The Revolution Was Radical in Some Ways, Not in Others

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In 1926, J. Franklin Jameson spoke of "the stream of revolution once started which could not be confined within thin narrow banks but which spread abroad upon the land." And in 1967 Bernard Bailyn saw in the Revolution "a movement of thought, rapid, irreversible and irresistible" which "swept past boundaries few had set out to cross, into regions few had wished to enter." In the "contagion of liberty" a spark jumped from Whig political ideology to ignite sentiment for antislavery, religious liberty, and the rejection of deference. All historians use metaphors and Jameson and Bailyn provided evocative physical analogies which, as they often do, allowed little room for human agency. If Jameson was vague in identifying the dynamic source of change, Bailyn, as David B. Davis has written, "tend[ed] to exaggerate the autonomous power of ideas" to effect change. Who broke the banks of the river? Which people carried the sparks from one tree of liberty to another?

Recent scholarship suggests a number of propositions that might restore agency to this process and moves us toward a synthesis of the origins of radicalism without, however, suggesting a single paradigm:

First, there were deep roots of radicalism in ideas, values, traditions, and customs held by common people long before the Revolution.

Second, as groups played an active role in the Revolution and became aware of their own interests, they invoked their own traditions in addition to appropriating Whig rhetoric.

Third, experiences over an unusually long revolutionary era contributed to radical impulses, not only in the now well-known decade of resistance before 1775, but during the protracted war from 1775 to 1781 and even more from the mid-1780s on, especially through the 1790s, when the impulses of the French Revolution and the successful black revolution in St. Domingue rekindled American radicalism.

Fourth, as antagonisms increased, many groups of common people acquired a heightened consciousness of themselves and their distinct interests which enabled them to become a presence in American life.

Sources of Radicalism

"That each of us may sit down under his own fig-tree and enjoy the fruits of his own labour"

The first proposition, that there were deep roots of radicalism in ideas, values, traditions, and customs held by common people which they brought to the era of the Revolution, has been analyzed by historians within various frameworks: moral economy, mentalité, class ideology, political culture, or "customs in common." . . . Take, for example, the yeoman farmers. . . . A common assumption among early American farmers was that they were entitled to "the fruits of their labor," attained by the "sweat of their brow." . . . This is what informed the long-standing fear, among New England yeomen in particular, of being reduced to "vassals" under "lordships." . . . This is what made yeoman farmers so quick to respond to any threat to the security of their title to land, especially to taxes that threatened to reduce them to the status of debtors, which could lead to the loss of their land. Political leaders like John and Samuel Adams were successful because they were attuned to such fears. This was the social nexus of the agrarian response to Whig political and constitutional rhetoric.

Historians can now pull this red thread through the skein of collective agrarian responses from the late seventeenth century through the prewar Regulator movements, the political conflicts of the 1770s with England, and the Shaysism of the 1780s, to the agrarian rebellions and agrarian politics of the 1790s and early 1800s. This was the radicalism of farmers who were property holders or would-be property holders and believed they had a right to land, tools, and other productive property. These were not necessarily marginal farmers, although many were landowners with uncertain title to their land, tenants with insecure leases, or backcountry squatters. Nor did farmers have to be poverty-stricken to become radical. As often as not, they
were landholders with families who worried about becoming impoverished—a fear of falling—or the sons of landholders who feared they would be unable to acquire land and duplicate the success of their fathers. Their goal was personal independence through secure landholding, a goal that merged with the political aspiration for national independence in some regions, making yeoman patriots, and which in other regions decidedly did not, leaving a large number of farmers Tory, neutral, or "disaffected" during the war.

Artisans were imbued with similar values. Also property holders or would-be property holders, they were men (and sometimes women) who practiced a productive trade as masters ("a man on his own") or as journeymen, working for others who aspired to be masters. They were heirs to the ancient traditions of their trades as well as to a belief in property right tenets long articulated by their forebears among English artisans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. . . . Artisans in the port cities, even more than country folk, lived in fear of becoming dependent, of falling into the poorhouse or becoming recipients of poor relief. Journeymen worried that they might remain wage earners and not rise to the ranks of the independent. Apprentices who ran away had little confidence they could ever climb the ladder into this artisan world.

What values might we expect to find among the free, propertyless wage earners at the bottom? Among merchant seamen, for instance—the largest single group of wage earners in early America? As Admiral Peter Warren testified in 1745 after they fiercely resisted impressment into His Majesty’s navy, seamen "have the highest notion of the rights and liberties of Englishmen, and indeed are almost Levellers." Sailors prized their freedom. . . .

Throughout the colonial era, those in servitude, whether African-American slaves, immigrant indentured servants from Great Britain, or native-born apprentices, demonstrated what in 1721 the Reverend Cotton Mather of Boston called a "fondness for freedom." Fifty years later a slave in the same city, the African-born Phillis Wheatley, wrote: "In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle, which we call Love of Freedom. It is impatient of Oppression, and pants for Deliverance; and by the Leave of our modern Egyptians I will assert, that the same Principle lives in us." . . .

Slaves of the last half of the eighteenth century warrant being identified as African American. . . .

What did slaves aspire to after emancipation? Their lives as workers were a constant reminder that their daily labor was being stolen from them, just as they or their ancestors had been stolen from Africa. The evidence of the revolutionary era, the time of the first emancipation, suggests that no less than white Anglo-American yeomen and artisans they sought the means to secure personal independence. Massachusetts slaves began a 1773 petition with the premise that "they have in common with other men, a natural right to be free, and without molestation, to enjoy such property, as they may accumulate by their industry," moved to a plea that "they may be liberated and made free-men," and ended with the request that they be granted "some part of the unimproved land, belong to this province, for a settlement, that each of us may there quietly sit down under his own-fig-tree, and enjoy the fruits of his own labour." Tens of thousands of slaves fled during the war; many were transported by the British to Nova Scotia in 1783, sought land there, and when they fared poorly made their way back to Africa to the British colony of Sierra Leone in quest of land. In the 1790s, when Robert Carter began to free the five hundred slaves on his Virginia plantation by individual acts of manumission, they sought from him land or the means to pursue a trade they assumed was their right.

This set of beliefs among both free farmers and artisans and unfree slaves, as their language alone suggests, was often rooted in religion, especially in the evangelical dissenting faiths. . . . They were Baptists, New Light Congregationalists, ultra-evangelical Antinomians who sought to bypass a learned clergy in pursuit of direct spiritual encounters.” . . .

Religious awakenings reverberated through the revolutionary era. While historians continue to explore the links between the Great Awakening (1739–45) and the Revolution, far more attention is being paid to the waves of enthusiastic religions during and especially after the war. Millennialism, it is now clear, took many forms—charging, for example, the radical protest of an intercolonial backcountry rebel like Herman Husband with his vision of a New Jerusalem in the West as a yeoman’s utopia. By the early 1800s the evangelical Baptists and Methodists, on the way to becoming the most numerous of American denominations, contributed not only to . . . "the democratization of American Christianity," but to the democratization of American political life. . . .

Appropriations of Liberty

"Who can have a better right to the land than we who have fought for it?"

If this commitment to prior source of radical values is valid, it is not hard to argue the second proposition, namely that in the era of the Revolution, as groups of ordinary people played an active role in the Revolution and became aware of their own interests, they invoked their own traditions as well as the Whig rhetoric of lawyers, ministers, planters, and merchants. There was a synthesis of traditional veins of radical thought with newer currents forged in the experiences of the Revolution that scholars are only now analyzing. . . .

Language reveals the synthesis. . . . They held an underlying assumption of a right to land drawn from radical Christian traditions ("God gave the earth to his children") and a sense of a moral economy. ("Wild lands ought to be as free as the common air.") But their military service in the war fortified this claim. ("Who can have a better right to the land than we who have fought for it?") And the fact that the land in dispute was confiscated from England made it all the more common property. ("These lands once belonged to King George. He lost them by the American Revolution & they became the property of the people who defended and won them.")

Other language showed an intricate appropriation of Whig rhetoric. The unfree living in the centers of patriot movements were extraordinarily quick to seize on Whig ideas, especially when patriots shifted the meaning of liberty from traditional English constitutional rights to natural rights, the first transition in the meaning of this keyword that Countryman analyzes. Thus, in Massachusetts, the first petition of slaves for freedom in January 1773 was a plaintive Christian humanitarian plea: "We have no Property! We have no Wives! No Children! We have
no City! No Country! But we have a Father in Heaven.” The second, in July, spoke of a “natural right to be free” but dwelt on a person’s right to his own labor. Even their 1774 petition, in which they spoke of themselves as “a freeborn People [who] have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever,” continued to blend this Whig theme with Christian values. Not until a 1777 petition, which referred to their patience in presenting “Petition after Petition,” did they pick up on their “natural & unalienable right” to freedom. This appropriation was so opportunistic one is tempted to argue that Whig rhetoric was more the occasion than a cause for asserting a claim to liberty.

As individuals picked up ideas that were in the air, they often pushed them far beyond anything intended by patriot leaders. Years later Ebenezer Fox, a Boston-area apprentice . . . who shipped out on a privateering vessel, wrote in his memoirs: “I thought I was doing myself a great injustice by remaining in bondage when I ought to be free; that the time was come, when I should liberate myself from the thraldom of others and set up a government of my own; or in other words, do what was right in the sight of my own eyes.” His words reveal the kind of personal Declaration of Independence from all authority that Henry Thoreau would have appreciated, and that would have made John Adams shudder.

The unequals had to make a leap in their thinking to turn the talk of liberty into a demand for equality for themselves; and the leap is better explained by experience than by any logic inherent in the idea. For George Robert Twelves Hewes, a Boston shoemaker who survives in two as-told-to biographies, the experience of participating in the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, and countless other events of resistance enabled him to cast off deference. He vividly recalled the deference he earlier felt as an apprentice shoemaker when he called on John Hancock, one of the wealthiest merchants in Boston; and then, a decade later, the sense of equality he felt when (as he remembered it) he worked side by side with Hancock throwing the tea overboard in the Tea Party. It is unlikely that Hancock would have risked arrest at so illegal an event, but Hewes could have mistaken another gentleman for him. For the rest of his life Hewes would remember the Revolution’s moments of equality—when he was as good a man as his “betters,” whether John Hancock, the customs official Hewes defied, or the ship’s officer for whom he refused to take his hat off.

We know enough about Abigail Adams to gain insight into what led one woman to make the leap and therefore to speculate about others. In her “remember the Ladies” letter to John in March 1776, she seemed to be raising the demand to end the tyranny of husbands over their wives for the first time. For more than a decade she had been reading or hearing her husband’s rhetoric of “tyranny” and “slavery” and “lords and vassals,” but it does not seem that she, John, or anyone else in Massachusetts had publicly applied the principle to the status of women.

What were her experiences? Over the decade she had followed the active participation of the women of Boston and the surrounding countryside in the making of the Revolution and referred to herself as a “politician.” She may well have drawn inspiration from the black petitioners and alleged conspirators of 1773–74 who, she felt, “have as good a right to freedom as we have.” In 1776, only the month before her letter to John, she had read Common Sense with its message to begin the world over again. But perhaps most decisive, for almost two years while her husband was intermittently away in Philadelphia, she had taken on new responsibilities outside the traditional “female sphere”: she managed the family farm, boasting she had become “quite a farmeress,” and she had become “school mistress” to her three young children. Thus she had a growing consciousness both of her own capacities and her own inadequacies—how ill-educated she was for the task. It was in the context of such experiences that she lifted her voice to John to “remember the Ladies.” Similar wartime experiences would lead other women to make such a leap and verbalize a new consciousness.

**Sources of Radicalism**

Promises Unfulfilled

The third proposition, that experiences shaped radical impulses over a very long revolutionary era that extended through the 1780s, the 1790s, and beyond, is becoming more of a commonplace among historians as they think through the life histories of the revolutionary generation. The Revolution did not end in 1776, in 1783, in 1787, or even in 1801. In writing about the great leaders—Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison—historians have no problem dealing with their entire political lives, which often stretched over half a century and more. Why not think the same way of the common people who lived out their lives over the same years? For many, their radicalism was the product of their cumulative experience over the entire era.

The experiences of a long war—the longest in American history—generated a variety of radical impulses. . . . Roughly 200,000 men served in the military, about half in the militia, half in the regular army. The Philadelphia militia, whose artisans, journeymen, and laborers were the base of the movement that pushed Pennsylvania to independence and enacted the most radical constitution of any state “carried their egalitarianism with them into the field” and carried it back to the streets of Philadelphia in the campaign for price controls in 1779–80. The militias elsewhere, even when a cross section of their communities, were too democratic in the eyes of elitist officer. Soldiers of the regular army, who after 1776 were drawn from “the very poorest and most repressed persons in Revolutionary society” scholars now agree were no less patriotic for having their aspirations for a better life tied to the promises of land. Tension between enlisted men and officers was endemic and Baron Von Steuben was astute enough to recognize that he had to teach American officers to adapt to the “genius” of individualistic American enlistees and win their “love and respect.” “Continents,” who early in the war often expressed their bitterness at the inequities of army life in drunkenness, desertion, and bounty jumping, as they became more disciplined and cohesive, expressed their protest collectively, climaxing in the mutinies of the New Jersey and Pennsylvania lines in 1781.

At sea the rage for privateering gave some 60,000 men (as opposed to a few thousand who served in the Navy) a chance to “make their fortunes and serve their country” as the recruiters beguiled them. It also gave them a taste of legalized privacy, in which captains, like pirate commanders, courted the consent of their crews. And thousands of seamen who were captured, if they survived the horrors of British prisons, had the experience of collective self-government.

In the countryside the Revolution took the character of a civil war for tens of thousands of ordinary Americans . . . especially in parts of the southern backcountry,
where it "took on the appearance of a social convulsion." Wherever there was a prior history of intense conflict between colonial elites and common folk—especially in the two Carolinas—patriot elites encountered intense opposition. In Maryland where there was more cohesion, there was still active opposition to large planter leadership by the "disaffected"—poor farmers and tenants. The pattern was similar in New York, where tenants opposed patriot landlords. Even in relatively tranquil Virginia there was opposition, only partially overcome when old elites embraced Patrick Henry. While alignments in the South often produced a patchwork of social classes, the principal experience for many southerners was confronting and thwarting their betters, tidewater or low-country elites.

For slaves the "turbulence of the war ... rocked the slave system to its foundations." The British army was a magnet to slaves, North and South, with General Clinton repeating in 1780 in South Carolina Lord Dunmore's offer of 1775 in Virginia, although the British never risked a generalized appeal that would alarm their slave-owning supporters. In the North the urgencies of recruiting quotes forced patriots to reverse their ban on slaves, but in the end probably more slaves wielded arms for the British than against them, and even more simply took flight. ... [In the southern low country, Philip Morgan points out, "wartime anarchy created a power vacuum in the countryside that allowed slaves to expand their liberty" or autonomy within the system. ...]

For women the war offered experiences out of the "domestic sphere." As many as 20,000 women attached themselves to the army as cooks, laundresses, and nurses, usually following family members. And when men went off to war, women were called upon to clothe them—a traditional role—but they also assumed male roles, managing the farm or trade, repeating Abigail Adams's experience of 1775-76.

The experiences of postwar society spawned a radicalism of disappointment. For those who had served in the Army, the inequities of the settlement left a long-simmering resentment. Officers received pensions; and soldiers who were wounded received some recompense. But ordinary soldiers rarely received the bounty lands promised them on enlistment. The government did not enact a pension for enlisted men until 1818, and then only for those "in reduced circumstances," which produced 40,000 claims, a Domesday book of American poverty. And not until 1832 was this means test eliminated and an unrestricted pension law enacted for those who could give "a very full account" of their service. Twenty thousand applied. Historians have only begun to take the measure of the pain, pride and outrage in the pension applications of these survivors of the Revolution.

The hard times of the Confederation era forged a radicalism of desperation: of farmers imprisoned for debt and faced with the loss of their land and property; of mechanics swamped by the flood of British-manufactured imports or ruined in the collapse of American shipbuilding; of migrants into the backcountry frustrated in their quest for land. Petitions rained on the state legislatures demanding "access to land, debtor relief, and remedies to the burden of heavy and regressive taxes." Shaysism was not confined to one state. Among elites ... there was an even greater fear that the radicalism of the "people-out-of-doors" would come "indoors," to dominate state legislatures.

Thus by 1787 there is every reason to believe that the "interests" James Madison analyzed in The Federalist no. 10 were also perceived by nonelites. Madison wrote of essentially two different sources of "factions." One source lay in substantial propertyed interests: "a landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a monied interest." But "the most common and durable source of factions" was "the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination," thus identifying the key conflicts of the 1780s uppermost in elite minds. The creation of the federal Constitution mobilized the substantial commercial interests as never before. The conflict over ratification mobilized a broader array of interests in opposition, inspiring a populist Antifederalism on a scale that is only now being recognized by scholars.

The Hamiltonian economic program of the 1790s, coming on top of the new Constitution, widened the popular perception of a national ruling class ... rule by the few at the expense of the many. In this context ... "the astonishing American enthusiasm for the French Revolution" is understandable. Once the French Revolution entered domestic politics in the guise of foreign policy issues—the war between revolutionary republican France and monarchist Britain, the Paineite effort to revalue Great Britain, the Federalist accommodation with Britain in 1795 and the half-war with France—it inspired new levels of egalitarianism and millennialism. Thomas Paine's The Rights of Man seemed to pose the same issues that Common Sense had in 1776. The impulses to radicalism soared. ...
Clearly, some nonelite groups “discovered themselves” more than others, moving toward a more interest-specific if not class-specific consciousness. . . . At some point in the 1770s, as conservative elites challenged their right to a voice in public affairs, “mechanics” began to wear that term as a badge of pride. In New York City and Philadelphia there were “mechanic” political tickets and Committees of Mechanics. By the mid-1780s in New York they formed a General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen (the title bridging old and new usage). In Boston The Association of Tradesmen and Manufacturers, a body with delegates from the various trades, addressed written appeals to “their brethren, the mechanics” in other cities, asking them to join in a campaign for the protection of American manufactures. The emblem of the New Yorkers, adopted by societies in other cities, was an upright brawny arm holding a hammer, with a slogan “By Hammer and Hand All Arts Do Stand,” a bold assertion of the primacy of the mechanic arts. Mechanics unquestionably became an influence in political life; they knew it, and political leaders knew it . . .

If such groups “discovered themselves” in conflict, it does not necessarily follow that they remained in constant antagonism with their opponents. On the contrary, because the Revolution was also a war for national liberation, nascent classes formed coalitions with other classes against a common outside enemy. Indeed, the era led to a constant reforming of coalitions, especially in face of a foreign danger that persisted in major crises throughout the era. . . .

Furthermore, nascent classes divided internally. In the countryside with the expansion of a market economy, the distinction . . . between market-embedded commercial farmers and non-market-oriented yeomen helps explain political divisions among farmers, for example, over ratifying the commercially oriented Constitution of 1787. In the cities the mechanic trades also divided according to market orientation. By the late eighteenth century free wage labor was becoming the norm in northern cities: imported indentured servitude was drying up, slavery was fading, and apprenticeship was being transformed into a form of cheap labor. As the market system made its inroads on artisan production the conflict between masters and apprentices and masters and journeymen rent the fabric of mechanic cohesion.

While there undoubtedly was a growing sense of commonality among “the laboring classes” embracing town and countryside, urban mechanics usually failed to support agrarians in insurrections, whether it was the tenant uprising in New York in 1766 or Shays’s Rebellion in 1786. . . . “The laboring classes” in countryside and city were female as well as male, but radicals who embraced Paine’s Rights of Man (1791–92) showed no comparable interest in Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Women (1791). The laboring classes included blacks—in a greater proportion than at any other time in American history—yet neither agrarian nor mechanic radicals welcomed Gabriel’s abortive insurrection in 1800, or the efforts of free blacks in northern cities to forge their own community institutions. And the free blacks of Boston volunteered to put down Shays’s Rebellion. Thus the multiple radicalisms of the revolutionary era remained separate.

Taken together, the argument advanced in these four propositions suggests new ways of thinking about the sources of radicalism in the revolutionary era. It posits not a single radicalism but multiple radicalisms. It does not see them stemming from one all-pervasive idea or ideology. It assumes a prior array of radical value systems which came into play at that time. The Revolution was itself an incalculable stimulus to radicalism . . .

Results of the Revolution

A Framework for Analysis

If recent scholarship has . . . increased our “appreciation” of the many radical movements of the Revolution, it leaves open the question of their success . . . The retention and expansion of slavery, the maintenance of a patriarchal subordination of women, the destructive inroads of a market economy on the laboring classes in the cities, to say nothing of the destructive impact of national expansion on American Indians, were developments central to post-revolutionary society.

Scholars contrasting such results with the democratization of American politics, the opening of economic opportunity, and the surges of equalitarianism—all gains benefitting principally yeomen and mechanics and then women—often end up using words like “contradiction” or “paradox,” which still leave us hanging for an explanation. Other historians, by claiming as does Gordon Wood, for example, that however much the Revolution failed “to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women, [it] made possible the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking,” essentially evade their responsibility for historical analysis.

. . . [T]here were several ways to measure the success of popular radical movements, short of their achieving power: by their capacity to articulate a distinct ideology, to endure as movements, and especially to influence those in power and shape events . . .

First, in response to the upsurges of radicalism, elites attempting to make themselves into a national ruling class, divided as to how to confront these threats. In the political sphere their responses ranged on a spectrum from the traditional methods of the English ruling class—force, deference and influence—to negotiation leading to accommodation.

Second, the processes of negotiation were most successful with the middling classes—yeomen and mechanics—who had pushed their way into the political system, establishing a continuing presence that elites could not ignore if they wished to govern successfully.

Third, negotiation was pervasive throughout the society, offering accommodations to groups excluded from the political system—women and slaves—without destroying the subordination on which the social and economic system rested. American Indians, the real outsiders, were powerful enough in certain places and times to force a kind of accommodation on Anglo-Americans that delayed expansion.

And finally, as a result of the process of accommodation which made the political system more democratic, radical popular movements divided as to the means to effect change on a spectrum that ranged from the traditional time-honored, effective, extralegal forms of opposition to working within the new political system.

Framing the analysis of results in this way—as a process of confrontation, negotiation and accommodation occurring on a range of separate spheres—offers the possibility of resolving the so-called contradictions in the outcome of the Revolution. It also leaves room in the analysis for the integration of the complex ways in
which the transformations leading the United States toward a capitalist society both stimulated and frustrated radical impulses.

**Elites Divide**

**Accommodation in the Public Sphere**

That the would-be ruling classes divided in response to the popular upheavals in the revolutionary era has been established by scholars, state by state. In the colonial era elites varied in their cohesiveness. In many colonies, elite families were ever at each other's throats, often appealing demagogically in elections to artisans or farmers with the vote, uniting only to assert their hegemony over the subordinate classes. The merchant classes were usually fragmented; so were large slaveholders or landlords in the Hudson River Valley. But, in general, elites contained the sporadic threats from below. What was new, from the 1770s on, was a persistent popular democratic presence in politics. How to handle it could divide great aristocratic families within (as with the Carrolls of Maryland) or from their neighbors and kin (as in New York), or divide even the confident ruling gentry (as in Virginia).

The Revolution produced a crisis of confidence among old elites in their capacity to take their chances with democracy (to them, "the rabble" or "the mob") and with the new men responsible to popular constituencies with whom elites now had to compete for power (to them, "upstarts" and "demagogues"). Confidence of this sort was something of a dividing line within elites over the entire revolutionary era: between Whigs and loyalists over separating from Great Britain, among Whigs in state making and constitution making, in the 1790s between Democratic Republicans and Federalists, and after their defeat in 1800, between "old school" and "new school" Federalists.

The metaphors elites used for the threats from below are telling tokens of their different outlooks. Panic-stricken conservatives referred to the people as a beast that had to be driven or as a reptile that would bite. By contrast, Robert R. Livingston, a landlord potentate in New York typical of more risk-taking conservatives, in 1777 used the metaphor of a stream: rulers had to "learn the propriety of Swimming with a Stream which it is impossible to stem"; they should "yield to the torrent if they hoped to direct its course." Thirty years later, Noah Webster scolded his fellow Federalists who had fallen from power because they "attempted to resist the current popular opinion instead of falling into the current with a view to direct it."...

What was new was that the Revolution nationalized the threat of radicalism which earlier was localized. Neither Shaysism nor the whiskey uproar was confined to one state. The creation of a national government created a national arena for conflicts. And the increase in the number and frequency of newspapers permitted a more rapid dissemination of opinion. Master mechanics communicated from one city to another. Some fifty Democratic Societies came into being in the backcountry as well as eastern cities. One consequence of this minor revolution in communications was that outside events could have a fairly rapid national influence. Successive events in the French Revolution produced common reactions all over the United States; the news of successful black revolutionaries in the Caribbean invigorated African-American resistance. North and South, alarming slaveholders as well as antislavery advocates.

The torrents of national radicalism required extraordinary skill of the nation's pilots. In the postwar crisis that culminated in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the elite leaders best able to assume national leadership were men like James Madison, who recognized it as a crisis of "the political system," itself a revealing phrase. Madison was able to negotiate on two fronts: with the conflicting substantial interests so well represented in the convention (the haves) and with the radical democratic movements that were a "presence" at the convention, even if they were not present (the have-nots and the have-littles). The framers more or less agreed with Madison that if the Constitution was to last for the ages, it had to conform to "the genius of the people," a phrase meaning spirit or underlying values. Nathaniel Gorham of Boston, a merchant sensitive to a mechanic constituency, summed it up: "We must consult the rooted prejudices of the people if we expect their concurrence in our propositions."

Bold, sophisticated conservatives had learned a lesson from the Revolution—their need to accommodate democratic-minded constituencies in advance. The Federalists of 1787-88 made two grand accommodations usually missing from civics lessons: the first, in the concessions to democratic rule they built into the Constitution itself; the second, during the process of ratification, when they divided the powerful popular opposition who wanted a less centralized and more democratic structure by promising amendments which they later reduced to the Bill of Rights, which left the essential framework intact. The result was a constitution a nationalist-minded radical like Thomas Paine and a localist plebian democrat like William Manning could fault but accept....

The elites who gained power but had the least long-run success were the Hamiltonian Federalists of the 1790s, who adopted England as a model. Hamilton tried to consolidate a government in the 1790s based on the English system of deference, influence, and force. But deference was on the wane, and any attempt to impose it led to the charge of "aristocracy." Building influence through a funding system and bank produced a backlash against corruption. And force—whether military to put down extralegal opposition or political repression like the Sedition Law of 1798 to imprison legal opposition—misjudged the "genius of the people," ushering the Federalists out of power.

The elites with the greatest capacity for survival coalesced as the Democratic Republicans, under the leadership of Madison and Jefferson. The Virginia leaders had mastered the process in their native state by building alliances with the dissenting religions in a ten-year battle to disestablish the Anglican church. They learned how to accommodate nationally: to build a coalition of southern slave-owning planters, yeomen, northern merchants in search of markets to make them independent of Britain, and mechanics and would-be manufacturers. It is not surprising that their principal northern allies were politicians from New York and Pennsylvania like Robert R. Livingston, who once again was ready to swim with the stream. The interests thus brought together could share a common aim of expanding overseas commercial markets for agricultural produce, expanding to the West, and developing American manufactures.

Democratic Republicans shifted to accommodate radical agrarians to their left. In 1794 Madison and Jefferson were more concerned with eliminating grievances than putting down agrarian rebels. And with the vast public domain as a
resource they were prepared to accommodate insistent settler demands for land. Both fought the repressive Sedition Law. They also recognized the importance of the mechanics—"the yeomanry of the cities" to Jefferson. However, they could not accommodate African Americans in slavery, or American Indians, and were indifferent to the new voices among American women.

**Negotiations in the Private Sphere**

**African Americans**

All this negotiation was in the public sphere. The work of historians in a variety of fields of social history suggests that negotiation also was underway within private spheres (a distinction from the public sphere that was often dissolving). This seems true among many segments of the laboring classes, especially in the 1790s. . . . Masters and apprentices literally signed a contract expressing reciprocal obligations for living and working under the same roof. As apprentice deference eroded, the master had to mend his ways. . . . At the same time, journeymen in many trades organized on their own to deal with masters, leading to the first pattern of American strikes by journeymen ("turnouts") and lockouts by masters. . . .

In rural areas the armed confrontations between settlers and great proprietors could end in negotiations. In Maine, once the proprietors conceded the right of squatters to acquire land, the conflict could boil down to haggling over the price of land. Leading men in frontier communities often served as middlemen. . . . Here politicians brokered a social conflict, an innovation that in time became a cliche in American politics.

The war enhanced the capacity of slaves to negotiate with their masters. The new scholarship on slavery in the revolutionary era has identified the processes by which slaves won "space" for themselves within an oppressive system. In 1775–76 southern planters clearly were in no position to accommodate the massive upsurge for freedom. Yet during the war they often had no choice; slaves expanded their autonomy within the system, or made good their flight from it. And after the war the low-country blacks, for example, did not readily surrender their wartime gains and "many continued to flaunt their increased autonomy." In the upper South, Maryland and Virginia passed laws that made it easier for individual slaveholders to free their own slaves through manumission, creating the first sizable free black population in the Chesapeake. . . .

In the North, where there were 50,000 slaves on the eve of the Revolution, emancipation on a state-by-state basis . . . dragged out for years. . . . [The insistent black pressures for freedom did as much as white antislavery benevolence to bring about this first emancipation. During and after the war northern slaves seized freedom, by fighting with the British or the patriots or by running away; or they purchased their own freedom and that of their families. In the five northern states with the largest slave populations, the legislatures provided only gradual emancipation for children born of slaves after they reached their twenties, which explains why in 1810 there were still 27,000 slaves in the North compared to 50,000 free blacks. Once free, blacks in the northern states faced a continuing struggle against racism for access to schools, the ballot, and civil rights. It was a grudging emancipation.

By 1820 in the country as a whole the number of freed blacks approached 250,000, while the number of slaves had grown to 1.5 million. Thus, as Berlin sums it up, "... if the Revolution marked a new birth of freedom, it also launched a great expansion of slavery."

How was this possible? The question is crucial to understanding the Revolution. . . . [David Brian Davis argued in 1975 that] "slavery was of central importance to both the southern and national economies, and thus to the viability of the 'American system.'" Moreover, "a free society was by no means incompatible with dependent classes of workers." . . . Chattel slaves provided the property which defined independence, the long-cherished goal of southern farmers. What accounts for the northern acquiescence to southern slavery? Economic interest, the high priority placed on national union, the devotion to private property in Whig ideology, and the growth of racism as the indispensable justification for continuing slavery in a land of liberty—all these contributed to what was perhaps the most fateful accommodation of the revolutionary era.

**Accommodations in the "Domestic Sphere"**

**Women**

This pattern of accommodation within a system of subordination assumed a different shape for women. "We are ready to ask," Linda Kerber writes, "whether and how the social relations of the sexes were renegotiated in the crucible of the Revolution." As a result of women's participation in the prewar resistance and in the war, "how much more inclusive American citizenship should be was under negotiation."

Thought about this way, the oft-cited exchange of letters between Abigail and John Adams in 1776 can be viewed as the opening round of a quintessential negotiation. He would hear nothing of equality of rights, but was receptive to her continuing demands for educational opportunities for women. Out of such exchanges—which we can assume were repeated without written record in countless families of the middling sort—came the accommodation Kerber has called "Republican motherhood," in which mothers were endowed with the patriotic responsibility of raising their sons and daughters as virtuous citizens for the new Republic and therefore required a better education. The "role of Republican motherhood," as Kerber recently reflected, "was a conservative stabilizing one, deflecting the radical potential of the revolutionary experience"; at the same time, it contributed to the expansion of education for women, the principal gain of the decades after 1790.

Thus the literate young women able to read novels . . . were the beneficiaries of the first negotiation. . . . In the long struggle by women for equal rights this may not seem very subversive, but as long as marriage was the chief option open to women, . . . a woman had "an opportunity to work out in the safe context of her imagination just what she wanted from men and from marriage." This in turn very likely contributed to "matrimonial republicanism," another product of the negotiation between the sexes. How widespread were these changes, how far they extended beyond educated middling women is not clear. . . . Scholars have found it easier to measure the absence of change in laws and institutions; they are only beginning to tap sources that measure changes in women's consciousness.
That some women should articulate independence as a goal is not surprising in an era in which personal independence was the heightened goal of every Tom, Dick, and Harry. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* found a receptive readership among educated American women. “In very many of her sentiments,” the Philadelphia Quaker Elizabeth Drinker confided to her diary, “she, as some of our friends say, speaks my mind. In some others, I do not always coincide with her. I am not for quite so much independence.” John Adams thought Abigail was “a perfect disciple of Wollstonecraft.” Through the 1790s Judith Sargent Murray, the most vocal American theorist of women’s rights, argued for an independence that pushed at the boundaries of republican motherhood. ... [She] argued, “marriage should not be presented as the *sumnum bonum*, or as a certain, or even necessary, event; they should learn to respect a single life, and even regard it as the *most eligible*, except a warm, mutual and judicious attachment has gained the ascendency in the bosom.” ... 

In an era when most white men had access to the means to achieve independence, most women did not; and most men were not prepared to surrender “our masculine systems,” as John Adams put it. Why not? Just as the independence of the slaveholder was defined by the dependence of his slaves, or the independence of the artisan defined by the dependence of his apprentices and journeymen, so the independence of a white male, whatever his occupation, was defined by the dependence of his wife and children. ... 

**Accommodations**

American Indians, Elites, and Frontiersmen

The revolutionary era was a time of unprecedented landed expansion.... This expansion produced a triangular confrontation of American Indians, eastern national elites, and western settlers that led to alternating national policies of accommodation and warfare and to deep divisions within native American societies.

The range of accommodation with native Americans was limited by an ethnocentrism that made the most well-meaning Anglo-Americans incapable of coexisting with Indians as they were. During and after the war, in which most Indians fought on the side of the British, their traditional protectors, the dominant attitude among whites ... [were] encapsulated in such toasts and slogans as “Civilization or death to all American Savages” or “Civilization or extinction.” But Anglo-American leaders had not calculated on the Indians’ will for independence or their capacity to defend it. In the decades before and after the war, native American societies had experienced movements of spiritual revitalization ... that reinforced political and military resistance. ... The Revolutionary War, which produced “a near unanimity of the trans-Appalachian struggle against the United States,” enhanced pan-Indianism. The tactics of Revolutionary War leaders such as the scorched-earth decimation of Iroquois villages (which earned George Washington the reputation among the Iroquois as “town destroyer”) put native Americans in no mood to accommodate the victorious United States.

In the peace treaty, the British ... “passed the card called sovereignty” over Indian land, “a legal fiction,” to the new nation. But spokesmen for the Iroquois Confederacy in the north said they were “a free People subject to no Power upon earth,” while the southern tribes insisted they had done nothing “to forfeit our Independence and natural Rights.” Confronted with Indian power, national political leaders rapidly shifted, recognizing Indian claims to sovereignty, literally negotiating treaties, and promising, in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, that “the utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their land and property shall never be taken from them without their consent.”

The corollary of this accommodation was to bring the “blessings of civilization” to American Indians. This meant ... that “Indian men would adopt plow agriculture, women would abandon the field for the home, and all would give up their heathen ways for Christ.” The symbol was engraved on the silver peace medal U.S. presidents bestowed on cooperating chieftains: a native American male throwing a broken arrow to the ground before President Washington, who is in his general’s uniform, sword at his side; and in the background, a man, perhaps the same Indian, guiding a plough pulled by two oxen, tilling a field.

The pressures of western agrarians forced a change on national policymakers. ... The tillers of the soil, whose labor gave it value, were alone entitled to the land. Indians, in the eyes of farmers, did nothing to improve the “howling wilderness.” The same class antagonism informed the backcountryman’s attitude toward absentee land proprietors and eastern opponents of an aggressive policy toward the Indians. The Tennessee territorial legislature in 1794 reminded Congress that “citizens who live in poverty on the extreme frontiers were as entitled to be protected in their lives, their families and little property, as those who were in luxury, ease and affluence in the great and opulent eastern cities.” In the 1790s eastern elites with their own agendas for expansion, bent to these pressures, sanctioning war on a massive scale. ...

Anglo-American pressures forced people into their own internal processes of accommodation. ... Tribal societies were divided among those who would accommodate by negotiating away land rights and moving on, those who were willing to adopt the white man’s ways, including Christianity and plow agriculture, and those who rejected them or sought selective adaptation of Anglo-American ways. ... In this context the divisions within Indian societies confronting imperial expansion bear some resemblance to the divisions within the Anglo-American society of the same era.

The Democratic Republicans, once in national power, offered their own mixture of benevolence and belligerence, paving the way for the next step, physical removal from the eastern United States. In 1783, 150,000 Indians lived east of the Mississippi; by 1844, less than one-fourth remained. ... 

**Radical Divisions**

The process of accommodation in the political system contributed to a division within radical popular movements as to the best means for effecting change. The norm inherited from colonial times was extralegal action: mob actions in the cities and Regulator movements in the countryside. ...

In the eyes of the common people the success of the Revolution legitimizied extralegal action, and the war sanctioned violence, endowing both with the aura of patriotism. ... If any single act became symbolic of the Revolution as a whole, it may have been the Boston Tea Party.
The democratization of the political culture, the accommodations by elites, combined with a quasi-revolution in communications, undoubtedly had an effect in channeling protest into a now more open political system. Petitioning to state legislatures, which very likely was on a greater scale than in the colonial era, lost the tone of supplication. Yet extralegal action was hardly abandoned; it seemed to run parallel to the legal. In the 1790s in western Pennsylvania, farmers formed Democratic societies, passed resolutions, and sent petitions to the federal government. Simultaneously, they resorted to tar-and-feathering tax collectors, erecting liberty poles, and parading thousands-strong through Pittsburgh to intimidate local elites. They were prepared for military resistance, but confronted by a massive federal mobilization of force, the rebels debated strategy and withdrew.

Resorting to force produced a crisis in confidence within popular movements over achieving their ends within the system, the mirror image of the crisis in confidence among elites over taking their chances with democracy. Clearly, a kind of constitutional democratic radicalism came into being. William Manning, the plebeian democrat who had opposed Shays’s Rebellion, would have members of his proposed national laboring society take an oath to support the government against insurrections. The aim of the society was to educate “the Many” to make use of their electoral power to oust “the Few.”

... [R]espectable mechanics and tradesmen fashioned new, affirmative, nonviolent rituals: they paraded in civic festivals, attended Fourth of July ceremonies, and celebrated the victories of the French Revolution at dinners. They also took part in politics, and those qualified to vote—a large proportion of the total—cast ballots in increasing numbers. The ballot box was not the coffin of a plebeian citizen consciousness. The assembly election of 1796 in New York City, Hamilton reported with anguish, “in the eyes of the common people was a question between the rich and the poor.”

If by the end of the eighteenth century, African-American slaves in the South had fewer legal paths to freedom, it might be argued they had enlarged their range of illegal options. The war and the rise of free black communities made flight more possible and more successful than ever before. But collective insurrection was now a possibility, inspired variously by the example of successful rebellions in St. Domingue, a new wave of evangelical religion, the emergence of artisan class among slaves, and the example of the first viable free black communities. There is a temptation to speak of a new cycle of insurrection after the turn of the century.

Gabriel Prosser’s failed conspiracy in Richmond, Virginia, in the summer of 1800, which to Gov. James Monroe was “unquestionably the most serious and formidable conspiracy we have ever known of that kind,” was led by urban artisans. St. George Tucker, an antislavery Virginian, measured how far black people had come in the quarter of a century since 1775. In response to Lord Dunmore’s plea, slaves had acted individually by running away; in 1800 they showed they were capable of “acting in concert”—to a degree Tucker found “astonishing.” In 1775 they “fought for freedom merely as a good; now they also claim it as a right.” At his trial one rebel said, “I have nothing more to offer than what George Washington would have had to offer, had he been taken by the British and put on trial by them. I have ventured my life in endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countryman, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause.”

Among advocates of women’s rights, by contrast, it is difficult to detect a split as to means. There clearly were differences among articulate women. However, that women aired their differences in newspapers, magazines, and novels or privately in correspondence, diaries, and conversations suggests the boundaries of women’s activities. ...[By 1800 it is not quite possible to speak of a women’s movement much less a women’s rights movement.

1776

Twenty-five Years Later

How successful were the multiple radicalisms that emerged in 1775–76 and flourished in the 1780s and 1790s? I have argued that over the long revolution era one of the best tests of the success of radical movements is their impact on the elites. In 1801 the Democratic Republicans, led by the more accommodating of the two national elites, won power. How far did they then carry the processes of accommodation in the different spheres of American life?

Some of the players are the same. Thomas Jefferson characterized his election over John Adams as “the revolution of 1800,” and “as real a revolution in the principles of our government as that of 1776 was in its form.”

In power the Jeffersonian elite would accommodate only some ... popular movements. Would-be yeoman farmers hungry for land could anticipate revisions in federal land laws making the public domain available in smaller parcels at lower prices. And when an expansionist president acquired the Louisiana Territory, he could claim to have fulfilled the expectation of his inaugural address of land “for the thousandth generation to come.” Mechanics could be optimistic when they submitted a petition to Congress in 1801 a petition for protection for American manufactures with the same wording they had submitted in 1789.

Others had less reason for optimism. The journeymen shoemakers of Philadelphia, a hundred of whom began a long strike in 1799, the first of a half a dozen such strikes that would take place in as many cities in the next decade or so, would be tried and convicted for conspiracy. They drew more opposition than support from local Democratic Republicans.

Nationally Jeffersonians wanted to contain, not accommodate, the radical thrusts for freedom from southern slaves. Jefferson had not published a word of public criticism of slavery since Notes on Virginia in the 1780s. His antislavery sentiment, already withering on the vine of his racism, froze with the news of rebellions in St. Domingue, even before Gabriel’s conspiracy at home. Confronted as president with the Napoleonic effort to overthrow the successful slave revolutionaries in their West Indies colony, Jefferson consistently “pressed for the devastation and destruction of the black Jacobins.”

Women could expect less support from Jefferson than Adams. “Our good ladies,” Jefferson rejoiced ... “have been too wise to wrinkle their foreheads with politics. They are contented to soothe and calm the minds of their husbands returning ruffled from political debate.” ... [O]nly here and there a few maverick Republicans—Benjamin Rush, James Sullivan, Charles Brocken Brown—took a public stand on women’s issues.

The limits of Jeffersonian accommodation were soon made clear to the American Indians. To a visiting delegation, the philosopher-scientist expressed the hope...
that "we shall see your people become disposed to cultivate the earth, to raise herds of the useful animals, and to spin and weave for their food and clothing." To the territorial governor of Ohio, Jefferson revealed his underlying rationale: "Our settlements will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians & they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the U.S. or remove beyond the Mississippi." Inside a velvet glove he kept a mailed fist. "We presume our strength and their weakness is now so visible," he remarked in 1803, "that they must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them." The "empire for liberty" Jefferson envisioned was for white male yeoman farmers and their families.

How radical was the American Revolution? Or, if you prefer, how much transformation was there as a result of the Revolution? The central concept I have advanced of a negotiation among contending groups, "classes," and individuals offers a number of advantages as an analytical tool or as a heuristic principle of investigation. It differs from the old progressive and conflict interpretations, which focused primarily on the political and saw outright victory for one side and defeat for the other. . . . It differs from the old consensus interpretation in analyzing results as the product of conflict. It avoids the weakness of intellectual or ideological interpretations that posit a single cluster of ideas from which all change emanates. It acknowledges the systems or structures that framed what people did, but assigns priority to the agency of people in effecting change and renewing their struggles even in the face of defeat.

It enables us to encompass more of the multiple dimensions of the Revolution: as a colonial struggle for liberation from imperial rule, in which there were coalitions of nascent "classes" in both cooperative and antagonistic relationships, and as a series of internal struggles in separate but often overlapping spheres. It allows us to measure the results of these struggles, not at one stopping point, but as an ongoing process, in which negotiations were often renewed and sometimes faded. It further permits us to measure results in many different spheres of life, private as well as public. And it enables us to recognize that while the Revolution was indeed radical, there is no single answer to the question, How radical was the American Revolution?