to address their concerns equally with those of the elite, they were now expecting the Assembly to do the same. As a De Lancey supporter wrote to the *New-York Journal* in 1769:

> Every Man whose all depends on the public Welfare, is as much interested in it, as the first Nobleman; and every Man who honestly supports a Family by a useful Employment, is honourable enough for any Office in the State, that his Abilities are equal to. And in the great essential Interests of a Nation which are so plain that everyone may understand them,—as every Individual is interested, all have an equal Right to declare their Sentiments and to have them regarded.[62]

When faced with the choice, the freemen concluded that their own "essential Interests" would be "regarded" most and served best by the De Lanceys and their merchant supporters on whom their economic lives, and the rest of the city, depended.

1770 proved to be a pivotal year in shaping the colony's eventual path to independence. Rather than deal with the economic issues facing the colony, the De Lanceys spent most of 1769 attacking and removing the Livingstons' remaining Assembly members through legislative fiat.[63]

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61. Moore to the Earl of Hillsborough, June 3, 1769, *DRNY*, 8: 170. Reporting back to London on the elections, Moore wrote of the De Lanceys' "motive of courting popularity" and the favor of a "licentious set of Men, who call themselves the Sons of Liberty, and who have had a very great influence on the Elections of Members for this City." Also see, Bonomi, *A Factious People*, 254. Bonomi writes, "the 'mechanics,' who made up slightly fewer than one-half of those voting, gave from 61 to 63 percent of their votes to the [De Lanceys]. . . ." Voting patterns "suggest that it may indeed have been the 'common people' who held the balance of power in these elections."

62. [An Episcopalian], "To the Printer," *New-York Journal*, December 21, 1769.

63. Lawrence H. Leder, "The New York Elections of 1769: An Assault on Privilege," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49 (March 1963): 675–82; Champagne, "Family Politics," 75–9. After the 1769 election, Philip Livingston was the sole remaining member of the faction's leadership in the Assembly. The De Lanceys used a largely unenforced statute from 1699, which required officeholders to reside in the county they represented, to oust him. When Supreme Court Justice Robert R. Livingston attempted

That their priority for much of the first post-election Assembly session in the spring of 1769 was to consolidate their political advantage rather than address the city's economic plight did not go unnoticed. Most of the colony's paper money had been recalled the previous November, stifling intra- and inter-colonial business.[64] Meanwhile, the boycott on British importations, signed by the merchants of the city in April and August of 1768 in conjunction with Boston and Philadelphia, continued unabated, at least in New York.[65] All previous negotiations between the British Ministry and the colony regarding a new issue of £260,000 of paper money had stalled over the inclusion of a suspending clause, which forbade the issuance of the currency until royal approval was secured.[66] A counter-proposal by the Assembly called for £120,000 to be issued without a suspending clause to expedite circulation. The Ministry rejected the proposal, despite Moore's pleas to "relieve the present distress 'till the American commerce opens channels for a better supply of silver and gold now so scarce that many of the poorer inhabitants have been ruin'd and all Ranks greatly impoverish'd."[67] Colden, who was serving as acting governor again after Moore's death, was still forbidden from signing any currency bill that did not include a suspending clause.

Along with the currency shortage, the largest issue facing the new Assembly was the Quartering Act of 1764. This act had required the Assembly to provision the garrison of British troops stationed in New York City.[68] Republican Whig rhetoric on the danger of standing armies notwithstanding, for common New Yorkers the issue was also once again

to take his seat, the De Lancey Assembly passed a bill forbidding Supreme Court justices from simultaneously holding an Assembly seat.

64. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 69. Imports from Britain dropped from £482,000 in 1768 to £74,000 in 1769. Of which, approximately "one Half of the Goods arrived here, are now in store, or sent back to England." *New-York Mercury*, May 21, 1770.

65. "A Copy of the Resolves," *New-York Journal*, Sept. 8, 1768.

66. Leopold S. Launitz-Schürer, *Loyal Whigs and Revolutionaries: The Making of the Revolution in New York, 1765–1776* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 51–2.

67. Moore to the Earl of Hillsborough, May 14, 1768, *DRNY*, 8: 72. Also see, Moore to the Earl of Shelburne, January 3, 1768, Ibid., 8: 1; Moore to the Earl of Hillsborough, May 29, 1769, Ibid., 8: 169.

68. The Assembly had faced suspension by a restraining act due to its refusal to grant the funds required to support His Majesty's troops stationed in New York. Faced with suspension, the Livingston Assembly first signed a bill providing £3000 in June 1767 and then a further £1500 in November. See Nicholas Varga, "The New York Restraining Act: Its Passage and Some Effects, 1766–1768," *New York History* 37, no. 3 (1956): 233–58; Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 56–7.

economic in nature.[69] To supplement their military salaries, British soldiers began offering themselves up for the city's limited available employment, in direct competition with the residents. However, because the soldiers already earned a salary from the Crown, they were willing to accept far lower wages than a citizen needing to support his family.

The governor's salary also came from the Quartering Act; without it, Colden was not paid.[70] Similarly, a number of the troops' largest creditors were De Lancey supporters, including Oliver De Lancey.[71] In December of 1769, the Assembly struck a deal with Colden. They approved the provisioning bill in return for his approval of the currency bill. Despite his specific royal instructions, Colden signed the bill with the provision that it would not take effect until the following June.[72] The currency issue at least seemed on its way to settlement, but many New Yorkers were not satisfied with the delay in addressing the issue or with the Assembly's collusion with Colden. Furthermore, they were angry at having to support soldiers with whom they were in open economic competition.

Tensions grew worse in December 1769 after the publication of a broadside criticizing the Assembly-Colden deal. Penned by Alexander McDougall, it was entitled, "To the Betrayed Inhabitants of the City of New-York."[73] Another broadside claimed,

> Whoever seriously considers the impoverished State of this City, especially of any of the poor Inhabitants of it, must be greatly surprised at the conduct of such as employ the Soldiers, when there are a Number of the former that want Employment to support their distressed Families. [. . .] Is it not enough that you pay Taxes for Billeting Money

69. The Livingstons faced much criticism during the campaigns of 1768 and 1769 because they had called out the very troops they had funded to suppress upstate land rioters, in open contradiction with their Whig rhetoric, which warned of the dangers posed by standing armies.

70. Colden was one of the only officials not reimbursed by the Assembly for losses sustained during the Stamp Act riots, despite his constant pleading in letters to the Ministry.

71. Roger J. Champagne, *Alexander McDougall and the American Revolution in New York* (Schenectady: Union College Press, 1975), 18. By the close of 1769, merchants that had supplied the troops with provisions were owed nearly £1,000.

72. Colden to the Lords of Trade, January 6, 1770, *DRNY*, 8:198–99. Colden hoped "that the time allowed by the Act, before the Bills can be emitted, is in effect equivalent to the suspending clause. . . . The Bills of credit are to bear date the 10th day of June next, and are not to be emitted till the last Tuesday of that month."

73. [Alexander McDougall], "To the Betrayed Inhabitants of the City and Colony of New York," broadside, New York, December 16, 1769, in *Documentary History of the State of New York*, ed. Edmund B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow (4 vols., Albany: Weed, Parsons, & Co., 1849–1851), 3: 528–32.

> to support the Soldiers, and a Poor Tax, to maintain many of their Whores and Bastards in the Work House, without giving them the Employment of the Poor. . . .[74]

Predictably, the soldiers took exception. In January 1770, after they tried to cut down the Liberty Pole, the soldiers and the citizens of the city fought a weeklong series of pitched street battles known as the Battle of Golden Hill.[75] The citizens passed resolutions affirming that "we will not employ any Soldier, on any Terms whatsoever; but that we will treat them with all the Abhorrence and Contempt which the Enemies of our happy Constitution, deserve."[76] Feeling as though they were being squeezed economically from all directions, the fight over the Quartering Act and, subsequently, the Battle of Golden Hill are further examples of how distinct economic factors also lay behind popular political actions in New York City during the imperial crisis.

But what of the ideological and constitutional arguments regarding colonial resistance to the imperial reforms that have formed the dominant scholarly paradigm for understanding the coming of the Revolution for nearly half a century? To foreground the economic factors in New York City is not to deny that Britain's program of imperial reforms after the Seven Years' War caused a constitutional crisis within the empire. Nor does it deny the importance of the republican ideology that framed the largely elite-produced resistance literature. Yet, to really understand what was happening on the ground, we must always remind ourselves that these debates and constitutional issues played out within a variety of local contexts. And those particular local concerns inevitably shaped popular perceptions of the conflict as well as the popular response.[77] Republican ideology offered a *grammar* of resistance but did not necessarily provide the *logic* of resistance for the broader populace. Rather, the quotidian concerns and experiences of the inhabitants of the colonial urban centers in which resistance was centered provided the logic of resistance. Furthermore, it is crucial to keep in mind

74. Brutus, "To the Public," broadside, New York, January 15, 1770.

75. Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1997), 131–42. The Liberty Pole had been erected in the Commons on the north end of the city, currently City Hall Park, to celebrate the popular role in the Stamp Act repeal.

76. *New-York Gazette*, January 22, 1770.

77. For an excellent rendering of this dynamic in Massachusetts, see Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976).

that ideology and economic interest were not antipodean. As Linda Colley and Jack P. Greene have argued, commercialism and trade were as fundamental to British national identity (and, hence, colonists' imperial identities) as their belief in the British Constitution as the unparalleled protector of liberty.[78] Throughout the imperial crisis, those two aspects of colonial identity found moments of common expression when local and imperial politics and economics overlapped, as shown by the response to the Quartering Act and, especially, the Battle of Golden Hill.

As the spring of 1770 arrived, New Yorkers awaited word from London that the Townshend Acts had been repealed. In late 1769, the Assembly had received reports that a full repeal had been proposed in the previous Parliamentary session and that a vote had been postponed until the spring.[79] The news finally arrived in May 1770 that all of the duties had been repealed except the duty on tea. In addition, the King had finally approved a new emission of paper currency.[80] While many people felt that the repeal and the paper currency emission showed good faith on the part of the Ministry and Parliament, the radicals felt otherwise. The consensus in the colony favored ending the boycott, but the radical leaders pushed for its continuation.

Even before final word of the repeal had arrived, New York merchants had considered either amending or rescinding the boycott. They were spurred on by reliable reports that the merchants of Boston and Philadelphia were not adhering as strongly to the boycott as they were.[81] If New York was the first of the three major cities to officially end the boycott, the radicals feared that the city's reputation would suffer. Also, it would render their leadership role unnecessary. Still, the radicals hung on to the fact that the duty on tea remained, and they vowed to fight as long as

78. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Jack P. Greene, "Empire and Identity from the Elizabethan Era to the American Revolution," in Jack P. Greene, *Creating the British Atlantic: Essays on Transplantation, Adaptation, and Continuity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 253–77.

79. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 87.

80. Ibid., 88.

81. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 85. Becker writes that "the laxness with which the association was observed at Boston was one of the principal considerations in inducing the New York merchants to take the first step in its abolition.

"the odious Power of Taxation by Parliamentary authority, is in one single instance exercised."[82]

On June 11, the Committee of Inspection—formed in each city by the merchants to monitor local compliance with the boycott—conceded to the radicals by agreeing to "take the sense of the city, by subscription."[83] A subscription entailed a number of "gentlemen" selected by the committee to go door-to-door asking each citizen whether they were in favor of keeping or amending the non-importation agreement to include only tea. By all accounts, the consensus was for amendment.[84] However, that did not satisfy the radicals. Despite previous communications stating a willingness to amend the non-importation agreement, Boston and Philadelphia responded bitterly to the New York merchants' notification of intent to amend the agreement. The Committee of Merchants in Philadelphia wrote, "However you may colour your Proceeding, we think you have, in the Day of Trial, deserted the Cause of Liberty and your Country." Another missive from Philadelphia claimed "the New-Yorkers were traitors to their country, to themselves, and ages yet unborn, who, no doubt, when groaning under a British yoke, will forever curse the traitors."[85] The city's merchants once again conceded to radical pressure and took another subscription. Once again, a significant majority of the inhabitants favored amending the agreement and resuming all imports except tea.[86]

The city had suffered tremendously in the preceding seven years and had held firm in the non-importation agreement despite innumerable hardships, especially among the working classes. The radicals continued public acts of protest, but without the mandate of the majority of the city's populace. This only further tarnished their reputation as they no longer

82. Brutus, "To the Free and Loyal Inhabitants of the City and Colony of New-York," broadside, New York, 1774.

83. Alexander Colden to Anthony Todd, Esq., Secretary to the Postmaster-General, July 11, 1770, *DRNY*, 8: 218–20.

84. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 90. In a letter from Colden to the Earl of Hillsborough, July 7, 1770, *DRNY*, 8: 271, Colden claimed he was told that "1180, among which are the principal Inhabitants, declared for importation, about 300 were neutral or unwilling to declare their sentiments, and a few of any distinction declared in opposition to it." In all likelihood, these exact numbers were exaggerated by Colden as he routinely misrepresented the public sentiment in his letters to the Ministry. Yet, by all accounts, the modification of the agreement enjoyed the support of the majority.

85. *New-York Journal*, July 19, 1770.

86. Ibid. Herein lies the genesis of New York's loyalist reputation. Significantly, the Boston and Philadelphia merchants agreed to amend the association in the same way New York had at the end of the summer and beginning of the fall of 1770.

appeared to represent the primary interests of the electorate. The radicals would never again regain the widespread influence they enjoyed during the Stamp Act and its immediate aftermath. From the end of the non-importation agreement until independence from Britain, the radicals' agenda ceased to represent and, at times, even opposed the goals and concerns of the majority of the common New Yorkers. Once importation resumed in the summer of 1770, the economic situation of the colony improved rapidly, "the lower classes were prosperous and contented; the *Sons of Liberty* were no longer heard of," and a relative calm reigned for the next three years. Impediments to the unfettered pursuit of individual interests and social mobility had been removed.[87]

In the spring of 1773, Parliament passed the Tea Act in an effort to prop up the troubled East India Company by removing duties and customs upon exportation (but not importation). This meant that the East India Company's tea could be sold more cheaply than the smuggled Dutch tea that colonists had been drinking since the non-importation agreement of 1768. Many saw this as a plot to trick the Americans into paying the tax on tea, thereby setting a future precedent for taxation.[88] Shortly after, Boston and New York conducted their own "Tea Parties," ceremoniously dumping the tea into their respective harbors upon arrival. The result of these actions was the Coercive Acts. The Boston Port Act and the Massachusetts Government Act closed the Boston port, dissolved the popularly elected council, appointed a military governor, and outlawed town meetings until the town of Boston recompensed the East India Company for the spilled tea. New Yorkers were shocked at the closing of Boston's port and the city's trade.[89] Like the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts, the Coercive Acts caused another realignment within the city's resistance politics, ultimately leading to the merchants' loss of popular support and the freemen's creation of their own committee to make sure their interests were regarded by both the merchants and the radicals.

87. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 95–6.

88. "The Association of the Sons of Liberty, of New-York," November 29, 1773.

89. For a contemporary account of the Livington faction's political wrangling in 1774, see Alexander McDougall, "Political Memorandums relative to the Conduct of the Citizens on the Boston Port Bill," Alexander McDougall Papers, Box 1, New-York Historical Society, New York. For a full account of the New York City "tea party," see Colden to the Earl of Dartmouth, May 4, 1774, in *American Archives,* 4th Series, 1: 248–9; *New-York Journal*, April 21, 1774 and April 28, 1774.

The radicals immediately called for a resumption of the non-importation association, as proposed in a letter from Boston.[90] Their proposals, however, were blocked. Instead, the city's inhabitants decided to form a city-wide committee. On May 19, 1774, while radicals called for a smaller committee of twenty five, "a great concourse of the inhabitants" met at the Coffee House to register their approval or disapproval of a slate of fifty names.[91] The inhabitants approved the slate, which was headed by the De Lancey faction and packed with merchants, along with an additional member. The radicals' proposal for a smaller committee had been rejected by a popular vote. In the wake of the unprecedented threat of the Coercive Acts, freemen were unwilling to let either the merchants or the radicals assume sole direction of the city's resistance. The conservative, merchant-led Committee of Fifty-One responded to Boston's letter. New York considered Boston's "injuries as a common cause," they wrote, but "what ought to be done . . . is very hard to be determined." Since "the cause is general, and concerns a whole Continent," New York proposed that "a Congress of Deputies from the Colonies . . . be assembled without delay, and some unanimous resolution formed in this fatal emergency."[92] New York merchants and freemen alike appeared unwilling to rush back into a non-importation agreement unless all the colonies agreed. If non-importation became necessary, they wanted to avoid the mistakes and fate of the previous association.

Freemen, however, became increasingly convinced that new boycotts were necessary, as their experience in the 1760s had shown them. 1774 was not 1770, after all. The city's economy had recovered and was doing well. But the merchants resisted. More importantly, the Coercive Acts were not the Townshend Acts. They were not a tax or a duty; they were a fundamental challenge to the colonial ability to pursue trade. What kind of security and potential for social mobility could common New Yorkers have within an imperial system that could allow legislation like the Boston Port Bill or the Massachusetts Government Act?[93] This was not a repudia-

90. Colden to the Earl of Dartmouth, June 1, 1774, in *DRNY*, 8: 433. On the De Lancey's ability to retain control in the immediate wake of the Coercive Acts, see Roger J. Champagne, "New York and the Intolerable Acts," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1961): 195–207.

91. "Meeting of the Inhabitants at the Coffee House," in *American Archives*, 4th Series, 1: 293.

92. "Letter to the Boston Committee," Ibid., 296–8.

93. For a contemporary account of the Livington faction's political wrangling in 1774, see Alexander McDougall, "Political Memorandums relative to the Conduct of the Citizens on the Boston Port Bill,"

tion of the limitations of mercantilism but of the overextension of imperial governance to the potential detriment of their local ecomomy, just as the responses to the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts had been. The debate in 1774 and 1775 remained one about how best to proceed in securing repeal of the offending legislation, not one between loyalty and rebellion. In that sense, the popular response in 1774 and 1775 was consistent with the motivations behind the popular response in 1765 or 1768.

As the fight over the nominations for the new committee heated up in the summer of 1774, freemen became increasingly aware of both the merchants' reluctance to commit to increasing resistance and the radical leadership's shortcomings.[94] Nevertheless, though they had lost the ability to dictate the agenda of the opposition to Britain, the radicals continued to lead public acts of protest and hold public meetings. The unwillingness of the Committee of Fifty-One to work with the radicals, however, finally led the city's freemen to form their own extra-legal political body, the Committee of Mechanics, to ensure that both factions regarded their interests.[95] New York's proposals for a Continental Congress were well received by the other colonies, and, in June of 1774, they began preparing to nominate delegates.[96] The Committee of Fifty-One proved more willing to work with freemen through the Committee of Mechanics than through the alienating radical leadership of Sears and McDougall. At the end of June, when it came time to elect five delegates from New York City to the Congress, the Committee of Fifty-One involved the Committee of Mechanics in the election. Each committee designated two members to poll the "freeholders, freemen, and such of the inhabitants who pay taxes."[97] The Mechanics

Alexander McDougall Papers, Box 1, New-York Historical Society, New York.

94. The rival slates of candidates each nominated for the committee illustrated the minimal qualitative differences between the radical and elite leadership. The eventual Committee of Fifty-One contained 24 of the 25 names originally proposed by the radicals.

95. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 120. Becker writes that the Mechanics' Committee was "virtually a continuation of the organization of the *Sons of Liberty*." However, "evidence for this assertion is lacking." Staughton Lynd, "The Mechanics in New York Politics," in *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 88.

96. It is unclear which group actually proposed the Continental Congress. Becker believed the merchants favored a large inter-colonial congress as a way to avoid haste and rash decisions regarding a resumption of non-importation. Champagne and Lynd believed the radical leadership proposed the congress because they felt they had a better chance at achieving a non-importation agreement that could then be forced on the New York merchants. While I cannot settle the debate about the initial proposition, it seems to me that both the merchants and the radicals did indeed favor the calling of a Congress for the reasons above, though the merchants could have been just as happy without any Congress at all.

97. "Letter from Jacob Lansing," June 27, 1774, in *American Archives*, 4th Series, 1: 309–10.

had consented to the moderate elite nominees who had in turn "pledged themselves to press for complete non-importation at the forthcoming Congress."[98]

If, like previous historians, one assumes that the Committee of Mechanics was merely a renaming of the Sons of Liberty and a front for the same pre-1770 radical leadership, the behavior of the Committee fails to make sense.[99] While it favored a more pro-active stance against Britain than the merchant-led Committee of Fifty-One, the Committee of Mechanics were not trying to usurp the local power assumed by the Committee of Fifty-One. However, neither did they acquiesce. Their full-fledged support for the Continental Congress guaranteed them a larger role in New York City as the Congress began to exert the authority to direct colonial opposition.[100] In October of 1774, the Congress passed and signed the Articles of Association, otherwise known as the Continental Association, which immediately established non-importation and non-consumption policies.[101]

The Continental Association not only called for the non-importation and non-consumption of British goods, but also prescribed penalties for violations. It even threatened to cut off all commercial contact and publicly shame any merchant caught violating the agreement.[102] It called for "every County, City, and Town" to hold elections for a Committee of Inspection that would "observe the conduct" of its citizens, establishing a legal mandate for the policing of economic transactions. By 1775, these committees had become, in many places, *de facto* local governments. In an attempt to manage the colonial economy in the face of the rough times ahead, the Association forbade ostentation, gambling, and slaughtering sheep. Furthermore, it also required merchants to "not take advantage of the scarcity of Goods that may be occasioned by this Association, but will sell

98. Lynd, "The Mechanics in New York Politics," 91.

99. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 136. Becker, under his own assumption that the Committee of Mechanics was merely the same Sons of Liberty, admitted that "the conduct of the radicals [i.e. the Mechanics]" during the nomination process was "inexplicable."

100. Lynd, "The Mechanics in New York Politics," 91–2.

101. "The Association read and signed," in *American Archives*, 4th Series, 1: 913. The Congress suspended non-exportation until the following September, should their demands not be met.

102. Becker, *A History of Political Parties*, 151–6. Becker succinctly captured the nature of the Articles of Association when he wrote, "It was one thing for two men to agree not to buy goods of English merchants; quite another to agree that if a third did so they would seize the goods and dispose of them as the pleased. [. . .] in making these recommendations, [the Congress] was transformed from a peaceable assembly into a revolutionary organization."

the same at the rates we have been respectively accustomed to do for twelve months last past."[103]

The Continental Association was a devastating defeat for the De Lancey merchants, who had hoped to avoid non-importation. They could not resist the Continental Congress's directives without the risk of being "universally contemned as the enemies of *American Liberty*."[104] The conservative merchants that led the Committee of Fifty-One had not presumed the Congress would achieve consensus and agree to such radical measures. Rather, they expected that, by sending the issue of non-importation to the Congress, they stood a much better chance of avoiding that policy than if it were to be decided in New York City. While the Congress spent the first few months sending petitions to the King and Parliament, it looked as if they had made the right choice. The Association, however, rendered the De Lanceys and their supporters impotent while emboldening the Committee of Mechanics and its constituents. Yet, even after this clear victory, the Committee of Mechanics made no attempt to wrest sole control of the resistance movement for themselves.

The Congress could only make policy, it could not enforce it. That responsibility fell to the local committees. The demoralized Committee of Fifty-One and the legitimized Committee of Mechanics agreed to dissolve their respective committees and hold an election for a new sixty-member Committee of Inspection.[105] Even though the political balance favored the Committee of Mechanics, they made no attempt to exclude the merchants, whose economic interests remained concomitant with their own. However, the Committee and its supporters took the lead in enforcing the Association, effectively becoming the local arm of the Continental

103. "The Association read and signed," in *American Archives*, 4th Series, 1: 915. While price controls were common in colonial America, especially in New York City, the Association attempted, for the first time, to institute an inter-colonial moral economy to assist in combating British economic policy. On "moral economy," see E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136. For a presumption of moral economy, or "corporatism," at work in colonial New York, see Countryman, *A People in Revolution*, 56–8.

104. "The Association read and signed," in *American Archives*, 4th Series, 1: 915. "Patriotism" became the defining political characteristic in this period. Those who openly opposed the Congress were subject to exclusion and harassment, and everyone had to be careful not to do or say anything that would cause their "patriotism" to come into question.

105. Becker, *A History of Political Parties,* 165–8. The mutual amicability of the committees' dissolution remains a point of dispute. Becker actually believes that the Committee of Fifty-One did not cease to exist and that it continued to direct the new Committee of Inspection. However, there is no direct evidence for this.

Congress.[106] Indeed, by the end of 1774, the political dynamic in New York City had changed drastically. Freemen took on new political responsibilities and power through inspection committees. The De Lanceys largely abandoned the resistance movement in favor of outright loyalty. And the moderate Livingston leadership toed the line as defined by the Continental Congress and as enforced on the ground by the Committee of Mechanics and its supporters.[107]

By the time the Second Continental Congress convened in May of 1775, shots had already been fired at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. With war afoot, a contingent of New Yorkers "secured about half the City Arms" stored at City Hall. One first-hand account stressed, "This was not done by the Magistrates, but by the people."[108] The combination of the Coercive Acts, the continuing suffering of Boston, the intransigence of the British Ministry, and finally the eruption of war brought many freemen to question whether their interests were best served by remaining subject to a capricious imperial government. They remained unsure into the spring of 1776, as shown by a broadside circulated throughout the city that called for setting up a new government that "may serve for the security of our persons and property, until a reconciliation can happily be brought about between us and our Mother Country."[109] Reticence toward independence among the moderate Livingston faction is well documented. They were largely landowners and professionals who sought, above all, to maintain order and protect property. Beyond the broader imperial and constitutional questions raised by the Coercive Acts, freemen in the early months of 1776 also had to consider the potential effects of war and military occupation upon their livelihoods and families, a circumstance that was unique to themselves throughout the colonies. Yet, with the largest military deployment in the history of the British Empire heading their way, New Yorkers celebrated the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence on

106. Lynd, "Mechanics in New York Politics," 92.

107. In covering the entire imperial crisis, this article is necessarily suggestive, thereby offering a broad perspective on the day-to-day politics between 1774 and 1776. For an unmatched account of the political machinations, subtleties, and minutiae of this period, see Tiedemann, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, 198–253. On the onset of loyalism, see Bernard Mason, *The Road to Independence: The Revolutionary Movement in New York, 1773–1777* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1966); and Philip Ranlet, *The New York Loyalists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986).

108. "Letter from New-York to a Gentleman in Philadelphia," in *American Archives*, 4th Series, 1: 364.

109. *Constitutional Gazette*, April 24, 1776.

July 9 by marching down Broadway to Bowling Green and pulling down the statue of King George III that they had erected only ten years earlier in honor of the repeal of the Stamp Act.[110]

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In sum, New York City freeholders and freemen had consistently used the city's municipal government to further their own economic interests throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. In so doing, they were both participating in and shaping the self-interested political culture of the colony. Throughout the imperial crisis, they translated that experience to provincial and imperial politics, while retaining an understanding of the interconnectedness of their own interests and that of the merchant class and the city as a whole. This becomes clearer when we recognize that the most significant issues of the period—including the Stamp Act, the colony's fiscal and currency crises, the provisioning of soldiers, and the institution and modification of nonimportation agreements—all had immediate economic dimensions that proved at least as important on the ground as their political (or abstract constitutional) dimensions. On each of these issues, common New Yorkers consistently acted in concert with their perceived economic interests. That is, the consistent motivation behind their seemingly contradictory behaviors was a desire to end the city's economic hardships. The split between the merchants and the radicals in 1770 over non-importation proved a political crossroads. When faced with a choice, the majority chose the merchants over the radicals. After nearly a decade of economic depression, the people were largely unsympathetic to the radicals' continuing insistence on economic sanctions, despite the repeal of the Townshend Acts. For artisans whose goods needed to be sold and seamen who needed merchant vessels to sail, among others, the city's economy was of primary importance, and when the merchants flourished, so did the rest of the city.

The Sons of Liberty and its radical leaders did represent the will of the majority, including the merchants, during the Stamp Act crisis and into the resistance to the Townshend Acts. However, previous historians have assumed that the radicals continued to speak for and act with the

110. See Roger J. Champagne, "New York Politics and Independence," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1962): 281–303. For the key role played by the mechanics in New York City following independence, see Lynd, "Mechanics in New York Politics."

approbation of the majority until independence. But they did not. The two popular votes taken for amending the non-importation agreement in 1770 as well as those taken for the nomination of a moderate delegation to the First Continental Congress spoke loudly to popular dissatisfaction with the radical leadership. The final measure in a break that had begun five years earlier came when the working classes formed their own Committee of Mechanics to deal directly with the elite-led Committees in 1775. As with the Sons of Liberty in 1770, their break with the merchants came only when the interests between the two groups no longer aligned and the merchants began subverting colonial resistance. If we acknowledge the radicals as representing the ideology of American resistance, as historians have, the dynamic relationship between the radicals and common New Yorkers makes clear that the latter's motivations could not have been wholly or even primarily ideological. While republican ideology provided a grammar for the rhetoric of patriot resistance, the logic of popular resistance in New York City was built on political economic assumptions and concerns that common New Yorkers had developed over the previous decades on both the municipal and provincial levels.

At the same time, there was no revolutionary, class-based attempt to wrestle power from the elite-led Committees. There were no efforts by common New Yorkers to form their own political faction with a competing agenda or alternative ideology. Instead, the Committee of Mechanics sought to secure regard for the popular consensus as the crisis between Britain and the colonies deepened. Popular support for moderate elite leadership in 1775 and 1776 was not due to common New Yorkers' loyalism or manipulation. They had fought Britain's imperial, economic encroachment at each step and cooperated fully in executing the resolutions of the Continental Congress on a local level. Finally, their abandonment of the radical agenda was followed by the formation of their own Committee to watch their own interests. At each turn of the imperial crisis, they made conscious political decisions based on their perceived interests and designed to maximize their prospects for social mobility. Just as freemen had withdrawn their previous support for the Livingstons in 1765, the Sons of Liberty in 1770, and the De Lanceys in 1774 because their interests were no longer concomitant, they ultimately did the same with the British Empire in early 1776. Despite the apparent paradox, the logic of popular resistance in 1775 was fundamentally no different than it had been in 1765.