Crowds in Eighteenth-Century America: Reflections and New Directions

O NE VERSION OF THE CONSENSUS INTERPRETATION of early American history, recently articulated by Jack Greene, argues that "by the mid-eighteenth century, levels of collective violence and civil disorder were ordinarily low." Outside New England, according to Greene, all of Great Britain's mainland North American colonies were moving over the course of the eighteenth century "from incoherence to coherence," from sociopolitical instability toward a greater internal tranquility that found "society routinely accept[ing] existing institutions and leadership structures."[1]

Even within New England, other scholars find sociopolitical relations in the mid-eighteenth century that seem more remarkable for interclass consensus than conflict, and they find this social harmony reflected in the behavior of crowds during the Revolutionary era. Drawing primarily on New England sources, Bernard Bailyn contends

    [1] Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1988), 199, 140. For a probing critique of the consensus paradigm, see Colin Gordon, "Crafting a Usable Past: Consensus, Ideology, and Historians of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter, *WMQ*) 46 (1989), 671-95.

that "not a single murder" resulted from the activities of Revolution-
ary-era riots. Building on the same interpretive and research base,
Gordon Wood and Pauline Maier have developed a paradigm-setting
model of early American mobs. The crowd actions studied by Maier
and Wood were conservative, often extralegal, but usually not anti-
institutional, except against foreign (i.e., British) authority, and seldom
embodied class or any other form of intracommunal conflict. These
crowds were purposeful, had circumscribed aims, directed their actions
more often against property than persons, and were tolerated when
they were not organized, encouraged, and/or led by those responsible
for the maintenance of public order. Indeed, according to Wood,
"what particularly seems to set mob violence in the colonies apart from
the popular disturbances in England and France is . . . the almost
total absence of resistance by the constituted authorities."[2]

This interpretive perspective—which, however unfairly, is often
termed "Whig," "neo-Whig," or "consensus"—is, according to its
authors, often caricatured or misunderstood.[3] Its adherents do not
expressly deny that there was meaningful conflict in Revolutionary-
era America, nor do they explicitly discount the existence of intracom-
munal strife that sometimes split communities along economic or
class lines. Indeed, Maier cautiously delimits the parameters of her
theoretical essay on crowds, noting that:

> not all eighteenth-century mobs simply defied the law: some used extra-
> legal means to implement official demands or to enforce laws not other-
> wise enforceable, others in effect extended the law in urgent situations
> beyond its technical limits.[4]

In other words, Maier acknowledges implicitly the existence of at
least two types of crowds in eighteenth-century America—those that

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[2] Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1965), 581;
Gordon S. Wood, "A Note on Mobs in the American Revolution," *WMQ* 23 (1966), 639;
Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America,"
ibid., 27 (1970), 3-35. Consistent with this interpretation, Richard Hofstadter characterized
early American riots as "low-key and almost charmingly benign." "Reflections on Violence
in the United States," in Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds., *American Violence: A Documen-
tary History* (New York, 1970), 10.

[3] Personal correspondence with Gordon Wood and Pauline Maier, and conversations with
Wood.

[4] Maier, "Popular Uprisings," 4.

defied the law and those that did not. She makes no specific claim that the latter sort of mob, more orderly and more readily tolerated, was more typical of the times in a quantitative sense. Indeed, she seems to recognize that most crowds acted in defiance of law, although she goes on in a subsequent paragraph to imply that the mobs she studies—the ones that respected property and persons, had limited and rational goals, and were at least tolerated by established authorities—were, if not the quintessential early American crowds, at least the more significant of the two types; and she ignores the disorderly mobs in the rest of her article and book.

Not surprisingly, given the subtlety of distinctions between the two sorts of riots made by Maier and Wood, and the exclusive focus of their subsequent comments on only the one kind of mob action, readers generally understand them to claim a special significance— quantitatively and qualitatively—for the orderly, communally consensual crowds that they study. And, rightly or wrongly, Maier and Wood are understood to define a fundamental distinction between mob violence in the eighteenth century and that of antebellum nineteenth century.

That such a reading of the consensus model still exists is amply demonstrated in a recent book by a former graduate student of Wood's. Paul Gilje summarizes his understanding of the consensus model in the Preface to his study of mob violence in New York City:

> [The] eighteenth-century milieu stressed the idea of corporate communalism. . . . [D]espite occasional riots representing cleavages in society, the legitimacy of rioting in the eighteenth century depended upon this corporate ideal. . . . [T]he eighteenth-century mob respected both persons and property; seldom did it lash out in murderous assault. Instead, rioters minimized conflict by focusing their ire upon an object— like an effigy—which symbolized their grievances.[5]

Again, the point is not just to delineate the typical eighteenth-century crowd, but to contrast it with mob violence in the antebellum era:

> By the beginning of the Jacksonian period, the ideal of the easily defined community interest, under assault for more than a century, finally broke

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[5] Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill, 1987), vii.

down. . . . Religious, ethnic, racial, and class differences came into prominence and created divisions that periodically erupted into bloody collective action. A riot in the Jacksonian period, then, tended to have diverse goals, employ violence, and attack persons as well as property. By the 1830s popular disturbances betrayed a deeply fractured social order. To many Americans, rioting had become an illegitimate activity to be resisted by whatever force necessary.[6]

Finally, and also in keeping with the essential outlines of the consensus model laid out before him, Gilje argues that the significant change across time that he finds in New York City can be applied across space, not just to other urban centers of the Northeast, but into the hinterlands as well. In response to the anticipated criticism that the significance of his study is limited by its research focus, Gilje responds that "for every riot in New York, there was a similar riot in Philadelphia, Boston, or even the small towns in the interior."[7]

However debatable each of these interpretations may be, and whatever limitations may be discovered in the consensus model, there should be no denying that "consensus" is a formidable paradigm for the study of eighteenth-century collective action. It has contributed more than a language of discourse, an elegant and utilitarian way of organizing data, and a fashionable approach around which several generations of historians have coalesced. It has provided more than just a useful past for "centrist" guardians of our patriotic myths and "leftist" scholars of the nineteenth century for whom an idyllic, static, communal, and consensual eighteenth century serves as a foundation for portrayals of antebellum conflict and change. There is also some truth to the consensus interpretation, at least as it applies to some

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[6] Ibid., vii-viii.

[7] Ibid., viii. Other exemplary studies of eighteenth-century popular politics that include a discussion of crowds, and which fall within the consensus paradigm, include John Lax and William Pencak, "The Knowles Riot and the Crisis of the 1740's in Massachusetts," *Perspectives in American History* 10 (1976), 161-214; Patricia U. Bonomi, *A Factious People: Politics and Society in Colonial New York* (New York, 1971); Sung Bok Kim, "Impact of Class Relations and Warfare in the American Revolution: The New York Experience," *Journal of American History* 69 (1982), 326-46; Thomas L. Purvis, "Origins and Patterns of Agrarian Unrest in New Jersey, 1735 to 1754," *WMQ* 39 (1982), 600-627; James H. Hutson, "An Investigation of the Inarticulate: Philadelphia's White Oaks," ibid., 28 (1971), 3-25, and Hutson's reply to Jesse Lemisch and John Alexander in ibid., 29 (1972), 136-42.

crowds, some riots, and some places in eighteenth-century Anglo-America.

To offer just one concrete example from the hundreds that might be chosen, a mob composed of Longmeadow, Massachusetts, residents that assaulted the home of merchant Samuel Colton late one night in July 1776 fits within the consensus model in most respects. Some members of the crowd had blackened their faces, while others wrapped themselves in blankets "like Indians." But these were symbolic testaments to this particular crowd's link to traditional and quite recent collective actions, rather than disguises as such. Colton's wife easily recognized the deacon of the town's Congregational church, a neighbor, and her own cousin, the last of whom was also the brother of her husband's first wife. This was no band of misfits and rowdies. Befitting their social standing, members of the crowd showed respect for both property and persons. Their actions were purposeful, orderly, and focused only on a particular range of goods in Colton's store—rum, molasses, sugar, and salt of West Indian origin—while leaving undisturbed the sundry other essentials of everyday life that lined the merchant's shelves. And the crowd was careful to leave sufficient quantity of the offending items so as not to inconvenience Colton's wife in her cooking and baking for the family.

Nor was it difficult to find the destination of the booty taken by the mob. The pilfered goods were delivered intact to the town clerk—another relative of the merchant—who proceeded to sell the merchandise for the recognized "just price" over the next two months, at which point the profits were turned over to Colton. An economic grievance perceived by the leading citizens of Longmeadow, and relating only to a particular range of "essential" commodities from a particular shipment, was redressed to the collective satisfaction of at least some residents of the town. Samuel Colton was outraged, to be sure, but his loss was limited to the difference between the price he was asking for the products taken by the crowd and the proceeds realized from the sale by the town clerk. His family was unharmed, and not even threatened; he suffered no additional property damage or loss.

The Longmeadow mob that invaded Colton's store is one of the best examples we have of the type of eighteenth-century crowd delineated by consensus historians. Members of the crowd were orderly, respectful of persons and property, limited in their aims, and focused on property rather than interpersonal violence; and their actions were

tolerated—indeed, in this case they were even led—by local authorities. Thus, the crowd constituted an extralegal assembly, but not one with anti-institutional designs. There is, however, no way to tell from the sources whether the crowd reflected a communal consensus. The participants apparently did not represent a cross section of the community, but there is no evidence of social conflict as defined by class or status, so the fit with the consensus model, if not precise, is still pretty close.[8]

Nonetheless, one example, or multiple examples for that matter, does not clinch the case for the consensus model. The question is not whether the eighteenth century was different in some essential ways from the twentieth century, but how it was distinctive. The issue is not whether the nature of collective violence changed, but when, how, and in response to what sorts of stimuli. The point at issue is not, or should not be, whether there were any examples of collective violence in the eighteenth century that conform well to the consensus model, but whether they were the "typical," most significant, most essentially eighteenth-century manifestations of mob action. And those are precisely the questions asked by historians whose perspectives are commonly termed "Marxist," "Progressive," or "neo-Progressive"—what this essay will refer to collectively as the "conflict" views of eighteenth-century crowds.

Unlike the consensus school, conflict historians of eighteenth-century America seldom generalize at a universal level. Indeed, most are suspicious of the model-building enterprise itself, offering instead a vision of contingent variety affected by regional, environmental, situational, class, racial, ethnic, economic, and political circumstances. For this reason, there is no single conflict "model" of eighteenth-century crowds. Historians writing from a conflict perspective dismiss notions of a hegemonic ideology applicable across class and regional lines, and suspect that the interclass cooperation identified by consensus historians is more a reflection of the historians' personal expectations than a recovery of eighteenth-century experience.

Certainly, though, conflict historians would find the eighteenth-century America depicted by Kenneth Lockridge more recognizable

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[8] Barbara Clark Smith, *After the Revolution: The Smithsonian History of Everyday Life in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1985), 3-42.

in light of their research than Jack Greene's version, which, for the most part, simply ignores their work.[9] Beginning around 1720, according to Lockridge, there was rapid change away from a society that is

> in the aggregate low in population density, has immediate access to land and is geographically immobile; a society in which wealth is widely distributed, which is socially undifferentiated and which is removed from dependency on the market economy, relative to the England of the eighteenth century or the America of fifty years later.[10]

In its place, Americans found themselves living through an era marked by "increasing population density, land shortage, migration, interpersonal and interregional concentration of wealth, social differentiation and commercial dependency." Under such circumstances, among an array of other changes, Lockridge observes increasing demands on the political system and a greater frequency of internal conflict "severe enough to provoke recourse to or require settlement by higher authority."[11]

This is precisely the sort of socially, economically, ethnically, and politically fissured society that the conflict historians have found identified as collectively violent. Where Greene depicts some variety of experience on a North-South regional axis, and Lockridge postulates significant variations along an East-West line demarcating length of settlement and distance from established centers of economic, cultural, and political authority, conflict historians might argue for even more nuances that are sensitive to intraregional differences. But there can be no doubt that the two schools of early American crowd historiography are operating from fundamentally contrary visions of the very

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[9] For a reading of Greene's book similar to mine on this point, see John M. Murrin, "The Irrelevance and Relevance of Colonial New England," *Reviews in American History* 18 (1990), 178, where Murrin notes that Greene "systematically discounts the significance of rising waves of social conflict and organized violence in the Middle-Atlantic colonies and the backcountry of the lower South on the eve of Independence." Maier, Wood, Bailyn, and Edmund S. Morgan all reject the term "consensus" as an accurate portrayal of their work, and deny that they have an interpretive perspective that can be fairly categorized in this way. Morgan has a point, but see note 18 below.

[10] Kenneth A. Lockridge, "Social Change and the Meaning of the American Revolution," *Journal of Social History* 6 (1973), 405.

[11] Ibid., 409, 412.

nature of eighteenth-century experience, and that the syntheses of social change offered by Greene and Lockridge help to define the poles of disagreement.[12]

Conflict historians have found the consensus model inadequate for analyzing particular mobs, where interpersonal violence between polar interests and different classes seems the essence of eighteenth-century experience. Jesse Lemisch, for example, frames his research as a counterpoint to Bailyn's assertion about the nonviolence of colonial mobs. Lemisch's seamen were violent, class-conscious, and often anti-institutional in their designs. They engaged in anti-impressment brawls that seemed to them literal, rather than symbolic or prophylactic, battles for their lives and liberties. The conflict of anti-impressment mobs was very real, according to Lemisch, and people were seriously injured and died as a consequence.[13]

Other scholars have located class and social conflict in urban riots throughout the eighteenth century and in New York's tenant uprisings before and during the Revolution. Still others have identified social and political disaffection in the Chesapeake and deep South. They have noted rampant interpersonal violence and anti-institutional designs among crowds, along with elite intolerance of mobs, and they have cited such examples as evidence of the limitations of consensual theory.[14]

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[12] Dirk Hoerder establishes the common ground between consensus and conflict historians of eighteenth-century mobs when he observes that "riots in defiance of established authorities had a long tradition in the colonies. . . . So had crowd action in support of authority." Unlike Maier, however, Hoerder believes that crowds reflecting social stress and existing in defiance of authority occupied an increasingly significant place in Boston, at least, beginning in the 1740s. Thereafter, according to Hoerder, what he terms "self-directed" mobs became more significant than the "gagged" crowds studied by Maier. Hoerder, "Boston Leaders and Boston Crowds, 1765-1776," in Alfred F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, 1976), 235-36, 240.

[13] Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *WMQ* 25 (1968), 371-407.

[14] Irving Mark, *Agrarian Conflicts in Colonial New York, 1711-1775* (New York, 1940); Staughton Lynd, "The Tenant Rising at Livingston Manor, May 1777," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly* 48 (1964), 163-77; Edward Countryman, *A People in Revolution: The American Revolution and Political Society in New York, 1760-1790* (Baltimore, 1981); Countryman, " 'Out of the Bounds of the Law': Northern Land Rioters in the Eighteenth Century," in Young, ed., *American Revolution*, 37-69; Beatrice Reubens, "Pre-emptive Rights in the Disposition of a Confiscated Estate: Philipsburgh Manor, New York," *WMQ* 22 (1965), 435-56; Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1979); Nash, "Social Change and the Growth

A short and far from comprehensive list, compiled for its dramatic alternative portrait of eighteenth-century crowds, includes the New York Doctors' Mob of 1788 in which at least nine rioters and three militiamen were killed when a crowd, ultimately of thousands, attempted to capture and harm physicians suspected of grave-robbing and dissecting corpses. Philadelphia's Fort Wilson Incident of 1779, like the Doctors' Mob, was ultimately more violent and less tolerated by authorities—six or seven persons were killed and between seventeen and nineteen "dangerously wounded"—than the communal riots portrayed by consensus historians. The Fort Wilson rioters' grievances were class-based in the sense that they decried the ability of the rich to avoid military service. Complaints came from the "destitute," and the incident bore the marks of a European bread riot in its origins, desperation, and demands. The Philadelphia Election Riot of 1742— the "Bloody Election Riot" as it has been called—was violent in part as a consequence of ethnic and religious prejudices that divided the community, and it reflected the periodic conflict that plagued Pennsylvania politics. The list could be expanded indefinitely and extended back farther in time. It could also be pushed forward into the 1790s, where John Adams, among others, would not have dissented from historian John Alexander's dubbing of Philadelphia the "city of brotherly fear."[15]

Enough has been said to illustrate the nature of the historiographic problem, to demonstrate the genuine contributions of scholars from

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of Prerevolutionary Urban Radicalism," in Young, ed., *American Revolution*, 3-36; Nash, "The Transformation of Urban Politics, 1700-1765," *Journal of American History* 60 (1973), 605-32; Marvin L. Michael Kay, "The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A Class Conflict," in Young, ed., *American Revolution*, 71-123; Kay, "An Analysis of a British Colony in Late Eighteenth-Century America in the Light of Current American Historiographical Controversy," *The Australian Journal of Politics and History* 11 (1965), 170-84; Ronald Hoffman, "The 'Disaffected' in the Revolutionary South," in Young, ed., *American Revolution*, 273-316; and Hoffman, *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics, and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1973).

[15] John K. Alexander, "The Fort Wilson Incident of 1779: A Case-Study of the Revolutionary Crowd," *WMQ* 31 (1974), 589-612; Norman Cohen, "The Philadelphia Election Riot of 1742," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (1968), 306-19; Jules Calvin Ladenheim, " 'The Doctors' Mob' of 1788," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science* 5 (1950), 23-53; John K. Alexander, "The City of Brotherly Fear: The Poor in Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," in Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz, eds., *Cities in American History* (New York, 1972), 79-97.

both interpretive poles, and to suggest that no one, from either perspective, has done the sort of research or presented an analytical framework that could decide the debate in any definitive fashion. That there were different kinds of crowds and different types of collective violence in eighteenth-century America seems clear. Less obvious is how we might begin to answer questions about typicality and change over time, but those issues are certainly high on the agendas of both consensus and conflict historians.

At a minimum, it is essential to define conditions appropriate to the eighteenth century that were most conducive to one or the other type of crowd. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a comprehensive sociopolitical map of eighteenth-century Anglo-North America, but it is within reason to suggest some theoretical parameters that are sensitive to the historical interplay of power, ideology, and social stress. By acknowledging the variety of early American conditions, and by seeking to generalize up to, but not beyond, such limits, perhaps we can gain a more subtle knowledge of collective violence across time and space.

This analysis is based on an assumption that is probably both obvious and unprovable. There were fundamental differences between urban and rural life in the eighteenth century that incorporated values and economic conditions and that had a profound impact on individual and collective interaction. James Henretta defines a rural *mentalité* that subsumed economic ambitions and familial values in a distinctive fashion. Gary Nash sees the cities as the "cutting edge" of social and economic change, which defined them as collectively different from the countryside, but that also gave each an eccentric character that makes generalizations about urban life inadequate for plotting the eighteenth-century sociopolitical landscape. Just as there are limitations upon our ability to generalize about eighteenth-century cities, so too the experiences of the 90 percent of Americans who lived outside the towns were marked by a variety of conditions that defy uniform analysis. What we need, among other analytical tools, is a theoretical device that will help to explain consensus and conflict crowds in terms of territorial configurations that account for such variables as population density and regional distinctiveness. The concept of "liminality," with its inherent sensitivity to power and perceptions, proves useful for this purpose.[16]

[16] James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-Industrial America," *WMQ* 35 (1978), 3-32; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, passim.

As political theorist Anne Norton has recently explained it, "liminality is a threshold state 'betwixt and between' existing orders. Liminars . . . are between identities. In politics, they are between allegiances." Liminal status can be the consequence of comparative economic and/or educational deprivation; it can be ethnically, racially, and/or gender based; and it can be the consequence of life on a territorial frontier. According to Norton,

> the poor, no less than those in residence on the frontier, are removed from the centers of economic, social, and political power. This removal, the demands of life in the face of limited peculiar social and cultural arrangements which arise in consequence, make the poor only ambiguously citizens of the nation in which they are included. They are less securely integrated in the structures that order the institutional state, and their allegiance is commonly compromised by a just sense of deprivation and exploitation.[17]

These statuses can be, and often are, overlapping and interdependent, reinforcing the marginality of those who fall outside cultural and national definitions of the self.

In one sense, the relationship between collective violence and territorial liminality should be obvious. Living at the fringes of power—cultural, political, and economic—people on the frontier are typically, perhaps definitionally, contemptuous of authority. Existing far from the centers of power; forced to rely on a "justice" less influenced by the rule of law; and competitive, individualistic, and perhaps desperate by the very natures that drove them to the margins of "civilized"

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[17] Anne Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity* (Baltimore, 1988), 53, 74. See also Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" (1964), reprinted in Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, 1967), 93-111; and Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, 1969). Like Turner, I understand that liminal status can have a range of benefits, as well as handicaps, for those in a liminal state, and that those occupying a liminal status may or may not share with non-liminal persons a conscious comprehension of their liminality. In other ways, I find Norton's application of the term to the political sphere more useful for the purposes of this essay than Turner's anthropological definition, which is designed for the study of ritual in primitive societies. In Turner's usage, liminality is definitionally transitional; it represents a movement across time between identities. This is not necessarily so in Norton's application, where an individual, a group, or a region might be termed liminal (from the perspective of the liminars themselves, contemporaries representative of the dominant referent culture, or the historian) in one or more ways for extended periods of time. In other words, to Turner, "liminal" shares a range of characteristics with "transitional"; to Norton, and in this essay, "liminality" is akin to "marginality," which may or may not be a transitional state.

society, inhabitants of Anglo-America's eighteenth-century frontier lived in a more interpersonally violent world than did rural, and even urban, easterners.[18] It makes sense, then, that some of the classic episodes of eighteenth-century collective violence—ones that are universally acknowledged to fall outside the consensus model—occurred on a territorial frontier. The Paxton Riots, the Regulator Movements of North and South Carolina, Shays's Rebellion, and the Whiskey Rebellion are remembered for their scale and for the challenges that they were perceived to represent to established institutions and authority. They were not remarkable, however, among frontier mobs of their day for the kind and degree of their violence or the nature of their anti-institutional goals.

Numerous examples could be marshaled to demonstrate the character of rural crowds, their interpersonal violence, their lack of respect for institutions, and the intolerance of lawful authority for this sort of collective action. It makes more sense, though, to focus on one place over time—a locale that is usually thought of as neither urban nor frontier—as a way to illustrate the functional consequences of territorial liminality for the history of mobs. Such an exemplary case can expose some of the ways in which a variety of marginal statuses interact to contribute to the collectively violent character of a liminal region.

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the location chosen for this purpose, experienced during a period of a little more than one hundred

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[18] Edmund S. Morgan takes the consensus perspective on the Revolution, and also shares Bernard Bailyn's displeasure with the label "neo-Whig." Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1973), 23; Morgan, "Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution," in ibid., 290. This consensus perspective is also reflected in Morgan's books on the Revolution, including *American Slavery/American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), where Morgan sees Virginia's participation in the Revolution as growing from an interclass white consensus formed in the late seventeenth century in response to the increasing presence of slaves in the colony. Unlike other "consensus" historians, however, Morgan emphasizes the role of sectional conflict between East and West as a major component of early American life. "The significance of the frontier," he writes, "was that it kept Americans in conflict." Morgan, "Conflict and Consensus," 300. Even for the frontier, however, Morgan's interpretation reflects his consensus instincts by concluding that "generally, though not always, [interregional conflicts] stopped short of large-scale violence." Ibid., 307. The desire to generalize in such a fashion, which biases all conclusions toward consensus, is a basic ingredient of the interpretations often described as "neo-Whig." This is not to say, however, that Morgan is necessarily "wrong" about the Revolution in Virginia, or about interregional conflict.

years—from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century—a status as territorial boundary in two different directions, which contributed to the frequency and violent character of crowd actions within its borders. Its place on the southern Pennsylvania border with Maryland was official and unchanging over time; its character as a western frontier of settlement was indeterminate and short-lived, but nonetheless significant in the local history of collective violence.

The conjunction of these two liminal statuses defined essential differences between rioting in Lancaster and other counties in the region with which it otherwise had much in common. Rural Pennsylvania counties that did not share the southern border with Maryland avoided eighteenth-century boundary disputes and suffered fewer outbreaks of violence associated with fugitive slaves and interracial tension during the nineteenth century. Counties to the east of Lancaster were less affected by conflict resulting from frontier conditions during the eighteenth century.

The first major outbreak of collective violence in Lancaster began shortly after it was established as a separate county in 1729, continued intermittently for about five years, and was a direct consequence of Lancaster's liminal status on Pennsylvania's southern border. A series of riotous episodes between the years 1732 and 1737 displayed a total disdain for local authority. They were interpersonally violent, resulting in dozens of serious injuries and at least three deaths, and they demonstrated a lack of regard for the institutions of colony and Empire. Settlers on both sides of the imprecise border exploited their geographical marginality to avoid paying taxes, to establish dubious land claims, and to declare contingent allegiance to whichever colony—Maryland or Pennsylvania— appeared most ready to sanction their actions for the lowest price.

When the Lancaster County sheriff and a posse tried, in 1732, to arrest two sons of John Lowe for destroying horses that grazed near, but not on, their land, and for assaulting two or more men who complained about the practice, the officers of the law were resisted on the grounds that they lacked jurisdiction. The facts are that the Lowes lived well within Pennsylvania's southern border, even as defined by Maryland's most extravagant claim. Nonetheless, the hue and cry that "Maryland" men were being carried off by "Pennsylvanians" raised a local mob that attempted by force to free the two prisoners. The posse kept the numbers of combatants within bounds by restraining

Mrs. Lowe before she could alert the whole neighborhood. Blows were exchanged, and at least one serious injury resulted, but the sheriff managed to secure his prisoners in the Lancaster jail.

Reprisals continued between gangs of "Marylanders" and "Pennsylvanians," whose loyalties only loosely correlated with the locations of their residences. "Maryland" mobs harassed peaceful Indians who lived along the northern bank of the Susquehanna River, apparently in an attempt to provoke violence that would eventually result in the freeing of more land for settlement. Prisoners were taken on both sides of the border, roughed up, and held indefinitely for exchange.

In September 1735, the Lancaster high sheriff attempted to take into custody against a debt claim a man who lived about twenty-three miles north of the disputed border. The fellow replied that he could produce bail, at which point a mob of between twenty and thirty mounted "Marylanders" advanced on the posse with cutlasses and clubs. Several of the officers of the law escaped after receiving serious beatings. The sheriff was not so fortunate. The last any of his party saw of him, he was on the ground being beaten with clubs by four men. Witnesses later testified that nothing further was heard of the sheriff; they were certain that he had been murdered and that the body had been disposed of in some undiscovered location.

The largest and most serious battle in this unofficial border war occurred in 1736, when some German settlers in Lancaster County attempted to switch allegiance from Maryland to Pennsylvania. Initially, the Germans had exploited the device of securing Maryland titles to their land as a way to avoid Pennsylvania taxes. The way such decisions were apparently made in this and any number of other cases was that settlers declared fealty to the government most remote from their locale, thus insuring the least intrusion and lowest cost for official sanction of property rights. This freed them, at least for a time, from the authority and the costs of local government. The price they willingly paid was the loss of whatever minimal protection was provided by the rule of law. Over time, these particular German settlers, and others like them, came to see their best interests differently. They feared their neighbors and the potential success of competing claims to their now cleared and prospering farms.

"Marylanders" and local officials who backed their interests saw such "treason" in another light, and responded by sending a "posse" of 300 armed men into Lancaster County for the purpose of ejecting

the Germans from their land. The Lancaster sheriff responded to protect his new constituents; and a battle was avoided by this show of force. Subsequently, another, less "official," band of about fifty "Marylanders" renewed the attempt to throw the Germans off their land. In the ensuing battle, at least two men were killed and an undetermined number wounded. Prisoners were taken on both sides; later a mob of "Marylanders" broke open the Lancaster jail and freed compatriots held there on riot charges.

The Crown eventually responded in the ploddingly slow manner of large bureaucracies, and the border dispute was settled in a fashion that precluded the exploitation of liminal status to avoid association with local, colonial, and imperial institutions. Boundaries were drawn clearly (although not finally accepted by all parties until the 1770s), institutional responsibility established, and competing land claims sorted out in a way satisfactory to those better able to protect their interests. Gangs dispersed, "leaders" were treated in a contingent fashion deemed best to achieve respect for authority, and "order" was brought to the frontier between Pennsylvania and Maryland.

The weight of imperial authority, once the Empire decided to act, was decisive in tipping the balance of power from those who tried to exploit liminal status to the governments and citizens who represented established authority. Lancaster was close enough to the centers of power and authority in 1737, and there was sufficient support for imperial rule within the county and on the other side of the border with Maryland, that decisions perceived reasonable by most residents could be enforced. Those who objected to the new regime generally moved on, westward when conditions permitted it, to fight the same losing battle against authority, or to exploit in more successful fashion the lessons learned about manipulating the system.[19]

[19] This discussion of collective violence in Lancaster County is based on Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Christiana Tragedy: A Story About Race, Violence, and Law in the Antebellum North* (New York, forthcoming in 1991), chapter 9. See also Slaughter, "Interpersonal Violence in a Rural Setting: Lancaster County in the Eighteenth Century," *Pennsylvania History*, forthcoming in April 1991. On the border dispute with Maryland, see also L. Daniel Rupp, *History of Lancaster County* (1844; rpt. ed., Spartanburg, 1984), 265-70; J.I. Mombert, *An Authentic History of Lancaster County, in the State of Pennsylvania* (1869; rpt. ed., Laughlin-town, 1988), 127-47; *Pennsylvania Archives* (119 vols., Harrisburg, 1874-1935), 1st ser., 3:passim; J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Baltimore City and County* (2 vols., 1881; rpt. ed., Baltimore, 1971), 1:64-66. The Germans paid some taxes to the Maryland government and, according to Maryland authorities, were "seduced" to switch loyalties by Pennsylvania officials

In the immediate future, though, emigration was slowed by "Indian troubles," war, and, to a much lesser extent, the edicts of central authority. So, although Lancaster's status as a border area with Maryland became less provocative of violence for a time, the county remained on the fringes of western settlement. And even as the line of Anglo-American expansion moved ever so slowly west over the thirty years following the border dispute with Maryland, Lancaster was close enough to the edge that frontier liminality influenced collective violence within its borders.

The best-known example of Lancaster's frontier collective violence occurred in December 1764—decades after the area had ceased to define a western terminus of European settlement. The Great War for the Empire had ended the previous summer, and Pontiac's War began shortly thereafter. Rural peoples were thus faced with yet another bloody wave of violence. Neither the Empire nor the colony's eastern-based government provided protection for those living on the fringes of civilization, and Indian forays now actually pushed back the frontier hundreds of miles. Carlisle, a small town about one-third of the way across the colony, became the western-most edge of the Pennsylvania frontier.

Frustrated by their inability to inflict punishment on their enemies, and bitter over the colony's refusal to provide any aid, a band of Scotch-Irish frontiersmen lashed out in an easterly direction. The settlers were furious that the colony provided food, clothing, and protection for Christianized Indians living around Lancaster, while offering no relief for white refugees. They were enraged by rumors that the "peaceful" Indians funneled supplies and perhaps information to the warriors who rampaged unchecked across the frontier.

At dawn on December 15, fifty-seven armed settlers descended on the village at Conestoga Manor, where a group of about twenty Indians lived under the government's protection. Brandishing firelocks, short-swords, and hatchets, the whites quickly dispatched the three Indian men, two women, and one boy they found at home. The ancient chief Shehaes was chopped to pieces in his bed. All the victims were scalped and their bodies mangled. The huts were then set on fire with the

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who promised them an even better tax break for declaring themselves "Pennsylvanians." Ibid., 1:65-66.

bodies inside, and the avenging frontiersmen dispersed after a search for the other villagers and a brief celebration of their victory.

Lancaster officials feared for the lives of those Conestoga Indians who had escaped the massacre and decided to collect them in the county workhouse for their protection. Settlers from the Paxton area (Harrisburg) heard of this plan, and another band of about fifty white men attacked the workhouse on December 27. According to Benjamin Franklin, when the sixteen unarmed Indians realized their fate, "they divided into their little Families, the Children clinging to the parents; they [the adults] fell on their Knees, protested their Innocence, declared their Love to the English, and that, in their whole Lives, they had never done them Injury." Still in the posture of prayer, each man, woman, and child was hacked to death. The murderers then mounted their horses, "huzza'd in Triumph, as if they had gained a Victory, and rode off—*unmolested!*"[20] Despite the attempts of authorities, who had little sympathy for the perpetrators of this mayhem, no one was ever apprehended for this crime.

The Paxton Riots shared a range of characteristics with numerous other episodes of rural collective violence during the eighteenth century. They were neither the most bloody riots in terms of numbers killed and wounded, nor the only flagrant challenges to institutions of law and authority. And they were far from the only riots that preyed upon victims who were marginal members of the community in which they lived. It is here, at the intersection of different forms of liminality—territorial, class, ethnic, and racial—that the character of collective violence is defined for particular times and places.[21]

It was those residents who perceived themselves as living on the margins of Lancaster society who most frequently and most aggres-

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[20] [Benjamin Franklin], *A Narrative of the Late Massacres, in Lancaster County, of a Number of Indians, Friends of this Province, By Persons Unknown, with Some Observations on the Same* (Philadelphia, 1764), in Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (27 vols. to date, New Haven, 1967-), *11*:52-53.

[21] Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986), 28-29; Brook Hindle, "The March of the Paxton Boys," *WMQ* 3 (1946), 461-86; James Kirby Martin, "The Return of the Paxton Boys and the Historical State of the Pennsylvania Frontier," *Pennsylvania History* 38 (1971), 117-33; John R. Dunbar, ed., *The Paxton Papers* (The Hague, 1957). For a bloodier example of collective violence on the frontier, in which approximately 100 persons were brutally murdered, see Slaughter, *Whiskey Rebellion*, 75-78.

sively engaged in collective violence. Likewise, it was those perceived to be liminal members of the community who were most frequently, and most disastrously, the victims of crowd actions. In the border war that meant that Indians and Germans—racial and ethnic liminars— were victimized disproportionately to their numbers in the populace.

The Indian victims of the Paxton Boys were liminal members of the community, and racially suspect in a uniquely significant sense. Not only were they "not white," representatives of an "other" defined by a range of unsavory qualities, but they were "Indian" with a difference that particularly enraged the mob. They were Christian Indians, Indians who had tried to acculturate to white norms. By adopting the raiment and artifacts of white life, these Indians had become culturally liminal, "betwixt and between" their native culture and that of the Anglo-European settlers among whom they lived. As Anne Norton observes, "the perceptible presence of likeness (of one's self) in another threatens the dissolution of the self in the overwhelming fear of all things surrounding." This likeness of that which is defined as the "other" is undoubtedly particularly threatening in a frontier environment, where representatives of the so-called dominant culture are painfully insecure about their own collective identity.[22]

The white settlers, too, were conscious of being in between their native culture and those, generally Indians, against whom they defined themselves. Thus, the whites acted out, in a horrible fashion, their own cultural liminality and that of their victims. By adopting violent techniques and weapons that they labeled as distinctively "Indian," the rioters proved to themselves how "non-Indian" they were. By dispatching the entire community of Christian Indians, the rioters proved how "non-white" their victims were. In other words—to switch from the shared discourse of cultural anthropology and political philosophy to the psychologists' concept of "projection"—the settlers projected their insecurities about their own collective and individual identities onto a culturally marginal and racially vulnerable group of Native Americans.

In addition to the autonomous significance of the Paxton Riots and Maryland border war, such events also furnish clues to the meanings

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[22] Norton, *Reflections on Political Identity*, 55.

of everyday occurrences that are less richly documented. Lancaster's court records provide an opportunity to explore the place of these extraordinary episodes within broader contexts of meaning. There are several limitations on the utility of court records in general, however, and of Lancaster's quarter sessions records in particular, which must be acknowledged forthrightly. First, there are gaps in the record; no minute books survive for the years 1765-1770 or 1792-1796. Second, there are real problems with the sources that are available—the minute books provide precious few details about the nature of the crimes prosecuted, and these are supplemented by more revealing documents in only a fraction of the cases. Unfortunately, there are no newspapers that could fill in missing details before the mid-1790s, and thereafter periodicals did not always comment on such commonplace local news. Third, by their very nature the court records are biased towards both violence and those sorts of collective action that represented a breach of communal tolerance for such behavior. They are, therefore, likely to reveal more intracommunal conflict than consensus.

The Lancaster quarter sessions records are not going to resolve disputes among historians about the comparative nature of eighteenth-century and antebellum crowds, both because of their innate limitations and because they provide evidence about such a small geographic area. The minute books and case papers do help us, however, to make qualitative judgments about collective violence outside the cities that have been the central focus of historians. The surviving records provide evidence about continuity and change over time in one locality, and they furnish a broader context for assessing the meanings of such extraordinary events as the Christiana Riot. The Paxton Riots and the collective action associated with the Maryland border war certainly were aimed at persons, resulted in serious injury and death, and represented a challenge to established authority rather than a pro-institutional consensus on the issues that provoked them.[23]

[23] The riots associated with the border war clearly reflect intracommunal divisions only loosely based on territorial location of the rioters. The Paxton Riots, on the other hand, may be seen either as a reflection of intracommunal strife—local authorities tried to protect the Indians—or as more representative of interregional disharmony over public policy towards the Indians. The Paxton Boys did march east to challenge central authority, and despite the desires of Pennsylvania authorities, none of the rioters was ever arrested for participation in the collective violence. For the rest of their lives, men proudly asserted their identity as Paxton Boys without any response by local authorities.

Every one of the fifty-eight riots identifiable in the eighteenth-century court records involved violence against persons rather than property. This represents, on average, almost one violent riot per year during the sixty-two years for which records survive. There were eight such prosecutions in 1764, and six during the border war in 1736; there were not more than three prosecutions for riot in any other year, and there were ten years in which there was only one. In thirty-eight of the sixty-two years there were no prosecutions for riot at all. Thus, violent riots, which challenged the community's sense of order, were neither an everyday event nor a rare occurrence in eighteenth-century Lancaster.

Sometimes the victims were officers of the law, who had breached the mob's collective sense of justice, perhaps by arresting a friend of the mob or by trying to collect what seemed to the debtor and his compatriots an unjust tax, as in the border war cases discussed above. There were events comparable to the impressment riots in seacoast cities studied by Jesse Lemisch, where a faction of the Lancaster community rose up in arms to resist by force inland "recruiting" parties from the British army. Sometimes mobs succeeded in retaking "recruits," sometimes they failed, but inevitably there was blood shed by both sides.

In 1758, for example, a recruiting party of five British soldiers secured two local "volunteers," who, the sergeant claimed, "very cheerfully entered and enlisted into the said service." Later the same day a mob of about thirty local men caught up with the party, engaged the soldiers in a fight, and "did forcibly rescue" the recruits. Again, according to the sergeant, two members of the mob threatened the soldiers that "if they should endeavour to recruit any more men in that part of the country they would kill those who should do so." Only one of the rioters was prosecuted—one of the two identified as spokesmen for the mob. He was found guilty and received the extremely lenient fine of six pence plus court costs.[24]

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[24] During the eighteenth century, it was common practice to prosecute only the "leader" or "leaders" of a riot. We know that there were riots that included 300 +/− (1736), 30 +/ − (1758), and 26 (1797) participants, for example, but with the one exception of the 1797 case only between one and seven people were prosecuted on a riot count. All twenty-six participants were tried in the 1797 case, and this is the only known riot prosecution in the eighteenth century to result in a full acquittal. In some cases, where between three and seven people were prosecuted on an individual count of rioting, it seems likely that the defendants constituted all of the participants, but it is not possible to tell this for certain. There are two

This prosecution and "slap on the wrist" could be interpreted in a number of ways—e.g., as a reflection of the community's weariness of such military raids on the local labor supply in the midst of the Seven Years' War, and tacit support for the rioters' actions; or as a rather casual attitude toward interpersonal violence, at least when it was confined to outsiders, and as soldiers and British nationals, the victims qualified on both counts. Perhaps the lenience was because of the court's general knowledge of the tactics employed by impressment gangs—citizens were injured at least as often resisting "enlistment" as the soldiers were securing their "recruits." In any event, the court took a stand against such behavior, but a rather weak one at best.[25]

More often, a handful of citizens would be charged for blocking a road or for brutalizing a person for reasons not revealed in the records. Recreational violence associated with drunken sprees by servants and other laboring people was the kind of riot most frequently prosecuted by local authorities during the eighteenth century. Such violence generally did not operate across class lines; "labourers," as the court labeled them, were the perpetrators and the victims in these sorts of riots. There was sometimes, just as in the more obviously anti-institutional violence, a sort of rough justice at work in recreational riots. Why did the crowd single out one person as victim? Perhaps the violence was random, but there are some cases in which the same individual was attacked on more than one occasion. That suggests either remarkable bad luck or that scores were being settled on weekends, when intoxica-

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eighteenth-century riot cases in which women were defendants. In one (1763), three women were tried, convicted, and fined six pence each, which represented the smallest fine for convicted rioters during the century. In the other case (1782), three of six defendants were women. The docket lists no outcome for this case. No documented eighteenth-century riot included defendants identified as black or Indian. A typical breakdown of costs for a defendant convicted of rioting included a fine of 5 shillings, attorney's fee of 18 shillings, court clerk's fee of £1.3.9, and combined sheriff and bailiff fees of 0.15.9, for a total of £3.2.6. If this is typical of other cases, it means that costs generally exceeded fines by a considerable sum. See the Lancaster County Quarter Sessions (hereafter, LCQS), Docket Books and Case Papers, 1729-1800 (Lancaster County Historical Society).

[25] *The King v. George Reynolds*, LCQS Docket, vol. 3, Feb. 1758 Session, LCQS Papers, 1758. For an example of a citizen seriously wounded by one of these recruiting parties, see Examination of Stoffle Elgar, Jan. 3, 1771, LCQS Papers. On another occasion, two soldiers filed a complaint that they were attacked and wounded by several Lancastrians. The court took the deposition, but decided not to prosecute the perpetrators of the violence. See Examination of John Norton and John Cowley, March 7, 1768, LCQS Papers.

tion provided license and courage to act out aggressions accumulated during the week.

When Larky Murry got bloodied in a barroom brawl, for example, had his handkerchief and hat stolen in the course of battle, and filed a complaint against the perpetrators, the court was not in the least interested. A riot among drunken laborers generally did not concern authorities during the eighteenth century *unless* its violence spilled over to affect other members of the community. Rioters who simply disturbed the peace in the course of a fight were occasionally required to give a bond for good behavior, but unless death or damage to property resulted from the violence, they were usually not even prosecuted by authorities who were apparently resigned to this form of recreation among the laboring classes. Even attempted murder in the course of this type of riot was not prosecuted *unless* musket-fire hit its mark. The losers of these fights, of course, were the ones attempting to redress the balance of power by enlisting the support of the law, and the court understandably threw up its hands at sorting out who started the ruckus, who was to blame, and who breached the "rules" of interpersonal conflict by drawing a knife, or stealing some change, or taking an item of clothing in the course of a brawl.[26]

In the absence of a professional police force or a local jail that was any more than a short-term holding facility, and in the presence of such widespread collective violence, authorities apparently accepted riots as a normal part of the eighteenth-century social scene. Half the riot charges brought to the court were dismissed out-of-hand. Fines in the 25 percent of complaints that resulted in convictions ranged widely from six pence to £70, but all save a handful of exceptionally violent political riots produced fines of five shillings or less, plus court costs and bonds for good behavior. Bonds were apparently effective in controlling future behavior, as the continuation of the practice through the Civil War suggests, and they were substantial in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Corporal punishment was reserved for property crimes, which the community took more seriously than brawls

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[26] Examination of Larky Murry, 1774; Bonds for Henry Runk and George Bramer, and Examinations of Peter Rutabagh and Henry Miller, March 1775; and Bond for Charles Rerigh, Aug. 3, 1779, all in LCQS Papers.

during both centuries, and was replaced by imprisonment for felony violence and property crimes during the antebellum era.[27]

Even riots that breached class boundaries were punished by fines during the eighteenth century, although the fines were significantly stiffer than those for intraclass collective violence. In April 1759, for example, thirty-one laborers, armed with clubs, swords, and pistols, broke into the house of Jacob Shriver, beat him up, and thoroughly terrorized him. Although the court records do not reveal the cause of the affray, the court took this attack much more seriously than the assault on the recruiting party or the brutalizing of Larky Murry. All the rioters were charged, convicted, fined five shillings plus court costs, and incarcerated until they could come up with the cash. Those at fault were easier to identify in such a case than in the recreational incidents, and the court's sympathy was clearly with the property-owner attacked in his own home by a band of outraged laborers.[28]

We might expect that, over time, respect for law would grow in what became a socially stable (although economically depressed) rural community, but, in fact, attempted rescues of prisoners occurred sporadically through the end of the century—in 1774, 1775, 1791, and 1796—with serious injuries sustained by the lawmen. So, too, did brawls and collective violence aimed at particular individuals remain part of life in Lancaster during the 1780s and 1790s, just as it had been half a century before. The size of fines waxed and waned in response to general fears of disorder operating in the culture at large, with the years during and after the American Revolution representing the century's high-point of judicial intolerance for collective violence;

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[27] Records show the outcomes in thirty-nine riot cases between 1729 and 1800. Nineteen were quashed or listed as nol. pros. (no prosecution). Two were held over and never prosecuted. That means that in a little over 53 percent of known cases, the court decided not to proceed against the defendants. Only one case that was prosecuted resulted in acquittal during this period; and two cases were removed on writs of certeriori. There were convictions in fifteen cases, for a conviction rate of about 40 percent. This calculation excludes the two cases that were removed to the Supreme Court. It is likely that the remaining nineteen cases from the eighteenth century for which no outcomes are listed did not result in convictions. Such an interpretation is consistent with what we know from more complete records about the antebellum nineteenth century. All cases in which there were convictions appear in the minute or docket books. If measured in light of this rationale, the conviction rate is about 25 percent. If these cases are excluded from the calculation, the conviction rate rises to about 38 percent.

[28] *The King v. John Ribgy and others*, LCQS Minute Book, May 1759, LCQS Papers.

but whenever the victims were members of marginal groups—as they continued to be most of the time—the court turned the same deaf ear to complaints that it had throughout the county's existence.

So collective violence fell into the same sorts of categories at the end of the eighteenth century that it had in the beginning: recreational, which normally occurred within class lines; anti-authoritarian, which often stayed within class lines as well, since deputies of the law and impressment gangs were generally recruited from the same class as those who attacked them; interethnic, which was also intraclass and which was usually one variation of recreational rioting; interracial, which, in the eighteenth century, was among the most violent expressions of collective action and which manifested itself across the racial line between whites and Indians, saw whites as the perpetrators, and reflected unity within the local white community and division between whites who lived in the region and central authority at the level of colony and empire over public-policy issues, as well as bigotry and a fragile sense of the self; political, which in the cases of the border war with Maryland and the Paxton Riots overlapped with several other categories, was exceptionally violent, manifested deep interregional divisions and, in the case of the border war, conflict within the local community as well; and interclass, which was rare, occurred for reasons not revealed in the court records, was vertical in the sense that laborers attacked propertied men, and was punished comparatively harshly by the courts.

If we take the degree of violence exhibited in riots and the court's response to different categories of collective action as guides to Lancaster's social landscape, we learn that although interracial riots were among the most violent, the courts took comparatively mild examples of interclass rioting much more seriously. In this sense, it might be argued that the status of the victim, rather than the degree of violence perpetrated, generally defined the seriousness of the crime. Such a formulation would also explain the surprising evidence that violence against law enforcement officials, who were usually members of the laboring classes themselves, was not punished as harshly as socially vertical violence that had no obviously anti-institutional designs, *except* in those cases that represented part of a general challenge to law rather than a specific act of resistance to a particular arrest. In such cases of general resistance—what I am calling political rioting because it represented a fundamental challenge to the authority of the state—

courts responded more forcefully, with 100 percent conviction rates and the stiffest penalties meted out for any riots of the century. Race, class, and politics defined the limits of the community's tolerance for collective violence during the eighteenth century, which meant that killing an Indian or seriously injuring a laboring-class white were not perceived to be serious breaches of the social order, while violence across class lines and/or rioting against lawful authority was treated as a threat to the community.

Rioting, and the prosecution of rioters, in Lancaster County was part of a larger process of violent definition of the self and the other that has boiled over time and again from the American "melting pot." The process is visible in the Paxton massacres and the border war, in any number of minor outbreaks of collective violence, and in the way the courts decided *which* riots were serious crimes. During the nineteenth century, when the county's territorial liminality reasserted itself in reference to the southern border with Maryland, collective violence took on another historically recognizable hue.

Black residents replaced Indians as the racially vulnerable victims against whom economically and ethnically marginal whites would measure the limits of their own achievement of mainstream cultural identity. Blacks would be singled out for their vulnerability, as in the numerous cases of kidnapping by the Scotch-Irish "Gap Gang," which would transport captives south across the state line and sell them into slavery. Economically successful members of the black community would be victimized by mobs of marginal whites for the challenge they presented to "white" identity, as in the case of the Columbia race riots of 1834 and 1835. And blacks would respond in the fashion of marginal peoples driven by circumstances to coalesce. Ultimately, a vibrant and well-armed black populace in Lancaster would define an identity separate from the rest of the region's inhabitants to defend itself against incursions from the south, and from marginal members of the local community, in such bloody confrontations as the Christiana Riot of 1851.[29]

The point of this nod towards the nineteenth century, in an essay about eighteenth-century crowd violence, is to suggest that continuity

[29] Slaughter, *The Christiana Tragedy*, passim.

of form and function, within a context of changing circumstances, marked the history of riots in at least this one rural community. The assumption, for the most part untested by research, that change towards a more collectively violent experience was a hallmark of transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century merits reconsideration and further research. For rural America, or at least for those rural environs that suffered one or more forms of marginal status, the presumption that one century was any more or less violent than the other requires reexamination in light of distinctive local circumstances. Distinctions should also be made between the contemporary percep-tions and realities of collective violence. An enhanced sense of vulnera-bility among law enforcement officials, and a community's belief that it is particularly beleaguered by violence, may be a response to more violent circumstance *or* it may reflect stimuli external to the locality that bear no necessary relationship to the realities of crowd actions.

Obviously, court records have real limitations as testaments to the relationship between perceptions and reality. The Lancaster County records relied upon here for generalizations are heavily weighted to-ward anti-institutional violence. Perhaps definitionally, a criminal court case represents an institutional response to a perceived challenge to good order and authority. Just as certainly, we are left to reckon in part from absence of evidence about the existence in Lancaster of the kinds of riots discussed by consensus historians. All that can be said with certainty is that research in extant Lancaster records reveals much more violence, anti-institutional ambitions, and intracommunal strife than consensus historians suggest was the norm for eighteenth-century Anglo-America, and that continuity in the form and function of collec-tive violence from the eighteenth to antebellum nineteenth century is as striking in the Lancaster records as change. And it seems logical to assume that Lancaster is not the only rural county in America to have a collectively violent past during the period from 1730 to 1860.

If we accept current wisdom that the South, the West, and the cities were even more violent than the rural North during this period, that presents a provocative challenge to the consensus paradigm. Even if we reason, as I think we should, that Lancaster was not necessarily "typical" of the rural North for reasons related to its distinctive over-lapping liminal statuses, then we still need to consider more subtle, more complex, less hegemonic models of collective violence than are currently offered by existing paradigms.

This broad discussion of collective violence, and its exploration through the narrow example of Lancaster County, leads to several observations about the possibilities for studying collective violence in eighteenth- and antebellum nineteenth-century America. Each of these should be well known to specialists in the field, but all are usually forgotten in the ambition to generalize at the highest possible levels of abstraction.

First, there was nothing approaching a national culture of violence or a typically American form of collective action up through the Civil War. We have excellent interpretive accounts of southern, frontier, and northeastern urban violence. Scholars of southern and frontier history are usually quite precise about their regional parameters, although historians of the South might benefit from more careful differentiation between the upper and deep South, between the western peripheries and the more settled and densely populated eastern areas; and frontier historians are not always clear about definitions, transitions, regional variations, and the ethnic, class, and racial components of individual and collective violence.

Historians of urban violence in the Northeast often neglect to define any limits to their generalizations at all, implying or asserting that their comments apply equally well to other, more recently settled regions and areas of much lower population density. The implications of such unqualified generalizations are significant. Whatever the value of monographic treatments of northeastern cities, the provincialism of authors is one of the more serious limitations of the field as it now stands.[30]

Second, and growing out of the first observation, interregional comparisons offer a tremendous potential for advancing our understanding of the varieties and the varying rhythms of collective violence. To date, however, most of even the best comparative work has focused on regional poles—for example, Massachusetts and South Carolina—

[30] Gary Nash's *Urban Crucible* is a striking exception to these generalizations about urban historians, which makes it a book that historians of antebellum cities have difficulty integrating into simpler analytical frameworks. Antebellum historians of both the left and Whiggish center find eighteenth-century consensus historiography more "useful," since it provides a sturdy foundation for the nineteenth-century "revolutions" that sustain antebellum historiographies.

rather than the frontiers of differentiation. We have little work so far that contrasts places and peoples distinguished by a more limited number of variables—the western shore of Maryland and southern rural Pennsylvania, to pick the one possibility hinted at above. Generalizations about what is southern about southern violence would certainly be less neat, as Edward Ayers has recently observed, if Maryland and Virginia were compared to Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey rather than South Carolina or Georgia to New York or New England.[31] A similar gain in understanding would come from refocusing urban-rural and frontier comparisons toward that which is different in a significant hypothesized sense, but otherwise very close to the same. The concept of liminality may be of more general use than it has been put to here. Comparisons of collective violence in a given city and its rural hinterlands may also prove useful.

Third, our ability to generalize about eighteenth-century collective violence and compare it across time to the antebellum nineteenth century is seriously limited in what may be an insurmountable way by striking differences in consciousness about violence, which had a profound effect on the prosecution and reporting of mob actions. This problem is unfortunate for those of us who want desperately to comment on change over time, but ignoring the fact or pretending that it can be easily overcome is a delusion with real historiographic consequences.

Colonial Americans, in a variety of ways that historians have only begun to explore, were not as self-conscious about violence as those of the early national and antebellum eras. Some historians have interpreted evidence of fewer prosecutions for collective violence, along with the lax reporting of riots, as proof that the eighteenth century experienced less collective violence, that the eighteenth century was in some essential sense more placid—less violent—than the nineteenth century.[32]

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[31] Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York, 1984), 22.

[32] On the eighteenth century, see Alden Vaughan, "From White Man to Redskin: Changing Anglo-American Perceptions of the American Indian," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982), 917-53. The most important work on the antebellum nineteenth century includes David Grimsted, "Rioting in Its Jacksonian Setting," ibid., 77 (1972), 361-97; Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study of Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, 1975); and Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1970). The literature on individual riots, riots in particular cities, and

Reasoning from absence of evidence, from notoriously sketchy and incomplete criminal court records and newspapers that often neglected to report local events, is a dubious process in any event. But it seems plausible in light of such comparative casualness about riots that colonial Americans were more resigned than their descendants to living in a violent world and less confident of their ability to alter the violence of their society. Indeed, to carry this logic one step further, it seems reasonable to assume from such an absence of evidence that colonial Americans were more inured to collective violence because they lived in a *more* violent society than their descendants. A wide array of literary sources could be marshaled to support such a hypothesis, but, as consensus historians would reasonably counter, it is difficult to "prove" that violence was the norm, rather than the exception, which defined the essence of early American experience by comparison to other times and places.

By way of illustrating the nature, if not the scope, of the reporting problem for the eighteenth century, consider two apparently similar riots that occurred in the city of Philadelphia. The first took place in 1776. A crowd of "common people" stoned a woman, whom they accused of being a witch, to death on the city streets. No local newspaper picked up the story; no evidence survives to suggest that law enforcement officials were outraged, or that anyone was prosecuted for the act.[33]

The only reason we know about the riot at all is that the homicide occurred outside the front door of a man who reported the incident to a southern visitor to the city, who, in turn, mentioned it in a letter back home. This story was retold one hundred years later by the writer of a magazine article. Thus, our knowledge of this event is serendipitous. We cannot possibly know how many riots, even of the

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groups of riots with a shared focus is too voluminous to list here. On the general question of agrarian violence in America, see Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York, 1975); Barbara Karsky, "Agrarian Radicalism in the Late Revolutionary Period," in Erich Angermann, Marie-Luise Frings, and Hermann Wellenreuther, eds., *New Wine in Old Skins: A Comparative View of Socio-Political Structures and Values Affecting the American Revolution* (Stuttgart, 1976), 87-114.

[33] Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Sort" During the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, 1987), 36; Rebecca H. David, "A Glimpse of Philadelphia in July, 1776," *Lippincott's Magazine* 18 (July 1876), 32.

interpersonally violent, undisciplined, unruly sort, occurred in a society where they caused so little stir among the inhabitants. Were women routinely stoned to death on the streets of colonial Philadelphia; did death frequently result from riots in the city; were interpersonally violent riots more common than those aimed in a limited way at property? We simply cannot know the answers to these questions. We can suspect, however, that Philadelphia's leading citizens were significantly less concerned about such events on the eve of the American Revolution than they would be a decade later, if only because they neglected in the earlier case to remark on the occurrence at all.

The second incident, in 1787, involved two distinct mobs, which had one shared victim. On May 5, as the *Pennsylvania Packet* reported, a woman was attacked by "some persons of the vicinity."

> Upon a supposition she was a witch, she was cut in the forehead, according to ancient and immemorial custom, by those persons. This old body long since laboured under suspicions of sorcery, and was viewed as the pest and nightmare of society in those parts of the town where she had hitherto lived; she was commonly called, at Spring Garden, Korbmacher, by the Germans: and on that score, on the present and other occasions, unfortunately became the victim of vengeance of some individuals, who afforded her the most pointed abuse which so misled a passion and resentment, could possibly impose and inflict.

The writer of the article did not share the mob's "absurd and abominable notions of witchcraft and sorcery"; and he hoped that such Old World superstitions would soon be eradicated from the "free and civilized parts of independent America." Other city newspapers reprinted the story exactly as it appeared in the *Packet*, including the author's ruminations on the difficulty of eliminating such "worm-eaten prejudices" as those displayed by the crowd.

Unfortunately for Korbmacher, neither the editorial pleas for enlightenment nor her own request to authorities for protection prevented a revival of mob violence against her on July 10. As the *Pennsylvania Evening Herald* reported the story,

> the poor woman who suffered so much some time ago, under the imputation of being a *witch*, has again been attacked by an ignorant and inhuman mob. On Tuesday last she was carried through several of the streets, and was hooted and pelted as she passed along. A gentleman who interfered in her favour was greatly insulted, while those who recited the innumerable instances of her art, were listened to with curiosity and attention.

Eight days later, the "witch" succumbed to her injuries, which led the newspapers to call for prosecution of her murderers. The case came to trial in the October session of the Mayor's Court, but the details and verdicts do not appear in surviving records.[34]

Although we lack the same richness of detail about the 1776 riot that we have for the collective violence against Korbmacher in 1787, it seems that the incidents stemmed from similar origins and worked themselves out in similar ways. At least on the basis of surviving records, we have good reasons to see both episodes as more compatible with "conflict" than with "consensus" interpretations of early American crowds. We have no good reason to believe that the riots were sanctioned by law enforcement officials; and every cause to suspect that the Enlightenment repulsion expressed by the newspapers in 1787 would have been shared in kind, if not in degree, by leading Philadelphia citizens who knew about the earlier episode. There is even a faint whiff of class conflict in the July 1787 riot, where a "gentleman" who interceded on the witch's behalf was "insulted" by the mob.

The question of degree is also of interest here. In a comparative sense, *how much* did the leading citizens of Philadelphia disapprove of the witch-murdering mobs of 1776 and 1787? If we can surmise that the lack of comment in 1776 reflected a lack of concern compared to 1787, when horror was recorded in the press and in the courts, then we need to ask why. It is, of course, conceivable that there was some significant distinction to be made between the two episodes, and the treatment of the "gentleman" in the July 1787 riot may be suggestive in this regard. It is also possible, however, that the main difference is that the attitude of elites toward collective violence changed in the decade between the two witch incidents, that this heightened sensitivity explains why fewer riots from the 1780s and 1790s are lost to us, and why none from the Jacksonian era passed without published commentary.

As a rule, historians of Jacksonian-era riots do not recognize the reporting problem, or distinguish as carefully as they might among varieties of experience based on regional distinctions and population

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[34] In addition to the newspapers, see Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class*, 36; and Edmund S. Morgan, "The Witch & We, the People," *American Heritage* 34 (Aug./Sept. 1983), 6-11.

density. Nor do they acknowledge the existence of two kinds of riots in the eighteenth century. They ignore the historiographical debate about the comparative significance of conflict and consensus crowds during the colonial and Revolutionary eras; they do not ask about the functions of such violence, or the circumstances most conducive to one or the other sort of riot. Instead, they make dubious quantitative assumptions, rely on the work of one historiographic school—which they caricature or partially misunderstand—and leave it at that. Typically, historians of antebellum collective violence presume the comparative tranquility and static quality of the previous two centuries. The articles by Wood and Maier are generally misread to document the only significant pattern of crowd behavior during the entire history of the Anglo-American colonies.

Thus, the limitations of historiographical models applied to the eighteenth century have serious consequences that transcend the field. The proposed corrections offered here cannot possibly solve all the problems, but they can point us in new directions. Research that results from asking new questions does have the potential to advance understanding of our violent past; and this essay provides as many destructive as constructive answers. In doing so, it seeks to reopen, rather than foreclose debate. Perhaps with more simplified syntheses cast aside, we can begin to explore the interstices between the conflict and consensus hypotheses, to develop novel approaches to the theoretical and research problems that remain.

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