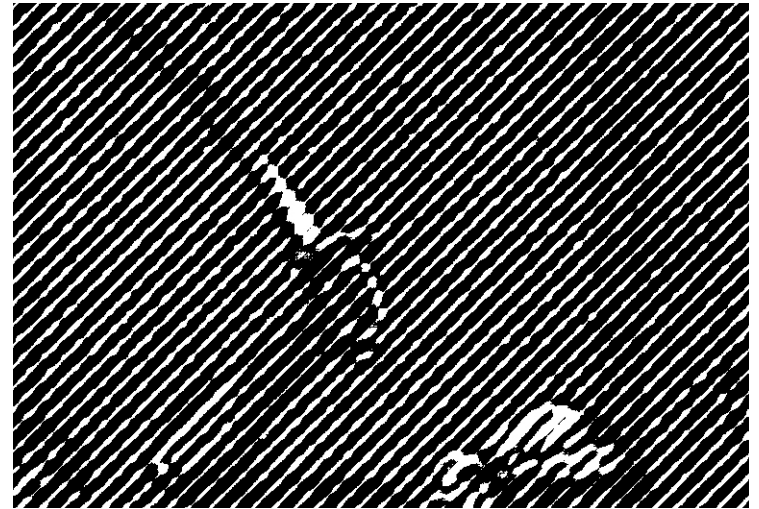


The American revolutionaries were not “men of their times,” tacitly supporting slavery like everyone else. They were among the vanguard of the slave institution, attempting to put down the possibility of a successful slave insurrection in a period when that possibility was very likely. White supremacy was a structural reaction against civil war, a way of coding inferior bodies to preserve the new revolutionary coalition of house holding men.



...OR REVOLUTION?



The following text is a chapter excerpted from Sasha Durakov's *The Savage Peace: Democracy's 2500 Years of Failure and the Legacy of Global Civil War*

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Typeset in Garamond and Px Grotesk, not unlike the original.

...OR REVOLUTION?

WHAT COMES OUT OF NAMING SOMETHING a “revolution” instead of a “civil war?” Let’s take Hannah Arendt at her word that revolutions “have little in common with *stasis*,” or with “civil strife.” If there’s anything immediately unique about the discourse around revolution, it’s the constant characterization of revolution as a form of change concerned with “beginning,” constitution, and constituent power. “[E]very revolution,” wrote François Furet, “has tended to perceive itself as an absolute beginning, as ground zero of history.” Let us also consider the idea that, in Condorcet’s words, “the word ‘revolutionary’ can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom.” If it is true that “only where this pathos of novelty is present and where novelty is connected with the idea of freedom are we entitled to speak of revolution,” then we must ask: of what nature is this “newness” (Hannah Arendt)? What sort of “freedom” is promised by the revolution and by whom?

The origins of the modern concept of “revolution” may seem surprising at first. It was originally only used in the astronomical sense, which we still use today, as the lawful and irresistible movement of stars. It indicated a cyclical movement, and neither something new nor liberating. Its first “political” usage in the 17th century in England in fact still retained this metaphoric content as it described the moment the Stuarts were exiled and sovereignty was restored to the monarchy. In addition, there was no clear and simple transition to the modern meaning of “freedom in novelty.” Arendt wrote, “The revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which to us appear to show all evidence of a new spirit, the spirit of the modern age, were intended to be restorations.” Indeed, at one point, Paine was actually able to refer to the French and American revolutions as “counter-revolutions” because they had reached that point where they discovered that a “revolution”—that is, a “restoration”—would be impossible and that they must embark on something new. And so the revolutionaries became partisans of the new and revolution-as-nature succumbed to revolution-as-will.

The original meanings of the word were carried into the modern era with the French and American revolutions in a mutated but fundamental fashion: the revolutionaries no longer believed that they were reviving some greater order of a family or a king from times passed, but the basic and universal rights of man. Even in the infant conceptions of revolutionaries, the “revolution,” which had just been created, was inevitable and as irresistible as the movement of the stars. It’s easy to get caught up in the dazzling logic and metaphors of revolution. But can we truly apply the title “revolutionary” to the Sons of Liberty without acknowledging that this “inevitable revival” appeared as one way of speaking in a much wider context? With that said, we can also ask the questions: what does calling something a “revolution” do? How does it reframe memory? Whom does it serve? Whose “universal rights” are they restoring, and what is the condition of the production of such rights? Who are the forgotten children of the Revolution?

What if the American “revolutionaries” were trying to control something more powerful and more dangerous than the Revolution as we’ve come to know it? If you read contemporary works of the Founding Fathers and revolutionaries, one finds them all in agreement that they had unwittingly unleashed a dangerous force of rebellion that threatened to destabilize and destroy more than just the authority of the king by furthering the instability of colonial authority with their resistance to the Stamp Act. Slave revolts, urban insurrections, and a general mood of rebellion were

with it and reinterpreting everything in the light of the categories it already chose. It's war. Paine makes black faces white. Jefferson drafts a law to get rid of pesky foreigners who don't like his "revolution." The Sons of Liberty encourage rioting when it undermines the British, but express moral outrage when it threatens them. This isn't "history" at all. This is democracy defining itself with new examples taken from history. Those who, like us, were brought up hearing the story of American democratic progress on repeat have learned to recite it very well with all the necessary reverence and gratitude. What we must now learn to do is to analyze power relations, not laws; structural functionality, not legal categories; the power of symbols and language, not identity. Until then, there will always be those who think racism is a logical construct rather than a historical one. Perhaps they truly believe racism to be "officially" over after Civil Rights and Obama or that one can be racist against whites. There will always be those who think patriarchal power is when a man is mean or unfair rather than the organizational model that structures the family, society, and the police. Maybe they actually think equal pay is the last frontier of systemic sexism. History is not an accumulation of identities and their legal recognition, nor is it the advancement of their inclusion into "democracy." Democracy has always been imagined to be eternally threatened by those events, those *decisions made by real people*—revolts, defection, denial, fleeing, conspiracy, piracy, murder—that threatened the whole of its identity with itself. Recognition by democratic discourse includes those people or acts that threaten it—to-day as much as during the revolution—as objects of management alone.

There is no eternal battle between humanity and a minority of evildoers, there are processes that sweep up bodies, inclining them temporally in one direction or another in a series of conflicts with other bodies. How those conflicts play out produces their lasting effects. That some bodies are together able to make the same decisions over and over again is the sign of a well-functioning machine, not a class. The binary conflicts imagined by the Left and the Right flatten history, removing from it the experiences that give it its texture and tones. Rather than examining the interplay of "types" apparently reproducing their own activities and status over and over for all eternity, we must stay firmly rooted in the decisive moments, for it is on their explosive potential that the world becomes different from itself.

threats to authority in general. Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to Charles Carroll, held that their "present danger seems to be a *defect of obedience* in the subjects." This sentiment was shared equally by the opposition. The loyalist Peter Oliver, for example, said that "[T]he *Hydra* was roused. Every factious Mouth vomited out curses against *Great Britain*." For any party concerned with a program based on unities or consensus models, the revolutionary era was a dangerous era. A detailed and expanded account of the civil war that we regularly call the American Revolution is outside the scope of this text. This is not the space to undertake a minute exposition of the Whiskey Rebellion, slave insurrections, frontier wars, or urban riots. We are concerned with exposing revolutionary discourse to what it rejects — to the visible elements of civil war. By doing so, we clear a path toward an empirical history of our capacities.

In *The Many-Headed Hydra*, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker outline some of the major points of conflict in the 18th century that so terrified the American revolutionaries. The sailors were extremely important in the New World. They transported goods, slaves, and colonists between the Old World, Africa, and the New World. They were also a motley sort of the lowest classes and spoke a variety of languages. Sailors presented two major threats: piracy and mutiny. Pirates attacked merchant ships, stole property, and challenged the hegemony of the seas. Mutiny manifested in riots on both sides of the Atlantic, where the authorities were faced with the horrific possibility that they would join with the local disaffected populations against them, as happened in the insurrectionary plot of 1741 in New York. On St. Patrick's Day, the main military installment of the city was set alight, marking the first of many fires to burn in the next few weeks. The plot was organized in a tavern by a mixed group of "soldiers, sailors, and slaves from Ireland, the Caribbean, and Africa," a typically dangerous mix for the authorities at this time. Sailors had also led a series of riots against impressment (the practice of forcing men to serve in the military) in North America beginning in the 1740s. In Boston, there were riots in 1741, 1742, and 1745, destroying and burning the pressmen's ships, and beating the sheriffs, press gangs, and magistrates who opposed them. Most horrifying of all were the slave insurrections, the most recent of which began in 1760s Jamaica with Tacky's Revolt. Slaves were considered inhuman. When they banded together—or, worse, joined sailors or indentured servants—to fight against their masters, the world seemed to be turning on its head.

Tom Paine feared the "risings of the people" that could conclude in a coordinated attack from the sailors in the city, the African slave revolts, and Native resistance at the frontier. In this new land being torn apart by

slave revolts and urban rebellions (both of which created new opportunities for elective activity between blacks, immigrant laborers, and Natives), the civic codes of the new country were being undermined in profound ways. Thus, it isn't surprising that, by the 1770s, the revolutionary elite began to worry that they had an uncontrollable monster on their hands. The first act of American revolutionary discourse was to set it apart from the unrest that came before. In this case they say: forget the slave revolts and the urban insurrections of the 1740s and 50s, this movement is new and unstoppable. It is significant in this regard that John Adams proposed Hercules, the subduer of monsters, as the symbol for this new forward-reaching America. They wanted the Revolution, they just didn't want the sailors, women, or blacks to be a part of it. As America trotted blindly forth, it would crush any bulwarks in its path.

Once again, the democrats—now “revolutionaries”—did their best to erase any threats to their identity. These democrats of the New World, at the birth of a new nation, surrounded by drunks, blacks, and savages, felt that everyone around them was in need of management. Their new scientific rationale explaining the naturalness of their need for control had an authority and social stature the Athenian democrats couldn't have possibly imagined. Once things got out of hand, these founding fathers couldn't just decree a ban on the Revolution. It would have to be a many-sided attack on memory. The narratives preserved from this period are merely the products of this attack.

Present at all the famous revolutionary protests beloved in our civic memory were violent mobs consisting of “Sailors, boys, and Negroes” who “repeatedly manhandled captains, officers, and crews, threatened their lives, and held them hostage for the men they pressed” (Captain Jeremiah Morgan). Mobs were present at the protests in the 1760s-70s against the Stamp Act, the Quartering Act, the Townshend Revenue Act, the Tea Act, and the Intolerable Acts. Riots and mob action were an integral part to the destabilization of British power in the colonies. Paul Revere participated in riots against the Stamp Act, and Samuel Adams was present at the Knowles Riots in 1747 when a crowd of thousands opposed the press gangs in Boston. Afterwards, he would cease writing that the “rights of Englishmen” needed to be defended to saying that the mob represents “the fundamental rights of man against which government itself could be judged,” and argued for taking direct, violent action against an unjust government. This line about the “fundamental rights of man” would eventually find its way into Paine's *The Rights of Man*, and Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*. One of the central tenets of American democratic discourse came from the

with the “deepest regrets,” but knowing in his heart that “the very existence of government and the fundamental principles of social order are materially involved in the issue, and that the patriotism and firmness of all good citizens are seriously called upon, as occasions may require, to aid in the effectual suppression of so fatal a spirit.”

Plagued with factional interest and the complexities of civil war, American democratic discourse functions in a precarious relation to its own potential dissolution, hence all disagreements and emotional disputes that put its identity in crisis are avoided on principle. The American democratic identity requires the idea there has been a progression of democratization that has crystallized into the rights we supposedly enjoy today. One need not face such a history head on, but rather can expose it to the demons it tirelessly struggles to exorcise. On the one hand, it imagines a “resistance” (cleaned up of all the things that made it threatening to the authorities in the first place) legally making progress to include more people in its processes. Democratic discourse fundamentally cannot account for the bloody deeds of the vengeful slave, the raucous child, the shameful drunk, the hysterical wife, and the determined warrior. They do not speak the same language, and they strive for something other than democracy using other tools.

On the other side, democratic discourse imagines a stable—and evil!—minority of slaveowners and then over-zealous and unchecked capitalists. When faced with the fearful white plantation owner raising the whip, of course, but also the poor white workers with minor privileges chasing slaves, or the recently freed slaves who kept still-enslaved wives—democratic discourse tends to retreat into narratives that imagine American history as a struggle between a collective democratic power and an oppressive minority of southern plantation owners or unchecked capitalists culminating in the recognition of civil and constitutional rights. In order to mold history in this way, they must embed associated practices in a stable minority endowed with particular interests and capacities to erase the possibility that they were shared by a wider portion of the country. An even more simplified and smoothed out version, cleaned of all the “minor conflicts,” has appeared today as the 99% versus the 1%. In American history, democratic power was undoubtedly a tool in the service of slaveowners, the complicit whites, and the heads of the households, and it served their interests.

Democratic discourse frames history in the same way that it frames all discourse: by excluding from the outset anything which does not agree

Pontiac war and the Paxton boys' revenge. The loose confederation of Great Lakes Natives had a short campaign of resistance against the British in Illinois and Ohio Country, taking some forts and killing a few hundred. This was one of many native conflicts generally seen as separate to the revolutionary ascendancy, and one that highlights the complex and tragic relationships between the "official" American colonial powers, the natives, and the new American citizens. Colonel Bouquet led an expedition to free one of those forts, using a now well-known tactic described here by him in a letter: "I will try to inoculate [sic] the Indians by means of Blankets that may fall in their hands, taking care however not to get the disease myself." The vigilante group known as the Paxton boys later led a campaign in Pennsylvania against natives, burning their villages, scalping and disemboweling adults and children alike. Coming to terms with these conflicts means coming to terms with both native violence and vigilante genocide, both uncomfortable for democratic discourse. In the same way, democratic discourse only obliquely discusses the arson and murder of slave revolts and the passionate rage leveled against black bodies by actors other than southern plantation owners like white workers, immigrant slave patrollers, or even black slaveowners. Doing so would force them to see these practices as related to forces and powers that are not embedded in a social mass or interest.

We can now also include the equally complex Land Riots. Between 1750 and 1800 in New York, Maine, and New Hampshire, tenants, landlords, and Natives all claimed ownership of the same tracts of land. Insurgents, after having been removed from their homes, would regather to destroy farms and buildings belonging to the landlord. After the Revolution, the new militias organized by the revolutionary government would use their power to suppress this domestic unrest and gain control of this conflict as well, returning land into the hands of the landlords. The Whiskey Insurrection of 1794 also threatened to undermine the new American civic identity. The federal government was only officially ratified in 1789. By 1791, they already passed the Whiskey Act, requiring small distillers to pay an exorbitant tax, which is how, almost as soon as the revolutionaries took power, they found their own slogans—"no taxation without representation"—being levelled against them by veterans of the war they'd just won. In what was beginning to look like a familiar situation, tax resistance followed until 1794, when that resistance turned into armed insurrection in Pennsylvania. Had it been allowed to grow, this could have caused the revolutionary discourse to spiral out of control. George Washington, then president, was charged with suppressing the rebellion. He took up the task

rabble. In short time, it would be used against them by the Patriots and Revolutionaries who exploited their activities.

Paul Revere removed all the black faces from his engraving of the Boston Massacre. Adams, desperate to separate the new movement from anything tainted by the presence of blacks in revolt, went so far as to defend redcoats after the Boston Massacre, telling the court that the face of the black leader Crispus Attucks "would be enough to terrify any person." Paine and Adams, who both argued, as we have shown, for the necessity and righteousness of the riots, turned against rioters in the late 1770s and 80s. Adams, for example, helped write the Massachusetts's Riot Act of 1786, which suspended habeas corpus, allowing authorities to jail rioters without trial in a bid to control the insurgents of Shay's Rebellion. The Sons of Liberty, the anti-Stamp Act and colonists rights group, came into existence in an express attempt to control and limit the new practice of rioting against the "threatened anarchy" it signaled as they "attempted to restrain the crowd and issued statements urging less misconduct" (Paul A. Gilje). Paine argued, for instance, that safeguards must be put in place lest "some Massenello may hereafter arise, who laying hold of popular disquietudes, may collect together the desperate and the discontented," i.e. the sailors, urban workers, African slaves, and natives. Let no one say that protest marshals are a new phenomenon.

All of the Founding Fathers sought particularly and in various ways to exclude slaves and blacks from the new revolutionary coalition. There was a deep and widespread fear of slave revolts among the colonists. According to Edward Rutledge, a leader of the South Carolina Patriots, the British strategy of arming free slaves tended "more effectively to work an eternal separation between Great Britain and the colonies than any other expedient could possibly be thought of." This is unsurprising since a cycle of slave revolts shook the colonial powers just before the revolutionary period, taking advantage of the breakdown and instability of the imperial and colonial powers in the period of urban anti-impressment and stamp act riots: slave revolts occurred in Alexandria, Virginia in 1767; Perth Amboy, New Jersey in 1772; Saint Andrew's Parish, South Carolina and in Boston in 1774; and in New York, Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina, and North Carolina in 1775. Lord Dunmore, the last colonial governor of Virginia, took advantage of this fact by providing what the Americans refused to offer: emancipation for slaves who fought in the King's army against the colonists.

But "[w]hile five thousand African Americans fought for liberty [by

accepting the promise of liberation for fighting in the army], the American political and military leadership battled the British and some of its own soldiers to protect the institution of slavery” (Linebaugh and Rediker). One of Washington’s slaves even snuck away in the night to fight against him for his freedom in the light of day. Rather than offer the same freedom in exchange for fighting, slaveholding colonists, particularly in the southern states, increased their efforts to mobilize and prevent slave emancipation. Simon Schama writes:

Instead of being cowed by the threat of a British armed liberation of the blacks, the slaveholding population mobilized to resist. Innumerable whites, especially those in the habitually loyal backcountry of Virginia, had been hitherto skeptical of following the more hot-headed of their Patriot leaders. But the news that the British troops would liberate their blacks, then give them weapons and their blessing to use them on their masters, persuaded many into thinking that perhaps the militant patriots were right.

The centrality of the issue for the colonists can equally be evinced in a letter from James Madison to William Bradford: “it is imagined our Governor has been tampering with the Slaves & that he [Dunmore] has it in contemplation, to make great Use of them in case of a civil war in this province. To say the truth, this is the only part in which this Colony is vulnerable; & and if we should be subdued, we shall fall like Achilles by the hand of one that knows that secret.”

Such reactions against civil war would be canonized in the new country’s founding political documents. The Constitution (“the Constitution against faction”) gave the federal government power to suppress domestic revolts and also extended the rights of slave owners by providing for the return of fugitive slaves. When Constantine Volney, an outcast of both the French and the American Revolution, visited Thomas Jefferson in 1796, he reported the following scene:

After dinner the master [Jefferson] and I went to see the slaves plant peas. Their bodies dirty brown rather than black, their dirty rags, their miserable hideous half-nakedness, these haggard figures, this secretive anxious air, the hateful timorous looks, altogether seized me with an initial sentiment of terror and sadness [...] The master took up a whip to frighten them, and soon ensued a comic scene. Placed in the middle of the gang, he agitated, he grumbled he menaced, and turned

far and wide [...] as he turned his face, the blacks changed attitudes: those whom he directly looked at worked the best, those whom he half saw worked least, and those he didn’t see at all, ceased working altogether.

Jefferson would say later that he believed that the drafting of the Act Concerning Aliens of 1798, designed to maintain “purity of national character,” had Volney specifically as its target.

The American revolutionaries were not “men of their times,” tacitly supporting slavery like everyone else. They were among the vanguard of the slave institution, attempting to put down the possibility of a successful slave insurrection in a period when that possibility was very likely. White supremacy was a structural reaction against civil war, a way of coding inferior bodies to preserve the new revolutionary coalition of householding men. The black body still embodies the history of its imprisonments, tortures, criminalization, and management. American democratic power and discourse is built upon the denigration of the black and native body. These same colonial authorities were promising vast swaths of land for whites by driving the natives into new camps, denigrating and dehumanizing them as a justification for plunder. The revolutionary vanguard of the late eighteenth century was one party in a civil war who tried to control the battles, revolts, and insurrections in a bid to expand their own interests. They themselves did very little in the way of participating in activities; besides Revere, Paine, and Adams, the Founding Fathers were primarily absent from the major urban rebellions and slave revolts of the period. Instead, they managed its appearance from afar, redirecting certain elements (the sailors, the urban workers), erasing others (slaves, women, Natives), and controlling or limiting the dangerous elements that threatened to undermine it from within (riots).

Then there were the rebellions and conflicts that were better to just ignore, or else reinterpret in the new dimmed light of the “revolution.” Many stories do not fit into the heroic colonial narrative of the “rights” of the American versus the imperial “tyranny.” The forms of rebellion captured and reinterpreted by the revolutionary vanguard span far back before the revolutionary period and continue after, now suppressed by the very people who hopped so late on the bandwagon to push their colonial agenda. Reclaiming it as a civil war allows us to recast the revolutionary era as one phase of a—sometimes tragic, sometimes awe-inspiring, but in any case real—wider ongoing conflict.

We can reinterpret the Revolutionary era, then, in the context of the