

ISSUE 6



Was the American Revolution a Conservative Movement?

YES: Carl N. Degler, from *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America*, rev. ed. (Harper & Row, 1970)

NO: Gordon S. Wood, from *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1991)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carl N. Degler argues that upper-middle-class colonists led a conservative American Revolution that left untouched the prewar economic and social class structure of an upwardly mobile people.

NO: Prize-winning historian Gordon S. Wood argues that the American Revolution was a far-reaching, radical event that produced a unique democratic society in which ordinary people could make money, pursue happiness, and be self-governing.

Was the American Revolution a true revolution? The answer may depend on how the term *revolution* is defined. *Strict constructionists*, for example, perceive revolution as producing significant and deep societal change, while *loose constructionists* define the term as "any resort to violence within a political order to change its constitution, rulers, or policies." Historians agree that American Revolutionaries fulfilled the second definition because they successfully fought a war that resulted in the overthrow of their British rulers and established a government run by themselves. However, historians disagree over the amount of social and economic changes that took place in America.

Early historians did not concern themselves with the social and economic aspects of the American Revolution. They instead argued over the causes of the Revolution and refought the political arguments advanced by the rebelling colonists and the British government. George Bancroft was the first historian to advance the *Whig*, or *pro-American*, interpretation of the war. America won, he said, because God was on our side.

Bancroft's view remained unchallenged until the beginning of the twentieth century, when a group of *imperialist* historians analyzed the Revolution from

the perspective of the British empire. These historians tended to be sympathetic to the economic and political difficulties that Great Britain faced in running an empire in the late eighteenth century.

Both the Whig and the imperialist historians assumed that the Revolution was an *external* event whose primary cause was the political differences between the colonists and their British rulers. In 1909, however, historian Carl Becker paved the way for a different interpretation of the Revolution when he concluded in his study of colonial New York that an *internal* revolution had taken place. The American Revolution, said Becker, created a struggle not only for home rule but also one for who should rule at home. This *progressive*, or *conflict*, interpretation dominated most of the writings on the American Revolution from 1910 through 1945. During this time progressive historians searched for the social and economic conflicts among groups struggling for political power.

Since World War II, most professional historians have rejected what they considered to be an oversimplified conflict interpretation of the Revolution by the previous generation of progressive historians. Robert E. Brown, in his studies on colonial Massachusetts and Virginia, argued that America had become a middle-class democracy before the American Revolution. Consequently, Brown maintained, there was no need for a social revolution. Most influential have been the works of Harvard University professor Bernard Bailyn, who used a neoconservative approach in analyzing the Revolution. In his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1968), Bailyn took ideas seriously once again and saw the colonists implementing the views of radical British thinkers in their struggle for independence. The most recent statement on the American Revolution from the neoconservative perspective is *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* by Jon Butler (Howard University Press, 2000). In it, Butler argues that American colonial society—politically, socially, and economically—was dramatically transformed between 1680 and 1770.

In the first of the following selections, Carl N. Degler argues the neoconservative view of the American Revolution, maintaining that the upper-middle-class colonists led a conservative Revolution that left untouched the prewar economic and social class structure of an upwardly mobile people. This essay is an excellent example of the loose constructionist definition of revolution.

Since the late 1960s, historians have written a great deal about blacks, women, Native Americans, and “ordinary” people. This neoprogressive interpretation of America’s past has also made views on the events surrounding the Revolution more complicated. See the collection of articles in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* edited by Alfred F. Young (Northern Illinois University Press, 1976).

Gordon S. Wood has given a new dimension to the neoprogressive studies of the Revolutionary era. In his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, he argues the strict constructionist view that the Revolution produced major social changes. In the second selection, taken from this book, Wood maintains that the American Revolution was a radical event because America was the first nation to hold democratic values, allowing ordinary people to make money, pursue happiness, and rule themselves.

A New Kind of Revolution

Conservatives Can Be Innovators

Like fabled genii grown too big to be imprisoned in their bottles, wars and revolutions frequently take on a life of their own irrespective of their first purposes. The overarching considerations of survival or victory distort or enlarge the narrow and limited aims for which the conflict was begun. The American War for Independence was such an event. Begun for only limited political and constitutional purposes, the war released social forces which few of the leaders ever anticipated, but which have helped to mold the American tradition.

One such unforeseen result was the rapid and final disestablishment of the Anglican Church, heretofore the state-supported religion in all of the colonies south of Mason and Dixon's Line and in parts of New York and New Jersey as well.¹ In knocking out the props of the State from beneath the Anglican Church, the states provided the occasion for wider and more fundamental innovations. Virginia in 1786, in disestablishing the Anglican Church, put no other church in its place and instead passed a law guaranteeing religious freedom. This law, with which Madison and Jefferson had so much to do, prepared the ground for the ultimate triumph of the American doctrine of separation of Church and State.

The ratification of the federal Constitution in 1788 constituted the first step in the acceptance of the principle that a man's religion was irrelevant to government, for the Constitution forbade all religious tests for officeholding.² Then in 1791, when the first ten amendments were added, Congress was enjoined from legislating in any manner "respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." These legalistic and now commonplace phrases had centuries of man's religious history packed within them; upon their implementation western Christendom reached a milestone in its long quest for a viable accommodation between man's religious conscience and *raison d'état*.

For millennia a man's religion had been either a passport or a barrier to his freedom and the opportunity to serve his State; it had always mattered how a man worshiped God. Since Emperor Theodosius in the fourth century of the Christian era, religious orthodoxy had been considered necessary for good citizenship and for service to the state. All this weighty precedence was boldly

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overthrown by Americans in 1789–91 when they erected a government wherein “a man’s religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the Laws nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest offices that are known in the United States,” as George Washington said.

In the course of the early nineteenth century, the federal example of a strict divorce of State and Church was emulated by the individual states. At the time of the Revolution many states had demanded Christian and often Protestant affiliations for officeholding, and some had even retained a state-supported Church. Gradually, however, and voluntarily—Massachusetts was last in 1833—all the states abandoned whatever connections they might have had with the churches. The doctrine of separation has been more deeply implanted in our tradition in the twentieth century by the Supreme Court, which has declared that separation is a freedom guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution and therefore obligatory upon the states as well as the federal government. Thus the two extremes of the American political spectrum—the popular state governments and the august Supreme Court—have joined in sanctioning this doctrine born out of the Revolution by the liberalism of the Enlightenment.²

It was a remarkably novel and even unique approach to the question of the relation between the State and religion. Although the doctrine repudiates any connection between the State and the Church, the American version has little in common with the practice in countries like revolutionary France and Mexico and atheistic Soviet Russia, where separation has been so hostile to religion as to interfere, at times, with freedom of worship. The American conception is not antireligious at all. Our Presidents invoke the Deity and offer Thanksgiving prayers, our armies and legislatures maintain chaplains, and the state and federal governments encourage religion through the remission of taxes. In America the State was declared to be secular, but it continued to reflect the people’s concern with religion. The popular interest in religion was still evident in 1962 and 1963 when the Supreme Court invoked the principle of separation of church and state to ban prayers and Bible-reading from the public schools. In both Congress and the public press there was a loud protest against such a close and allegedly antireligious interpretation of the principle. But efforts to amend the Constitution in order to circumvent the Supreme Court’s interpretation failed.

In the eighteenth century the American principle of separation of Church and State was indeed an audacious experiment. Never before had a national state been prepared to dispense with an official religion as a prop to its authority and never before had a church been set adrift without the support of the state. Throughout most of American history the doctrine has provided freedom for religious development while keeping politics free of religion. And that, apparently, had been the intention of the Founding Fathers.

As the principle of the separation of Church and State was a kind of social side effect of the Revolution, so also was the assertion in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.” These five words have been sneered at as idealistic, refuted as manifestly inaccurate, and denied as preposterous, but they have, nonetheless, always been capable of calling forth deep

emotional response from Americans. Even in the Revolutionary era, their power was evident. In 1781 the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts declared slavery at an end in that state because it "is inconsistent with our own conduct and Constitution" which "set out with declaring that all men are born free and equal. . . ." The Reverend Samuel Hopkins told the Continental Congress that it was illogical to "be holding so many hundreds of blacks in slavery . . . while we are maintaining this struggle for our own and our Children's liberty." In 1782 William Binford of Henrico County, Virginia, set free twelve slaves because he was "fully persuaded that freedom is the natural right of all mankind." Another Virginian, a few years later, freed all his slaves which had been "born after the Declaration of Independence." Such efforts to reconcile the theory of the Declaration with the practices of life represent only the beginnings of the disquieting echoes of the celebrated phrase.

It is wrong to assume, however, that the mere inclusion of that phrase in the Declaration worked the mighty influence implied in the foregoing examples; social values are not created so deliberately or so easily. Like so much else in the Declaration, this sentence was actually the distillation of a cherished popular sentiment into a ringing phrase, allegiance to which stemmed from its prior acceptance rather than from its eloquence. The passionate belief in social equality which commentators and travelers in Jacksonian America would later find so powerful was already emergent in this earlier period. Indeed, we have already seen its lineaments during the colonial period. After 1776 the conviction was reinforced by the success of the Revolution and by the words of the great Declaration itself.

It was also supported by the facts of American social life. Despite the lowly position accorded the Negro, wrote the French traveler [Jacques-Pierre] Brissot in 1788, it still must be admitted "that the Americans more than any other people are convinced that all men are born free and equal." Moreover, he added, "we must acknowledge, that they direct themselves generally by this principle of equality." German traveler Johann Schoepf noticed that in Philadelphia "rank of birth is not recognized, is resisted with a total force. . . . People think, act, and speak here precisely as it prompts them. . . ." ³ And in the privacy of the Federal Convention of 1787, Charles Pinckney of South Carolina urged his fellow delegates to recognize the uniqueness of their country. "There is more equality of rank and fortune in America than in any other country under the sun," he told them.

There were other signs of what an earlier generation would have stigmatized as "leveling tendencies" in the new post-Revolutionary society. The attacks made by the Democratic-Republican societies upon the privileged Order of the Cincinnati, because it was secret and confined to Revolutionary officers and their descendants, were obviously inspired by a growing egalitarian sentiment. French traveler Moreau de Saint-Méry recalled with disgust how Americans proudly told him that the hotel custom of putting strange travelers together in the same bed was "a proof of liberty." By the end of the century old social distinctions like rank-seating in churches and the differentiating title of esquire were fast passing out of vogue. On an economic level, this abiding American faith was translated as equality of opportunity, and here our

Federalist Fisher Ames could lock arms with his Republican opponents when he averred that "all cannot be rich, but all have a right to make the attempt."

Though economic grievances seem to have played a negligible role in bringing on the Revolution, this is not to say that there were no economic consequences. The economic stimulus afforded by the war demands and the freedom from English mercantilistic restrictions which victory made permanent provided adventuresome American merchants and entrepreneurs with wide opportunities for gaining new markets and new sources of profit. The expansion of the American economy, which was to be characteristic all through the nineteenth century, was thus begun.

But even when one has added together the new constitutions, the enlightened religious innovations, and the stimulus to equality, it is quickly apparent that the social consequences of the Revolution were meager indeed. In both purpose and implementation they were not to be equated with the massive social changes which shook France and Russia in later years. For the most part, the society of post-Revolutionary America was but the working out of social forces which were already evident in the colonial period.

It is significant, for example, that no new social class came to power through the door of the American Revolution. The men who engineered the revolt were largely members of the colonial ruling class. Peyton Randolph and Patrick Henry were well-to-do members of the Virginia Assembly; Washington, reputed to be the richest man in America, was an officer in the Virginia militia. The New York leaders John Morin Scott and Robert Livingston were judges on the Supreme Court of the colony, while William Drayton, a fire-eating radical of South Carolina, was a nephew of the lieutenant governor of the province, and himself a member of the Governor's Council until his anti-British activities forced his removal. Certainly Benjamin Franklin, citizen of the Empire, celebrated scientist, and long retired, well-to-do printer, was no submerged member of Philadelphia's society—or London's for that matter. Moreover, Franklin's natural son, William, was a Royal Governor at the outbreak of the Revolution. Hancock of Boston and Christopher Gadsden of Charleston were only two of the many respected and wealthy merchants who lent their support to the patriot cause. In fact, speaking of wealth, the Revolution in Virginia was made and led by the great landed class, and its members remained to reap the benefits. Farther down the social scale, in the backwoods of Massachusetts, it has been shown that the chief revolutionists in the western counties were the old leaders, so that no major shift in leadership took place there either, as a result of the Revolution.

This emphasis on position and wealth among the Revolutionary leaders should not be taken as a denial that many men of wealth and brains left the colonies in the exodus of the Loyalists. Certainly few patriots were the peers of Jared Ingersoll in the law, Jonathan Boucher in the Church, and Thomas Hutchinson and James Galloway in government. But the Loyalist departure did not decapitate the colonial social structure, as some have suggested—it only removed those most attached to the mother country.⁴ A large part of the governing class remained to guide the Revolution and reap its favors. It is true, that in the states of Georgia and Pennsylvania, where the radical democrats

held sway in the early years of the Revolution, new men seemed to occupy positions of power. But these men were still unknowns on the periphery of government and business, and generally remained there; they cannot be compared with the Robespierres and the Dantons, the Lenins and the Trotskys, of the great continental eruptions.

A convenient gauge of the essential continuity of the governing class in America before and after the Revolution is to be found in an examination of the careers of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Surely these fifty-five men are important patriot leaders and presumably among the chief beneficiaries of the Revolution they advocated. Yet they were by no means a disadvantaged lot. Fully 40 percent of them attended college or one of the Inns of Court in England at a time when such a privilege was a rarity. An additional 21 percent of them came from important families of their respective colonies, or, like Robert Morris and Joseph Hewes, were men of acquired wealth. Over 69 percent of them held office under the colonial regimes, 29 percent alone holding some office within the executive branch; truly these were not men held at arm's length from the plums of office.

Most striking about the careers of these men is the fact that so many of them held office before and after the dividing line of the Revolution. Of those who held an office under the state governments after the Revolution, 75 percent had occupied offices before 1774, proving, if need be, that service in the colonial governments before the Revolution was no obstacle to political preferment for a patriot afterward. If those who held no office before 1774 are not counted—and several might be considered too young to be expected to have held office—then the continuity shows up even more clearly. Eighty-nine percent of those who filled an office before the Revolution also occupied an office under one of the new state governments. And if federal office after 1789 is included, then the proportion rises to 95 percent. Add to this the fact that other leaders, not included in the group of signers, had similarly good social backgrounds—men like Washington, Robert Livingston, Gouverneur Morris, Philip Schuyler, and a dozen more—and the conclusion that the Revolution was a thoroughly upper-middle-class affair in leadership and aim is inescapable.

A further and perhaps more important conclusion should be drawn from this analysis of the political careers of the signers after the Revolution. These conservative, upper-class leaders who proclaimed the Revolution suffered no repudiation in the course of the struggle; no mass from the bottom rose and seized control of the Revolutionary situation to direct the struggle into new channels. Rather these men merely shifted, as it were, from their favored status under the colonial regimes to comparable, if not improved, positions after the Revolution.

As a colonial revolt against an alien power, such a development is not surprising. But certainly—for better or for worse—the continuity brought a degree of social and political stability to the new nation rarely associated with the word "revolution" and serves, once again, to illustrate the truly conservative nature of the American revolt.

Similarly, in the redistribution of land, which played such a crucial role in France and Russia, the American Revolution set no example of social motivation or consequence. The Crown's lands, it is true were confiscated, and—of greater

import—so were the lands of the proprietors and those of the literally thousands of Tories. But the disposition of these lands hardly constitutes a social revolution of major proportions. One can collect, of course, examples of the breakup of great estates, like the De Lancey manor in New York, which was sold to 275 individuals, or the 40,000-acre estate in North Carolina which was carved into scores of plots averaging 200 acres apiece, or the vast 21,000,000-acre proprietary lands of the Penns. But the more significant question to be answered is who got the land. And, from the studies which have been made, it would appear that most often the land went to speculators or men already possessing substantial acreage, not to the landless or even to the small holder. To be sure, much Tory land which first fell under the auctioneer's hammer to a speculator ultimately found its way into the hands of a yeoman, but such a procedure is a rather slow and orderly process of social revolution.

Furthermore, it is obvious from the Confiscation Acts in the several states and the commissioners who operated pursuant to them that the motive behind the acquisition of Tory lands was enhancement of the state revenues—as, indeed, the original resolution from Congress had suggested. Under such circumstances, pecuniary motives, not democratic theories of society, determined the configuration distribution would take. And it is here that we begin to touch upon the fundamental reason why the confiscation of the royal, proprietary, and Loyalist lands never assumed crucial social importance. Land was just too plentiful in America for these acres to matter. Speculators were loaded down with it; most men who wanted it already possessed it, or were on the way toward possession. One recent investigator of the confiscations in New York, for example, has pointed out that land there could be bought cheaper from speculators than from a former Tory estate.

Even the abolition of primogeniture in all the southern states by 1791 cannot be taken as a significant example of the Revolution's economic influence. The fact of the matter is that primogeniture had never appreciably affected land distribution, since it came into play only when the owner died intestate. Considering the notorious litigiousness of eighteenth-century Americans, it is hardly to be doubted that partible inheritance was the practice, if not the theory, long before primogeniture was wiped from the statute books. Furthermore, in almost half of the country—New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and all of the New England states—primogeniture never prevailed anyway.

As for the abolition of entail, it was frequently welcomed by owners of entailed estates, as was the case in Jefferson's Virginia, since it would permit the sale of otherwise frozen assets. These laws had not created a landed aristocracy in America and their repeal made no significant alteration in the social landscape.

Instead of being an abrupt break, the Revolution was a natural and even expected event in the history of a colonial people who had come of age. It is true that social and political changes accompanied the Revolution, some of which were destined to work great influence upon American institutions in the future, but these had been implicit in the pre-Revolutionary society. Moreover, important social institutions were left untouched by the Revolution: the class structure, the distribution of property, the capitalistic economy, the ideas of the people concerning government.

This lack of profound and widespread social and economic change is not surprising. These Americans, for all their talk, had been a contented and prosperous people under the British Crown and they were, therefore, contented revolutionaries who wanted nothing more than to be undisturbed in their accustomed ways. They are in no wise to be compared with the disgruntled lawyers, the frustrated bourgeois, the tyrannized workers, and the land-hungry peasants of the *anciens régimes* of France and Russia.

Yet, in conclusion, it is perhaps fitting to recall that America was born in revolution, for this fact has become embedded in our folk and sophisticated traditions alike. It was apparent in the self-conscious, often naive enthusiasm displayed by American statesmen and people in support of the colonial rebellions in South America and in Greece in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Revolutionaries of the middle of the century, like Louis Kossuth [Hungary] and [Giuseppe] Garibaldi [Italy], garnered moral and material benefits from this continuing American friendship for rebellion. European exiles and revolutionaries of 1848 were entertained at the London residence of United States Minister James Buchanan. And it is still apparent today. The declarations of independence of Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam in 1945 and Ian Smith's Rhodesia in 1965 both begin with quotations from the United States Declaration of Independence! And [President Gamal Abdel] Nasser of Egypt, at the time of the United States intervention in Lebanon in July, 1958, taunted Americans with their revolutionary tradition. "How can the United States, which pushed off British colonialism many years ago, forget its history?" he shouted to a crowd in Damascus.

An anticolonial tradition of such weight could not fail to leave its stamp upon American attitudes. . . . It was invoked again and again in debates over American foreign policy, and its continuing influence is evident in the movement of former colonies like Hawaii and Alaska into statehood and the Philippines into independence. Long before, in the era of the Revolution, American leaders, profiting from the lessons of Britain's imperial problems, agreed in the Ordinance of 1787 and the Constitution that newly acquired territories could attain, in the natural course of events, equal constitutional status with the original thirteen states. Thus, in a single stroke, Americans sidestepped the tensions and divisions attendant upon a colonial empire and laid the enduring foundations for an expanding and united country.

Constitutional devices, however, no matter how clever or farsighted, cannot of themselves create a new people. The forces of economics and geography can wreak havoc with the best laid plans of Founding Fathers. Whether Americans would retain their independence and become a truly united people was to be determined only by time and the people themselves.

Notes

1. This is not to say, however, that disestablishment of all churches was brought about by the Revolution. All of the New England states, with the exception of Rhode Island—still loyal to Roger Williams in this respect—continued to support the Congregational Church.

2. Just because the so-called conservatives dominated the Constitutional Convention, such religious indifference was possible. Generally the radicals during the Revolutionary era were in favor of state support or recognition of some religion. Thus in the states where the radicals dominated, religious tests were part of the Constitution: Georgia (all members of the legislature had to be Protestants); North Carolina (no one could hold office who denied "God or the truth of the Protestant religion"); and Pennsylvania (the test oath demanded a belief in one God and his rewarding and punishing, and the acknowledgment that the Old and New Testaments were "given by Divine Inspiration"). The contrast with the Constitutional Convention of 1787 is striking. The Continental Congress, which had been dominated by the radicals, always opened its deliberations with chaplain-led prayers; the Convention of 1787, however, failed to have either a chaplain or prayers, though Franklin made an eloquent plea for both. He wrote later that "the Convention except three or four persons thought Prayers unnecessary." Whereas the Declaration of Independence refers to "God" and "Divine Providence," such words are completely absent from the "conservative" Constitution—much to the mystification of modern conservatives.
3. Schoepf, interestingly enough, discovered in the economic opportunities available in America the source of the social equality. "Riches make no positive material difference," he wrote concerning Philadelphia society, "because in this regard every man expects at one time or another to be on a footing with his rich neighbor, and in this expectation shows him no knavish reverence, but treats him with an open, but seemly familiarity."
4. William Nelson, *American Tory* (Oxford, 1961), suggests in his last chapter that America lost an organic or conservative view of society with the departure of the Loyalists. Insofar as that is true, it would reinforce the liberal bias that has been so characteristic of American political and social thought.



The Radicalism of the American Revolution

We Americans like to think of our revolution as not being radical; indeed, most of the time we consider it downright conservative. It certainly does not appear to resemble the revolutions of other nations in which people were killed, property was destroyed, and everything was turned upside down. The American revolutionary leaders do not fit our conventional image of revolutionaries—angry, passionate, reckless, maybe even bloodthirsty for the sake of a cause. We can think of Robespierre, Lenin, and Mao Zedong as revolutionaries, but not George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. They seem too stuffy, too solemn, too cautious, too much the gentlemen. We cannot quite conceive of revolutionaries in powdered hair and knee breeches. The American revolutionaries seem to belong in drawing rooms or legislative halls, not in cellars or in the streets. They made speeches, not bombs; they wrote learned pamphlets, not manifestos. They were not abstract theorists and they were not social levelers. They did not kill one another; they did not devour themselves. There was no reign of terror in the American Revolution and no resultant dictator—no Cromwell, no Bonaparte. The American Revolution does not seem to have the same kinds of causes—the social wrongs, the class conflict, the impoverishment, the grossly inequitable distributions of wealth—that presumably lie behind other revolutions. There were no peasant uprisings, no jacqueries, no burning of châteaux, no storming of prisons.

Of course, there have been many historians—Progressive or neo-Progressive historians, as they have been called—who have sought, as Hannah Arendt put it, “to interpret the American Revolution in the light of the French Revolution,” and to look for the same kinds of internal violence, class conflict, and social deprivation that presumably lay behind the French Revolution and other modern revolutions. Since the beginning of the twentieth century these Progressive historians have formulated various social interpretations of the American Revolution essentially designed to show that the Revolution, in Carl Becker’s famous words, was not only about “home rule” but also about “who was to rule at home.” They have tried to describe the Revolution essentially as a social struggle by deprived and underprivileged groups against entrenched elites. But, it has been correctly pointed out, despite an extraordinary amount of research

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and writing during a good part of this century, the purposes of these Progressive and neo-Progressive historians—"to portray the origins and goals of the Revolution as in some significant measure expressions of a peculiar economic malaise or of the social protests and aspirations of an impoverished or threatened mass population—have not been fulfilled." They have not been fulfilled because the social conditions that generically are supposed to lie behind all revolutions—poverty and economic deprivation—were not present in colonial America. There should no longer be any doubt about it: the white American colonists were not an oppressed people; they had no crushing imperial chains to throw off. In fact, the colonists knew they were freer, more equal, more prosperous, and less burdened with cumbersome feudal and monarchical restraints than any other part of mankind in the eighteenth century. Such a situation, however, does not mean that colonial society was not susceptible to revolution.

Precisely because the impulses to revolution in eighteenth-century America bear little or no resemblance to the impulses that presumably account for modern social protests and revolutions, we have tended to think of the American Revolution as having no social character, as having virtually nothing to do with the society, as having no social causes and no social consequences. It has therefore often been considered to be essentially an intellectual event, a constitutional defense of American rights against British encroachments ("no taxation without representation"), undertaken not to change the existing structure of society but to preserve it. For some historians the Revolution seems to be little more than a colonial rebellion or a war for independence. Even when we have recognized the radicalism of the Revolution, we admit only a political, not a social radicalism. The revolutionary leaders, it is said, were peculiar "eighteenth-century radicals concerned, like the eighteenth-century British radicals, not with the need to recast the social order nor with the problems of the economic inequality and the injustices of stratified societies but with the need to purify a corrupt constitution and fight off the apparent growth of prerogative power." Consequently, we have generally described the Revolution as an unusually conservative affair, concerned almost exclusively with politics and constitutional rights, and, in comparison with the social radicalism of the other great revolutions of history, hardly a revolution at all.

If we measure the radicalism of revolutions by the degree of social misery or economic deprivation suffered, or by the number of people killed or manor houses burned, then this conventional emphasis on the conservatism of the American Revolution becomes true enough. But if we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place—by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other—then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary: it was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history. Of course, the American Revolution was very different from other revolutions. But it was no less radical and no less social for being different. In fact, it was one of the greatest revolutions the world has known, a momentous upheaval that not only fundamentally altered the character of American society but decisively affected the course of subsequent history.

It was as radical and social as any revolution in history, but it was radical and social in a very special eighteenth-century sense. No doubt many of the concerns and much of the language of that premodern, pre-Marxian eighteenth century were almost entirely political. That was because most people in that very different distant world could not as yet conceive of society apart from government. The social distinctions and economic deprivations that we today think of as the consequence of class divisions, business exploitation, or various isms—capitalism, racism, etc.—were in the eighteenth century usually thought to be caused by the abuses of government. Social honors, social distinctions, perquisites of office, business contracts, privileges and monopolies, even excessive property and wealth of various sorts—all social evils and social deprivations—in fact seemed to flow from connections to government, in the end from connections to monarchical authority. So that when Anglo-American radicals talked in what seems to be only political terms—purifying a corrupt constitution, eliminating courtiers, fighting off crown power, and, most important, becoming republicans—they nevertheless had a decidedly social message. In our eyes the American revolutionaries appear to be absorbed in changing only their governments, not their society. But in destroying monarchy and establishing republics they were changing their society as well as their governments, and they knew it. Only they did not know—they could scarcely have imagined—how much of their society they would change. J. Franklin Jameson, who more than two generations ago described the Revolution as a social movement only to be roundly criticized by a succeeding generation of historians, was at least right about one thing: “the stream of revolution, once started, could not be confined within narrow banks, but spread abroad upon the land.”

By the time the Revolution had run its course in the early nineteenth century, American society had been radically and thoroughly transformed. One class did not overthrow another; the poor did not supplant the rich. But social relationships—the way people were connected one to another—were changed, and decisively so. By the early years of the nineteenth century the Revolution had created a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world.

That revolution did more than legally create the United States; it transformed American society. Because the story of America has turned out the way it has, because the United States in the twentieth century has become the great power that it is, it is difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate and recover fully the insignificant and puny origins of the country. In 1760 America was only a collection of disparate colonies huddled along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast—economically underdeveloped outposts existing on the very edges of the civilized world. The less than two million monarchical subjects who lived in these colonies still took for granted that society was and ought to be a hierarchy of ranks and degrees of dependency and that most people were bound together by personal ties of one sort or another. Yet scarcely fifty years later these insignificant borderland provinces had become a giant, almost continentwide republic of nearly ten million egalitarian-minded bustling citizens who not only had thrust themselves into the vanguard of history but had fundamentally altered

their society and their social relationships. Far from remaining monarchical, hierarchy-ridden subjects on the margin of civilization, Americans had become almost overnight, the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world.

And this astonishing transformation took place without industrialization, without urbanization, without railroads, without the aid of any of the great forces we usually invoke to explain "modernization." It was the Revolution that was crucial to this transformation. It was the Revolution, more than any other single event, that made America into the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world.

Of course, some nations of Western Europe likewise experienced great social transformations and "democratic revolutions" in these same years. The American Revolution was not unique; it was only different. Because of this shared Western-wide experience in democratization, it has been argued by more than one historian that the broader social transformation that carried Americans from one century and one kind of society to another was "inevitable" and "would have been completed with or without the American Revolution." Therefore this broader social revolution should not be confused with the American Revolution. America, it is said, would have emerged into the modern world as a liberal, democratic, and capitalistic society even without the Revolution. One could, of course, say the same thing about the relationship between the French Revolution and the emergence of France in the nineteenth century as a liberal, democratic, and capitalistic society; and indeed, much of the current revisionist historical writing on the French Revolution is based on just such a distinction. But in America, no more than in France, that was not the way it happened: the American Revolution and the social transformation of America between 1760 and the early years of the nineteenth century were inextricably bound together. Perhaps the social transformation would have happened "in any case," but we will never know. It was in fact linked to the Revolution; they occurred together. The American Revolution was integral to the changes occurring in American society, politics, and culture at the end of the eighteenth century.

These changes were radical, and they were extensive. To focus, as we are today apt to do, on what the Revolution did not accomplish—highlighting and lamenting its failure to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women—is to miss the great significance of what it did accomplish; indeed, the Revolution made possible the anti-slavery and women's rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking. The Revolution not only radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, including the position of women, but also destroyed aristocracy as it had been understood in the Western world for at least two millennia. The Revolution brought respectability and even dominance to ordinary people long held in contempt and gave dignity to their menial labor in a manner unprecedented in history and to a degree not equaled elsewhere in the world. The Revolution did not just eliminate monarchy and create republics; it actually reconstituted what Americans meant by public or state power and brought about an entirely new kind of popular politics and a new kind of democratic

officeholder. The Revolution not only changed the culture of Americans—making over their art, architecture, and iconography—but even altered their understanding of history, knowledge, and truth. Most important, it made the interests and prosperity of ordinary people—their pursuits of happiness—the goal of society and government. The Revolution did not merely create a political and legal environment conducive to economic expansion; it also released powerful popular entrepreneurial and commercial energies that few realized existed and transformed the economic landscape of the country. In short, the Revolution was the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history. . . .



By the late 1760s and early 1770s a potentially revolutionary situation existed in many of the colonies. There was little evidence of those social conditions we often associate with revolution (and some historians have desperately sought to find): no mass poverty, no seething social discontent, no grinding oppression. For most white Americans there was greater prosperity than anywhere else in the world; in fact, the experience of that growing prosperity contributed to the unprecedented eighteenth-century sense that people here and now were capable of ordering their own reality. Consequently, there was a great deal of jealousy and touchiness everywhere, for what could be made could be unmade; the people were acutely nervous about their prosperity and the liberty that seemed to make it possible. With the erosion of much of what remained of traditional social relationships, more and more individuals had broken away from their families, communities, and patrons and were experiencing the anxiety of freedom and independence. Social changes, particularly since the 1740s, multiplied rapidly, and many Americans struggled to make sense of what was happening. These social changes were complicated, and they are easily misinterpreted. Luxury and conspicuous consumption by very ordinary people were increasing. So, too, was religious dissent of all sorts. The rich became richer, and aristocratic gentry everywhere became more conspicuous and self-conscious; and the numbers of poor in some cities and the numbers of landless in some areas increased. But social classes based on occupation or wealth did not set themselves against one another, for no classes in this modern sense yet existed. The society was becoming more unequal, but its inequalities were not the source of the instability and anxiety. Indeed, it was the pervasive equality of American society that was causing the problems. . . .

This extraordinary touchiness, this tendency of the colonists in their political disputes to argue "with such vehemence as if all had been at Stake," flowed from the precariousness of American society, from its incomplete and relatively flattened character, and from the often "rapid ascendancy" of its aristocracy, particularly in the Deep South, where families "in less than ten years have risen from the lowest rank, have acquired upward of £100,000 and have, moreover, gained this wealth in a simple and easy manner." Men who had quickly risen to the top were confident and aggressive but also vulnerable to challenge, especially sensitive over their liberty and independence, and unwilling to brook any interference with their status or their prospects.

For other, more ordinary colonists the promises and uncertainties of American life were equally strong. Take, for example, the lifelong struggle of farmer and sawmill owner Moses Cooper of Glocester, Rhode Island, to rise from virtual insignificance to become the richest man in the town. In 1767–68, at the age of sixty, Cooper was finally able to hire sufficient slaves and workers to do all his manual labor; he became a gentleman and justice of the peace and appended “Esq.” to his name. Certainly by this date he could respond to the rhetoric of his fellow Rhode Islanders talking about their colony as “the promised land . . . a land of milk and honey and wherein we eat bread to the full . . . a land whose stones are iron . . . and . . . other choice mines and minerals; and a land whose rivers and adjacent seas are stored with the best of fish.” And Cooper might well have added, “whose forests were rich with timber,” for he had made his money from lumber. Yet at the same time Cooper knew only too well the precariousness of his wealth and position and naturally feared what Britain’s mercantile restrictions might mean for his lumber sales to the West Indies. What had risen so high could as readily fall: not surprisingly, he became an enthusiastic patriot leader of his tiny town of Glocester. Multiply Cooper’s experience of uneasy prosperity many thousandfold and we have the stuff of a popular revolutionary movement.

... The great social antagonists of the American Revolution were not poor vs. rich, workers vs. employers, or even democrats vs. aristocrats. They were patriots vs. courtiers—categories appropriate to the monarchical world in which the colonists had been reared. Courtiers were persons whose position or rank came artificially from above—from hereditary or personal connections that ultimately flowed from the crown or court. Courtiers, said John Adams, were those who applied themselves “to the Passions and Prejudices, the Follies and Vices of Great Men in order to obtain their Smiles, Esteem, and Patronage and consequently their favors and Preferments. Patriots, on the other hand, were those who not only loved their country but were free of dependent connections and influence; their position or rank came naturally from their talent and from below, from recognition by the people. “A real patriot,” declared one American in 1776, was “the most illustrious character in human life. Is not the interest and happiness of his fellow creatures his care?” . . .

It is in this context that we can best understand the revolutionaries’ appeal to independence, not just the independence of the country from Great Britain, but, more important, the independence of individuals from personal influence and “warm and private friendship.” The purpose of the Virginia constitution of 1776, one Virginian recalled, was “to prevent the undue and overwhelming influence of great landholders in elections.” This was to be done by disfranchising the landless “tenants and retainers” who depended “on the breath and varying will” of these great men and by ensuring that only men who owned their own land could vote.

A republic presumed, as the Virginia declaration of rights put it, that men in the new republic would be “equally free and independent,” and property would make them so. Property in a republic was still conceived of traditionally—in proprietary terms—not as a means of personal profit or aggrandizement but rather as a source of personal authority or independence. It was regarded not

merely as a material possession but also as an attribute of a man's personality that defined him and protected him from outside pressure. A carpenter's skill, for example, was his property. Jefferson feared the rabble of the cities precisely because they were without property and were thus dependent.

All dependents without property, such as women and young men, could be denied the vote because, as a convention of Essex County, Massachusetts, declared in 1778, they were so situated as to have no wills of their own." Jefferson was so keen on this equation of property with citizenship that he proposed in 1776 that the new state of Virginia grant fifty acres of land to every man that did not have that many. Without having property and a will of his own—without having independence—a man could have no public spirit; and there could be no republic. For, as Jefferson put it, "dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition."

In a monarchical world of numerous patron-client relations and multiple degrees of dependency, nothing could be more radical than this attempt to make every man independent. What was an ideal in the English-speaking world now became for Americans an ideological imperative. Suddenly, in the eyes of the revolutionaries, all the fine calibrations of rank and degrees of unfreedom of the traditional monarchical society became absurd and degrading. The Revolution became a full-scale assault on dependency.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century the English radical whig and deist John Toland had divided all society into those who were free and those who were dependent. "By *Freeman*," wrote Toland, "I understand men of property, or persons that are able to live of themselves; and those who cannot subsist in this independence, I call *Servants*." In such a simple division everyone who was not free was presumed to be a servant. Anyone tied to someone else, who was someone's client or dependent, was servile. The American revolutionary movement now brought to the surface this latent logic in eighteenth-century radical whig thinking.

Dependency was now equated with slavery, and slavery in the American world had a conspicuous significance. "What is a slave," asked a New Jersey writer in 1765, "but one who depends upon the will of another for the enjoyment of his life and property?" "Liberty," said Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, quoting Algernon Sidney, "solely consists in an independence upon the will of another; and by the name of slave we understand a man who can neither dispose of his person or goods, but enjoys all at the will of his master." It was left to John Adams in 1775 to draw the ultimate conclusion and to destroy in a single sentence the entire conception of society as a hierarchy of graded ranks and degrees. "There are," said Adams simply, "but two *sorts* of men in the world, freemen and slaves." Such a stark dichotomy collapsed all the delicate distinctions and dependencies of a monarchical society and created radical and momentous implications for Americans.

Independence, declared David Ramsay in a memorable Fourth of July oration in 1778, would free Americans from that monarchical world where "favor is the source of preferment," and where "he that can best please his superiors, by the low arts of fawning and adulation, is most likely to obtain favor." The revolutionaries wanted to create a new republican world in which

"all offices lie open to men of merit, of whatever rank or condition." They believed that "even the reins of state may be held by the son of the poorest men, if possessed of abilities equal to the important station." They were "no more to look up for the blessings of government to hungry courtiers, or the needy dependents of British nobility"; but they had now to educate their "own children for these exalted purposes." Like Stephen Burroughs, the author of an extraordinary memoir of these years, the revolutionaries believed they were "so far republican" that they considered "a man's merit to rest entirely with himself, without any regard to family, blood, or connection." We can never fully appreciate the emotional meaning these commonplace statements had for the revolutionaries until we take seriously their passionate antagonism to the prevalence of patronage and family influence in the *ancien régime*.

Of course, the revolutionary leaders did not expect poor, humble men—farmers, artisans, or tradesmen—themselves to gain high political office. Rather, they expected that the sons of such humble or ungenteel men, if they had abilities, would, as they had, acquire liberal and genteel republican attributes, perhaps by attending Harvard or the College of New Jersey at Princeton, and would thereby rise into the ranks of gentlemen and become eligible for high political office. The sparks of genius that they hoped republicanism would fan and kindle into flame belonged to men like themselves—men "drawn from obscurity" by the new opportunities of republican competition and emulation into becoming "illustrious characters, which will dazzle the world with the splendor of their names." Honor, interest, and patriotism together called them to qualify themselves and posterity "for the 'bench, the army, the navy, the learned professions, and all the departments of civil government." They would become what Jefferson called the "natural aristocracy"—liberally educated, enlightened gentlemen of character. For many of the revolutionary leaders this was the emotional significance of republicanism—a vindication of frustrated talent at the expense of birth and blood. For too long, they felt, merit had been denied. In a monarchical world only the arts and sciences had recognized talent as the sole criterion of leadership. Which is why even the eighteenth-century *ancien régime* called the world of the arts and sciences "the republic of letters." Who, it was asked, remembered the fathers or sons of Homer and Euclid? Such a question was a republican dagger driven into the heart of the old hereditary order. "Virtue," said Thomas Paine simply, "is not hereditary." . . .

In their revolutionary state constitutions and laws the revolutionaries struck out at the power of family and hereditary privilege. In the decades following the Revolution all the new states abolished the legal devices of primogeniture and entail where they existed, either by statute or by writing the abolition into their constitutions. These legal devices, as the North Carolina statute of 1784 stated, had tended "only to raise the wealth and importance of particular families and individuals, giving them an unequal and undue influence in a republic, and prove in manifold instances the source of great contention and injustice." Their abolition would therefore "tend to promote that equality of property which is of the spirit and principle of a genuine republic." . . .

Women and children no doubt remained largely dependent on their husbands and fathers, but the revolutionary attack on patriarchal monarchy

made all other dependencies in the society suspect. Indeed, once the revolutionaries collapsed all the different distinctions and dependencies of a monarchical society into either freemen or slaves, white males found it increasingly impossible to accept any dependent status whatsoever. Servitude of any sort suddenly became anomalous and anachronistic. In 1784 in New York, a group believing that indentured servitude was "contrary to . . . the idea of liberty this country has so happily established" released a shipload of immigrant servants and arranged for public subscriptions to pay for their passage. As early as 1775 in Philadelphia the proportion of the work force that was unfree—composed of servants and slaves—had already declined to 13 percent from the 40 to 50 percent that it had been at mid-century. By 1800 less than 2 percent of the city's labor force remained unfree. Before long indentured servitude virtually disappeared. . . .

One obvious dependency the revolutionaries did not completely abolish was that of nearly a half million Afro-American slaves, and their failure to do so, amidst all their high-blown talk of liberty, makes them seem inconsistent and hypocritical in our eyes. Yet it is important to realize that the Revolution suddenly and effectively ended the cultural climate that had allowed black slavery, as well as other forms of bondage and unfreedom, to exist throughout the colonial period without serious challenge. With the revolutionary movement, black slavery became excruciatingly conspicuous in a way that it had not been in the older monarchical society with its many calibrations and degrees of unfreedom; and Americans in 1775–76 began attacking it with a vehemence that was inconceivable earlier.

For a century or more the colonists had taken slavery more or less for granted as the most base and dependent status in a hierarchy of dependencies and a world of laborers. Rarely had they felt the need either to criticize black slavery or to defend it. Now, however, the republican attack on dependency compelled Americans to see the deviant character of slavery and to confront the institution as they never had to before. It was no accident that Americans in Philadelphia in 1775 formed the first anti-slavery society in the world. As long as most people had to work merely out of poverty and the need to provide for a living, slavery and other forms of enforced labor did not seem all that different from free labor. But the growing recognition that labor was not simply a common necessity of the poor but was in fact a source of increased wealth and prosperity for ordinary workers made slavery seem more and more anomalous. Americans now recognized that slavery in a republic of workers was an aberration, "a peculiar institution," and that if any Americans were to retain it, as southern Americans eventually did, they would have to explain and justify it in new racial and anthropological ways that their former monarchical society had never needed. The Revolution in effect set in motion ideological and social forces that doomed the institution of slavery in the North and led inexorably to the Civil War.

With all men now considered to be equally free citizens, the way was prepared as well for a radical change in the conception of state power. Almost at a stroke the Revolution destroyed all the earlier talk of paternal or maternal government, filial allegiance, and mutual contractual obligations between rulers and ruled. The familial image of government now lost all its previous relevance, and the state in America emerged as something very different from what it had been.

POSTSCRIPT



Was the American Revolution a Conservative Movement?

In arguing that the American Revolution was a conservative affair, Degler compares the American colonial leadership classes of lawyers, merchants, and planters with those who led similar revolutions later in France, Russia, and China. The American leadership was different, maintains Degler, because most held positions in government both before and after the Revolution. The goals of the American leaders also appear tame compared to revolutionaries in other countries. The Americans got rid of mercantilism but preserved capitalism. Also, loyalists were dispatched to Canada and England, but an upper middle class of pre-Revolutionary leaders remained in power.

Degler challenges the views of the earlier progressive historian J. Franklin Jameson, who argues in *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton University Press, 1926, 1967) that a radical transformation had taken place in the postwar distribution of land. Jameson also argues that the abolition of the slave trade and the separation of church and state were radical results of the American Revolution. And if the abolition of slavery and the attainment of equal rights for women were to come later, its roots were in the Revolutionary period.

Wood concedes that the American Revolution was not radical in the strict constructionist definition of the term. There were no major land reforms or political upheavals. Tories such as Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson were given a one-way ticket to England—not a trip to the guillotine. Nevertheless, Wood argues that the Revolution was radical and social in a special eighteenth-century, premodern, pre-Marxian sense. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, class divisions and economic exploration of the people resulted from abuses by corrupt, tyrannical governments run by various kings and queens. Once the monarchy was overthrown, says Wood, the American Revolution created “a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century.”

Although Degler and Wood disagree on whether the American Revolution was radical or conservative, their arguments converge in several areas. Degler sees the disestablishment of the Anglican Church and the acceptance of the separation of the church from the state as an unintended result of the Revolution. Both Degler and Wood concede that deference to authority was weakened and that small farmers entered state legislatures, a number of state capitals were moved west, and legislative sessions were opened to the public. Obviously, the new social history caused both historians to think about the long-range effects of the Revolution on the rights of women and the eventual abolition of slavery.