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**Rethinking the History
of the American Revolution:
An Interview with Michal Jan Rozbicki**

Michal Jan Rozbicki (b. 1946) is currently Professor of History at Saint Louis University and Director of the SLU Center for Intercultural Studies, which he founded in 2011. To the middle generation of Polish Americanists he is better remembered as the Director of the American Studies Center at the University of Warsaw, 1987–1990, Managing Editor of the Center’s periodical *American Studies* (now *The Americanist*) in the years 1985–1994, and a co-founder of the Polish Association for American Studies in 1990. His academic trajectory began in Poland with studying Protestantism as a vehicle for the diffusion of scientific ideas across seventeenth-century northern Europe and England. Then he went on to look at how metropolitan cultural values changed when transmitted to British America, and explored the colonial origins of American identity. These lines of inquiry led him to investigation on how the conceptual package contained in the narrative of liberty produced by the American Revolution affected the political culture and the development of equal rights in the United States. It was this project that resulted in his biggest professional success so far, *Culture and Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution* published by the University of Virginia Press in 2011, a book immediately noticed and widely discussed among the historians of early America. It also brought him the 2012 Best History Book award from the State Historical Society of Missouri. His article “Rethinking the American Revolution: Politics and the Symbolic Foundations of Reality,” a follow-up on the book, won the 2012 Best Essay in Intellectual History prize awarded jointly by the Historical Society and the Jack Miller Center for Teaching America’s Founding Principles and History.

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IRMINA WAWRZYCZEK: *No event in the history of the United States can rival the American Revolution in importance and the mythical status it enjoys in American cultural consciousness. It is well reflected in American history writing in which*

the historiography of the Revolutionary period constitutes a well-populated, perhaps even crowded field of study. A number of major interpretations of the political, economic and moral reasons of the Revolution have gained widespread acceptance; a lot of excellent monographs have appeared on revolutionary warfare, leaders, foreign policy and the making of the Constitution. Yet, amid all the scholarship on the topic, and across the patterns and trends in American historiography of the last seventy or so years, one particular dilemma continues to be seen as an unsolved issue in understanding the meaning and consequences of the Revolution. It is the allegedly paradoxical coexistence of the grand political vocabulary of liberty, equality, universal rights and sovereignty as coined and propagated by the America's Founding Fathers, and many instances of supposedly betraying these ideals by the same Founders in their private lives and in the functioning of public institutions they controlled, slavery being the most flagrant example. In the United States, the country that built its political and cultural identity around the sacred concepts of liberty, freedom, and equality, this apparent "flaw" must be particularly disconcerting. With such celebrated contributors to the historical debate on the nature of American liberty as Bernard Bailyn (1967; 2003), Gordon Wood (1991; 2009), Edmund Morgan (1988), what urged you and gave you the intellectual courage to challenge the existing interpretations?

MICHAL JAN ROZBICKI: The names you mention are indeed pillars of American colonial scholarship, venerable authors of canonical works from which both you and I have learned our fundamentals in this field. Wood and Bailyn are still active (and flocks of their former doctoral students populate the history departments at major universities across the USA). They are often labeled consensus historians because of their traditionalist, and not infrequently celebratory, presentations of the Founders, and because of their inclination to de-emphasize social conflict, presenting instead a society relatively unified around the ideas and values of the founding elites. There is also an equally substantial group of early American historians who call themselves progressive and contest the consensus scholarship by stressing class differences and the role of ordinary people. The former concentrate on the political and constitutional, and the latter on the socio-economic and the cultural. This division has long and deep roots, and the two camps march along two parallel paths that rarely cross. Their work is at times quite politicized, as both groups seek usable histories to make their arguments about the present.

Although the two schools have produced remarkably impressive scholarship and defined the field for several decades, it is becoming increasingly evident that they are both heading down a dead-end street. I see two main reasons for it. First, they are seriously burdened by presentism. They delight in "discovering"

their own ideas in the past. Instead of reconstructing what liberty meant to various groups of people, and how they used it in ways peculiar to the cultural and social order of their time, both groups tend to treat it as a kind of Hegelian, abstract, and timeless idea that floats across centuries. After all, Jefferson proclaimed equal liberty, and although he “betrayed” his proclamation by holding slaves, we supposedly still subscribe to the *same* ideal. Second, it is a rare author that clearly makes a distinction between cultural fictions and their real-life functions in social and political praxis. What often gets lost is that mentions of freedom in a sermon or a congressional speech were symbolic representations, not objective descriptions of reality. So was the very concept of Revolutionary liberty. In short, both schools, despite their deeply divergent conclusions, share the same flawed, anachronistic premise—that the meaning of Founders’ liberty talk already included equal rights for *all* classes of people. One of the groups makes the Founders more modern than they were, and the other laments that they did not live up to their political language.

As to your point about the audacity needed to question both schools, it was not so much courage as the excitement of coming up with an explanation of a persistent historiographical puzzle. Once one has absorbed the relevant sources and achieved a solid familiarity with the literature, questions about unresolved problems inevitably turn up. It is how one goes about answering them that makes a difference. I like to tell my students that the best position to find oneself in at that point is that of the boy in Hans Christian Andersen’s story, who, unburdened by the established, pre-reflexive assumptions of the crowd, easily identified the truth that was invisible to others—that the Emperor had no clothes.

For those scholars and students of early American history and culture who have not had a chance yet to read your book, could you summarize briefly its main goal and the assertions around which you built your argument?

Perhaps the most succinct way to explain my criticism of current Revolutionary historiography would be to try and picture, for a moment, how someone like Sławomir Mrożek or Woody Allen would have seen it through their glasses. Let’s visualize two groups of academics, with two disparate, *imagined* visions of the American Revolution, huddling in the opposite corners of the faculty lounge and not speaking to each other. The first cluster, known as Top Down Historians, believes that the Founders’ minds were 237 years ahead of their time in their belief in absolutely equal liberty, that every word they wrote was a timeless description of objective reality, unembellished by class interests, and that their greatest dream came true when Americans woke up on the morning of

July 5th, 1776, to find that centuries-old, deeply ingrained belief in hierarchies of social difference had vanished. Presumably, their joy would have also included relishing the logical consequence of such a dramatic shift—an instantaneous downfall from their positions of power and privilege. The second professorial faction, known as Bottom Up Historians, are convinced that the Founders lied to themselves with their democratic language, betrayed their own noble dream by holding on to power and wealth, and thus helped to *deny* the otherwise predestined freedoms to ordinary people for two more centuries. But not to worry, these scholars have rectified the unsavory situation by replacing the old Founders with new ones, consisting of the remaining 99.99% of colonial population called “the people,” who—237 years ahead of their time—all “stood for” a truly modern, inclusive, and egalitarian country that the old Founders neglected to create.

As you can see, some of my colleagues needed to be gently reminded that the Revolution took place well over two centuries ago. More seriously, my larger goal was to bridge the yawning gap between political and cultural histories of the era. The axis of my argument is a deeply historicized examination of the concept of liberty, not just as an ideological and constitutional notion, but also as the central metaphor of the age. Deconstructing the different meanings of that metaphor assigned to it by various social groups allowed me to separate the factual (practice) from the symbolic (rhetoric)—two spheres that are so often casually conflated in historiography—and to reflect on the relationship of culture and power. Ultimately, my aim was to resolve the perennial puzzle you mentioned earlier—that the Revolutionary era was a constitutional and rhetorical paean to equal freedom, while it preserved most of the existing unfreedoms.

To do so, I put forward two main theses. One is that the Founders and their contemporaries understood liberty as a privilege, not a universal right. For them it was a social relation between unequals. This may come as a shock to the present-minded but it should not surprise—this restricted meaning was deeply rooted in the preceding centuries, brought to America, and was not only *not* abandoned at the time of the Revolution but continued for the next two centuries until the civil rights legislation after World War II. In 1776, it was understood as a spectrum of immunities and entitlements that were accessible in different amounts to people according to their rank, with the widest privileges claimed by the upper elite. I note that even for Montesquieu there was an obvious difference between “the liberty of the people” (the right to do what the laws allowed) and “the power of the people” (reserved for the elite who had the qualifications to exercise authority on behalf of the people). A realization that this meaning of liberty was predominant among the Founders should put an end to the fruitless debate whether their ideas were egalitarian in a modern sense or not.

The other thesis relates to the ontology of liberty in this period. I suggest that we should not look at it as some sort of bounded and internally fixed entity, but as a complex amalgamation of political acts and symbolic representations used to construct the social relationship that liberty ultimately was. This enabled me to explain the crucial problem of how the extent of its meanings expanded to include new social groups between 1776 and 1800. It also allowed me to show the inaccuracy of the assumption—shared by so many in both historiographical schools as well as by much of the public in America today—that liberty is timeless and self-evident, rather than a man-made product of a specific time and place. To believe this is to assume that people are born with the concept of the Fourth Amendment or trial by jury, a view akin to believing that we are born with the concept of the cell phone. Liberties first had to be “invented,” codified, and implemented. The fact that Revolutionary sources extoll universal freedom does not mean that they describe social reality. They were used to fight political battles and articulate ideal models for the future.

Because the Founders deeply believed that they would “naturally” hold on to their rank as an “aristocracy of merit,” they produced an open-ended, universalistic narrative of equal liberty—not to disrupt the social order they dominated, but to validate the Revolution and attract political support. But if their vision of society was modeled on classical republics ruled by virtuous elites, their narrative of universal and equal rights was a gift of legitimacy to the ambitions of ordinary people. It soon became part of America’s common cultural capital, enabling various groups to employ it as a weapon in their demands for rights and inclusion. Shays’s Rebellion of 1786 in Massachusetts is a prominent example of this process—the insurgents utilized the entire vocabulary of *equal* liberty popularized by the Founders to frame their demands against the government of the new republic, now run by the Revolutionary leaders.

You can see why I cannot agree with the conclusions of Gordon Wood’s otherwise splendid studies that the Revolution brought radical change in the way everyone in America perceived freedom. Politicians can quickly modify the language of liberty, but its meanings, historically embedded in the culture, need a long time to evolve—because the culture that generates these meanings must evolve too, and that is not an overnight trip.

The book stirred an animated discussion in the top circles of early Americanists. The authorities in the field speak highly of your book. Trevor Burnard calls it “a major achievement” in the historical study of American liberty and finds your definition of it in the eighteenth-century “immensely helpful” (11). To Peter S. Onuf, your monograph reads like “a blast of fresh air in a stale, moribund field” (14),

and a “brilliant reconstruction of the history of liberty in Revolutionary America” (15). Allan Tully states that you succeeded in “what only a few early Americanists have done: ... [you have] created through carefully constructed historical analysis an argument that gives a credible coherence and direction to the long 18th century” (17). Paul A. Gilje compliments your “sweeping interpretive approach to the changing nature of liberty in the age of the American Revolution” (291). J. M. Opal finds your grasp of historical subjects “profound and often brilliant” (125), and Marc L. Harris has no doubt that your book “deserves a significant place in a rethinking of what the Revolution set in train” (183). What is it like to find oneself at the center of academic attention and be so well received by fellow-historians?

Having started a serious discussion is, of course, very rewarding. That is what we historians live for—spend long years in the archives to try to lift the veil of time, get a bit closer to the truth, and convince others that we have a case. On the other hand, proposing a new take on such hallowed subjects as the American Founding, simply cannot be a bed of roses. History is subject to the same mechanism of reluctant paradigm shifts—described so ably by Thomas Kuhn—as science. Established scholars, who had devoted their lives to promoting their research, have a genuine stake in preserving the status quo. Recall François Furet, who revised the reigning interpretation of the French Revolution by moving the focus from class-conflict to the populist conceptual framework that fuelled the progress of freedom *as well as* the Reign of Terror (and later, twentieth-century totalitarianisms). He desacralized an academic orthodoxy, and ended up being treated as a heretic. But he was right; one-size-fits-all methodological schemata, once consecrated by academia, inevitably become reductionist (and worse, boring). They certainly cannot capture the unruly and non-linear history of liberty.

Your interest in European and American constitutionalism is not a recent strand of your research work. As Director of the American Studies Centre at Warsaw University, already in 1987 you hosted an interdisciplinary international conference devoted to the origins and consequences of three eighteenth-century constitutions, American, Polish, and French; you also edited a volume of the conference essays (European and American Constitutionalism). Your first major book published in the US, The Complete Colonial Gentleman (1998), was a cultural study of the colonial plantation elites in which you argued that the growth of their American class identity and aspirations foreshadowed democratic developments in the Revolutionary period. Culture and Liberty seems a culmination of the “revolutionary” themes in your research. Are you currently working on another cultural history project in the field?

I have been working for some time now on a study tentatively called “Provincialism and the Trans-National Gentry Ethos in Early Modern British America and Poland,” a comparative analysis of how the canon of public virtues was used to reproduce and maintain political power in both societies. I am hoping to show how these shared, symbolic representations had political utility among such otherwise distinct groups as colonial American planters and Polish provincial *szlachta*.

One might say that your academic background is both interdisciplinary and inter-continental. Born and bred in Poland, you went to a high school in Colombo, Sri Lanka, you studied English at Warsaw University and got your PhD from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin for a study on Samuel Hartlib. Your transition from English studies to American cultural history happened in the course of working on your Habilitationsschrift, Transformation of English Cultural Ethos in Colonial America: Maryland, 1634–1720. Since 1990 you have lived permanently in the US and taught colonial history at an American university. This combination of disciplinary perspectives and different intellectual experiences in various institutional contexts was bound to produce a cross-cultural scholarly personality. Also, when reading Culture and Liberty, I registered with satisfaction references to Polish authors: Zygmunt Bauman, Leszek Kołakowski, Antoni Mączak, Wojciech Wrzosek and Adam Zamoyski. In what way were their works useful for the construction of your argument? More generally, what do you consider your most precious Polish/European intellectual inheritance, and what are the best things you acquired from American academia?

The older I get, the more grateful I am for the solid liberal arts education I received at the Department of English Studies at Warsaw University. My American students would be surprised to hear that most of the *undergraduate* classes I took were conducted in English (a *foreign* language we students had to be fluent in even to be admitted), and that I was required to be intimately familiar with long reading lists in the classics of literature from ancient Greece to modern France, apart from the canon of English and American literature, not to mention Old and Middle English, Latin, and other foreign languages. In addition, there were many world class professors at the university who inspire me up to this day, to mention only Leszek Kołakowski and Zygmunt Bauman, as well as a number of magnificent historians. I hold dear Kołakowski’s reflections on the relation between relativism and certainty (especially the role of tensions between them as drivers of intellectual activity in history), and on the “happy” incompatibility of the various components of culture. Bauman’s dazzling sociological study of freedom opened my eyes to many new problems. Antoni Mączak’s elegant study on the

relations between the governing and the governed in early modern Europe has few equals up to this day.

Academically speaking, the experience of life in Poland before 1989 taught me three priceless things: skepticism toward established authority and all forms of political correctness, a sense of humor and irony (indispensable in maintaining epistemological self-awareness), and an abiding respect for the fragility of liberty, which is never a given.

As to American academia, it is changing but two things remain very impressive: a high degree of professionalism (for instance in faculty evaluations, peer reviews for publication, editorial decisions by research journals, etc.), and serious competitiveness in the academic marketplace—both attributes that challenge faculty to demand ever more from themselves.

Your youngest brainchild is the Center for Intercultural Studies at Saint Louis University. You created it for systematic research on the interactions between different cultures. Does it signal your departure from the cultural history of early America, or is it only an addition to it in response to the challenges posed by contemporary globalization processes?

It was a natural outcome of my interests. While editing a book of essays on cross-cultural history published last year, I realized that scholars in many disciplines increasingly deal with interculturality but have few methodological tools to deal with it. If they do have any, they almost always come from within the narrow boundaries of their fields. The intercultural is a rather elusive phenomenon that occurs in the space between two or more distinct cultures that encounter each other and negotiate reciprocal relationships. Studying it without proper theory is like sailing a ship without sails. By its very nature, it can only be explained with the help of various interdisciplinary methods. I founded the Center—and my university embraced the idea—to create a home for scholars of interculturality seeking new ways and new theoretical tools to do their work. As Greg Denning of the Melbourne School of history once observed, the historian gives voice to the dead, and the interculturalist gives voice to the Other. In so many ways, their work and their tools are alike.

May it give you as much satisfaction as your other academic pursuits. Thank you.

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