

Van der Leeuw-lezing Russell Shorto

You Say You Want a Revolution: The Elites and the Masses, the English and the Dutch in America's Founding

by Russell Shorto

You may know the feeling: you begin working on a topic, and suddenly that topic seems to be everywhere. Because it's in the front of your mind, you notice it in the world. In researching a book about the American Revolution, I have been struck by how present that subject seems today in American discourse, 230-odd years after the fact. In case you hadn't noticed there is a presidential race going on in America now, and many of the candidates seem to want a revolution, or a return to *that* revolution.

Senator Bernie Sanders--the dreaded "socialist" (who expresses few actual socialist proposals that I can detect, but that is another story) has been calling for a revolution. The other Democratic candidates have backed away from his use of the term. It is possible that undoing the structural inequalities in the banking and financial systems, as Sanders wants, would require an actual political revolution. And those inequalities have become so vast that perhaps we are heading in that direction.

On the Republican side, meanwhile, the right wing has consistently used the term. In fact the adoption of the name "Tea Party" by that far-right group is an overt linkage to the American Revolution. Commentators asked when the Tea Party came to prominence, "Is this the start of a new American Revolution?" The group's muddled historical leanings can be pushed aside with a simple observation. All of its angry rhetoric boils down to a clarion call borrowed from the American Revolution: "taxation without representation," whereby Britain was foisting taxes on the American colonists without giving the colonists a voice in the taxation or the manner in which the raised monies would be spent. The modern right wing so-called revolutionaries try to apply this to politics today: to Obamacare, for example. It doesn't apply, and the reason is simple. The politicians at whom they fling the "taxation without representation" charge were in fact elected. Any taxation, therefore, involved representation. End of revolution, one might say.

But that simple dismissal doesn't do away with the anger and fury underlying this impulse to revolt. What is happening in the Republican Party right now--the chaos, the preference for non-politicians; for non-thinkers, in fact; the righteous denial of the authority of the President and the Congress and the law--seems to point toward some future cataclysm in America. Could it be a revolution?

Answering that question is beyond the scope of this talk, fortunately for me. I have, however, found myself pondering the concept of "revolution" and what it involves. What is a revolution?

Does a sustained, violent attack against the existing order constitute a revolution? I think, for example, of the so-called Pontiac's War, in America in the decade before the American Revolution. It was a deep, coordinated, violent, sustained assault. It covered a staggering geographic territory, from the Mississippi River to Canada to the eastern seaboard, and involved at least 14 native American tribes, speaking many different languages. Thousands of people were killed. It was an attack on a system, a government, a culture, a way of life.

Pontiac's War followed from the Seven Years War, known in America as the French and Indian War. This was a contest between the English and French for control of the North American continent. Before and during the war, power was balanced. The English and their American colonists, the great Iroquois confederation of tribes, and the French each maintained a sphere of control. When the English won, in 1763, it upset this balance of power. During the war, the English had signed a treaty with the Indians promising never to move westward from the Allegheny Mountains. After their victory over the French, the English promptly took over French forts and settlements in the west. Indians realized the English wouldn't rest in their land grabs until there was no more western land to grab. So they began a series of attacks that spread across 30,000 square kilometers of territory, over three years, under the token leadership of an Ottawa chief named Pontiac, and with names of players and antecedents that read like a used car lot of the 1950s: Pontiac, Cadillac, LaSalle, De Soto. (Americans have a way of turning everything into advertising fodder.) This Indian war was valiant; it was principled: they truly were in the right; it was well-reasoned; it was sustained: but it was crushed. So it was only a rebellion, not a revolution. Had it been a revolution, I would probably be speaking a variant of Iroquois right now.

But it was a kind of precursor to a successful revolution: the American Revolution.

I recently learned of an event that may be the Dutch equivalent of Pontiac's Rebellion, that is to say a precursor to the Dutch revolt against Spain: the so-called "Arumer Zwarte Hoop" Rebellion, in Friesland, which tried to overthrow Hapsburg rule in early 1500s. It, too, failed. Perhaps it was premature. The Dutch provinces were disparate, each with its own concerns. There was no force strong enough to unite them, to make them see themselves not as Frisians first, or Hollanders, or Zeelanders, but as Dutchmen, with a common purpose. In short, the ingredients were not assembled.

That time came, of course. And when it came, the result was an event that changed the course of history. And here perhaps is an ingredient to a revolution that if not strictly necessary certainly brings it to our attention: its consequences. What flowed from the Dutch Revolt? The Dutch Golden Age. The Dutch Enlightenment, precursor to the wider European Enlightenment. The beginnings of secularism, of scientific inquiry. True and meaningful experiments in democracy.

Which brings me to my focus today: the American Revolution and its causes and influences. The American founding fathers showed awareness of the Dutch revolt and looked to it as a precedent. Adams: "The Originals of the two Republicks are so much alike, that the History of one seems but a Transcript from that of the other: so that every Dutchman, instructed in the subject, must pronounce the American Revolution just and

necessary, or pass a Censure upon the greatest Actions of his immortal ancestors." (He was trying to cajole the Dutch into coming in on the side of the Americans, but it shows awareness.)

But my broader goal today is to gently poke and pry at a scholarly dichotomy on the question of where the American Revolution came from.

In recent decades there have been two schools of thought in understanding the origins of the American Revolution. One is a variant of the so-called Great Men theory; it holds that revolutionary ideas germinated in the minds of an elite, leaders who were influenced by Enlightenment thinkers in Europe. This was the prevailing model from the 19th century. It has enjoyed a comeback of sorts, with historians and writers like Joseph Ellis, Ron Chernow and Walter Isaacson focusing attention on Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison and others.

The other school of thought grew out of the social unrest of the 1960s; it takes a bottom-up approach to history, and holds that the impetus for the Revolution came from unrest among tenant farmers, city dwellers, religious revivalists and the like. The historian Gary Nash is often thought of as the godfather of this approach. Recent writers who have adopted it in part include Jill Lepore and Benjamin Carp.

The two perspectives sometimes have been seen to be in competition; arguments have been vehement at times, and can take on (modern) political overtones. Are they reconcilable? Surely something as complex as a political revolution springs from many sources, and operates on many levels of society at once.

What I am going to do with the rest of my talk is outline a modest attempt to draw the two strands together by focusing my attention on one largely unheralded figure from the period, while at the same time giving some special attention to the Dutch antecedent.

ABRAHAM YATES

Abraham Yates was born in 1724, in Albany, New York: about 250 km north of Manhattan on the Hudson River. In the previous century, Albany--then called Beverwijck--was the second city of the Dutch colony of New Netherland. New Netherland had been settled by the Dutch West India Company, following the charting of the region by Henry Hudson, who was English but sailed on behalf of the VOC. The English took over the colony in 1664, but the mix of people--mostly Dutch, up here in the northern wilderness region--largely remained.

It had become something of a tradition in Albany for English men marrying Dutch women. Yates' father, Christoffel Yates, was of English-Dutch ancestry. His mother, Catalina, was Dutch. On his father's side, his people came from Gelderland and Utrecht. Ancestors of his mother, Catelyntje Winne, came from Ghent and from Turnhout.

Albany was a very Dutch place in the mid-18th century. There were gables on houses, koekjes for the children, delft tiles around the hearths. Visitors said it was isolated, had a retro feel. It was truly a bilingual city. Or trilingual: A visitor from another colony remarked in 1754, "Everyone in Albany speaks Indian," by which he meant the Mohawk language.

Yates' father was a blacksmith. The trade was not open to Abraham. He was born in the city's second ward, the 9th child. His 4 older brothers took up positions at the smith. He apprenticed as a shoemaker.

Apprenticeship was long--typically four to seven years--and Abraham was industrious by nature, so he did his time and eventually went into business for himself. He kept careful books, in English or Dutch, depending on the preferred language of the client. His account book, in the Archives of the New York State Library, gives a fascinating look at this thoroughly Dutch-English moment in American history, and it covers decades. Apparently it was Yates' practice to go over an entry with the client. So to the family of Jacob Gerritse van Schaick, who lived in the farming community of Half Moon along the Hudson River, he recorded selling "Een paar schoenen voor je kind," while to the local hatter he sold "een stuk sool leer," and had "een paar schoenen gelapt voor je dochter."

But Yates was not content to be a tradesman: he wanted to get ahead. He made a good marriage: to Annetje de Ridder, daughter of a wealthy Dutch farmer in Schaghticoke.

Now that he was properly set up with a wife and a home, he took a careful look at his city and how it was changing. He was searching for a rung, something with which to pull himself up. He knew that the fur trade--the power base of the town's mighty families--was diminishing. Albany was losing its preeminence. At the same time, the city was becoming a center for tradesmen and craftsmen like him. The region was growing fast, and these men--coopers, tanners, masons, tinsmiths, who came from New York City and as far away as Europe--saw opportunity in supplying manufactured goods to the surrounding communities.

Yates also knew that farmers in the Hudson Valley were growing wheat that was shipped to the Caribbean to feed slaves, and that the returning ships brought rum, sugar and molasses. He decided to augment his shoe trade by expanding into the buying and selling of these Caribbean goods--and in time he added others, such as tea, wine and writing paper. On one occasion--on behalf of his older brother Johannes--he purchased from a Mr. Coeman "de Neger, de Negerin een het Kint." But beyond this extraordinary transaction, he seems to have dealt exclusively in food and household items. He made profits as a merchant, but he was after something more. As he built up his trade, and as he and other tradesmen grew impatient at the rule of the leading families, he was also building connections with this newly burgeoning working class.

As was the case elsewhere in the colonies, politics was a gentleman's business. In Albany, political offices were held or controlled by the extremely powerful leading families, all of them of Dutch descent.

Whether he was born with a chip on his shoulder or it developed over time, Abraham Yates did not take the inequality of Albany society as a given. A lively resentment toward the oligarchs and the special status that came with their wealth brewed inside him. He discovered that he had a preference for what he called the “middle sort” of people. It had long been the custom--in English North America as well as in the Dutch enclave of Albany--for voters to follow the “advice” of their betters in deciding who to back for office. But things were changing, tradesmen’s guilds were pushing for political power, and Yates hit on the idea of tapping into their unrest and appealing directly to voters.

In September 1753 he ran for the office of assistant alderman for Albany’s third ward. It was the lowest office on the city council, but at the same time it was a foothold on the body that governed the city. Going against convention, he marketed himself directly to voters. Those in his district were tradesmen: blacksmiths, carpenters, bakers, brewers, coopers and hatters. Yates--the shoemaker, the merchant, the blacksmith’s son--had by now spent years cultivating connections with them. He won.

From there, he looked for more openings to exploit. He had had no higher education, but he was determined to teach himself.

The next year he found another opening, and became Sheriff of Albany County. The French and Indian War was on, with the Americans, British and their Indian allies pitted against the French and their native allies. But as sheriff, Yates found that his immediate enemy was not with the French but the British army, which was supposed to protect American civilians. Thousands of soldiers were quartered in Albany as part of an effort to take Canada from the French. The soldiers caused chaos: Homes were broken into, furniture and family objects taken, women sexually assaulted. Yates, as defender of his populace, complained to the Earl of Loudon, the head of the British army in North America; Loudon rebuffed him, belittled his civil authority.

Yates then wrote to the governor. Loudon subsequently encountered Yates on the street and the two had a remarkable public confrontation. Loudon said he had seen the letter Yates sent to the governor and that it was filled with lies. Yates replied that every sentence could be proved and supported by witnesses. Loudon warned Yates against discharging a military prisoner from his jail. “Sir,” Yates replied, “I have already discharged him.” “By whose order?” Loudon demanded to know. “By the King’s writ,” Yates responded. Loudon then ordered the sheriff to stay daily within his sight--“and if you do not do I shall send for you with a file of muskets, with their bayonets fixed.” The citizens of Albany who were witness to the exchange must have thought that would be the end of it. Instead, the inexperienced and not terribly threatening-looking sheriff replied, “My Lord, I have no time to wait upon you. I have other business to attend.” Loudon, barely containing his fury, vowed that for Yates’s insolence he would turn his house into a hospital for wounded soldiers and the local church into an artillery storehouse. “I don’t know what you will do, My Lord,” Yates replied coolly, “but I know you have no right to do it.” At that, Loudon informed him that he did indeed have a right: that the Lord Chancellor in England had decreed that when the army was required to defend a place, “there the law ceased” and the army’s rule prevailed.

Apparently in direct response to the insolence Yates exhibited during this encounter, one of Loudon's officers arrived at Yates' house and announced that he would be staying there henceforth. Yates told him the house was already filled with soldiers. The captain replied that if necessary he would "lay in the same bed" with Yates and his wife.

Yates had been teaching himself the law. In this, he had the help of William Livingston. Livingston was from Albany but now moved in larger circles in New York City. There, he had founded a journal of radical ideas called *The Independent Reflector*. Probably with his help, Yates composed a remarkable memorandum against Loudon. This is the 1750s, 20 years before the American Revolution, and this self-taught Dutch-American shoemaker is confronting the most powerful man in America, leader of the British army, using the Enlightenment ideas of John Locke on rights of a people.

He began with a foundational observation: that every person has "a fixed, fundamental right, born with him, as to freedom of his person and property in his estate, which he cannot be deprived of." He asserted, further, that "The King of England can neither change laws without the consent of his subjects nor yet change them with impositions against their wills..." for "a King is made and ordained for the defence of the law of his subjects..." Then, picking up on Loudon's pronouncements that the actions of the army in Albany transcended civil law, he declared, "The pretended power of dispensing with laws or the execution as it hath been assumed and exercised of late is illegal."

He later outlined abuses that the people of Albany had endured at the hands of the British troops: "the most iniquitous and tyrannical violations...robberies, assault, batteries, burglaries and other most abominable crimes have been committed, some of them under colour and sanction of advancing His Majesty's service." He detailed how "oppressive numbers" of soldiers were quartered in private homes while nearby barracks remained empty. He charged that "We have been threatened by the Earl of Loudon [that] our houses should be burned," and that troops did indeed burn houses and furniture. He charged that violence of soldiers had been "the means of frequent abortions," that drunken soldiers "have kept their whores in the rooms in defiance of the people," that soldiers had "stripped women naked to their waste and banished them out of the city with halts about their necks."

Among the authorities Yates cited was John Locke, whose *Two Treatises on Government*, written the previous century, had been important for the development of Livingston's own thinking. In particular, Locke's concept of "natural law," according to which all people had certain basic rights that could not be taken away, inspired both men. Very few people in America had read Locke, but Yates found his ideas to be suddenly pertinent to the situation that Americans found themselves in vis-a-vis the British. He referred to Locke in saying that when a government takes advantage of extraordinary circumstances to override the basic rights of its people, that government becomes "the product of force and violence."

The presence of English soldiers in Albany during the French and Indian War helped remove a layer of Dutchness from Albany; it pushed the city into the wider English world of the colonies. Dutch things were suddenly old-fashioned. English was new: the future.

At the same time, the war had brought the beginnings of a split with England. Before, Americans had thought of themselves as English citizens who happened to live across the ocean. The war gave them the clear sense that they were considered second class citizens, or worse. Yates was at the forefront of this. In 1770s he becomes one of the very first people to call for independence. He became Chairman of the Albany Committee of Correspondence, the shadow government during the Revolution, and a member of the New York Provincial Congress during war. As of July 1776 the British colonies in North America were fighting a war against the home country. In the midst of it, one couldn't call it a revolution. No one knew if it would end as Pontiac's war had -- if it would be crushed and be remembered by history as a mere rebellion.

But with the Treaty of Paris, signed in September 1783, the colonies won a profound victory, one that would change their continent, and, I don't think it hyperbolic to say, change the world.

Abraham Yates was part of this. He had been a revolutionary, a radical, a man living in fear of hanging. And then, with the peace treaty, he was one of the victors, with the task of forming a new government. But in the 1780s Yates made a turn that may seem surprising. The original form of government chosen by the victorious Americans was a confederation, with a weak central government. There's an interesting parallel with the Dutch situation two centuries earlier. In America, people thought of themselves as Virginians or Pennsylvanians or New Yorkers, not as Americans; just as in this part of the world people thought of themselves as Hollanders or Frisians rather than "Dutch," and in both cases this separateness was an impediment to unity, to fighting a war of independence. There was still a strong element of it after the war, which is reflected in the name they chose for their new country: the United States of America. After the individual colonies became states, each state kept and jealously maintained broad powers: to raise armies, to print currencies. The national government, without a president or central leader, had difficulty negotiating treaties with foreign powers.

Most leaders felt the situation had to change. There was a movement to create a Constitution, which would empower a new, federal government that would have a degree of authority over the state governments.

Abraham Yates became one of the most strident voices arguing against the wisdom of this federal government: one of those who saw that as power gathered in the hands of a small group, the federal government would take on absolute powers. He warned the delegates to the Constitutional Convention that their actions would "sign the death warrant of American liberty." He believed that individual liberty was best maintained by keeping power in small states, not in a large federal government. The state constitutions, he said, "administered upon republican principles are the greatest blessings we enjoy." And he added that a national constitution would be "the greatest curse." "In a word, the new constitution will

prove finally to dissolve all the power of the several state legislatures, and destroy the rights and liberties of the people."

The interesting thing in all of this is that it sounds very familiar to those tuned into American politics today. Yates sounds here, in fact, like the members of the far-right Tea Party. The irony is that this same faction believes itself to be steadfast in defending the Constitution. In fact, their rhetoric, their demands, harken not so much to the Constitution as to the Bill of Rights. One of the Tea Party groups, on its website, highlights this commitment not to the Constitution but to individual rights: "Tea Party Patriots stands for the rights of all individuals as laid out in the first amendment. The Bill of Rights is a fundamental piece in securing our freedoms and every American possesses the right to free speech, the freedom of religion, freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble...right to bear arms."

Yates made this arguments to Washington, to Jefferson, to Madison, to Alexander Hamilton, the great proponent of a federal system. They all hated him. Hamilton called him "a man whose ignorance and perverseness are only surpassed by his pertinacity and conceit. He hates all high-flyers, which is the appellation he gives to men of genius." And then Hamilton revealed his elitism when he flung another slur: Yates, he said, was *a mere shoemaker*.

The Constitution did of course go into effect. Yates went on to become Mayor of Albany in 1790, and remained in that office until his death in 1796. He represents a fascinating working class type, determined to lift himself up by his bootstraps, who remained true to his roots and to the common man, distrustful of power and elites.

But he represents something more. To what extent was Yates' own very distinctive take on independence, on revolution, on the rights of the common man, a result of his Dutch heritage? We get some answer to this question from Yates himself. For Yates wrote. Thousands of pages: newspaper essays, articles, political diatribes. One of most fascinating documents he constructed is a kind of history of New York, which is in part what is surely one of the earliest histories of New Netherland. I think it was written in 1776 or 1777, in the midst of the war, possibly to justify American independence by showing that the English never had claim to the land in the first place. And it links the American situation to that of the Dutch in the clearest terms.

Yates wrote, of "the first settlers of the State of New York" "that they were Dutchmen," and brought with them "their history...their character, rights, liberties, their oppressors and revolt." He wrote that they had come from "the seven United States, that the United States before their union were made part of the seventeen provinces of the Netherlands, whose respective governments were Republican." They revolted because of "the violation of the peoples rights and liberties." He recounted the history of the Burgundian and Hapsburg rulers, devoted attention to King Philip, the zealot whose favorite instrument was the Spanish Inquisition. He wrote of the Dutch revolt, and of the founding of the colony of New Netherland by this new nation, and detailed how the Dutch in America had negotiated land treaties with the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy.

He seems, in this document, to have been trying to show his fellow revolutionaries not only that the Dutch Republic was a worthy model for their actions, but that the Dutch nation's claim to the territory in America constituted a wholly different legal basis for the Revolution. He offers, in other words, depth to our understanding of the antecedents of the American Revolution. It was not one group of Englishmen fighting another group of Englishmen. The colonials were of mixed ancestry, and their influences were likewise more varied than we have been led to believe.

Now, let me restate what I have been trying to do with Mr. Abraham Yates. In recent years, historians of the American Revolution have divided themselves into two groups: those who feel that the spark for Revolution was the work of the elites, and those who believe it came from the lower classes. In Yates, we have someone who bridges this divide: a man of very humble beginnings who trained himself in the law and in these new Enlightenment ideas. And, to boot, he used his Dutch past, his knowledge of the Dutch language and of Dutch history, connecting the Dutch spirit of individualism, with its emphasis on individual rights, which came out of history, the battles against water, the formation of Water Boards; and out of Descartes and Spinoza and the Dutch Golden Age, which animated the revolt against Spain and animated the Republic under Johan de Witt. Yates used his simmering lower-class sense of injustice and his awareness of the history of the Dutch revolt to bring a voice to the American debate that fueled the fires of revolution. And while he was not a Founding Father, and is largely forgotten, he corresponded with, traded barbs with, got the attention of, and surely influenced George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and others.

In one of his attempts to villify Yates, who won a succession of local political elections in his lifetime, Alexander Hamilton said, "The people have been a long time in the habit of choosing him in different offices," as if it is a negative thing for a politician to be popular. Hamilton accused Yates of being "a preacher to their taste," meaning, of course, being one of them: a commoner. Again, Hamilton sees this as a negative. The truth is that Hamilton, like Washington and Jefferson, despite the vaunted democratic nature of the American Revolution, were elitists all, who viewed common folk with suspicion.

This contrasts with Yates, and has everything to do with their feelings about Abraham Yates. Yates was a small man: physically, to judge by the one painting we have of him, but also in terms of how he identified. He worked in politics all his life, but always at the local level. He brooked no patience for kings and autocrats, nor for elites of any kind. His was an egalitarian spirit, and here as well he is reflecting his Dutch ancestry. The Dutch Republic was an utter anomaly in 17th century Europe, which otherwise was the era of outsized monarchs, from Queen Elizabeth to Louis XIV. This difference was reflected in cityscapes: in Paris and London the skyline was dominated by cathedrals and castles, the edifices enunciating the power and might of Church and State. But in Dutch cities the distinguishing landmarks--canals and canalhouses--were lower to the ground and reflected the exultation of ordinary life. As Romeyn de Hooghe, the Dutch artist and anti-monarchic writer, put it two generations before Yates, contrasting the Netherlands with other parts of

Europe, "Glory in other lands reposes in an outward show of flags but here in the manner of thrifty and modest households."

When Abraham Yates used the term "the middle sort" to refer to someone, he didn't mean it as an insult but as sturdy praise. And this, too, I think, reveals his Dutch roots.

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