

The Revolution Preserved Social Inequality

BARBARA CLARK SMITH

The Radicalism of the American Revolution is a powerful and ambitious work, a synthesis that aspires to reinterpret events that Americans have long seen as central to their identity as a nation. Gordon Wood states his purpose in the title: his book will explicate ways in which the American Revolution was radical, establishing that it was, in fact, "as radical and as revolutionary as any [such upheaval] in history." But if the radicalism of the era is crucial to Wood, it remains in his hands an elusive and unsatisfying characterization. Seventeenth-century English revolutionaries toppled a king and embraced startling, leveling, and millennial ideas. Eighteenth-century French revolutionaries went so far as to abolish slavery and consider the rights of women as citizens of the republic. And in early nineteenth-century Peru, an anticolonial revolution produced the impulse to include Native Americans as "Peruvians." In the light of such events, how are we to understand Wood's repeated emphasis on the radicalism of the American case? . . .

What were the characteristics that made the Revolution radical? Most obviously, perhaps, Wood means that it was extensive and sweeping. No quick explosion of colonial resentment, American Independence had roots deep in the colonial past and came to fruition in the experience of subsequent generations. As Wood constructs it, the American Revolution consisted of more than the two decades of turmoil that consume a full semester in many college courses. His synthetic account, he suggests, will offer a larger view. Some historians cite John Adams, who said that the Revolution took place well before Independence in the hearts and minds of the American people; others quote Benjamin Rush, who declared that the Revolution would not be complete until the institutions of American society were transformed in accordance with the premises of liberty. Wood deftly and ambitiously incorporates both emphases; his revolution is a long revolution, and it happens twice.

It happens first to a society steeped in the principles of monarchy. Colonial America was obsessed with dependencies, premised on patriarchal authority, caught up with degrees and subordinations, organized around personal connections and political influence, committed above all to hierarchy. That society had republican aspects nonetheless, for the colonies suffered from a weak aristocracy, unruly commoners, and a mobile population increasingly given to commerce and consuming. These elements of republicanism became so pronounced that the Revolutionaries were able to slough off monarchy rather effortlessly when the time came. . . . But Wood's revolution occurs decades later as well, in a democratic phase, as republicanism (which, after all, was already pervasive in American society and, as such, is not easily posed as an agent of sweeping change) yielded to democracy, as the pretensions of aristocracy fell and the defense of gentlemanly merit increasingly fell on deaf ears. In this moment Wood finds the "real revolution," a transformation that took place in the nineteenth century. . . .

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As to what was radical about this, readers receive various and conflicting indications. Patriot leaders, Wood points out, adopted a radically new way of seeing themselves and their world. Born in a society that reserved political authority for men of birth and breeding, they imagined and dared to embrace the notion that men of humble origins might merit political rule. . . .

Within pages, however, those patriots' achievement melts into air. Readers learn that the Revolution was not republican at all. . . . In the aftermath of the Revolution, with the coming of the Jacksonian age, Americans faced the limits of human virtue, dismissed their utopian ideals, and accepted the invisible hand of self-interest as the basis for social and political life. The radicalism of the Revolution, it emerges, was not republicanism but its abandonment. . . .

Reserving the term "revolutionaries" for an elite makes it possible, even necessary, for Wood to leave out significant parts of the resistance movement. There is a gap at the middle, at the heart, of his dual revolution. If he offers more than the usual college course on Revolutionary America, he also offers less. A section entitled "Revolution" occupies twenty out of 369 pages of text. Neither there nor elsewhere do readers learn substantial amounts about these topics and events: the Boston Tea Party, the Boston Massacre; the gathering of Sons of Liberty; women mobilizing to disuse tea and take up the spinning wheel; merchants and artisans negotiating over terms of nonimportation; committees of correspondence feverishly linking inland villages and seaports; committees of inspection cementing a cross-class patriot coalition by enforcing the Continental Association of 1774; wartime antiroyal mobs and struggles against monopolists and price gougers. In this revolution there is no heroism, delinquency, or treason; no one fought this revolution (save George Washington, who took no salary for it). Although the federal Constitution comes in for discussion, the bulk of what counts as "the Revolution" in many courses and monographs is barely here.

Readers receive no picture of the unfolding of resistance, the moves and counter-moves of different actors, the reluctance of merchants and the energy of artisans; the fears of indebted slaveholders as they faced fervent evangelicals and unruly African-American workers. Wood doesn't march us through the familiar course of events, and for that we might well be grateful, save for this effect: he has thereby omitted the means by which the patriot coalition, a coalition across region, rank, interest, and belief, was achieved. . . .

There is too little here, for example, about popular ideas of liberty and popular political forms. Wood does not consider whether the relatively humble patriots who joined the Revolution actively shaped the coalition and contributed their own understanding of events. If there was something radical about the era, it seems, it could not be the plebeian capacity for interracial alliance, for running away, rising up, contesting the law, and otherwise presuming their own competence to occupy a public terrain. If there was something radical about patriot leaders, it could not be their capacity to ally themselves and hence negotiate with those beneath them on the social scale. So the long sweep of Wood's Revolution, from colonial society to Jacksonian America, takes place at the surface, absent a careful account of revolutionary events, absent the agency of artisans, sailors, and foot soldiers, absent the full daring of elite patriots, who staked their all on their inferiors' competence to resist constituted authority and to commit themselves to liberty. . . .

... To accept much of Wood's argument, to follow his use of terms, readers must absorb an imperative: although many things have happened in this history, we allow only some of them to count....

Indeed, it is noteworthy that what interests Wood most about African-American slavery is whether that institution was conspicuous to eighteenth-century Euro-Americans.... Most slaveholders and others saw no evil, Wood tells us, as if that were all we need to know about them or as if theirs were the only subjectivities that mattered. Surely African-American slavery was conspicuous to some Americans: it depends on who was looking....

We might imagine a radical revolution in the eighteenth century, centered in the vision and the acts of those Americans—patriot and tory, black and white—who extended the imperatives of liberty from the imperial controversy to relationships at home. The radical moment in some Americans' revolution came when they looked anew at slavery. Although some Founding Fathers would still figure as revolutionaries in this story and although the narrative would still unfold in the nineteenth century, its center would substantially shift outside elite hands and elite vision.

One is left with the impression that Wood's purpose is less to discover American radicalism than to avoid acknowledging radicalisms of the wrong kind. He plays down historical reservations about the market to suggest an unproblematic relationship between ordinary people and consumption.... Yet in one crucial decade, from 1765 to 1775, colonists high and low sought liberty by rallying around a critique of consumption and withdrawing from the British market.... Antebellum Americans were strongly evangelical, Wood says, but he does not note that many looked to religion—as to trade unionism, political participation, and social reform—precisely to give their individualistic, consuming society some moral compass. Instead, Wood resolves the Revolution into a comfortable, democratic nineteenth-century society that was, after all, good enough for everyone. What, in the end, does Wood mean when he characterizes the American Revolution as radical? At heart, I think, he means that it was adequate.

Edmund S. Morgan once noted that most Americans seem to think that the American Revolution was "a good thing." Morgan's characteristic understatement contains a wealth of insight. Few historians or others approach the Revolution freshly.... Revolutionary ideas and events lay claim to Americans' loyalty.... Americans do not have to accord sacred status to the intentions of the Founders to feel implicated in the American Revolution or obligated by its commitments and aspirations.... In this culture, the Revolution has claims.

It is because of that context, I think, that *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* remains insistent that for Revolutionaries we look to the Founders and for radicalism we ultimately look to impersonal demographic and commercial forces.... This book invokes the American Revolution as a powerful legitimating narrative and attaches it to the socioeconomic changes of the early nineteenth century. There is more to this than harnessing our approval of the Revolution to nineteenth-century capitalism, making mobile, competitive, and individualistic elements of the Jacksonian era not just revolutionary but American Revolutionary, hence worthy of celebration and deference....

... Wood commits himself to overstating the impact of Revolution, constructing a unidimensional, fully adequate revolutionary legacy. That commitment renders the relationship between the Revolution and the freedom of people not initially

included in its blessing far too transparent, linear, and simple than it was and remains. Wood's revolution takes too much credit. It slights the agency of those who did struggle to end slavery and makes it difficult to comprehend or even credit those who opposed abolition. "American 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.... 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." But Revolutionaries and their followers defended slavery too. Those who believed that slavery was the bedrock of the republic were drawing on their Revolutionary heritage every bit as surely as those who cast the Constitution as a compact with the devil....

Wood silently rejects the argument that slavery and freedom were less coincident, contradictory growths than two formations that implied and assumed each other, phenomena "joined at the hip"... Wood does not attend to the ways that the bonds of slavery loosened and then tightened again in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.... [M]aking a defense of slavery necessary was not the same as making a defense of slavery impossible.

Yet Wood persists in constructing a Revolution and a Jacksonian society sufficient to all. In his account, women of any circumstance figure largely as an absence. The Revolution failed to liberate women in this period, he notes, although it would do so later. But the Revolution was not a transhistorical agent that could go marching through the ages to bestow economic, social, or political rights on waiting womanhood. Women's inequality was a presence in the nineteenth century, and present with it were ideological versions of women's nature that have profoundly affected female Americans for over a century. Take women's responsibility for virtue. As Wood himself notes, having adopted self-interest as the basis of politics and society, American culture did not dispense with virtue but placed it under the custodial care of middle-class women. At the same time that self-interest became what participation in public life was about, women were given the virtue that made it crucial that they not participate.

Thus neither women nor enslaved African Americans were left out of American freedom; both were included in it within critical, unfree, and arguably necessary roles.... This Revolution did not bring "a full-scale assault on dependency" so much as a reformulation of dependence that banished it from the consciousness of the public world, set apart African Americans, children, women, tenants, and other poor people, remade the American state, recast forms of participation, and constructed a narrative of the Revolution and of American-ness without their aspirations, experiences, and agency. Such omission was necessary and real, in part as a denial of the dependence of the heads of households, the supposedly independent and sometimes even self-made men of the nineteenth century, who in fact relied on the labor they controlled and denied in the home, the fields, and the mills.

For Wood, I think, such arguments appear to be quibbling, stressing the things the Revolution did not do, when in fact it accomplished so much. The Revolution made possible later movements for abolition and women's rights "and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking," he writes. Others would suggest that those movements and that thinking have also taken place against the weight of the American past, for

the Revolution extended and contained liberty. It offered a particular heritage of participation, particular possibilities for public life, but not others . . .

The Revolution Destroyed Monarchy and Paved the Way for Democracy

GORDON S. WOOD

Smith, like other neo-Progressive or New Left historians, believes that radicalism means "substantive change in the lot of those who were most oppressed, subjugated, or marginal in the society." In her opinion, these most oppressed, subjugated, or marginal were African-American slaves, women, and other "have-nots" on the very bottom of American society.

No one denies that these groups were oppressed in various ways, as most people were in premodern times, and that black slaves especially endured a subjugation rarely duplicated in the history of the world. . . . I do not ignore issues of slavery and gender or of ethnicity. . . . To be sure, I do not repeat . . . dozens of monographs on race and gender over the past few decades, but I believe I have set these issues in their proper context for fully understanding them. . . . and have correctly set forth the essential challenges the Revolution made to the position of women and to slavery, including explaining the origins of the first emancipation and the abolition movement.

No doubt I spent less time than Smith . . . would have liked or expected on the lot of slaves and women in the Revolution. . . . But I never intended merely to synthesize contemporary scholarship. Of course, my book does rely heavily on the writing of many historians. . . . But it tries to be much more than a simple summing up of existing scholarship; it also aims to say something new and original about the Revolution, to see it from an unconventional, if not unfashionable, perspective—which is why . . . "the bulk of what counts as 'the Revolution' in many courses and monographs is barely here."

What I hoped to do was press beyond the issues of contemporary scholarship, which often deal with past oppressions of women and blacks in a very present-minded manner, to retrieve a kind of oppression that has been lost to us. There existed in the premodern world another, more general sort of oppression that I believe the Revolution eliminated, a comprehensive oppression that subsumed the oppression of both slaves and women and in which all ordinary people had a stake.

This oppression involved all common ordinary Americans, including not only blacks and women but white males as well. This oppression was, of course, scarcely comparable to the particular degradation suffered by African-American slaves; nevertheless, its elimination had to precede the elimination of the oppression of blacks and women. The age-old humiliation felt by all commoners in the premodern world is by no means as well known today as that experienced by black slaves and women, and for that reason I thought it was worth emphasizing. . . . Because this oppression of all ordinary people is not an issue of our own time in the way race, gender, and ethnicity are, it is not easy to get present-minded historians . . . to

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understand it. In fact, so absorbed in the present cultural wars are they that it is inconceivable to them that any white males in the past, unless they were sailors or homeless or very poor, could ever have been oppressed or have felt oppressed. They imply that only those who are oppressed or marginalized in our own time were capable of being oppressed two centuries ago. If the Revolution did not totally abolish slavery and fundamentally change the lot of women, then it could not possibly have been radical. In other words, there is something profoundly anachronistic about their conception of the Revolution, as far as it is expressed in their critiques: they indict the Americans of the past for not thinking as we think and for not behaving as we would behave today. Consequently, they are unable to understand a document as fundamental to the Revolution as the Declaration of Independence.

We cannot appreciate the radical significance in 1776 of the Declaration's ringing affirmation that all men were created equal and had certain inalienable rights unless we understand the earlier presumptions of inequality and the contempt in which ordinary people, white as well as black, were held throughout previous history. What was radical about the Declaration in 1776? We know it did not mean that blacks and women were created equal to white men (although it would in time be used to justify those equalities too). It was radical in 1776 because it meant that all white men were equal. . . . In my book I wanted to get that point clear: for once the claim of equality by all white males was established in the eighteenth century (no mean feat since it took a few thousand years of Western history to accomplish), then the other claims to equality could follow and, relative to the total span of Western history, although not to our brief American past, follow rather rapidly.

So when Smith says that developments concerning social leveling are not central to my story, or . . . that I exclude from my account the ideals and passions of ordinary Americans, they could not be more mistaken. Central to my story is the struggle of ordinary people to emerge into consciousness and prominence; indeed, their emergence ultimately is what the radicalism of the Revolution is all about.

Contrary to what these critics say, my account is not written out of elite archives and is not merely a reflection of northeastern aristocrats. They assume that I am taking the point of view only of the Revolutionary leaders and the better sort and ignoring that of common ordinary people because I do not talk about Jack Tars or women in food riots or the homeless. The only ordinary people they can really conceive of are those on the very bottom of the society, usually the society's victims, whom they sentimentalize and wrap in a nostalgic mantle of romantic communalism. Common farmers, artisans, shopkeepers, petty merchants, photobusinessmen—those whom today we might label "lower-middle class" or "middle class"—these ordinary people have no real place in their consciousness.

Yet these sorts of ordinary people are the major actors in the Revolution and the major actors in my story. . . . The demographic and economic forces that I talked about are not some superhuman entities. They are merely shorthand terms for the actions of hundreds of thousands of these ordinary working people.

These common people did have spokesmen among the Revolutionary elite. . . . Jefferson was the most important of these spokesmen. Better than anyone else ever had, Jefferson articulated our basic American ideology—our belief in liberty and equality, our confidence in education, and our faith in the common sense of ordinary people. But Jefferson was not an ordinary working person—he was a slave-owning