

Historians on the Revolution

Point of View #1

Admittedly, the American Revolution did not witness an uprising of the *sans-culottes* like that of France some years later. It is hard to make out of it a class struggle, when the very term "class" did not yet enjoy wide currency. Notwithstanding, the attachment to the cause of revolution by the lower and middling orders, as they were then known, was central both to its initiation and its ultimate success. These orders were distinguished from their "betters" by dress, and often, too, by speech, manners, and habits. *M'Fingal* [M'Fingal was a mock epic poem written as a caricature of John Adams] might jeer at "each leather-aproned dunce grown wise," a point of view shared by many who wore silks and velvets, covered their heads with powdered wigs, wore silver-buckled shoes, and rode in chaises. What surprised them more often than not was how the "village Hampden" and the "mute inglorious Milton" made their discontent known, though deemed to be inarticulate. Their use of songs, jigs, and toasts, of effigies, parades, and demonstrations, even of mobbing and tarring and feathering proved that the inarticulate were by no means mute. Neither literary correspondents nor diarists, careless in preserving farm and account books, they wrote the stories of their lives in baptismal registers and on gravestones, in the court records, the deeds and wills, the inventories of estates, the assessment, tax, and tithable rolls, the militia lists, and in countless newspaper notices placed by craftsmen, shopkeepers, and owners of runaway servants.

United only in resenting privilege, the lower ranks of society voiced different grievances in different areas. In interior Massachusetts the court system and the aggrandizement of power by the justices of the peace aroused their ire. In Vermont, New York, and the Jerseys, New York patentees, manor lords, or the Jersey proprietors blocked the settlers' quest for fee-simple lands. Pennsylvania found frontiersmen arrayed against the Eastern inhabitants, while the back country regulators of the Carolinas registered protests against regressive taxation, unequal representation, inequitable or inadequate justice, and in the southern towns white mechanics joined to limit the employment of slaves in the handicraft trades.

The severe social strains which so many members of the lower orders experienced, while perhaps accounting for some of the frenzied rhetoric of the period, failed to unite all the aggrieved, if disparate, groups in support of independence. Contrariwise, where landlords happened to be stout Whigs, tenants understandably became Tories. Imperial measures aroused the seaboard from end to end, while the frontier remained sharply divided in allegiance. It is not a fictitious unity of the aggrieved inhabitants that is relevant to the Revolution, but rather the evidence that the various movements they began, to eliminate inequities in society, gathered strength and thereby defined the reform goals of the Revolution.

In adopting the Declaration of Independence, an act of paramount, sovereign authority, Congress acted for the people rather than for thirteen separate states, since only four state governments, three of them provisional, had been formed prior to its passage. Jefferson's felicitous phrasing described "one people" as dissolving the political bands connecting them with another, affirmed that governments derived "their just powers from the consent of the governed," and proclaimed "the right of the people" to alter or abolish "a government destructive of the ends set forth." Good Whig rhetoric or political reality? The United States Supreme Court thought it was the latter. Members of the first Court, who--one might say--

were present at the creation, characterized the Great Declaration as the act of the "whole people," one which transferred sovereignty "from the crown of Great Britain" to "the people." Chief Justice Jay, who never went back to Philadelphia to sign the document that New York's delegates had been originally enjoined from endorsing, might, if pressed, have conceded that the "whole people" excluded the substantial segment opposed to independence.

In the face of an impressive body of evidence of social tension and of mounting pressures to end inequities between ranks and regions, consensus historians still deny that the American Revolution was a rising of the masses against their oppressors. Nobody today seriously argues that an internal war over who should rule at home was fought between the propertyless masses and the privileged minority. Property was too widely distributed or the expectation of possessing it too broadly held for society to divide over this issue. In fact, despite their many differences, the people did unite in a common cause. What unified the discordant elements of the Patriot populace was the conviction that only through independence could they build a free society. What informed their common purpose was a republican ideology that recognized the people as the constituent power. To fill the vacuum of governmental authority which the act of revolution created, it was necessary to build a new political structure both for the thirteen states and for the nation. In the ensuing series of experiments in constitution-making and legislation, a people, liberated from the strictures of the old colonial order, began an era of innovation unprecedented in that day and age.

A people's revolution achieved more than independence and nationhood. It brought new men to power, raised people's political aspirations, made the new governments of the Revolution more responsive to social inequities, and underpinned the notion of the sovereign people as the constituent power, of which the Preamble of the Federal Constitution is the most eloquent affirmation.

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