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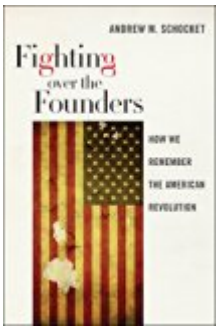

Andrew M. Schocket. *Fighting Over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution.* New York: NYU Press, 2015. 256 S. hardcover, ISBN 978-0-8147-0816-3.

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As the title of the book suggests, Andrew M. Schocket's study deals with the contested memory of the American Revolution – and it does so within a very contemporary time frame: 2000–2012. Given that this era demarcates a new millennium, the decade after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing new dimension of global terrorism, the time during which the first African American president, who is frequently evoking the ideas of the founding fathers in his speeches and publications, was elected into office, and a period that generated a new political movement, namely the Tea Party Movement, which claims an important Revolutionary event as sine qua non for its existence (and thus furthered the political and cultural polarization of the nation), this relatively narrow chronological framing makes perfect sense. The book essentially addresses the agendas, values, and ideologies American society and culture has been employing and often enough projecting onto the past when commemorating the Revolutionary era. In five broad chapters Schocket looks at the Revolution in political speeches, history books that became bestsellers, museums and historical sites, television and film, and at how the law, the Tea Party Movement, and reenactors approach the origins of the nation.

As conceptual framework the author uses the oppositional notions of essentialist versus organicist memory. The 'essentialist' view considers the memory of the founding as unchanging and definitely knowable, timeless 'truth' – and is regarded as conservative approach. The 'organicist' view promotes a more fluid reading of the nation's beginnings, conceptualizing America as an evolutionary process that needs to be interpreted and adapted to changes – and is regarded as liberal approach. While the conservative view of the founding fathers as demigods automatically evokes essentialist notions, such as private property, capitalism, traditional gender roles, and protestant Christianity, the more liberal view focuses on the founding documents' stress on forming "a more perfect union" and that "all Man are created equal" – standing for the organicists' dedication to processual principles. The book's aim, "to untangle the ways that battles over the contemporary memory of the American Revolution serve as proxies for America's contemporary ideo-

logical divide" (p. 4), is pursued by surveying an impressive amount of material.

This ideological divide is, naturally, best exemplified through presidential campaign rhetoric, which is investigated in chapter one. Backed up with selected speeches and helpful empirical data, Schocket shows that, while Republican and Democratic candidates often refer to the same passages of the founding documents, they interpret them quite differently. In contrast to the essentialist view of the Republican candidates, who consider the Revolution as "a definitive past, an unchanging past we can study for guidance, wisdom, and understanding" (p. 25), "Democrats reclaimed the founders' dreams [...] as a work in progress, rather than a completed act" (p. 34). Thus, for "essentialists, the past sits in judgement of the present; for organicists, the present sits in judgement of the past" (p. 33), resulting in Schocket's conclusion that in American politics, "the American Revolution is still being waged" (p. 44).

Chapter two addresses the aspect of historians feeding the nostalgia for the American Revolution (more recently labelled "founders chic") by publishing – and, thus, cashing in on – high-profile biographies on the founding generation. Spearheaded by David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize winning "John Adams" David McCullough, John Adams, New York 2002. , this chapter partly comes across like a cumulative review, not so much like a dense analysis. As an overview, however, it is quite useful. Essentialist histories Walter Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin: An American Life, New York 2003; Joseph Ellis, His Excellency: George Washington, New York 2004; Cokie Roberts, Founding Mothers, New York 2004. celebrate the founders as exemplars of moral virtue, leadership, vision, and masculinity, "searching for men for all time" (p. 63). Organicist histories Prominently included here are the works by Alfred F. Young and David Waldstreicher as well as Annette Gordon-Reed's "Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings" (Charlottesville / London 1997). , by contrast, often "challenge great men's greatness and sometimes forego consideration of founding fathers entirely for stories about women and slaves" (p. 49).

Chapter three addresses how the ideological debate has become appropriated in museums and historical sites, which dramatically raises questions about the politics of memory. By taking the complicated new 2001 implementation of the Liberty Bell Center in Philadelphia – and especially the First White House – as one of the few positive examples of how public history can work differently, Schocket expands on what he calls the "transition from a mostly essentialist memorialization to one incorporating organicist themes" (p. 95). The fruitful and rather exceptional cooperation between the National Park Service, the Independence National Historical Park, academic historians, and local (in this case, African American) activists is seen as key to this new quality. This stands in stark opposition to the essentialist commemoration of Independence Hall, the Washington Mall, Colonial Williamsburg, and Mount Vernon, with Monticello alone among the well-known sites (and largely due to the Jefferson/Hemings-revelations) showing heavy organicist tendencies. Sites commemorating the American Revolution thus "reinforce a strain of libertarianism that represents the agenda of America's most privileged and affluent residents, who want to be bound by no rules and to minimize their public responsibilities" (p. 118). Hence, the Revolution is made "safe for public agencies and for corporate and individual sponsors [to be] co-opted as an endorsement of current social and economic conditions" (p. 119).

Chapter four begins with the general assumption that recent screen portrayals "have presented an essentialist interpretation with organicist trappings" (p. 127). While Jon Turteltaub's "National Treasure" franchise (part one: 2004; part two: 2007) offers an unambiguously essentialist reading of the Revolutionary past as knowable facts

and indisputable sacredness of the founding documents, Roland Emmerich's "The Patriot" (2000) is described as a hybrid mix of the essentialism and organicism. A similar hybridity is ascribed to the HBO miniseries "John Adams" (2008) after McCullough's biography. This mix combines unambiguous patriotism and a sort of escapist view of slavery (e.g., representing African Americans as wage earners rather than slaves), on the one hand, and a happy multiracial society (e.g., a maroon community which offers a new home for the protagonist's family), on the other hand, in which every individual, particularly common people, have agency. Interestingly, the PBS TV series "Liberty's Kids" (2002–2004) is considered "the most sustained filmic treatment ever made of the American Revolution" (p. 143) in that it addresses major cultural, technological, and social transformations with an organicist view. Depicting a diverse and multicultural early America that reflects the didactic intention to promote a diverse and multicultural present, Schocket criticizes that organicism overwrites historical accuracy by crediting too much agency to a few exceptional African American and female characters, thus indirectly silencing the more representative experience of the vast majority. For a series with a G (General Audiences – All Ages Admitted) rating, this assessment, and the accusation that PBS eschews a more complex and "messy" (p. 153) interpretation, however, seems rather exaggerated.

The most heterogeneous part, chapter six, tackles how different groups (lawyers, the Tea Party, reenactors) have been applying essentialist readings of the Revolutionary past to current American political problems. Schocket introduces the chapter by taking the conservative political commentator Glenn Beck, who has been arguing that the three-fifths clause in the U.S. Constitution was an attempt by the founders to abolish slavery (rather than to grant Southern politicians more power), as representative voice of the Tea Party Movement's essentialist interpretation of the Revolutionary era. Since this view has also been turned into a practice of constitutional law called the "doctrine of 'originalism,'" this desire to "recast the nation in the founders' image" (p. 166) has become very influential, in spite of the many historical examples of the Revolutionary generation itself to modify the founding legal document. This more recent, conservative position is contrasted with the historically deeper rooted liberal, organicist tradition of "living constitutionalism" (p. 168). Accordingly, conservative and libertarian advocacy groups associated with the Tea Party Movement promote "history as catechism" and "historical fundamentalism" (p. 182).

"Fighting over the Founders" is a very readable, accessible, and frequently entertaining study on how Americans have debated the nation's founding era in the decade or so after the turn of the century. It fulfills its own claim to contribute to an understanding "of the ways in which we use those memories and the stakes involved" (p. 201). It is indeed surprising that "the postmodern challenge to age-old ideas" (p. 202), which runs counter to clear-cut binary oppositions, seems to have had little impact on the commemoration of the American Revolution. Including a vast amount of examples and case studies, Andrew Schocket convincingly shows that the way the Revolutionary era is perceived still largely operates along the binary oppositions of what he calls essentialism versus organicism. The study also demonstrates that, in essence, both views are limited and too narrow: Neither did the founding principles directly pave the way for the abolition of slavery and women's rights, as the essentialist view would have it, nor did the founders envision a multicultural America as part of the process of "perfecting the union," as the organicists claim. History is certainly a more confused, messy, and unpredictable process, as Schocket poignantly displays, and so are the practices of remembering it – even though the final results often contradict this confusion and messiness.

In a scholarly monograph, the conscious and didactically explained use of the first person (we "are always informed by our experiences, our education, our values", p. 12) is somewhat awkward at a first glance. Since the study also includes interviews conducted by the author (e.g., with curators, activist, and reenactors), this makes both sense and frequently also contributes to a better readability. However, from a scholarly point of view I fail to understand what is gained by avoiding the conventional documentation of sources. On 235 text pages, there is not one footnote being used (unconventional, but ok!), and the standard list of works cited is replaced by an additional essay of 20 pages which is supposed to "guide the reader through [the author's] thought process" (p. 213). While the latter is certainly innovative, it is also inexpedient. And, as a logical consequence, none of the in-text quotations is documented with page numbers. This is actually something we tell our students not to do – and for a good reason!

Maybe most importantly, for scholars engaged in the research of history, cultural studies, and political culture, "Fighting over the Founders" reinforces very emphatically that the need to study the politics of cultural memory is by no means an outdated approach to historical and cultural research. No doubt, for this particular topic, the essentialist versus organicist approach is very consequentially implemented – and it works very smoothly.