

The American Revolution: Intellectual or Social?

Edmund S. Morgan. *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1938. Pp. 306.

Gordon S. Wood. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992. Pp. 359.

Did America experience an intellectual or social revolution in the eighteenth century? That is the overall question that these two historians address in their works. Edmund S. Morgan's book examines the intellectual constructions of both the English and Americans can constitutions respectively. Accordingly, he attempts to portray the formation of the U.S. Constitution as a radical transformation in the conception of government. Gordon Wood, on the other hand, while rejecting a constitutional revolution, seeks to explain the same period in terms of a social revolution, emphasizing an extreme transformation within American society. The crux of these two arguments comes down to an understanding of British politics and society. In the end, it is this historical foundation that weakens Morgan's argument while elevating Wood's research to new levels of erudition.

In his Bancroft-winning publication, Morgan reinvigorates the dying Whig interpretation of seventeenth-century English history by exploring the roots of the popular sovereignty movement. He believes that in the 1640s and 50s, England boldly attempted to replace the political fiction of divine right monarchy with

the same issue. They knew that they wanted to make the people the supreme authority of the new nation, but they did not want any single political body to be absolute. In effect, they sought to separate the representatives from the people, and thus place representation inside the government.

They found their answer in the formation of the United States Constitution. According to John Locke, the people of a nation generally escape the state of nature by making two contracts: the first creates a society, and the second passes the sovereign authority of the people over to the government. In America, the Constitution became the written form of the social contract. Americans then faced the task of transferring the sovereignty of the people over to the government. This, however, they never did. Instead, the Americans used the Constitution as a way to limit the actions of their representatives in the government. Representatives no longer embodied the people. Rather, they represented them with limited power of attorney. The representatives now could be placed within the governmental structure along with the executive because of these limitations. As Morgan states: "...the Americans found a way that the British had rejected to balance the real majesty of the people against the personal majesty of their representatives" (233). In effect, these limitations had transformed the people into the ruler, and the government into the ruled.

Unfortunately, Morgan's choice of secondary research serves only to undermine his thesis, especially in his examination of seventeenth-century England. Indeed, much of his understanding of this particular issue comes from the

severely beaten Whig school of thought. Recent revisionist research exposes the misconceptions of this more traditional school. Conrad Russell (*The Crisis of Parliaments*) and Mark Kishlansky (*Parliamentary Selections*) have shown, respectively, that Parliament was not fighting to replace divine right monarchy with popular government, nor was it their place to give consent (but rather assent) to the king's policies until well after the 1640s. Further studies by W.A. Speck (*Reluctant Revolutionaries*) disprove Morgan's understanding of the Glorious Revolution as the abandonment of "divine right and hereditary succession, to make clear the community's freedom of action by placing the crown in someone whose heredity did not entitle him to it" (108). Furthermore, what Morgan seems to forget is that after 1688, English government did indeed undergo a transformation. Before, the Whigs argued for the sovereignty of Parliament (embodying the people) while the Tories argued for the supremacy of the Crown. But with the institutionalization of Parliament, Whigs and Tories alike came to accept that real sovereignty resided in the Crown in Parliament. It appears that England had in fact learned how to divide sovereignty and limit government a century before the Americans. In effect, the Americans had merely copied the British form of government. They did not, as Morgan argues, turn the English Constitution inside out.

Perhaps social transformation better describes the American Revolution. Today, many historians believe that with the Constitution came the reestablishment of an older British model of society. Not Gordon Wood. In fact, his book explicitly attacks this argument. According to

Wood, "in destroying monarchy and establishing republics [the Americans] were changing their society as well as their governments, and they knew it" (6). The Revolution was not fought solely for political change, but also for social reconstruction. The Americans wanted to cast aside the chains of monarchy in all its various forms and to don the mantle of republicanism, with all its virtue and equality.

Wood examines the period from the middle of the eighteenth century through the beginning of the nineteenth (a different period than Morgan), and sees the primary conflict of the Revolution as between two differing views of society. The British lived within a monarchical society which, being strongly hierarchical, required intense obedience and deference. However, Wood argues, due to the policy of salutary neglect, the American colonies, before 1763, developed in a slightly different manner. Republican ideals of the Enlightenment slowly infected society, challenging the existing structure. Indeed, these new conceptions of the individual, the family, and the state stood diametrically opposed to the monarchical ideals of hierarchy, inequality, kinship ties, patriarchy, patronage, and dependency. In effect, republican ideology lived within an incompatible monarchical structure.

In 1763, Britain toughened its colonial policy, using every means at its disposal. Wood stresses that in a monarchical society, as it existed in America, politics and society were intertwined: "Indeed, all government was regarded essentially as the enlisting and mobilizing of the power of private persons to carry out public ends" (82). Through the manipulation of the patronage system—with-

out which a monarchy cannot maintain control—the British expected to enforce obedience to the wishes of the Crown. Unfortunately for them, the Enlightenment had undermined much of their control over the American populace. The ideals of benevolence and individualism had unraveled the vertical ties of society. In this manner, republicanism already had established a foothold in the colonies. When the British attempted to strengthen monarchical forces within the society to enforce their measures, the Americans abandoned their traditional social format, seeking to establish a fully operative republic. They looked to the future, not to the past, for their inspiration.

Once the king was defeated, Wood claims that almost overnight the structure of society underwent radical changes. For example, the flight of the loyalists occasioned the collapse of monarchical hierarchy. As Wood points out their significance was not in their numbers, but in "who they were. A disproportionate number of them were well-to-do gentry operating at the pinnacles of power and patronage" (176). This greatly affected the remaining colonists by freeing them from the bonds of dependence. Furthermore, shortly after the Revolution, the states abolished primogeniture by their numerous attacks on "the power of family and heredity privilege" (183). Equality—especially equality of opportunity—was no longer just an idea; it became practice. In fact, Wood argues, largely because of this liberated idea of equality, "suddenly it was as if the whole traditional structure, enfeebled and brittle to begin with, broke apart, and people and their energies were set loose in an unprecedented outburst" (232). This

idea of individual superiority became the driving force behind democracy.

But a force still survived to resist democracy: gentility. Where once the battle had been between patriots and courtiers, Wood contends, it had now become one of democrats versus aristocrats. Democracy led to the emergence of special interest in politics and many were adamant about their opposition to such a danger. According to Wood, some of those who assembled to create the Constitution (the Federalists) decided that virtuous politicking could only come from the select few—the "disinterested" gentlemen. These men dominated the framing of the Constitution, with the purpose of limiting the advance of democracy.

But, as the Anti-Federalists argued, democracy based on self-interest could not be stopped. The Federalists failed in their attempts to create a ruling class of virtuous gentlemen. Not only were these natural leaders few and far between, but the electorate voted for candidates who were in line with their interests. Wood shows how, in 1787, the Federalists won the battle, but lost the war. They discovered that the Revolution had unleashed uncontrollable and expansive democracy which culminated in the Jacksonian era—that highly democratic period of a rising middle class with its materialistic

ambitions. Wood argues that the Revolution "had succeeded only too well" (368).

Perhaps the most questionable aspect of Wood's thesis is the speed with which the Revolution ushered in Jacksonian society. He represents the change as almost instantaneous, a phenomenon that is extremely hard to believe. Nevertheless, Wood has cogently synthesized both the traditional Whig and Progressive schools of thought on the causes and effects of the American Revolution. And the result is masterful.

In their respective works, both of these historians have exhibited great skill in analysis. For those who adhere to the Whig school of English history, Morgan does indeed make a compelling argument, enhanced wonderfully by his use of prose. He has taken an extremely complex idea and made it easily comprehensible. But Wood, though not as literary, seems to have a more sound historical foundation. His care in uncovering the underpinning assumptions of the revolutionary Americans is more thorough and more enlightening. In the end however, both of these scholars expertly weave an abundance of primary and secondary sources into highly impressive theses.

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