

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

BOOK REVIEW:

THE RADICALISM OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

BY GORDON S. WOOD

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO

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Wood, Gordon S. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1992; Vintage Books, 1993.

Compared to the violent and bloody events of the French Revolution that were brought on by dire poverty and class conflict, Americans have viewed their revolution for liberty and equality as being rather conservative. However, Gordon S. Wood argues in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* that the American Revolution was anything but conservative, emphasizing that “only if we measure radicalism by violence and bloodshed” can the American Revolution be defined that way (231). He explains that the belief in equality that Thomas Jefferson described in the *Declaration of Independence* was radical in scope as it set the stage for the destruction of the monarchical social/political hierarchy that allowed for the creation and the rule of the middle class in America.

Wood portrays colonial American society as a backwards place that was pleading for a revolution, with blacks bound to spend their lives as slaves, tens of thousands of whites mitigated to indentured servitude for what could be a good part of their lives, where the hard work of the average man was looked down upon by the elites, and where the social structure to get ahead in society depended on the people one knew and what they thought of him. If that were not bad enough, the British would never allow individuals from the plebeian class, such as Benjamin Franklin, to rise into the aristocracy, regardless of the success they achieved. Feeling unfulfilled in this society, despite it being one of the most liberal societies in the world for the time, Americans in this time period wanted more, and after hearing Thomas Paine’s passionate argument in *Common Sense* “that there [was] something absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island,” Americans united behind colonial leaders, like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Samuel and John Adams in supporting a

revolution against the mighty island-nation, Great Britain, in order to achieve the equality they felt they deserved.¹

Wood contends that after the revolution, “with all men now considered to be equally free citizens the way was prepared...for a radical change in the conception of state power (187).” However, the revolution cannot be given so much credit for this change. Wood explains that colonial society was already changing before the revolution, with individuals wanting more out of their lives than the current order would allow. In addition, the economy was expanding with the average person becoming more materialistic. Therefore, it was only a matter of time before the masses would have joined the workforces in order to afford a more luxurious lifestyle. Thereafter, workers would have organized, as they did when they entered the workforce, to demand better treatment and opportunity to advance in their companies and in society. While this would have taken a more aggressive stance on the workers part, it was indeed inevitable, as was the case in Great Britain after the masses entered the industrial age.

Additionally, Wood credits the Revolution with “set[ting] in motion [the] ideological and social forces that doomed the institution of slavery in the North and led inexorably to the Civil War (186-87).” By all means, this is a profound stretch of the imagination on his part. If anything, it might be possible to claim that the Revolution was a failure then because if equality was how victory was measured, the colonial leadership never strived for it for the women, who still were not afforded any political power, for the white men who did not own a certain amount of property still could not vote, and for the blacks who continued to be enslaved, life was not much better. The purpose of the revolution and as Wood explains, why “all the major revolutionary leaders died less than happy with the results of the Revolution” was because they intended equality only for

¹ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995), 31.

themselves, to make themselves equal to the leadership of Great Britain without regard for everyone else (365).

If anything, the revolution ensured that slavery would continue for as long as it did, with the Southerners even being induced into an unequal United States with the Constitution allowing them to count five slaves as three white men for representation purposes in the House of Representatives. Had there been no American Revolution, slavery would have ended much sooner than it did, without a war, because Great Britain ended slavery in the 1830s and if the American colonies were still a part of Great Britain, it would have ended at the very same time. If the Southern colonies resisted, with the power of Great Britain, in addition to the support of the Northern colonies, they would have swept into the South and put an end to any rebellion. So, the revolution cannot be given credit for the ordinary man gaining power in society. Ordinary men gained power in spite of the revolution that betrayed them and the cause of equality they believed in.

For his study, the *Radicalism of the American Revolution*, Gordon S. Wood uses the usual correspondence of the revolutionary war leaders, including John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, among others, to discuss their viewpoints and perspectives, in addition to synthesizing a great amount of the research that was done on the American Revolution up to his book's publication in 1992. His descriptions, though, are generally of life in the North, possibly because discussing Southern life may have undermined his premise of how great the Revolution was for creating "equality." He unfortunately does not provide a bibliography for suggested readings on the American Revolution either. Overall, Wood provides a compelling and acceptable argument that the American Revolution was radical because of its professed quest for equality, which was unheard of for its time, but overall, he fails to win the argument that the social order of the colonies was changed because of the American Revolution.