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History and Culture

Review: The Radical Recreation of the American Republic

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Reviewed work(s):

The Radicalism of the American Revolution. by Gordon S. Wood

Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct., 1994), pp. 679-683

Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2946925>

Accessed: 21/04/2010 09:50

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The Radical Recreation of the American Republic

Joyce Appleby

WE should all be grateful to the Pulitzer Prize committee for giving its 1993 prize in history to *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. Now thousands of readers will be introduced to the colonial society we love so well—its attachment to the past and its exposure to the battering of contingencies made accessible through Wood's evocative prose. They will delight in his vignettes of social gestures, cameos of gentleman Revolutionaries, and broad-brushed paintings of colonial communities caught between unparalleled growth and their provincial nostalgia for a world they never knew. More than anything else, Wood's book provides the kind of illustrative detail that will enable readers to participate imaginatively in colonial life. Readers' appetites will be whetted for more eighteenth-century American history. They will want to read our books.

What Wood has not done—and no doubt earned the gratitude of many readers for not doing—is build an argument for his contention that the American Revolution radicalized American society. Nor has he engaged—again probably garnering thanks—in any of the scholarly debates about the American Revolution that have raged during the past eighty years. Instead, he has summoned a wealth of information about the colonies, mixed it with the astute commentaries of dozens of contemporary witnesses, and proffered an interpretation on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. His tendency throughout is to imply rather than to explain, suggest rather than argue, all the while pointing out how extraordinarily dramatic were the social developments he sketches.

For the general reading public, Wood's rhetorical montage offers a brilliant representation of early America. For those in this room, his method and assertions raise problems. Having so recently praised the virtues of *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* in print, I shall confine myself this morning to a critical evaluation of Wood's argument, his characterization of pre-Revolutionary colonial society, and his representation of the radicalism he sees triumphing in the new nation.¹

For the two or three persons who have not read the book, I shall cite some passages that convey its essential message: "In a monarchical world of numerous patron-client relations and multiple degrees of dependency,"

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¹ Joyce Appleby, review of Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), in *American Historical Review*, XCVIII (1993), 239.

Wood writes, “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.” And fifty-one pages later: “Instead of creating a new order of benevolence and selflessness, enlightened republicanism was breeding social competitiveness and individualism; and there seemed no easy way of stopping it. Since at the outset most revolutionary leaders had conceded primacy to society over government, to modern social virtue over classical public virtue, they found it difficult to resist people’s absorption in their private lives and interests. The Revolution was the source of its own contradictions.” Finally, from the introduction: “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.”²

There is here no hint of modesty either for the phenomenon under study or for the author’s commanding understanding of it. To detail this transformation, Wood creates a morphology of societal types: monarchy, republicanism, and democracy. What is critical in his interpretation, as the quotations indicate, is that democracy emerges because a higher form of political aspiration, republicanism, fails. Hence his is not a book about a successful revolution but rather an ironic tale that ends with the residual effects of dashed political aspirations, something that happened when a gentlemanly effort at social change got out of control.

The interpretation—not to mention the denouement of the drama—depends on the causal force of the Revolution itself, and here Wood has to rely on a venerable before-and-after transformation. All too familiar to historians of the early modern period, this depiction of a marked transition from the traditional to the modern nonetheless deserves some skepticism. Some years ago, with a colleague, I edited a textbook collection of primary documents. My volume covered the years from 1607 to 1861 and his the later period. I introduced the whole with a description of how society had gone from a network of face-to-face communities to an integrated nation, how low levels of productivity had yielded to industrial development and primitive forms of social interaction to rapid transportation and communication systems. Reading this over, my colleague announced, “You can’t say this.” “Why not?” I replied. “Because,” he said, “that’s what I’m going to say.” Well, he was entitled to say that, and we all do, holding a simpler past stable

² Wood, *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 179, 210, 5.

as a backdrop to our story of novel transformation commencing in the 1740s or the 1790s or the 1820s or the 1870s.

Another problem with Wood's rather ingenious interpretation of the American Revolution is the lack of argumentation. Evidence is not laid out and examined; rather, it is spun around in a whirlpool of metaphors. Most of the old workhorses of historical explanation—demographic growth, geographic mobility, market expansion—are alluded to, but their import is assumed. Correlations are suggested, not tested; events are juxtaposed rather than causally linked. This is especially the case with the contemporary witnesses whose lines about the unraveling of the traditional fabric of their lives Wood quotes liberally. They are never interrogated for their views; it is enough that those views converge with the grand theme of the book. With similar evasiveness, the Revolution is deployed as the multifaceted cause of the custom-shattering force of modernity. Its capacity to effect the transformation Wood claims is never questioned. Indeed, so prominent is the sweeping reified force of the Revolution that *Radicalism of the American Revolution* could have been written by George Bancroft—if he had only read Clifford Geertz.

In *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, as in Wood's justly honored *Creation of the American Republic*, republicanism represents the pinnacle of civilized social order. In the first book Wood claimed that the sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism. The echo of this view comes in *Radicalism of the American Revolution* when Wood writes of the hope that the republican gentry's love and benevolence would inspire gratitude and obedience in the masses. In both accounts, Americans' failure to live up to the standards of disinterestedness betray the Revolution. This story of ethical decline mirrors Perry Miller's account of Puritan declension, except that Miller depicted how Puritans interpreted social change whereas Wood is passing judgment himself. It is this fall from civic grace that provides the bittersweet undercurrent of *Radicalism of the American Revolution*. The leaders of the French Revolution, Wood tells us, mourned their revolution's failure; American Revolutionaries, looking back at the movement for Independence from old age, despaired their revolution's success.

The closing lines of *Radicalism of the American Revolution* are worth quoting in full because they depict this descent from glory with particular poignancy: "A new generation of democratic Americans was no longer interested in the revolutionaries' dream of building a classical republic of elitist virtue out of the inherited materials of the Old World. America, they said, would find its greatness not by emulating the states of classical antiquity . . . Instead, it would discover its greatness by creating a prosperous free society belonging to obscure people with their workaday concerns and their pecuniary pursuits of happiness—common people with their common interests in making money and getting ahead. No doubt the cost that America paid for this democracy was high—with its vulgarity, its materialism, its rootlessness, its anti-intellectualism. But there is no denying the wonder of it and the real

earthly benefits it brought to the hitherto neglected and despised masses of common laboring people. The American Revolution created this democracy, and we are living with its consequences still."³

This wonderfully theatrical finale depends for its effect on our accepting Wood's characterization of what was involved when Thomas Jefferson mobilized the hoi polloi and upset the republican appellation of the Federalist elite. Critical, too, is his view that only the elite had motives; all other effects were part of a mindless release of petty ambition. Monarchy and republicanism, in the book, are the products of intention. Only democracy comes into being without singular will. Wood's depiction of democracy as indifferent to virtue permits him to elide the question of agency in the radical transformation he describes. Rather than detail how the opponents of the Federalist gentry carried the day, Wood depicts radicalization devoid of intentionality except the assumed common impulse to strive for more. It just happened when the elite made critical concessions, giving ordinary men an opening for expressing their ordinary desires. Unexplained eruptions of new ideological imperatives, in Wood's account, move the mountains of republican virtue; there is no examination of the new intellectual commitments and political organization that it took to usher in democracy.

This interpretive emphasis explains the striking absence in *Radicalism of the American Revolution* of the most radical of the Revolution's achievements, the abolition movement that brought northern slavery to an end and turned the surveyors' line of Mason and Dixon into the most conspicuous ideological divide in the world. Similarly neglected is the impact of the French Revolution in the United States that gave democracy its epoch-making momentum. It was then—not during the 1770s—that New York's King Street was renamed Liberty Street and Boston's Royal Alley became Equality Lane.

What difference would inclusion of these developments have made to Wood's interpretation? Their impact would have been twofold. First, they would have pushed to the fore the role of conflict in the radicalization of the United States, and with the spotlight trained on conflict issues of power would have become more conspicuous. Visible, too, would have been the connection of ideas to assumptions and both to the exercise of power. In Wood's history people rarely appear as actors, forming plans and mobilizing resources. Rather, they are repositories of opinions, reflectors of social norms, and registers of political disappointments.

Second, dealing with the provocative influence of the French Revolution in tandem with the politicizing of presidential elections, would have thrown up obstacles to Wood's reducing democratic values to crass material striving and competitive individualism. This is democracy as seen from the cultural salient of Boston and its environs. If we go further south and examine the radicalizing of America from the heights of Monticello, we would have to take account of a highly sophisticated set of ideas that drew on Jefferson's trio of the greatest men that ever lived—Francis Bacon, John Locke, and

³ *Ibid.*, 369

Isaac Newton. What Jefferson and his followers took from these men was the prospect of liberation from ignorance as well as from penury. Their democratic propaganda was a redaction of an Enlightenment that Wood ignores—the one that spoke of unshackled reason, untamed imagination, unconstrained inquiry, and the injuries of privilege. Nowhere in Wood's treatment of the radicalism wrought by the American Revolution does there figure the stunning and highly contested reconceptualization of society as a natural order, an understanding dependent on English natural philosophy and the polemics of French philosophes. Eighteenth-century American radicalism was more liberating than the simple democratization of elite social relations, more intellectual than the benign affirmation of civic virtue by classical republicans, and more revolutionary than a war for Independence.

To leave these forcefully interacting theories about the physical universe, the natural social order, and the rights of man out of the political developments of independent America, or to subsume them within the story of a failed effort to establish a classical republic, is to deprive American democracy of its philosophical underpinnings. And that is to leave us today with a basket of consumables and an empty library shelf—a lot of elbowing competitors in a capitalist economy and no participants in a public debate about what is natural, what is just, and what is true.

I always like to give Thomas Jefferson the last word—all the more appropriate in that this week we are celebrating his 250th birthday. Ten days before his death, he wrote of the Declaration of Independence: "May it be to the world what I believe it will be to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all, the signal for arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition has persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government."⁴

To be sure, the text got out of Jefferson's hands, and working-class men, all women, and the descendants of Monticello's slaves found the courage to burst the chains of whiggish ignorance and the superstitions of racism and sexism. But that's the way it is with texts and why historians ignore them at their peril.

⁴ Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman, June 24, 1826, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, 12 vols. (New York, 1892–1899), X, 391.