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The Destruction of Property and the Radical Nature of the Boston Tea Party

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Recommended Citation

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Holly Nehls

History Thesis

4/26/16

“The Destruction of Property and the Radical Nature of the Boston Tea Party”

On a cold and wet winter night in December 1773, around two thousand Bostonians gathered at Griffin's Warf to witness one of the most memorable events in pre-war colonial America. Ninety-two thousand pounds of tea were destroyed in the event that came to be known as the Boston Tea Party. John Rowe, the owner of one of the ships that carried the tea across the Atlantic to Boston, was ill on the night of the destruction of tea, or so he wrote in his diary. Rowe was a merchant who engaged in smuggling and protested restrictions on trade in the colonies. He was cited as a leader in the Stamp Act riots that destroyed a large amount of property a decade before the Tea Party. While Rowe most likely did not participate in the Tea Party, he was still angry. His diary suggests it was not another Boston riot; it was radical. Two days after the event, Rowe penned in his diary, "The affair of Destroying the Tea makes Great Noise in the Town. Tis a Disastrous Affair & some People are much Alarmed."¹ People were talking about what had occurred on the evening of December 16. In fact, the conversations caused some people to even become afraid of what may come as a result. Parliament was almost certain to enact harsh punishments on Boston and force the colonists to pay for the destroyed tea. The colonists feared the wrath of Parliament as much as they feared another Boston Massacre.

The Boston Tea Party has been well studied. It is recognized as one of the most critical events in the years before the Revolutionary War.² Historians, however, do not

¹ Rowe, John, and Anne Rowe Cunningham. *Letters and Diary of John Rowe*. [New York: New York times, 1969], 258.

² "All in all, the tea action was the most revolutionary act of the decade in Boston." Young, Alfred F. *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*. Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1999, 101.

always agree on precisely how the destruction of tea should be remembered. Historians debate how to define a riot, rebellion, or protest, and categorize said events into conservative or radical conflicts. Some historians do not explicitly state their opinion on whether the Boston Tea Party is radical or conservative, but the details they provide pertaining to the event, the tone they use, and word choice provides insight into their views.

Some historians view the December 16 destruction of tea as a more conservative approach to expressing grievances against Parliament's taxation laws. The Boston Tea Party was not the only riot to result in the destruction of property. Significant amounts of private property were destroyed in various riots often led by the Sons of Liberty.³ While the Sons of Liberty did lead the Boston Tea Party, the participants included persons from many walks of life and from different geographical regions, which distinguishes this event from other riots. Masons, businessmen, merchants, artisans of various types, apprentices, and persons of other occupations were involved. A group of seventeen men known as The Lebanon Club traveled from Maine for the primary purpose of destroying the tea.⁴ While many participants and viewers did not know of the plans to destroy the tea prior to the commencement of the act, the group from Maine points to the fact that the destruction was well planned. Therefore, even if the Stamp Act riots destroyed more property in terms of expense and variety, the Boston Tea Party was more purposeful and

³ Gary Nash writes on the Stamp Act riots, "in pillaging the Boston mansions of Oliver and Hutchinson, and in storming the houses of William Story and Benjamin Hallowell...[this was] the most ferocious attack on private property in the history of the English colonies." Nash, Gary B. *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, 294.

⁴ Labaree, Benjamin Woods. *The Boston Tea Party*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, 144.

widespread in its impact. The Bohea tea destroyers had one goal, to destroy the detested tea subject to the Townsend Act, and the result affected many American colonies and social classes.

On the other hand, there were ways in which the Boston Tea Party was not a riot, or a rebellion. Some historians argue that it did have a major and influencing impact, but the purpose was to start “political mobilization.”⁵ The Patriots viewed Parliament’s actions as tyrannous. They wanted to change the system and the Boston Tea Party led to full revolt. It mobilized Patriots across the American colonies to act against a form of government that they considered oppressive. Rebellion often occurs as a desire for political change. Referring to the Tea Party as an “act of political mobilization” and denying that it was a rebellion seems contradictory.

Therefore, the Boston Tea Party was a radical riot.⁶ Some historians cite the initial shock of the participants to the destruction of private property. Why would the Patriots be so shocked and working hard to justify their actions if it was not radical?⁷ Many historians are certain to point out the Boston Tea Party’s significance and the impact it

⁵ Benjamin Carp states, “The Boston Tea Party wasn’t a rebellion, or even a protest against the king—but it set in motion a series of events that led to open revolt against the British Crown. The destruction of the tea, which became known as ‘The Boston Tea party’ fifty years later, was a bold, defiant act of political mobilization...The Tea Party was an expression of political ideology about taxes, rights, and authority.” Carp regularly refers to the Boston Tea party as nonviolent. He recognizes it as historically important, both for the time and today. His assertions that it was nonviolent and not a riot, however, place him in the category of conservative historians. Carp, Benjamin L. *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010.

⁶ Alfred Young states that the Revolution was radical, but it cannot be determined how radical it was. Young, Alfred F. *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution*. Edited by Harvey J. Kaye. New York: New York University Press, 2006, 249; Paul Gilje asserts that it was a radical riot, even with a nice name like the “Boston Tea Party.” Gilje, Paul A. *Rioting in America*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996.

⁷ Benjamin Labaree writes, “The patriots for their part made every effort to justify the violence which may have surprised some of them as well.” Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party*, 147.

had on affairs then and its impact throughout history. Some scholars view it as radical because of the very nature of the event. It was violent, it was revolutionary, it turned things upside down and it was the event that brought all pre-war incidents together and began the American Revolution.⁸

In order to argue that the Boston Tea Party was radical, the term radical needs to be defined. I define radical as subversive and will use that understanding throughout the paper. The act of destroying private property was subversive. The behavior of the participants in the Boston Tea Party was radical.

This paper seeks to prove that the Boston Tea Party was indeed radical. Four points related to the destruction of property provide evidence for this assertion. First, the reactions of both Patriots and Loyalists show that it was considered radical in that time. People were shocked and became fearful due to the actions. Second, private property was important in the eighteenth century, so a large-scale destruction of property was appalling. Private property was considered a right that should be protected by government. Third, it was not an act of civil disobedience because of the property destruction. The destruction of property was violent, while civil disobedience promotes nonviolent political action. Finally, for many participants, mob mentality was present, particularly amongst the apprentices of tory masters as well as amongst merchants, resulting in the destruction of property that was not originally intended by some participants.

⁸ Alfred Young writes, "It was the largest mass action of the decade...It was a quasi-military action, the boldest and most dangerous in Boston up to that time...All in all, the tea action was the most revolutionary act of the decade in Boston...The tea action was the most carnivalesque event of the era." Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 101.

Prior to 1773, the British East India Company was required to ship its tea to London where the Townsend Act duty was placed before it could ship to the American colonies. However, this did not stop the tea from making its way to the American colonies illegally as merchants smuggled the tea into the colonies and sold it for a profit. The British East India Company eventually fell into financial troubles and also held a surplus of tea in London. Parliament therefore devised the Tea Act of 1773, in which the East India Company would be allowed to sell their tea directly to the colonies without first having to pay taxes in London. Parliament also hoped to combat the smuggling issue. The theory was that the East India Company would save money by shipping directly to America, which meant they would be able to sell the tea for a lower cost than smuggled tea, thereby encouraging colonists to purchase legitimately. Rather than using merchants, however, the governors of the colonies would choose a set of consignees who would arrange for the sale of the tea. This infuriated many in the colonies. Parliament had created a monopoly over tea and upset the hierarchy of merchants on the Boston waterfront.⁹ People were nervous that Parliament might create monopolies over other industries.

Parliament did not anticipate the unifying force of the 1773 Tea Act amongst the colonists. An anonymous letter to Lord Dartmouth, chairman of the East India Company

⁹ Carp, Benjamin L. *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

in London, read, “If the Company ever expects to sell any tea in America they must use all their influence to get this Tea Act repealed, otherwise they will never sell one ounce...The people will risk life and fortune in this affair; the very being of America depends on it...The Americans will not swallow cheap tea, which has a poison in the heart of it; they see the hook through the bait.”¹⁰ Parliament refused to listen to such notions, believing they were in the right and that the colonists would eventually come around to the idea. Rather than give in to Parliament’s wishes, Patriot colonists worked to prevent the British East India Company tea from reaching the American land. If the Patriots gave in and accepted the taxes, they would show that Parliament does have the right to tax without representation. In Boston, the tea would be allowed to remain on board the ships until December 17, 1773, before it would be forced off, the tax paid, and the tea sold in auction. The Patriots asked to send the three ships back to England, but Governor Thomas Hutchinson refused each time. With the ships unable to return across the Atlantic and the tea not to come onto land in order to boycott the tax, the only solution that remained to the Patriots was to sink the tea. On December 16, around a hundred men dressed in disguises resembling Mohawk Indians boarded the *Dartmouth*, the *Eleanor*, and the *Beaver* and proceeded to destroy all 342 chests of British East India Company tea.

The Governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, was outraged over the destruction of tea. As governor of a colony, Hutchinson assigned the consignees for the British East India Company tea that arrived in Boston. Hutchinson chose two of his sons

¹⁰ Roberts, Richard Arthur. *Calendar of Home Office Papers of the Reign of George III*. Vol. 4. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1899, 172.

as consignees, who together were promised one-third of the tea. The Boston Tea Party attacked both Hutchinson's political and business interests. Hutchinson was furious that the Patriots were able to come together and directly oppose his orders. The colonists undermined his authority. Power was now in the hands of the people, which put Hutchinson in a dangerous position. Hutchinson wrote, "There never was greater tyranny in Constantinople than has been lately in Boston."¹¹ Constantinople was once the gem of Western civilization. The city was one of the richest in the Western world and was critical to the Roman Empire. Constantinople was founded by Constantine the Great, notable amongst Christians for his conversion to Christianity and support of the Church throughout the Empire. The great Christian city eventually fell to Muslim Turks. The Protestant Hutchinson looked at Constantinople with contempt. Accusing the Boston Tea Party participants of engaging in more tyranny than the Muslims in Constantinople was a significant insult.

Muslims were not the only group that Hutchinson used as a comparison to the Tea Party participants. Hutchinson wrote, "Such barbarity none of the Aborigines were ever guilty of."¹² Hutchinson was very familiar with the relations between the Native Americans and the British colonists. The French and Indian War had occurred just a decade prior to the Boston Tea Party. The colonists and British often cruelly called the Native Americans savage and uncivilized. The British criticized the Native's attacks on property and overall destruction towards the colonists. Like the Muslim Turks, Hutchinson compared the destroyers of tea to another group that clashed with his

¹¹ "Thomas Hutchinson, the Last Royal Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay." In *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*. Vol. VII. Ottawa: James Hope & Son, 1901, 70.

¹² *Ibid*, 71.

ethnocentric views. To Hutchinson, out of every “savage” act the Natives committed he thinks this destruction of tea was far worse. His criticisms also highlight the participants’ dress. They donned costumes resembling the nearby Mohawk Indians, darkened their faces with soot, and spoke in grunts and war whoops. In addition to concealing their individual identities, the colonists showed they were enemies of England with their costumes. Hutchinson threw it back to them and said that not even the enemies of England were as barbarous as the Patriots. Hutchinson created strong insults towards the colonists by using his crude statements on Muslims and Native Americans. As a governor approved by King George III himself, Hutchinson’s reaction was on public display. The affair occurred as a direct result of his decisions. His reaction to the Boston Tea Party and his opinion of the affairs mattered.

While there were people who were upset over the destruction of tea, it was not the only perspective. John Adams was a prominent Patriot in Boston. He was a well-known lawyer, famous for representing the British troops after the Boston Massacre, and rising politician. He was also the cousin of the Boston Tea Party instigator, Samuel Adams. John Adams was not present in Boston on December 16, but he was familiar with the affairs surrounding the dutied tea and learned of the details regarding its destruction. Adams recognized the radical nature of the event and the possible future implications. He wrote on December 17, “This however is but an Attack upon Property. Another similar Exertion of popular Power, may produce the destruction of Lives. Many Persons wish, that as many dead Carcasses were floating in the Harbour, as there are Chests of Tea: -- a

much less Number of Lives however would remove the Causes of all our Calamities.”¹³

While the destruction of property was a major event, Adams explained that there was the very real possibility of the destruction of lives. This was serious. The people were so upset that they actually wished death on others. The people felt that Parliament was not giving them the rights that they deserved. As retaliation, they acted against the right to property and in their hearts acted against the right to life. While not promoting violence against persons, Adams does admit that a few deaths would relieve the Patriots of their problems. As the years edge towards war, a violent mindset is becoming more apparent in Boston.

The Boston Tea Party has become a symbol of nonviolent protest. The Tea Party is often cited as a historical moment of civil disobedience.¹⁴ While there is evidence to paint the Boston Tea Party as an act of civil disobedience, I argue that it was not. It was a riot, and illegal.

Historian Benjamin Carp writes, “Throughout history, and today, the Boston Tea Party has given off mixed signals. In part because it involved so little bloodshed (no one died at the Boston Tea Party), it became a formative expression of liberty, independence, and civil disobedience, representing the finest human tradition of non-violent resistance

¹³ John Adams diary 19, 16 December 1772 - 18 December 1773 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

¹⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. famously cited the Boston Tea Party in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in 1963. Dr. King wrote, “Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience...In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.” “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Martin Luther King, Jr. to Fellow Clergymen. April 16, 1963. Birmingham City Jail, Birmingham, Alabama.

to tyranny.”¹⁵ The problem with this argument is that the destruction of tea was violent. Violence is not limited to the destruction of lives. Violence can include the destruction of property. A significant amount of property was destroyed, so it was violent. As previously discussed, John Adams wrote that many people wished for the deaths of their oppressors. As Adams pointed out, there was hatred in the hearts of the people. They desired the death of many British officials. This desire is almost equal to actual destruction of lives.

In defense of Carp, the Boston Tea Party is sometimes viewed as nonviolent due to its nature. The affair was quiet, calm, and organized. The British Navy and troops were not sent to break up the action for fear of another Boston Massacre. Admiral John Montagu of the British Navy even stated, “that during the whole of this transaction neither the Govr Magistrates, owners or the Revenue Officers of this place ever called for my Assistance.” However, Montagu recognizes that if his services were called upon, “I could easily have prevented the execution of the plan but must have endangered the Lives of many innocent People by firing upon the Town.”¹⁶ The British officials and military commanders were all aware of the proceedings, but it was allowed to occur. People praised the fact that the only sound heard that night was the sound of hatches opening the chests of tea, along with the occasional grunt. The event was methodical with a nonviolent feel. However, if violence includes the destruction of property, the Tea Party was violent. The other historians consulted have actively used the term “violent” to describe the Tea Party.

¹⁵ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

The question of whether or not the Boston Tea Party was an act of civil disobedience may be argued further. Some definitions hold that civil disobedience should be nonviolent, however others argue that some violence is acceptable in certain cases. The violent versus nonviolent nature of civil disobedience is still debated, so those historians who believe violence is acceptable may consider the destruction of tea an act of civil disobedience. I am working with the understanding that civil disobedience is expected to be nonviolent. According to this definition, the Boston Tea Party was not civil disobedience because of the destruction of property. I grant that the Tea Party was an act against a particular flaw in the governmental system and not the entire system, a signifying point of civil disobedience. Nevertheless, Carp does explicitly call the Tea Party nonviolent, to which I disagree and argue that destruction of private property is an act of violence.

In order to prevent more violence, the British Navy and troops did not interfere. The British troops and Navy were prepared for action due to potential trouble surrounding the tea affair. The Boston Harbor anchored warships to act as a blockade to prevent the tea ships from returning to England, and Fort William on Castle Island held the British troops. The town expected the Navy to interfere in the violent proceedings. The participants themselves accepted that there was a real danger to their actions. Admiral Montagu was ready if Governor Hutchinson called for the Navy. However, no call of action came. The Navy and troops knew better than to interfere on their own. The two thousand people surrounding the participants of the tea party made it impossible to stop the actions without bloodshed. The British wanted to avoid another Boston massacre.

Admiral Montagu of the British Navy was an observer of the Boston Tea Party. He was residing in a house nearby and watched the proceedings from his window. After the event, he was troubled by the subversive nature of the perpetrators. After commenting that the colonists would have to pay for their actions (famously warning the participants that they had to pay the fiddler after their evening of fun), Montagu stated, “The Devil is in this people...for they pay no more respect to an act of the British Parliament, which can make England tremble, than to an old newspaper.”¹⁷ He recognized that the people were rejecting their government’s law. Respect of government and property rights were declining.

Adams further wrote in his diary on December 17, “Last Night 3 Cargoes of Bohea Tea were emptied into the Sea. This Morning a Man of War sails. This is the most magnificent Movement of all. There is a Dignity, a Majesty, a Sublimity, in this last Effort of the Patriots, that I greatly admire.”¹⁸ Adams was known for his criticism. He was not one to beat around the bush. While generally brutally honest, it must be expected that Adams was even more honest in his personal diary. Adams intended for his sons to read his diary one day, but he most likely did not foresee his personal thoughts becoming public. Nevertheless, he did claim that he did not know any of the participants in order to avoid altercations. It can be assumed that he did feel passionately in favor of the destruction of tea. He admires an act he did not conduct, an interesting comment from the critical Adams. He calls the Boston Tea Party the “last Effort of the Patriots.” He recognized that this was not a spur of the moment action. The Patriots had tried

¹⁷ Carp, *Defiance of Patriots*, 139.

¹⁸ “John Adams Diary.”

incessantly to rid themselves of the tea. Only on the last day did they resort to destruction of property.

In order to fully understand the impact of the destruction of tea, consideration must be given to the view of private property in the eighteenth century. The tea that diligently was destroyed was British East India Company and the appointed consignees' private property, and the tea ships were private property as well. Private property was important to the colonists and the British in the eighteenth century. John Locke, a seventeenth century philosopher, famously influenced many of the founding leaders of the United States. He promoted natural rights, including the right to property. In his "Second Treatise," Locke wrote, "For in governments, the laws regulate the right of property."¹⁹ Locke believed that it was government's responsibility to protect natural rights.

John Adams was clearly influenced by Locke's ideas. Adams wrote in 1787, "The moment the idea is admitted into society, that property is not as sacred as the laws of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence."²⁰ Adams is explicit in his belief that property is a natural right and that there must be government to protect it. He wrote those thoughts in support of the American Constitution, but they provide an interesting analysis compared to how he reacted to the Boston Tea Party. A force of law was protecting the East India Company's

¹⁹ Locke, John. *Of Civil Government: Second Treatise*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955.

²⁰ *The Works of John Adams*. Edited by Charles Francis Adams. Vol. 6. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1850--56.

tea, yet the Patriots still destroyed it. Hutchinson felt that it was tyranny.²¹ Adams argued that the Boston Tea Party was necessary and justified, but he also had a great respect for private property. The Patriots were not running around through the city destroying anything they saw, but had carefully chosen exactly what needed to be destroyed and why.

Consideration was given to the other cargo and property of the ships apart from the tea. The participants were careful to only destroy the 372 chests of tea. They were making a statement only relating to the unfair taxation of the tea and their inability to have control over what lands in Boston. The *Boston Gazette* reported, “It is worthy of Remark that although a considerable quantity of Goods were still remaining on board the Vessels, no Injury was sustained; Such Attention to private Property was observed that a small Padlock belonging to the Captain of one of the Ships being broke, another was procured and sent to him.”²² The participants could not be accused of recklessness. While one man was accidentally injured, he survived and was hidden by his friends. The Patriots only wanted to destroy the tea and made a point of replacing property that had been unfortunately destroyed.

Boston was not the only city affected or concerned by the dutied tea. The people of Portsmouth, New Hampshire met on December 16, 1773, coincidentally the same day as the Boston Tea Party, to pass a resolution to refuse to accept the tea if it were shipped to their port. The third section of their resolve states, “That the act of the British

²¹ Thomas Hutchinson, *Proceedings and Transactions*, 70.

²² Greene, *Headlines of the Past*, 19.

Parliament, laying a duty upon teas landed in America, payable here, is a tax, whereby the property of Americans is taken from them without their consent.”²³ The American colonists believed that the Tea Act was affecting their right to property. If their rights were not protected, they then felt they had the right to oppose laws that restricted their rights.

Property in the eighteenth century was considered a natural right as outlined by John Locke. As Parliament did not respect the colonists’ right to property, the colonists responded by destroying private property. It was a deliberate statement. While it was out of necessity and a last resort idea, it was a political statement. In fact, it was the moment that “set in motion a series of events that led to open revolt against the British Crown” and “set the stage for an American rebellion and the war that followed.”²⁴ Regardless of how persons view the Boston Tea Party, whether favorably or critically, the fact remains that ninety-two thousands British pounds of privately owned Bohea tea was destroyed that night.

The destruction of property and the rejection of the right to property was a bold statement. John Adams wrote in his diary, “The People should never rise, without doing something to be remembered—something notable And striking.”²⁵ Whereas Hutchinson was furious that the people were able to organize a rebellion, Adams praised them for doing exactly that. Adams, however, did not think that people should rise all the time. In

²³Bouton, Nathaniel, D.D., ed. *Documents and Records Relating to the Province of New Hampshire, from 1764 to 1776*. Vol. 7. Nashua: Orren C. Moore, 1873.

²⁴ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 2-3.

²⁵ “John Adams Diary.”

this case, the people were serious about making a statement in their rebellion. The leaders had thought through their actions and chose what they believed would make the greatest statement and gather the greatest support. Adams supported this careful thoughtfulness. Adams highlights the radical and conservative elements of the Boston Tea Party. The impact made a radical statement with its subversive nature, but there was also a conservative element in that the affair was well controlled. The crowd expected the event to loud and riotous, but it was unusually calm. Also, as previously discussed, the desire for destruction of lives was radical, but as it was only destruction of property, the entire affair of destroying the tea was more conservative than it might otherwise have been had bloodshed occurred.

Adams continued in his diary, “This Destruction of the Tea is so bold, so daring, so firm, intrepid and inflexible, and it must have so important Consequences, and so lasting, that I cant but consider it as an Epocha in History.”²⁶ Adams fully believed that the Boston Tea Party was a defining moment in the history of Britain versus the American colonies. He knew Parliament would not ignore such an offense against the government. He knew the response would be great on both sides. Adams was insightful. Like Hutchinson, he was Harvard educated. Adams was eloquent and extraordinarily intelligent. He did not make arguments that could not be supported. He did not just live in the present. He often spoke of the future and considered the big picture and made sense of confusion. Towns around Boston also anticipated punishment. For some, they despised

²⁶ “John Adams Diary.”

the Boston Tea Party because of the consequences it would surely bring to towns other than Boston.

Punishments placed on Boston would almost certainly affect the smaller towns that depended on the city. Boston was the major port city in Massachusetts. If trade were disrupted, or if the Boston Harbor was closed, surrounding towns would feel the consequences. In Littleton, the people dissolved their committee of correspondence. In Freetown, the residents criticized the Bostonians for not preventing or stopping the destruction. The townspeople were fearful of Parliament's punishment and speculated that the owners of the tea would demand payment, which would cause the colonists great debt. In Pittsfield, the inhabitants believed the Boston Tea Party was subversive and unnecessary. They supported the punishment of the participants, but did not support repayment of the destroyed tea. Some towns were supportive of the actions or even strictly divided on opinions, but their reactions show that they found both the subversive nature of the event and the destruction of property radical. They feared that the destruction of property would cause debt and the undermining of authority would result in political punishment.²⁷

Adams knew the Patriots would be punished for their radical actions. He wrote, "What Measures will the Ministry take, in Consequence of this? Will they resent it? will they dare to resent it? will they punish Us? How? By quartering Troops upon Us? – by annulling our Charter? – by laying on more duties? By restraining our Trade? By

²⁷ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriot*, 167.

Sacrifice of Individuals, or how.”²⁸ The Patriots did not just want to get rid of the tea. They wanted a reaction from other colonies, inhabitants in Great Britain, and Parliament. They wanted to force Parliament to recognize their grievances. Parliament had caused suffering in Boston and other cities in the colonies, so the Patriots wanted Parliament to suffer loss as well.

When news first arrived about the Boston Tea Party in January of 1774, Parliament was originally not concerned of the colonies’ rejection of authority and government. King George III stated, “I am much hurt that the instigation of bad men hath again drawn the people of Boston to take such unjustifiable steps; but I trust by degrees tea will find its way there.”²⁹ The king initially saw the destruction as a minor hiccup in operations, but that Parliament’s plan would ultimately prevail as the people would gradually accept the new act and begin purchasing and distributing the Townsend dutied tea. It was not surprising that Boston would reject an unfavorable act in the beginning. The spark that had spread from Boston was what caused shock amongst the British officials and inhabitants of Great Britain. After news of the rejection of tea in cities including Philadelphia and Charleston, people became angry at the subversive act of the Bostonians.

The Great Britain newspaper *Middlesex Journal* reported multiple accounts of how the Patriots were perceived in England. Published phrases included, “seditious as well as turbulent and insolent behavior of the Bostonians...state of anarchy...The whole Continent is in a flame, from Boston to Charles Town, and the whole of the inhabitants,

²⁸ “John Adams Diary.”

²⁹ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 187.

to a man, appear unanimously resolved to dispute with their lives the right of taxation in the mother country.”³⁰ This destruction of property was significant to the Great Britain residents. The crime was not just an act of stealing or destroying property due to drunkenness. The calculated and defiant act was a rejection of British authority. Even more, the rejection of authority had traveled throughout the colonies, not just Boston. The paper concluded, “The Americans, it appears, are absolutely in open and avowed rebellion.”³¹ Parliament needed to control Boston and the colonies before full rebellion occurred.

The Patriots absolutely refused to allow the tea subject to the Townsend Act to land. They were actively boycotting the taxes implemented by Parliament. If the tea were to go onto land, the Patriots would lose in their efforts. Parliament would triumph in their right to tax the colonies. Adams wrote, “To let it be landed, would be giving up the Principle of Taxation by Parliamentary Authority, against which the Continent have struggled for 10 years, it was losing all our labour for 10 years and subjecting ourselves and our Posterity forever to Egyptian Taskmasters – to Burthens, Indignities, to Ignominy, Reproach and Contempt, to Desolation and Oppression, to Poverty and Servitude.”³² Adams believed that giving into Parliament that once on the topic of the Tea Act would forever place the colonies as subjects to Parliament’s unfair regulations. The Patriots did not necessarily want to destroy such a significant amount of property,

³⁰ Carp, *Defiance of Patriots*, 187.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “John Adams Diary.”

but they had no choice. In order to stand firm in their beliefs, they had to take such actions.

Hutchinson and Adams stood on two extremes in reaction to the destruction of tea. Hutchinson felt it was one of the worst crimes in history, while Adams felt it was one of the greatest achievements in history. John Rowe, however, took a more moderate and neutral view. John Rowe was a Boston merchant, committee member in Boston, and followed the Whig ideology. While it would be natural to assume that Rowe was a part of the planning and destruction, he stated that he had no part in the matter. He wrote in his diary on December 16, "I being a little Unwell staid at home all Day & all the evening."³³ Rowe was certain to point out that he was not present for the day's activities in the morning or the evening. The question is whether or not we can trust his account. Other first hand accounts place Rowe at the meeting prior to the destruction of tea. In fact, these accounts claim that he made a comment about tea mingling with salt water. Either these accounts mistook another man for Rowe, or Rowe lied in his diary in order to clear his name. It does seem odd that Rowe was conveniently unwell on that day and night, but it has yet to be proven either way. The fact remains that he wanted no part in the matter and kept silent.³⁴

Another leader in colonial politics, Benjamin Franklin, also voiced his opinion on the destruction of tea while he resided in England. After the Tea Party, Franklin wrote to the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence, "I am truly concern'd as I believe all

³³ Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe*, 257.

³⁴ Carp states, "Many people were inclined to be neutral, or apathetic, or to support the British government. They worried that the Tea Party and its attendant boycotts would only provoke further acrimony and invite the Crown's punishment." Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 164.

considerate Men are with you, that there should seem to any a Necessity for carrying Matters to such Extremity, as, in a Dispute about Publick Rights, to destroy private Property...I cannot but wish & hope that before any compulsive Measures are thought of here, our General Court will have shewn a Disposition to repair the Damage and make Compensation to the Company.”³⁵ Franklin disapproved of the Boston Tea Party. He urged the participants to pay for the tea that they destroyed. He did not think it necessary to resort to destruction of private property. To Franklin, these extreme measures were radical.

The observers to the Boston Tea Party understood that all the tea had to be destroyed. Saving any part of the tea could be considered an act of thievishness and change the meaning of the Tea Party and its efforts to demonstrate radical ideals through the full destruction of property. Some observers kept watch to ensure that men seeking to gain from the riot stole none of the detested tea off of the ships. There were a few cases of such thievery, but as far as records show, all such men were caught and dutifully given justice by the crowd.³⁶

The Boston *Gazette* reported, “Those Persons who were from the Country returned with a merry Heart; and the next Day Joy appeared in almost every Countenance, some on Occasion of the Destruction of the Tea, others on Account of the Quietness with which it was effected.—One of the Monday’s papers says that the Masters

³⁵ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776*. New York: Frederick Ungar Pub., 1957, 300.

³⁶ Carp, *Defiance of Patriots*, 128.

and Owners are well pleased that their Ships were thus cleared.”³⁷ Newspapers are known for their bias, and this is no exception. The Boston *Gazette* is clearly a Patriot leaning paper. The *Gazette* was written by strong-willed Patriots who were involved in the Boston Tea Party and who otherwise had close connections with Patriot leaders like Samuel Adams.³⁸ While there were many persons in the Boston area who were excited and content, John Rowe’s account shows the exaggeration of the report. Rowe was a ship owner and was not pleased. Rowe wished he had not shipped the tea and just lost the money as the Tea Party upset many in town. He wrote in his diary, “I would rather have lost five hundred Guineas than Bruce [Rowe’s ship captain] should have taken any of this Tea on board his Ship.”³⁹ If Rowe were well pleased with the clearing of his ship, he would have written so in his diary. What he did write, however, shows that he was upset with the affair and points out that others were upset, and even fearful, as well. Rowe wrote that some people were concerned. They speculated that greater violence and even bloodshed might result, along with heavy punishment from Parliament that would affect their livelihoods.

In Governor Hutchinson’s letters to Lord Dartmouth of the British East India Company, he wrote, “At and near Boston...the people seem regardless of all consequences.”⁴⁰ There seemed to be a widespread joy and approval of the Boston Tea

³⁷ Greene, Laurence. *America Goes to Press: Headlines of the Past*. Garden City. [New York: Garden City Publishing, 1938],19.

³⁸ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 33.

³⁹ Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe*, 258.

⁴⁰ Labaree, *Boston Tea Party*, 152.

Party amongst the Patriots as the *Boston Gazette* asserted.⁴¹ In general, those who disapproved of the destruction of tea kept quiet for fear or otherwise. Joy did seem to be widespread then since the voices of opposition were silent or limited. However, even if the general feeling in the months following was excitement, there were still opposing views. Even with seemingly widespread approval throughout the American colonies for the exciting Boston Tea Party, the Patriots did not commemorate the event. While it pushed towards full rejection of British authority, it was also the cause of suffering due to the Intolerable Acts and punishment enforced by Parliament. The Patriots wanted to paint the British as the enemy and the perpetrators of aggression. The Boston Tea Party does not fit that story. The Patriots reacted to the destruction of tea with praise, but were particular not to create a visual remembrance through engravings or paintings until decades after the event.⁴²

One reason Loyalists and British officials were offended by the destruction of tea was because of the mockery of the event. Alfred Young states, “The tea action was the most carnivalesque event of the era. Planned, deliberate, controlled, the action was also a wild reversal of the traditional order.”⁴³ Young recognizes the conservative elements of the Boston Tea Party, namely that it was not a chaotic affair, but subverting the traditional order is radical. Carnival is a time of topsy-turvy activities and often feature

⁴¹ Labaree states, “When the people of Boston recovered from their surprise at the destruction of the tea, they were almost unanimous in their approval of what had happened...Joy seemed to be the most common feeling, as if the inhabitants had just been delivered from the clutches of the Devil.” Labaree, *Boston Tea Party*, 152.

⁴² Young, *Shoemaker*, 106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 102.

masquerades, which compares to the events in 1773. Colonial Boston celebrated mockery in its use of effigies, mock funeral processions, and tarring and feathering. The Boston Tea Party fit with this theme. Even the name “Boston Tea Party,” while not used for decades after, jests at a traditionally proper affair. One continuous theme throughout the night of destruction was the idea that the harbor had become a teapot and that the participants were making a large cup of saltwater tea, or as Joshua Wyeth joked, “so large a cup of tea for the fishes.”⁴⁴ The proper form of making tea was an elaborate ceremony. Many items of silverware were used by the upper class to properly serve tea. It was also seen as a custom for women. Great men, however, mockingly made tea by drowning a large amount in the harbor and poking fun of a traditionally English custom. The participants in the Boston Tea Party wore disguises like that of a masquerade. The Mohawk Indian costumes were yet another element of mockery.⁴⁵ The Patriots insulted the British on multiple levels.

Reactions to the Boston Tea Party varied greatly amongst the Patriots and Loyalists. British officials became furious like Hutchinson. Many Patriots celebrated like Adams. And yet others like Rowe had their hesitations. The newspapers reported a widespread joy, which while not wholly accurate, nevertheless demonstrates that the Boston Tea Party was a major event in its time. The destruction of private property caught people’s attention and encouraged them to talk about the subversive nature of the event and its implications moving forward.

⁴⁴ Young, *Shoemaker*, 102.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The Sons of Liberty carefully deliberated on the planning of the Tea Party and were fully conscious of their actions. They also were not unfamiliar with destruction of some property. However, while the Sons of Liberty were the instigators of the Boston Tea Party, they were not the only participants. There is evidence then to suggest that mob mentality affected some of the participants. If mob mentality was present, this points to the idea that many participants were not otherwise in favor of destruction of private property.

The Boston Tea Party united people from various classes, from farmers and carpenters to merchants and barbers. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger states, “But it is clear that many merchants, who went into the movement against the East India Company with the intention of resorting only to peaceful opposition, were swept by the surge of popular feeling into measures of which their best judgment disapproved.”⁴⁶ Merchants were trying to rectify the situation in a way that would not cost them money or result in Parliament’s wrath. However, mob mentality took over and they destroyed property, which they did not originally intend to do. Gary Nash agrees that some merchants were fearful of the actions and tried to correct their wrongs. He writes, “Shrinking from these displays of popular force, the merchants tried desperately to head off a crisis with England by subscribing money to pay for the destroyed tea.”⁴⁷ The merchants realized that the destruction of property was the reason they would be punished. It was not the joining of classes that caused such a reaction. It was the destruction of private property

⁴⁶ Schlesinger, *Colonial Merchants*, 289.

⁴⁷ Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 358.

and by extension, the rejection of authority. The owners of the former, however, could be monetarily compensated for their loss, which would possibly help alleviate some of the punishment.

In addition to merchants, the apprentices who participated in the destruction of tea were especially swept up with the ideals of mob mentality. Carp states, “Many of the men and boys on the ships probably had little knowledge of any advance planning—Joshua Wyeth said he had no more than a few hours’ warning. They were, as one chronicler later wrote, ‘extempore volunteers, who could not resist the temptation of the moment.’”⁴⁸ The young men in particular were eager to join the excitement while they were in the moment and did not have time to pre-plan or truly consider the actions in which they would soon partake. The apprentices welcomed an exciting change to their daily lives; “as one memoirist remembered of that time, ‘It is perfectly natural that the spirit of insubordination, that prevailed, should spread among the younger members of the community.’”⁴⁹ The boys could not resist the opportunity to take a risk and challenge the law of the land. As apprentices, they were bound to a master. In this case, they had a chance to act like the great men in the town. “Local loyalty, the chance to free themselves from the restraints of their apprenticeships, and the thrill of destroying the tea gave these boys a feeling of autonomy and self-respect.”⁵⁰ Joshua Wyeth even points out that apprentices, like himself, were under tory masters, which presented yet another reason to

⁴⁸ Carp, *Defiance of Patriots*, 137.

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

engage in an act that secretly places apprentice against master.⁵¹ Perhaps apprentices are more likely to feel the effects of mob mentality than merchants, but they were nevertheless affected by mob rule.

The mob that destroyed the tea was not like normal Boston mobs. Boston was well known for its turbulent actions. Carp writes, “Eighteenth-century Boston was a town where crowd action was not uncommon: from time to time, townspeople pulled down opponents’ houses, brawled with soldiers, threw bricks at officials, tarred and feathered civilians, and otherwise asserted their power. In this climate, the tea consignees and senior customs officials had feared for their lives to such a degree that they fled to Castle Island offshore.”⁵² These mobs were often loud and dangerous. The quiet and relatively peaceful mob of the Boston Tea Party then stands in sharp contrast to what was expected in Boston. It is easy to see mob mentality at play in a boisterous mob, but more difficult to determine in an event like the Tea Party. However, the reactions from merchants who took part in the event suggest that they were affected by the excitement and mob mentality took over. Mob mentality therefore was one of the defining factors in separating the Boston Tea Party from other Boston riots. What was radical about this particular riot and a distinguishing factor from the others was that the mob mentality unified persons from many walks of life, so the participants were not just the Sons of Liberty. The destruction of property by representatives from many demographics was the reason the Tea Party caused such a reaction.

⁵¹ Young, *Shoemaker*, 43.

⁵² Carp, *Defiance of Patriots*, 5.

On December 16, 1773, the colonists in Boston committed an act that has since become one of the most well known events in Colonial American history. The Boston Tea Party is one of the most recognizable events of pre-Revolutionary War America for both British and American citizens today. Americans value the rejection of authority and unjust laws presented in the actions of the Patriots. As Carp states, “To this day, journalist, pundits, and politicians frequently cite the Tea Party as the first and most famous example of Americans’ heritage of civil disobedience, their penchant for secret conspiracies, and their aversion to foreign trade restrictions, excessive taxation, or government overreach. By reading the tea leaves at the bottom of Boston harbor, we can see the American character itself taking shape.”⁵³ The Boston Tea Party is so beloved and well remembered because of the destruction of private property.

Referring to Boston Tea Party with its now proper name rather than calling it the destruction of tea changes the tone of such a violent event. While the Tea Party was a mockery and poked fun at the system of government, it was not a laughable affair. It was a violent riot with a theme of “savage Indians.” The term Boston Tea Party does bring jesting back to light, but it underplays the importance of the destruction of property. Young states, “Very likely the new term served both the conservative and radical claimants to the Revolution.”⁵⁴

The destruction of property is the primary reason the Boston Tea Party is a radical riot. As evidenced by the reactions of Hutchinson, Adams, Rowe, and others, the Boston Tea Party caught their attention through the political statement made through the tea’s

⁵³ Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 4.

⁵⁴ Young, *Shoemaker*, 161.

destruction. Property was important to them. They considered it a natural right that had to be protected by the government. The Patriots felt the Tea Act took this right away, so they acted in protest. As the Tea Party was a violent act due to property destruction, it was not an act of civil disobedience. Finally, mob mentality resulted in persons from many walks of life joining together to destroy the tea. For these reasons, the Boston Tea Party was a radical riot.

Recognizing the Boston Tea Party as a radical riot contributes to understanding the American Revolution as a whole. The Tea Party was a critical event in the Revolution leading up to the war. It is important to recognize it as radical versus conservative. If the Tea Party were not radical, it would not have mattered. If it were a conservative affair, it would not have shocked both the Patriots and the Loyalists. The Boston Tea Party needed to be radical in order to help tie the colonies together and demonstrate the idea that the problem did not lie in Boston alone, but that tyranny radiated throughout the colonies. The radical nature resulted in the Intolerable Acts, influenced similar events across the colonies, and became a culminating event prior to the outbreak of war. The radical nature is the reason it is remembered and studied. It is the reason the Tea Party became a popular discussion throughout the British Empire. The Boston Tea Party had a major impact on the surrounding political environment because it was a radical riot.

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