



The American Revolution

The nation's bicentenary has spurred a number of leading scholars to take another look at the American Revolution. Some have uncovered new data on social and economic life in colonial America. Others have sought anew to explain the Revolution's causes and effects, its leaders' strengths and weaknesses. Here, Sociologist Robert Nisbet discusses the Revolution's social impact; in a second essay, Historian Merrill Peterson analyzes the contrasting roles of the Revolution's principal thinkers, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, two political allies who became ideological foes, and then, in old age, were reconciled.



THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE REVOLUTION

by Robert Nisbet

Was there in fact an American Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century? By this, I mean a revolution involving sudden, decisive, and irreversible changes in social institutions, groups, and traditions, in addition to the war of liberation from England that we are more likely to celebrate.

Clearly, this is a question that generates much controversy. There are scholars whose answer to the question is strongly negative. Indeed, ever since Edmund Burke's time there have been students to declare that revolution in any precise sense of the word did not take place—that in substance the American Revolution was no more than a group of Englishmen fighting on distant shores for traditionally English political

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rights against a government that had sought to exploit and tyrannize. According to this argument, it was a war of restitution and liberation, not revolution; the outcome, one set of political governors replacing another. This view is widespread in our time and is found as often among ideological conservatives as among liberals and radicals.

At the opposite extreme is the view that a full-blown revolution did indeed take place. This is clearly what John Adams believed: "The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations. . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affectations of the people, was the real American Revolution." And Samuel Adams, more radical in ideology and hence more demanding in defining revolution, asked rhetorically, "Was there ever a revolution brought about, especially one so important as this, without great internal tumults and violent convulsions?"

If there was a genuine revolution in America, we shall find it not in the sphere of ideological tracts—which history demonstrates may or may not yield actual revolution—but rather in the social sphere.

Whether we follow Tocqueville and Taine* in seeing centralization and collectivization of political power as the principal consequence of revolution, or more radical historians in seeing individual liberty and welfare as the chief consequence, it is invariably the impact on the intermediate social sphere†—on the ties to land, kindred, class, estate, and servitude of one kind or another—that is at the heart of the matter.

Consider the French Revolution. Scholars may differ among themselves as to whether, in the final analysis, it was the *individual* with his rights and liberties or the *political state* with its

* Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (1828–93), French philosopher and historian.

† That is, intermediate between individual and state.

centralized power and national solidarity that had the greater triumph. But what is unmistakably clear is that the whole complex of social authorities, allegiances, and functions, so largely the heritage of the medieval period, was vitally changed during the French Revolution. The real essence of this revolution was not its Reign of Terror, formidable as that was, but the legislation enacted by successive French revolutionary governments—legislation that profoundly affected the nobility, the traditional family, the corporate nature of property, the laws of primogeniture and entail, the place of religion in society, the guilds, and other groups.

Such changes in intermediate society can be seen vividly in other modern revolutions—in some degree in the Puritan Revolution of seventeenth century England, in far greater degree in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and in our own time in some of the new nations in the non-Western world.

Now, it is worth stressing that the social sphere is commonly “feudal” in nature when we find it being assaulted by the hammer blows of revolution. Feudalism invites revolution because it virtually consecrates inequality—the prime cause of revolution everywhere. It succumbs rather easily because of its seeming inability to command wide loyalties and because it is unable, by its nature, to mobilize the necessary military power quickly and effectively. Feudalism’s characteristic diffusion and decentralization of power results in an inability to draw upon a central power in crises. Marxists have told us much about how capitalism and its associated political structures are subject to revolution. But, in truth, all the revolutions of modern history have been launched against systems more nearly *feudal* than capitalist. It may well be that the overriding effect of modernization in both its economic and political manifestations is to sterilize the revolutionary impulse.

Feudalism in America

In light of these observations, let us now consider the American Revolution. Was there in the colonies a social order that can reasonably be called feudal?

Can conflicts originating in inequality, in social class, property, and religion be discerned in America in whatever degree, analogous to the conflicts leading up to the English, French, and Russian revolutions?

Finally, can substantial changes, effected politically, within revolutionary circumstances, be found taking place in the social

structure of America during the two decades following the outbreak of war with England?

The answer to these questions is yes.

An American "feudal stage" has often been denied or effaced by historians in their stress on the homogeneous middle-class character of American colonial history. But there was indeed a solid substructure of feudalism in the American colonies.

Feudalism has less to do with knights, castles, and dukedoms than with the "ties of dependence" uniting individuals of all classes into a society. I am inclined to think that a feudal system necessarily emerges whenever a relatively small number of persons seek to live in a new territory with great expanses of land to be had by the well-off or energetic, where ties with a central authority are weak or absent, where localism is enforced by topography as well as custom, and where landed property tends to create the fundamental rights and privileges in society. Certainly by the mid-1700s the American colonies met these feudal criteria, no matter how loath we may be to apply them to the Pilgrims and others of established historical fancy, who we are prone to believe left all European history behind when they came to the New World.

A Land-based Class System

In the colonies, land counted for a very great deal. And where a social system is rooted in the land, land-hunger is the common and abiding accompaniment—a hunger that directs itself particularly to large manorial estates.

Nearly three million acres in New York alone were occupied by large, essentially manorial, estates. The Van Rensselaer manor on the Hudson measured some 24 by 20 miles. The Fairfax estate in Virginia had, at the height of its prosperity, some six million acres. There were very large estates in the Carolinas, and in most of the other colonies as well—New England alone forming the exception. How could there not have been a substantial admixture of feudalism where such land holdings existed, assuming, as we have every right to assume, the survival of customs, conventions, and authorities brought to the New World from the Old?

From these great manorial holdings in America sprang a class system that was a vivid, if today often minimized, feature of colonial life. Feudal in essence, it had the large landowners at the top. As Richard Morris has pointed out, families such as

the Livingstons, De Lanceys, and Schuylers had a place in the social hierarchy and in politics not a bit different from that enjoyed in England at the time by such members of the nobility as the Duke of Bedford, the Marquess of Rockingham, and Lord Shelburne. Below the landed class fell tenant farmers, artisans, mechanics, small freeholders, laborers, indentured servants, and the very large class of Negro slaves.

There was little rhetoric in colonial times about homogeneity and equality when it came to classes as distinct in their powers and privileges as some of these were. Indeed, Jackson Turner Main has concluded, in his *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, that the long-term tendency was "toward greater inequality, with marked class distinctions." Class lines were discernible in the cities as well. A great deal of the inbreeding and the close social and political solidarity found in eighteenth century England existed, and was surely increasing in intensity, in pre-revolutionary America.

An established religion—a "state church"—is another aspect of life that is feudal in root and connotation. In most of the colonies, religious establishment existed in one degree or other. Congregationalism reigned in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, and the Church of England in a number of other colonies. Yet in none, so far as I can ascertain, did a majority of the people actually profess the established faith.

Is it difficult to suppose widespread resentment on the part of the majority at the thought of paying taxes to support a church to which they did not belong and may even have detested? Even where taxes were light and only randomly collected, the symbolic aspect was important. Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, and Methodists in Virginia were bound to have resented paying taxes in support of the Church of England and a clergy notoriously given to sloth and drink.

Laws of Inheritance

Where feudalism exists in any degree, so do the customs of *primogeniture* and *entail*, the first granting the inheritance of fixed property only to the oldest son, the second fixing land firmly to family line. These customs existed throughout Europe and were also familiar to the colonists. When the Revolution broke out, only two colonies had abolished primogeniture, only one had abolished entail.

Some historians of the American Revolution belittle the effect in the colonies of the laws of primogeniture and entail

and of religious establishment because contemporary research into the records of that time finds evidence of only infrequent legal recourse or attempted recourse. But the comparative study of social movements makes plain enough that there is little correlation between the *symbolic* importance attached to issues and their measurable incidence. Think only of abortion and busing in our own day!

The same can be said of the significance attributed to the economic prosperity experienced in the colonies for decades before the war with England. Given this prosperity, it is sometimes argued, social tensions could not have been severe. Again, however, we learn from the study of revolutions that there is nothing so calculated to focus attention upon social resentments and raise popular expectations and demands as a period of relative economic prosperity.

An Inevitable Revolution?

Would there have been a social revolution in America—bringing changes to such institutions as property, family, religion, and social class—if the war with England had not broken out? Would internal social tensions themselves have led to revolution?

My own guess, and it can only be that, is that no such revolution would have occurred without a precipitating war in which ideological values were strong.

Quite probably the social changes we see in the American Revolution would have occurred, albeit more slowly, under the spur of rising pressures during the next century. In fact, this did happen in Canada. But who can be sure in these matters?

If war was the necessary precipitating factor in the American social revolution, let it be remembered that war has accompanied each of the other major Western revolutions of modern times. The link between war and revolution is both existentially and historically close, especially when war is either intense or prolonged. Both destroy traditional authorities, classes, and types of wealth; both create new kinds of power, rank, and wealth. With much reason, conservatives have been as suspicious of war as of revolution. It was, after all, in the wake of war that revolutionary changes occurred in ancient Athens at the end of the fifth century B.C., and in the Rome of Augustus. Almost all the intensity of the French Revolution burst upon the French people in war and under the justification of war emergency.

Now let us consider the changes which took place so suddenly in traditional American social institutions and values—changes fully meriting the label “revolutionary.”

First, there is the relation between land and the family. Although discontent with the laws of primogeniture and entail had certainly existed for a long time, only Pennsylvania and Maryland had abolished the former and only South Carolina the latter, prior to the outbreak of the revolutionary war. Yet within a single decade of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, all but two states abolished entail, and in these two, entail had become relatively insignificant in any case. Within another five years, primogeniture had become illegal in every state and all had established some form of partible inheritance. Only two states, North Carolina and New Jersey, failed to include daughters as well as sons in the new laws of inheritance. Elsewhere full equality became the rule.

We may not be inclined *today* to regard the abolition of primogeniture and entail as a revolutionary change in social structure. But looking back a half-century into American history, Tocqueville spoke of society being “shaken to its center” by the adoption of that legislation.

Tocqueville was already steeped in the comparative aspects of the study of revolution, if only by virtue of the obsessive influence of the French Revolution; he knew very well indeed that strong family systems everywhere are rooted in the continuity of family property. He also knew that the best possible prescription for the individualization and, in time, the economic rootlessness of a population is the separation of kinship from this foundation. Not only does the law of partible inheritance make it difficult for families to preserve their ancestral domains, Tocqueville pointed out, but it soon deprives them of the desire to attempt the preservation. Historians of our own day echo Tocqueville’s view (although with far greater documentation). One need reflect but a moment on the incentives—to land speculators, not to mention to the heirs—that would have stemmed from this abolition.

How simple it was for France to effect similar changes two decades later! Only a single act by a single body of lawmakers was required, such was the centralization that had been wrought by French monarchs and then confirmed by the revolutionary assembly. The same can be said of analogous Russian changes following the Bolshevik triumph. How remarkable, then, that in America one of the most telling acts of equaliza-

tion known in social history was effected virtually in unison by 13 different legislatures. To say, as many American students of the Revolution have said, that laws of primogeniture and entail mattered little, that they were at best hardly more than vestigial memories, scarcely fits the swift and uniform eradication of these laws by the state legislatures.

Nor should we overlook the revolutionary impact of the confiscations of large Tory-owned estates, with shares of these holdings going to American patriots. The exact number of acres involved is less significant than the *fact* of confiscation and distribution. For an appropriate parallel in our own day we should have to imagine state confiscation of a substantial number of large "disloyal" business corporations, with ownership of shares turned over to loyal citizens. The sense of revolutionary acquisition among the citizens in that day of overwhelmingly landed wealth must have been substantial.

Religious Freedom

It was inevitable that the shocks of the war with England would produce revolutionary consequences in the religious realm as well. Agitation for release from the exactions of religious establishment could hardly help but become part of the act of war against England in those colonies where the Church of England was established. And this agitation was bound to have reverberations even in colonies where the Congregational church was established.

True, the laws pertaining to religion were not everywhere overthrown in a single spasm. In parts of New England, disestablishment did not occur until the nineteenth century. Nor was there by any means firm agreement among the leaders of the revolutionary war as to its desirability. John Adams and others had serious misgivings on the matter, and the Baptists and Quakers who had begun to work for religious freedom before the Revolution found considerable opposition to their labors. The historical fact is, however, that religious liberty did become a matter of burning concern to a great many Americans during the Revolution. Its importance is evidenced by responses to the Constitution when this document was given to the states for ratification.

The lack of any safeguards for liberty of faith at once struck critics in all sections. The Virginia Convention proposed an amendment guaranteeing freedom of

conscience. North Carolina's Convention seconded the proposal, adopting the same language. . . . In the first Congress attention was directed to the oversight by James Madison, and the required guarantee was made the first constitutional amendment proposed to the nation.*

Of all the consequences of the American Revolution, undoubtedly the most heralded in other parts of the world was the firm establishment of religious freedom. Tocqueville was but one of many who thought this creation the most remarkable of American achievements.

The Great Contradiction

There remains the deeply troubling question posed by the presence of Negro slaves in America. At the time of the Revolution, there were about a half-million slaves in the 13 colonies—most of them in the South, but a fair number, perhaps 55,000, in the North. It would be splendid indeed if we could say that under the principles of liberty and equality proclaimed by the American founders these slaves were given their freedom. Obviously, we cannot. But it by no means follows that the position of the Negro in America was insulated from revolutionary thought and action.

In 1774, the Continental Congress decreed an "American Association" (that is, a nonimportation agreement) pertaining to slavery, and the prohibition on slave-trading seems to have held up throughout the war. In July 1774, Rhode Island enacted a law that thenceforth all slaves brought into the colony should be freed. The law's preamble, which begins as follows, is instructive:

Whereas the inhabitants of America are generally engaged in the preservation of their own rights and liberties, among which that of personal freedom must be considered as the greatest, and as those who are desirous of enjoying all the advantages of liberty themselves should be willing to extend personal liberty to others . . .

Delaware prohibited importation in 1776, Virginia in 1778, and Maryland in 1783 (for a term of years), with North Carolina imposing a higher tax on each Negro imported. States where

* Allan Nevins. *The American States During and After the Revolution, 1775-1798* (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1924), p. 440.

there were few slaves proceeded under the stimulus of the Revolution to effect the immediate or gradual abolition of slavery itself. In short, the planting of the seeds of abolitionism was one of the major acts of the American Revolution.

Freedom and Slavery

True, a case can be made that war with England only hardened the determination of many southerners to maintain the institution of slavery. There can be no doubt that the eagerness with which a good many southern plantation owners entered the war sprang from the fear that an English victory would bring emancipation of the slaves. And a great many blacks saw, and had every reason to see, more hope of freedom with the British than with American plantation owners.

Yet even so, we cannot miss the strong tide of abolitionism that rose during this period. The minds of the men who led the Revolution and its war were sensitive and humane. The contrast between the principles of freedom and equality on the one hand and the presence of a half-million black slaves on the other no more escaped men like Jefferson and Adams than it did Edmund Burke and other Whigs in England. It is precisely the awareness of this contrast that marks the real beginning of the long and tragic story of black liberation in America, a story that would have its next great episode in the Civil War and that would still be unfolding during the 1960s.

The American Revolution failed the Negro. Nevertheless, as Bernard Bailyn has written, "as long as the institution of slavery lasted, the burden of proof would lie with its advocates to show why the statement that 'all men are created equal' did not mean precisely what it said: all men, 'white or black.'" And Benjamin Quarles, whose study of the Negro in the American Revolution is the most detailed investigation of the subject yet made, has written:

The American Revolution touched all classes in society, even Negroes. On the eve of the conflict, the same religious and political idealism that stirred the resistance to Britain deepened the sentiment against slavery. . . . Ultimately the colored people of America benefited from the irreversible commitment of the new nation to the principles of liberty and equality.

Now I want to turn to a very different aspect of the subject: the justly celebrated moderateness of spirit of the American

Revolution. A revolution did indeed occur in America, one involving social structures and values. Why, then, did no Terror, no Thermidor, no military dictatorship make its appearance, as has been the case in European revolutions?

We cannot doubt that the idea of equality was buoyant in America; we need look only at the many pamphlets written and circulated before and during the revolutionary war. Nor can we doubt that significant sections of the American people were bound to have felt the impact of laws directed at slavery, established religion, traditional inheritance of property, and, to a lesser extent, the expropriation of estates. These are explosive issues, and they ordinarily arouse the deepest passions. How do we account, then, for the widespread spirit of acceptance of the Revolution in America, a spirit shared by conservatives, liberals, and radicals, a spirit characterized by consensus and continuity?

Dispersion and Division

Some historians speak of a "spirit" of moderation and pragmatism in America that contrasts with the ideological passions of Europe. This does not, however, carry us very far. Looking at the subsequent history of America, from the War of 1812 through the Civil War to World Wars I and II, and bearing in mind the fierce ideological passions that have flared often enough in our history, it would be risky to appeal to any such embedded spirit.

Other historians properly refer to the temper of the leadership that America was fortunate to have during the Revolution. We cannot fail to see the restraint, responsibility, and wisdom of such men as John Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Dickinson, Franklin, Hamilton, and others, and I would not for a moment dismiss their importance. But how did such a restrained and moderate leadership survive throughout the Revolution? After all, the English and French revolutions began in moderation, and something of the same can be said of the Russian if we consider the Kerensky government the first phase of that revolution, yet they eventually succumbed to ever more radical and zealous leaders.

Any answer to so complex a question must be offered in the spirit of hypothesis. And it is in that spirit that I present the following possible explanations:

First, the American Revolution was, by virtue of the nature of colonial America, a *dispersed* revolution. There was nothing

in America comparable to a London, Paris, or Moscow, no large city steeped in historical traditions of turbulence and occasional revolt. Tensions rooted in social and economic conditions certainly existed in New York and Boston, and possibly in our other cities; but there was not, and there could not have been, the cumulative disorder or the air of incipient revolt known to have existed in the great European cities.

Nor was there in America, either before or after the Revolution, the centralization of political power that England, France, and Russia knew so well. The French and Russian revolutions, especially, must be seen against a background of long-developing governmental centralization. Each of the European revolutions was a *focused* revolution, which made it easy for the sudden passions of the ideologues or the crowd to be translated into acts that could affect the entire country.

In America, we must look to the 13 separate colonies or states to find the vital elements of the social revolution. Certainly, there was communication among the colonies and states; but it was communication among separate, independent, and proud political societies. It was this dispersion and decentralization of power that moderated passion and inclination so far as the nation as a whole was concerned. The vital principle of countervailing power—of intermediate authority, of division of rule—operated to reduce, at least for a long time, the national impact of intellectual and social movements arising in any one part of the nation.

Second, religion remained a strong force in American society. Plural in manifestation and closely connected with locality and region, it did not easily mix with political passions. Admittedly, religion as a cultural force seems to have declined somewhat during the eighteenth century; but once the symbols of establishment were removed, evangelical religions began to transform the religious landscape. We could not explain the immense burst of religiosity in the 1820s and later—carrying with it the birth of many new faiths and lasting through the century—if the seeds of it had not been present earlier.

In America, religious values and aspirations consumed psychic energy that might otherwise have gone into political ideology. In France, as students of the French Revolution from Edmund Burke to Hannah Arendt have observed, it was with religious passion translated into political action that the Jacobins dealt with government and society. In the English Revolution, by the time it was under way, the line between re-

ligion and political evangelism was very thin indeed. In the twentieth century, Marxism has become the substitute for established religion in Russia and wherever it prevails.

How very different was the American experience: In America, as was not the case in France or Russia, revolution never had a chance to become God.

A Nation of Joiners

Third, and closely related to the first two factors, is the idea of voluntary association. Our reputation for being a nation of joiners was made early; and neither the fact nor the reputation could have been possible had it not been for an American attitude toward association vitally different from any attitude easily discernible in most European countries at the time. The hatred of internal associations by the French revolutionaries—a hatred manifest not only in the destruction of the guilds, monasteries, and other bodies deriving from the past, but also in the explicit prohibition of almost all new associations—never existed in the United States. No specific constitutional provision guaranteed freedom of association; but, given the guarantees of freedom of assembly and petition, and the strong social and cultural roots of the phenomenon, voluntary associations thrived.

This suggests again that a great deal of passion that would surely have gone into *political* movements was directed elsewhere—that is, into the innumerable intermediate associations which, along with local, regional, and religious loyalties, made the American social landscape very different from the French in the nineteenth century.

Fourth, post-revolutionary America had few if any of the *politically* important class divisions found in Europe. True, the colonies did have very distinct social classes, and these were almost certainly becoming more distinct before the Revolution. It was the war with England that significantly changed the pattern of social class in America.

Although most wealthy, educated, and socially influential Americans sided with Britain in one degree or another, and most members of the lower classes chose the side of the Continental Congress, there were altogether too many exceptions in each instance to give a distinct character of *class conflict* to the war.

All serious students of social class, including Karl Marx, have noted the vital importance of conflict—conflict that is

political in character and ideological in thrust—in shaping and hardening classes. Had the upper class in America solidly opposed the war instead of supplying most of its leaders, and had the lower class alone supported the war, the outcome (assuming war would have taken place at all) would almost certainly have been a class structure like that of Western Europe, with ideological conflict to match. That this did not occur in America—much to the dismay of Marxists later—is, it would seem, a result of the “accident” of the war against England. For, with tenant farmers, indentured servants, and even Negroes frequently to be found on the rebel side, and with the rebel leaders coming from the upper classes of New England and the South, only the slightest “class-angling” of the revolutionary war was possible.

The American Brand of Intellectuals

Fifth, I would adduce the absence of an intellectual class in America at the time of the Revolution as one of the prime reasons for the lack of political ferocity both during and after the Revolution.

I am referring, of course, to the class of political intellectuals of which the Philosophes in France—who had much to do not only with setting the intellectual background of the revolution in France but also with giving that revolution the special ideological ferocity it came to have by 1791—were such iridescent examples. This class may be said to have begun with the politically minded humanists of the Italian Renaissance. It grew steadily in size during the succeeding centuries. We properly include in it not only the humanists and their successors, the Philosophes, but also, later, the revolutionists of 1848 (to be found in just about all coffee houses on the continent), Saint-Simonians, Fourierists, positivists, and, eventually, anarchists, socialists, and communists. Its dominant characteristics are, and have been, social rootlessness, an adversary position toward polity, and a fascination with power and its uses. The capacity of this class for ideological fanaticism, for the sacrifice of life and institution alike in the name of principle, and even for outright blood-lust and terror is well known.

This kind of class was lacking in America before and during the Revolution. There were indeed men and women of extraordinary intellect and learning; but for a Jefferson or an Adams or a Dickinson, learning—even great learning in phi-

osophy and the arts—could be compatible with a strong sense of *membership in society*. It did not invite alienation or revolt.

The intellectual leaders of the American Revolution were generally businessmen or landowners; they had a stake in society. It is inconceivable that either a Jefferson or a Hamilton could have renounced what Burke called the “wisdom of expediency” in the interest of pursuing an abstract principle. No American leader could have contemplated mass executions or imprisonments with delight, as did the millennialist intellectuals of 1649, 1793, and 1917. At no point in the American Revolution, or in its aftermath, do we find any Committee of Public Safety after the French fashion, any Council of the People’s Commissars, any Lilburnes, Robespierres, or Lenins. Nothing so completely gave the American Revolution its distinctive character as the absence of the European species of political intellectual. It is only in the present century that we have seen this species coming into prominence in America.

In conclusion, I would argue, then, that there was indeed an American Revolution in the full sense of the word—a social, moral, and institutional revolution that affected major changes in the character of American society—as well as a war of liberation from England that was political in nature.

The line from the social revolution of the 1770s to the civil rights revolution of the 1960s is a direct one. It is a line that passes through the Civil War—itself certainly not without revolutionary implication—and through a host of changes in the status of Americans of all races, beliefs, and classes. The United States has indeed undergone a process of almost permanent revolution. I can think of no greater injustice to ourselves, as well as to the makers of revolution in Philadelphia, than to deny that fact and to allow the honored word *revolution* to be preëmpted today by spokesmen for societies which, through their congealed despotisms, have made real revolution all but impossible.