AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The American Revolution began in the early 1760s with changes in British colonial policy. Resistance opened a large problem: belonging to Britain while residing outside the British realm. The problem proved insurmountable as argument and riot led to open warfare. But virtually until independence in 1776, most rebels wanted only to stave off unwanted changes, and in this sense the Revolution was “conservative.”

Abandoning British loyalty and identity forced enormous changes. Monarchy yielded to republicanism, easy to accept as an ideal but hard to work out in practice. Hierarchy beneath a king gave way to proclaimed equality. Ordinary white men who had been marginal claimed full political citizenship. White women and enslaved people of color, whom the old order had virtually excluded from public life, demanded that American liberty should apply to them, as well. Both slaves and Native Americans waged their own struggles for independence, and slavery did begin to crumble. Wartime needs gave rise to a national economy.

By the Revolution’s end a separate, republican American people existed, with powerful political institutions to achieve its will. Energies had been released that would transform both the American people and the American continent. However, entirely new problems had emerged and only some of them were resolved. Others would prove as difficult as the questions on which the British Empire had foundered. In these senses, the Revolution was radical and transforming.

AN EMPIRE FALLS APART

In 1763 Britain stood triumphant over its ancient rival France. British merchant capitalism was delivering unprecedented wealth. Britons and Europeans alike celebrated British liberty, based on the premise that the British monarch could rule only with the consent of Parliament, the legislative body of Great Britain. White colonials joined in the celebrations, singing “Rule Britannia!” and huzzahing for the youthful George III (1738–1820), their “best of kings.” Like their fellows in “the realm,” the people of the overseas dominions were fully and proudly British.

But being British had two possible meanings. From London’s viewpoint, all Britons owed obedience to the supreme authority, the king-in-parliament, which was Great Britain’s absolute sovereign power. The British House of Commons represented the interests and protected the liberties of all Britons everywhere. Colonials had given little thought to such matters, but if pressed they would have said otherwise. Parliament could address large imperial questions, but their assemblies protected their local liberties and privileges. As long as Parliament did not exercise its claims, the question was effectively moot.

Defeating the French, however, had been very expensive, and British officials believed that Americans had not done their part. They also thought that the local assemblies were fractious and needed to be reined in. Some feared the northern colonies would become rivals. The answer seemed simple. Tax the colonies directly and control their economies. The money would stay in America, to pay salaries and maintain troops. But Parliament, not the local assemblies, would raise it.

The result was the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts (1767), as well as a host of administrative changes. None of the taxes matched what Britons paid at home, but they were to be paid in coin, which was scarce in America. Further, the new laws were to be enforced in vice-admiralty courts, whose judges could be fired and where no juries sat. The Stamp Act, in particular, threatened the well-being of the entire commercial economy. The act undercut the power of colonial elites to use finance as a weapon in their ongoing struggle with royal governors. It also threatened colonials with taxes on virtually all business transactions, to be payable in hard coin, which they simply did not have.

Colonials protested with words and deeds, and the British retreated twice. But at the end of 1773, when Bostonians destroyed three shiploads of valuable East India Company tea rather than pay the one import duty still in effect, Parliament decided that it had retreated enough. It would isolate Boston and Massachusetts and punish them severely. Shocked and in awe, the other colonies would retreat.

OLD ISSUES DIE, NEW PROBLEMS EMERGE

Instead, matters worsened. Troops occupied Boston, and people in rural areas refused to let Parliament’s attempt to reform the province take effect. By the late summer of 1774, British authority in Massachusetts extended only where royal troops could march. Their commander, General Thomas Gage (1721–1787), was also the governor of the province, and he knew that rural armies were being formed. Acting under orders from London, he tried to seize a cache of supplies at Concord, Massachusetts, on April 19, 1775, along with rebel leaders who were there. Instead, he launched a war.

By that time the effort to isolate Massachusetts had failed. One Continental Congress (the federal legislature of the thirteen American colonies and later of the entire United States following the American Revolution) had met, and another was preparing to assemble. Provincial
congresses and local committees were draining power from the old institutions. People from New Hampshire to Georgia rallied to support Massachusetts. George Washington emerged as American commander and began the long task of turning a haphazard volunteer force into an army capable of facing Britain.

But for fourteen more months Americans held on to the idea that they could turn back the clock. In January 1776 Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* argued that all monarchy needed to end and that for Americans it was “time to part.” Paine’s powerful language and vision of a transformed world reached people of all sorts, and they began to assert their own claims, challenging the ideas that the “better sort” deserved to rule the rest and that women should not have political voices, and that among America’s precious liberties was the privilege of holding slaves. Nonetheless, for many slaves and native people, the king seemed to offer a better prospect for freedom than any congress.

The Declaration of Independence was more temperate than Paine’s pamphlet. Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), who drafted it, and Congress, which edited and adopted it, knew that attacking all monarchy would not play well with the French king, who already was giving secret aid. At the center of the document, Jefferson penned a crescendo-like indictment of “the present king of Great Britain,” presenting “facts” to a “candid world.” As his last count, Jefferson tried to blame the king both for forcing black slavery on unwilling white Americans and for encouraging slaves to rise. It was bad history and worse logic, written in tortured language. Congress dropped it, but it did demonstrate one point. Slavery was on the new republic’s agenda, ultimately to the point that it nearly destroyed what the Revolution achieved.

**THE NEW AMERICAN ORDER**

Immediately, however, the revolutionaries had to confront two urgent problems. One was winning the war. Excited by early successes and convinced of their own virtue, they expected a short conflict. But what began with a firefight in Massachusetts turned into a global conflict, involving not just France, which became an American ally in 1778, but most of Europe. The main North American war ended at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. The very last hostilities involving Europeans were in India. French forces first intervened there in 1778, and between 1780 and 1782. The two sides fought on the Indian mainland, Ceylon, and in Indian waters. Word of the Treaty of Paris arrived just as the British were about to lay siege to the major French stronghold, at Cuddalore, south of Madras. For native people, threatened by the American victory and abandoned by the British at the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the conflict simply continued.

Secondly, the war brought major changes, requiring a national economy in order to meet the army’s needs and creating a national elite, the men who went on to create the United States in its present form. It shook slavery, and it stimulated women, left to manage affairs, to think and act for themselves. It drove out thousands of loyalists, white, black, and native, who left rather than accept the Revolution’s triumph.

Nobody gave any thought to calling a European prince, in the way that the English had called William and Mary to the throne when they overthrew James II in 1688. There was no question that the Americans would be republican. But creating a republican order proved very difficult. Most fundamentally, it raised the problem of how to give real meaning to the idea that “the people” now were the final authority. The earliest state constitutions were simply proclaimed into effect. Not until 1780 in Massachusetts was there a popular vote on whether to accept a state’s proposed constitution. In all the states, debate raged between the idea of a remote, complex government and the idea of simple, responsive institutions. The new institutions brought men to the center of affairs who had been mere onlookers under the old order. New York split, as Vermont seceded from it, and people in the other states thought of doing the same. In 1786 Massachusetts erupted into armed conflict as farmers rose to close the courts rather than let tough fiscal policies threaten their farms. Looking around at the time, George Washington saw the danger of similar insurrections everywhere.

In 1784 Washington had seen that Americans had acquired “a mighty empire,” stretching from the Atlantic to the Mississippi and from Florida to the Great Lakes. At its center was the extremely weak Confederation Congress (the immediate successor to the Second Continental Congress), where each state had one vote and every state could veto major change. Under Congress, the United States had won the war and negotiated a very successful peace. It laid down its own colonial policy, by providing for new states in the western territories, if it could force native people out.

But in peacetime, Congress withered and men like Washington worried about the states. The result was the United States Constitution, written by a special convention in Philadelphia in 1787 and brought into effect when New Hampshire became the ninth state to ratify it in June 1788. Writing the Constitution required great creativity. Ratifying it meant hard conflict among people with widely differing visions of the American future.

Farmers, city artisans, women, slaves, and natives: All of these as well as the familiar “Founding Fathers” took part in the Revolution’s course. All of them had voices in what the Revolution wrought. Together, though rarely in agreement, they forged an unprecedented republic that
that was capitalistic and democratic, elitist and open, racist and egalitarian, imperial and inclusive, operating under a political settlement—the Constitution—that included all those qualities. They had abandoned the problems that went with being British. They solved many of the problems that rose from independence and republicanism. But they were only beginning to address the more profound social and ideological issues that their revolution raised.

SEE ALSO Bill of Rights, U.S.; Burr, Aaron; Confederations; Congress, U.S.; Constitution, U.S.; Coup d’Etat; Declaration of Independence, U.S.; Empire; Franklin, Benjamin; Hamilton, Alexander; Loyalists; Monarchy; Parliament, United Kingdom; Political System; Republicanism; Revolution; Slavery; Violence; Voting; Washington, George

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Historically, the social sciences in the United States were the province of amateurs, clergy, and practitioners who belonged to the interdisciplinary American Social Science Association. During the early twentieth century, the social sciences came to be the province of academically trained PhDs working in separate disciplines. Sociology broke away from the American Social Science Association and later became part of the American Economics Association. Finally, fifty sociologists formed the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 1905. Since its founding, the ASA has grown to an organization of nearly 14,000 members. During its first 100 years, the ASA grew in complexity as well as in size as it attempted to meet members’ needs and responded to contentious as well as ordinary issues—issues that continue to affect the discipline as a whole.

PROFESSIONALISM

The professorate in sociology has become professionalized along several dimensions: its long training period terminating in a PhD, its claim to autonomy and freedom in research and in the classroom, its relative freedom from supervision, its body of specialized knowledge, and its adherence to a code of ethics. As of 2000, about 70 percent of sociology PhDs were employed in academia. Since 1933, especially during periods of economic downturn, the ASA or its members have attempted to develop positions for professional sociologists outside of the professorate. These efforts, an effort to control the labor supply, were buttressed by claims about the overproduction of PhDs. At the same time, there were strong feelings that practicing sociology outside of the academy, especially in political or business settings, compromised scientific objectivity and theoretical rigor. The distinction between scientific sociology and client-oriented sociology decreased with the growth of pressure for academics to seek outside funding and with the increase in state-mandated accountability and assessment requirements for faculty. The most recent rewriting of the ASA Code of Ethics bound both academic and nonacademic sociologists to avoid conflicts of interest, assure confidentiality, and respect people’s “rights, dignity, and diversity.”

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Because norms of autonomy and control are important in research and teaching, the ASA developed institutional mechanisms for dealing with issues of academic freedom. In the early years, the ASA joined with the American Economics Association and the American Political Science Association in a Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure. This committee produced one report. During the 1950s, members of the ASA passed a resolution at the annual business meeting “deploring such discriminatory requirements” as loyalty oaths on account of the special interest of social scientists in inquiring about controversial social, political, and economic issues. In the 1980s the ASA’s elected Council founded the Committee on Freedom in Research and Teaching (COFRAT) to protect individual freedom of research and teaching. During the 1980s this committee served in a fact-finding capacity on individuals’ complaints against institutions and recommended institutional sanctions if warranted. These efforts became increasingly acrimonious as institutions protested COFRAT’s work. A committee appointed to review COFRAT’s mission recommended that COFRAT should