

Historians on the Revolution Point of View #2

Many students of political history are inclined to qualify the American Revolution as primarily a war for independence and not truly revolutionary in the fuller sense of that concept. This argument stems from the historic fact that, as revolutions go, the American variety, while still a violent civil war, was not roiled by the social cataclysm and economic upheaval characteristic of more-radical events in other countries. What happened in Russia (1917) and France (1789-1799), the argument correctly asserts, did not occur in America. There was no extensive social rearrangement among the classes, no economic reinvention, no workers' revolt, no redistribution or abolition of property, no abolition of religion or destruction of an established church, no revolutionary "justice," no new calendar, no cult of personality, no reeducation camps--in sum, no millennial aspirations. Indeed, after all the smoke cleared, institutionalized oppression remained, most notably in the lamentable and shameful preservation of slavery even after several thousand African Americans bravely joined their white comrades in the military. Socially and economically, the war produced independence but not revolution, or so the argument maintains.

If revolution is to be understood only in terms of social and economic upheaval, then what happened in eighteenth-century America was not a revolution. Additionally, if one adheres scrupulously to these criteria, then what happened in twentieth-century Germany was revolutionary. For if sudden and dramatic social and economic transformation are the only legitimate standards that one is allowed to consider in assessing revolutions, then the stunning and willful ascent of the Nazi Party in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s is the real thing, while the American assertion of the right to limited self-government in the name of higher principles is not. The former immediately and utterly mutated German society at every level, while the latter merely affirmed the elusive and eternal principle of natural law and right as the only legitimate basis for political power.

If one is not so confined in defining revolution, it is in this affirmation of natural law and right that one finds America to be a revolutionary society. Perhaps it is in the appeal to higher principles over and beyond interest and utility that makes the American Revolution more radical than revolutions enmeshed in the dense matrix of social structure and economic necessity. Early- nineteenth-century French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville once famously remarked on the comparative equality of conditions already present in late colonial America (slavery notwithstanding), a quality of society that owed its existence to the lack of residual feudal structures and the seeming abundance of apparently open land. While disparity in wealth was a feature of American society both before and after the Revolution, barriers between the rich and poor were not as insurmountable as in Europe, and wealth as a whole was far more fluid than in any society at that time. While it cannot be denied that economic conditions and social status influence nearly every political act, noble or ignoble, revolutionary or otherwise, it was primarily a revolutionary principle and not material exigency or class enmity that drove the colonists to revolt.

Above all, what is truly revolutionary about the American Revolution stems from its metaphysical underpinnings, namely, that sovereign power is always subordinate to the principles of natural law, and that these principles are fixed to the attendant notion that natural rights inhere in all persons by virtue of their humanity. This assertion was not simply a rhetorical flourish concealing more mundane motivations; rather, it flows from comprehension of and adherence to an eternal verity. Granted, no

one can read the hearts of others, past or present, and it may be that a good number of revolutionaries cynically employed the language of Locke and the Whigs for their own selfish purposes. The language was important, however; the first two paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence (1776) deliberately provide its most forthright and eloquent expression. If one removes those paragraphs, one still has a powerful indictment of King George III and his ministers. From the beginning Jefferson and his associates saw fit to explain that all government is based on consent, asserted by individuals who are unqualifiedly created equal, and instituted for the sole purpose of guaranteeing the protection of the inalienable rights of free, equal, consenting individuals. General search warrants, regardless of the circumstances; taxation without valid representation, regardless of the monetary percentage; and all of the many grievances enumerated in the Declaration are intolerable not simply because they violate English law and inconvenience the colonists, but because they are in violation of those higher principles of natural law and right. It was not "bread and peace" that was promised by the Sons of Liberty, for the colonists had both in ample supply, but rather their insistence upon the universal truth that no government holds title to the natural rights of its charges. Nothing can be more revolutionary than this simple fact, and more dangerous to the minions of government by force, however benign or despotic that force might be.

Great revolutions vary from age to age: some are propelled by necessity, others are undertaken only because of an idea--still others combine both. Those revolutions that endure and resonate with greatest power are the ones that are driven by transcendent principles that exist prior to any material or social condition or contingency. They speak to human beings simply as human beings. A revolution that is about more than material necessity and interest is a revolution undertaken by the free and for the sake of freedom itself. Otis understood this fact during the faint, initial murmurs of the American Revolution. That quintessential radical Thomas Paine understood the magnitude of this concept when speaking of America as liberty's last true asylum. The perceptions of the actors who were immersed in the events cannot be dismissed—they comprehended their own struggle in enduring, transcendent terms. The social and economic ramifications remain in dispute, and perhaps that is as it should be. In that which is most innovative and influential, the ideas and principles themselves, the answer is clear: the American struggle for liberty was and remains revolutionary.

-- Scott John Hammond, Professor of Political Science, James Madison University