Silent Songs of Sedition: The Re-appropriative Dynamics of Broadside Ballads in the American Revolution

Abstract

Political revolutions constitute brief yet powerful instances of social upheaval and administrative change, and are key moments in the origin stories of nations and the formation of national identities. From printed broadsides ballads in eighteenth-century America to social media platforms in the Arab Spring, popular communicative mediums provide revolutionaries with powerful vectors for propaganda and consciousness-raising. These mediums are often credited as necessary causes or catalysts of both revolutionary success and its newly-minted nationalisms. In many scholarly and popular accounts of the American Revolution, the perception of eighteenth-century print ephemera's liberatory character and widespread dissemination have positioned it as a fundamental cause of American revolutionary independence, and hence as a cornerstone of contemporary American nationalism. Nonetheless, such perspectives tend to suffer from a reliance on technological determinism: a school of thought that appeals to the inherent essences of communicative mediums and their overwhelming influence on society, technological determinism elides the social specificities of a particular medium's implementation under the sweeping claim that its essential traits inevitably produce societal progress. This paper thus adopts a social-constructivist approach to the cultural particularities of a specific form of propaganda – the broadside ballad – to examine its role as a formal and substantive vehicle for English-American colonial ideologies in the American Revolution's incubatory period. Through an analysis of pro-American lyrics set to popular British tunes and the broadside’s medium-specific traits, I suggest that Patriot balladeers appealed to narratives of British moral corruption to justify revolutionary conflict and consecrate the emergent American nation as the superior recuperation of English and Enlightenment values.