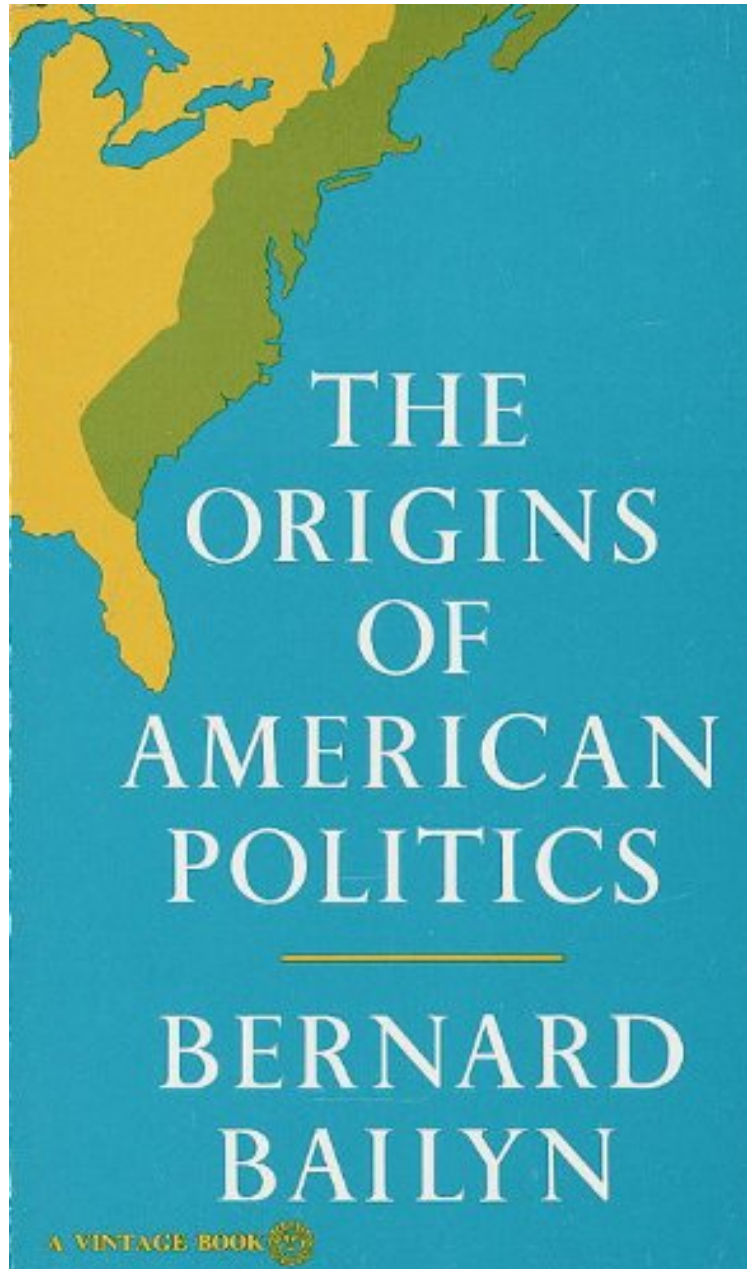


(Get free) The Origins of American Politics

## The Origins of American Politics

*Bernard Bailyn*

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**Bernard Bailyn : The Origins of American Politics** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Origins of American Politics:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. In search of the "real Causes" of the American Revolution: The Plot

thickensBy Herbert L CalhounIt cannot be forgotten that revolutionary history was written just after the events of the war itself. Thus, history was the victors way of binding down their victory through the process of recounting their own heroism. Therefore, no one should be surprised that the resulting historiography of the revolution was of a purely heroic nature. In point of fact, America's revolutionary history is not only highly personified, but almost without exception morally and heroically exaggerated.The author begins this book with the ultimate provocation: stating that what the founders had in mind was nothing short of overthrowing the English Constitution both in America and in England? But his narrative does not back up this grandiose provocation. (Indeed, it is well known that at first the founding fathers wanted nothing more than to be a part of a condominium with the King of England.) Why then would they want to overthrow the British Constitution?Was it because the English Constitution did not work well in England and thus could be expected to work even less well in America? Or, was it that Americans had been allowed to "fly solo" for so long that they considered that their own ideas about constitutional rule would be better than that offered by England? Or, was it that they considered England so corrupt despite the Glorious Revolution, that it had forfeited it's right to lead its colonies, especially America? Or, were there other reasons that would develop only in the aftermath of the French-Indian War?These are but a few of the pregnant questions left hanging in the air after the author's analysis here.The backdrop of his speculative provocation of course was made up mostly of what had been going on back in England that led to the English Constitution in the first place, namely, the Exclusion Crisis followed by the Glorious Revolution.What the author succeeds in convincing the reader of is that although these crises were in principle resolved in favor of a very limited form of democracy, the effect on the ground was quite otherwise.As he argues convincingly, even in England the granular details would only get worked out on the ground through bitter social struggles taking place over the next half century. But when the meager results of the English Constitution were weighted and then transferred across the ocean to America, the problems on the ground not only multiplied but often appeared insurmountable.Thus, from this author's angle of perception, the crucial background that one sees as shaping both the new nation and the revolution that brought it into being, is to be found in the succession of deep-lying social struggles taking place during the first three quarters of the 17th century, both back in England and in America -- struggles that he argues took place between the dispossessed and the property-owning classes; between debtors and creditors; between coastal aristocrats and inland democrats.I hesitate to add that there are other angles of perception by other historians. The more recent ones believe that the main causes of the revolution were put in place as a direct result of the French-Indian War.That said, what is extremely important to understand about this treatise, is that, unfortunately the hierarchy of terms needed to delineate the lines of power in the 17th Century political and social sphere, was left as an exercise for the reader. And, as far as I could determine, an approximate delineation of that hierarchy went somewhat as follows:England, before the Glorious Revolution, was a brutal absolutist monarchy ruled entirely by the King, backed up by his handpicked court, an aristocracy of noblemen, who over time would gain enough power to pose a challenge to the King's power itself. Next in line was the power of the Church, which operated more or less as an independent power base. However, as the Church of England proved in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, its power could, and often was, circumscribed by, and made subordinate to the power of the King.But equally important for the case of the American Revolution, is the fact that ever since the 15th Century, a merchant and commercial class had arisen directly out of royal commissions and land parcels granted by the Kingdom, especially in the colonies. Below them lay the proprietary class, those granted special favors in the colonies, such as royal governors, and appointees who were expected to toe the royal line, but who also over time, would learn to exercise a certain amount of autonomy on their own -- far away from the home office.At the bottom of this hierarchy were the "democrats:" the white men with just enough land (freeholders) to qualify to vote. Importantly, those below the democrats went completely unrecognized in the hierarchy -- poor white men, all women and slaves. The democrats during the 17th 18th and part of the 19th centuries, themselves were treated with great disdain and more often than not, seen as rabble-rousing troublemakers.All levels of the hierarchy could of course degenerated into their evil counterparts: tyranny, oligarchy, and mob rule, which everyone believed led ultimately to dictatorship and tyranny anyway.Given that even the freeholders, were considered a distant thought within this matrix of 18th Century power, of course it goes without saying that everything below them was well off the social and political grid. Thus, nascent ideas of democracy in 18th Century eyes, was a very distant thought well below the horizon of possibilities indeed. How our historical narrative of the American Revolution came to include the democrats, beats the hell out of me?Although I found this background of the first half of the 17th Century interesting and useful, the part of the book that most disappointed me was that it ended at the French-Indian War?Since most of the revisionist history of the causes of the revolution begins there; that is to say, at exactly the point where this narrative ends, I found this a very curious place to end an analysis of the causes of the American Revolution?If things moved fast on the North American continent before the war, surely the author could have no reason not to believe that they would move even faster during and after the war.But to get back to the main line of this narrative. The controlling idea about the English Constitution was, that at least in principle, some success could be achieved by mixing elements of these pure forms within a single constitution so that the countervailing pressures might keep the system stable and healthy. This in fact is where our notion of the separation of powers came from. However, the reality was different because the ideal forms

in the hierarchy bled into each other. Plus, eighteenth-century England was governed by a successful aristocracy that felt that its authority was justified by the quality of its rule. Put simply, it was widely believed that superiority should justify autocratic rule, that leadership in politics should fall to the natural leaders of society -- leaders in status, in wealth, and in the skills associated with a superior way of life. This belief held on both sides of the Atlantic. Arguably, this did not leave much room for speculating about any notions of "bottom up democratic rule" -- even after the Glorious Revolution. But who is to say that the founding fathers were in search of bottom up rule anyway? A quick search of American history will easily reveal this to be as much revolutionary fiction as anything else, since there was a consensus among the founders that more than anything else they wanted to be accepted as legitimate members of the English ruling class on par at least with the court in England? In fact, arguably, it was because England laughed at this "puffed up" idea of colonial hubris, as much as any, that sent the founders off on their separate course towards their own notion of a Glorious American Revolution and a constitution of their own. Ending the narrative even before the French-Indian War, there is still a great deal of cynicism built into the idea that the American Revolution was a Libertarian bottom up democratic Revolution designed to bring grassroots democracy to North America. It just was not so. Three stars of 3 people found the following review helpful. The Origins of American Politics By Nancy Maxwell This book, a series of three lectures by Bernard Bailyn, traces the roots of American politics back to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. It then demonstrates how a disconnect developed between the Crown and the colonies and how this disconnect gradually snowballed into a revolution, especially after the end of the Seven Years' War, that permanently severed their mutual ties. Anyone who really wants to know just how the American Revolution came to be should read this book. 1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Interesting Perspective By Shopper This book is not the best written book in that it sometimes goes off and explains too much and it can be dry. But, if you can overlook those things then it can be a great way to look into the politics of pre-revolutionary America via the eyes of the British. A very interesting perspective.

"An astonishing range of reading in contemporary tracts and modern authorities is manifest, and many aspects of British and colonial affairs are illuminated. As a political analysis this very important contribution will be hard to refute . . ." Frederick B. Tolles, *Political Science Quarterly* "He produces historical analysis which is as revealing to the political scientist or sociologist as to the historian, of the significance of social and cultural forces on political changes in eighteenth-century America." John D. Lees, Cambridge University Press " . . . these well-argued essays represent the first sustained and systematic attempt to provide a comprehensive and integrated analysis of all elements of American political life during the late colonial period . . . the author has once again put all students concerned with colonial America heavily in his intellectual debt." Jack P. Greene, *The New York Historical Society Quarterly* " . . . Mr. Bailyn brings to his effort a splendid gift for pertinent curiosity. What he has found, and what patterns he has made of his findings, light our way through his longitudes and latitudes of scholarly precision." Charles Poore, *The New York Times*

"An astonishing range of reading in contemporary tracts and modern authorities is manifest, and many aspects of British and colonial affairs are illuminated. As a political analysis this very important contribution will be hard to refute .... "-- Frederick B. Tolles, *Political Science Quarterly* "He produces historical analysis which is as revealing to the political scientist or sociologist as to the historian, of the significance of social and cultural forces on political changes in eighteenth-century America."-- John D. Lees, Cambridge University Press "... these well-argued essays represent the first sustained and systematic attempt to provide a comprehensive and integrated analysis of all elements of American political life during the late colonial period...the author has once again put all students concerned with colonial America heavily in his intellectual debt."-- Jack P. Greene, *The New York Historical Society Quarterly* "...Mr. Bailyn brings to his effort a splendid gift for pertinent curiosity. What he has found, and what patterns he has made of his findings, light our way through his longitudes and latitudes of scholarly precision."-- Charles Poore. *The New York Times* From the Back Cover'....these well-argued essays represent the first sustained and systematic attempt to provide a comprehensive and integrated analysis of all elements of American political life during the late colonial period... the author has once again put all students concerned with colonial America heavily in his intellectual debt.' - Jack P. Greene, *The New York Historical Society Quarterly*. About the Author Bernard Bailyn is Adams University Professor and James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History Emeritus at Harvard University. He founded, and for many years directed, the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, which helped to reorient the study of the Atlantic region in the early modern era. His books include *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, which received the Pulitzer and Bancroft Prizes in 1968; *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, which won the 1975 National Book Award for History; *Voyagers to the West*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987; *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours*; *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of British North America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675*, and *Sometimes an Art: Nine Essays on History*.