

A TRUE REVOLUTION

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TOPIC: The American Revolution's ideal of "republicanism" and a discussion of the reasons for why it took on such a revolutionary character.

A True Revolution

Perhaps it is hard to envision a transformation of society in which republicanism became the prevailing political ideology as a truly "revolutionary" event, at least within a modern-day context. However, for those who lived in eighteenth century Anglo-American society, the American Revolution and its ideal of republicanism was truly revolutionary for altering the political and structures of the time. Republicanism implied a social order that profoundly replaced the nature of Old Society. It was instrumental in thoroughly redefining the roles of various social groups within American society. The Americans used republicanism to create

institutions of government that were fundamentally different from the British system they replaced. In effect, the Revolution transformed a monarchical society in which the colonists were “subjects”, into a republic in which the colonists were transformed into equal citizens under the law with the ability to participate in the political process.

The American Revolution’s ideal of republicanism entailed social implications that were far-reaching because it essentially disintegrated the old pre-capitalistic society that was based on patronage and dependent relationships. In Old Society, politics involved personal maneuvering and manipulation because society was bound together by lines of interests and connection, as validated by Gordon Wood. However, the social order that emerged after the American Revolution entailed members of a republic world who would maintain public order by voluntarily giving power to the state, with the expectation that their rights would be preserved and their society would be equal. According to John Locke, whose works formed the basis for many of the principles governing the new republic, “The great end of men’s entering into society being the enjoyment of their properties... the supreme power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his consent”. Public order within Old Society was maintained because of the monarchy’s corrupting influence whereas republicanism held society together by the “virtue” of the people. It can be said that the eventual transition to republicanism in 1776 possessed immense social significance that was radical for its time period, and thus truly “revolutionary” in its nature as a fundamental ideal of the American Revolution.

The American Revolution also profoundly deepened the divisions between certain groups of people while redefining the roles of others. For one, the Revolution’s propagation of republicanism exposed the continuing tension between the nation’s commitment to principles such as liberty, and its simultaneous advocating of slavery. This caused widely differing opinions

between colonists in the South, whose plantation success relied heavily on slavery, and those in the North, whose exposure to Evangelical Christian fervor enabled anti-slavery sentiment to spread. Native Americans were another group of people swept into the whirlpool of ideas and events that became the American Revolution, and the triumph of the Patriots contributed significantly to their weakened position in the end. Finally, women were a social group whose lives saw extensive changes because of the American Revolution. Women were left in charge of farms and businesses while their husbands or fathers were off at war. The emphasis on “liberty” and “equal rights” led some women to question their own position in society. Many Americans of the time believed they were producing a kind of citizen that was different from the traditional “subject” and therefore, women had an important task as mothers in directing their children in the virtues of republican citizenry. Overall, the American Revolution represented an era of social upheaval in which a great variety of people were exposed to its ideas and events and forced to decide whether their own beliefs aligned with those of the revolution. In this sense, the Revolution demonstrates the complex root of ideas beneath the divisions caused by republicanism and the genuinely held convictions about rights and power held by the revolutionaries, thus legitimately qualifying the Americans’ bid for Independence and defense of republicanism as a truly revolutionary occurrence.

As a result of the American Revolution, the Americans created fundamentally different institutions of government in which power came from the people, rather than from supreme authority. Such a society would consist of a population ingrained with civic virtue as opposed to the society of a few powerful aristocrats and a great mass of dependent workers. Also crucially important to the new governmental ideology of republicanism was the concept of equality, which is best encapsulated in the recognizable phrase from the Declaration of Independence, “All men

are created equal”. Rather than power being distributed by birth and wealth as it has been in the feudal structure for so long, the revolutionaries sought to determine the roles of people in society based on their talents and merits. Both the creation of state and national governments amidst the Revolution reflected an ideology that was starkly different from the British governmental ideologies implemented in colonial society. The Constitution of 1787 would eventually emerge as a resolution to the issue of state and national sovereignty while also establishing a “separation of powers” among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The federal structure of the government was designed to protect against the tyranny Americans believed had emerged in England and thus represented an opposite form of government that revolutionized the nature of how authority was exercised. The idea of having state versus national governments was a concept that was completely foreign to England and the rest of Europe for that matter, so the political structure that republicanism allowed for and produced should be considered very progressive for its time and thus “revolutionary”.

As should be clear, the American Revolution and its ideal of republicanism was significant because it remade the social order, redefined the roles of various social groups, and established a completely new form of government. More broadly, the American Revolution and the ideal of republicanism it so strongly affiliated with fits within the historical time period known as the “Age of Revolutions”. To examine this period, one must first examine the ideas of the Enlightenment from which the whole notion of overturning old systems and regimes was derived. The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement that swept across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries and popularized the ideas of popular sovereignty, individual freedom, and legal equality. The American Revolution was one of many Enlightenment-inspired uprisings and served as a strong model of inspiration to people in other countries who sought to overthrow

their unpopular governments. Just about a decade after the American Revolution, a revolt by the French national legislature against the king emerged in 1789 and eventually evolved into a radical challenge to established authority. The French Revolution surely evolved into a more bloody transformation of society but nonetheless can be considered an offshoot of the American Revolution. Models of resistance such as the American Revolution helped to inspire many more uprisings as part of the “Age of Revolutions”, including the Haitian slave revolt, the Latin American revolutions against the Spanish and Portuguese, and the Greek revolutionary movement against the Ottomans. To conclude, the American Revolution and its ideal of republicanism was truly revolutionary because of its immense significance within America society internally, but also because it served as an inspiration and model of resistance for other nations within the “Age of Revolutions”.

Works Cited

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