Revolution or Reformation: Assessing the Limits of Radical Change in the American Revolution

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The common rhetoric among many Americans is that the American Revolution was an event that was not only radical enough to birth a national superpower but to catch the attention of foreign nations and inspire others to fight for change in their country. Such an interpretation is only natural given the circumstances. "Revolution" implies an uprising, a change in dynamic, and a disruption to the order of power in one's country. All of these ideas ring true broadly for the American Revolution; the tyranny of the British government was defeated in the name of independence and democracy. However, it is important to dig deeper into the mechanisms of the American Revolution to truly understand how 'radical' such an event actually was. Though many historians have provided their input and interpreted the American Revolution in a number of different ways, when the revolution is looked at from the perspective of marginalized groups, such as the enslaved Africans and women of the colonies, one may find that the Revolution is only as radical as it seems on the surface. These groups lacked the necessary social and economic progression to be considered at all beneficiaries of a struggle that supposedly allowed common men to prosper under a new, representative democracy. This essay will examine arguments from two historians who offer competing interpretations of the American Revolution, how demonstrating the limited advance of liberties for women and slaves in the Revolutionary period is best to understand this consequential period in American History, and the effects of doing so.

The conventional wisdom surrounding the American Revolution is that the time period was brought about by colonists angry about lacking representation in British Parliament and warding off a tyrannical British government. This interpretation, however, is quite simplified. Gordon S. Wood offers a more analytical perspective of the radical social aspects of the revolutionary period. In his book *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Wood assesses

that the radicalism of the revolution does not lie in the superficial deposing of tyranny, but in the transformed social aspects of American society. Wood argues that from 1760 to 1810, the United States transformed from "a collection of disparate colonies huddled along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast" to "a giant, almost continent-wide republic of nearly ten million egalitarian-minded bustling citizens."[1] Wood's argument lies in the fact that this social change was owed to the American Revolution; that it was an "integral part" of the changes occurring.[2]

However, Wood's history was met with criticism for its interpretation of events. Barbara Clark Smith scrutinizes Wood in her review 'The Adequate Revolution.' One of B. Smith's main objections to Wood is his focus on the American elites of the revolution and overstating the role they played in shaping the period. B. Smith criticizes Wood for interpreting the opinions and observations of the elites of the period as fact, rather than as part of a greater picture.[3] Wood focuses on the egalitarianism of the Revolution, yet excludes those who played arguably the largest part; those who influenced the revolution in some way, or were marginalized during this period.

Turning to Wood's own Founding Fathers provides a striking glimpse into how they wished to continue limiting advancements in liberties for their African counterparts. The American Yawp notes that Thomas Jefferson wrote in his 1784 *Notes on the State of Virginia* that "Black people were incapable of mental improvement and that they might even have a separate ancestry—a theory known as polygenesis, or multiple creations. His belief in polygenesis was less to justify slavery…more to justify schemes for a white America."[4] These opinions deriving

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[1] Gordon S. Wood, "Introduction" in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 6.
[2] Ibid., 7.
[3] Barbara Clark Smith, "The Adequate Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, vol. 51, no. 4, (Oct. 1994): 686
[4] Justin Clark et al., "The Early Republic," Nathaniel C. Green, ed., in *The American Yawp*, eds. Joseph Locke and Ben Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018). Accessed February 25th, 2025.

directly from the desk of Jefferson are inarguable proof of the desire of the founding fathers dismissing concern for including enslaved peoples in their new, free, reformed republic. While the lack of scientific knowledge can be forgiven in Jefferson's age, his use of it to justify excluding Africans and specifically targeting the formation of a white country does not demonstrate any radical ideals in terms of race relations in the minds of the Founding Fathers.

Wood's (1992) assessment of slavery during the revolutionary period garnered criticism. B. Smith (1994) states that "it is noteworthy that what interests Wood most about African-American slavery is whether that institution was conspicuous to eighteenth-century Euro-Americans" and that he finds the "elite subjectivity" on slavery, meaning the accounts and opinions of the white, land owning slaveholders who occupy the category of "Founding Father" as unproblematic.[5] One can see how diminishing the magnitude of slavery during the American Revolution plays a role in categorizing the period as radical in any societal capacity. In B. Smith's own words, Wood's credit for the revolution in eventually ending slavery "slights the agency of those who did struggle to end slavery" and that Wood merely "elides the actual experience, the small gains and setbacks, the lived struggle for freedom."[6] While the American Revolution can be seen loosely as setting into motion a course of actions that would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery, slavery was intrinsic to post-revolutionary America, and Revolutionary heritage was drawn upon as a way to defend it as an economic institution.

Turning to first-hand accounts of enslaved peoples during the revolutionary period helps demonstrate the integral role slavery played, how the system was rife with exploitation for years during and following the period, and how calls for freedom, equality, and rights existed during

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https://www.americanyawp.com/text/07-the-early-republic/#II_Free_and_Enslaved_Black_Americans_and_the_Challenge_to_Slavery

[5] B. Smith, "The Adequate Revolution," 688.

[6] Ibid., 690.

this period, and thus had to be suppressed or ignored by revolutionaries. Venture Smith's autobiography of his times as a slave showcases the injustices that hampered him being able to purchase his own freedom when given the chance. According to his account, he "had already been sold three different times, made considerable money with seemingly nothing to derive it from, been cheated out of a large sum of money, lost much by misfortunes, and paid an enormous sum for my freedom."[7] V. Smith's testimony serves as a reminder that even given the rare chance to become free in post-colonial America, slave owners still took as many chances as possible to exploit and disenfranchise Africans to deter their empowerment in American society. Furthermore, the constitution codified slavery, further expanding the institution of slavery in the 1790s rather than enabling any freedom for enslaved peoples.

Another group that lacked enfranchisement in the revolutionary and post revolutionary period were women. B. Smith (1994) points out that Wood (1992) also credits the revolution with admittedly not liberating women at the time, though doing so eventually; she refutes by arguing that "the Revolution was not a transhistorical agent that could go marching through the ages to bestow economic, social, or political rights on waiting womankind."[8] Women of the time period continued to advocate and struggle for their basic rights, and were instead slotted into roles that "made it crucial that they not participate" as she states.[9]

Turning to the words of the Founding Fathers themselves once again demonstrates their interest in limiting the liberties of unfree groups in America at the time. In a 1776 letter to her husband John Adams, Abigail Adams writes to him to "remember the ladies" in his declaration of independence and the new laws that will be created to establish their new country, further

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[7] Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa* (New London: 1798), 22-24.
[8] B. Smith, "The Adequate Revolution," 690.
[9] Ibid., 691.

emphasizing that "all Men would be tyrants if they could."[10] In her husband's response, John Adams treats her request as a joke. "As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh." He goes on to say "We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems."[11] Adams' language is clear in his assertions. He does not wish to, nor think seriously of, including suffrage for women in the laws of the new constitution for the United States. His letter to his wife clearly demonstrates a lack of socially radical thinking among the Founding Fathers. The Founding Fathers were not unaware of what these groups wanted, rather they intentionally excluded these calls for equality and rights, clearly outlining their ideas for the country following the revolution.

Towards the end of her critique, B. Smith (1994) summarizes and reframes Wood's (1992) assessment of the role women and slaves played in the American Revolution: "Neither women nor enslaved African Americans were left out of American freedom; both were included in it within critical, free, and arguably necessary roles…This Revolution…remade the American state, recast forms of participation, and constructed a narrative of the Revolution and of such American-ness without their aspirations, experiences, and agency.[12] B. Smith's focus on the narrative crafted by the Revolution is important to assess when considering the experiences of unfree groups. Wood's history is from a rose-tinted point of view, one that views the Revolution as a patriotic reminder of the freedoms all Americans are able to enjoy in the present; that Americans should revel in the chances taken by the Founding Fathers and reflect on the radical possibilities entrenched in the idea of the Revolution. However, when viewing the period from the point of view of those unfree groups, and seeing the results of their visions of possibilities, one can see how the "radical" societal changes are not supported at all, and only support the

[10] Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March – 5 April 1776 [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Massachusetts Historical Society.
[11] Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 April 1776 [electronic edition]. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Massachusetts Historical Society.
[12] B. Smith, "The Adequate Revolution," 691.

possibilities of a strictly white, patriarchal America in the eyes of the Founding Fathers. It is important to frame Revolutionary history in a way that steps away from the historical esteem of the Founding Fathers in order to challenge the common rhetoric of the Revolution, and to acknowledge the struggles for abolition and suffrage as things that were fought for by marginalized groups rather than enabled by the device of the Revolution.

Choosing to narrate the Revolutionary period in this way does have some implications that leave out parts of the whole picture of the Revolution. One must acknowledge the sacrifices made by the common Americans fighting alongside each other on the battlefield for independence. These Americans carried out the goals of self governance under seemingly impossible odds and influenced other proletariat revolutions in other colonial societies. Their contribution cannot be understated. However, neither can those marginalized by the Revolution itself. While the Revolution has been assessed in many different ways, challenging pre-existing narratives and the veneration of American figures to include marginalized groups leads to a more critical and important analysis of American history as a whole.

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