Bernard Bailyn

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What was essentially involved in the American Revolution was not the disruption of society, with all the fear, despair, and hatred that that entails, but the realization, the comprehension and fulfillment, of the inheritance of liberty and of what was taken to be America's destiny in the context of world history. The great social shocks that in the French and Russian revolutions sent the foundations of thousands of individual lives crashing into ruins had taken place in America in the course of the previous century, slowly, silently, almost imperceptibly, not as a sudden avalanche but as myriads of individual changes and adjustments which had gradually transformed the order of society. By 1763 the great landmarks of European life—the church and the idea of orthodoxy, the state and the idea of authority: much of the array of institutions and ideas that buttressed the society of the *ancien régime*—had faded in their exposure to the open, wilderness environment of America. But until the disturbances of the 1760s these changes had not been seized upon as grounds for reconsideration of society and politics. Often they had been condemned as deviations, as retrogressions back toward a more primitive condition of life. Then, after 1760—and especially in the decade after 1765—they were brought into open discussion as the colonists sought to apply advanced principles of society and politics to their own immediate problems.

The original issue of the Anglo-American conflict was, of course, the question of the extent of Parliament's jurisdiction in the colonies. But that could not be discussed in isolation. The debate involved eventually a wide range of social and political problems, and it ended by 1776 in what may be called the conceptualization of American life. By then Americans had come to think of themselves as in a special category, uniquely placed by history to capitalize on, to complete and fulfill, the promise of man's existence. The changes that had overtaken their provincial societies, they saw, had been good: elements not of deviance and retrogression but of betterment and progress; not a lapse into primitivism, but an elevation to a higher plane of political and social life than had ever been reached before. Their rustic blemishes had become the marks of a chosen people. "The liberties of mankind and the glory of human nature is in their keeping," John Adams wrote in the year of the Stamp Act. "America was designed by Providence for the theatre on which man was to make his true figure, on which science, virtue, liberty, happiness, and glory were to exist in peace."

The effort to comprehend, to communicate, and to fulfill this destiny was continuous through the entire revolutionary generation—it did not cease, in fact, until in the nineteenth century its creative achievements became dogma. But there were three phases of particular concentration: the period up to and including 1776, centering on the discussion of Anglo-American differences; the devising of the first state governments, mainly in the years from 1776 to 1780; and the reconsideration of the state constitutions and the reconstruction of the national government in the last half of the eighties and in the early nineties. In each of these phases important contributions were made not only to the skeletal structure of constitutional theory but to the surrounding areas of social thought as well. But in none was the creativity as great, the results as radical and as fundamental, as in the period before Independence. It was then that the premises were defined and the assumptions set. It was then that explorations were made in new territories of thought, the first comprehensive maps sketched, and routes marked out. Thereafter the psychological as well as intellectual barriers were down. It was the most creative period in the history of American political thought. Everything that followed assumed and built upon its results. . . .

It was an elevating, transforming vision: a new, fresh, vigorous, and above all morally regenerate people rising from obscurity to defend the battlements of liberty and then in triumph standing forth, heartening and sustaining the cause of freedom everywhere. In the light of such a conception everything about the colonies and their controversy with the mother country took on a new appearance. Provincialism was gone: Americans stood side by side with the heroes of historic battles for freedom and with the few remaining champions of liberty in the present. What were once felt to be defects—isolation, institutional simplicity, primitiveness of manners, multiplicity of religions, weakness in the authority of the state—could now be seen as virtues, not only by Americans themselves but by enlightened spokesmen of reform, renewal, and hope wherever they might be—in London coffeehouses, in Parisian *salons*, in the courts of German princes. The mere

existence of the colonists suddenly became philosophy teaching by example. Their manners, their morals, their way of life, their physical, social, and political condition were seen to vindicate eternal truths and to demonstrate, as ideas and words never could, the virtues of the heavenly city of the eighteenth-century philosophers.

But the colonists' ideas and words counted too, and not merely because they repeated as ideology the familiar utopian phrases of the Enlightenment and of English libertarianism. What they were saying by 1776 was familiar in a general way to reformers and illuminati everywhere in the Western world; yet it was different. Words and concepts had been reshaped in the colonists' minds in the course of a decade of pounding controversy—strangely reshaped, turned in unfamiliar directions, toward conclusions they could not themselves clearly perceive. They found a new world of political thought as they struggled to work out the implications of their beliefs in the years before independence. It was a world not easily possessed; often they withdrew in some confusion to more familiar ground. But they touched its boundaries, and, at certain points, probed its interior. Others, later—writing and revising the first state constitutions, drafting and ratifying the federal Constitution, and debating in detail, exhaustively, the merits of these efforts—would resume the search for resolutions of the problems the colonists had broached before 1776.

This critical probing of traditional concepts—part of the colonists' effort to express reality as they knew it and to shape it to ideal ends—became the basis for all further discussions of enlightened reform, in Europe as well as in America. The radicalism the Americans conveyed to the world in 1776 was a transformed as well as a transforming force.

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In no obvious sense was the American Revolution undertaken as a social revolution. No one, that is, deliberately worked for the destruction or even the substantial alteration of the order of society as it had been known. Yet it was transformed as a result of the Revolution, and not merely because Loyalist property was confiscated and redistributed, or because the resulting war destroyed the economic bases of some people's lives and created opportunities for others that would not otherwise have existed. Seizure of Loyalist property and displacements in the economy did in fact take place, and the latter if not the former does account for a spurt in social mobility that led earlier *arrivés* to remark, "When the pot boils, the scum will rise." Yet these were superficial changes; they affected a small part of the population only, and they did not alter the organization of society.

What did now affect the essentials of social organization—what in time would help permanently to transform them—were changes in the realm of belief and attitude. The views men held toward the relationships that bound them to each other—the discipline and pattern of society—moved in a new direction in the decade before Independence.

Americans of 1760 continued to assume, as had their predecessors for generations before, that a healthy society was a hierarchical society, in which it was natural for some to be rich and some poor, some honored and some obscure, some powerful and some weak. And it was believed that superiority was unitary, that the attributes of the favored—wealth, wisdom, power—had a natural affinity to each other, and hence that political leadership would naturally rest in the hands of the social leaders. Movement, of course, there would be: some would fall and some would rise; but manifest, external differences among men, reflecting the principle of hierarchical order, were necessary and proper, and would remain; they were intrinsic to the nature of things.

Circumstances had pressed harshly against such assumptions. The wilderness environment from the beginning had threatened the maintenance of elaborate social distinctions; many of them in the passage of time had in fact been worn away. Puritanism, in addition, and the epidemic evangelicalism of the mid-eighteenth century, had created challenges to the traditional notions of social stratification by generating the conviction that the ultimate quality of men was to be found elsewhere than in their external condition, and that a cosmic achievement lay within each man's grasp. And the peculiar configuration of colonial politics—a constant broil of petty factions struggling almost formlessly, with little discipline or control, for the benefits of public authority—had tended to erode the respect traditionally accorded the institutions and officers of the state.

Yet nowhere, at any time in the colonial years, were the implications of these circumstances articulated or justified. The assumption remained that society, in its maturity if not in its confused infancy, would conform to the pattern of the past; that authority would continue to exist without challenge, and that those in superior positions would be responsible and wise, and those beneath them respectful and content. These premises and expectations were deeply lodged; they were not easily or quickly displaced. But the Revolution brought with it arguments and attitudes bred of arguments endlessly repeated, that undermined these premises of the *ancien régime.*

For a decade or more defiance to the highest constituted powers poured from the colonial presses and was hurled from half the pulpits of the land. The right, the need, the absolute obligation to disobey legally constituted authority had become the universal cry. Cautions and qualifications became ritualistic: formal exercises in ancient pieties. One might preface one's charge to disobedience with homilies on the inevitable imperfections of all governments and the necessity to

bear "some injuries" patiently and peaceably. But what needed and received demonstration and defense was not the caution, but the injunction: the argument that when injuries touched on "fundamental rights" (and who could say when they did not?) then nothing less than "duty to God and religion, to themselves, to the community, and to unborn posterity require such to assert and defend their rights by all lawful, most prudent, and effectual means in their power." Obedience as a principle was only too well known; disobedience as a doctrine was not. It was therefore asserted again and again that resistance to constituted authority was "a doctrine according to godliness—the doctrine of the English nation . . . by which our rights and constitution have often been defended and repeatedly rescued out of the hands of encroaching tyranny. . . . This is the doctrine and grand pillar of the ever memorable and glorious Revolution, and upon which our gracious sovereign George III holds the crown of the British empire." What better credentials could there be? How lame to add that obedience too "is an eminent part of Christian duty without which government must disband and dreadful anarchy and confusion (with all it horrors) take place and reign without control"—how lame, especially in view of the fact that one could easily mistake this "Christian obedience" for that "blind, enslaving obedience which is no part of the Christian institution but is highly injurious to religion, to every free government, and to the good of mankind, and is the stirrup of tyranny, and grand engine of slavery."

Defiance to constituted authority leaped like a spark from one flammable area to another, growing in heat as it went. Its greatest intensification took place in the explosive atmosphere of local religious dissent. Isaac Backus spoke only for certain of the Baptists and Congregational Separates and against the presumptive authority of ministers, when, in the course of an attack on the religious establishment in Massachusetts, he warned that

> *we are not to obey and follow [ministers] in an implicit or customary way, but each one must consider and follow others no further than they see that the end of their conversation is Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever more. . . . People are so far from being under obligation to follow teachers who don't lead in this way they incur guilt by such a following of them.*

It took little imagination on the part of Backus's readers and listeners to find in this a general injunction against uncritical obedience to authority in any form. Others were even more explicit. The Baptist preacher who questioned not merely the authority of the local orthodox church but the very "etymology of the word [orthodoxy]" assured the world that the colonists

> *have as just a right, before GOD and man, to oppose King, ministry, Lords, and Commons of England when they violate their rights as*

> *Americans as they have to oppose any foreign enemy; and that this is no more, according to the law of nature, to be deemed rebellion than it would be to oppose the King of France, supposing him now present invading the land.*

But what to the Baptists was the establishment, to Anglicans was dissent. From the establishment in New England, ever fearful of ecclesiastical impositions from without, came a strong current of antiauthoritarianism as from the farthest left-wing sect. It was a pillar of the temple, a scion of the church, and an apologist for New England's standing order who sweepingly disclaimed "all human authority in matters of faith and worship. We regard neither pope nor prince as head of the church, nor acknowledge that any Parliaments have power to enact articles of doctrine or forms of discipline or modes of worship or terms of church communion," and, declaring that "we are accountable to none but *Christ*"—words that had struck at the heart of every establishment, civil and religious, since the fall of Rome—concluded with the apparent paradox that "*liberty* is the *fundamental* principle of our establishment."

In such declarations a political argument became a moral imperative. The principle of justifiable disobedience and the instinct to question public authority before accepting it acquired a new sanction and a new vigor. Originally, of course, the doctrine of resistance was applied to Parliament, a nonrepresentative assembly three thousand miles away. But the composition and location of the institution had not been as crucial in creating opposition as had the character of the actions Parliament had taken. Were provincial assemblies, simply because they were local and representative, exempt from scrutiny and resistance? Were they any less susceptible than Parliament to the rule that when their authority is extended beyond "the bounds of the law of God and the free constitution . . . 'their acts are, *ipso facto*, void, and cannot oblige any to obedience'"? There could be no doubt of the answer. Any legislature, wherever located or however composed, deserved only the obedience it could command by the justice and wisdom of its proceedings. Representative or not, local or not, any agency of the state could be defied. The freeholders of Augusta, Virginia, could not have been more explicit in applying to local government in 1776 the defiance learned in the struggle with Parliament. They wrote their delegates to Virginia's Provincial Congress that

> *should the future conduct of our legislative body prove to you that our opinion of their wisdom and justice is ill-grounded, then tell them that your constituents are neither guided nor will ever be influenced by that slavish maxim in politics, "that whatever is enacted by that body of men in whom the supreme power of the state is vested must in all cases be obeyed," and that they firmly believe at-*

tempts to repeal an unjust law can be vindicated beyond a simple remonstrance addressed to the legislators.

But such threats as these were only the most obvious ways in which traditional notions of authority came into question. Others were more subtly subversive, silently sapping the traditional foundations of social orders and discipline.

"Rights" obviously lay at the heart of the Anglo-American controversy: the rights of Englishmen, the rights of mankind, chartered rights. But "*rights,*" wrote Richard Bland—that least egalitarian of revolutionary leaders—"imply *equality* in the instances to which they belong and must be treated without respect to the dignity of the persons concerned in them." This was by no means simply a worn cliché, for while "equality before the law" was a commonplace of the time "equality without respect to the dignity of the persons concerned" was not; its emphasis on social equivalence was significant, and though in its immediate context the remark was directed to the invidious distinctions believed to have been drawn between Englishmen and Americans its broader applicability was apparent. Others seized upon it, and developed it, especially in the fluid years of transition when new forms of government were being sought to replace those believed to have proved fatal to liberty. "An affectation of rank" and "the assumed distinction of 'men of consequence'" had been the blight of the Proprietary party, a Pennsylvania pamphleteer wrote in 1776. Riches in a new country like America signified nothing more than the accident of prior settlement. The accumulation of wealth had been "unavoidable to the descendants of the early settlers" since the land, originally cheap, had appreciated naturally with the growth of settlement.

Perhaps it is owing to this accidental manner of becoming rich that wealth does not obtain the same degree of influence here which it does in old countries. Rank, at present, in America is derived more from qualification than property; a sound moral character, amiable manners, and firmness in principle constitute the first class, and will continue to do so till the origin of families be forgotten, and the proud follies of the old world overrun the simplicity of the new.

Therefore, under the new dispensation, "no reflection ought to be made on any man account of birth, provided that his manners rise decently with his circumstances, and that he affects not to forget the level he came from."

The idea was, in its very nature, corrosive to the traditional authority of magistrates and of established institutions. And it activated other, similar thoughts whose potential threat to stability lay till then inert. There was no more familiar notion in eighteenth-century political thought—it was propounded in every tract on government and every ministerial exhortation to the civil magistracy—than that those

who wield power were "servants of society" as well as "ministers of God," and as such had to be specially qualified: they must be acquainted with the affairs of men; they must have wisdom, knowledge, prudence; and they must be men of virtue and true religion. But how far should one go with this idea? The doctrine that the qualifications for magistracy were moral, spiritual, and intellectual could lead to conflict with the expectation that public leaders would be people of external dignity and social superiority; it could be dangerous to the establishment in any settled society. For the ancient notion that leadership must devolve on men whose "personal authority and greatness," whose "eminence or nobility," were such that "every man subordinate is ready to yield a willing submission without contempt or repining"—ordinary people not easily conceding to an authority "conferred upon a mean man . . . no better than selected out of their own rank"—this traditional notion had never been repudiated, was still honored and repeated. But now, in the heated atmosphere of incipient rebellion, the idea of leaders as servants of the people was pushed to its logical extreme, and its subversive potentialities revealed. By 1774 it followed from the belief that "lawful rulers are the servants of the people" that they were "exalted above their brethren not for their own sakes, but for the benefit of the people; and submission is yielded, not on account of their persons considered exclusively on the authority they are clothed with, but of those laws which in the exercise of this authority are made by them conformably to the laws of nature and equity." In the distribution of offices, it was said in 1770, "merit only in the candidate" should count—not birth, or wealth, or loyalty to the great; but merit only. Even a deliberately judicious statement of this theme rang with defiance to traditional forms of authority: "It is not wealth—it is not family—it is not either of these alone, nor both of them together, though I readily allow neither is to be disregarded, that will qualify men for important seats in government, unless they are rich and honorable in other and more important respects." Indeed, one could make a complete inversion and claim that, properly, the external affluence of magistrates should be the consequence of, not the prior qualification for, the judicious exercise of public authority over others.

Where would it end? Two generations earlier, in the fertile seedtime of what would become the revolutionary ideology, the ultimate subversiveness of the arguments advanced by "the men of the rights" had already been glimpsed. "The sum of the matter betwixt Mr. Hoadly and me," the Jacobite, High Church polemicist Charles Leslie had written in 1711, is this:

I think it most natural that authority *should* descend, *that is, be* derived *from a* superior *to an* inferior, *from God to* fathers *and* kings, *and from kings and* fathers *to* sons *and* servants. *But Mr. Hoadly*

> *would have it* ascend *from* sons *to* fathers *and from* subjects *to* sovereigns, *nay to God himself, whose* kingship *the men of the* rights *say is* derived *to* Him *from the* people! *And the* argument *does naturally carry it all that way. For if* authority *does* ascend, *it must* ascend *to the* height.

By 1774 it seemed undeniable to many, uninvolved in or hostile to the revolutionary effort, that declarations "before GOD . . . that it is no rebellion to oppose any king, ministry, or governor [who] destroys by any violence or authority whatever the rights of the people" threatened the most elemental principles of order and discipline in society. A group of writers, opposed not merely to the politics of resistance but to the effect it would have on the primary linkages of society—on that patterning of human relations that distinguishes a civilized community from a primitive mob—attempted to recall to the colonists the lessons of the past, the wisdom, as they thought of it, of the ages. Citing adages and principles that once had guided men's thoughts on the structure of society; equating all communities, and England's empire in particular with families; quoting generously from Filmer if not from Leslie; and explaining that anarchy results when social inferiors claim political authority, they argued, with increasing anxiety, that the essence of social stability was being threatened by the political agitation of the time. Their warnings, full of nostalgia for ancient certainties, were largely ignored. But in the very extremism of their reaction to the events of the time there lies a measure of the distance revolutionary thought had moved from an old to a very new world.

One of the earliest such warnings was written by a young Barbadian, Isaac Hunt, only recently graduated from the College of Philadelphia but already an expert in scurrilous pamphleteering. Opening his *Political Family*, an essay published in 1775 though written for a prize competition in 1766, with a discourse on the necessary reciprocity of parts in the body politic he developed as his central point the idea that "in the *body politic* all inferior jurisdictions should flow from *one superior fountain* . . . a due subordination of the less parts to the greater is . . . necessary to the *existence* of BOTH." Colonies were the children and inferiors of the mother country; let them show the gratitude and obedience due to parents, and so let the principle of order through subordination prevail in the greater as in the lesser spheres of life.

This, in the context of the widespread belief in equal rights and the compact theory of government, was anachronistic. But it expressed the fears of many as political opposition turned into revolutionary fervor. Arguments such as Hunt's were enlarged and progressively dramatized, gaining in vituperation with successive publications until by 1774 they were bitter, shrill, and full of despair. Three Anglican clergymen wrote wrathful epitaphs to this ancient, honorable, and moribund philosophy.

Samuel Seabury—Hamilton's anonymous opponent in the pamphlet wars and the future first bishop of the Episcopal church in America—wrote desperately of the larger, permanent dangers of civil disobedience. The legal, established authorities in New York—the courts of justice, above all—have been overthrown, he wrote, and in their places there were now "delegates, congresses, committees, riots, mobs, insurrections, associations." Who comprised the self-constituted Committee of Safety of New York that had the power to brand innocent people outlaws and deliver them over "to the vengeance of a lawless, outrageous mob to be *tarred, feathered, hanged, drawn, quartered, and burnt*"? A parcel of upstarts "chosen by the weak, foolish, turbulent part of the country people"—"half a dozen fools in your neighborhood." Was the slavery imposed by their riotous wills to be preferred to the tyranny of a king? No: "If I must be devoured, let me be devoured by the jaws of a lion, and not *gnawed* to death by rats and vermin." If the upstart, pretentious committeemen triumph, order and peace will be at an end, and anarchy will result.

> *Government was intended for the security of those who live under it—to protect the weak against the strong—the good against the bad—to preserve order and decency among men, preventing every one from injuring his neighbor. Every person, then, owes obedience to the laws of the government under which he lives, and is obliged in honor and duty to support them. Because if* one *has a right to disregard the laws of the society to which he belongs,* all *have the* same *right; and* then *government is at an end.*

His colleague, the elegant, scholarly Thomas Bradbury Chandler, was at once cleverer, more thoughtful, and, for those who heeded arguments, more likely to have been convincing. Two of his pamphlets published in 1774 stated with peculiar force the traditional case for authority in the state, in society, and in the ultimate source and ancient archetype of all authority, the family. His *American Querist*, that extraordinary list of one hundred rhetorical questions, put the point obliquely. It asked:

> *Whether some degree of respect be not always due from inferiors to superiors, and especially from children to parents; and whether the refusal of this on any occasion be not a violation of the general laws of society, to say nothing here of the obligations of religion and morality!*

And is not Great Britain in the same relation to the colonies as a parent to children? If so, how can such "disrespectful and abusive treatment from children" be tolerated? God has given no dispensation to people

under any government "to refuse *honor* or custom or *tribute* to whom they are *due;* to contract habits of thinking and *speaking evil of dignities,* and to weaken the natural principle of respect for those in authority." God's command is clear: his will is that we "*submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake;* and require[s] us on pain of *damnation* to be duly *subject to the higher powers,* and *not to resist* their lawful authority."

Chandler's *Friendly Address to All Reasonable Americans* was more direct. It touched the central theme of authority at the start, and immediately spelled out the implications of resistance. The effort "to disturb or threaten an established government by popular insurrections and tumults has always been considered and treated, in every age and nation of the world, as an unpardonable crime." Did not an apostle, "who had a due regard for the rights and liberties of mankind," order submission even to the cruelest of all despots, Nero? And properly so: "The bands of society would be dissolved, the harmony of the world confounded, and the order of nature subverted, if reverence, respect, and obedience might be refused to those whom the constitution has vested with the highest authority."

The insistence, the violence of language, increased in the heightening crisis. "Rebellion," Daniel Leonard wrote flatly in 1775, "is the most atrocious offense that can be perpetrated by man," except those committed directly against God. "It dissolves the social band, annihilates the security resulting from law and government; introduces fraud, violence, rapine, murder, sacrilege, and the long train of evils that riot uncontrolled in a state of nature." But the end was near. By the spring of 1775 such sentiments, fulminous and despairing, were being driven underground.

Jonathan Boucher's sermon "On Civil Liberty, Passive Obedience, and Nonresistance" had been written in 1775 "with a view to publication," and though it had been delivered publicly enough in Queen Anne's Parish, Maryland, it was promptly thereafter suppressed; "the press," Boucher later wrote, "was shut to every publication of the kind." Its publication twenty-two years afterward in a volume of Boucher's sermons entitled *A View of the Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution* was the result of the French Revolution's reawakening in the author, long since safely established in England, the fears of incipient anarchy and social incoherence that had agitated him two decades before. It was a fortunate result, for the sermon is a classic of its kind. It sums up, as no other essay of the period, the threat to the traditional ordering of human relations implicit in revolutionary thought.

Boucher sought, first and foremost, to establish the divine origins of the doctrine of obedience to constituted authority—a necessity, he

felt, not merely in view of the arguments of the Reverend Jacob Duché whom he was ostensibly refuting, but, more important, in view of the gross misinterpretation rebellious Americans had for years been making of that suggestive verse of Galatians 5:1: "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free." What had been meant by "liberty" in that passage, he said, was simply and unambiguously freedom from sin, for "every sinner is, literally, a slave . . . the only true liberty is the liberty of being the servants of God." Yet the Gospel does speak to the question of public obligations, and its command could hardly be more unmistakable: its orders, always, "obedience to the laws of every country, in every kind or form of government." The rumor promoted in the infancy of Christianity "that the Gospel was designed to undermine kingdoms and commonwealths" had probably been the work of Judas, and patently mixed up the purpose of the First Coming with that of the Second. Submission to the higher powers is what the Gospel intends for man: "obedience to government is every man's duty because it is every man's interest; but it is particularly incumbent on Christians, because . . . it is enjoined by the positive commands of God."

So much was scriptural, and could be buttressed by such authorities as Edmund Burke, Bishop Butler, "the learned Mr. Selden," and Lancelot Andrewes, whose biblical exegesis of 1650 was quoted to the effect that "princes receive their power only from God, and are by him constituted and entrusted with government of others chiefly for his own glory and honor, as his deputies and viceregents upon earth." More complicated was the application of this central thesis to the associated questions of the origins and aims of government and of the equality of men. As for the former, the idea that the aim of government is "the common good of mankind" is in itself questionable; but even if it were correct, it would not follow that government should rest on consent, for common consent can only mean common feeling, and this a "vague and loose" thing not susceptible to proof. Mankind has never yet agreed on what the common good is, and so, there being no "common feeling" that can clearly designate the "common good," one can scarcely argue that government is, or should be, instituted by "common consent."

Similarly popular, dangerous, and fallacious to Boucher was the notion "that the whole human race is born equal; and that no man is naturally inferior, or in any respect subjected to another, and that he can be made subject to another only by his own consent." This argument, he wrote, is "ill-founded and false both in its premises and conclusions." It is hard to see how it could conceivably be true in any sense. "Man differs from man in everything that can be supposed to lead to supremacy and subjection, *as one star differs from another star*

in glory." God intended man to be a social animal; but society requires government, and "without some relative inferiority and superiority" there can be no government.

> *A musical instrument composed of chords, keys, or pipes all perfectly equal in size and power might as well be expected to produce harmony as a society composed of members all perfectly equal to be productive of order and peace. . . . On the principle of equality, neither his parents nor even the vote of a majority of the society . . . can have . . . authority over any man. . . . Even an implicit consent can bind a man no longer than he chooses to be bound. The same principle of equality . . . clearly entitles him to recall and resume that consent whenever he sees fit, and he alone has a right to judge when and for what reasons it may be resumed.*

A social and political system based on the principles of consent and equality would be "fantastic"; it would result in "the whole business of social life" being reduced to confusion and futility. People would first express and then withdraw their consent to an endless succession of schemes of government. "Governments, though always forming, would never be completely formed, for the majority today might be the minority tomorrow, and, of course, that which is now fixed might and would be soon unfixed."

Consent, equality—these were "particularly loose and dangerous" ideas, Boucher wrote; illogical, unrealistic, and lacking in scriptural sanction. There need be no mystery about the origins of government. Government was created by God. "As soon as there were some to be governed, there were also some to govern; and the first man, by virtue of that paternal claim on which all subsequent governments have been founded, was first invested with the power of government. . . . The first father was the first king: and . . . it was thus that all government originated; and monarchy is its most ancient form." From this origin it follows directly that resistance to constituted authority is a sin, and that mankind is "commanded to *be subject to the higher powers.*" True, "kings and princes . . . were doubtless created and appointed not so much for their own sakes as for the sake of the people committed to their charge: yet they are not, therefore, the creatures of the people. So far from deriving their authority from any supposed consent or suffrage of men, they receive their commission from Heaven; they receive it from God, the source and original of all power." The judgment of Jesus Christ is evident: the most essential duty of subjects with respect to government is simply "(in the phraseology of a prophet) *to be quiet, and to sit still.*"

How simple but yet how demanding an injunction, for men are ever "*prone* to be presumptuous and self-willed, always disposed and ready to despise *dominion,* and to *speak evil of dignities.*" And how necessary to be obeyed in the present circumstance. Sedition has already penetrated deeply; it tears at the vitals of social order. It threatens far more than "the persons invested with the supreme power either legislative or executive"; "the resistance which your political counselors urge you to practice [is exerted] clearly and literally against *authority* . . . you are encouraged to resist not only all authority over us as it now exists, but any and all that it is possible to constitute."

This was the ultimate concern. What Boucher, Leonard, Chandler, and other articulate defenders of the status quo saw as the final threat was not so much the replacement of one set of rulers by another as the triumph of ideas and attitudes incompatible with the stability of any standing order, any establishment—incompatible with society itself, as it had been traditionally known. Their fears were in a sense justified, for in the context of eighteenth-century social thought it was difficult to see how any harmonious, stable social order could be constructed from such materials. To argue that all men were equal would not make them so; it would only help justify and perpetuate that spirit of defiance, that refusal to concede to authority whose ultimate resolution could only be anarchy, demagoguery, and tyranny. If such ideas prevailed year after year, generation after generation, the "latent spark" in the breasts of even the most humble of men would be kindled again and again by entrepreneurs of discontent who would remind the people "of the elevated rank they hold in the universe, as men; that all men by nature are equal; that kings are but the ministers of the people; that their authority is delegated to them by the people for their good, and they have a right to resume it, and place it in other hands, or keep it themselves, whenever it is made use of to oppress them." Seeds of sedition would thus constantly be sown, and harvests of licentiousness reaped.

How else could it end? What reasonable social and political order could conceivably be built and maintained where authority was questioned before it was obeyed, where social differences were considered to be incidental rather than essential to community order, and where superiority, suspect in principle, was not allowed to concentrate in the hands of a few but was scattered broadly through the populace? No one could clearly say. but some, caught up in a vision of the future in which the peculiarities of American life became the marks of a chosen people, found in the defiance of traditional order the firmest of all grounds for their hope for a freer life. The details of this new world were not as yet clearly depicted; but faith ran high that a better world than any that had ever been known could be built where authority was distrusted and held in constant scrutiny; where the status of men flowed from their achievements and from their personal qualities, not from distinctions ascribed to them at birth; and where the use of power over the lives of men was jealously guarded and severely restricted. It was only where there was this defiance, this refusal to truckle, this

distrust of all authority, political or social, that institutions would express human aspirations, not crush them.

Gary B. Nash

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Although eighteenth-century America was predominantly a rural, agricultural society, its seaboard commercial cities were the cutting edge of economic, social, and political change. Almost all the alterations that are associated with the advent of capitalist society happened first in the cities and radiated outward to the smaller towns, villages, and farms of the hinterland. In America, it was in the colonial cities that the transition first occurred from a barter to a commercial economy; where a competitive social order replaced an ascriptive one; where a hierarchical and deferential polity yielded to participatory and contentious civic life; where factory production began to replace small-scale artisanal production; where the first steps were taken to organize work by clock time rather than by sidereal cycles. The cities predicted the future, even though under one in twenty colonists lived in them in 1700 or 1775 and even though they were but overgrown villages compared to the great urban centers of Europe, the Middle East, and China.

Considering the importance of the cities as dynamic loci of change, it is surprising that historians have studied them so little. Even the fascination with urban history in the last few decades has done little to remedy this. We have at our disposal a shelfful of books on the early American inland villages, whose households numbered only in the hundreds, but have comparatively little to inform us about the colonial urban centers. . . .

This book proceeds from a different conception of how urban societies changed in the eighteenth century and is based largely on different

sources. It stems from my interest in the social morphology of America's colonial cities and how it was that urban people, at a certain point in the preindustrial era, upset the equilibrium of an older system of social relations and turned the seaport towns into crucibles of revolutionary agitation. More particularly, I have tried to discover how people worked, lived, and perceived the changes going on about them, how class relationships shifted, and how political consciousness grew, especially among the laboring classes.

What has led early American historians to avoid questions about class formation and the development of lower-class political consciousness is not only an aversion to Marxist conceptualizations of history but also the persistent myth that class relations did not matter in early America because there were no classes. Land, it is widely held, was abundant and wages were high because labor was always in great demand. Therefore, opportunity was widespread and material well-being attainable by nearly everybody. If being at the bottom or in the middle was only a way station on a heavily traveled road to the top, then the composition of the various ranks and orders must have been constantly shifting and class consciousness could be only an evanescent and unimportant phenomenon. Thus, our understanding of the social history of the colonial cities has been mired in the general idea that progress was almost automatic in the commercial centers of a thriving New World society.

Only recently has the notion of extraordinary elasticity within classes and mobility between them begun to yield to a more complex analysis of how demographic trends, economic development, the spread of a market economy, and a series of costly wars produced a social, political, and ideological transformation. Historians have begun to create a far more intricate picture of social change by studying the extent of vertical and horizontal mobility, the degree of stratification, the accumulation and distribution of wealth, the social origins of the elite, the changing nature of economic and political power, and the shaping of class, ethnic, and religious consciousness. Historians are also coming to understand the need to retreat from discussing how *the* community was affected and to consider instead how different groups within the community were affected. Armies were supplied by some urban dwellers and manned by others, and those who gained or lost were not randomly selected. Price inflation and monetary devaluation caused problems for the whole society but the burdens were not distributed evenly. A sharp rise in overseas demand for American grain might increase the profits of inland farmers and seaboard merchants but could undercut the household budget of urban laborers and artisans.

Much of this book is about those who occupied the lower levels of urban society, the people who frequently suffered the unequal effects

of eighteenth-century change. This is no mere quest for aesthetic balance or for simple justice in recreating the past. Examination of the circumstances of life for the great mass of common people in every period and place and inquiry into their ways of thinking and acting are essential if we are ever to test and correct the hallowed generalizations made from the study of the select few upon which our understanding of history is primarily based. What is more, I proceed from the conviction that the success of any society is best measured not by examining the attainments and accumulations of those at the top but by assaying the quality of life for those at the bottom. if this be thought the maxim of a utopian socialist, it was also the notion of an eighteenth-century English aristocrat whose writings circulated in Boston. "Every Nation," wrote Sir Richard Cox, "has the Reputation of being rich or poor from the Condition of the lowest Class of its Inhabitants."

In examining the lives of the lower classes in the eighteenth-century American cities I have repeatedly encountered evidence of social situations for which there is no accounting in the standard scholarship. Boston, I have found, was not only the commercial and intellectual center of New England Puritanism, as we have been taught, but also, by the 1740s, the New England center of mass indebtedness, widowhood, and poverty. By the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 poverty on a scale that urban leaders found appalling had also appeared in New York and Philadelphia. The narrowing of opportunities and the rise of poverty are two of the subthemes of this book. This is not to deny that compared with most places from which the colonists came—at least those who were white and free—the material circumstances of life were far more favorable than they had previously known. Comparisons between life in the colonial cities and life in Europe, however, like comparisons today between the plight of the urban poor in Chicago and Calcutta, miss the mark. An indebted shoemaker in Boston in 1760 took little satisfaction that for many of those who worked with hammer and awl life was worse and the future even bleaker in Dublin or London. People's sense of deprivation is not assuaged by referring them to distant places or ancient times. Like those above them, they measure the quality of their lives within their own locales and make comparisons primarily with the world of their parents.

To study those who resided at the bottom of the seaport societies it is also necessary to study those in the middle and at the top. Whether it is the reaction of the poor to the new formulae for dealing with urban poverty or the role of the crowd in the Stamp Act demonstrations of 1765, nothing is explicable without understanding the ideology and conduct of men at the higher levels. It was, after all, with those who possessed economic, political, and social power that the lower orders ultimately had to resolve matters. All urban people were

linked together in a social network where power was unevenly distributed, and one part of this social organism cannot be understood in isolation from the others. Above all, this book is about the relationships among urban people who occupied different rungs of the social ladder.

The concept of class is central to this book. Therefore, it is important to specify that the term has a different meaning for the preindustrial period than for a later epoch. I employ it as both a heuristic and a historical category. It is a term which enables us to perceive that urban people gradually came to think of themselves as belonging to economic groups that did not share common goals, began to behave in class-specific ways in response to events that impinged upon their well-being, and manifested ideological points of view and cultural characteristics peculiar to their rank. This is not to say that all carpenters or all shopkeepers occupied the same position along the spectrum of wealth or that all ship captains or all caulkers thought alike or that merchants and shoemakers consistently opposed each other because they occupied different social strata. Nor can class be determined simply by notations on a tax assessor's list or by occupations given in inventories of estate. Moreover, evidence is abundant that vertical consciousness was always present in a society where movement up and down the social ladder never stopped and where the natural tendency of economic networks was to create a common interest among, for example, the merchant, shipbuilder, and mariner.

Thus, we must recognize the problems in employing the concept of class in eighteenth-century society, for the historical stage of a mature class formation had not yet been reached. To ignore class relations, however, is a greater problem. The movement between ranks and the vertical linkages that were a part of a system of economic clientage did not foreclose the possibility that horizontal bonds would grow in strength. People who had always thought of themselves as belonging to the lower, middling, or upper ranks, but saw no reason that this implied social conflict, would gradually associate these rough identifiers of social standing with antagonistic interests and make them the basis for political contention. One of the main tasks of this book is to show that many urban Americans, living amidst historical forces that were transforming the social landscape, came to perceive antagonistic divisions based on economic and social position; that they began to struggle around these conflicting interests; and that through these struggles they developed a consciousness of class. This is quite different, as E. P. Thompson points out, than arguing "that classes exist, independent of historical relationship and struggle, and that they struggle *because* they exist, rather than coming into existence out of that struggle."

Hence, I am concerned with the evolving relations among different groups of urban people who were subject to historically rooted changes

that may have been as perplexingly intricate to them as they have been to historians since. It is not my argument that by the end of the colonial period class formation and class consciousness were fully developed, but only that we can gain greater insight into the urban social process between 1690 and 1776 and can understand more fully the origins and meaning of the American Revolution if we analyze the changing relations among people of different ranks and examine the emergence of new modes of thought based on horizontal rather than vertical divisions in society. The shift in social alignments would continue after the Revolution, not moving with telic force toward some rendezvous with destiny in the industrial period but shaped by historical forces that were largely unpredictable in 1776.

This book is also comparative in its approach. Examining concurrently the process of change in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia has enabled me to comprehend how particular factors intertwined in each city to hasten or retard the formation of class consciousness and to give a particular texture to social discourse and political behavior. I have chosen these three cities not only because they were the largest northern maritime centers, as well as the seats of provincial government, but also because their populations differed significantly in racial and ethnic origins, in religious composition, and in the legacies of their founding generations. It should be apparent in what follows that class consciousness developed according to no even-paced or linear formula. It emerged and receded depending upon conditions, leadership at both the top and bottom, cultural traditions, and other factors. The comparative approach has also convinced me that the Marxist maxim that the mode of production dictates the nature of class relations has only limited analytic potential for explaining changes during some historical eras. It is not different modes of production that account for the striking differences among the three port towns in the historical development of class consciousness but the different experiences of people who lived within three urban societies that shared a common mode of production. Thus, it is necessary to go beyond determining objective class structures and objective productive relations to examining "the specific activities of men [and women] in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process." Bostonians, New Yorkers, and Philadelphians experienced their situations differently between 1690 and 1776 because discrete factors impinged upon them, ranging from their proximity to Anglo-French theaters of war to the development of their hinterlands to their cultural heritage.

In inquiring into the history of the common people of the northern port towns I have adopted the term "laboring classes." I do so in order to take account of the fact that before the American Revolution—in fact, for more than half a century after the Revolution—there was no

industrial working *class* composed of a mass of wage laborers who toiled in factories where a capitalist class wholly owned and controlled the productive machinery. My concern is with broad groupings of people who worked with their hands but were differentiated by skills and status. Thus, the laboring *classes* included slaves, whose bondage was perpetual, indentured servants, whose unfree status was temporary, and free persons, whose independence could be altered only in unusual circumstances. The laboring ranks also ascended from apprentice to journeyman to master craftsman. Likewise, there were gradations among ill-paid merchant seamen, laborers, and porters at the bottom; struggling shoemakers, tailors, coopers, and weavers who were a step higher; more prosperous cabinetmakers, silversmiths, instrumentmakers, and housewrights; and entrepreneurial bakers, distillers, ropewalk operators, and tallow chandlers. There was, in short, no unified laboring class at any point in the period under study. That does not mean that class formation and the shaping of class consciousness was not happening in the era culminating with the American Revolution.

Despite the importance attached to economic and social change, this book argues that ideology in many instances was far more than a reflection of economic interests and acted as a motive force among urban people of all ranks. But it needs to be emphasized at the outset that ideology is not the exclusive possession of educated individuals and established groups. Nor do I believe that those at the top established an ideology that was then obligingly adopted by those below them. Slaves, indentured servants, the laboring poor, women, and the illiterate also had an ideology, although many of these people did not express ideas systematically in forms that are easily recoverable by historians two hundred years later. What I mean by ideology is awareness of the surrounding world, penetration of it through thought, and reasoned reactions to the forces impinging upon one's life. People living in communities as small as the prerevolutionary port towns, linked together as they were by church, tavern, workplace, and family, exchanged views, compared insights, and through the face-to-face nature of their associations, arrived at certain common understandings of their social situations. The world for them may have always been half-seen and imperfectly comprehended, but, as is universally true, they acted upon reality as they understood it, whether they were university trained and rich or could barely keep their shop books by crooked hand in a rented room.

It is not possible to fathom the subterranean social changes that transformed the urban centers of colonial America or to peer into the minds of the mass of urban dwellers who have been obscured from historical sight by consulting only the sources that are most accessible to the historian—newspapers, municipal records, business accounts, diaries and correspondence, and published sermons, political tracts,

and legislative proceedings. As vital as these sources are, they are insufficient to the task, for they most often came from the hands of upper-class merchants, lawyers, clergymen, and politicians, who, though they tell us much, do not tell all. These sources are particularly silent on the lives of those in the lower reaches of the urban hierarchy and they are only occasionally helpful in revealing the subsurface social processes at work. This is not surprising, for on the one hand the gentry was not interested in illuminating the lives of laboring-class city dwellers and on the other hand they were often unaware of, mystified by, or eager to obscure the changing social, economic, and political relationships in their cities. Buried in less familiar documents, virtually all of them unpublished and many of them fragmentary and difficult to use, are glimpses of the lives of ordinary people. The story of how life was lived and conditions changed in the colonial cities can be discerned, not with mathematical precision or perfect clarity but in general form, from tax lists, poor relief records, wills, inventories of estate, deed books, mortgages, court documents, and portledge bills and wage records. This book draws extensively upon such sources as well as upon more traditional forms of evidence. It also infers lower-class thought from lower-class action, which is justifiable when the action is adequately recorded and is repetitive. . . .

IT IS NOT within the compass of this book to analyze the revolutionary process that occurred after the outbreak of fighting in eastern Massachusetts in the spring of 1775. It is enough to note that the work of a new generation of historians has begun to demonstrate that much of the complexity and significance of the American Revolution is missed by portraying it primarily as a movement for independence and the creation of republican institutions. It was certainly that, but it was also a social upheaval involving "the rapid and often violent mobilization into public life of many different groups," the challenging of gentry control of public affairs, and the proposing of remedies for the social ills that many believed had beset American society.

The burden of this book has been to show how the growth and commercial development of the northern seaport towns brought about multifaceted change involving the restructuring of social groups, the redistribution of wealth, the alteration of labor relations, the emergence of states of consciousness that cut horizontally through society, and the mobilization into political life of the lower ranks of laboring people. Haltingly it was recognized by many in the cities that the ligaments of the corporate society of the past had been torn in ways that struck at their opportunities, well-being, and sense that equity prevailed. In this century-long process there emerged no perfect crystallization of classes or class consciousness. But both master craftsmen and small retailers in the middle ranks and lesser artisans, merchant

seamen, and laborers below them learned to define their interests and identify the self-interested behavior of those they had been taught to believe acted for the good of the whole. We have seen them beginning to struggle around the issues that were most palpable in terms of their daily existence and, in the process of struggling, developing a consciousness about their separate roles and their antagonistic interests with others in their communities.

Liberal theory, as imbibed by historians, recognizes tension and conflict only in terms of the "explicit and unwarranted intrusion of authority upon individual [political] freedom." But on a wide ensemble of issues—including political rights, but extending beyond them to wages and prices, charity, taxes, market and labor relations, and evangelical religion—the urban lower orders formulated distinctly different points of view from the ones held by those above them. It is necessary to reiterate that there was no unified ideology among those who worked with their hands or among those who did not. Urban society was much too fluid for that. Nor can it be said that there were no important areas where interclass agreement prevailed. Nevertheless, within their own cognitive structures, merchant seamen, artisans, and the poor, as well as merchants, shopkeepers, and professional men, saw their world changing. This led, as the Revolution approached, to the rise of a radical consciousness among many and to an interplay between calls for internal reform and insurgency against external forces that adversely affected the lives of city people. Challenges to the concentration of economic, political, and cultural authority ultimately shattered the equilibrium of the old system of social relations.

Although no social revolution occured in America in the 1770s, the American Revolution could not have unfolded when or in the manner it did without the self-conscious action of urban laboring people—both those at the bottom and those in the middle—who became convinced that they must create power where none had existed before or else watch their position deteriorate, both in absolute terms and relative to that of others. Thus, the history of the Revolution is in part the history of popular collective action and the puncturing of the gentry's claim that their rule was legitimized by custom, law, and divine will. Ordinary people, sometimes violently, took over the power and the procedures of the constituted authorities. With wealth becoming far more concentrated at the top of urban society, plebeian urban dwellers forced their way into the political arena, not so much through the formal mechanisms of electoral politics as through street demonstrations, mass meetings, extralegal committees that assumed governmental powers, the intimidation of their enemies, and, in some cases, spirited defenses of traditional norms. This reordering of political power required a mental breakthrough, for it had to be accomplished in the face of a model of social relations, set by the elite, which

claimed the superior wisdom and public mindedness of the educated and wealthy and prescribed deference as the customary and proper role of "inferior" people.

This shattering of the habit of obedience, advanced by the Great Awakening, proceeded far more rapidly in Boston in the second third of the century than in the other towns. Yet it relapsed after 1765, as traditional leaders, aided by the descent of a red-coated enemy on the community, reasserted themselves and as the people closed ranks in a reaffirmation of the spirit of covenant. In New York and Philadelphia the political leadership of the elite was challenged only sporadically until the end of the Seven Years War, when economic derangements and internal factionalism set the stage for the rise of laboring men to political power. But in all the cities those who labored with their hands, especially those who found it most difficult to weather the changes that had overcome their society, formed a picture of the social arrangements by which they lived. It was a picture that was political in its composition and increasingly vivid in its portrayal of the port towns as places where men struggled against each other rather than working harmoniously for the mutual good of the whole society.

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The Constitution

CONFLICT OR CONSENSUS?

The Constitution remains one of the most controversial documents in all of American history. Generations of Supreme Court justices have reinterpreted the document according to their own predilections when handing down constitutional decisions bearing upon the problems of American society. Presidents and political parties in power traditionally have viewed the Constitution in the light of their own interests, pursuits, and philosophies of government. Historians, too, have presented conflicting interpretations of the Constitution in different periods of American history. But to a large degree such scholars have confined their controversies to the writing and ratification of the Constitution. They have usually disagreed about the intent of the founding fathers in framing parts of the Constitution and the motives of the men involved. The changing outlook of historians toward the Constitution, moreover, has often tended to coincide with changes in the intellectual climate of opinion within America itself.

From the Convention of 1787 to the close of the Civil War the Constitution was considered a controversial document by historians because of the questions it raised regarding the nature of the federal union. Politicians in both North and South were fond of citing the Constitution in support of their arguments concerning the relationship between the states and central government, and the respective rights of majorities and minorities under the federal form of government. Since the overwhelming preoccupation of American historians during this period was with politics, scholars tended to reflect this point of view in their writings about the Constitution. They usually interpreted the document in terms of two opposing doctrines: states' rights versus national sovereignty, or a strict versus a loose construction of the Constitution. The outcome of the Civil War seemed to settle the issue in favor of the national theory of the Constitution by force of arms.

In the century since the Civil War, however, five distinct groups