[The Radicalism of the American Revolution](http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-chat/3049578/posts%22%20%5Ct%20%22_self)
1991 | Gordon S. Wood

We Americans like to think of our revolution as not being radical; indeed, most of the time we consider it downright conservative. It certainly does not appear to resemble the revolutions of other nations in which people were killed, property was destroyed, and everything was turned upside down. We can think of Robespierre, Lenin, and Mao Zedong as revolutionaries, but not George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. We cannot quite conceive of revolutionaries in powdered hair and knee breeches.

They made speeches, not bombs; they wrote learned pamphlets, not manifestos. They were not abstract theorists and they were not social levelers. They did not kill one another; they did not devour themselves. The American Revolution does not seem to have the same kinds of causes – the social wrongs, the class conflict, the impoverishment, the grossly inequitable distributions of wealth – that presumably lie behind other revolutions. There were no peasant uprisings, no burning of chateaux, no storming of prisons.

The social conditions that generically are supposed to lie behind all revolutions – poverty, and economic deprivation – were not present in colonial America. American colonists were not oppressed and had no crushing imperial chains to throw off. In fact, the colonists knew they were freer, more equal, more prosperous, and less burdened with cumbersome feudal and monarchical restraints than any other part of mankind in the 18th century.

Precisely because the impulses to revolution in America bear little or no resemblance to the impulses that presumably account for modern social protests and revolutions, we have tended to think of the American Revolution as having no social character, as having virtually nothing to do with the society, as having no social causes and no social consequences.

We tend to admit only a political, not a social radicalism. We have generally described the Revolution as an unusually conservative affair, concerned almost exclusively with politics and constitutional rights, and in comparison with the social radicalism of the other great revolutions of history, hardly a revolution at all.

If we measure the radicalism of revolutions by the degree of social misery or economic deprivation suffered, or by the number of people killed or manor houses burned, then this conventional emphasis on the conservatism of the American Revolutions becomes true enough. But if we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place – by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other – then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary, it was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history.

The social distinctions and economic deprivations that we today think of as the consequence of class divisions, business exploitation, or various isms – capitalism, racism, etc. – were in the 18th century usually thought to be caused by the abuses of government. Social honors, social distinctions, perquisites of office, business contracts, privileges and monopolies, even excessive property and wealth of various sorts - all social evils and social deprivations – in fact seemed to flow from connections to government, in the end from connections to monarchical authority. So that when Anglo-American radicals talked in what seems to be only political terms – purifying a corrupt constitution, eliminating courtiers, fighting off crown power, and, most important, becoming republicans – they nevertheless had a decidedly social message.

In our eyes the American revolutionaries appear to be absorbed in changing only their governments, not their society. But in destroying monarchy and establishing republics they were changing their society as well as their governments, and they knew it. Only they did not know – they could scarcely have imagined – how much of their society they would change.

By the time the Revolution had run its course in the early 19th century, American society had been transformed. One class did not overthrow another; the poor did not supplant the rich. But social relationships – the way people were connected one to another – were changed, and decisively so. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world.

In 1760 America was only a collection of disparate colonies huddled along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast – economically underdeveloped outposts existing on the very edges of the civilized world. The less than two million monarchical subjects who lived in these colonies still took for granted that society was and ought to be a hierarchy of ranks and degrees of dependency and that most people were bound together by personal ties of one sort or another. Yet scarcely fifty years later these insignificant borderland provinces had become a giant, almost continent-wide republic of nearly ten million egalitarian-minded bustling citizens who not only had thrust themselves into the vanguard of history but had fundamentally altered their society and their social relationships. Far from remaining monarchical, hierarchy-ridden subjects on the margin of civilization, Americans had become almost overnight, the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world.

And this astonishing transformation took place without industrialization, without urbanization, without railroads, without the aid of any of the great forces we usually invoke to explain “modernization.” It was the Revolution, more than any other single event, that made America into the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world.

To focus, as we are today apt to do, on what the Revolution did not accomplish – highlighting and lamenting its failure to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women – is to miss the great significance of what it did accomplish; indeed, the Revolution made possible the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements of the 19th century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking.

The Revolution not only radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, including the position of women, but also destroyed aristocracy as it had been understood in the Western world for several millennia. The Revolution brought respectability and even dominance to ordinary people long held in contempt and gave dignity to their menial labor in a manner unprecedented in history and to a degree not equaled elsewhere in the world. The Revolution did not just eliminate monarchy and create republics; it actually reconstituted what Americans meant by public or state power and brought about an entirely new kind of popular politics and a new kind of democratic officeholder.

The Revolution not only changed the culture of Americans, but even altered their understanding of history, knowledge and truth. Most important, it made the interests and prosperity of ordinary people – their pursuits of happiness – the goal of society and government. The Revolution did not merely create a political and legal environment conducive to economic expansion; it also released powerful popular entrepreneurial and commercial energies that few realized existed and transformed the economic landscape of the country.

In short, the Revolution was the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history.

Excerpted from the Introduction to *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, by Gordon S. Wood, 1991.

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The People’s History of the United States, Howard Zinn

The American victory over the British army was made possible by the existence of an already-armed people. But general enthusiasm for the war was not strong. John Adams estimated a third opposed, a third supported and a third were neutral about the war. Was it revolutionary? And what kind of revolution? Slavery got in the way of some states to join the war; some states even offered a sense of “adventure” and rewards for military service to get poor people to fight for a cause they may not see clearly as their own. Revolutionary America may have been a middle-class society; happier and more prosperous than any other in its time, but it contained a large and growing number of fairly poor people, and many of them did much of the actual fighting and suffering between 1775 and 1783. In CT, a law was passed requiring military service of all males between 16 and 60, omitting certain government officials, Yale students, Negroes, Indians and mulattos. Someone called to duty could provide a substitute or get out of it by paying 5 British pounds. What looks like democratization shows up as a something different: a way of forcing large numbers of reluctant people to associate themselves with the national cause, and by the end of the process believe in it. Here, in the war for liberty, was conscription, as usual, cognizant of wealth.

The Continental Congress, which governed the colonies through the war, was dominated by rich men, linked together in factions and compacts by business and family connections. To give more assurance to those who loaned money to the Congress, representatives voted to guarantee to half-pay for life of officers who stuck to the end. There was no guarantee to the common soldier, who wasn’t even getting paid while fighting. A small mutiny occurred in the New Jersey Line, involving 200 men who defied their officers and started out for the state capital at Trenton. 600 men, who had been fed and clothed, marched on the mutineers and surrounded and disarmed them. 3 ringleaders were put on trial immediately, in the field. One was pardoned, and two were shot by firing squads made up of their friends, who wept as they pulled the triggers.

The new state constitutions written during the Revolution varied. In MD, for example, to run for governor one had to own 5000 pounds of property; to run for state senator, 1,000 pounds. Thus, 90% of the population were excluded from holding office. And so, “small” slave holders, non-slaveholding planters, tenants, renters and casual day laborers posed a serious problem of social control for the elite. Other states increased qualifications for voting during the war. Only Pennsylvania abolished them totally.

One would look, in examining the Revolution’s effect on class relations, at what happened to land confiscated from fleeing Loyalists. It was distributed in such a way as to give a double opportunity to the Revolutionary leaders: to enrich themselves and their friends, and to parcel out some land to small farmers to create a broad base of support for the new government. Indeed, this became characteristic of the new nation: finding itself possessed of enormous wealth, it could create the richest ruling class in history, and still have enough for the middle richest ruling class to act as a buffer between the rich and the dispossessed. Edmund Morgan sums up the class nature of the Revolution this way: “The fact that the lower ranks were involved in the contest should not obscure the fact that the contest itself was generally a struggle for office and power between members of an upper class: the new against the established.” Richard Morris comments: “Everywhere one finds inequality.” He finds “the people” of “We the people of the United States” did not mean Indians or blacks or women or white servants. In fact, there were more indentured servants than ever, and the Revolution “did nothing to end and little to ameliorate white bondage.”

Some opposed the ratification of the Constitution because of a strong connection between wealth and support of the Constitution. State legislatures were refusing to issue paper money to make it easier for famers to pay off debt after the war. The courts held proceedings to take away farmers’ land who hadn’t paid their debts even though those fields were now full of grain and ready for harvest. Farmers began to organize into squads, many of them former veterans to demand better treatment. Some asserted the people’s constitutional rights to protest unconstitutional acts like the land confiscation. The militia was called in but it was split in its opinion. Many farmers and veterans were part of the militia. Samuel Adams, once looked on as a radical leader in Boston, now insisted people act within the law. People in town responded: You in Boston have the money, and we don’t. And didn’t you act illegally yourselves in the Revolution? As the fight for ratification continued, many began to ask: Is it the aim of government to simply maintain order, as a referee, between two equally matched fighters? Or is it the government has some special interest in maintaining a certain kind of order, a certain distribution of power and wealth, a distribution on which the government officials are not neutral referees but participants? In that case, the disorder the leaders might worry about is the disorder of the popular rebellion against those monopolizing the society’s wealth. When economic interest is seen behind the political clauses of the Constitution, then the document becomes not simply the work of wise men trying to establish a decent and orderly society; but the work of certain groups trying to maintain their privileges, while giving just enough rights and liberties to enough of the people to ensure popular support.