Shifting Dynamite: An Anarchistoriography from Haymarket to Sacco and Vanzetti

Max Speare

Max Speare will graduate Fall 2014 from San Francisco State University with an MA in American History. His primary research concerns gender, race, class, troublemakers, and ne'er-do-wells.

"The springs of popular government in revolution are at once virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless."¹ It is ironic that this quote could have been uttered just as easily by the anarchist Johann Most as it was declared by the authoritarian architect of the Reign of Terror, Maximillian Robespierre. The historiography of twentieth-century anarcho-terrorism is just as oppositional as these two men's ideologies were to one another. Scholars have generally book-ended two watershed moments in the history of anarchism to denote the movement's golden age. It began when an unknown saboteur hurled a bundle of dynamite at police during a peaceful protest in Haymarket Square, and it ended when the state of Massachusetts electrocuted those two “anarchist bastards,” Sacco and Vanzetti, making fireworks both literally and figuratively.² As such, a series of important debates have arisen within the academic community regarding the scope of the anarchist movement, its commitment to the propaganda of the deed, the role that anarchism has played in the larger story of America, and its relevance to shaping the age of Progressivism.

Since the beginning of this historiography, scholars have asserted that four developments in the history of anarchism shaped American popular opinion of radicals. Broadly understood, these four events are the Industrial Revolution, the surge of unionization across the country, the prominent role that unions played in working-class family life at the turn of the century, and the substantial influx of European immigrants into urban centers and rural mining towns. However, scholars have disagreed on a number of issues including whether anarchism was destroyed by the massive migration of European peoples with radical ideas, or whether the masses were unfairly targeted by the national government; whether telling the history of anarchism stylistically should be told from the single vantage point of a famed radical, or from the perspective of a thousand voices that claimed anarchy; and whether anarchism was in fact a

threat to the national status quo, or if the demise of anarchism should be attributed to hysteric jingoistic fear.

Louis Adamic attempted to write the first episodic tale of anarchism. He argued that labor between 1870 and 1930 was characterized by class war. Immigrants, unionists, and anarchists formed the vanguard opposition against the capitalist elites. Historians writing immediately after Adamic's publication wrote to show that American anarchists were exceptional when compared to European radicals. Chester Destler made the claim that anarchism was part of a pacifist tradition of informal associations that was ripped apart by the violent aliens arriving on America's shores at the turn of the century. The era of McCarthyism turned the study of anarcho-terrorism into an exercise at looking at why and when anarchism was made illegal. Robert Murray showed that radicalism was criminalized after a general strike in the Pacific Northwest, but overlooked the numerous other red scares that gripped the nation before the 1919 strike: the Haymarket bombing, McKinley's assassination, and the bombings of the Los Angeles Times building and the Preparedness Day Parade to name just a few. Murray's research was sparked by the hysteria of his contemporary America, which was embroiled in the second wave of the Red Scare.

Phillip Taft showed that anarchism, though it had an insulated culture, never influenced the unions it sought to galvanize into revolution. New Left historians, most notably Melvin Dubofsky, challenged this point. Paul Avrich added to this scholarship by trying to legitimize the field of anarchist studies, showing that anarchism has not been studied closely enough and that its rich culture is in dire need of more thorough study. After Avrich came several arguments that, though they are not presented in chronological order, demonstrate the ways scholars since have sought to take up Avrich's challenge.

I have organized this latter section thematically based upon the political, gender, and overall cultural importance of anarchism to Gilded Age and Progressive Era struggles for labor and social justice. Eric Rauchway's monograph portrays anarchism as an agent for political change, which was used to legitimate non-anarchist political icons like Teddy Roosevelt. The murder of McKinley reinvigorated the stale politicking that had characterized Gilded-Age politics. Candace Falk devoted research to understanding the dichotomy between anarchism, eroticism, and the politics of gender. Her biography of Emma Goldman, possibly the most famous immigrant anarchist, illuminates the ways in which anarcho-terrorism related to gender. Finally, Beverly Gage concludes this section because she exemplifies the culmination of the previous studies that Avrich helped pioneer. Anarchism has a culture, and it was an important force for not just individual, political, or cultural transformation, but it also contributed to social change across the nation.

Louis Adamic's *Dynamite!* was the first historical narrative of the first half-century to tackle the significance of anarchist violence. In 1931, the world in which the Slovenian émigré wrote and researched *Dynamite!* was, in a sense, ready for this work. The national panic over a subversive anarchist menace was at its crescendo. Anarchists, especially those who were foreigners, had spent the

**EX POST FACTO**
better part of fifty years being ostracized by the American legal system, and a spirit of nativism was still on the rise. The First Red Scare and Attorney General Palmer’s purges were still fresh in the American memory. International attention scorned the unjust execution of the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, while the domestic consensus characterized the anarchists as Bolshevik subversive sociopaths. The stock market took a turn for the worse two years later, and by the time Adamic’s book was published, the darkest years of the Depression were yet to come. He must have sensed that the worst years of the purges were behind him and that the public was receptive now to the anarchist cause; why else risk publishing such a sympathetic and controversial work?

*Dynamite!* is an episodic primer that details the instances when anarchist and union men opposed the enemies of the working class: their industrialist bosses. The number of women and causes associated with women mentioned in Adamic’s narrative could be counted on a thumb and forefinger alone. The author’s story was concerned with narrating a classic Marxist interpretation of the workingman’s relationship to capital and the financial terror of wage slavery. He portrayed the period between 1870 and 1930 as an ongoing class war between “the have-nots against the haves in the United States.”

Adamic’s narrative sought to show that the nature of work in a capitalist society was the real crime, and, moreover, that the exercise of terrorism was a legitimate retaliation by the disenfranchised voiceless against the overlords of business. Adamic levied his “most severe” criticisms at America’s wealthiest elites. They were the sole guilty parties that began the bloody class war.

Terrorism aided and in many instances was an important factor in supporting weak unions against powerful bosses. Blowing up ore and iron mines to disrupt the daily violence of commerce, lobbing bombs into crowds, and carrying out assassinations against the figureheads of the capitalist class all functioned as a kind of marketing campaign for the radical Left. Adamic argued that because the anarchists remained mostly small and unorganized, only reportage through the mass media had the capacity to get the message of revolutionary change and transformation to the uninitiated and uneducated working class.

*Dynamite!* was also the first scholarly work to connect the anarchist movement to the origins of class violence and to the revolutionary traditions of European immigrants, a theme that is constantly explored in the later scholarship. Foreign laborers were “imported” by “American industrialists,” paid meager wages in industrial cities, “and then treated inhumanely.” Adamic contended that as more immigrants occupied the worst jobs available, violent labor conflict became commonplace at the end of the nineteenth century. He attributed the large influx of extremist European anarchists into America to the

---

4 Ibid., 1.
5 Ibid., 8.
6 Ibid., 10.
untapped revolutionary potential of the labor force at that time. America became a testing ground for their theory of the "propaganda of the deed."7

When Dynamite! was published, an explosion of scholarship blasted down the halls of academia. Over the next ten years, academics set about reinterpreting anarchism as an exceptional facet of the American character.8 Chester Destler argued that anarchists were at one time pure, untouched, and virginal. In this telling passage, antebellum communitarians such as Josiah Warren established "indigenous" utopian schools to "peacefully [insist]" upon a return to agrarian society. He blamed the corruption of this lamb of the Left on the hordes of European "aliens" that invaded the shores of America, bringing with them the foreign-born gnat known as anarcho-terrorism, which disrupted the pacifist tradition.9 Destler portrayed Johann Most as a German-born wolf disrupting the national harmony of the radical Left. Communist-anarchists like Most saw themselves as distinctively different from the anarcho-individualists of the utopian schools in the Mid-West. Most preached a "semi-mystical doctrine of violence," and was the progenitor of the ideological underpinnings for the propaganda of the deed.10 Destler scrutinized the works of Most for what he believed was part of a larger European infestation that arrived on the shores of America. Thus, when assailants among the German-American community possibly perpetrated the Haymarket bombing, it was understood to be an unnatural occurrence, completely outside the realm of possibilities for nativist America. Destler's work is important, on the other hand, because it shows that the acceptance of individualist pacifism was a valid ideology for political organization. Surely by the time that his Shall Red and Black Unite? was published, anarchism as a product of the American identity was no longer foreign. Rather, its terrorist component, which was perpetrated by European communist-anarchists, was considered barbaric.

Over the next fifteen years, the second-wave of communist witch-hunts shaped the ways that scholars studied the radical Left. Academics became agents of another dramatic shift in the research. They shifted their research from the ideological roots of revolutionary terrorism to understanding anarchism within the context of the First Red Scare. Robert Murray's Red Scare: A Study of National Hysteria, 1919–1920 was part of this vanguard of contemporary work. He argued that the criminalization of anarchy, even against theoretical practitioners, did not become widespread until 1919, though Murray conceded that a few states passed anti-anarchist legislation in the wake of the McKinley

---

7 They advocated that aggressive action is the only means for bringing about a true revolution of the proletariat and the precariat, and that a violent act could become a signal to commence the revolutionary upheaval of American society.
10 Ibid.

EX POST FACTO
assassination. He wrote, "America was an extremely infertile place in which to sow the seeds of...violent revolution" before the First World War. After U.S. boots stormed across European soil, American jingoism reached a fever pitch.

Murray asserted that before the war, the rhetoric of bomb-throwing insurgents was "tolerated" by the middle-class public, but one has to forget the public outcry after Haymarket to believe such a claim. Then, Tsarist Russia fell to the Bolsheviks, and this is the reason that the "fear complex" gripped the country and the largely sane "public mind" descended into hysteria. Newspaper editors expressed fear that the Reds' clarion calls for armed insurrection was basically "inviting" Lenin and Trotsky to "set up business" in the United States. Murray's writing exemplified his fellow scholars' angst over the nation's second major Red Scare. Their hysteria would be novel had similar red scares not happened consistently since the 1870s, when Paris was briefly under communist and anarchist control.

Murray contended with Adamic's and Destler's depiction of a terrorist tradition passed down from immigrant groups. While he did not deny immigrant influence, for Murray the homegrown Seattle Strike of 1919 marked the moment when the entire labor movement was radicalized to a new level of violence and subsequently blacklisted by American policymakers. When approximately seventy thousand workers struck out for higher wages in 1919, the mayor declared martial law and called in three thousand army and security forces to quell a larger general uprising. "Then the bombs came."

Hysteria became the order of the day because bomb throwers represented a much larger menace in the public consciousness. Murray portrayed the public as emotionally unreasonable because the anarchists' ranks were always so "few" in number. Yet just the presence of anarchist posters and leaflets captured the attention of the entire nation and galvanized the public to believe that everywhere they looked, they saw "red." Murray's fear of McCarthyism drips from the pages of his narrative. The Left was targeted indiscriminately once again, and pacifists were lumped into the lot with those who sent bombs through the mail between April and June of 1919. Murray argued that only foolish people perpetrated these singular events, and law enforcement turned them into "martyrs" for radicals to emulate. Newspapers facilitated the creation of this mythos by reporting on the bombings and spreading the insurgents' message. Those of the citizenry who counted themselves the most patriotic "were prepared to believe almost anything" the

---

12 Ibid., 31.
13 Ibid., 32.
14 Ibid., 72.
15 Ibid., 58.
16 Ibid., 63–64.
17 Ibid., 68.
18 Ibid., 69.
authorities told them. 19 Powerful people like A. Mitchell Palmer (read: Joseph McCarthy) used the public hysteria to jockey for political office and personal gain. 20 Over time, however, the anti-red propaganda “elicited less and less response” from the general population, as anarchists were shown to pose less and less of a threat to national stability. Murray articulated that the trajectory of Palmer’s political career was a foreshadowing for the downfall of the redbaiter Joseph McCarthy. 21

During the 1960s, significant labor historians sought to reclaim the anarchist bomber as an American icon and looked to anarchism as a cultural narrative and a social history. Ironically, the emergence of social history into the narrative of anarchist-terrorism was the result of one historian, Phillip Taft, claiming that the radical Left was ineffectual and unimpressive to the larger working class. In effect, this brazen analysis acted as a challenge to future scholars. He wrote, “It may appear anomalous that the United States, a country in which class feeling and class ideology are almost entirely absent, has experienced a considerable amount of labor disputes.” 22 In many ways, it was the inverse of the argument Destler had made twenty years prior. Taft agreed that anarchism was an American-born-and-bred phenomenon. He argued accordingly that labor disputes were the result of the interpersonal interactions between the employer and the employed, but not the triangulation of bosses, workers, and immigrant radicals. 23 By using dynamite against the factory system, the proletariat attempted to alter this simplified relationship for more humane—albeit capitalist—means. This effort was not meant to fundamentally transform the United States into a classless society. Violence, as a result, came from the structural issues presented under capitalism, but it was not a clear expression of the Left’s ideology. 24

Taft effectively kept his head up, refusing to look down as he took a large leap across a gorge filled with logic. His article is problematic of course because the history of labor was rife with leftist ideology. This is the same group that Taft said did not bring its ideology “into these early labor disturbances.” Yet Adamic found evidence to the contrary on a national scale after researching the Socialist Party’s “first success at the polls” during the 1910 and 1911 nationwide elections. 25 Taft’s article was thus disconnected from the lived reality of working-class people. Working class people incorporated the ideologies of the left into their day-to-day disputes with their bosses, and also rationalized the use of violent tactics to achieve the ends that they desired.

19 Ibid., 83.
20 Ibid., 192.
21 Ibid., 251.
23 Ibid.
24 Gage, 99.
25 Taft, 130; Adamic, 133.

EX POST FACTO
Taft forced historians after him to contest this new idea that the anarchists of the Progressive Age had an ideology, but that this ideology did not trickle downward (or upward depending on your point of view) to the rest of the working class. Melvin Dubofsky was among the first scholars of the New Left to dispute Taft’s claims in We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World. He showed that the I.W.W. developed its own distinct anarchist culture. Individual acts of left-wing terrorism, nevertheless, remained a marginalized contingency within the union. The Wobblies in Dubofsky’s stellar work had no more radical demands than other working-class Americans who desired access to the middle-class dream. However, because of their associations with and acceptance of the more radical elements within the Left, bourgeois newspaper editors characterized them as the prototypical “bogeymen”: immigrants with wild-eyes and crazy dispositions. Dubofsky wrote that “[They] did not carry bombs, nor burn harvest fields, nor destroy timber”—in other words they were not crazed madmen. Insurrection for them was only a means of establishing a more egalitarian American wage system, but it was not the means by which they existed. Their visions of utopia were far more diverse.

Dubofsky’s focus on mass violence as a trait of the larger union movement helped transform the way academia associated the Left with revolutionary violence. He destroyed the individualistic tradition of the bomb thrower by stating that the Wobblies engaged in a form of retaliatory violence, much in the same way that Adamic regarded the working class defense against the capitalist onslaught. Wobblies sabotaged factories, but never threw bombs into innocent crowds. The Wobblies maintained a strict code of peaceful direct action and civil disobedience. They combined the “radical tradition” of overthrowing the capitalist structure with a desire for a working-class consumer culture. They wanted the bread and roses of life.

Dubofsky’s assertion that the Wobblies desired, above all else, access to mass culture nevertheless gives his study a sharp and definite teleological bent. He wrote that the I.W.W. was “doomed to failure” because of the “internal deficiencies” present in the union’s vanguard. The I.W.W. faced an insurmountable obstacle that cannot be substantiated as the signifier of the group’s death sentence. It was only in the face of extreme repression from private corporations and their supportive government that the union was crushed. We Shall Be All was part of a larger movement to marginalize the individualism of left-wing terrorism. Instead, scholars of this time used massive protests and coordinated insurgency as the vehicle for discussing radical action.

---

26 Gage, 103.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 90.
30 Ibid., 271.
31 Ibid., 269.
in hopes of regenerating sympathy for Wobblies and the noble, passive anarchists—and by doing so the civil rights movements of the sixties.\(^\text{32}\) In many ways this scholarship detached anarchism from individual acts of terror in order to legitimize the change that the radicals sought in the present.

The next twenty years witnessed a rebirth of “event histories” as historians rediscovered the ideological foundations of radicalism and reinserted the radical back into the center of labor disputes.\(^\text{33}\) Single moments of catastrophic upheaval were shown to have had a greater impact on the nation’s story than previous scholars had portrayed. As such, Dubofsky’s ilk were criticized for ignoring the importance of anarchist terrorism in the larger picture of labor violence. Paul Avrich, possibly the most recognizable and in many ways the most important scholar of anarchism, was among the first historians to lob criticism at this facet of New Left scholarship. Looking at two of his secondary works—*The Haymarket Tragedy* and *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background*—we can see that Avrich took a dramatic left turn with a far more sympathetic and reverent look at these anarchists than we have seen before.

Both of these monographs take two important features of academic scholarship to task. The first was the use of English-only sources, especially when dealing with a predominantly immigrant population. Referring to the controversy surrounding Sacco and Vanzetti, he wrote, “The authors have not availed themselves of materials in the Italian language which shed light on virtually every aspect of the case.”\(^\text{34}\) His second point of contention was that previous scholarship failed to “[consult] the anarchist sources” that served to contextualize the world anarchists inhabited.\(^\text{35}\) This is particularly true when trying to comprehend the hostility that anarchists have toward unjustified abuses of authority. Sacco and Vanzetti’s coy behavior during the night they were first apprehended and interrogated appears more crystalized from this angle. Avrich challenged Dubofsky’s assertion that only the Wobblies “retaliated” against capitalist exploiters. He wrote, “on the contrary,” anarchist terrorists who carried out bombings believed that “their tactics, their organization, their very mental attitude had been shaped for the purpose of retaliation.”\(^\text{36}\) The propaganda of the deed, in other words, was all part of a “code of honor” that maintained strong retribution against the state lest the revolutionary appear “cowardly and unworthy of a true anarchist.”\(^\text{37}\)

The second assumption that Avrich called into question was the central thesis that Murray articulated: that anarchists were “a small group of radicals” that had no tradition of ideological warfare in this country prior to the Red

---

32 Ibid., 90.
33 Gage, 104.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 103.
37 Ibid., 97.

EX POST FACTO
Avrich counter-argued that they only became fragmented after the Red Scare. He showed that in Chicago, the central hub for industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century, anarchists were "a distinct power within American labor, particularly within its German-speaking segment." Prior to the Palmer raids, Italian anarchists fluidly moved through a number of radical circles and established their own culture defined by one of four visions of a post-capitalist society that regularly "overlapped" one another. These were the anarcho-syndicalists, the individualists, the anarchist-communists, and the unhyphenated anarchists. "All four groups," Avrich explained, "shared the fundamental beliefs of all anarchists, above all the total rejection of authority and the need to 'make propaganda'."

The third argument that Avrich asserted was against the idea that anarchists were the product of the massive influx of European immigrants. He wrote, "Anarchism in the United States has often been dismissed as an alien phenomenon...with few native roots or adherents." The Haymarket Tragedy set out to prove that anarchism was "far from being an alien doctrine, it was deeply anchored in American soil." Avrich's biography of Tragedy's protagonist Albert Parsons made a point to show that the poster-child for subversive activity was a native-born citizen with ancestry in America dating back to the Puritans. Avrich’s influence on the scholarship of American anarchism looms large, and if he made one important contribution to this canon, it is that he humanized the anarchist community. After his masterpiece was published in 1984, Avrich reinvigorated a new interest in understanding the individual decisions that lead to carrying out apparently irrational violence.

Thus the old and stale anarchist archetype as an arch-villain became irrelevant. Historians redefined the immorality of murder by moralizing the anarchists' philosophies in an effort to investigate and rationalize the phenomenon of terrorism. Eric Rauchway sought to make this assertion by investigating the ways that the assassination of President McKinley catalyzed

---

38 Murray, 16.
40 Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 52.
41 A brief dissection of the four anarchist groups is as follows: The anarcho-syndicalists believed that the union in the industrial society was the best vehicle for reorganizing the capitalist society. The anarchist communists believed fervently that all forms of society needed to be reshaped not just the shop floor, so that the working class held the reigns of all means of production. Within this strain of anarchism were the bomb throwers, and many of the insurrectionists. The anarchist individualists were mostly pacifists, and in many ways the most 'American' of the anarchist groups. They maintained ties with the utopian ideas of Josiah Warren and Benjamin Tucker. Basically they argued that only the individual had the right to govern him or herself. The anarchist-without-adjecitives branch tolerated all schools of anarchist thought until at the very least the anarchist revolution was actually underway.
42 Ibid., 53.
43 Ibid., 105.
44 Ibid., 3.
the revamping of the entire American political process during the Progressive Era.\textsuperscript{45} He asserted that Leon Czolgosz instigated something irrational within the American consciousness, which revamped the entire political process. McKinley’s dull presidency was all but forgotten after the robust presidency of Theodore Roosevelt overshadowed his administration. Rauchway stated that McKinley’s murder served as a refreshing moment for the American people to “[clear] the decks.”\textsuperscript{46} Roosevelt capitalized on America’s revaluation of the Executive Branch and became the symbolic representation of the state. His anti-anarchist rhetoric enhanced his ability to hinge the stability of the nation on the survival of the president. “Roosevelt acutely understood that stories were a means to political ends.”\textsuperscript{47} Like the blowback that anarchists experienced after the Haymarket conspiracy, the assassination represented a “fearful wound” that opened up across the country and served to demonize the entire Left.\textsuperscript{48}

With this in mind, Rauchway asserted that McKinley was murdered twice. The first was his obvious physical death at the hands of a twenty-eight year old assassin. But the second execution was the more important one. The elimination of McKinley’s memory from the American mind became a reality when the far-reaching reformist policies of the Roosevelt administration took shape. The vice president became more relevant than the president. Pairing his findings with the alienist and Czolgosz’s case-reviewer Lloyd Vernon Briggs, Rauchway agreed that an analysis of the murderer’s motivations laid the “foundation [for discovering] Czolgosz’s ordinariness” within local Chicago anarchist circles.\textsuperscript{49} He had tried to reach out to fixtures of the community, yet only Emma Goldman responded to Czolgosz’s attempts to get in contact with her once McKinley was shot.

Anarchy has had a gendered component that has been manipulated and exploited. Czolgosz was smitten with Goldman. It was her fiery oration that stirred him. The prosecution argued that the “lure of anarchism” seduced the young murderer. Rauchway saw this as a neat fit to pin the male anarchist as naturally weak to the cunning temptress, but Candace Falk thought there was something to this argument.\textsuperscript{50} Falk devoted research to understanding the dichotomy between anarchism, eroticism, and the politics of gender. She unearthed writings of Goldman that were integral to showing the complexity of the famed revolutionist. In \textit{Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman}, Falk narrated Goldman’s longstanding affair with Ben Reitman, “her lover and manager,” in order to expunge the revolutionist’s internal duality, which sought for personal


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., xi.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., xiii.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 99.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 116.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 99; Rauchway argues that Czolgosz was diagnosed with terminal syphilis that doomed him for an early grave anyway. Therefore he was “not only homicidal, but suicidal.” Killing the president served to fulfill his philosophical convictions, but also sped up what his doctors considered the inevitable. Czolgosz would have died either way.
stability, but also for the creation of an external authority-less society.\textsuperscript{51} Goldman was “caught between her anarchist feminist demands for freedom in personal relations and her longing for a stable and fulfilling relationship with a man.”\textsuperscript{52}

Falk’s biography was one of the first histories to find the significant role of gender within Goldman’s ideology. Goldman was forced to come to terms with her calls for a free and borderless utopia. Her control issues flew in the face of her philosophical desire to love anyone she pleased. Falk argued that Reitman’s infidelity was “[acknowledged only] as a political conflict over their visions of the meaning of free love.”\textsuperscript{53} Goldman reacted to the gender constraints of the cult of domesticity by advocating free love and promiscuity. Yet at the same time, she desired a monogamy which was only realized during a “brief period” of relationship stability.\textsuperscript{54} This illustrates the inconsistencies of anarchism as it relates to the theory of female emancipation as Goldman saw it.

Falk’s sources are important to anarchist scholarship because they rely on her discovery of a trove of correspondences between Goldman and Reitman. Goldman’s love life takes center stage, but word of the anarchist’s early life as a disciple of Most and the propaganda by the deed remains minute.\textsuperscript{55} Falk uses Goldman’s violent rhetoric to explain the discontinuity between her subject’s personal beliefs and public personae. Falk’s discussion of anarcho-terrorism, however, is not barren. In fact, she reveals another inconsistency within “Red Emma’s” philosophy. Falk points out the “irony” that at the time of the McKinley assassination, Goldman “no longer believed in the efficacy of such individual acts of violence.” However, Goldman was more ardent in her defense of Czolgosz “than anyone else.”\textsuperscript{56} Falk came to terms with Goldman’s vagary by explaining that it was not her belief that anarchism leads to murder, but “the tremendous pressure of conditions that made their lives unbearable.”\textsuperscript{57}

Anarchism, in Falk’s narrative, does not represent the orchestration of an anarchist-led movement to overthrow the state, but rather the physical articulation of the grievances of the working class.

Thus, the historiography of anarchism post-Avrich should be seen as the beginning of a new cultural shift within the publications. Historians during and after the 1980s sought to disrupt earlier narratives of the anarchist as an

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., xiv; don’t you think it is ironic that an anarcho-individualist such as Goldman would have a manager?
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Falk, 98.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{55} 
\textsuperscript{56} Falk, 44–45.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 45.
irrational actor. Therefore, this period should be categorized as the reinvigoration of the philosophical viability of anarchism within historical scholarship. Gender, for instance, had always been an important component of anarchism. Goldman described herself as a feminist, but these ideas appeared merely complementary and only significant to those who inhabited both identities. However, anarchism at this juncture became a new category for historical analysis that influenced parts of Rauchway's narrative, and, most strikingly, the scholarship of Beverly Gage.

Beverly Gage saw the political power of terrorism similar to Rauchway's depiction, and made the bomb thrower a social theorist in *The Day Wall Street Exploded: The Story of America in Its First Age of Terror*. She argued that the age of Progressivism experienced the violence of class struggle as it "ran in at least two directions." Similar to the works during the cultural turn, Gage defined American-born terrorism as random acts of seemingly irrational violence that were brought into the world of regular Americans. Gage showed that terrorism in fact belongs to an episteme that began in 1866, when dynamite "transformed an individual's ability to create mass destruction and wreak havoc from afar." It ended on September 16, 1920, with the Wall Street bombing. She saw the explosion in New York's financial district as a ripple of a memory that was informed by a revolutionary ideology that sought the overthrow of self-interested banking institutions and political power centers.

Then, Gage wrote, "This form of violence disappeared" because of the supremacy of the Soviet-led communist movement throughout the country, which "explicitly rejected" the propaganda by the deed. At the same time, the Red Scare hastened the effort of the Justice Department to disintegrate the anarchists and the Wobblies, while immigration quotas capped radicals from entering U.S. borders. Thus, it was no wonder that the worst terrorist bombing to follow the Wall Street explosion would not occur until nearly eighty years later in Oklahoma City, orchestrated by a member of the extreme Right. The federal government did not monitor the extreme Right's behavior with the same restrictions and pressure the extreme Left faced. Gage's narrative fittingly concludes the historiography of anarchic-terrorism because it represents the end of the zeitgeist's fear of rabid anarchists.

Only after anarchism disintegrated as a national threat could Adamic's scholarship generate this explosive debate. Gage's work was the culmination of not just the event history that Adamic pioneered: it did not just trace the trajectory of anarchist violence during the Progressive Era and it did not just reintroduce forgotten victims of the Red Scare. It looked at the individual as the vehicle of change. In the case of Wall Street bombing, the perpetrator's identity remains unknown, but in that spectacular manifestation of radical violence anarchism was forced underground. Terrorism in all its barbarity forced the Left

59 Gage, 312, 325.
60 Ibid., 310.
to redirect itself, and, in this way, it was individuals who became the arbiters of social and cultural transformation.

Bibliography


The Reform of Control and the Folsom Prison Riot of 1927

Brendan Byron

Brendan Byron hopes to complete his MA in U.S. History at San Francisco State University by the end of the Spring 2015 Semester. He holds a BA from Dominican College of San Rafael in International Studies and is currently attending SFSU under the GI Bill.

On November 25, 1927, the day after the riot began, The San Francisco Examiner provided its readers with this diagram of the action.
On Thanksgiving Day, 1927, California Governor C.C. Young mobilized over 500 National Guard soldiers in order to suppress a riot at Folsom State Prison. He issued his instructions by telephone, immediately after receiving a phone call from the prison warden. That day saw two institutions brought together by the governor’s prompt order—the California prison system and the National Guard. Progressive-era reformers had affected changes in both organizations in the years before Young assumed office with the opposite effect of their stated or desired intentions. Folsom Prison was in crisis despite the implementation of these well-intentioned reforms. The crisis was created after reformers failed to create a viable parole system in California. Prisons like Folsom had become places of exile, where convicted and unredeemable criminals were warehoused indefinitely. As a result, escape attempts by desperate convicts increased in number and level of violence. One botched attempt on Thanksgiving Day, 1927, induced a panic among the prison guards and state officials. The Governor called up the National Guard, which was about to achieve great success following its own twenty-five year period of modernization. It looks as if reformers sent the two organizations down separate roads, one that led the Guard toward public esteem and another that led the prison system to a remote and neglected warehouse.

At once, the Folsom riot and its aftermath revealed widespread discouragement with penal reform and a growing enthusiasm for the use of a modernized militia. Thus, as this incident demonstrates, regardless of how they labeled themselves, the governor, state officials, and progressive newspapers of the day, in both attitude and action, transformed themselves from active reformers into prototypes of modern conservatives. The Folsom riot signals, in other words, was the transformation of progressives from liberal social reformers to conservative social controllers. Political scientist Corey Robin argues that the “subordinates of this world,” those who “live and labor in conditions of unequal power,” will “contest their fates” and provoke conservatives (i.e. those with more power) into a reactionary suppression. This reaction defends conservatives, also referred to as “elites,” from a perceived threat of self-government and empowerment among their subordinates. From the point of view of the powerful, the subordinate’s “first duty is submission,” while agency is “the prerogative of the elite.” As Robin makes clear, the conservative reaction to subordinate unrest is sharp, severe, and often violent.

Conservatives, according to this view, are obsessed with the military and highly value martial courage, for even on a metaphorical battlefield, heroism emphasizes “the natural proving ground of superiority,” which proves their right to rule. The Progressive Era, for instance, began with vague ambitions to reform prison policies, but ended with prison modernization that simply enhanced control of inmates. When that control seemed in danger, a modernized

---

militia was the immediate answer to a perceived crisis. In this sense, conservatism of the 1920s shares much in common with the conservatism of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, as historian Kim Phillips-Fein notes, “historians...have traced some of the most distinctive features of postwar conservatism back to the 1920s and 1930s.”

Reviewing the Folsom riot offers another opportunity to describe these features. Where modern liberals respond to crime and civil disorder with proposals to reform, modern conservatives respond with proposals to control. The fate of progressive prison reform and the use of the National Guard reveal these trends.

Most historians, however, would not consider C.C. Young or any other self-proclaimed progressive to be a prototypical conservative. For example, historian Jackson K. Putnam asserts that the election of C.C. Young as governor harkened back to the years of progressive supremacy during the governorship of Hiram Johnson. He writes, “California progressivism remained vigorous throughout the decade [of the 1920s] and...progressives succeeded in preserving the main body of advances made in the Johnson era and in adding to it some substantial achievements of their own.”

Yet Putnam recognizes “that a considerable amount of ‘backsliding’ among progressives did occur.” Using the response to the Folsom riot as an example, I will substitute the concept of transformation for the idea of “backsliding.” Putnam notes that in the 1920s “progressive spokesmen had little sense of being inconsistent.” Similarly, I argue here that no one at the time recognized any form of conservatism in their actions in responding to the riot, nor in their evaluation of its causes, nevertheless these indeed constituted expressions of a prototypical modern conservatism.

Defining conservatism seems a necessary step in making such an argument. In his essay “Problems of American Conservatism,” historian Alan Brinkley calls the ideology “a cluster of related (and sometimes unrelated) ideas.”

The problem to which he refers is the tendency of historians to restrict their definition of conservatism, or to dismiss it altogether. He defines this succinctly as “a problem of historical imagination.”

Inspired by this line of thought, one can search for the antecedents of modern conservatism prior to World War II. This paper adds to Brinkley’s redefinition of conservatism and its roots.

When historians recount early twentieth-century progressive military reforms, they also inadvertently describe traces of proto-conservative thought.
among self-proclaimed progressives. In his *History of the Militia and the National Guard*, historian John K. Mahon notes that in 1903, Secretary of War Elihu Root "saw clearly that the United States needed a workable reserve system." Root and his successors modernized the military by adhering to long-standing American political traditions. The old state militias were neither federalized nor eliminated, a testament to continuing mistrust of the central government's power. State governors retained a large measure of control over their own states’ units. Thus, the structure of the modern American military reserve system is in part an accident of history, but also a reflection of the conservative mistrust of big government. As Corey Robin asserts, conservatism is "an activist doctrine for an activist time." Exclusive access to local power provides elites greater control over factory, field, household, prison or militia. All of these qualify as intimate places, where, Robin says, "a private fuse" is lit and a "contest for rights and standing" is fought out. It was not until the Cold War that conservatives saw the value of a large federal armed force in a larger contest.

With extensive federal support that provided for improved pay and training, the National Guard became a professional reserve force. By 1925, the federal government spent $180 per California guardsman, as California's Adjutant General reported, whereas the state spent a mere $49.41 per man. Later conservatives avidly adopted the twin concepts of local control, exemplified by the continuing power of the state governors, and generous federal support of the military. It can be argued that Progressive-Era politicians, such as Elihu Root and his President, Theodore Roosevelt, had adopted distinctly conservative attitudes towards prison reform.

In contrast, hardly any proto-conservative thought can be seen in early Progressive-Era prison reform. Historian Kenneth Lamott describes the early Progressive platform as emphasizing the rehabilitation of criminals. Some reformers advocated education and industrial training for convicts, as well as the separation of criminals by type of crime committed. Thus, Progressives housed women and juveniles away from hardened criminals, who were considered recidivist prisoners. The most innovative proposal allowed for time off for good behavior and the implementation of parole instead of continued incarceration. Lamott traces these proposals and the impulse to reform as far back as 1870. These reforms effectively reached Folsom State Prison in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

---

11 Ibid., 9–10.
14 Lamott, *Chronicles of San Quentin*, 169.
Yet the description of Folsom Prison circa 1917 presented by historian Shelley Bookspan in *A Germ of Goodness: The California State Prison System, 1851–1944* offers proof that Progressive-Era prison reform had stalled. Bookspan describes Folsom Prison as a place of exile that "received its official distinction as the prison for recidivists...For the inmates, [attempted] escape was the dangerous way out of the situation." Ten years later, the riot that took the lives of ten inmates and two prison guards shows that very little substantial change had taken place. The bungled escape attempt of six convicts caused the riot. By using the Folsom riot as an example, this study will demonstrate that what was true in 1917 remained true in 1927, and the idea of Progressive prison reform had failed.

Indeed, the tale of Progressive prison reform and its effects on Folsom State Prison offer a convenient place to begin. In his study, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and its Alternatives in Progressive America*, historian David J. Rothman has noted the desire by some Progressives to create more humane and effective ways of treating incarcerated adult criminals. Progressive confidence in the treatment of individuals replaced the old rules by empowering the administrators of the institutions they inherited. By June of 1912, this type of empowered administrator had been appointed to Folsom—in the form of Warden James J. Johnston. While serving as warden for a brief period, Johnston initiated a series of humanitarian projects. In June of 1912, he opened the first school at the prison, enrolling over 400 prisoners in its first year. In July of 1912, he had a bathhouse built to accommodate the expanding prison population and also built a gazebo for band concerts. His example inspired his successors to continue with humanitarian improvements after he left to become warden of San Quentin prison in December of 1913. In 1916, Warden J.J. Smith ordered a new cellblock to be completed and opened. Two years later, the construction of a sewage disposal plant replaced the habit of dumping waste into the American River. In 1923, a new school was completed. The school housed an auditorium that later became the site of the riot of 1927. Smith carried on with these and a few other improvements, as yet another example of an empowered administrator. He served for thirteen years, ensconced in the position until his retirement on February 2, 1927, eight months prior to the riot.

Rothman makes another point of interest regarding empowered Progressive prison administrators when he asserts that they were blind to their own limitations and prejudices. The population boom at Folsom in the years prior to 1927 illustrates both their activism and their blindness. The problem began after 1919, when both Folsom and San Quentin state penitentiaries began

---

to see rising numbers of prisoners. The California Board of State Prison Directors attributed the rise to Prohibition, the new and stringent drug act, and post-war demobilization, causing unemployment and mischief-making among veterans.\(^{19}\) By 1924, the directors reported, California’s growing population also added to Folsom’s population increase.\(^{20}\) By July 1, 1927, the prison had reached 2,058 convicts and humanitarian measures were being taken to accommodate them as quickly as the legislature made funds available.\(^{21}\)

These measures highlight the administration’s power and humanitarian activism at Folsom. A new dining room and bakeshop were rushed to completion and opened in the summer of 1927. As the prison’s dairy herd continued to grow, a pasteurizing machine was installed at the prison ranch. Other improvements included the addition of a new post office, an x-ray machine in the prison hospital, and another boiler to provide heating for the mess hall and cell building, which had been built in 1916.\(^{22}\) Yet, in the 1920s, neither officials in Sacramento nor those at the prison implemented any policy reforms to accompany these impressive improvements.

The state’s legislators even provided an opening for administrators to address prison overcrowding, in addition to the humanitarian measures already taken. In July 1927, they empowered the state prison directors to decide who could be classified as a habitual criminal. This act meant the courts would be bypassed and, in theory, sentences could be reduced through an administrative review of convicts standing for parole before the directors. Because habitual criminals had no chance for shortened sentences, the Board could have increased the number of parolees by simply reducing the number of convicts labeled habitual. Fewer habitual criminals would mean fewer extended sentences because more non-habitual criminals would be given the opportunity for parole. In practice, however, the legislature had enabled bureaucrats to violate due process.\(^{23}\) In their annual report the following year, the directors noted “the [amended] law requires the Board of State Prison Directors to visit each prison and there hold at least one session each month.”\(^{24}\) The day after the riot broke out, the directors “denied rumors that convicts had been restless because the board failed to keep up with the parole calendar and was behind in fixing sentences.”\(^{25}\) Yet “at each [monthly] session,” the directors’ report notes, “a multitude of prison and administrative details...come on for consideration and...consume much time.”\(^{26}\) It seemed that the board was not inclined to

---

\(^{19}\) Brown, *130 Years*, 23.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 24.


\(^{22}\) Brown, 24.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 25.


\(^{26}\) Prison Directors, 10.
increase the number of parolees and, in any case, was distracted by matters of discipline from doing so.

Either the legislature’s action was not meant to reduce overcrowding, or Progressive-Era administrators ignored its potential to do so. What the legislature actually did was empower prison administrators. This was a typically progressive action in the area of prison reform, as Rothman has noted. Blind to their limitations and prejudices, however, the directors did not use the opportunity to reduce overcrowding or encourage rehabilitation through the promise of parole. Far from continuing an era of reform, the amended law merely permitted the administrators to exercise more power over their charges. Despite the directors’ assertion to the contrary, at least six convicts felt restless enough to bypass the ineffective parole system altogether and, in late November of 1927, conspired to escape. The true account of events after they put their plan into operation was distorted from the beginning by the press and the authorities. Since these distortions demonstrate a shift in Progressive attitudes from belief in reform to a belief in control, an accurate accounting of events, as best can be determined, is useful.

“I never looked upon that episode at anytime,” wrote convict Al Stewart three and a half years later, “but as a maniacal [sic] proposition, that could only emanate from a diseased or afflicted mind.”27 On November 20, 1927 fellow convicts Tony Brown and Roy Stokes approached Stewart in the prison yard and invited him to join their conspiracy. Brown told him they had a pistol, one hundred and ten rounds of ammunition, and six knives.28 The three men planned to overpower one or more guards in the Main Cell Block and use them to gain access to the adjacent administration building, where Stewart had at one time performed office work. Stewart was therefore familiar with the prison phone system, and the conspirators wanted him to use his knowledge to lure the warden into a trap. Intimidated by the technology themselves, Stewart’s co-conspirators thought he merely had to pick up the phone and the warden would report in person to their location. Then, using the warden and other guards as hostages and human shields, they would break out of the administration building to freedom. However, Stewart turned the plan down after learning that convicts James Gleason, Walter Burke, and James Gregg were also in on the plot. He later testified, “As soon as they told me them guys was in it, why I knew them by sight, and you might say, reputation too; and right away I figured there was going to be violence used, and I told them I didn’t want to have nothing to do with it.”29

But the conspirators were persistent. On Thanksgiving morning, November 24, the men approached Stewart again. This time they were

27 Albert M. Stewart to Governor James Rolph, Jr., March 1, 1931, Governor’s Office Records, California State Archives Inventory No. 4, James Rolph, Jr., California State Archives.

28 Albert M. Stewart Sworn Statement, Governor’s Office Records, California State Archives Inventory No. 4, Clement C. Young, California State Archives.

29 Stewart Sworn Statement, 175.

EX POST FACTO
determined to proceed with him or without him. Stewart agreed to participate only after all five men swore no violence would be used. At 10:00 a.m., the would-be escapees put their plan into action. In the main cellblock, they quickly overpowered guard Charles Nelson, and locked him up, along with several other convicts they deemed untrustworthy. From there, they hurried to the west end of the block in order to gain access to the administration building. Once through the connecting door, it would have been a simple matter to seize hostages and make their escape, or so they thought. But here their plans went awry.

Prison guard Charles Gorhanson, armed only with a cane, resisted the convicts’ attempts to gain access through the iron door leading into the administration building. They beat and stabbed Gorhanson several times before he agreed to cooperate, yet he did not have a key. Access could only be granted by another guard who was stationed on the other side of the door. Convict Gregg rang a bell to gain this man’s attention while the others forced Gorhanson to show himself at a window. Cannily, Gorhanson showed his bloody hands to the guard posted on the other side, who firmly denied access, at which time the convicts became enraged. The inmates decided to abandon this troublesome access point and quickly concocted a new plan: they could leave the main cellblock through another exit located on the north side of the building, thus bypassing the administration building altogether. Once outside, the men could proceed to freedom through a gap in the south prison wall. They quickly decided to implement their new plan and on the way to the north exit, seized another hostage, guard Walter Neil.

Here again their plans were frustrated. A trustee, who had been working under supervision outside, opened the door soon enough, but Neil slipped past the convicts and slammed the door shut in their faces. Though shot in the leg, Neil had managed to escape from their control, and the convicts remained locked inside the main cell building. Ironically, much of the trouble that followed might have been avoided had the men actually made it past the exit and outside of the building. Of course, guards Gorhanson and Neil deserve commendation for performing their duty, but from this time on, until the prisoners surrendered, chaos and violence reigned supreme. Convict Brown discharged his weapon again in anger before turning away from the door. The round hit and killed George Baker, a convict who was standing nearby. Brown then shouted, “Everybody to the show house!” and fled in the direction of the prison school, where approximately one thousand convicts were gathered in the auditorium to see a movie. Thinking they had already killed guard Walter Neil anyway, convicts Burke and Stokes beat and stabbed Gorhanson yet again,

---

30 Brown, 26.
32 Brown, 25.
33 Stewart Sworn Statement, 181.
34 Brown, 26.
35 Stewart Sworn Statement, 181.
before following Brown. Gorhanson managed to escape and survived despite the brutal assault.\textsuperscript{36}

Guard Ray Singleton was not so lucky. The desperate convicts encountered him in the tunnel that connected the east side of the main cellblock to the school building. Overpowered by five men and stabbed repeatedly, Singleton slumped to the floor and slowly bled to death as the convicts burst into the auditorium. Pandemonium broke out after someone fired two more shots into the schoolhouse. Brown had probably announced their presence by demonstrating that they were armed. However, by this time, the prison was on full alert and it is possible that a guard stationed in a nearby perimeter tower was sniping through a window. The six men had secured five more hostages within the school building, and spent most of the next thirty hours trying to avoid being shot. Danger came from all sides. At 11:00 a.m., one hour after the convicts had begun their escape attempt, the warden alerted Governor Young, who in turn alerted local law enforcement officials and the National Guard. Nearby police and sheriffs poured in to Folsom. The first National Guard troops arrived as early as 1:00 p.m., however, most soldiers arrived later throughout the night.\textsuperscript{37} The soldiers established a perimeter around the prison but did not fire a shot during the thirty-hour siege. In contrast, the prison guards and nearby law enforcement officers, who had responded to the governor’s alert, fired thousands of rounds into the school building and the main cellblock.

For the other convicts, who had been waiting to watch a movie, there was no safe place to go. Early on, convict Brown fired a few potshots at the guards through a window. For most of the thirty hours, however, he had no opportunity to shoot back at the guards and police. “The boys in the school house was laying down on the floor,” Stewart testified, “getting behind benches and everything...we didn’t know which way they [the prison guards] would attack.”\textsuperscript{38} Sometime during all this excitement, guard Charles B. Gillies died of a heart attack while manning a post near the Main Gate,\textsuperscript{39} becoming the last casualty among the guards. Meanwhile, ten prisoners were shot and killed, and five more wounded.\textsuperscript{40} Safety was only assured again after the six conspirators agreed to surrender to the warden, who had made a vague promise to do what he could for them.\textsuperscript{41}

By that time, newspapermen had also responded to the governor’s emergency alert. Coverage of the riot was sensationalized by every paper, regardless of its political stripe and many of the details in the initial reports proved incorrect. However, the extent of the reporting on the incident is

\textsuperscript{36} Brown, 26.
\textsuperscript{38} Stewart Sworn Statement, 187.
\textsuperscript{40} Brown, \textit{130 Years}, 26.
\textsuperscript{41} Stewart Sworn Statement, 189–190.
impressive, with many papers providing photos, diagrams, sidebar stories and biographies of the significant figures involved. Their clear intent was to publish a dramatic and violent tale as quickly as possible and to avoid diluting the story by adding any analysis.

Unfortunately, this shallow view carried over into their editorials. As early as November 26, the San Francisco Examiner assigned blame for the riot to "the average convict [who] does not think clearly. If he did he would not be a lawbreaker...The results of his clouded thinking is such revolts as occurred on Thanksgiving Day."42 That same day, the San Francisco Chronicle wrote that "if there is a useful lesson in the prison break it is that the breakers prove that they are where they belong for the good of the rest of the world."43 Even Fremont Older’s San Francisco Call and Post refused to believe "inhumane treatment" of prisoners had any role in the killings that day.44 However, most of Older’s editorial was a plea for leniency to the other prisoners caught up in the violent siege. "We need not lose our heads,” the editorial concluded, “merely because a half dozen hard boiled men in one prison lost theirs.” In a similar spirit that December, the San Diego Sun became the only newspaper in California to call for a serious investigation into the Folsom Prison Riot. “The people of California,” the paper editorialized, deserve to know why “their prison had to be turned into a shambles.”45

The governor had already sidestepped this question. “To my knowledge,” he said on November 26, “a break at Folsom prison has been feared for at least a dozen years, or ever since the prison began to become at all congested with the number of inmates.”46 Evidently satisfied with this explanation, he did not order any special investigation, although the press assumed he had. For example, the Chronicle reported on a Prison Board meeting at San Quentin, as previously scheduled, on the same day the governor made his statement.47 From this meeting, they concluded: “Prison Board to Investigate Rioting Cause.” In fact the Board conducted normal business on that day. On December 10, the Los Angeles Times carried an Associated Press report stating, “informal investigation begun a week ago into the causes of the Folsom prison Thanksgiving Day riots were continued today by the State Prison Board.”48 However, the brief article goes on to describe what was again a typical Board meeting, neither "informal" nor an “investigation.” Neither the San Diego Sun nor any other major news outlet chided state authorities for their lack of interest in investigating the causes of the riot.

42 Editorial, San Francisco Examiner, November 26, 1927.
43 Editorial, San Francisco Chronicle, November 26, 1927.
44 Editorial, San Francisco Call and Post, November 26, 1927.
45 Editorial, San Diego Sun, December 15, 1927.
46 Associated Press, "Riots Brewing."
47 "Prison Board to Investigate Rioting Cause," San Francisco Chronicle, November 26, 1927.
The following year in their annual report to the governor, the prison directors included a few brief words about the incident, worth quoting in full because it represents the sum total of their "investigation" and conclusions regarding the entire matter:

The outbreak at Folsom prison of November, 1927, was due to no disturbance on the part of the prisoners occasioned by the administration, or the treatment, or the discipline of prisoners but was due to the machinations of a group of prisoners who had determined to make an attempt to escape from confinement at any peril to themselves and were ready to take the hazard of destruction in the attempt.

Such disturbances are not unusual in prison experience—prison authorities are forced to realize that they will occur...We are informed that mental attitudes of the kind are especially prevalent with convicts condemned to life service in prison who are without hope of clemency which release them from confinement.

In the month of November 1st, 1927, the new addition to the prison at San Quentin constructed for the use of female prisoners was brought into service.49

Certainly the immediate cause of the disturbance was a result of the violent and desperate acts of six convicts, yet state authorities were uninterested in pursuing the appropriate questions. It seems that officials had none of the fervor for reform that progressives had demonstrated in previous years. In his portion of the annual report, the Catholic chaplain at Folsom presented a gentle dissent:

Instead of abolishing or curtailing the number of paroles as frequently of late advocated, very likely it would be advisable to extend the parole system so that every man would spend the last months of his sentence under its guidance with suitable work provided by kindly officers...If over eighty (80%) per cent of those paroled keep it, would not the experiment of extending it to every man be worth the attempt?

The recent attacks on the indeterminate sentence law, the advocacy of very long, or life, terms based on the Baumes law for recidivists—seem ill-advised, at least in so far as the amelioration of the lives and conduct of the inmates is concerned. Hope springs eternal in the human breast, and it is doubtful indeed, if it is the part of wisdom to exclude the hope of release from the third or fourth-time offender.

It is no uncommon experience to observe that after a long term of confinement a man breaks down mentally or becomes more vicious.50

No other state administrator publicly expressed these opinions. Neither they nor any outsiders would push for further reforms within Folsom Prison and San Quentin. For its part, the conservative Los Angeles Times echoed a statewide consensus in August of 1928 when it called for building more prisons, if that was what was needed to keep dangerous men under control.51
When the six conspirators were found guilty of murdering prison guard Ray Singleton, but given life imprisonment over the death penalty, the Woodland Daily Democrat captured the statewide outrage well when it fumed, "The Sacramento jurors who enabled the Folsom riot gangsters to cheat the gallows rendered anything but a useful service to society. Their verdict was wholly unjustified and affords encouragement to those who are prone to favor mob rule and 'neck-tie parties.'" Public outrage was such that the six were promptly tried for the murder of their fellow prisoner, George Baker. Al Stewart testified against the other five. For this, Governor Rolph later commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment. "Is it any wonder that decent people are ashamed of the results of some of our trials?" asked the Corning Observer after the convicts' attorney objected to Stewart's testimony being admitted. "Is there any wonder that so many fiendish criminals are abroad in the land?" The remaining five conspirators were sentenced to death and hanged between January 3, 1930 and January 17, 1930. Even after the final verdict was announced, there was still grousing. "Three trials," wrote the Berkeley Daily Gazette, "costing the State of California more than $50,000, were necessary to impose the death sentence upon the ringleaders of the riot at the prison last Thanksgiving." Thus, it can be seen that the public's attitudes against the ringleaders never softened.

Furthermore, throughout all of these controversies, almost everyone behaved as modern-day conservatives, enamored with the instruments of control, and not the liberal-minded reformers previously described by Jackson K. Putnam and other historians. Instead of further reforms, greater attention was paid to order and efficiency in government. The governor was well-pleased by the response to the riot, and even went so far as to claim that the prompt arrival of extra police and soldiers was probably the key to convincing "the cooler heads among the prisoners that further resistance was useless."

Some have taken the governor's statement to mean a military demonstration was performed in the courtyard between the school building and the main gate, and the sight of it overawed the prisoners. However, as they arrived throughout the day and into the evening, National Guard troops manned a perimeter mostly beyond the view of the convicts, and did not open fire. Few in the public remarked on the tremendous discipline it must have taken for over five hundred soldiers to remain calm and not shoot for over twenty-four hours while all around them law enforcement officers constantly fired

---

52 Editorial, Woodland Daily Democrat, February 21 1928.
53 Executive Department, State of California, Commutation of Sentence, March 11, 1931, Governor's Office Records, California State Archives Inventory No. 4, California State Archives.
54 Editorial, Corning Observer, February 18, 1928.
55 Brown, 130 Years, 26.
indiscriminately. It was for other reasons that the soldiers impressed the Governor, the prison administrators, and the press that day. A cherished myth has developed asserting that Company E, 184th Infantry entered the prison at daybreak on November 25 and, through an impressive display of military drill and ceremony, brandished their bayonets and caused the immediate capitulation of the convict rioters.\(^58\)

Company E is indeed listed among sixteen other companies and detachments in the Governor's special order activating the National Guard for this emergency. In fact, the convicts held out until the afternoon of November 25, not the morning.\(^59\) The efficiency and speed of the soldiers' response had indeed established a reputation. "One of the outstanding features of the day," said the Governor afterwards, was "the rapidity with which the companies of the California National Guard mobilized, and the order and splendid spirit of the guardsmen."\(^60\) Never before had the militia in California reacted as quickly to a mobilization, and in such numbers. Although precedent established over a century earlier existed for the use of the militia to quell civil disorder, this incident was unique in several other ways besides the speed at which troops assembled. The soldiers arrived fully equipped with modern weapons, including machine guns and two tanks.\(^61\) They demonstrated their discipline by not firing a shot during the entire incident, as ordered.\(^62\)

Additionally, it was the first time since August 1893 that the California Guard had been used to respond to anything other than labor-related unrest.\(^63\) In that incident in Redlands, California, three Companies reported for duty in response to racial unrest, but did not, in fact, deploy. This was the first California mobilization to be completed since the national military reforms of 1903 through 1920. In three separate incidents—June 1909, August 1913, and March 1917—worried state officials activated much smaller numbers of troops in response to a strike and two International Workers of the World actions respectively, but did not deploy them. No other incidents of civil disorder occurred from March 1917 to November 1927. In effect, the modern California National Guard mobilized for the first time to maintain law and order on November 24, 1927 at Folsom State Prison.

When Warden Court Smith called the governor, approximately one hour after the escape attempt had begun, it is unlikely that he knew how many

---


\(^{59}\) Brown, _130 Years_, p. 26.


\(^{61}\) Brown, _130 Years_, 26.

\(^{62}\) State Military Museum, "Folsom."

\(^{63}\) The California State Military Museum, "Riots, Protests, and Other Civil Disturbances: The Redlands Emergency, August 1893" [accessed April 1, 2002].

EX POST FACTO
weapons the convicts had acquired. By that point, hostages had been taken and the conspirators had holed up in the auditorium, surrounded by approximately one thousand other prisoners. No transcript of the warden's talk with the governor exists. However, we can surmise that the governor was alarmed, because he immediately telephoned the Adjutant General, who was in San Francisco, and gave orders "that the National Guard units of the nearby cities be called by telephone, mobilized at their respective armories and with or without uniforms be transported to Folsom as rapidly as possible."\(^{64}\)

The Adjutant General noted afterwards that despite the holiday, a total of 532 soldiers responded to the emergency. Approximately one hundred soldiers arrived at the prison gates by 1:00 p.m. that afternoon.\(^{65}\) Most, however, arrived after dark. The tanks came from Salinas on the backs of two freight trucks.\(^{66}\) Two army airplanes flown from Los Angeles were placed on stand by and the Adjutant General came by airplane from Crissy Field, San Francisco. Most of the soldiers were from nearby Sacramento, Stockton, Woodland, Marysville, Yuba City and Lodi—all Central San Joaquin Valley towns.\(^{67}\) Previous local mobilizations had not used telephones or radios to activate soldiers so quickly, nor had they reported to the scene of action by automobile.

Once on the scene, the prison authorities had the soldiers establish a perimeter along the entire length of the prison wall and the riverbank, facing into the prison yard. As previously noted, the soldiers did not fire a shot throughout the incident.\(^{68}\) Though the soldiers had arrived with automatic weapons, the prison guards and other police officers, using Gatling guns and other weapons, did all of the shooting. Given the information available to Governor Young at 11:00 a.m. that morning, it is understandable why he would immediately order such a large mobilization. One might argue that, in the end, the soldiers were not, in fact, needed at the prison. It seems likely, however, that the prison guards welcomed their arrival with relief because their presence meant control of the situation was now doubly assured. The perimeter they established must have been a psychological boost for the authorities and the press. A correspondent for the San Francisco Bulletin seemed to echo this sentiment when he described the scene that night:

The mobilization of the National Guard was carried out speedily and efficiently by Col. Wallace Mason, acting until the arrival of Adjutant General R.E. Mittelstaedt. The guardsmen were stationed about the walls of the prison during the afternoon and throughout the night. In addition picked men manned machine guns along the railroad tracks between the prison and the American River. All the Guardsmen carried side arms, and those not equipped with automatic rifles carried Springfield. An unlimited supply of ammunition was available. Blankets and heavy overcoats were drawn from the Sacramento armory

\(^{64}\) Military Museum, "Folsom."

\(^{65}\) The Adjutant General, 1928, 13.

\(^{66}\) Brown, Folsom Prison, 53.

\(^{67}\) Brown, Folsom Prison, 4.

\(^{68}\) Brown, 130 Years, 26.
and issued to all men on guard. The Guardsmen's appearance with their steel helmets presented a picturesque scene, reminiscent of war days.69

The newspapers went to an extreme when they painted all the convicts as riotous desperadoes unworthy of leniency. They went to another, opposite extreme in their praise for the soldiers. A writer for the Stockton Record took note of their disciplined silence along the perimeter, while "it was hard to tell whether or not the convicts were returning fire, so loud were the reports of the guns... [But] their officers were slowly strolling up and down behind them cautioning them not to fire without the command."70 The San Francisco Daily News was also extravagant in its praise, and looked towards the future in believing that "California National Guardsmen...can be relied upon in any emergency."71 The Fresno Bee was also looking towards the future when, on November 26, 1927, it urged the California State Assembly to "pass appropriations sufficient to keep [the Guard] in a state of efficiency and preparedness" despite no one having suggested any change to the steady increase in the militia's budget.72 These examples reflect the response of the press statewide, whether the newspaper was conservative or progressive. One could argue that the mobilization of the National Guard in this instance was so highly praised that it became a paradigm for handling future emergencies. Certainly the call-ups for the San Francisco Dock Strike of 1934, Watts Riots of 1965, and the Rodney King Riots of 1992, followed the Folsom pattern. In each case, the governor recognized a local emergency, and then mobilized the Guard, acting as his state's "Commander in Chief."

In conclusion, there is little evidence that C.C. Young and the previous governors had come to see and rely upon the National Guard as an instrument for maintaining law and order prior to the Folsom Prison Riot of 1927. In addition to nearby Guard units, the governor also mobilized every sheriff and law enforcement official available to him. After Thanksgiving Day 1927, however, governors certainly considered the National Guard the ultimate enforcers in civil disorder emergencies. Further study of these incidents is required to determine the extent of this new view of Guardsmen as the ultimate enforcers of law and order. Despite the irony that the National Guard was given more credit for its actions at Folsom than it really deserved, use of the National Guard as the trump card in responding to civil disorders was considered by all to be the premier lesson learned from the Thanksgiving Day Riot.

Unfortunately for the convicts and the cause of prison reform, "strong laws...speedy and relentless prosecution" and punishment were the only lessons learned for the other institution involved in the day's events.73 Overcrowding and reduced opportunities for parole were hardly discussed in the aftermath of the attempted escape. Progressives had taken some steps to reduce the inhumane

---

69 Military Museum, "Folsom."
70 Military Museum, "Folsom."
71 Military Museum, "Folsom."
72 Editorial, Fresno Bee, November 26, 1927.
73 Fresno Bee.

EX POST FACTO
conditions at Folsom. Certainly no one argued in favor of deliberately overcrowding or mistreating convicts. Yet in the following decade, additional escape attempts would take place at Folsom, all of them violent. In 1937, the warden himself, Clarence Larkin, was murdered during a particularly bloody incident. Ten years earlier he had been on duty at Folsom as the Captain of the Prison Guard, next in rank to the warden among administrators. Further study of prison riots throughout the country in the twentieth century and beyond is warranted. It seems that even in the aftermath of the Thanksgiving Day Riot of 1927, policy reform, such as increased opportunity for parole, continued to be ignored.

Instead, the governor and others believed in the "firm manner in which the revolt was quelled, [which would] prevent another similar incident for years to come." Federal military modernization, conservative in nature, had provided former progressives with an effective and modern military force to call upon in dire civil emergencies. Use of this instrument, and indeed the overall emphasis on control of prisons rather than policy reform, are further examples of the deep historical roots of modern conservatism. As early as 1927, progressives had begun to transform into conservatives.

---

74 Brown, *130 Years*, 33.
75 Associated Press, "Riots Brewing."
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Executive Department, State of California, *Commutation of Sentence*, March 11, 1931, Governor’s Office Records, California State Archives Inventory No. 4, James Rolph Jr., California State Archives.

Healey, Floyd J. “Convict Leaders Stand In Gallows’ Shadow,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1927.

“Prison Board to Investigate Rioting Cause,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 26, 1927.


Stewart, Albert M. *Plea for Clemency Written to Governor James Rolph, Jr., March 1, 1931*, Governor’s Office Records, California State Archives Inventory No. 4, James Rolph Jr., California State Archives.

———. *Sworn Statement Regarding the Events of November 24, 1927*, Governor’s Office Records, California State Archives Inventory No. 4, Clement C. Young, California State Archives.


Secondary Sources


EX POST FACTO


The California State Military Museum, “Riots, Protests and Other Civil Disturbances: Folsom Prison Riot, 1927,”

The California State Military Museum, “Riots, Protests, and Other Civil Disturbances: The Redlands Emergency, August 1893,”


Republican Education and Gender Ideology in Post-Revolutionary America

Sarah Dodson

Sarah Dodson will be graduating next May from San Francisco State University with an MA in early American history. Sarah has a special interest in early American religion and gender history.

I allow that [ladies] are naturally more fanciful and volatile than men; but this is an additional argument for their pursuing dignified studies. And I dare say we should find that their vivacity and spirit, under restraint thus acquired; joined with tempering judgment of the men, would form a most happy union, and sufficiently reward us for whatever pains we might undergo in attaining the great end.¹

The American Revolution was a huge triumph for the colonies, but it had its limitations. Among them were the distinct expectations that new republican society—as voiced by outspoken members of the community—placed on male and female education. For the population as a whole, the newfound freedom heightened the value of education. A citizen was now obligated to become educated in order to promote new republican values in both the public and private sphere. When it came to gender, however, education became an arena in which to inscribe a new, bifurcated understanding of gender difference that was needed to preserve a continued hierarchical structure between the sexes. For men, the ability to obtain an education represented the freedom from despotism won by the Revolution. Men felt an obligation to preserve this newfound liberty in an informed and responsible public and political role. For women, education was understood to be a recent gift with which they could hope to advance their social status and intellect. Members of republican society accepted this advancement only on limited terms, however, as female instruction largely guided young ladies towards a subordinate role in the private and domestic realm.

The new role of the Republican Mother gave public and political meaning to the female domestic arena. This new role included women in the political sphere by placing a high value on female virtue and modesty, and charged women with the responsibility of keeping a moral household. The Republican Mother fulfilled her obligations by raising virtuous, republican sons, and ensuring her husband upheld these values and represented her family in an honorable light in both society and politics. Education became a way to guide Republican Motherhood by providing females with the correct virtues and morals, so that they might pass on these principles to their families, specifically their husband and sons, who would recall their teachings in their public and political roles. Female education would refine the adolescent young woman and mold her specifically to fit her given role within the hierarchical structure in a new republican society.

Gender ideology in post-revolutionary education became a way to contain the increasing amounts of new freedoms available to American women as female instruction reinforced traditional hierarchical structures and innate differences between the sexes. Although female education informed the new public duty of Republican Motherhood, it was still largely expected to refine republican morals and virtues in young ladies so that they might best fulfill their private domestic duties under the “cover” of their husband’s public and political presence and authority.

Historiography

Three works help provide a rounded insight into how early republican society understood gender difference and offer a clear historical context for reading and understanding Revolutionary Era discourse on female education. Clare Lyons’s book *Sex Among the Rabble* (2006) is a description of the evolution of sexual identity and the creation of sexual deviancy in Philadelphia before and after the American Revolution. Lyons addresses how racial, gender, and economic oppression were founded through the sexual subordination of women in early U.S. history. She argues that a new concept of males and females as biological opposites was necessary after the Revolution in order to retain gender hierarchy in an increasingly egalitarian society. While Lyons does not directly address gender and education she provides a crucial analysis of how gender ideology shifted as the role of women became more restricted after the Revolution, focusing particularly on the high value placed on the Republican Mother.

Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton are similarly concerned with the role of gender in society, specifically with the continued exclusion of women from the public and political arena after the Revolution. In her book *Liberty’s Daughters* (1980), Mary Beth Norton aims to understand how women were largely left out of the sweeping changes to culture and society, using primary sources from Revolutionary-Era women themselves. This strategy allows her a unique perspective of the post-revolutionary female’s perception of gender and her own place in society. Linda Kerber’s *Women of the Republic* (1980) addresses the role of gender in the political realm, and discusses specifically
how women were largely denied access to affairs of the state. She claims that leaders of revolutionary ideology created the role of the Republican Mother to rectify the problem of female exclusion.

This work, using the Revolutionary-Era rhetoric of elite males in social media and the public arena, aims to utilize the arguments of these authors and examine more closely the ways in which female intelligence was manipulated in the late eighteenth century in order to preserve traditional sexual and gendered roles in post-revolutionary society. While I acknowledge that these sources come mostly from a limited pool of the literate male elite, I chose to utilize them because at the time elite males were the vast majority of those in positions of power. It was these elite males who were accepted into the public and political arena where they planted their discourse, and who had a deep interest in protecting sexual and gendered difference in the new republican society.

**Innate Gender Difference and Republican Discourse**

As Lyons, Norton, and Kerber demonstrate, the "thinkers" of the Republican Era, both men and women, saw innate differences between the male and female body and mind. Most citizens of the Revolutionary Era believed that female intelligence, although comparable, was distinct from a man's. So too, then, was a woman's role. One post-Revolutionary writer explained, "as nature has appointed a remarkable difference of constitution of body between the sexes, it is reasonable to suppose, that there are certain occupations more peculiarly appropriated to the one than the other." He follows that "disputing and wrangling political points...renders the company of men tiresome to the more sensible part, but that of women would be disgustful if thus employed" and thus the female mind should not bother itself with education in political matters.

Often those writing their opinions on education in the new nation used metaphors or strong language to emphasize the distinctions between men and women. Writers describing the importance of education for men often placed the male sphere or the men themselves at the center of the universe. Friend to Liberty provides an excellent example of this as the author explained that with educated citizens, "America will then increase in wealth, in commerce, agriculture, and manufactures... as the towering cedar among the trees of wood, or the sun in the presence of the stars." The author was clearly talking about a male-dominated sphere with the inclusion of wealth, commerce, agriculture, and

---


4 Friend to Liberty, "Importance of Education" *The Massachusetts Magazine: or, Monthly Museum of Knowledge and Rational Entertainment, Containing Poetry, Musick, Biography, History, Physick, Geography, Morality, Criticism (1789–1789)*, 1,6 June 1789, pg. 381, 3.

**EX POST FACTO**
manufactures—this sphere, with the help of republican instruction, would become the majestic center of all other nations. The author’s emphasis on natural symbols suggests his or her belief in the divine authority and power of the male domain. Many of these metaphors also contained phallic and sexual undertones. Friend to Liberty suggested that with education man could “erect a superb building” and “regale ourselves under the tree of liberty and freedom.”

These powerful metaphors underscored a purely masculine authority.

Conversely, writers used metaphors discussing female education in order to emphasize the negative effects of ignorance, or to suggest the consequences of a lack of male authority. Probably the most pronounced example of this is Clio’s description of female ignorance as “like the India ship freighted with diamonds, which never reached the port for want of a pilot.” While the pilot clearly suggests a dominant, masculine figure, the port itself has a more feminine connotation, as it is something one, specifically a ship’s male captain, might enter. Here, the wandering female ship (full of the elegance and beauty of diamonds) and the abandoned port itself are both left undirected and incomplete, for want of the male authority provided by the pilot.

Authors of the period also used revealing metaphors when describing the need for female education to ensure the sexual purity of a young lady. Philometis, in his third “Letter to Parents,” proclaimed, “I will promise the world, it shall shortly behold a race of females, beautiful as innocence, lovely as the mistress of Eden.” Philometis promised that the rewards of education would essentially restore a young lady’s innocence and purity to the status of Eve (pre-apple) while Sophronia described a young lady who did not take care to cultivate this seraphic purity as “like the rose cut down by the reaper’s hand.” Here, Sophronia compared the lack of education and cultivation of chastity to the symbolic and inevitable “deflowering” of the ignorant young female. Without education a young girl will most certainly become unchaste, her “rose” stolen by the hand and scythe of the demonic and dark.

This metaphor of a flower or floral objects as a reflection of images of innocence can be seen throughout these social commentaries on education. Mary Beth Norton writes that children were often referred to as “flowers” and their rearing as “cultivation,” specifically as they began to grow into “adults who needed to be trained and shaped.” In her book she quotes Abigail Paine Greenleaf’s letter to her father as she describes this symbolism: “How the tender buds of reason opening promise fair flowers if rightly cultivated and spar’d to full growth.” Friend to Liberty wrote about Revolutionary edification as “protecting the flower of our youth,” just as Sophronia similarly used floral

---

5 Ibid., 2.
language to warn against ignorance, which would lead to a "wilderness instead of a garden." The significance of this floral symbolism relates back to ideas of female purity and innocence, as well as male sexual power and authority. Flowers had long represented feminine beauty, just as gardens represented the cultivation of this feminine beauty. To "deflower," however, was long recognized as a term signifying the act of "[depriving] a woman of her virginity," which itself recalls the popular connection between flowers and female innocence and purity. To "deflower" is to ultimately remove this innate virtue from a woman.

The language these authors used shows a clear understanding of the sexes as inherent biological opposites. Both Clare Lyons and Thomas Laqueur suggest that a shift occurred in the understanding of gender and sexual difference in this period, perhaps to compensate for the changing social and political order. Lyons argues that previously, gender distinctions had been based on behavior and performance, not biology. Within the context of a monarchical government, gender was simply "one of the many ordained and fixed hierarchical relationships that ordered society." She describes the need to create a new understanding of gender difference as "the Enlightenment undermined the belief in such natural hierarchies and upset the basis of woman's subordination to man." Thomas Laqueur describes this new understanding of biological opposition as the "two-sex" model of gender and sexual difference. Laqueur believes that "sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented." He writes that during this time the cultural understanding of gendered difference evolved into an anatomical understanding of sexual opposites: "distinct sexual anatomy was adduced to support or deny all manner of claims in a variety of specific social, economic, political, cultural, or erotic contexts...the body became decisive."

In the transition from a monarchical society defined by social hierarchies to a more egalitarian one, citizens of the new Republic found a need to recreate understandings of sex and gender in order to maintain female subordination. The language these authors used in the context of Revolutionary education shows a clear comprehension of the opposite male and female realms. In a world in which the male arena of public politics was often "rough" and "untamed," many leading literary figures saw education as a tool to maintain the female antithesis: "softness" and "submission." Recalling Clio's vision of the lost "India ship freighted with diamonds," it is interesting that the author specifically chose to use the image of diamonds, long utilized as a symbol of

---


female elegance and beauty. Still, with no hope of a pilot or male authority, these diamonds are to forever remain uncut and unmastered by the male jeweler’s hand, lost in an abyss of ignorance. The author of “Desultory Observations” also displayed this developed understanding of a distinct, subdued female realm as he argued, “every employment, or amusement, that excites violent or unsocial affections, is by no means becoming in that character which was formed for everything graceful, tender and worth of imitation.”

Here, the author clearly defines a contrasting role between those who were “formed” to be too delicate for that which “excites violence or unsocial affections” and those who were not.

A common thread throughout the language of these authors is the need to exclude females from the wild and “violent” world of public politics and contain them within a realm of “government” and submission. Benjamin Rush, in his address to the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia, blatantly described education as needed to enhance female government. Perhaps because young females had gained a significant amount of independence in the absence of their husbands and other male authority figures during the war, new republican society called for a containment of that independence in order to retain gender hierarchy. Education in post-Revolutionary America became a way to instill these new notions of female “government.” Women were ironically placed under the authority and rule of those who occupied the “violent” public and political realm.

Education in the New Republic

All together, this fascinating language allows us to look deeply into the different ways inhabitants and citizens of the late eighteenth-century United States viewed the different characteristics and roles assigned to men and women and their relationship to expanding fields of knowledge. Ideas about education and the cultivation of thought and the mind played a significant role in the ideology of the American Revolution. To many revolutionaries, citizens, and inhabitants of the new nation, education signified the ability to “unshackle [themselves] from ignorance, which is the origin of feuds and animosities in free states.” Prescriptive literature of the period shows the significance of republican education and the role it was to play maintaining and preserving the new nation. As the author of a 1788 magazine wrote, “In despotic governments, the people should have little or no education, except what tends to inspire them with a servile fear. Information is fatal to despotism. In monarchies, education should be partial, and adapted to the rank of citizens.” Referring to Montesquieu

he quoted, "But 'in a republican government...the whole power of education is required.' Here every class of people should know and love the laws." Education became a symbol of freedom from the oppression of tyrannical governments; it came to represent, "the instruction, or training up of freemen...that is free from the slavish commands of others, and the slavery of low, vulgar, and base prejudices, passions and vices in themselves."18

This newfound value attached to republican instruction also provided a means to mold and create new understandings of culture, society, and politics. Republican instruction became the means by which new ideas were imprinted into the mind of the common man. As Gordon Wood describes, "With the Lockean premises they had about how knowledge was acquired, everything suddenly seemed possible. The revolutionary leaders were faced with the awesome task of creating their own world."19 Because no governmental department was to take over the job of promoting civic republican virtue, everyday community institutions, specifically schools, took on this task.20 Loyalist Jonathan Boucher argued against the promotion of "community education" because it promoted the Revolution and republican ideology. He lamented that "whilst we read and study the classics, (as excellent models of all that is elegant or perfect in composition), let us take due care not to be misled either by their loose morals, or any of their false notions of government."21

While education had traditionally been crucial to the social status of the nobility and gentle class, education of political leaders, even the common man, it now became essential to preserving the values of the new nation. One author wrote, "If we examine the men who compose these legislatures, we shall find that wrong measures generally proceed from ignorance either in the men themselves, or in their constituents."22 To this author, education was required to fulfill the duties of the new nation, particularly in the legislature and central government. A Friend to Liberty similarly argued in 1789, "as the freedom, the liberty, and the life of our country depend upon it...Without common education; we can be compared to nothing but a ship at sea, deprived of sails, rudders, compass, and exposed to the billows and hurricanes of the boisterous deep."

17 "Education: The Importance of Accommodating the Mode of Education to the Form of Government." The American Magazine, Containing a Miscellaneous Collection of Original and Other Valuable Essays in Prose and Verse, and Calculated Both for Instruction and Amusement (1787–1788), 1,5 April 1788 311. 1.
22 "Education: The importance of Accommodating the Mode of Education to the Form of Government," 2.

EX POST FACTO
With no republican instruction, the future leaders of the Republic would not only grow up deprived of their most “invaluable birthright,” but raised without the moral and intellectual compass so crucial to the success of the new nation. Thomas Dawes made the same argument, commenting that ignorance undermined the very foundations of the republican government, “for it is a maxim, drawn from natural experience, that the only means of inducing the people to make a proper use of their liberty, is to enlighten, instruct, and employ them.” For Dawes and others, education would help citizens to not only ensure increased prosperity in their own lives, but even more importantly to increase the wealth and progress of the new nation.

These works almost unanimously refer to male citizens who were expected to lead or participate in the new public and political spheres. During the Revolutionary Era and long after, popular gender ideology almost entirely excluded women from these exciting and newly reformed arenas and from general discussions of republican instruction. Society did not expect women to become future legislators, nor to become future voters, and women were not in charge of agricultural production as their husbands were, so they were not expected to take any interest in the political changes taking place around them.

Female Education and Republican Motherhood

Nevertheless, while women were largely excluded from the public and political realms, women did gain significant educational opportunities from the American Revolution and its intellectual ideology. Still, their instruction was far more limited than that of their male counterparts and continued to guide women specifically towards their natural domestic and private roles. As described by Mary Beth Norton, the new model female needed a specific sort of education to fulfill her new republican duties, which required her to be “an independent thinker and patriot, a virtuous wife, competent household manager, and knowledgeable mother.” In contrast to creating a new, more egalitarian public and political society for men, republican culture still expected a young woman to be the dutiful, submissive housewife and mother she had always been. But new republican ideology gave her life added purpose and provided perhaps her only means of acting if not in the public, male dominated arena, then for it. As Linda Kerber saw it, “The role of guarantor of civic virtue...could not be assigned to a formal branch of government,” thus it became the job of the Republican Mother to raise the virtuous and moral republican sons needed to

---

26 Norton, Liberty’s Daughters, 256.
lead the nation and to instill them with a strong sense of honorable republican ideology. This duty required proper education in order to be fulfilled.\(^{27}\)

In order to be the leader of republican virtue in her household, a young woman must be instilled with proper republican values, a primary goal of republican female schooling in the late eighteenth century. Writers repeatedly described female edification as the means by which most young women would grasp their sense of duty to the nation and family, and the institution by which her mind would be imprinted with the refined morality that was required of her. One author wrote in *The New York Magazine* in 1797 that, “where female understanding has been properly cultivated, women have not only obtained admiration by their useful abilities, but respect by their exemplary conduct.”\(^{28}\) Philometis, who wrote a series of “Letters to Parents” on education in 1772, took this expectation of female education a bit further when he cried, “Give your daughters education; those flatteringly and pevish demons, would then be wholly cast out, the vain one kept within proper limits, and *they* become the innocent, lovely *things* nature intended them.”\(^{29}\) Philometis declared in his next letter, “I will promise the world, it shall shortly behold a race of females, beautiful as innocence, lovely as the mistress of Eden.”\(^{30}\) By contrasting words like “pevish demons” with “innocent” and “lovely things,” specifically emphasizing the intentions of “nature,” Philometis also illustrated the common perception of the feminine role, as it existed in the late eighteenth century.

Authors of the period specifically saw education in the arts as a means to tame what many believed were wild, innate female tendencies and instill within women properties of virtue. Once a woman was fully polished, she could fulfill her lone gift to the nation, her duty as the Republican Mother. Ansximander, in 1785, expected a young woman’s instruction to refine what he believed were innate female tendencies and described the best studies to do so. He wrote that science and “the study of dead languages” can only “cloud and contract” the female intellect, whereas the study of fine arts is “peculiarly adapted to the natural softness of the sex; and fitted to eradicate any species of roughness, indelicacy or absurdity that might possibly have crept among them.”\(^{31}\) Ansximander continued to persuade the reader that along with fine arts, music is particularly suited to “improving both manners and morals” as it “humanizes the soul; inspires tenderness, sympathy, and love; together with an aversion to everything mean and groveling.”\(^{32}\)

---


\(^{30}\) Philometis, “III,” 1.


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 2.

EX POST FACTO
virtue became less defined in a masculine context and became associated with refined feminine qualities, “virtue at times seemed to mean little more than female chastity.”33 In order for the young woman to assume her respectable female role as leader of republican virtue and morality in her household, she had to embody those ideals herself. Here, Ansximander also displayed a common understanding of innate, biological opposition between the sexes as he described education as leading the female away from “everything mean and groveling” or “rough”—characteristics that males were better suited to withstand—and toward her proper place filled with “softness,” “tenderness,” and “love.”

To fulfill Republican Motherhood, a young woman received an education only in the service of her family, so that she might raise virtuous republican sons to become the future leaders of the God-blessed nation, and to stimulate virtue and morality in her husband and leader of her household. Clio, in 1774, emphasized the importance of a Lady’s education when she stressed “the advantage it will be to those who are under their care, their learning and virtues may survive in posterity and shine with improvement, as the declining sun sets to rise more fair.”34 Sophronia reiterated this point in 1789 as she pointed out the significance of motherly influence on “the boasted Lords of Creation” who “are dependent, for years, upon the maternal fondness; and ought not these mothers to receive in early life, such instruction as may be profitable to their children?”35 Those alive in the Revolutionary Era saw a young lady’s education more as a benefit to the future “Lords of Creation” and the new Republic that depended on them than as an individual service to the “young fair,” specifically, as her future was already clear. Sophronia continued with this sentiment when she asked the question, “are those females, who have enjoyed only a superficial education, proper companions for our secretary—fit mothers for our legislature?...How mortifying is it to find all within a void and barren waste, when the outside shell is loaded with every ornament?”36 Sophronia’s questions regarding female instruction are significant because she recognizes the sole purpose of a young lady in the new Republic to be to submit to and serve her male leaders.

The new citizens of the United States established the role of young females as a collective nurturing of the adolescent child that represented the new nation, and the imprinting on the leading male mind proper notions of virtue and republican morality. Without this crucial instruction the new, mighty Republic would surely fall. Benjamin Rush similarly recognized the need for good republican Mothers to provide responsible young sons in order to lead the new nation in his “Thoughts Upon Female Education” addressed “to the Visitors of the Young Ladies’ Academy in Philadelphia.” He proclaimed, “There have been few great or good men who have not been blessed with the wise and prudent mothers.” He offered up four examples of men, from Constantine to Cyrus, who

33 Wood, Radicalism, 357.
34 Clio, “On Female Education,” 2.
36 Ibid., 4.
were saved by the virtue and wisdom of their mothers, and claimed, "many other instances might be mentioned, if necessary, from ancient and modern history, to establish the truth of this proposition."37 Rush continued to venerate the role of the Republican Mother as he stated, "There is no fame in the world equal to this; nor is there a note in music half so delightful, as the respectful language with which a grateful son or daughter perpetuates the memory of a sensible and affectionate mother."38 Rush warned the young ladies, however, that a lack of education will indeed bring about the return of female vices and the quick destruction of the glorious, young nation; "the first marks we shall perceive of our declension, will appear among our women. Their idleness, ignorance, and profligacy will be the harbingers of ruin."39

Education to Fulfill Duties of Female Delicacy, Domesticity, and Submission

If the model republican woman was to be instructed and refined in the service of the public sphere, she was also to be instructed to best fulfill traditional expectations of female delicacy, domesticity, and submission. Not all members of the new republican nation, however, agreed that education was fit for the delicate fair. Many held fast to the traditional belief that female instruction would lead to too much intellect and eventually would "unsex" the delicate ladies. Intellectual instruction could threaten a female’s gendered identity, essentially making her no longer a woman. According to Mary Beth Norton, "the difficulty was caused when a female tried to go beyond the knowledge appropriate to her sex, for then she risked becoming that universal object of ridicule and reproach, a ‘learned lady,’ a ‘female pedant.’"40

According to Leander, at the height of revolutionary fervor, the woman’s mind was too delicate and her nature too soft to impose on the intellectual rights of men. He noted this in 1774 as he questioned, “What can be more displeasing to the man of taste than female pedantry!?—It deprives the lady of that sweetness, so peculiar to the gentle soul of the fair...how must it disgust the refined ear, when introduced to a circle of the polite sex.”41 Leander expressed utter disgust at the thought of an exercised female mind invading the male intellectual circle. He continued to boast, “Surely these austere sciences, so adapted to the speculative minds of the deep learnt metaphysicians, hardly fit gracefully on the lips of the fair.” He then pleaded to society: “let them, therefore, be well instructed in the polite branches of literature—Men of real merit will court their company; and they will be universally esteemed as the ornament of human nature.”42

37 Rush, “Thoughts Upon Female Education,” 3.
38 Ibid., 2.
39 Ibid., 3.
42 Ibid., 2.

EX POST FACTO
The author of *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine*’s “Unhappy Effects of a Fashionable Female Education” in 1790 seemed to agree with Leander that ill-effects came from the over-education of republican ladies. “Unhappy Effects,” offered a cautionary tale of a wealthy young woman who had received an impractical education. “Through a series of misfortunes” she found herself begging a young man on the street for, “a penny, to save a wretch from starving.” The “poor, meager, ragged female” lamented, “if I had only been taught to handle the distaff, and my mind had been impressed with sentiments of humility, and the importance of industrious habits... I should not have fallen prey to the arts of seduction, and now experience the vanity of my once boasted education.”43 The author warned the female reader against the waste of intellectual instruction and pleaded for her to learn only what she might need to make herself useful as a woman in society, dependent upon her husband. The author begged, “May thy example impress the maxims of wisdom and benevolence on the mind of the affluent, and teach them to unite the useful with the ornamental.”44 For both Leander and the author of “Unhappy Effects,” intellectual instruction for females did not provide the necessary tools women needed to perform their God-given, natural roles. For Leander, this meant being an attractive, yet silent ornament for men to enjoy; for the author of “Unhappy Effects,” this meant fulfilling domestic duties that would make a woman valuable to society and a young man who could support her.

Many who published their opinions through magazines and newspapers expressed similar concern for the effects of education on the delicacy of the female mind and composition, using this concern to urge gender segregation in schooling in order to save young ladies from the harshness and brutality of a man’s instruction. In another one of his letters, Philometis persuaded the reader to separate his young daughters from his sons as he bemoaned “that the little innocents be sent into the claws of a tyrant, to a school, where the cheapest blunderer is called the best master.” He continued to deplore that “your poor daughters...the kindly disposition nature has given them, being discouraged, would vanish and they catching the infection from their master, would become little carping tyrants.”45 Benjamin Rush also commented on the need for separation to preserve femininity, arguing that in education segregated by gender, “female delicacy is cherished and preserved. Here the young ladies may enjoy all the literary advantages of boarding-school, and at the same time live under the protection of their parents.”46 Young females receiving instruction in the late eighteenth century needed protection from the harsh atmosphere and serious subject matter—such as business or law—of a young boy’s education,

43 “Unhappy Effects of a Fashionable Female Education: (A Fragment),” *The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine (1790–1792)*, May 1790, 284. 1
44 Ibid., 1.
without which their delicate, innocent character would be destroyed and the young ladies turned into "carping tyrants."

That the young fair were too delicate and might be corrupted by "tyrant" schoolmasters and serious subject matter seen fit for young boys made sense to those in the Revolutionary Era who assumed that young females were predestined to exist within a separate, private sphere. The author of "On the Education and Studies of Women," published in 1797, remarked that the study of chemistry, specifically, "is a science particularly suited to women...it applies immediately to useful and domestic purposes; and while the ingenuity of the most inventive mind may be exercised, there is no danger of inflaming the imagination." The author continued to note specifically that the study of science would "produce a salutary reform in receipt books, and must improve the accomplishments of every lady who unites in her person the offices of a housekeeper and wife."47 John Swanwick Esq., who also addressed the Young Ladies' Academy in Philadelphia in 1790, expressed that "all I could desire" of female education "is that it should form a part of the education of our ladies, generally, and that... they should be taught as much of it as may qualify them to please, charm, and entertain." Swanwick then expressed a desire to limit a woman's education only to that which would allow her the abilities to be a sufficient homemaker, charmer, and entertainer, as he says, "that the less time and experience than is generally imagined are fully sufficient for this."48

Benjamin Rush made a remarkable point about the utility of female instruction to the domestic realm of the fair in his address to the ladies of Philadelphia. In contemplating the uselessness of instruction of the French language, Rush stated, "the English language certainly contains many more books of real utility and useful information that can be read without neglecting other duties, by the daughter or wife of an American citizen."49 Rush knowingly or unknowingly unveiled within his speech the complex, gendered positions within the new Republic. Women were to be held strictly to their domestic, private sphere, and were defined in the public only as a "daughter or wife of an American Citizen." Not only was she not a citizen herself, Rush deprived her of any individual identity outside that of her husband or father and claimed that education should assist only under this specific assumption. At the end of his address he begged the young ladies specifically to consider whether their education has contributed to their "duties of social and domestic life." While remarking that some men considered female instruction to be "unfriendly to the domestic character of a woman," he assured them "this is the prejudice of little minds, and springs from the same spirit which opposes the general diffusion of knowledge among the citizens of other republics."50 While noting the benefits of

49 Rush, "Thoughts Upon Female Education," 2.
50 Ibid., 4.

EX POST FACTO
education, Rush continued to infuse republican ideology of gender and knowledge, implying that “diffusion of knowledge” is a unique characteristic of the new, noble United States, yet that for the female sex this knowledge should only be aimed at her virtuous, yet still very limited, domestic role. With these few words Rush clearly outlined the role of gender in republican and revolutionary society, in the context of female education.

As a young woman’s education was expected to protect to her delicate mind, and enforce her obligations to the home, so too did it promote female submission in marriage. Education would serve to shape the young female’s character to provide perfect companionship for the ideal republican union. As Kerber notes, while some wealthier families may have relied on education as a way for a young woman to sidestep marriage, most families used education as a “means of strengthening their daughters’ position within the marriage market.”

Many contributors to magazines and newspapers demonstrated this fact. Philometis wrote of the benefits of education to a young girl’s marriage potential in his second “Letter to Parents,” saying, “Single, they would be agreeable, married, the most endearing companion. They would have other topics for delight and entertainment, than the common chat.” Anximander similarly noted that female instruction “would make the female sex fit companions in our most serious hours, would make them as fair within as without.” Benjamin Rush also commented on the proper ends of education as he noted that “to be the mistress of a family is one of the great ends of a woman’s being.” Female education optimized a young woman’s prospect of marriage by making her the ultimate companion for her public and political male counterpart.

Many of the writers who described marriageability as one of the benefits of female instruction made this argument by underlining the importance of female submission within wedlock. The author of “On the Education and Studies of Women” asked whether women of insufficient and “uncultivated understanding” could make appropriate female companions. He remarked that proper instruction for females would allow young women who “cannot precisely force the tastes of the person with whom they may be connected” to learn the art of submission where “their happiness will greatly depend upon their being able to conform their tastes to his.”

Benjamin Rush made the strongest argument for education as a means to enhance a young woman’s marital submission. He remarked on the importance of female intelligence as a means to make young women more manageable under the government of their husbands. He stated that “if men believe that ignorance is favorable to the government of the female sex, they are certainly deceived; for a weak and ignorant woman will always be governed with the greatest difficulty.” He then pleaded to the young ladies: “it will be in your power, LADIES, to correct the mistakes and practice of our sex...by

51 Kerber, Women of the Republic, 208.
52 Philometis, “II,” 1.
53 Rush, “Thoughts Upon Female Education,” 2.
demonstrating that the female temper can only be governed by reason, and that the cultivation of reason in women, is alike friendly to the order of nature, and to private as well as public happiness.” Not only did Rush describe the use of education to promote the ultimate goal of female submission, but he also made it a woman’s republican duty to enhance her ability to be “governed” as the “order of nature” and the health of the home and nation depend on it.55 Furthermore, Rush displayed the common dichotomy of male and female discourse exhibited by many of these authors, highlighting how many eighteenth-century thinkers viewed sexual and gender difference. Rush clearly saw the female as an object to be governed by male authority and education as the means to provide this structure. Specifically intriguing is that his remarks came not ten years after the end of the Revolutionary War, when the United States won their independence from the government of the tyrannical British monarchy. This fact, if nothing else, shows the sheer exclusion of females from the new, egalitarian republican ideology. Leading males (subconsciously or consciously) used education to enforce continued female submission and gender hierarchy, perhaps to contain the threat of too much independence in republican society.

**Conclusion**

While education signified a newfound freedom, prosperity, and duty for the newly formed United States as a whole, female education specifically reinforced the recently conceived concept of bifurcated gender difference, which was needed to preserve a structure of gender hierarchy within the new, egalitarian republican society. While men were expected to become educated in order to fulfill their public and political roles at all levels in society, the Republic expected young ladies to become educated almost entirely to inform their domestic and private service to their families and the new nation. Perhaps the most significant role for females was that of the Republican Mother, in which a woman became educated in the virtues and morals of the new nation not only to refine her own inherently erratic female character, but more so to better raise her young sons to become the informed and responsible future leaders of the new United States. Republican society specifically expected female instruction to respect the delicacy of the female mind and composition, guide the woman in her domestic obligations, and ultimately improve her ability to be “governed” by her male authority. These expectations, based upon a belief in innate opposition between male and female sexuality and gender, were demonstrated clearly through the contrasting language used to describe each within the context of education. Ultimately, the gender ideology of late eighteenth-century republican society is significant because it protected certain hierarchies within an increasingly egalitarian society. While the American public and political arena teemed with debates about “freedom” and “unchained liberty,” leading figures from all sides took great care to cultivate the continued rule of American women.

---


**EX POST FACTO**
Bibliography


"Education: The Importance of Accommodating the Mode of Education to the Form of Government." *The American Magazine, Containing a Miscellaneous Collection of Original and Other Valuable Essays in Prose and Verse, and Calculated Both for Instruction and Amusement (1787-1788)*, 1,5; April 1788.


Leander. "On the Education of the Fair Sex," *The Royal American Magazine, or Universal Repository of Instruction and Amusement (1774-1775)*, 1,4, April 1774.


http://www.oed.com


Swanwick, John Esq.“Thoughts on Education, addressed to the Visitors of the Young Ladies’ Academy, in Philadelphia.” The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine (1790-1792), October 1790.

“Unhappy Effects of a Fashionable Female Education: (A Fragment).” The Universal Asylum and Columbian Magazine (1790-1792), May, 1790.


EX POST FACTO