

On English Culture and the American Frontier's Influence on Bacon's Rebellion

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Introduction

In the American narrative of our history, we tend to represent ourselves as overcoming tyranny in favor of liberty and justice. We point to different struggles in our history, such as the world's "liberation" from the "axis of evil" in the world wars and our overcoming of slavery in the Civil War. Most popularly, we recall the Revolutionary War, in which our founders fought the British Empire for independence.

Indeed, while Americans have a sense of nostalgia for its past, it's easy to forget that the founders also had a sense of nostalgia. They created their country modeled on the (perhaps imagined) republican glory of the Roman Empire. They pointed to the theoretical philosophy of Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers and historical evidence that their revolution would be possible. Specifically, they referenced a Virginian rebellion that coincidentally occurred 100 years before the American Revolution.

Named after its leader Nathaniel Bacon, the founders saw Bacon's Rebellion as an early attempt for the colonies to gain freedom from their British oppressors. One can see this in an anecdote attached to Thomas Mathew's *The Beginning, Progress, and Conclusion of Bacon's Rebellion*, an account whose original manuscript was owned by then-president Thomas Jefferson (Mathew, iv). Indeed, this anecdote claims that Bacon should be regarded as a patriot (Mathew, 1897, p.iv) but falls into the historical pitfall of interpretation.

To understand exactly what Bacon was trying to achieve, and indeed, why the rebellion occurred, one must examine the environment in which the 17th-century Virginian colonists lived. To do this, this essay will use Brent Tarter's *Bacon's Rebellion, the Grievances of the People, and the Political Culture of Seventeenth-Century Virginia* to examine colonial society and James

D. Rice's *Bacon's Rebellion in Indian Country* to understand the role of Indigenous peoples in the conflict. This work shall utilize Mathew's account to relay the events of the rebellion and use James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* and Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits* to analyze the anthropological impacts of Bacon's rebellion. Ultimately it will be clear that while Bacon's Rebellion derives from various problems endemic to English colonial society, circumstances on the colonial frontier resulted in a unique kind of insurgency,

Colonial Society

Life in the Virginia Colony, like in England, was dominated by a class system. At the very top sat Governor Berkley, and the General Assembly. They were appointed by the English crown, like the nobility system in England, and delegated the governance of daily life to county commissioners, local judges, and church parishes (Tarter, 2011, p.9). Essentially, major decisions were made by an extension of the crown, but in 1643 Governor Berkley changed this; he made the General Assembly's legislature bicameral (Tarter, 2011, p.9). The new house in the assembly called the House of Burgesses, was comprised of elected local Virginian tobacco plantation owners. For the first time local Virginians were given more self-governance, but following English law, only gave landowners the right to vote (Tarter, 2011, p.10). As most colonists were landless indentured servants, The House of Burgess represented the interests of the wealthy planter class. Now being at the forefront of policymaking, they were able to manipulate the state to the advantage of their class.

Tarter describes how the House of Burgess earned the ire of the people; Foremost were complaints about local taxes, specifically, their high cost and unequal benefit toward the planter class (Tarter, 2011, p.16). Most complaints singled out the county poll tax, a fixed levy of pounds of tobacco per person based on members in a household (Tarter, 2011, p.16). Virginians claimed,

“Whereas ther are some great persons both in honor, rich in estat and have several ways of gaines and profits are exempted from paying Leavies and the poorest inhabitant being compelld to pay the great taxes which wee are burdened with having a hogshead or two of tobacco to pay for rent and near two hundred yearly for leavies having a wife and two or three children to maintain whether our taxes are not the greater by such favour and privileges granted them which wee desire to be safe of by their paying of Leaies as well as wee they having noe necessitie from being soe exempted.” (Tarter, 2011, p.17). The poor were resentful of an effectively untaxed upper class and proposed a fairer method of taxation based on land ownership (Tarter, 2011, p.17). This would have hurt the elite, whose wealth was based on property, but fortunately for them, the landless lower classes had no political means of change.

Taxation without representation unsurprisingly breeds discontent, but what the Virginian government was doing with the money further incensed colonists. The king had granted land to court favorites, causing Berkley to purchase large swaths in the north for aristocrats, as well as the construction of a fort at the mouth of the James River. (Tarter, 2011, p.11). Furthermore, the House of Burgess afforded themselves large “per diem” allowances and high tavern bills (Tarter, 2011, p.11), as well as a large plantation for Governor Berkley and his secretary (Tarter, 2011, p.15). All of this was at the expense of the local taxpayers, who not only felt overtaxed but upset that their taxes had little to no impact on the public good. Indeed, corruption plagued the Virginian government, and this caused a general attitude of contempt among the classes.

In the peasantry, men rallied around the term *Commonality* to distinguish themselves from the privileged plantation owners. (Tarter, 2011, p.22). Although a late medieval term, it resurfaced during the English Civil War, serving as a way for the parliamentary forces of Cromwell to identify themselves against the landed nobility (Tarter, 2011, p.22). Intriguingly, the

term disappeared in England around the time it came to Virginia, roughly the 1670s; we see its use in the written grievances against county governments (Tarter, 2011, p.22). Through it, emerges a combative tone modeled on the class conflict of the English Civil War. Indeed, peasants were very class-conscious and framed their classism as an us vs them struggle.

From the evidence presented, Virginia had all of the right conditions for revolt. Tarter gives us examples of taxation without representation, corruption, and class factionalism. All these conditions have historically caused rebellion; One only must look at the American Revolution, which took place in the same area 100 years later and erupted due to similar tax grievances. Still, these factors alone didn't trigger insurgency in the Virginia colony. Tarter states that even with its flaws, Virginia was still the king's most prosperous colony. (Tarter, 2011, p.9) For the most part, the colony operated smoothly and avoided the turmoil of the English Civil Wars (Tarter, 2011, p.10). Furthermore, the land tax paid to the crown and customs charges for parliament were virtually unopposed by colonists (Tarter, 2011, p.16). Indeed, the tension in colonial Virginian was local. It was present, yet society was stable; This begs the question, what changed in 1676 that allowed Bacon's Rebellion to erupt? To answer this, one must examine the other power players in the region: the tribal nations.

Conflict with the Susquehannock

Central to the story of Bacon's rebellion is the Susquehannock tribe, an Indigenous group native to the Susquehanna River region of Pennsylvania. Their role began roughly 100 years before the rebellion, which, like many tribes in the region, came into conflict with the developing Iroquois League (Rice, 2014, p.731). Indeed, constant warfare with the much larger and stronger confederation forced the Susquehannock south, who by 1610 had taken refuge in the northern Chesapeake region of Maryland (Rice, 2014, p.732).

One must remember that during this time, Europeans were not yet the dominant imperial powers, but rather, smaller players in much larger regional conflicts. Newly established Virginia was forced to pick a side in Indigenous affairs; It needed diplomatic relations with native peoples to survive. Virginia allied with the Susquehannock tribe and used their warriors to fight proxy wars over territorial disputes (Rice, 2014, p.733). This bled the Susquehannock's manpower though; The Iroquois still loomed over their northern flank, and while Rice states the Susquehannock found early victories in the 1660s, by 1673 the Iroquois had "utterly defeated" them. Their numbers were reduced to three hundred warriors (Rice, 2014, p.733), and once again, the Susquehannock were forced to move south. Their new home, located at today's Mt. Vernon, was located on Virginia's border (Rice, 2014, p.733). This stirred discontent with the colonists. Rumors spread of the Susquehannock murdering locals, and while likely false, instilled fear in locals (Rice, 2014, p.733).

By 1676, an air of tension existed between British colonists and the Indigenous peoples. Berkley's purchase of land in the north put settlers in increasingly close contact with the natives. News of King Philip's War, a deadly conflict between New England colonists and natives, had also begun circulating in the southern colonies (Tarter, 2011, p.11). Furthermore, Mathew describes a series of bad omens from the year before, a comet, and pigeon sightings, reminding planters of a massacre committed by natives 30 years prior (Mathew, 1897, p.1). Whether imagined, exaggerated, or real, conditions on the frontier seemed foreboding. Fear and suspicion plagued the two groups, with the region sitting on the precipice of explosion.

Bacon's Rebellion

In Mathew's account of Bacon's Rebellion, he describes the social meltdown in Virginia starting with a mistake. A group of Doeg natives killed some tenant farmers, and in retaliation,

the local militia tracked and killed 10 natives (Mathew, 1897, p.2). Mistakenly, the militia attacked a Susquehannock cabin instead of the Doegs (Mathew, 1897, p.2). Rice highlights the Susquehannock dilemma: they could not risk angering their Virginian allies but needed to avenge their people. They chose to kill two Virginians and destroy crops, then sought peace with the Virginian government (Rice, 2014, p.734).

Virginia did not accept the offer though. Mathew states that Virginia raised a thousand-man army to confront the Susquehannock at their settlement (Mathew, 1897, p.4). They besieged the settlement, though losing significantly more men than the Susquehannock, until they were able to starve the indigenous peoples out (Mathew, 1897, p.4.) The Susquehannock escaped and fled south, causing colonists to retreat into English forts and large plantations (Mathew, 1897, p.4). Although Mathew claims the Susquehannock did very little damage to the property of the colonists on their move south, the damage was already done. Mass hysteria broke out in Virginia.

Colonists sent pleas to Governor Berkley for assistance in repelling the native invaders, which Mathews says were answered with “promises of assistance” (Mathew, 1897, p.4). Indeed, governmental inaction forced colonists to find someone who would protect them, turning many people towards Nathaniel Bacon.

Mathew introduces Bacon a young aristocrat connected to English nobility. (Mathew, 1897, p.22). A recent immigrant to the colonies, Bacon sought power in the new world; to get it, he played on popular discontent (Mathew, 1897, p.22). Likely wanting to replace Berkley, Bacon released the *Declaration of the People against Sir William Berkley*, in which he criticized Virginia’s taxes as unjust and corrupt, and that this corruption left Virginia defenseless against the native invaders (Tarter, 2011, p.28). Bacon directly acknowledged the grievances of the peasantry, going as far as signing the document as “General, by consent of the people” (Tarter,

2011, p.22), but more importantly, he was the lone figure claiming to protect them from their greatest fear.

Mathew tells us Bacon advocated for direct and severe military action against all native peoples, and controversially, marched against the Susquehannock, but also allied Occaneechi tribes without the consent of the government (Mathew, 1897, p.5). Superseding the government's authority, Governor Berkley wrote a warrant for Bacon's arrest, raising a militia to stop the vigilante (Mathew, 1897, p.11). Upon hearing this, Mathew says Bacon marched upon Jamestown to confront Berkley (Mathew, 1897, p.12). Brandishing his weapon he said, "No, may it please your honor, we will not hurt a hair of your head nor of any other man's; we are come for a commission to save our lives from the Indians, which you have so often promised, and now we will have it before we go." (Mathew, 1897, p.12).

While the colonial government officially gave Bacon a commission, they did so at gunpoint. When Bacon returned to his frontier campaigns, Berkley raised an army to stop him (Mathew, 1897, p.17). Bacon caught wind of this, returning to Jamestown, but this time, burning the city. (Mathew, 1897, p.17). Berkley and the Burgess fled into the countryside (Mathew, 1897, p.17).

With the colonial government in hiding, Bacon embarked upon his last campaign. In a great irony, he had very little success: Mathew claims he found "no Indians" and died of indigenous "pawawing" magic (Mathew, 1897, p.19). Without the leadership of Bacon, the rebellion fizzled out. English troops landed on the James River to stabilize the territory, and after executing some of Bacon's generals, Berkley resumed his post as governor (Mathew, 1897, p.20)

Anthropological Analysis

From the evidence presented, while it seems apparent that English classism brooded resentment in the colony, it was conflict with the Susquehanock that pushed colonists into Bacon's arms. One can analyze this using the framework proposed in James Scott's *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, in which he describes subsistence farming. Taking place in Southeast Asia, Scott describes peasants living at the bare minimum, a "danger zone" that risks starvation without meeting this threshold (Scott, 1976, p.13). For the peasant survival is everything, and he claims that insecure poverty is the worst of all (Scott, 1976, p.34). Indeed, because of this, peasants will often do unadvantageous things, such as becoming tenant farmers, to guarantee security and avoid risk (Scott, 1976, p.37). Indeed, Scott discusses the many kinds of injustices peasants are willing to take to guarantee subsistence, but in the seventh chapter, he discusses what makes them rebel. Ecological vulnerability (Scott, 1976, p.197), hostile capitalist markets, (Scott, 1976, p.198), or monochrome failures (Scott, 1976, p.200), all contribute to rebellion, but in each case, it returns to the general idea of subsistence. Peasants act when insecure circumstances risk putting them below the line of survival.

While not about resources, which is the primary focus of Scott's subsistence, we can see this occur in the Virginia territory. Indeed, peasants were certainly exploited by the aristocracy but still lived above the line of survival in an extremely successful colony. They were upset by high taxes, but it must be remembered that they willingly still paid taxes to the king. Indeed, peasant gripes with poverty were that they were isolated and abandoned by the local aristocracy. Taxes disproportionately affected them and the self-serving nature of aristocratic corruption, combined with an inability to vote disenfranchised them. Still, a socially unequal society is not the same as an insecure society.

What put Virginians below the line of survival was the arrival of the Susquehannock. The omens described by Mathew demonstrate a form of paranoid collective consciousness; Colonists were still relatively weak compared to the vast wilderness and warlike tribes that inherited them. As Scott describes, peasants fear insecure poverty, and Virginian peasants sat in a very exposed and insecure position in the American frontier. Fear of Indigenous peoples is the resulting reflection of this. It, therefore, is no surprise that false rumors spread about murders. As the tribe increasingly encroached on colonists, it did not matter what the native peoples did, but rather English insecurity and anxiety that started to dictate action.

While it is true that paranoia and fantasy often clouded colonial judgment, it cannot be understated that the Susquehannock were an objectively formidable force. Unlike previous Indigenous peoples the English skirmished with, the Susquehannock were battle-hardened from many years of war with the Iroquois; they were also desperate and displaced nomads. They had nothing left to lose. Indeed, these natives were more terrifying than tribes before, and by the time colonists were forced to flee into forts, colonists would have legitimately seen the conflict as an existential threat of annihilation.

Colonists could put up with political neglect, but a full-scale invasion was too much. A lack of physical safety put peasants under the line of subsistence, and with the colonial government's refusal to deal with the situation, they were given no other option but to take matters into their own hands. Indeed, the insurgency Bacon was able to conjure was less of a political revolution targeted towards political change, but a panicked reaction to external circumstances.

Indeed, we can see this is a reaction as the conflict doesn't have the typical attributes of a "rebellion". As previously stated, colonists had no qualms with paying taxes to the King and Parliament; They recognized British authority and never questioned their right to rule. Even during the rebellion itself, very little of the violence was directed towards Berkley and the Burgess. While Bacon may have wanted to overthrow Berkley, he framed his actions as doing the job of the state, which was to protect colonists from the natives. Even after banishing Berkley and burning Jamestown, Bacon did not try to become a dictator but rather returned to the frontier to fight the natives. Furthermore, after the rebellion ended, Virginia's government resumed similarly to before the rebellion. Berkley returned to his post as governor and the Burgess remained in power. Aside from the loss of the capital city of Jamestown, Bacon's Rebellion didn't conclude with any kind of "overthrow" of power.

In this way, Bacon's rebellion was the peasantry's response to being put under the subsistence threshold. Internal strife underlined it, but the peasantry's goal wasn't to change the system, but rather get above the subsistence threshold by riding the colony of its indigenous peoples. Because of this, it is more useful to look at Bacon and his followers less as rebels, but more as Bandits.

In Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits*, he claims that bandits are a symptom of crisis and tension in society. (Hobsbawm, 1969, p.20). Bacon himself is a perfect example of this, as his rise to power was made possible through tension between the peasantry and aristocracy, and peasantry and Indigenous peoples. In a sense, Bacon was the form of self-help that Hobsbawm claims people use to escape circumstances (Hobsbawm, 1969, p.20). From the peasantry's perspective, Bacon brought a voice to the deep inequality that plagued their lives. They had no platform to express their resentment, meaning Bacon as the bandit represented a leader and figurehead for a

people abandoned by their aristocratic leaders. Indeed, Hobsbawm describes bandits as avengers of the poor (Hobsbawm, 1969, p.58), and for poor colonists, Bacon represents the “Noble Robber” archetype.

According to Hobsbawm, the “Noble Robber” is a bringer of justice and equality, beginning his journey as a victim of injustice and for being persecuted by the authorities for something moral. (Hobsbawm, 1969, p.34). He “takes from the rich and gives from the poor”, never kills but in self-defense, and is not the enemy of the king, but rather the aristocracy (Hobsbawm, 1969, p.34). Comparing this description to Bacon, one can see similarities from the peasant’s perspective. Bacon justifies his campaign with the injustice of the government and is persecuted for trying to get revenge on the natives. He takes political power from the rich and gives it to the poor by giving them military agency and frames his campaigns as self-defense. Lastly, Bacon didn’t appear to challenge the authority of the King or power structure, but rather, justified his actions through a commission. Indeed, Bacon escaped the classism that dominated colonial society but gained legitimacy not by rebelling against the system but by undertaking its task of protecting its citizens.

Bacon is not a purely innocent “Noble Robber” though. His indiscriminate persecution of both Susquehannock and Occaneechi demonstrates he had no problem with using dishonorable means to reach his ends. Furthermore, Bacon used the burning of Jamestown as a form of terrorism; While he attempted to get a legitimate commission, it was a message to the colonial government that he would act regardless of their authority. Hobsbawm tells us that moderation in violence was essential to the image of the bandit (Hobsbawm, 1969, p.50), and Bacon was on the knife edge of what was appropriate. While executing indigenous peoples was permissible, Bacon would have lost support had he slaughtered Englishmen. Bacon therefore returned to the frontier

after the burning of Jamestown, and from this, we see that Bacon wasn't trying to start a class revolution, but rather, engage in warfare with the native peoples.

Conclusion

By examining the factors underlying Bacon's Rebellion, it seems evident that Bacon's rebellion is not the same kind of conflict the Founding Fathers were engaged in. While the effect of classism was less in the 1770s, it was very much present in early Virginia. 18th-century patriots were free men and used to a century of self-rule; They were upset with the monarchy exerting control on their self-determination. Bacon's peasantry had no such rights. As a population of indentured servants without the right to vote, they lived under the yoke of an overbearing local aristocracy. Living without self-determination and exploitation certainly angered peasants, but their job first and foremost was to survive. While ideology permeated the American Revolution, Bacon's Rebellion was a backlash generated by the fear of obliteration by indigenous peoples. In this way, Bacon wasn't a freedom fighter for Democracy, but rather the bandit figurehead of social unrest.

Revisionist history is often controversial, but in this case, it seems apparent the founders erroneously imposed their values onto the world of 17th-century Virginia. Indeed, this discussion of Bacon's Rebellion is relevant because, in contemporary society, we often make the same mistake. As previously stated in the introduction, we tell a certain narrative about our history, and many Americans attribute the Virginia colony to the first Americans. From the evidence presented in this paper, one can challenge this. Virginians lived in a definitively English society with English grievances. They had unique reasons for rising against the colonial government, but never challenged English authority or the social mechanisms of their society.

The America of today is a multicultural society with values influenced by a variety of historical and international sources. It seems inaccurate to derive all sense of “Americanness” or “Liberty” from originating in this small colony, but rather, we can consider it a smaller piece of the English colonial world that would one day transform into the United States of today.

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