

# THE UNEASY CONNECTION: BRITISH COLONIAL THEORY AND PRACTICE IN NORTH AMERICA BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

## I. Introduction

A. Here we will examine the relationship between Great Britain and her North American colonies, focusing on the century from 1660 to 1763. Our purpose is simple: we want to understand the imperial relationship on the eve of the American Revolution.

B. When one first looks at the American Revolution, it appears that the imperial relationship deteriorated very rapidly.

1. It is a common belief that the relationship between Britain and her colonies prior to the Stamp Act (1765) was satisfactory to both sides, and that the Stamp Act led to a quick about-face on the colonial side.

2. Scholars who have taken this view have focused primarily on one question: why in a little more than a dozen years after 1763 did the colonists become so estranged from Britain to take up arms against her and declare independence.

C. Preoccupation with the period 1763-1776 has left two important questions unanswered:

1. What was the imperial relationship like in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries?

2. What changed in the 1750s and 1760s to alter that relationship and open the way for independence.

D. When one looks closely at the relationship between Britain and the colonies during the century from 1660 to 1760, one discovers that it was in many respects an uneasy connection. The British theorized about their colonial system one way: it was to be centralized in the Crown-in-Parliament in London. However, the colonial practice was quite different: in practice the colonies were “pockets of approximate independence” -- they were handling a substantial portion of their internal affairs and ruling themselves without London’s interference.

E. When the Great War for the Empire ended with the close of the French and Indian War in 1763, the British sought to exercise their central power to raise revenue in the colonies. Meanwhile, the colonials, who had been ruling themselves for many years, sought to keep power at the local level.

F. So, here we will look at the British colonial theory, the colonial practice in North America, and the Great War for the Empire, which brought the discrepancy between the theory and practice into the open: these are the preconditions of the American Revolution.

## II. Theory

A. The British Colonial Theory held that the system should be absolutely centralized. All power should reside in London with the British Crown-in-Parliament.

B. The question we will concern ourselves with here is: why did the British have this conception of the Empire.

C. Five main reasons for centralized theory.

1. The Colonial models: Spain and France

- a. Spain

- 1) established the first European Atlantic colonial system in 1496

- 2) Spain’s colonial system was extremely profitable - it was the richest colonial system in the world

- 3) Spain’s colonial was huge, stretching 8,000 miles from the tip of South America to California

- 4) Based on this colonial system, Spain was the main power in Europe until 17th century

- b. France

- 1) When Louis XIV (ruled 1643-1715) gained power in France, that country emerged as the social, economic, and political leader in Europe

2) Louis set up his court at Versailles; he was known as the Sun King; and made a famous proclamation of absolute power and centralization: “L’état, c’est moi,” I am the state

3) Louis began an Atlantic empire in North America, and it was centralized at Versailles.

c. So, we see that the two main powers of the age - Spain and France - both had centralized colonial systems. This led the British to believe that if their system was to be successful it should look the same way.

## 2. Economic theory: Mercantilism

a. Mercantilism was the socio-economic theory that European colonial systems were based upon - the term “Mercantilism” was first used by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), a book in which he criticized the old economic system.

### b. Principles of Mercantilism

- 1) There are a static number of resources in the world
- 2) The population of the world is growing
- 3) It is the natural state of human kind to want more and more
- 4) Therefore men fight with one another to get what is available
- 5) States are begun to bring peace to fighting individuals
- 6) But states then war over goods available
- 7) As a leader of a state it is your job to get your people the goods they want, and you do it at the price of others.

c. Colonies are therefore begun to supply the people of the mother country with the goods they need.

d. Also, since it is the natural state of affairs for countries to be at war - you must make your country self-sufficient

e. So we see that the colonies were established, and were, in the minds of the British rulers, in existence because they benefited England.

## 3. Political theory

a. The Political theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth century British colonial government was based upon the writings of **Jean Bodin**, a late 16th century French author.

b. In the first half of the 17th century, according to one Constitutional history, he was the most quoted theorist in English political theory.

c. Bodin’s main work was entitled *Six Books of the Commonwealth* (1570)

- 1) This is important text because it deals with the fundamental idea – sovereignty.
- 2) Bodin said that sovereignty resides in one place in a political system.
- 3) Sovereignty cannot be divided.
- 4) There would therefore be evidence that your system is falling apart if the sovereign leader could not be found.

d. So, we see in theory that the political structure of the colonial system should be centralized in the sovereign Crown-in-Parliament.

## 4. General Colonial Attitude: Mother-child metaphor

### III. Attempts to Put Theory into Practice

A. During the first 150 years after Jamestown was settled, British governments put in place a mercantilist system of imperial regulation and made repeated efforts to strengthen royal authority over the colonies.

B. Colonial Administration in England

1. No equivalent in England of a Council of the Indies. So, there was no single agency in charge of colonial administration.
2. Instead, the English Government relied on already existing Departments to administer the colonies.
3. Three main bodies were involved

a. The King and his Advisory Body: The Privy Council

- 1) The Privy Council had access to the King.
- 2) It had grown to be a large, diverse body.
- 3) It could only give advice to the King.
- 4) It was to create coherent domestic, foreign, and colonial policy.

b. The Board of Trade and Plantations (1696)

- 1) Trade and colonies inseparable and so William III created the Board of Trade and Plantations to oversee colonial commerce.
- 2) Made recommendations to Privy council: colonial governors, laws, trade.

c. Parliament

C. Attempt to Regulate and Centralize the Colonial System

1. In the Five Navigation Acts [Navigation Act of 1651; The Enumerated Commodities Act, (1660); The Staple Act (1663); The Duty Act (1673); and The Enforcement Act (1696)], Parliament decreed that:

- a. All goods entering England must be carried in ships owned and in major part manned by British subjects, including colonials, or in ships of the country producing the goods. [Meant to build up British and colonial carrying trade and reduce power of other nations - especially the Dutch - carrying trade]
- b. The colonies were forbidden to export tobacco, sugar, cotton, indigo, and dyes to any country except England or the other English colonies. The list was made to include rice, molasses, and naval stores in 1706. In 1722 it was further extended to copper, ore, and skins. [Don't want competition from colonies]
- c. All European imports into the American colonies had to first enter English ports and pay duty to be reshipped. [Don't want foreign competition in colonies]
- d. Parliament levied a plantation duty, to be paid in colonial ports, to prevent colonials from exploiting flaws in earlier legislation designed to thwart their participation in direct trade with Europe.
- e. Smuggling was prevalent in Colonial British America, so . . .
- f. The Enforcement Act of 1696 contained stringent clauses to break up smuggling:
  - 1) it required that all English and colonial ships be registered
  - 2) it authorized customs officials to search ships, wharves, and warehouses and to seize unlawful goods.
  - 3) it set up Admiralty courts to handle enforcement proceedings were established in all the colonies - such bodies could proceed without the accused having benefit of common law protections, notably a jury trial.

2. Royalization of colonies:

- a. 1624: Virginia becomes first Royal Colony.
- b. 1680: New Hampshire becomes a Royal Colony after it is separated from Massachusetts.

c. 1684: Massachusetts charter is revoked and there and the James II's advisors convince him to merge the several settlements of New England into the Dominion of New England.

- 1) The creation of the Dominion was represented as a measure necessary for military defense, but Americans generally regarded it as a device to impose royal authority on the colonies.
- 2) The Dominion collapsed when James II was driven from the throne by the Glorious Revolution (1688).
- 3) Massachusetts had its charter restored in 1691, but was considered a royal colony from 1684 to the Revolution.
- 4) Both Rhode Island and Connecticut retained their charters until the Revolution.

d. 1685: New York becomes a Royal Colony, with accession of James Duke of York to the throne as James II.

e. 1702: East and West Jersey become the Royal Colony of New Jersey and are governed by New York.

f. 1729: Carolina is split into the two royal colonies of North Carolina and South Carolina.

g. 1752: Georgia becomes a Royal Colony.

h. Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island all still had charters at the outbreak of the Revolution - Massachusetts was considered a Royal Colony

i. Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware were still proprietary colonies at outbreak of Revolution.

j. So, we see that 8 of the 13 colonies were royalized. None had started as royal colonies.

### 3. Governance of colonies: Royal Governors

- a. Royal governor represented a direct link to England.
- b. He was at the top of Colonial Government, appointed by the King with no fixed term
- c. Most royal governors were Englishmen sent to colonies.
- d. The Governor was assisted by a council.

- 1) Chosen for loyalty to crown.
- 2) Chosen for social standing.
- 3) Had to be residents of colonies.
- 4) No fixed terms

e. On paper the Governor's Council had considerable power.

- 1) Equal branch of the Legislature in colonies
- 2) Executive agency giving advice to Governor
- 3) Also was supreme court for the colonies.

f. Membership on Council was highly prized.

- 1) Social status.
- 2) Influence.
- 3) Usually consisted of richest men

g. Governor's council never became powerful.

- 1) Distrusted by colonists.
- 2) No offices to give out
- 3) Never trusted by King or advisors.

#### IV. The British North American Colonies in the Mid-Eighteenth Century

(This discussion is taken directly from Jack Green's essay "An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution")

A. All of the colonies by 1750 possessed virtually all of the conditions necessary for self-governing states.

1. The first of these conditions was the emergence of stable, coherent, effective, and acknowledged local political and social elites: "By the middle of the century, there existed in virtually every colony authoritative ruling groups with great social and economic power, extensive political experience, confidence in their capacity to govern, and broad public support"

2. "A second and complementary condition was the development of local centers and institutions of acknowledged and functioning authority within the colonies, that is, centers and institutions in which authority was concentrated and from which it was dispersed outward through a settled network of local urban administrative centers and institutions to the outermost perimeters of colonial society."

a. Centers: Williamsburg, Annapolis, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Charleston.

b. Institutions: elected lower houses of assembly.

3. The development of remarkably elastic political systems in the colonies.

a. They were inclusivist rather than exclusivist

b. They permitted the resolution of internal conflict--prevented any group from having a long-standing monopoly of political power, economic opportunity, and social status--new groups were constantly springing up demanding parity.

4. Competence of the colonies in nonpolitical or semi-political spheres during the eighteenth century gave rise to self-government.

a. Internal and external trade, travel, migration, increasing availability of knowledge, education.

b. Cultural, social, religious institutions.

c. Law, trade, finance

5. Tremendous increase in the size and wealth of the colonies in terms of the number of people, the amount of productive land, labor, and skills, and the extent of settled area.

B. So, Green concludes:

It is thus clear in retrospect that the colonies had achieved a high degree of competency by the 1750s and 1760s. Far "removed from the sources of metropolitan authority," they had early been transformed by the very exigencies of life in America from passive "recipients of tradition and objects of authority into independent, differentiated, initiating" social and political entities that put a high premium upon resourcefulness, self-control, and the ability to act successfully and confidently in an uncertain environment that frequently threw them back upon their own devices. By 1760 the colonies were thus not only able to meet most of the objective conditions necessary for self-government but even had to a significant degree been governing themselves, maintaining internal civil order, prospering, and building an ever more complex and closely integrated society for at least three-quarters of a century, and in some cases longer."

#### V. Great War for the Empire Exposes Discrepancy between Theory & Practice

1689-97	King William's War	War of the League of Augsburg	Treaty of Ryswick (1697)
1702-13	Queen Anne's War	War of Spanish Succession	Treaty of Utrecht (1713)
1721-42	Robert Walpole	Prime Minister in England	Period of Salutary Neglect
1739-48	King George's War	War of Austrian Succession	Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748)
1754-63	French and Indian War	Seven Years War, 1756-63	Treaty of Paris (1763)

A. In 1700, the thirteen British colonies in North America that hugged the Atlantic coast were not of major imperial significance.

1. The colonies in North America made up only a small part of the entire British Empire, which spread from northern Canada, to the British West Indies, even a small area in India.
2. The British West Indies were certainly more valuable for their trade in sugar, molasses, and fruit.

B. Between 1689 and 1763, the British government did not rigorously enforce its theory of centralization.

1. During the wars, the colonies were left largely to themselves. It was not until the Seven Years War that the British sent troops to fight in the North American colonies.
2. The administration of Prime Minister Robert Walpole (1721-42) was a period of Salutary Neglect. The colonies were left to themselves and prospered. Because: New line of British Kings after 1715, and Walpole thought that would encourage trade.

C. The Great War for the Empire ended in 1763 with the conclusion of the Seven Years War. The Treaty of Paris (1763) - that ended that war - was a measure of rising British power in America.

1. French power was thrown completely off the continent of North America
2. The English controlled all the land east of the Mississippi River, and won Canada from the French.
3. The French, to compensate their Spanish ally for its losses, ceded to Spain all trans-Mississippi Louisiana, plus the outlet of New Orleans.
4. Spain, for its part, turned Florida over to England in return for Cuba, where Havana had fallen to British arms.
5. Great Britain thus emerged as the dominant power in North America, while taking its place as the leading naval power of the world.

D. The British Colonies in North America after the Great War for the Empire

1. How then did the Great War for the Empire expose the discrepancy between British colonial theory and practice, and how might it have led to the American Revolution.
2. To begin with, we know that British North Americans were very happy to be part of the British empire in 1763. Indeed, their mother country had just won a series of the Great War for the Empire and had control of all of North America.
3. But if we look deeper we may, with hindsight, see the roots of the Revolution.

a. Colonial Position

- 1) The colonies were largely self-sufficient and self-governing in 1763
- 2) The colonies had a well-educated cultural and political elite by 1763
- 3) The colonies no longer faced the threat of the French and Spanish on their borders - the British controlled the original thirteen colonies, plus Canada, Florida, and all the land between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi River.
- 4) So, if they were pushed to do things they did not want to do, the colonists could theoretically ask themselves - not that they were in 1763 - why do we need the British ruling over us?

b. British Imperial Position and the Roots of Revolution

- 1) The British had won great victories throughout the Great War for the Empire.
- 2) However, with the conclusion of the Seven Years War in 1763, the British government faced its largest debt in history.

- 3) As a consequences of the massive debt that the British faced, many members of Parliament began to argue that the British colonists in North America should pay at least part of their share of the war debt and the cost of keeping a small contingent of troops (10,000) in North America.
- 4) Thus, as Parliament issued new taxes, and as the colonists argued that they were British subjects - not to be taxed by Parliament without representation -the roots of revolution became apparent.
- 5) So, victory in the Great War for the Empire, and the subsequent attempt to raise revenue in the colonies, led the British to the realization that the system was not working as they envisioned it. They would attempt between 1763 and 1776 to tighten the colonial system.
- 6) As the British tried to tighten their hold on the colonies, the colonists would begin - like an growing adolescent with an overbearing parent - to want freedom.