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# THE NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY

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## LIBERALISM AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

JOYCE APPLEBY

THE specific problem confronting historians of the American Revolution is to explain that event without relying upon the assumptions embedded in the revolutionary legacy. The heirs of a revolution are at a disadvantage, for they have received the revolutionary tradition as a set of unexamined assumptions. The fact that men would resort to the violent overthrow of their government for personal liberty is such an assumption. The preeminent place which the founding fathers gave to individual freedom has been accepted as natural, and if the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence have not always been taken as self-evident truths, they have rarely been approached as radical ideas requiring explanation. This does not mean that the historiography of the American Revolution has remained where George Bancroft left it. For forty of the two hundred years of writing on the subject, powerful currents of European thought interrupted the tendency to examine American events within a closed cultural context. However, the Progressive historians' effort to interpret liberal ideology as a mask behind which diverse economic groups struggled for power, foundered on the rock of specific proof. More enduring as a challenge to the Whig explanation

for the Revolution was the scholarship of the Imperialist school associated with Charles Andrews. These colonial historians effectively demonstrated that the tyranny the revolutionary pamphleteers evoked could more accurately be described as a legitimate endeavor by British policymakers to bring the old colonial system up-to-date. The bewilderment of American Tories over the radical response of their compatriots has supplied contemporary validation to the Imperialists' claim that the British connection was capable of evoking affection and loyalty. Still the Revolution did take place, and the imposing intellectual and moral stature of the men who led it has survived popular and scholarly scrutiny for two centuries. During the last twenty-five years, a new revisionist group has confronted the problem of reconciling revolutionary rhetoric with the realities of British rule. Accepting man as a culture-creating being, the Neo-Whig historians have looked at the period as a socially constructed reality. Their interpretation, nonetheless, hangs upon liberal assumptions about human nature.

By taking seriously the colonists' expressions of purpose and motive, Edmund Morgan, Bernard Bailyn, Richard Buel, Jack Greene, and Gordon Wood have moved with historical imagination to recapture the way the revolutionaries themselves perceived their situation. In their view, the English Commonwealth literature furnished the colonists with a model of republicanism and a critique of government power.<sup>1</sup> The Neo-Whig interpretation is idealist, emphasizing the role which colonial assumptions and values played in determining behavior. As Wood said of Bailyn, he found that "ideas counted for a great deal, not only being responsible for the Revolution but also for transforming the character of American society."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Jack P. Greene, "The Flight from Determinism: A Review of Recent Literature on the Coming of the American Revolution," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXI (1962) and Robert E. Shalhope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historical Geography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxix (1972).

<sup>2</sup> "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxiii, 22 (1966).

The concept of ideas transforming American society, however, should be examined as a logical proposition. The English Commonwealth tradition has done yeoman service for American historians, but it is after all a passive complex of concepts unable to move men by itself. It cannot be used like some *deus ex machina* to explain the causes for belief. Examining the content of the revolutionary mind does not relieve the historian of the responsibility for explaining what compelled belief, what triggered reactions, what stirred passions, and what persuaded the colonists of the truth of their interpretation of events. One might accept the Commonwealthmen's description of political reality while refusing to break into a formal legislative session with a seditious speech, join a crowd to coerce the resignation of a crown commission-holder, countenance the destruction of private homes, connive at the burning of one of His Majesty's schooners, organize public meetings to mobilize town sentiments against constituted authorities, or risk the loss of self-governing privileges by thwarting the commands of the British Parliament. These are acts flowing from a revolutionary consciousness, a state of mind which accepts, almost embraces, a suspension of the normal rules of conduct and justifies nonordinary behavior by referring to the extraordinary nature of the times. There is no power in the Commonwealth tradition by itself to produce this response.

We are necessarily thrown back to the social situation which prompted a significant number of colonists to endorse these actions as a legitimate response to justifiable fears. Although the Neo-Whigs began with an explicit rejection of the Progressives' efforts to locate the cause of the Revolution in the American social structure they, nonetheless, have related their idealist explanation to an interpretation of colonial society. More by inference than explicit demonstration, they have used the idea of colonial maturity to explain the colonial protest movement. According to their interpretation, colonial society had diverged slowly from British norms through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This imperceptible

process of differentiation became clear in the turbulent years after the French and Indian War and explains the aggressive behavior of the colonists when new British policies were laid down. Intellectual developments in the decade before Independence, Bailyn has written "led to a radical idealization and conceptualization of the previous century and a half of American experience."<sup>3</sup> Such an interpretation necessarily understates the risks, the social tensions, the skewed relations and personal anxieties generated when legitimate authority is challenged. It also leaves unanswered why the particular conception of personal liberty and government legitimacy set forth in the revolutionary literature should have seized the American imagination and carried sober men to violent protest and the resort to arms.

By not answering these questions, the Neo-Whig explanation of the American Revolution is necessarily tied to liberal assumptions. It relies upon the liberal concept of human nature and the proper relationship of the individual to social authority. Yet the personal detachment implied in liberal theory runs athwart what we know about the social nature of men and women: their dependence upon integrating institutions and their need for social cohesion. The only form of social tension which liberalism recognizes is that generated by the explicit and unwarranted intrusion of authority upon individual freedom. If the universality of this tension is assumed, then it is not necessary to seek far for an explanation of the American Revolution. Its causes are contained in the rationale for independence: governments are instituted among men to protect individual liberties and destroyed by those same men when the governments fail to achieve this goal. If on the other hand, liberalism is a cultural perspective which triumphed through the successful American Revolution and not the expression of a constant and basic relationship between man and society, we are forced to ask what conditions would have prompted the adoption of the liberal vision of

<sup>3</sup> *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1967), vi.

the good society. The Neo-Whigs have immeasurably enriched our knowledge of the way colonial patterns of thought mediated between the colonists' anxieties and the resolution of those anxieties in a program of action. We still need to explain the nature and origin of their anxieties and the circumstances which made extralegal violence in the interest of a radical theory of individualism tolerable.

Recent scholarship has begun to coalesce around a new interpretation of prerevolutionary society. Instead of the slowly diverging process of cultural differentiation associated with the colonial maturity view, there is now evidence of a disjuncture in colonial life in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. A social order of due subordination incumbent in varying degrees upon all members of the community gave way in the decades after 1730 to an atomized society. The disruption of the contained, community-oriented societies which had been established in the seventeenth century produced new circumstances of far-reaching importance. For a large number of men coming of age in the 1740's and 1750's the contrasting statuses of free and unfree, dependent and independent, came to represent stark alternatives. To be dependent in a society of interdependence was quite a different thing from being dependent or fearing dependence in a society in which institutions no longer integrated people's lives into a satisfying social order. This new social situation made contemporaries peculiarly sensitive to threats against their personal freedom. Among the many satisfying human goals, liberty came to overshadow all others. This changing balance between the demands of the community and the individual helps explain two puzzling American developments in the revolutionary era: why the colonists reacted with such frenzied apprehensiveness to Parliamentary efforts to enforce imperial controls, and why liberalism with its core affirmation of the individual's claim upon society to protect his natural rights could so easily have displaced the devotion to order which animated colonial life a half century earlier.

Historical research on the seventeenth century has enabled

us to appreciate more fully the efforts colonists made in that century to establish traditionally structured, interdependent communities. Informed by a more sophisticated understanding of social organization, some colonial historians have been able to break from the liberal perspective which promoted a search through colonial records for evidence of individual self-assertion and antiauthoritarian stands. Instead recent histories of New England and scholarly work on religion in the colonies have demonstrated the importance colonists attached to social order and their consequent willingness to give up personal freedom to achieve stability. Evidently social cohesion was a widely shared goal, and the drive for local autonomy in the New World served to build strong communities rather than to liberate individuals. The microscopic studies of towns in Connecticut and Massachusetts have revealed that community authority determined farming practices, religious establishments, land allocations, and social responsibilities.<sup>4</sup> Michael Zuckerman has made a good case for interpreting the apparently democratic suffrage as an operational device for assuring conformity and social control in communities lacking any other coercive force.<sup>5</sup> As Timothy Smith has pointed out, religious groups doctrinely opposed to civil sanctions in religious matters, turned to political authority to shore up congregational discipline when faced with the "threat of social disorder, of barbarization, which hung over their common

<sup>4</sup> Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town*, Middletown, Conn., 1963; Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, 1967); John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth* (New York, 1970); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1970); Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970); See also T. H. Breen and Stephen Foster, "Moving to the New World: The Character of Early Massachusetts Immigration," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxx, 217-219 (1973), and "The Puritans' Greatest Achievement: A Study of Social Cohesion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts," *Journal of American History*, lx (1973).

<sup>5</sup> "The Social Context of Democracy in Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxv, 3-30 (1968). David Grayson Allen, "The Zuckerman Thesis and the Process of Legal Rationalization in Provincial Massachusetts, with a Rebuttal by Michael Zuckerman," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxix, 456ff. (1972), notes the decline of community cohesion as the eighteenth century progressed.

enterprise.”<sup>6</sup> In Virginia the self-made men of the short-lived tobacco boom did not solidify their power. This was largely because they lacked the capacity to command respect or the ability to create the integrative institutions lacking in the raw frontier of the Chesapeake before 1670.<sup>7</sup> In Maryland the proprietor’s authority supplied much of the direction for social organization, whereas in Pennsylvania the most effective social arrangements grew out of the sectarian discipline of the Quakers and Baptists.<sup>8</sup>

If we abandon, or at least suspend, belief in the notion that the American colonists arrived with the conscious desire to break with European corporate traditions, we must question why the social order established in these discrete colonial communities broke down. Why did the group-centered social organization, the deferential political system, and the orthodox congregational establishments which characterized seventeenth-century colonial society fail to survive intact through the second third of the eighteenth century?<sup>9</sup> A tentative answer is that demographic and economic changes overwhelmed

<sup>6</sup> Timothy L. Smith, “Congregation, State, and Denomination: The Forming of the American Religious Structure,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxv, 164 (1968). See also Sidney Mead, “From Coercion to Persuasion: Another Look at the Rise of Religious Liberty and the Emergence of Denominationalism,” *Church History*, xxv (1956).

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Bailyn, “Politics and Social Structure in Virginia,” in James M. Smith, Editor, *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History* (Chapel Hill, 1959); Wesley Frank Craven, *The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 1949), 269-299.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Nash, *Quakers and Politics: Pennsylvania, 1681-1726* (Princeton, 1968). See also James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man’s Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1972). Although Lemon’s “poor man’s country” is characterized throughout as one “free of external restraint” (5, 13) he also suggests repeatedly that the sectarian discipline in Quaker and Mennonite communities accounted for their superior economic growth and social stability (20-22, 71, 224).

<sup>9</sup> A critical step in the undermining of deferential politics was the shifting of attention of the colonial leaders from imperial authorities to domestic constituencies. This subtle process is illuminated somewhat by Robert M. Calhoun and Robert M. Weir, “The Scandalous History of Sir Egerton Leigh,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxvi (1969), and David Curtis Skaggs, “Maryland’s Impulse Toward Social Revolution: 1750-1776,” *Journal of American History*, liv (1968). See also Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 122-143; Lockridge, *A New England Town*, 119-138. I am using the term congregational here in the generic sense rather than in specific reference to the Puritan churches.



these communities' adaptive capacities. Richard Bushman estimated that Connecticut's population grew by 58 percent between 1670 and 1700 and by 380 percent between 1700 and 1730, and "the increase in town planting placed extraordinary pressures on the colonial government."<sup>10</sup> Examining the demographic history of Andover, Massachusetts, Philip Greven found an explosive population rate in the last decades of the seventeenth century followed by slower, but sustained population growth in succeeding decades. As long as the land resources of each town were sufficient to distribute to the bumper crop of surviving children, population growth did not present a social problem. According to Greven, "the small rural agricultural towns like Andover probably proved to be excellent places in which to realize the goals of order, hierarchy, and the closely-knit community" until the middle decades of the eighteenth century when population outran the town's allocation of land and young men "reached maturity sooner, married younger, established their independence more effectively and earlier in life, and departed from the community with even greater frequency than in earlier generations."<sup>11</sup> In Dedham, Massachusetts, a town subjected to a similarly close scrutiny, Kenneth Lockridge found the same pattern.<sup>12</sup> While population growth among the Pennsylvania Quakers did not match the extraordinary fertility of New Englanders, the demographic studies of Robert Wells indicate a fertility rate which would have made it difficult for parents to provide for all of their adult children. The conservative transmission of culture from one generation to another was challenged by the unprecedented number of children growing to maturity.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *From Puritan to Yankee*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> *Four Generations*, 270-272.

<sup>12</sup> *A New England Town*, 147ff.

<sup>13</sup> "Family Size and Fertility Control in Eighteenth Century America: A Study of Quaker Families," *Population Studies*, xxv (1971); "Quaker Marriage Patterns in a Colonial Perspective," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxix (1972). See also John Demos, "Families in Colonial Bristol, Rhode Island: An Exercise in Historical Demography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxv (1968); Kenneth A. Lockridge, "The Population of Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736," *Eco-*

Population growth forced a change in rural society. The "out-livers" of Bushman's seventeenth-century Connecticut became the norm as independent farmers, even squatters, moved onto the land outside of town boundaries. The style of town planting changed drastically too. If one compares the founding of Sumner Chilton Powell's Sudbury with that of Charles Grant's Kent, the social consequences of land distribution by town planners in contrast to colony auction becomes apparent.<sup>14</sup> And the qualities of Kent were represented in the dozens of frontier towns that marked the migration of surplus population into Northwestern Connecticut, Western Massachusetts, New York's Mohawk Valley, and the Southern tier of Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire.<sup>15</sup>

In the middle decades of the eighteenth century the demographic structure of the colonies was not only changed by the spectacular growth of native population in the rural communities of the North, but also by the total increase from immigration. Philadelphia, a city of 12,000 in 1730, began receiving immigrants from Germany and Ireland at the rate of 7,000 a year, an average maintained for the next two decades!<sup>16</sup> While Philadelphia was the principal port of debarkation for white immigrants in the eighteenth century, New Castle, New York, and Boston also felt the impact of Europe's second great westward migration.<sup>17</sup> Although many of the immigrants, of

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*nomic History Review*, xix (1966); and Philip J. Greven, Jr., "Family Structure in Seventeenth-Century Andover, Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxiii (1966).

<sup>14</sup> "Puritan Village," 102-113; *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent*, New York, 1961, 12-39.

<sup>15</sup> Jackson Turner Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965), 11ff.; P. M. G. Harris, "The Social Origins of American Leaders: The Demographic Foundations," *Perspectives in American History*, III, 234-236 (1969). According to Harris' computation of towns recognized by the Massachusetts legislature, there were 23 new towns between 1696-1722; 40 between 1723-1746; and 67 between 1747-1770.

<sup>16</sup> Gary B. Nash, "Slaves and Slaveowners in Colonial Philadelphia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxx, 227-228, n. 11 (1973). See also A. E. Smith, *Colonists in Bondage* (Chapel Hill, 1947), 308-337.

<sup>17</sup> J. Potter, "The Growth of Population in America, 1700-1860," in D. E. C. Eversley and D. V. Glass, Editors, *Population in History* (London, 1965), 644-

whom probably half were redemptioners or indentured servants, stayed where they landed, these ports also served as distribution centers. Philadelphia particularly offered access to the inland valleys of the Susquehanna, Shenandoah, and other intermountain valleys of western Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. In Charleston the principal immigrant of the 1720's and 1730's was the black slave who, of course, could more easily be brought under social control. The increase in the slave population after 1710, however, called forth measures to restrict even more than previously the slaves' freedom of action. Colonial legislatures, not individual masters, defined the conditions of black and white servitude. Despite these efforts, South Carolina remained vulnerable to the fear of slave rebellions.<sup>18</sup> Both South Carolina and the Chesapeake experienced a dramatic demographic transformation between 1700 and 1740. Not only was there an absolute increase of 51 percent in the first decade; 30 percent in the second; 37 percent in the 1720's; and 38 percent in the 1730's, but the black population in this forty-year period increased by 500 percent to reach a ratio of one black for every three people in the Chesapeake and two in three in South Carolina.<sup>19</sup> Many of the landless whites and marginal family farmers were pushed out into the areas of Southern subsistence farming described by Jackson Turner Main.<sup>20</sup> Edmund Morgan's recent contention that the yeoman farmer came into his own in Virginia during the eighteenth century is obviously applicable to those

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646; Wayland F. Dunaway, "Pennsylvania as an Early Distributing Center of Population," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, LV (1931); Clifford Shipton, "Immigration to New England, 1680-1740," *Journal of Political Economy*, XLIV (1936); and Erna Risch, "Joseph Crellius, Immigrant Broker," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY*, XII (1939).

<sup>18</sup> M. Eugene Sirmans, "The Legal Status of the Slave in South Carolina, 1670-1740," *Journal of Southern History*, xxviii (1962). Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slaves Revolts* (New York, 1943), 174-175, 184, and Elmer D. Johnson and Kathleen Lewis Sloan, Editors, *South Carolina: A Documentary Profile of the Palmetto State* (Columbia, 1971), 110-111.

<sup>19</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Washington, 1960, 756. For the impact of immigration upon Maryland see Skaags, "Maryland's Impulse Toward Social Revolution: 1750-1776," 771.

<sup>20</sup> *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, 49ff.

who could hold out through the changeover from white to black labor.<sup>21</sup> Nor does it take into account the social dislocations involved in such a wholesale switch of labor and land usage.

Economic forces lay behind many of the demographic changes of the 1720's and 1730's. While the striking decline in the infant mortality rate in the Northern rural communities is partially explained by fortuitous conditions, prosperity also contributed by raising living standards. Economic growth obviously stimulated both white and black immigration. European famines and economic distress created a pool of potential immigrants, but the rapid growth in the Atlantic commerce in foodstuffs and timber promoted the demand for servants, tenants, and land buyers which turned the shipping of passengers into a major business.<sup>22</sup> Economic growth raised incomes, brought all but the most remote frontier outposts into connection with the great Atlantic commerce, rewarded enterprise, and generated impressive local capital accumulation.<sup>23</sup> These same results put severe pressures upon social stability. Rising land values stimulated waves of land speculation from Georgia to New Hampshire which undermined the

<sup>21</sup> "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *Journal of American History*, LIX, 28 (1972).

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 44-55, 113ff. D. A. Farnie, "The Commercial Empire of the Atlantic, 1607-1783," *Economic History Review*, xv (1962); George R. Taylor, "American Economic Growth Before 1840," *Journal of Economic History*, xxiv (1964); James G. Lydon, "Philadelphia's Commercial Expansion, 1720-1739," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, xci (1967); and Ralph Davis, "English Foreign Trade, 1700-1774," *Economic History Review*, xv (1962). Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, 179ff.

<sup>23</sup> Aubrey Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure: The Northern Chesapeake in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History*, xxv (1965); James Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxii (1965); Jacob Price, "The Economic Growth of the Chesapeake and the European Market, 1695-1775," *Journal of Economic History*, xxiv (1964); Edward Edelman, "Thomas Hancock, Colonial Merchant," *Journal of Economic and Business History*, i (1928); Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, 222ff.; Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 122-133; Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, 61, 281ff.; Gary Walton, "New Evidence on Colonial Commerce," *Journal of Economic History*, xxviii (1968). William S. Sachs, "Interurban Correspondents and the Development of a National Economy Before the Revolution: New York as a Case Study," *New York History*, xxxvi (1955).

conservative development of land resources. Possibilities for profit promoted enterprise, but introduced competitive attitudes that destroyed group solidarity. Land values climbed steadily but caused dissension over the distribution and organization of agricultural acreage.<sup>24</sup> Paper money, land banks, and credit extension created opportunities, democratized competition, unleashed the acquisitive instinct and encouraged personal ambition—all corrosives to a community order which valued continuity, solidarity, and stability. In addition to the demographic and economic changes affecting the colonies, for eighteen of the twenty-four years between 1739 and 1763, England's rivalry with Spain and France erupted into open hostilities. The frontier communities of New York, New England, and Pennsylvania were subject to enemy attacks. Privateering and profiteering skewed normal patterns of trade throughout the colonies. Georgia and South Carolina were not only exposed to military threats but also felt the repercussions of slave unrest stimulated by Spanish invitations to desert.<sup>25</sup>

The characteristic colonial society of 1700 subordinated the individual to the group and regulated his activities in accordance with traditional purposes usually defined by the local church or the ruling class. Prosperity, new economic opportunities, immigration, population growth, and the pressures of war undermined efforts to perpetuate this social pattern. Religious establishments in the South were unequal to the task of providing ministers for the new communities in the hinterland. Immigrants recreated their native religious affilia-

<sup>24</sup> Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 143; Lockridge, "Land, Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790," *Past and Present*, No. 39 (1968); Charles S. Grant, "Land Speculation and the Settlement of Kent, 1738-1760," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY*, XXVIII (1955); Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, 1970, 89-91; and Lockridge, *A New England Town*, 145-146. Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, 16; Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, 86-89.

<sup>25</sup> Howard H. Peckham, *The Colonial Wars, 1689-1762* (Chicago, 1964), 81-155; Edelman, "Thomas Hancock"; Sachs, "Interurban Correspondents"; Grant, *Democracy in Kent*, 6-9; Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 139-140; Aptheker, *American Slave Revolts*, 184; Johnson and Sloan, Editors, *South Carolina*, 110-111. Arthur Pierce Middleton, "The Chesapeake Convoy System, 1662-1763," *William and Mary Quarterly*, III (1946).

tions with delay and great difficulty.<sup>26</sup> Within the established churches the changing nature of colonial life presented itself as a challenge. The one great effort to reassert the religious focus of the community aroused such passions that its effect was more disruptive than ameliorative. The succession of revivals which swept over the colonies between 1728 and 1741 were directed to bringing people back to God-centered lives, but in appealing to individual sensibilities, the Great Awakening boomeranged. The dissension it aroused bred contempt for much of the church hierarchy, and the voluntary nature of the conversion experience undermined authority. The aftermath of the Awakening was an explicit recognition of religious pluralism.<sup>27</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the relative importance of the purposeful and the contingent in the breakdown of the social order of seventeenth-century America. Our liberal historiographical bias has led to an emphasis upon the purposive. Eighteenth-century opportunities no doubt encouraged men and women to free themselves from the restraint of family, church and town government, but the acceleration of economic and population growth forced freedom upon others. There was no room in the established towns for the surplus population of the third and fourth generations. Immigrants were cultural outsiders. Slaves and Indians were hostile

<sup>26</sup> Richard J. Hooker, Editor, *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution; The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason* (Chapel Hill, 1953), 67-81; Smith, "Congregation, State and Denomination," 171-176; George M. Brydon, *Virginia's Mother Church* (Richmond, 1947), I, 127ff.; Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790*, 26-27 (Durham, North Carolina, 1930); and Joseph Henry Dubbs, "The Founding of the German Churches of Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, xvii, 256ff. (1893).

<sup>27</sup> Edwin Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York, 1957), 113-135; J. M. Bumsted, "Revivalism and Separatism in New England: The First Society of Norwich, Connecticut, as a Case Study," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxiv, 600ff. (1967); and "Religion, Finance, and Democracy in Massachusetts: The Town of Norton as a Case Study," *Journal of American History*, lvii, 829-831 (1971); Perry Miller, "Jonathan Edwards' Sociology of the Great Awakening," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY*, xxi (1948); Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: a Reexamination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, 1949), 71-98; and Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 235ff.

groups by definition. Whether the transformation of colonial society came about principally from conscious effort or necessary adjustments, the historian must weigh the effect upon the perceptions, sensibilities, and expectations of the people who grew up through this period.

The middle decades of the eighteenth century brought challenges to the political authority and the deferential social structure in the colonies, created choices of religious loyalties, including the possibility of not belonging to a church at all, forced young adults from the protective control of their families, and added thousands of black and white aliens to the native population. These changes, however, did not expand the range of personal opportunities. Neither vertical nor horizontal mobility increased with growth and prosperity during these years. Sketchy as our knowledge is of the exact details of the distribution of wealth, several studies indicate that the trend of the eighteenth century was toward greater economic stratification. As it became more difficult for the colonists to find personal meaning through traditional social institutions, the alternative possibilities for individual fulfillment as independent farmers, artisans, and merchants were decreasing. The size of farms in New England shrank from an average over 100 acres to less than 50.<sup>28</sup> New opportunities for town founding were checked by the hostile activity of the Spanish, French and their Indian allies in the Northeast and along the southern frontier. As capital accumulated in the hands of the wealthier merchants in the major colonial ports, chances for success for the unsponsored young man diminished. The landless and disenfranchised population in Boston

<sup>28</sup> The decline in size of agricultural holdings is confirmed in the studies of Lemon, *Best Poor Man's Country*, 87-94; Lockridge, "Land, Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790." Although rising land values could compensate for declining size of holdings, Lockridge argues persuasively that rising land values would have exacerbated the situation by making it more difficult for the landless to acquire land. See Stanley D. Dodge, "The Frontier of New England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries and Its Significance in American History," *Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters Papers*, xxviii (1942).



and Philadelphia grew throughout the century.<sup>29</sup> Tenant farming increased in New York, New England, Maryland, and Virginia as people pushed into the western areas where far-sighted investors had patented large tracts of land. The opportunity for indentured servants to acquire land and assume civic responsibilities decreased rather than increased with time.<sup>30</sup> Colonial society was becoming liberalized in the middle decades of the century, but the prospect of becoming a fully free man in that society was conditioned by forces largely outside individual control.<sup>31</sup> In an earlier time some people had had more authority than others, but few were free from the restraints of the community. After 1740 more colonists were free from authoritarian restraints, but they did not necessarily have greater control over the decisive forces in their lives.

Let us analyze the social structure of the American colonies in forms of personal freedom. There was not the tapestry of shaded ranks which European society presented. Nor had colonial America produced the elaborate social usages which

<sup>29</sup> Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, 31-43, 44-46. Although Main argues that opportunities were great in revolutionary America, the morphology of social structure he develops would indicate that economic opportunity decreased with the growth, complexity and wealth of America, as a result of the concentration of wealth in urban areas, the conversion of some frontier areas to commercial farming and the movement westward into lands held by speculators or large absentee landlords. These implications are borne out by Henretta, "Economic Development and Social Structure in Colonial Boston"; Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure"; Gary Nash, *Quakers and Politics*, 321ff.; Lemon, "Urbanization and the Development of Eighteenth-Century Southeastern Pennsylvania and Adjacent Delaware," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxiv (1967); and Allan Kulikoff, "The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston," *Ibid.*, xxviii, 381ff. (1971).

<sup>30</sup> Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure"; Russell R. Menard, "From Servant to Freeholder: Status Mobility and Property Accumulation in Seventeenth-Century Maryland," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxx (1973); Main, *Social Structure of Revolutionary America*, 45, 50, 61-65, 278-279; and Skaags, "Maryland's Impulse Toward Social Revolution."

<sup>31</sup> See Michael G. Kammen, "Essay Review: Intellectuals, Political Leadership, and Revolution," *NEW ENGLAND QUARTERLY*, xli, 590ff. (1968) for an interesting suggestion about unemployed intellectuals in revolutionary situations. At the opposite extreme, for evidence of the increase in "idlers and vagabonds" on the frontier, see Hooker, Editor, *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution*, 167-168.



enabled an Englishman to exercise a vocabulary of verbal class distinction every time he greeted a fellow countryman. But if the breadth of personal freedom is used as the gauge of social distinctions, America offered a range of statuses unique for its extremes. The continuum would begin at one end with the slave who was formally stripped of all rights and informally dependent upon the will of a master. Next on the continuum was the white servant whose status was defined by contracts binding him or her to personal service up to seven years. Indentured servants had legally enforceable rights relating to work, punishments, living conditions, and freedom dues, but the person who owned a servant's contract could exercise control over a whole range of personal liberties dealing with property, selection of friends, use of free time, and supervision of behavior. A. E. Smith has estimated that between half and two-thirds of the several hundred thousand immigrants of the eighteenth century entered into indentured service either before or after their arrival in the colonies.<sup>32</sup> Next to indentured servants on the continuum of personal freedom were dependent sons, young men who reached maturity but did not possess a craft or a freehold which could make them independent of their fathers' support.

Figures on the number of dependent sons or the number of years of their dependency are difficult to establish. Several factors, however, contributed to the importance of this group. The demographic profile of rural society north of Maryland was marked by longevity and large families.<sup>33</sup> This meant that usually sons in their late twenties had living fathers still in possession of the family farms and that there was competition for land among the potential heirs. Recent scholarship has made it difficult to generalize about dependency trends.<sup>34</sup> Where fathers in one community left evidence of controlling

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 336.

<sup>33</sup> See note 13 above.

<sup>34</sup> Compare for instance Greven with Demos, "Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxii (1965) and Linda Auwers Bissell, "From One Generation to Another: Mobility in Seventeenth-Century Windsor, Connecticut," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxxi (1974).

their children through bequests or gifts of land, in other towns the aged parents' fear of neglect suggests that grown sons had great freedom of movement. The undulating cycles of population growth could affect the personal freedom of young people in two contrasting ways. Population growth could stimulate town planting which might give migrating young couples early independence from their parents, or population pressure could create a land scarcity which inhibited young people from leaving the security of a prospective share in the family farm.<sup>35</sup> The fact remains that land resources of eighteenth-century America were controlled by proprietors or corporate bodies, and decisions about opening up land were made by the older generation. Despite the apparent economic opportunity, preindustrial society offered a limited range of self-supporting occupations to men without land, and real property was essential to personal freedom defined both economically and politically. If the average colonist under twenty-seven or twenty-eight was neither slave, nor servant, neither was he free.

This calibration of personal dependency might appear as an elaboration of the obvious truth that society involves subordination were it not for the fact that at the end of the continuum were thousands of the freest individuals the western world had ever known. These people were not members of an elite, but average white men whose childhood, youth, and maturity had paralleled the disruption of the previous, conservative social order. Neither family, state nor church could lay fundamental claims upon them, for the terms of group membership in colonial life had become voluntary, short range, and unintrusive. Already in the 1760's and 1770's there was in adumbrated form the qualities of a liberal society which Tocqueville described so well three-quarters of a century later:

As social conditions become more equal, the number of persons increases who, although they are neither rich nor powerful enough

<sup>35</sup> Contrast Grant, "Land Speculation and the Settlement of Kent, 1738-1760," and Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 83, with Lockridge, "Land, Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630-1790."

to exercise any great influence over their fellows, have nevertheless acquired or retained sufficient education and fortune to satisfy their own wants. They owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.<sup>36</sup>

If we can accept this picture of the qualitative changes in colonial society before the Revolution, and can entertain the idea that the removal of traditional social restraints would make the categories of free and unfree crucial to personal satisfaction, then it is possible to see how British imperial reforms could be viewed as menacing acts demanding immediate and forceful repudiation. The proof of these conjectures lies deep in the consciousness of the revolutionary generation, but the language of their protests offers some clues. Acceptance of Parliamentary authority is repeatedly compared to slavery in the political pamphlets of the 1760's. Servile is the description for accommodation. The imagery of subjugation, submission, and subordination courses through the literature that marked the way to Independence. Stephen Hopkins evoked the prospect of slavery in *The Rights of Colonies Examined*: "Liberty is the greatest blessing that men enjoy, and slavery the heaviest curse that human nature is capable of," explaining later on in his pamphlet that "those who are governed at the will of another, or of others, and whose property may be taken from them by taxes or otherwise without their own consent and against their wills are in the miserable condition of slaves."<sup>37</sup> His critic, Martin Howard, Jr., answered Hopkins with a statement of the conservative view of society:

every connection in life has its reciprocal duties; we know the relation between a parent and child, husband and wife, master and

<sup>36</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Richard D. Heffner, Editor (New York, 1956), 194 (taken from Part II, Book Two of the original Henry Reeve translation).

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Bailyn, Editor, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), I, 507-508.

servant, and from thence are able to deduce their respective obligations.<sup>38</sup>

But the idea of slavery stayed firmly fixed in the colonial imagination. "Slavery," "slavish," "enslave" appeared throughout James Otis' *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*. "The people," he asserted, "never entrusted any body of men with a power to surrender [their liberty] in exchange for slavery." Slavery was so vile and miserable an estate of man that Otis found it hard to believe that an Englishman would plead for it.<sup>39</sup>

In his *Summary View of the Rights of British America*, Jefferson claimed that the series of oppressions by parliament "too plainly prove a deliberate and systematic plan of reducing us to slavery." Were the British parliament to succeed, he said, Americans would "suddenly be found the slaves, not of one, but of 160,000 tyrants."<sup>40</sup>

Jonathan Mayhew, the liberal Boston minister, wrote his *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers* to refute the orthodox religious argument for obedience to authority. His pamphlet is an exegesis on the meaning of "submission" and "subjection," but he also used the imagery of slavery: "Resistance was absolutely necessary in order to preserve the nation from slavery, misery, and ruin"; "In plain English, there seems to have been an impious bargain struck up betwixt the scepter and the surplice for enslaving both the bodies and souls of men"; not to resist the English king "would be to join with the sovereign in promoting the slavery and misery" of the colonies, passive obedience is a "slavish doctrine," and disobeying the civil powers in certain circumstances is "warrantable and glorious" if it in-

<sup>38</sup> "A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax," *ibid.*, 534-535.

<sup>39</sup> Bailyn, Editor, *Pamphlets . . .*, 477, 424, 434-435, 429, 447, 439, 440 and 443. Although this pamphlet appeared before Howard's "Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax," Otis did answer Howard with "A Vindication of the British Colonies, against the Aspersions of the Halifax Gentleman," *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Merrill Jensen, Editor, *Tracts of the American Revolution: 1763-1776*, Indianapolis, 1967, 264-265.

volved freeing oneself and “posterity from inglorious servitude and ruin.”<sup>41</sup> Writing principally to protest the “servile” judicial tenure of “during pleasure,” the anonymous author of *Letter to the People of Pennsylvania* insisted that the colonists should profit from what the histories of Europe had to say about the designs of arbitrary princes for “quelling the spirit of liberty and enslaving their subjects to their will.” “If Charles and James dispensed with penal statutes in order to introduce popery,” colonial governors, he said, have suspended laws “in order to introduce slavery.” Those who cooperated with royal officials were “slaves” preparing a “slavish condition” for Americans who “will become slaves indeed, in no respect different from the sooty Africans, whose persons and properties are subject to the disposal of their tyrannical masters.”<sup>42</sup>

Benjamin Church was equally insistent that slavery awaited the colonists. In *Liberty and Property Vindicated*, he claimed that “every action which should tend to promote the freedom of Britons is most notoriously made use of to enslave and plague them.” “Britons never must be slaves,” he intoned and, warming to his topic, recommended to his readers that if they find a man

in any post that unjustly grinds the face of the poor or that contributes to your slavery, ask him peaceably to resign it, and if he refuses to, use him in such a manner that he will be glad to do anything for a quiet life.<sup>43</sup>

Oxenbridge Thacher raised the specter that the colonists had shed their blood in the French and Indian war only “to bind the shackles of slavery on themselves and their children.”<sup>44</sup> The author of *The Constitutional Courant* described the Stamp Act as a design to “change our freedom to slavery.” “What then is to be done?” he asked rhetorically. “Shall we sit down quietly, while the yoke of slavery is wreathing about

<sup>41</sup> Bailyn, Editor, *Pamphlets . . .*, 241, 245, 232, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Bailyn, Editor, *Pamphlets . . .*, 259, 269, 271, 272.

<sup>43</sup> Bailyn, Editor, *Pamphlets . . .*, 592, 596.

<sup>44</sup> *The Sentiments of a British American* in Bailyn, Editor, *Pamphlets . . .* 490.

our necks? He that is stupid enough to plead for this," he answered, "deserves to be a *slave*." "What is a slave, but one who depends upon the will of another for the enjoyment of his life and property?" The English parliament that "can lay burdens upon us . . ." he warned, "can also, if they please, take our whole property from us, and order us to be sold for slaves." The fate of the colonists will be unrelieved. "Let us not flatter ourselves, that we shall be happier, or treated with more lenity than our fellow slaves in Turkey."<sup>45</sup> Far less radical than the author of *The Constitutional Courant*, John Dickinson, nonetheless, devoted the last of his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* to a discussion of the slavery that awaited the colonists.<sup>46</sup> Even the young Alexander Hamilton found slavery the most appropriate analogy for the colonial situation. "Were not the disadvantages of slavery too obvious to stand in need of it," he declaimed in his *Full Vindication*, "I might enumerate and describe the tedious train of calamities inseparable from it." Appealing to farmers on the grounds that they would be most oppressed in a country where slavery prevailed, he asked, "Are you willing, then to be slaves without a single struggle?"<sup>47</sup> John Adams as "Novanglus" put the case most succinctly: "There are but two sorts of men in the world, free-men and slaves." "The very definition of a freeman," he went on to explain, "is one who is bound by no law to which he has not consented."<sup>48</sup>

As the inheritors of the point of view expressed in these writings we often have been uncritical of its genesis. Surely no one today would defend so stark an assertion as that there are only two sorts of men in the world, nor would the colonists' contemporaries in the other New World colonies or in Europe have agreed. By contrasting freedom to slavery the revolutionaries were giving an absolute value to freedom which it

<sup>45</sup> Jensen, Editor, *Tracts of the American Revolution*, 87, 82, 83, 90, 89.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Leicester Ford, Editor, *The Writings of John Dickinson* (Philadelphia, 1895), I, 397-406.

<sup>47</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, Editor, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1904), 2nd ed., I, 15, 34-35.

<sup>48</sup> Jensen, Editor, *Tracts of the American Revolution*, 315-316.

had not previously possessed, even in the intellectual tradition from which they drew. Our understanding of the Revolution in part hinges upon our capacity to discover what experiences would have prompted this apocalyptic attitude about freedom. Social upheaval by itself does not produce radical notions about individual rights. One could guess that the social instability occasioned by population pressures, high rates of immigration, the increased use of slaves, wartime dislocations, and religious revivals would cause a conservative reaction. Perhaps, on the other hand, the individual energy recently freed from familial, congregational, and community restraint supplied the force for liberalization rather than reaction.

Because law enforcement had always been weak in the Anglo-American colonies, community coercion had supplied the social control normally exercised by superior authorities. Local autonomy had served group, not individual goals, but the effectiveness of such a system of control depended upon the capacity of the larger society to create new locales of community control to keep pace with growth. Rapid and diversified population growth strained the system. The controversies over the Great Awakening undermined the consensual basis for religious discipline. Economic opportunity beckoned to the ambitious. American society was maturing, but its maturation was not that of the acorn, for the oak had not yet been prefigured. Perhaps the prosperity and economic growth of the middle decades provided the possibility of a new order which would minimize social control and maximize the individual ambit of choice and responsibility. In such a context, any threat to the expectations generated by a liberal vision of society could induce panic and encourage violence. Such threats could also be widely accepted as tyrannical, unjust, unnatural, and unacceptable. This, at least, is what the revolutionary rhetoric suggests was the prevailing response.

Historians of the American Revolution who have devoted themselves to reconstructing the discrete steps that led to "the seizure of power over a governmental apparatus by one group from another," are understandably reluctant to see the careful



definitions of the last two decades of scholarship disappear into a quagmire of explanations which rely more upon theories of social psychology than evidence supporting a connection between presumptive cause and discernible effect.<sup>49</sup> Their capacity to disentangle causes from prior events was demonstrated recently by Jack Greene. Addressing himself again to the implications of Gordon Wood's assertion that the rhetoric of the American Revolution indicated "the most severe sort of social strain," Greene astutely distinguished between the modernization of American society and the American Revolution.<sup>50</sup> Few would contend that this modernization process which produced a sweeping social revolution throughout Western Europe would not have taken place in America without a political break from Great Britain, as Greene points out. However, distinguishing these two revolutions for purposes of analysis is not the same as demonstrating that contemporaries experienced them as separate forces. Modernization is inseparable from the demographic and economic changes which sapped the cohesion of the first colonial communities. The transformation of values which accompanied the intrusion of the market into social relations can scarcely be distinguished from the liberal philosophy which found expression in revolutionary rhetoric. One aspect of a change from an ascriptive to an achieving basis of social ranking is the anxiety generated by fears about one's personal access to avenues to achievement. Frenzied concern for individual liberty makes little sense un-

<sup>49</sup> Just how wide the parameters of social explanations for the American Revolution can be is demonstrated in Kenneth A. Lockridge, "Social Change and the Meaning of the American Revolution," *Journal of Social History*, vi (1973). The quoted phrase appears in Jack P. Greene, "The Social Origins of the American Revolution: An Evaluation and an Interpretation," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXVIII, 19 (1973); it is from James Rule and Charles Tilly, "1830 and the Unnatural History of Revolution," *Journal of Social Issues* (forthcoming).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5; see also Greene's "Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America," *Journal of Social History*, III (1970); "William Knox's Explanation for the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, xxx (1973); and "An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, Editors, *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1973).



less the meaning of freedom is related to the specific social context which gives it preeminent importance. Even if it is agreed that the modernization of colonial society would have continued without the American Revolution, can the converse be dismissed? Would the American Revolution have taken place without the tensions generated by social atomization and a spreading commercialism? Can we understand the revolution without exploring how personal ambition was elevated to a fundamental right in Jefferson's tellingly modern phrase "the pursuit of happiness."