Taking Sides

Issue Six

Was The American Revolution a Conservative Movement?

p. 120, ¶ 1, line 1 – “Was the American Revolution a true revolution? The answer may depend on how the term revolution is defined.”

p. 120, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Early historians did not concern themselves with the social and economic aspects of the American Revolution.”

p. 121, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Both the Whig and the imperialist historians assumed that the Revolution was an external even whose primary cause was the political differences between the colonists and their British rulers.”

Yes

p. 122, ¶ 1, line 4 – “The American War for Independence was such an event. Begun for only limited political and constitutional purposes, the war released social forces which few of the leaders ever anticipated, but which have helped to mold the American tradition.”

p. 122, ¶ 1, line 1 – “One such unforeseen result was the rapid and final disestablishment of the Anglican Church, heretofore the state-supported religion in all of the colonies south of Mason and Dixon’s line and in parts of New York and New Jersey as well.”

p. 122, ¶ 3, line 1 – “The ratification of the federal Constitution in 1788 constituted the first step in the acceptance of the principle that man’s religion was irrelevant to government, for the Constitution forbade all religious tests for office holding.”

p. 123, ¶ 2, line 1 – “In the course of early nineteenth century, the federal example of a strict divorce of State and Church was emulated by the individual states.”

p. 123, ¶ 3, line 1 – “It was a remarkably novel and even unique approach to the question of relation between the State and religion. Although the doctrine repudiates any connection between State and the Church, the American version has little in common with the practice in countries like revolutionary France and Mexico and atheistic Soviet Russia, where separation has been so hostile to religion as to interfere, at times, with freedom of worship.”
p. 123, ¶ 5, line 1 – “As the principle of the separation of Church and State was a kind of social side effect of the Revolution, so also was the assertion in the Declaration of Independence that ‘all men are created equal.’”

p. 124, ¶ 2, line 6 – “The passionate belief in social equality which commentators and travelers in Jacksonian America could later find so powerful was already emergent in their earlier period.”

p. 124, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Despite the lowly position accorded the Negro, wrote the French traveler [Jacques-Pierre] Brissot in 1788, it must be admitted ‘that the American more than any other people are convinced that all men are born free and equal.’”

p. 124, ¶ 4, line 8 – “By the end of the century old social distinctions like rank-seating in churches and the differentiating title of esquire were fast passing out of vogue.”

p. 125, ¶ 4, line 1 – “It is significant... that no new social class came to power through the door of the American Revolution.”

p. 125, ¶ 5, line 5 – “But the Loyalist departure did not decapitate the colonial social structure, as some have suggested– it only removed those most attached to the mother country. A large part of the governing class remained to guide the Revolution and reap its favors.”

p. 125, ¶ 2, line 1 – “A convenient gauge of the essential continuity of the governing class in America before and after the Revolution is to be found in an examination of the careers of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.”

p. 127, ¶ 3, line 1 – “Even the abolition of primogeniture in all the southern states by 1791 cannot be taken as a significant example of the Revolution’s economic influence.”

p. 127, ¶ 5, line 1 – “Instead of being an abrupt break, the Revolution was a natural and even expected event in the history of a colonial people who had come of age.”

No

p. 130, ¶ 1, line 16 – “There was no reign of terror in the American Revolution and no resultant dictator– no Cromwell, no Bonaparte. The American Revolution does not seem to have the same kinds of causes – the social wrongs, the class conflict, the impoverishment, the grossly inequitable distributions of wealth – that
presumably lie behind other revolutions.”

p. 130, ¶ 2, line 6 – “Since the beginning of the twentieth century these Progressive historians have formulated various social interpretations of the American Revolution essentially designed to that the Revolution... was not about ‘home rule’ but also about ‘who was to rule at home.’ They essentially have tried to describe the Revolution essentially as a social struggle by deprived and underprivileged groups against entrenched elites.”

p. 131, ¶ 1, line 8 – “There should no longer be any doubt about it: the white American colonists were not an oppressed people; they had no crushing imperial chains to throw off.”

p. 131, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Precisely because the impulses to revolution in eighteenth-century America bear little or no resemblance to the impulses that presumably account for modern social protests and revolutions, we have tended to think of the American Revolution as having no social character, as having virtually nothing to do with the society, as having no social causes and no social consequences.”

p. 131, ¶ 3, line 1, through the whole ¶ – “If we measure the radicalism of revolutions by the degree of social misery or economic deprivation suffered, or by the number of people killed or manor houses burned, then this conventional emphasis on the conservatism of the American Revolution becomes true enough...”

p. 132, ¶ 1, line 1 – “It was as radical and social as any revolution in history, but it was radical and social in a very special eighteenth-century sense.”

p. 132, ¶ 2, line 1 – “By the time the Revolution had run it course in the early nineteenth century, American society had been radically and thoroughly transformed.”

p. 132, ¶ 3, line 1 – “That revolution did more than legally create the United States; it transformed American society.”

p. 133, ¶ 2, line 4 – “It was the Revolution, more than any other single event, that made America into the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world.”

p. 133, ¶ 3, line 14 – “…the American Revolution and the social transformation of America between 1760 and the early years of the nineteenth century were inextricably bound together.”

p. 133, ¶ 4, line 1 – “These changes were radical, and they were extensive.”
p. 134, ¶ 2, line 5 – “For most white Americans there was greater prosperity than anywhere else in the world; in fact, the experience of that growing prosperity contributed to the unprecedented eighteenth-century sense that people here and now were capable of ordering their own reality.”

p. 134, ¶ 2, line 21 – “But social classes based on occupation or wealth did not set themselves against one another, for no classes in this modern sense yet existed.”

p. 135, ¶ 3, line 1 – “It is this context that we can best understand the revolutionaries’ appeal to independence, not just the independence of the country from Great Britain, but, more important, the independence of individuals from personal influence and ‘warm and private friendship.’”

p. 136, ¶ 2, line 1 – “All dependents without property, such as women and young men, could be denied the vote because, as a convention of Essex County, Massachusetts declared in 1778, they were so situated to have no wills of their own.”

p. 136, ¶ 3, line 3 – “What was an ideal in the English-speaking world now became for Americans and ideological imperative.”

p. 137, ¶ 2, line 1 – “Of course, the revolutionary leaders did not expect poor, humble men – farmers, artisans or tradesmen – themselves to gain high political office.”

p. 137, ¶ 3, line 1 – “In their revolutionary state constitutions and laws the revolutionaries struck out at the power of family and hereditary privilege.”

p. 138, ¶ 2, line 1 – “One obvious dependency the revolutionaries did not completely abolish was that of nearly a half-million Afro-American slaves, and their failure to do so, amidst all their high-blown talk of liberty, makes them seem inconsistent and hypocritical in our eyes.”

p. 138, ¶ 4, line 1 – “With all men now considered to be equally free citizens, the way was prepared as well for a radical change in the conception of state power.”

Note: The Postscript paragraphs found on page 139 provide an excellent analysis of both articles.