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Pictures of America


Judith N. Shklar

"Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?" Gordon Wood has certainly taken John Adams's despairing question to heart. He has not tried to write the history of the American Revolution. Instead, he has offered us three verbal photographs to illustrate what America was like before, during, and after the Revolution. The people in the last of the pictures have no features in common with those represented in the first one, which is the point that Wood wishes to make. America was transformed in the course of becoming an independent nation. By 1820 America had, moreover, not just changed radically, but it had become uniquely democratic and egalitarian in its politics and daily manners. In these respects it was and remains unlike any other country in the world.

To make his "before" and "after" argument effective, Wood has chosen to write the equivalent of group portraits, one after the other, not a narrative. It is unlike a movie, in which a story unfolds in motion, effects and causes following one another imperceptibly, just as even revolutionary social change is supposed to move. In the first picture, "Monarchy," a portly, bewigged, decoratively attired, and stern patriarch, sits surrounded by offspring and dependents of various kinds, all in deferential attitudes. His lady sits demurely at his side, the oldest son a bit closer to him than the other children. There might be some black house slave and white servant hovering in the background.

The second picture, "Republicanism," is of several tall and lean males, dressed quite unostentatiously, though not without elegance. They do not put on togas, for theirs is a modern, not a classical style, but many

* The editors of the Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities would like to thank the family of Judith Shklar for permission to publish this "first draft" of a book review commissioned by the Journal, which Professor Shklar submitted to us shortly before her death. Because the review came to the Journal untitled, its title, "Pictures of America," has been supplied by the editors.

wear swords and other military insignia. Their wives, however, do wear very décolleté gowns inspired by Roman models, and they seem rather more lively than their predecessors. The young people are less stiff and the older and younger ones are all mixed together. There may be fewer white servants, but the black slaves are in exactly the same positions as in the first picture.

The third picture, "Democracy," is of an open-air barbecue. There is no order among these people at all. They are not even posing to be painted, being far too busy having a good time and consuming all kinds of local delicacies. Dress is casual and so are table manners, if any. Only a couple of black slaves are to be seen, doing the cooking and holding a baby. In the far distance we do notice a cotton field where a lot of black people seem to be very busy. The picture itself is painted with far more skill than the two earlier ones, because the arts and crafts have come a long way in this new consumer society.

This is not, perhaps, exactly what Wood meant to show, but it is what one might well see in his three representations of America. And they certainly do serve his main aim: to highlight the changes that in a brief fifty-odd years turned the people of this country from obedient subjects of a monarch into free citizens of a democracy.

"Monarchy," or "before," is a pre-revolutionary hierarchical society in which everyone knew his or her place. Patriarchy was the model to which relationships within the family and in society were meant to conform. While there were no European aristocrats, the difference between "gentlemen" and the "vulgar" was supposed to be clear. To be sure, even in the South landowners engaged in commercial activity, but they did not think that they or their Northern counterparts were "in trade." They had a lot of leisure and this was supposed to distinguish them drastically from those who had to engage in degrading labor or other undignified occupations. The mores of Great Britain meant much to them, and they practiced primogeniture even when it was not in their interest to do so. Indeed, there is some reason to believe that among gentlemen there was a tendency to re-Anglicize by sending their sons to be educated in England. Perhaps England could not be entirely re-created in the colonies. Families rose and fell with their economic fortunes as they did not in blood and caste-bonded traditional societies, but those who had made it in America behaved as if they had been born to their condition.

The bottom of the social pyramid was far more abject than its English counterpart. There were half a million African slaves and some tens of thousands of indentured European servants and apprentices whose lot was appreciably worse than that of the working poor in England. These people had every reason to fear their masters, but they were not alone. Fathers were generally supposed to be feared by their children, and
patrons by their clients. Authority was a decidedly positive notion, and obedience a virtue encouraged by moralists and preachers.

Religion did much to glue this hierarchy together, in fact, but there were never quite enough Anglican clergymen to support patriarchal beliefs, and the New England clergy was not altogether reliable in this respect. Not that they were any less authoritarian than Anglicans. Disobedience was not an acceptable thought or practice in clerical eyes. God meant authority—so did the king, magistrates, and heads of families. Only by forfeiting their claims to reverence could these men lose the authority to govern. God had delegated them to curb men in their sinful state and, in any case, the young, women, and the vulgar majority of men needed a firm hand to guide them and to teach them how to serve their masters.

This authoritarian and paternalistic ethos made the very idea of rebellion unacceptable to those who clung to the monarchical order. That is also why the earliest pamphlets against the British government had to charge the king and his advisers with such horrendous and incredible corruption and sins. Nothing less could serve as an excuse for rebellion. For whatever the outcome, the original protesters against English colonial policies were not modern revolutionaries. They were old-fashioned rebels who could defy established authority only if it had utterly delegitimized itself by tyrannical conduct. Then it was not they, but the government in Westminster that had really rebelled and embarked upon wholly new and wicked policies. They had petitioned and pleaded with their paternal king and Parliament, had been good and obedient sons and subjects, but their father had turned against them in an inexplicable rage, so that they must now reluctantly defend themselves.

The ideology that made the monarchical order really crumble was, according to Wood, far more radical than these early protests. It was "Republicanism," the title of his second family photograph. Whatever republicanism may have meant, it was a rejection of monarchy. In continental Europe it was also anti-clerical and often pagan in its more utopian dreams. In England it was merely a pervasive civic-mindedness that accepted that ancient city-states were a thing of the past, but that Cicero- nian virtues might yet become personal moral ideals capable of controlling the conduct of the ruling classes. There would be no court with its aristocratic debauchery and other corruptions. A sense of the public good would replace commercial rapacity among those who controlled the government, and citizens generally might be moved to a more patriotic and less self-regarding social outlook. If in no sense Spartan, the American advocates of republican virtue did admire the most notable of the Roman senators. To be sure, if writers became too fond of their Tacitus, as many did from the Renaissance on, then there was genuine
subversion afoot, but the majority of republicans just wanted to see more
evidence of civic virtue in England.

In America this civic ethos was not even seen as in any way at odds
with the commercial activity in every part of the economy. To be sure,
Jefferson thought that political virtue and independence could flourish
only among yeoman farmers, yet it was not just commerce itself, but its
consequences, that haunted him: the European city with its *canaille*
and paupers. Yeoman farming was not incompatible with a domestic com-
cmercial economy for most republicans, who were, in any case, less rigi-
rous than Jefferson. Washington, as has often been noted, was much
taken with Addison’s *Cato* and seems to have used him as a model. He
certainly was very concerned to keep his reputation as a disinterested
patriot unsullied. And at the end of his terms of office, Jefferson followed
Washington’s example by retiring entirely into privacy, though Adams
and Madison did participate in local politics.

“What do We Mean by the Revolution?” wrote John Adams. “The
War? That was no part of the Revolution. It was only an Effect and
Consequence of it. The Revolution was in the Minds of the People and
was effected . . . before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington.”² In
stressing the impact of republican ideology, Wood clearly has come to
share Adams’s view of the revolutionary primacy of enlightened beliefs.
They were, to be sure, the convictions of an elite of educated gentlemen,
far less religious than most of their fellow citizens, and also far better
educated. They had also grown away from the political customs of the
metropolitan state.

America’s new leaders stood apart from both the majority of their
countrymen and the English ruling class. The colonial assemblies were
based on actual, not virtual, representation and their members spoke far
more as the delegates of their constituents than as trustees for their
respective colonies as wholes. And for all the veneration expressed for a
paternal king, the royal governors, a rather incompetent lot, were treated
with scant respect. They were politically insignificant.

It may also be that disappointed ambition stimulated republican ardor.
Adam Smith thought that if the American elites had been allowed to
become members of Parliament and to join the highest ranks of the polit-
ical order in London, they would not have become so disaffected. He
may, in fact, have been thinking of Benjamin Franklin, with whom he
was acquainted. Burke, in a more sociological vein, noted all the cultural
differences that separated Americans from their British rulers. A conten-
tious Protestantism, too much legal training, and the obsession with per-
sonal freedom peculiar to slave-owners, all made Americans difficult to

². Letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson (Aug. 14, 1815), in LETTERS, supra note 1, at
455.
rule from London. The conclusion that Daniel Dulaney, one of the earli-
est and most famous of the American pamphleteers, drew from these
facts was inevitable: virtual representation, which assumed a community
of interests, was just not possible in the face of such profound diversity.
Americans could not be represented in Parliament, and no English MP
could speak for Americans. Yet Dulaney sat out the Revolution in
Maryland and lost his fortune.3

Republicanism as an ideology thus not only offered a vision of an alter-
native order to the American elite, but also gave them a positive vocabu-
larly which went beyond complaint to constructive politics. The
contribution of the Enlightenment to the new politics was considerable.
I think that Wood is right in pointing to the importance of Locke’s Essay
Concerning Human Understanding and Some Thoughts on Education
rather than to the Second Treatise. These were very encouraging books,
and Jefferson certainly relied on both. The uncompromising sensational-
ism of the Essay taught him that we were all alike at birth and that the
environment, impressing itself upon our minds through the senses, made
us what we were. Clearly, social change and education could do much,
in that case, to improve us all. Moreover, Locke believed that “the can-
dle of the Lord,” or at least a moral sense within us, was quite enough to
tell us all we needed to know about right and wrong, as long as we were
not misguided by bad conventions, oppressive governments, and enthusi-
astic preachers. Finally, a gentle and reasonable education would do
more to turn children into reasonable and practical adults than harsh
punishments and rote learning. Education for freedom was to begin
ey early in life. The threatening patriarch was to become a companionable
parent.

If fathers were to become gentle, governments were to be constrained
by the laws and the will of the people. The laws were the expression of a
social contract. Contract was a particularly powerful notion in America;
for in addition to its place in Roman law and in daily transactions, and
the sanctity of oaths that republicanism cherished, there was the Cove-
nant. New Englanders had, after all, really made covenants, and had
done so as the true children of Israel. Every Biblical covenant resonated
in their own political communities and made the later versions of polit-
ical promising particularly compelling. Moreover, as there were no
financial institutions in this underdeveloped face-to-face society, credit
was given and received personally, which reinforced the importance of
mutual trust and reliability in public life. The virtuous, public-spirited
citizen-statesman was first of all an honest and trustworthy individual.

3. Daniel Dulaney, Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes in the British Colonies, in
Honor was personal, not inherited, and to keep one's word was the surest sign of both political and commercial probity.

This mixture of attitudes was not coherent, but what it lacked in intellectual rigor, it certainly made up in appeal to a variety of people. To see how it might all fit into a single mind, one can do worse than read the election sermon that Samuel Langdon, President of Harvard, delivered in May, 1775, entitled "Government Corrupted by Vice and Recovered by Righteousness." Langdon's mind is a compendium of old and new received ideas. The disaster of war was no doubt due to the sins of the colonists. What else could a New England preacher believe, after all? Much, however, as the colonists had erred, it was nothing compared to the vices of the British government. Once the citadel of freedom and virtue, the English had read pagan philosophy instead of sacred literature and had become bloated with luxury and corruption too horrible to name. They were even given to popery. To understand what had happened to them, one need recall not only the Babylonian exile of the unfaithful children of Israel, but also the fate of the Roman emperors as described by Tacitus. There is to be found the archetype of monarchical corruption. But the war was more than a punishment; it was also a purification. It had banished luxury and instilled genuine public virtue in the colonists. They knew what they were fighting against and also what they should hope for. Langdon had read his Locke. It was one's political obligation to defend one's natural rights and to establish governments that would preserve them. America had now been blessed with virtuous leaders who were charting its future locally and in Philadelphia. They were, in his mind, I suppose, a mixture of Christian magistrates and Roman Senators. Tacitus, the Old Testament and Locke, Puritan rigor and Roman austerity, virtue and salvation, public vice and personal corruption, natural rights and natural sin, consent and authority, all were somehow in one mental place here. No doubt this mish-mash made sense to his audience, whom he managed to simultaneously warn of the horrors of anarchy and the necessity of revolution.

This then was the mixture, with considerable variations in detail, that made republicanism the ideology of the Revolution. It did not appeal to all Americans. Some eighty thousand Loyalists emigrated to Canada or returned to Britain. Others no doubt endured the Revolution silently. Moreover, republicanism was an unstable ideology. In the hands of a Tom Paine it could become extremely radical: here, the free man is clearly the self-made individual, contemptuous of the past and, in his sense of independence, all but an anarchist. To be natural counted for more than being civilized. It was not so much his vehemence against the "royal brute" as the notion that all government was an unnecessary nui-

sance that set his republicanism apart from the austere doctrines of the Augustan poets whom Washington tried to follow. Paine’s appeal was to colonists who had, after all, created a new country with no help at all from the powers that be. He did not dwell on civic virtue, but on the competence and rights of self-reliant pioneers. He spoke to people who had to take on many roles and to ply many trades just to get on as they moved westward. The message of untutored virtue was nothing if not corrosive, and it was very popular, as the huge sale of Common Sense proved. The Revolutionary elite, in spite of all their restrained and classical ideals, had set in motion a democratic tide that would overwhelm them and their dreams of a virtuous modern republic.

While the republican ethos was far more egalitarian than its monarchical predecessor, it did draw a firm social line between the educated few and the unlettered many. Jefferson, who really believed in democratic local self-government, was determined to create an educated “natural aristocracy” for his state in the University of Virginia, which he designed, both physically and spiritually. Good manners also meant a lot to him. He instructed his grandson on good behavior and lamented that Americans lacked the little courtesies that made life in Europe so pleasant. The generation that succeeded him in politics was indifferent to these distinctions. They were poorly educated and credulous. They had turned to religion. Protestant denominations multiplied and revivals of religion abounded, all responding to the spiritual needs of ordinary folk. Not a learned Calvinist clergy nor royalist Anglicans, but emotional preachers with little theology but plenty of zeal, roamed all over the land. So while Jefferson lamented that the new generation had no use for learning, Adams noted with equal apprehension that “the Priests are at their Old Work Again.”

Worse was to come. They had not thought of themselves as leisured gentlemen, entitled to rule their inferiors, but as patriots whose education and personal character qualified them to lead a people in war and in peace. That perception now came under attack.

The democratic outlook that republican equality had ushered in had little use for civic virtue. Democratic politicians took the republican stance to be no more than the political interest of the older elite, but this judgment did not express disapproval. Quite the contrary. They simply acknowledged that all politics was a matter of interests, be they local, economic, or ethnic. The fact that a man might have idled away four years at Harvard or Princeton, moreover, counted for little. What did matter was personal achievement and especially self-made fortunes. And in one of the most stunning transvaluations of all values, the dignity of labor replaced the glamour of leisure. No more would physical work

5. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams (July 5, 1814), in LETTERS, supra note 1, at 434. Letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson (Nov. 13, 1815), in id. at 457.
defile the laborer, nor idleness create respect for the self-styled aristocrat. The latter had not disappeared, as many a surprised European visitor was to note, but they had withdrawn into private discontent, into their clubs and occasional philanthropy. They were not really to rejoin the American people until Teddy Roosevelt set them an example. In politics men were not only supposed to defend their interests openly, they were to be proud of the fact that they had something to defend, that they had acquired wealth and had done so all on their own.

Benjamin Franklin as *Poor Richard* was now the democrats’ hero. Wood thinks that they misunderstood him, and that he had really been an aristocrat *manqué*. I am not so sure. The plebeian pride in his *Last Will and Testament* is extraordinary: “I, Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, Printer” it begins, and only then do all his later offices and titles follow. To be sure, Franklin was such a secretive and complex man that we will never be able to fully understand him. In any case, he was not an odd idol for the newly self-assertive democratic artisans. There is also no doubt that they frightened the old republicans, especially when the state legislatures tended to protect debtors against their creditors. This classical conflict of rural life was the immediate stimulus to the creation of the Constitution in 1787, and shared anxiety did manage to create unexpected alliances, such as that between Hamilton, who wanted to imitate the English political system, and Madison, who certainly did not.

In one respect both Hamilton and Madison were new men. They also were prepared to take the politics of interest for granted. Interests, differences whether material or intangible, were natural and unavoidable. The art of government was to balance and integrate them in such ways that contests of interests might redound to the public good. There might even be some men, members of the professions, who would maintain the old republican spirit of public duty, but the system, neither at the electoral nor legislative level, presupposed virtuous citizens. The object of politics was conflict resolution, not the single-minded pursuit of a common good. Republicanism was dead. The typical politician was not a college graduate, drank too much distilled liquor, and was a budding venture capitalist. Economic expansion was his program, and he certainly succeeded in that respect. State-protected monopolies were abolished, banks multiplied, paper money was ubiquitous, debts accumulated, and a fair amount of corruption became normal. “Rotation in office,” or the “spoils system,” depending on whether you were in or out, was Andrew Jackson’s avowed practice. The new men around him found it acceptable. What they could not abide was the “aristocracy” that the Bank of the United States came to represent, but which really stood for all “vested interests,” as contrasted with independent, competing, equal citizens, who demanded respect and equality of opportunity. What they
feared above all was the remembered threat of indentured service, made all the more dreadful by the visible prevalence of slavery in the South.

Madison and his friends were saddened by the blatant rejection of public virtue by the new politicians, but they could take comfort in the thought that not all of young America was contemptible. Wood reminds us of Holgrave, the hero of Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*. An ardent Jacksonian democrat, this young man has practiced a dozen professions and travelled far and wide, but though socially unencumbered, Holgrave has a flinty personal integrity far more genuine than the pretended virtue of the old Salem oligarchs. In his view the old elite were nothing but a bunch of self-seeking hypocrites.

In fact, the politics of virtue went down rather ignominiously in the struggle for universal white manhood suffrage that marked the Jacksonian era. The defenders of property qualifications for voting, like Chancellor Kent, argued that only property gave men a stake in their country. Paupers were too dependent to be citizens, and poor people generally lacked virtue. They paid no taxes and had no real share in the country as a whole. Against this it was argued that there was more virtue and less corruption among the poor who served in the militia and fought for their country than among the selfish rich. They were genuine soldier-citizens, unlike the wealthy who did nothing for the public at all and did not in fact display any real republican virtues. When the vote was won, virtue arguments ceased, to come up only occasionally as a device to prevent women's suffrage, because, it was said, their superior virtue might be tarnished if they entered the rough world of politics.

Instead of a less-than-inspiring republicanism, Americans generally preferred democratic politics. Not patrons and clients but parties dispensed patronage to hold the political system together. Economic expansion on an unequalled scale did much to fuel democracy, but it was a two-way street. Democratic politics knocked down every obstacle to the individual scramble for wealth, while economic opportunities formed the basis of the interests that were to be played out in the political arena.

Wood ends on a decidedly triumphant note, as he hails the unique and enduring egalitarianism of American life. Inevitably, one must remind him that it took another, far more radical revolution, one that really did destroy an entire social system, to put America on the road to an ever-elusive genuine political and social equality. To read Wood, one would never guess that some forty years after his story ends, Americans would be engaged in a Civil War more violent and far more transforming than any of its previous or subsequent wars.

It would, however, be entirely mistaken to end by taking Wood to task for not having written another sort of book altogether. It would be easy to find fault with it. One could ask for more continuity between his three moments and for a more flowing narrative. Too great a reliance on the
testimony and lives of well-known diarists and correspondents individualizes his account to an almost Plutarchian level. We are treated to a book of parallel lives. There are too many heroes here and not enough ordinary people, who can only be seen in groups. As such, this book is surely a revolt against social history. It is also a patriotic exercise, celebrating America as the once and future democracy. In spite of all these not unreasonable objections, this is a wonderful book, readable, intelligent, full of illuminating quotations and vignettes, and above all, successful in its chief aim: to show how very different America was before and after the Revolution. Many readers will surely be encouraged, as I have been, to add reflections and illustrations to Wood's stimulating and evocative account. This book is meant to give pleasure, and so it does.