

Historians on the Revolution

Point of View #4

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 anti-colonial 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? He clearly does not mean that it brought substantive change in the lot of those who were most oppressed, subjugated, or marginal in the society. Wood credits the Revolution with ending slavery in the North and, in the long run, raising the status of all African Americans and women; he notes that Revolutionary events generated notions of social leveling among a few. Yet these developments are not central to his story. The liberation of those at the bottom, the inclusion of those left out, the amelioration of conditions for the "have-nots" of eighteenth-century American society—these are not Wood's criteria for measuring the radicalism of the era.

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... 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 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.

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. Such a vision was more sweeping and transformative than may first appear, given the traditional premises from which the patriots began...Within pages, however, those patriots' achievement melts into air. Readers learn that the Revolution was not republican at all. Those famous leaders who presided over the first of its movements, so lately praised for their vision, are revealed to have accomplished little. Independence itself was a "clarifying incident," Wood says, and in the face of powerful demographic and market forces the Revolutionaries' goal of a virtuous citizenry and reformed society rapidly gave way...Reserving the term "revolutionaries" for an elite makes it possible, even necessary, for Wood to leave out significant parts of the resistance movement...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. In this context, it seems to me, only some historical actors, only some historical radicalisms, can even be visible. Indeed, it is noteworthy that what interests Wood most about African-American slavery is whether that institution was conspicuous to eighteenth-century Euro-Americans. (His preoccupation with that issue underscores how greatly the book is about what only some Americans saw.) Other historians have taken the denial of slavery as a historical fact of extraordinary significance; Wood takes elite subjectivity as unproblematic. 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.

Much of this book expresses a determined optimism; in Wood's eyes, the glass is nearly always half full...What else, Wood seems to ask, could anyone really have wanted? Because he and we know at least part of the answer, 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...Yet Wood persists in constructing a Revolution ...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...Given the power of the narrative of the American Revolution to frame our sense of identity, the nation, and the politically possible, we are in danger of concluding, with Wood, that "nothing could be more radical than" these aspects of the American case.¹⁸ It would be a pity for us to leave out of account the many Americans and Revolutionaries who dissented from that view.

Barbara Clark Smith is a curator at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.