

Making a Mess of Democracy

Gordon S. Wood's *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991)

Chris Mack, 7-10-2015

Like most Americans, my knowledge of the American Revolution comes from what I remember from a few high school history classes, plus the occasional biography and television miniseries. That is to say, it is neither complete nor deep. My history classes were taught in the typical fashion: a sequence of significant people and events, punctuated by the occasional personal backstory, lead bravely and inevitably to the birth of America and with it modern democracy. The Stamp Act, the Boston Tea Party, one if by land, Bunker Hill, the shot heard round the world, the declaration of independence, Red Coats, Valley Forge, Yorktown, the Constitution. What seemed at the time like a standard telling of history was just as much an exercise in myth building: every nation needs a creation myth. And the creation myth of America is still with us today, invoked frequently by politicians and beer-hall debaters whenever an emotional boost is needed for an otherwise weak argument.

But lest you think that Gordon S. Wood's Pulitzer prize winning book *Radicalism of the American Revolution* is just another history of the American Revolution, rest assured it is not. Far from it. Wood does not rely on significant events or people to propel a storyline forward, and most of the major events leading up to and including the revolutionary war are left unmentioned. And while the book is roughly divided into sections of before, during, and after the revolution, a timeline is not strictly necessary for Wood's aim. As for myth building, well, myth busting might be a more appropriate description.

Wood's goal is simple and important: to explain how the American Revolution came to be, and why the outcomes of that revolution were both radical and unexpected, at least from the perspective of our founding fathers.

Before: Monarchy

Wood begins by describing the monarchical mindset of the first half of the 18th century. Governments were formed along the model of society in general, dominated by patriarchal relationships and dependencies and expressed through acts of patronage. There was little distinction between private and public spheres. Society was hierarchical and class oriented, with a small aristocratic elite and a mass of uneducated commoners. Honor and reputation were more important than wealth. There was little to no social mobility. People accepted their place, like children dependent upon their father. Besides slaves, a large number of indentured laborers, apprentices, servants, women, and children were essentially unfree.

Economic theory of the day reflected this rigid hierarchy. Export was thought to be the only method of wealth creation, and internal commerce was thought of as a zero sum game. Laziness was considered the natural state of the commoner, and only privation and hunger could make him work. As one contemporary said, "Everyone knows that the lower class must be kept poor or they will never be industrious." (p. 34)

While monarchy was the way of the Western world in the first half of the 18th century, England was the least hierarchical nation in Europe. And the American colonies were far less stratified than England, with both the highest and lowest classes of society missing. The abundance of land made for many landowners: 95% of colonists were farmers. Still, the distinction between a gentleman and the rest of society was well established.

During: Republicanism

Without titled nobility, a state church, and disparity of wealth and land ownership, the colonies were less tied to the monarchy and ready to embrace republicanism. Enlightened ideas of family and parenting replaced paternalism. Fast population growth and ample land meant the people were less tied to place, so that property became a means to economic prosperity rather than an end in itself. Consumption began to drive economic growth, lessening the dependency on patronage that defined and upheld monarchy.

The revolutionary leaders were idealists, believers in the Republicanism born of the Enlightenment. But their idea of republicanism required a ruling elite, disinterested gentlemen of virtue and learning who could make the sacrifice to serve their country without salary or personal interest. Aristocracy of birth needed to be replaced with an aristocracy of talent and virtue, with the goal of separating public and private interests. And if the citizenry could be enlightened as well, they would choose the most virtuous among them to lead.

Such a change required a revolution.

After: Democracy

Wood's main thesis, compellingly articulated and defended, is that while the revolutionary leaders fought to create Republicanism in the classical sense, they unwittingly unleashed a powerful and chaotic new force: Democracy. The freedoms given to the people in the wake of the revolution fed their desire for more freedom. Equality meant that everyone had an opportunity to succeed, and to lead. While the revolutionary leaders hoped for a new elite based on virtue and learning, the people wanted no elite – leaders chosen from among themselves to be like themselves.

Political freedom and free market economic activity became self-reinforcing. Abundant resources available with the expansion to the west meant that economic growth was constrained only by the talents and efforts of the individual. Self-interest became the new mantra, and political leaders were chosen to represent those interests. Individualism filled the vacuum as old ties of dependency and patronage were broken. The modern system of competing self-interests dominated politics.

Most of the revolutionary leaders were appalled, and frightened, by what they had created. How could the vulgar masses, the uneducated, the low and the mean, possibly rule themselves? But the wisdom of crowds proved less vulgar than the Republicans feared. Democracy was messy, but it worked, amazingly well, and still does. In hindsight, it is easy to recognize the naivety of the revolutionary leaders' understanding of human nature. They could not have guessed how a political and economic system

opened up to the interests of the people could unleash their creative potential and their willingness to strive for a better life. Of course, democracy frequently fails to do what's right in the near term, but usually finds a good-enough path forward in the long run.

While brilliant, this book is not without its flaws. Wood assumes the reader to be familiar with many details of a 100 year span of American history. The Seven Years' War, the Imperial Crisis, the Sedition Act of 1789, and a long list of revolutionary characters are brought forth without explanation, leaving me a little less educated than I would have hoped. Sometimes it seems that Wood is writing for his fellow historians rather than for me. But the biggest deficiency is in his treatment of the South. Wood gives a few nods to the darkness of slavery and to the differences in North/South culture that would eventually culminate in civil war, but his explanations are so entirely lacking compared to the thoroughness of his major points that I felt lost in a gaping hole. By the end I thought I could get inside the mind of a Northern revolutionary, but not a Southern one.

Still, this book opened my mind to the history of the American Revolution in a way that more conventional history books could not. And the next time a politician, or a friend with a beer, invokes an image of our founding fathers to justify some argument, I have a knowing smile in store for them. As my friend Randy Meek would say, this book is the real deal.