

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

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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, protobusinessmen—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 workaday 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

aristocrat who never really worked a day in his life—and consequently he never fully saw the explosive implications of what he was saying. His words outran many of his intentions, and his common people became far more money-loving and religious than he ever imagined. Certainly, he had little awareness of the commercial nature of the popular forces he was leading.

But ordinary people themselves also became spokesmen for their cause, and they spoke with a degree of anger and feeling that the liberal intellectual Jefferson could never muster. I am thinking of middling men like William Findley, Matthew Lyon, and William Manning, men to whom I devote a good deal of attention in my book. These Scots-Irish immigrants, ex-weavers, ex-servants, uneducated farmers, and all the hundreds of thousands of lowly and middling folk they spoke for—these are the real heroes and principal agents of my story. . . . These men were intelligent and tough-minded exponents of the emerging democratic ideology. . . . They were the principal actors in Jefferson's democratic assault on the Federalist establishment and other remnants of an older hierarchical society. These ordinary people did not need the French Revolution to give their democratic movement its momentum. They had enough indigenous rage and resentment to make their revolution without the aid of a foreign model. They were determined to destroy the social pretensions of so-called or would-be aristocrats like Hugh Henry Brackenridge or Nathaniel Chipman or James Bowdoin and to establish the moral superiority of their hitherto despised labor. . . .

But Smith . . . can scarcely admit the existence of men like Findley, Lyon, and Manning because such white males do not fit the modern definition of oppressed people. Since the Revolution did not totally abolish black slavery or free women from patriarchal dependency, it could not have been radical; it could only have been, in Smith's word, "adequate."

How the Revolution could have been merely adequate if it transformed something as important as people's sense of equality and self-worth and their conceptions of property and labor is not addressed by these critics. . . . The British historian and socialist R. H. Tawney, for example, realized that America "is marked indeed by much economic inequality; but it is also marked by much social equality." In his classic 1906 account *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* German economist Werner Sombart illustrated this social equality by contrasting the American worker with the European one: "He carries his head high, walks with a lissom stride, and is as open and cheerful in his expression as any member of the middle class. There is nothing oppressed or submissive about him." More important than equality of wealth, says [Mickey] Kaus, is this social equality, this equal sense of self-worth and dignity among people, a feeling of equality that allows people, regardless of differences of wealth, to look others in the eye and treat them as equals and to expect to be treated as equals in return. Americans generally have had more of this feeling of equality than other peoples, and the Revolution was crucial in creating it.

Correspondingly important were changes that the Revolution brought about in people's conceptions of property and labor. These changes were linked and were based on substantial transformations in the society. . . . Eighteenth-century gentry were eager to acquire landed property or any other form of property that would give them the desired independence. . . . Such wealth was composed of static forms of property that generated what we might call "unearned income"—rents from tenants, returns on bonds, interest from money out on loan—sufficient to allow its

holders not to have to work for a living so that they had leisure to assume the burdens of public office without expecting high salaries. . . . Their static proprietary wealth was of course very vulnerable to inflation, which is why the printing of paper money was so frightening to these gentry: inflation threatened not simply their livelihood but their very identity and social position. . . .

Not only was this kind of proprietary wealth very hard to come by in America, where, compared to England, land was so plentiful and rent-paying tenants so rare, but commerce and trade were creating new forms of property that gave wealth and power to new sorts of people. The Revolution accelerated the creation of this kind of property. This new property was anything but static: it was risk-taking, entrepreneurial capital—not money out on loan, but money borrowed; it was in fact all the paper money that enterprising people clamored for in these years. . . . This was the property of businessmen and proto-businessmen—of commercial farmers, artisan-manufacturers, traders, shopkeepers, and all who labored for a living and produced and exchanged things, no matter how poor or wealthy they might be.

Unlike proprietary wealth, this new kind of dynamic, fluid, and evanescent property could not create personal authority or identity; it was, said Joseph Story, "continually changing like the waves of the sea." Hence it could not be relied on as a source of independence. Once this was understood, then property qualifications for participation in public life either as voters or as officeholders lost their relevance and rapidly fell away.

This radical change in people's idea of property during the Revolution is linked with similarly radical changes that took place in their conception of labor. But this seems to be the wrong kind of radicalism for my critics. . . .

In a world where aristocratic leisure was valued above all—leisure being defined as the freedom from the need to labor or to have an occupation—the necessity of earning a livelihood and working directly for money was traditionally seen as contemptible. In fact, this need of common people to work, particularly to work with their hands, was what lay behind their degraded and oppressed position throughout history. Even Native American males had an aristocratic contempt for common labor; they hunted and fought and regarded ordinary work as belonging exclusively to their women. Before the American Revolution, labor, as it had been for ages in Western culture, was still widely associated with toil, trouble, and pain (which is why women's experience of childbirth was called labor in all European languages). To be sure, industriousness and the need for a calling were everywhere extolled in the colonies, and the Puritan ethic was widely preached—but only for ordinary people, not for the aristocratic gentry, and only for moral reasons, not for the sake of increasing an individual's prosperity or the society's productivity. Hard work was good for common people; it lifted them out of idleness and barbarism and kept them out of trouble. . . . People labored out of necessity, out of poverty, it was said, and necessity and poverty bred the contempt in which working people had been held for centuries. But changes had long been in the air, and enlightened eighteenth-century aristocrats condescended to extol the value of labor much as they condescended to celebrate the equality of all men. Just as the Revolution became the occasion for the wholesale expression of the new importance to be granted to equality, so too was it the occasion for the full expression of this new moral value to be given to labor. . . .

This transformation in the meaning of labor is a major part of what I mean by the radicalism of the Revolution. Suddenly, all who worked for a living were no

longer willing to put up with their hitherto degraded and oppressed condition. The Revolution became an important expression of their strenuous and angry struggle to establish their moral superiority over those they labeled leisured aristocrats—over those who did not have to work for a living or have occupations, over those whose income came from proprietary wealth, came, in other words, without exertion or manual labor: landed gentry, rentiers, and those we today would call professionals. Many of these leisured aristocrats, having themselves so recently praised the virtues of labor and equality, were in no position to resist this assault, and in the North they were overwhelmed.

This struggle was what the farmer William Manning and the rich manufacturer Matthew Lyon meant when they said the essential social conflict was between "those that Labour for a Living and those that git a Living without Bodily Labour" or between "the industrious part of the community" and those brought up in "idleness, dissipation, and extravagance." Manning and Lyon are not yet talking about the later nineteenth-century class conflict between a modern proletariat and businessmen. In the eighteenth century, hard as it may be for us to accept, rich businessmen like Lyon with many employees and struggling single shoemakers like William Brewster of Connecticut saw themselves in a similar category as laborers, sharing a common resentment of a genteel aristocratic world that had humiliated and disdained them since the beginning of time because of their need to work. Eventually, of course, this common category of laborers would break apart into employers and employees, into manual and nonmanual, and into blue-collar and white-collar workers—into, in other words, the modern categories and classes that New Left historians like Smith are more comfortable with. . . . Presentist prejudices . . . prevent them from seeing that my book is all about social and class conflict; it is just not the social and class conflict that they have been conditioned to expect.

They are unable to see the social conflict and the radicalism of the Revolution that I describe because the Findleys, Lyons, and Mannings and other ordinary white males who are featured in my story were not opposed to the development of capitalism, and everyone today knows that one has to be opposed to capitalism in order to be truly radical. This assumption that the eighteenth-century proponents and practitioners of capitalism could never have been radical is probably the ultimate anachronism. . . . There was a time, however, . . . when the development of capitalism was regarded as very radical indeed. But to link the Revolution, which, as Smith says, was "a good thing," with capitalism, which is "a bad thing"—well, that's going too far: this "harnessing our approval of the Revolution to nineteenth-century capitalism" is to make "mobile, competitive, and individualistic elements of the Jacksonian era not just revolutionary but American Revolutionary, hence worthy of celebration and defence." Smith needs to . . . realize that what Americans thought about politics and the economy in 1800 is no longer much with us in the late twentieth century. It is quite possible for us to recognize that the Revolution and capitalism were linked and that early nineteenth-century contemporaries considered both to be good things, and yet at the same time for us to believe that capitalism today might need controlling by the government. That is what doing history is all about—recovering different, lost worlds and showing how they developed into our present. . . .

The democratic world of the early nineteenth century that I attempted to describe was not a world only of crass material strivings and obsessive consumers. Throughout the book I was concerned with the different ways people related to one

another. By the early nineteenth century, it is my opinion that, with the general denunciation of the monarchical adhesives of blood, family, and patronage and with the perceived weakness of republican virtue and sociability as a means of trying people together, many people had come to rely on interest as the principal and strongest source of attachment between people. This is not the same thing as saying that they cared only about money or consumer goods. . . .

This new liberal society of the early nineteenth century may have been held together largely by interest, which was no mean adhesive, but interest was not the only adhesive. Not only did the older bonds, both monarchical and republican, linger on into the nineteenth century and even into our own day, but the Revolutionary explosion of evangelical religious passion worked to tie people together in new ways and to temper and control the scramble for private wealth—a point my book spends some time on, despite Smith's statement to the contrary. Most evangelicals were not unworldly and anticapitalist. Quite the contrary: there is considerable evidence that religion increased people's energy as it restrained their liberty, got them on with their work as it disciplined their acquisitive urges, and gave them confidence that even self-interested individuals subscribed to absolute standards of right and wrong and thus could be trusted in market exchange and contractual relationships. . . .

In the three decades between the 1760s and the 1790s the religious landscape of America was transformed. The older state churches that had dominated colonial society for a century and a half—the Anglican, Congregational, and Presbyterian—were surrounded or supplanted by new and in some cases unheard of religious denominations and sects. By 1790 the Baptists had already become the largest denomination in the country, and the Methodists, who had no adherents in America in 1760, were moving up fast, soon to outstrip every group. . . .

These religious changes represented a radical shift in the American people's social relationships and cultural consciousness. Because religion (and not the ideas of Bacon, Locke, and Newton as issued from the heights of Monticello) was still the major means by which most ordinary people made sense of the world, these startling religious changes are some of the best signs we have of the radically social and class-ridden character of the Revolution. But there is more work to be done, particularly on this matter of religion. I have no doubt that the more we explore the social and cultural history of the Revolution, the more we will discover just what a radically transforming event it was. And it is not over yet.

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Boycotts Made the Revolution Radical

T. H. BREEN

On the eve of independence, . . . Parliament aggressively asserted its sovereignty by taxing the colonists at about the same time that a flood of British manufactured items transformed the American marketplace. . . .

By reconstructing the mental framework that informed one of the central narratives of the mid-eighteenth century—in this case, an elaborate story of misunderstood

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