The Revolution in Context:
A review of Gordon S. Wood's
Radicalism of the American Revolution

By Christopher Bauermeister


Gordon S. Wood, in his introduction to The Radicalism of the American Revolution, asserts that "the Revolution was the most radical and far reaching event in American history" (8), and it is this assertion that he sets out to prove. Wood sees the Revolution as radical because it not only brought about the political change from British to American rule with which we are familiar, but it also brought about changes in the basic structure of American society. In order to appreciate the radical nature of the American Revolution it is necessary to consider this change within the socio-political context of the eighteenth century. In particular, it is essential to recognize that the political and social aspects of colonial society were inextricably intertwined. Thus, the revolutionary leaders were not merely rebelling against the British political system but the very social foundations of British colonial society in America (173).

In tracing this development Wood sees American society moving through three distinct phases: Monarchy, Republicanism and Democracy. His book is organized into three sections dealing with the changes which occur in each of these phases in fundamental social assumptions and institutions. He begins with an analysis of eighteenth century British and American society under the system of Monarchy. Like the home country, Colonial American society was originally based on a pervasive social hierarchy. From the king at its apex to the slaves at its bottom, this hierarchy bound all the members of monarchical society to one another in mutual relationships of inferiority or superiority. Each member of this hierarchy was dependent upon the person above him. This relationship of dependence to a superior was, as Wood sees it, the fundamental principal of the larger pre-revolutionary society, affecting, through the system of patronage, even those white males who seemed to be free of all dependencies.

Within this social hierarchy the aristocrats and the commoners were distinct, fundamentally separate, groups. The aristocrat was believed to be superior primarily by virtue of his birth into a higher station. But his superiority also rested upon his relative freedom from the system of dependencies. Within British and colonial monarchical society only the aristocrats had direct access to the descending line of patronage and authority, the "lifeblood" of Monarchy, which originated with the king. The lowest order of aristocrat was the common gentry who interacted directly with the commoners. Each member of this gentry, or "gentleman", patronized those commoners directly below him, and acted as the liaison between his dependents and the larger world. As Wood shows, the gentleman bought what the commoners produced, he lent them money, and he used his influence with his superiors to help promote the commoners' interests. In return, the commoners incurred obligations to him which they had to fulfill by various means such as filling the ranks of any regiment which he might be called upon to raise, displaying
deference in his presence, or supporting him in elections. Thus, each gentleman was his own little king, commanding the respect and allegiance of a large number of common dependents.

Government in this monarchical society was little more than the extension of this social hierarchy into the political realm. In fact, the differentiation between public and private barely existed. In the absence of modern bureaucratic systems, the monarchical government depended upon the mobilization of the power which was concentrated in these aristocrats to carry out state policies. Naturally, government positions thus went to those aristocratic individuals who already commanded respect because of the allegiances owed them. The government depended upon the respect for authority and local power which they commanded. Thus, all aspects of colonial society were controlled by a small number of men who derived their power from the extended line of royal patronage and their position within the social hierarchy. Monarchical authority, monarchical government, was merely the extension of the hierarchical relationships inherent in eighteenth century society. This, then, was the society which the revolutionaries were seeking to change. When they attacked the issue of patronage, they were not merely attacking the political system whereby office was granted, they were attacking the very foundation of monarchical society.

In the second section of his book Wood shows that the system with which the revolutionaries sought to replace this hierarchical government was one based on the enlightment ideal of republicanism. Republicanism, as Wood outlines it and as he shows the revolutionary leaders to have understood it, sought to replace the bonds of dependency and obligation in monarchical society with a system of civic virtue. As Wood says in defining the classical model of virtue upon which republicanism is based: "This virtue could be found only in a republic of equal, active, and independent citizens, . . . free from dependence and from the petty interests of the marketplace. Any loss of independence and virtue was corruption" (104). Republicans still held that the only person fit to govern was a gentleman, since only he was properly educated enough and possessed of the independent means to act without his own interests in mind while serving in government, thus displaying the quality of "disinterestedness" that was held to be the most important virtue (105). His gentility, though, was no longer to be measured purely by accident of birth but, rather, by the degree of enlightened education, ability and virtue he displayed. Thus, the gentleman would not command the respect of the people because of any obligations or dependence they owed him, but because of their recognition of his qualities.

Wood shows how the revolutionary leaders sought to eliminate the monarchical aristocracy of family and patronage and, in Thomas Jefferson's words, "make an opening for the aristocracy of virtue and talent"(182). Therefore, the Revolution can be seen as a conflict between what Wood calls "courtiers" and "patriots":

Courtiers were persons whose position or rank came artificially from above – from hereditary or personal connections that ultimately flowed from the crown or court... Patriots, on the other hand, were not only those who loved their country but were free of dependent connections and influence; their position or rank came naturally from their talent and from below, from recognition by the people (175-176).
In his chapter entitled "Enlightenment" (189-212), Wood shows how a great many of the revolutionary leaders, Jefferson among them, had risen from humbler origins to become just such "patriots," finding in republicanism "a vindication of frustrated talent at the expense of birth and blood" (180). These revolutionaries not only sought to eliminate their own dependence upon patronage, but to eliminate the system of dependency altogether.

The transformation of the colonies into a republican society, though, had already begun by the time of the Revolution. Wood covers familiar territory with his discussion of how the nature of life in America provided a fertile ground for republican ideals to take root, particularly the way in which the ready availability of land produced a society in which most Americans were independent freeholders and possessed of political rights. These factors, combined with a republican change in the conception of superior-subordinate relationships from an arbitrary rule to one based on respect and appeal to reason, began to alter the nature of political reality in America. No longer were these landowning commoners mere dependents to be arbitrarily ruled, but human beings who not only possessed the ability to discern just and virtuous rule, but who had a right to chose their rulers based upon these characteristics. The commoners choice of such leaders was the fulfillment of the republican ideal of an involved populace.

The American republican revolutionary gentry used this idea of popular leaders as a weapon against British monarchical rule, pitting their popular support against the "great men" and the patronage monopoly which made up the remnants of monarchical authority in America. This appeal, however, led to unforeseen results for the revolutionary leaders. As Wood notes, "...popular principals and popular participation in politics, once aroused, could not be easily put down" (173). Through their introduction of republican principles, the revolutionaries inadvertently let loose forces which would sweep away their concept of an enlightened gentry. What eventually emerged from the Revolution was not the elite republican society based on enlightened principals of civic virtue that the revolutionary leaders had sought to create, but an egalitarian democracy in which the concerns of the common man became the basis of government itself. It is the failure of the "republican experiment" and the emergence of this democracy that Wood looks at in his final section on Democracy.

The chief means by which the plans of the republicans were undermined was their use of the idea of equality itself. Wood argues that, while equality was considered essential for a republic, equality as the revolutionary leaders conceived of it was not an equality of condition but an "equality of opportunity" (233). Anyone, given the proper education and environment, could become a member of the enlightened gentry. Enlightened or not, this gentry still constituted an elite distinct from the general population. The right of this elite to rule, however, was almost immediately challenged by the burgeoning strength of democratic power that the revolutionaries themselves had called into being in support of their cause. If the distinctions that had separated the monarchical aristocracy from the rest of society were not valid, if the order of dependency itself was to be eliminated, why should any distinction be made between one man and another? Wood illustrates how the democratic argument was made that if a citizen could be trusted to judge virtue in his leaders, he must therefore have an innate sense of that virtue himself. Therefore, those leaders possessed no more virtue than him, and thus no innate right to rule (239-240). Ironically, the increased popular participation in government that the republican leaders had promoted led to an increased sense of popular
equality in which *all* men were equal, and any form of superiority was seen as a vestige of an aristocracy which was unnecessary. Wood shows that by the 1780's this assault on the idea of a gentry of merit, or of any distinct upper class, had redefined the conflict in America as one between "aristocrats" and "democrats" (241). While the democrats ultimately won – American society becoming an egalitarian democracy unlike anything which the world had known – it was the idealistic hopes of the republican revolutionary leaders themselves and their failed "republican experiment" that brought down the old monarchical system and thus allowed a democratic society to emerge. Thus, Wood reasserts the importance of the American Revolution, denied by several schools of historical thought, in creating our modern society.

The most important aspect of Wood's study, and the one that is the most convincing, is the issue of perspective brought up in his comparison of these societies. It is essential to recognize that it is modern society that is eventually created, and any attempts to use modern standards to analyze those societies which preceded it must inevitably fail. This seems to be the shortcoming which Wood frequently cites to show how his thesis differs from previous historical interpretations of the American Revolution. It is this question of Wood's thesis in the context of and in response to these modern interpretations which I now wish to focus on.

Wood argues in his introduction that just because historians fail to see the causes which are normally associated with revolution – because "there was little evidence of those social conditions we often associate with revolution...: no mass poverty, no seething social discontent, no grinding oppression" (169) – this does not mean that the revolution was, as some such as the New Left would have it, merely a conservative and purely political event (4-5). The eighteenth century society was, as he has shown, so different from the present, and the eighteenth century impulses for revolution were so different from those we assumed must be present, that many fail to see the social aspect of the struggle, the way in which the very nature of American society was changed.

The first mistake previous interpretations made was the assumption of a differentiation between the political and social realms such as exists in the present society. By overlooking the integration of these two as it occurred in monarchical society these previous interpretations cannot help but see the Revolution as having, as Wood says, "no social character, as having virtually nothing to do with society, as having no social causes and no social consequences" (4). This idea of the separation of government from private interests only emerged, as Wood has showed, from the republican idea of civic virtue and disinterestedness, and was only finally instituted through the Revolution. Any search for this separation in the causes of that Revolution, therefore, will inevitably fail. Furthermore, exercises, such as Robert Gross' attempt in *The Minutemen*, to explain the revolution in terms of a system of demographics far beyond the capability of the eighteenth century are also destined to fail since they cannot explain colonial society in its own terms. As Wood illustrates by demonstrating the immediate and personal experience of monarchical government as the will of powerful individuals,

No one as yet could conceive of the massive and impersonal social processes - industrialization, urbanization, modernization - that we invoke so blithely to describe large-scale social developments. Such complicated processes were simply not part of people's consciousness (60).
Here there is an implicit criticism of the use of the use of modern concept to explain historical realities, evidenced in Wood's use of the word "blithely."

These first mistakes are compounded by the never ending modern attempt to explain everything in terms of class, and it is Wood's refutation of this class argument that is the most compelling aspect of his thesis, since it appears completely ridiculous to me to try to find Marxist class struggle in a pre-industrial, let alone a pre-Marxist, society. The first instance in which this analysis by class fails is in its inability to properly explain the structure of monarchical society. As Wood notes,

"In the mid-eighteenth century most Americans still conceived of their society in a traditional manner, composed not of broad and politically hostile layers or classes but of "various individuals connected together and related and subservient to each other" (23)."

Since colonial society did not even conceive of such a thing as class in the modern sense of the word, there would of course be none of the social upheavals that we have come to be expected from modern revolutions. While the revolutionaries wanted to change their society, class struggle as a means to this end had not yet even entered human consciousness. In fact, as Wood demonstrates, "many of the revolutionaries wanted nothing more than a reconstruction of American society. But they had no desire to overturn one class and replace it with another. They could scarcely conceive of society in these modern terms" (213). Even within the "democrat versus aristocrat" struggle of the early republic the idea of class divisions fails to fully explain the divisions which occurred. There was not a separation between rich and poor, based solely upon economic standing, but between gentry and commoner:

"Gentlemen traditionally tended to lump together as commoners all those who worked for a living...despite all apparent differences between wealthy mule merchants, small shoemakers, and big manufacturers, socially and psychologically they were still the same - which has caused no end of trouble for those modern historians looking to celebrate a heroic working class but despising businessmen (280)."

The conflicts which arose in the revolution and in the constitutional period fail to display those attributes of social and class difference which historians seek because these conflicts were caused by reasons specific to their time and were products of worries and concerns which are not our own. The very nature of humanity seems to have been, as Wood shows, in some ways different. When an attempt to apply universal theories of human behavior to past events is made, it becomes difficult to see the true nature of those events. While this may not be as true for events occurring closer to our own time, it seems particularly true of the pre-revolutionary society Wood has shown.

To its leaders the Revolution was radical, as is evidenced in their writings and actions. Wood is trying to understand revolutionary society from its own viewpoint and seeking the true nature of its causes and results; not in terms of our present assumptions, but in terms of the assumptions and reasons of the people who were directly involved. He is not looking to find some hidden motivation behind the use of such words as "liberty" and "equality," whose meaning has become faded, but he is taking the revolutionaries at
their word and trying understand what they meant. With Wood's interpretation, it is possible to see what David Ramsey meant when, in a fourth of July speech he made in 1778, he said that Americans were "no more to look up for the blessings of government to hungry courtiers, or the needy dependents of British nobility" (180). When it is clear, as Wood has shown, the degree to which monarchical aristocracy dominated colonial society, it is possible to understand the revolutionaries vehement reaction against it:

Because the revolutionaries were so different from us, so seemingly aristocratic themselves, it is hard for us today to appreciate the anger and resentment they felt toward hereditary aristocracy. We tend to ignore or forget the degree to which family and monarchical values dominated colonial America... Real emotion lay behind their constitutional statements (181).

It is this "real emotion" which Wood is searching for in the actions and motivations of the revolutionary leaders, and most important element in understanding these actions is the sincerity with which those leaders believed in the virtue of their cause and the ideals of enlightened republicanism:

We will never understand the unique character of the revolutionary leaders until we appreciate the seriousness with which they took these new republican ideals of what it was to be a gentleman. No generation in American history has ever been so self-conscious about the moral and social values necessary for public leadership (197).

Those leaders' adherence to the republican ideal of a disinterested ruler is brilliantly displayed by Wood in his portrayal of how their actions can only be explained through its application (197-212), particularly his detailed analysis of George Washington.

What Wood seems to be trying to do is to understand why the revolutionaries were willing to have a revolution to change what students of the American Revolution today would consider a mere change of administration. And he shows that fault lies not with the revolutionaries motives but with previous interpretations of those motives. Ultimately, Wood demonstrates that these men were no less great because they were not trying to create a truly equal society, and their revolution was no less dramatic for not having resulted in massive death and destruction. The revolutionaries created the environment in which the structure of society could, in fact, be questioned because it was revealed to be nothing more than a human construct. And they made a great leap of faith in attempting to create a society based on a true belief in enlightenment principals. In the end, they succeeded in making real what remained purely abstract in the rest of the world for years to come.

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