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# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC

Gordon S. Wood

Until very recently the period from the American Revolution to the election of Andrew Jackson was the most neglected if not the most despised period of American history. Although this has not always been the case, certainly during the past generation or so—during the golden age of historical reinterpretation following World War II—the early republic was slighted and scorned. While historians during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were engaged in major reevaluations of most other periods of American history, they virtually ignored the early republic. And the period consequently developed a reputation for dreariness and for being the most boring part of American history to study and teach.

This is a curious situation, and it is not easily explained. The period after all seems to have an immediate and palpable importance for all Americans. During the half century following the Revolution our political institutions were established, political parties were developed, and a political economy was worked out. It is the period when American nationalism is generally thought to have been created. All in all, so much of significance occurred in this period of the early republic that its neglect is puzzling.

Neglect may be the wrong word to describe the situation. It is not that no attention has been paid to the early republic in the past forty years. Far from it. There have been many books and articles written, but little has come of them. Unlike the antebellum period or the Populist era, there have been no major attempts made to reinterpret the period, to bring the many monographs together, and to erect overarching compelling syntheses. Ten or fifteen years ago there were

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some tentative efforts to apply the social science concept of "modernization" to the period.[1] But, as often happens, historians began using the concept just as it was going out of fashion among social scientists. Thus the effort died aborning, and the scholarship of the period remains diffuse and unconnected, without compelling significance.

Instead of setting forth overall schemes for organizing the period of the early republic, historians in the decades following World War II have dealt with discrete problems. There has been, for example, important work on the origins of political parties. Political scientists and political sociologists like William Nesbit Chambers and Seymour Lipset were very interested in the conditions out of which political structures and political parties were created. Thus the United States became the "first new nation" and the conflict between Federalists and Republicans became the "first party system."[2] Despite all their apparent interest in the past, however, these political scientists were not historians. They were primarily concerned with forming generalizations about politics that were applicable to the present, in particular to the experience of newly developing nations in the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, they were not always sensitive to the differentness of the past, and in their books they often left us with a very unhistorical and anachronistic view of America's political parties in the early republic. Only recently has this conception of the "first party system" been seriously challenged in the work of Richard Buel, Jr., Ronald Formisano, and Ralph Ketcham.[3]

A number of other topics in the early republic have been intensely studied, and these likewise clearly reflect present concerns. During the past several decades there have been a number of books on the Indians and the tragic conflict between whites and native Americans that climaxed with Indian removal.[4] We have had some notable studies

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[1] Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600-1865* (New York 1976).

[2] William Nisbet Chambers, *Political Parties in a New Nation: The American Experience, 1776-1809* (New York 1963); Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York 1979). The early republic continues to fascinate political scientists. For recent studies see Rudolph M. Bell, *Party and Faction in American Politics: The House of Representatives, 1789-1801* (Westport, Conn. 1973), and John F. Hoadley, *Origins of American Political Parties, 1789-1803* (Lexington, Ky. 1986).

[3] Richard Buel, Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789-1815* (Ithaca 1972); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York 1983); Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency, 1789-1829* (Chapel Hill 1984).

[4] In a huge literature see in particular Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's*

of blacks and of slavery, or more precisely of white attitudes toward blacks and slavery.[5] Until recently we have not had much scholarship on the lives of the black slaves themselves during the early republic.[6] More fully covered has been the changing role of women during the period; indeed, the early republic is now emerging as a major area for historical scholarship on women.[7] Still, most of these imaginative studies of Indians, blacks, and women remain isolated and unconnected, uninvolved as yet in any overall reinterpretation of the period.

Since the early republic, of all the periods of American history, is the period of "great men," it is not surprising that our historical scholarship on the period has continually devoted a great deal of its energy to the lives of these great men. All the Founders—Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Marshall, and so on—have continually been the subjects of biographies. Scarcely a year passes when one or another of them does not have his life reportrayed in print. And of course each of them now has his own mammoth papers project underway, each promising to publish virtually everything written by and to the great man. Even Aaron Burr, forever disgraced but forever fascinating, has had two volumes of his political correspondence published, and books about him go on without an end in sight.[8] Secondary figures in the period too get written about. Fisher Ames and William Loughton Smith, to name only two, have superb biographies. Even Daniel D. Tompkins, vice president under Monroe, has his life recorded.[9]

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*Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York 1978); Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill 1973); and William McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839* (New Haven 1984).

[5] Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill 1968); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca 1975); Duncan J. Macleod, *Slavery, Race, and the American Revolution* (London and New York 1974).

[6] See, for example, Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill 1986).

[7] Ruth H. Bloch, "American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815," *Feminist Studies*, 4 (June 1978), 100-126. See also note 17.

[8] Mary-Jo Kline with Joanne Wood Ryan, eds., *Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr* (2 vols., Princeton 1984). The most recent biography of Burr is Milton Lomask, *Aaron Burr* (2 vols., New York 1979, 1982).

[9] Winifred E. Bernhard, *Fisher Ames: Federalist and Statesman, 1758-1808* (Chapel Hill 1965); George C. Rogers, Jr., *Evolution of a Federalist: William Loughton Smith of Charleston, 1758-1812* (Columbia, S.C. 1962); Ray W. Irwin, *Daniel D. Tompkins: Governor of New York and Vice President of the United States* ([New York] 1968).

This fascination with the great and not-so-great men of the era has tended to further fragment our understanding of the period. We often see the early republic solely in terms of its individual political leaders. This is easy to do when we have such majesterial works as Dumas Malone's six volumes on Jefferson or Irving Brant's six volumes on Madison. But such biographies of leading political figures contribute little to a comprehensive understanding of the early republic. Indeed, they tend to aggravate the incoherence of the period.

Yet it is not simply the dominance of great men in the early republic that accounts for this incoherence and for the lack of any imaginative reinterpretation of the period during the great decades of history-writing following World War II. A number of other factors have contributed to the difficulty historians have had in organizing and synthesizing the era.

The first and most obvious is the overriding influence of political history during this period. This dominance of political history is clearly related to the presence of so many great men, but goes beyond it. It is not simply that individual leaders, such as Hamilton or Jefferson, are important, but that political events and political institutions in general tend to overpower the period. If there is any period of American history that is controlled by presidents and presidential elections, it is the early republic. But not just the presidency, all our national institutions—the Congress, the Supreme Court—were getting established and naturally have been the object of historical interest. And then there is the influence of Henry Adams' great multi-volumed work, which focuses on great political and diplomatic happenings in the early republic. Indeed, there is no period of American history that has more of what might be called great headline events than the early republic.

Unfortunately, however, such headline events do not much interest the new social and cultural historians who have recently come to dominate the historical profession. During at least the past two decades many American historians have become more and more interested in social and cultural history—in the kind of history that deals with impersonal long-term developments. Such new history might involve, for example, changing demographic patterns over several generations or changing attitudes towards childhood or death. The early republic was probably the period least receptive to treatment by these new social and cultural historians. The period's preoccupation with headline events, with big political and diplomatic happenings, got in the way of social and cultural studies that try to sweep through decades and to ignore prominent individuals in favor of statistical aggregates

and mentalities. Unlike the colonial period where there are no presidents, no congressional elections, and very few headline events, the early republic was not a very attractive place for the new social and cultural historians to practice their craft.

Another explanation for the neglect or dreary treatment of the early republic has to do with the specialized nature of the historical profession. Historians have traditionally divided themselves at the end of the eighteenth century. They become either colonialists or early nationalists, but usually not both. Colonial historians, on the one hand, have generally dealt with the period up to the Revolution or the formation of the Constitution. If they do cover the 1790s or after, they tend to see these years as the culmination of what went before, the eighteenth century and the Revolution. The early national historians, on the other hand, have usually been interested in the later nineteenth century, in particular the great event of the nineteenth century—the Civil War. Thus they tend to look ahead to that event or to urbanization and industrialization that essentially occurred after 1830, so that they often treat the period 1790-1830 as a prelude to what was really important in the nineteenth century.

Consequently the early republic tends to fall between two schools of the historical profession, and its significance and integrity are lost. One group of historians knows the period only as an epilogue; the other group knows it only as a prologue. Neither sees it whole.

But the preoccupation with political events and the peculiar way the historical profession divides itself up do not fully account for the ways in which the early republic has been slighted and scorned. More important than these was the almost total collapse in the decades following World War II of the one great synthetic treatment of the period we have had—that by the Progressive historians who dominated American history-writing during the first half of the twentieth century.

American historians have not always neglected the early republic; indeed, it has been only historians writing in the past forty years or so who have found the period unappealing and boring. The Progressive generation of historians—those professional historians whose assumptions about reality came out of the Progressive era at the beginning of the twentieth century—not only had an overarching scheme for understanding the early republic, but also had a special fascination for this period. Although the Progressive historians offered a framework for understanding all of American history, it was the period of the early republic—from the Revolution to the Age of Jackson—that particularly interested them. All the giants among them—Carl Becker, Charles Beard, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., Vernon Parrington—tackled

problems in this period and felt most at home in this period. Even Frederick Jackson Turner thought his "frontier thesis" had a particular applicability to the half-century following the Revolution. The early republic seemed to be the natural arena for demonstrating the truth of the Progressive historians' interpretation of American history.[10]

These historians, as we know, tended to see American history as a conflict between a populist majority, usually agrarian, against a narrow aristocratic or business minority. The Revolution and early republic was essentially a seesawing struggle betwen these two groups. The aristocratic and merchant interests of the 1760s lost control of the resistance movement to more popular and radical elements who moved Americans into revolution. By the 1780s, however, conservative aristocratic and mercantile interests had reasserted themselves to the point where they were able to write the new federal Constitution of 1787. The following decade saw a continuation of the struggle between these commercial interests led by Hamilton and popular agrarian and artisanal forces led by Jefferson. The popular historian Claude Bowers writing in the 1920s summed up perhaps better than any professional historian this Progressive view of the conflict between Hamilton and Jefferson.[11]

With Jefferson's election in 1800 the popular agrarian majorities came into their own. The next three decades saw the relentless emergence of the "common man" in American history. The last remnants of the colonial *ancien régime* were cast aside or destroyed. The churches were finally disestablished, the suffrage gates were lowered, and the clamoring populace rushed to the polls and overthrew the commercial aristocracy, at least outside of the South. The entire struggle came to a climax with the election of Andrew Jackson, which marked the completion of the unfinished business of the Revolution.

It was a powerful interpretative framework. It accommodated a wide variety of facts, and it was simple enough to be applied by hosts of student disciples. No wonder therefore that some of the best and most durable monographs on the period, particularly state histories, have been written by followers of the Progressive historians. All had

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[10] See in particular Richard Hofstader, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York 1968). Hofstader, before his untimely death in 1970, planned a multi-volume history of the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries—the very period that fascinated his mentors. What he completed of his first volume was published as *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York 1971).

[11] Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America* (Boston and New York 1925).

similar titles and themes, and all described political developments in terms of "from aristocracy to democracy."[12]

This Progressive paradigm dominated historical writing during the first half of the twentieth century. But in the years following World War II this interpretative framework was assaulted from a hundred different directions and dismantled by a thousand different monographs. Book after book, article after article in the 1950s and 1960s ate away at every aspect of the Progressive interpretation. In the great historiographical revolution that marked the golden age of American history-writing, the Progressive interpretation of American history was virtually destroyed. This destruction has affected all aspects and all eras of American history, but it has affected the period of the early republic the most. For it was the early republic where the Progressive interpretation seemed strongest.

The 1950s and 1960s assault on the Progressive interpretation of the early republic took the form of denying the extent of change that took place in the period. Colonial America, it appeared from a number of studies, was not an *ancien régime* after all. Since sixty to eighty percent of adult white males could legally vote in the colonial period, the high suffrage barriers that the Progressive historians had posited turned out to be not so high after all. The churches in the eighteenth century were already weak and did not much need disestablishment. The aristocracy that existed was hardly an aristocracy by European standards and scarcely needed elimination. All in all, colonial Americans did not have much to revolt against; their revolution seemed to be essentially a mental shift. The Americans were born free and equal, and thus, as Tocqueville said, they did not have to become so. Their revolution therefore became a peculiarly conservative affair, an endorsement and realization, not a transformation of their previous history.[13]

At the same time as historians were reinterpreting the colonial period, others were reevaluating the Jacksonian era. Not only did it now appear that the Jacksonians had less unfinished business to deal with than historians used to think, but Jacksonian society seemed less egalitarian and democratic than earlier historians had believed. Thanks to the work of Edward Pessen we found out that the distribution of wealth in the 1820s and 1830s was more unequal than earlier in the century. Indeed, other studies showed that the distribution of wealth

[12] Among the best of these was Dixon Ryan Fox, *The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York* (New York 1919).

[13] For a summary of this literature see Bernard Bailyn, "Political Experience and Enlightenment Ideas in Eighteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review*, 67 (Jan. 1962), 339-351.

after the Revolution was more unequal than in the colonial period. Some historians even suggested that the Jacksonian era ought to be called "the era of the uncommon man."[14] No democratic Jacksonian Revolution had occurred after all, it seemed. It was hard to see much difference between the Democratic and Whig parties. Both were composed of men-on-the-make; certainly they did not stand for coherent social classes in conflict. Nearly everyone in the North at least seemed to belong to the middle class. America was liberal to its toes and had been so, according to Louis Hartz, from the very beginning of its history.[15]

These attacks on the Progressive paradigm affected all periods of America's past, but they ravaged history-writing on the period between the Revolution and the Age of Jackson. For the Progressive interpretation really had its heart and soul in this period of the early republic. If the Progressive interpretation was true anywhere, it was true here in the early republic. This after all was the time when the conservative European-like aristocratic forces were finally shattered, when American democracy was first established, and when modern American liberalism was born.

But if this were not truly the case, if revolutionary Americans were in fact already free and equal and did not have to experience a democratic revolution, then what significance could this period of the early republic have? According to the findings of the historians of the 1950s and 1960s, the period was not formative after all. The Progressive historians had been wrong about it; and with the collapse of their interpretative framework, this period of the early republic on which they had rested so much of their case sank into insignificance.

The breakup of the Progressive framework was so complete, and the insignificance into which the early republic sank was so deep that only in the past few years has a reversal begun. The revisionist excitement that has touched other eras of American history has at least reached the early republic. Everywhere in the historical profession there are indications of a revived interest in the early republic, not the least of which is the formation of SHEAR and the creation of this journal. Monographs—books and articles—devoted to the early republic are popping up all over. The enormous impact of social history on the

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[14] Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana 1985); Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany 1967); Douglas T. Miller, *Jacksonian Aristocracy: Class and Democracy in New York, 1830-1860* (New York 1967).

[15] Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York 1955).

profession in general is finally making itself felt on this period in particular. Long-range social histories are finally outflanking or overlooking the old presidential framework and the preoccupation with political leaders that had hitherto been inhibiting.

Society and culture, rather than prominent men, have become the subjects of these new histories. Thus the new studies of law in this period are less interested in the decisions of Chief Justice John Marshall and more interested in the relation between law and society.[16] No subject has been more important in forcing a new kind of history of this period—as well as others—than that of women. But it was not just that women in the early republic were doing something other than making headlines; it was also that women's roles in this period in particular appear to have dramatically changed. It was a period, Mary P. Ryan has said, of "patriarchy in disarray." New ideals of womanhood arose and new divisions of labor in the household were worked out. Such transformations have made recent studies of women's history in the early republic especially imaginative and extensive.[17] We have had new, impressive histories of women and the family that sweep through a half-dozen decades or more—histories of everything from women and property law to the role of single women and free black women to rural middle-class households in obscure counties in New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, all ranging in time from the mid-eighteenth century or the Revolution to the Age of Jackson or the mid-nineteenth century.[18]

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[16] See in particular William E. Nelson, *Americanization of the Common Law: The Impact of Legal Changes on Massachusetts Society, 1760-1830* (Cambridge, 1975); Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1780-1860* (Cambridge 1977); Harry N. Scheiber, "At the Borderland of Law and Economic History: The Contributions of Willard Hurst," *American Historical Review*, 75 (Feb. 1970), 744-756. Much of the new legal history was inspired by James Willard Hurst. See his "Old and New Dimensions of Research in United States Legal History," *American Journal of Legal History*, 23 (Jan. 1979), 1-20.

[17] The literature is vast. Among the best are Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston 1980); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill 1980); and Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven 1977).

[18] Marylynn Salmon, *Women and the Law of Property in Early America* (Chapel Hill 1986); Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill 1985); Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780-1840* (New Haven 1984); Suzanne Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York 1984); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New*

With these histories of women and the family leading the way, we have had in the past decade or so an increasing number of other broad social histories—on the emerging professions, the decline of apprenticeship, the rise of counting, the creation of common schools, the spread of alcohol-drinking, the transformation of artisans, the change in urban mobs, and so on. No subject now is too insignificant to be written about if it extends over a long enough period of time. Thus we even have a new book on log construction in Ohio from 1750 to 1840.[19]

The dates covered by these new studies are significant. At last the new histories are transcending the traditional division of the historical profession between colonial and national history and are creating new periodizations. Now we have more and more books that cover the period from 1763 or 1780 to 1830, or from 1740 or 1750 to 1840. Within these new perspectives the Revolution, when it is mentioned at all, becomes merely a political event expressive of broader social and cultural changes that take longer than a decade to work themselves out. This new periodization constitutes a virtual revolution in American historiography; its implications for our understanding of our past have yet to be felt.

Perhaps equal in importance to the history of women and the family in compelling this new periodization is the attempt by historians to understand the origins of liberal capitalism. Much of the recent work in eighteenth-century history suggests that Americans were not born liberal after all. In studies of New England towns farmers now emerge as pre-modern people, almost medieval in their outlooks. They were

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*York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, Eng. 1981); Joan M. Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds: Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850* (New Haven 1986).

[19] Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia 1978); Gerard W. Gawalt, *The Promise of Power: The Emergence of the Legal Profession in Massachusetts, 1760-1840* (Westport, Conn. 1979); W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York 1986); Patricia Cline Cohen, *A Calculating People: The Spread of Numeracy in Early America* (Chicago 1982); Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York 1983); W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York 1979); Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Albany 1981); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York 1984); Cynthia J. Shelton, *The Mills of Manayunk: Industrialization and Social Conflict in the Philadelphia Region, 1787-1837* (Baltimore 1986); Paul Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763-1834* (Chapel Hill 1987); Donald A. Hutslar, *The Architecture of Migration: Log Construction in the Ohio Country, 1750-1850* (Athens, Ohio 1986).

members of patriarchal communities concerned with patrimony and kin and everything but capitalist aggrandizement. James Henretta's work in particular has brought into question the assumption that Americans were naturally liberal and naturally commercial-minded. Liberal capitalism and modernity were not ascribed, it seems; they had to be achieved.[20]

Colonial society thus appears now to be more of an *ancien régime* than we used to think. It is certainly not the *ancien régime* that the Progressive historians once conjured up, of rigid classes, legally restricted voting, and rich exploitative merchants. But it is not the liberal, egalitarian, democratic society of Tocqueville's America either. It now seems to have been a hierarchical, patriarchal, society vertically, not horizontally, organized and tied together by kinship and patron-client relations. Some of this old, hierarchical, small-scale eighteenth-century world survived the Revolution and lingered on into the nineteenth century, but not much. Recent studies stress more and more the fundamental difference between the old aristocratic pre-revolutionary society and the new popular commercial society that emerged in the nineteenth century.[21]

This sense of the differentness of the eighteenth century from what followed has been reinforced by studies of republicanism in the revolutionary era. It now seems clear that the central ideology, the central language, of the Revolution was not Lockean liberalism concerned only with private rights and popular democracy. Instead, most American revolutionary leaders adhered to and spoke the language of what we have called civic humanism or classical republicanism. However much this republican ideology contributed to America's future culture, it was essentially backward-looking. It was rooted in a traditional aristocratic aversion to commerce and remained committed to communal goals at the expense of private desires. Thus J.G.A. Pocock has concluded that the American Revolution, far from intending to move America into a liberal, capitalistic, and democratic world, was in fact "the last great act of the Renaissance."[22]

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[20] See James Henretta, "Families and Farms: Mentalité in Pre-Industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 35 (Jan. 1978), 3-32; Christopher M. Jedrey, *The World of John Cleaveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth-Century New England* (New York 1979); and John J. Waters, "Patrimony, Succession, and Social Stability: Guilford, Connecticut in the Eighteenth Century," *Perspectives in American History*, 10 (1976), 131-160.

[21] On monarchial culture in the eighteenth century see especially Richard L. Bushman, *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill 1985).

[22] J.G.A. Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal*

But if this was true, if classical republicanism was indeed elitist, hierarchical, and nostalgic, then where did the liberal, commercial, democratic, money-loving America of the early nineteenth century come from? Some historians such as Isaac Kramnick and Joyce Appleby have argued that liberalism and capitalism were there all along. Much of what they say is undoubtedly true, for the dynamic reality of American culture cannot be easily sorted out into neat ideological boxes that historians have invented. Certainly by the last half of the eighteenth century the classical republican tradition was much attenuated and domesticated, tamed and transformed by modern financial and commercial forces. But as commercial and as liberal as eighteenth-century colonial society may already have been, it was nothing compared to the scrambling, acquisitive individualistic society that emerged in the aftermath of the Revolution.

The decades following the Revolution now constitute a period of immense change, "deep change," as David Hackett Fischer has called it. On the face of it, this conception of the early republic being a period of "deep change" seems exaggerated, which is why it has not been readily accepted by historians. To be sure, we know that people's dress changed between the Revolution and the Age of Jackson. By 1830 most men were no longer wearing wigs and knee breeches; they were dressing in recognizably modern ways. But in other more important areas change does not seem all that obvious or palpable.

Perhaps it is hard to see what changed because we historians have tended to know mostly our own specialized area, either colonial American or nineteenth-century America, but not both; thus we cannot really appreciate any of the contrasts that exist. But more important in preventing us from seeing the extent of change is that the kinds of things that we usually associate with dramatic historical change simply did not occur. There were no great technological breakthroughs in this period between 1780 and 1820, certainly nothing comparable to the railroad or the telegraph. It still took weeks to travel from Boston to Washington, D.C., in the 1820s. Industrialization and urbanization had scarcely begun. As late as 1810 there was no urban center larger than 100,000. Even by 1830 New York was the only city larger than

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*of Interdisciplinary History*, 3 (Summer 1972), 120; see also Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited," *American Historical Review*, 87 (June 1982), 629-664. The literature on republicanism is enormous. See the special issue of *American Quarterly*, 37 (Fall 1985), devoted to republicanism in American history, and the articles by Lance Banning and Joyce Appleby in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 43 (Jan. 1986), 3-19, 20-34.

100,000. Beyond the east coast the society was even more primitive. Cincinnati was the largest city in the West; yet by 1830 it still had less than 25,000 people. In the early republic there were no great waves of foreign immigrants. The heavy infusion of nineteenth-century European migrants was yet to come, in the period following 1830. As late as the Age of Jackson America was still predominantly a rural agricultural society, on the surface not all that different from rural agricultural eighteenth-century colonial America.

Yet beneath that seemingly similar surface everything had changed. America may have been still largely rural, still largely agricultural, but now it was also largely commercial, perhaps the most thoroughly commercialized nation in the world. Hundreds of thousands of very ordinary people were very busy buying and selling in order to realize what *Niles' Weekly Register* in 1815 said was "the almost *universal ambition to get forward.*" Every European like Frances Wright who saw firsthand this society "teeming with business" was excited, awed, or frightened. There was nothing quite like it on such a scale anywhere in the world. And it seemed to have emerged out of nowhere.

If the early republic was indeed a period of deep change, then the Progressive historians were correct after all. The changes may have been more complicated, more subtle, more confused, and more unintended than they assumed, but the changes were no less momentous. Thus however crude, class-obsessed, and anachronistic the Progressive historians were in explaining the transformation America experienced during the early republic, they were certainly right to see the period as one of great significance.

The changes of the early republic were everywhere, but we have barely begun to appreciate them. Surely most fundamental and pervasive was the spread of commerce.[23] This was the period when the business of America became business. An extraordinarily high proportion of the society, at least outside the South, became involved in buying and selling. The 1820s saw the first modern use of the term "businessman." Out of this experience with business new conceptions of the economy arose. People began to realize that a society could become more prosperous not simply by selling abroad but, more importantly, by its members selling to each other; and Americans developed a new understanding of the value of internal trade. The

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[23] Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York 1984). For an excellent recent account of the cultural reaction to this explosion of commerce see Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore 1987).

love of money seemed to spread everywhere. "It is a passion as unconquerable as any with which nature has endowed us," said Henry Clay in 1812. "You may attempt to regulate—you cannot destroy it."[24]

The explosion of entrepreneurial energy in the early republic cannot be exaggerated. There had been only about a half-dozen business corporations in the colonial period. But in a few short decades following the Revolution they multiplied into the hundreds. People wanted paper money to participate in this expanding economy, and they got it, despite Article I, Section 10 of the Constitution that forbade the states from emitting bills of credit. The people simply pressed their state legislatures to charter banks, scores of them, which in turn issued the paper money this enterprising people desired.

Stimulating all this business bustle was a consumer revolution of immense importance. More and more people were buying luxury goods—from feather mattresses to china tea sets—that had once been the preserve of an aristocratic minority. Traditional genteel standards of ownership and display reached deeper and deeper into the population, and created in the early decades of the nineteenth century a genteel middle-class world that was already recognizably similar to our own. Now a piano in every parlor did not seem beyond ordinary people's newly awakened aspirations.[25]

An equally important source of change was the growth and movement of people. Although the birth rate after 1800 began to decline as people became more conscious of controlling the prosperity of themselves and their children, the population as a whole continued to grow, as it had in the past, by leaps and bounds; and it was on the move as never before. In the decades following the Revolution Americans spread themselves over half a continent at speeds that astonished everyone. Between 1790 and 1820 New York's population quadrupled, Kentucky's multiplied nearly eight times. In a single decade Ohio grew from a virtual wilderness to become larger than most of the hundred-year-old colonies had been at the time of the Revolution.

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[24] Speech, Jan. 22, 1812, in James F. Hopkins, ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay*: Volume I: *The Rising Statesman, 1797-1814* (Lexington, Ky. 1959), 626.

[25] We have only begun to scratch the surface of this consumer revolution that seems to have taken off in the mid-eighteenth century. See the articles of Carole Shammas, especially "The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America," *Journal of Social History* 14 (Fall 1980), 3-24; and Lorena S. Walsh, "Urban Amenities and Rural Sufficiency: Living Standards and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1643-1777," *Journal of Economic History*, 43 (Mar. 1983), 109-117.

In a single generation, Americans occupied more territory than they had occupied during the entire 150 years of the colonial period.[26]

Such changes, so basic and pervasive, could not help affecting every aspect of American life. In politics, the arena that drew the attention of most of the Progressive historians, the changes were most manifest. The legal qualifications for political participation were democratized. By 1825 every state but Rhode Island had achieved white manhood suffrage. But this legal change scarcely did justice to the extent of transformation. We have always known that the world of the Founding Fathers, where politics was regarded by gentlemen of leisure as an obligation of their rank and where such gentlemen were supposed only to stand for election, was supplanted in the early republic by a very different, recognizably modern world, a democratic world where competing professional politicians ran for office under the banners of modern political parties. The transformation was so sudden, so stark that people at the time could hardly miss seeing it. The newly emerging generation of the early nineteenth century, like every subsequent generation in American history, already looked back to the generation of Founding Fathers with a wistful sense that they were men the likes of whom they would never again see in America. By 1823 *Niles' Weekly Register* was already defining modern politicians as "persons who have little, if any regard for the welfare of the republic unless immediately connected with . . . their own private pursuits."[27] But it was not just the character of politics that changed. The very nature and purpose of government was transformed. With books like Hendrik Hartog's *Public Property and Private Power* (1983) we are just beginning to appreciate how much.

In religion the changes in the early republic were equally momentous and palpable. In a single generation the entire religious landscape of America was transformed. In this period not only were the remains of traditional religious establishments finally destroyed, but modern Christian denominationalism was created. Older religious groups, the Congregationalists, Presybyterians, and Anglicans which

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[26] For recent demographic studies see Peter D. McClelland and Richard J. Zeckhauser, *Demographic Dimensions of the New Republic: American Interregional Migration, Vital Statistics, and Manumissions, 1800-1860* (Cambridge, Eng. 1982); and Morton Owen Schapiro, *Filling Up America: An Economic-Demographic Model of Population Growth and Distribution in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Greenwich, Conn. 1986). For an excellent recent study of the origins of Ohio see Andrew R.L. Clayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio County, 1780-1825* (Kent, Ohio 1986).

[27] Quoted in M.J. Heale, *The Making of American Politics, 1750-1850* (London and New York 1977), 130.

had dominated eighteenth-century colonial society, were now supplanted by energetic evangelical churches, Baptists, Methodists, and entirely new groups unknown to the Old World such as the Disciples of Christ. Christendom had probably not witnessed anything like the religious ferment of the Second Great Awakening on such a scale since the Reformation. The Second Great Awakening made America the most evangelically Christian nation in the world.[28]

Perhaps more obvious and more interesting to our modern consciousness than the changes in religion in the early republic were the changes in the culture. The American Revolution saw the birth of our modern assumption about culture: that the culture is man-made and capable of manipulation. We today so take this assumption for granted and have followed out its implications to the point of deconstructive nihilism that we tend to forget what a new and recent assumption it is in western history. Perhaps for the first time in American history enlightened Americans at the end of the eighteenth century sensed that they alone were responsible for their culture, for what they thought and believed. It was an awesome responsibility, but the revolutionary leaders shouldered it with optimistic urgency and nervous excitement. People were not born to be what they would become. Lockean sensationalism told the revolutionary leaders that human personalities were unformed, impressionable things that could be molded and manipulated by controlling people's sensations. Suddenly everything seemed possible, and the revolutionary leaders were faced with the formidable task of creating their own consciousness.[29]

Nothing less than this awful task can explain the revolutionaries' extraordinary preoccupation with education. It was not just formal schooling that interested them but all forms of cultural influence, from the Great Seal to parades to John Trumbull's history paintings. The Revolution and the early republic created a sudden outpouring of artistic and iconographic works, the extent of which we have never fully appreciated. The revolutionary leaders continually interrupted their constitution-making and their military campaigning to design all sorts of emblems, Latin mottos, and commemorative medals and to sit for

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[28] See Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (forthcoming), and Randolph A. Roth, *Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1850* (Cambridge, Eng. 1986).

[29] Two important, imaginative studies dealing with this new cultural awareness are Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, Eng. 1982); and Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York 1986).

long hours to have their portraits painted for history's sake. Plays, prints, and pageants were created in support of the Revolution and the new nation.

Although these American educational efforts may pale beside the comparable efforts of Jacques Louis David and the French revolutionaries, by eighteenth-century colonial standards they were astonishing. The eighteenth-century British colonists had been a very provincial people living on the very edges of the civilized world, and their artistic achievements had been negligible, to say the least. Yet suddenly with the Revolution they launched a multitude of artifacts and devices designed to change their culture, including by 1820 the writing of a hundred novels where none had existed before the Revolution. What else but his sense of responsibility for creating the culture of his country could have led Jefferson from Paris in the 1780s to badger his Virginia colleagues to erect as the new state capitol in Richmond a magnificent copy of the Maison Carrée, a Roman temple from the first century A.D. at Nîmes? No matter that Richmond was still a backwoods town with mudlined streets. No matter that a Roman temple was hard to heat and acoustically impossible. There were other educational considerations that Jefferson had in mind in presenting such a classical building to his fellow Americans for "their study and imitation."[30] We today are used to our public buildings resembling Greek or Roman temples, but eighteenth-century Americans, or Europeans for that matter, were not. Once we realize that no structures in colonial America pointed in this classical direction and that indeed public buildings in the colonies were usually indistinguishable from large private dwellings, then we can better appreciate the radicalness of America's architectural revolution in the early republic. It is simply another manifestation of the great changes that characterize the period.

Related changes took place in science and what today we might call ecology. In the aftermath of the Revolution Americans made extraordinary efforts to control their physical environment—efforts just as heroic as those made to control their cultural environment. Americans of the early republic were eager to master their world, even to the point of manipulating their own climate.[31] We make a mistake if we think that Dr. Benjamin Rush, in all of his Enlightenment enthusiasm

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[30] Jefferson to James Madison, Sept. 20, 1785, in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (20 vols., Princeton 1950-1982), VIII, 535.

[31] John C. Greene, *American Science in the Age of Jefferson* (Ames, Iowa 1984). On the problem of America's climate see Antonello Gerbi, *The Dispute of the New World: The History of a Polemic, 1750-1900* (Pittsburg 1973).

to make the world over, is some sort of zealous eccentric. Many Americans in the early republic shared Rush's hopes and dreams to change the world. They cut down forests, filled in swamps, built waterworks, and planned entire cities. Think of what it took for provincials living on the periphery of Christendom even to conceive of a monumental city like Washington, D.C. It is true that the creation of Washington can be linked with the great European efforts during this same period to reorganize and reconstruct their cities; yet nowhere in the world, except perhaps St. Petersburg, was a city of the size and grandeur of Washington planned and built.

In all aspects of life in the early republic there were changes—so many and so diverse as to be ultimately incalculable. But beneath all of them lay a basic social revolution, a fundamental shift in the way people related to one another. The republican Revolution had assaulted the sinews of family, patronage, and dependency that had held the old eighteenth-century society together and had attempted to substitute new enlightened bonds of respect and affection to tie people together. But the old society came apart faster than anyone expected, and the new enlightened bonds could not hold. The society of the early republic became atomized—with "every Man standing single," as Philadelphia gentleman George Clymer complained—to an extent the revolutionary leaders had never anticipated.[32] By the 1820s America had become the most egalitarian, individualistic, and money-making society in western history. That it was at the same time the most evangelically Christian society in the world only accentuated the awesomeness of the change. In many respects the America of the 1820s was the exact opposite of the kind of society the Founding Fathers had wanted to create. Never before or since has American society been so unsettled and the lines of authority so confused. Everything seemed up for grabs, and no ties that did not come from volitional allegiance seemed tolerable.

It was a society dominated by ordinary people—to a degree never duplicated by any nation in modern history. We historians have trouble appreciating what this emergence of common ordinary people into consciousness really meant. Even the new social historians have often been concerned only with people kept out of the mainstream of the society or with those who did not participate fully in this democratic revolution—with Indians, blacks, women, or perhaps displaced craftsmen. Ordinary white males who made it, who constituted the sum

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[32] Jerry Grundfest, *George Clymer: Philadelphia Revolutionary, 1739-1813* (New York 1982), 141.

and substance of the prosperous, scrambling, money-making society that America became are generally not the kinds of people we academics like to celebrate. Men like Mathew Lyon, who fought his way from Vermont to Kentucky scrounging votes and dollars anyway he could, or Talmadge Edwards, who emerged out of nowhere to become a wealthy glove and mitten king, did not much resemble the Founding Fathers. Their nineteenth-century motto was:

On others inspiration flash,
Give them eternal fame—
But give me cash!

Many were awed and frightened by this new emerging society. It seemed to be exploding in all directions, growing helter skelter, and moving relentlessly westward. And no one seemed in control of it. People now felt themselves carried along in a stream, caught up in a process that was larger and more significant than any of the individuals involved in it. This new social experience affected everything from people's conception of the historical process—how events occurred—to their understanding of the competitive marketplace. They developed a new appreciation of statistics, a word first used in America in 1803, and they came for the first time in the 1820s to use the term "mass" positively in referring to collective Americans. By the 1820s classical Rome was thought too stolid and imitative to express the excitement and originality of this dynamic new democratic society. Ancient Greece, said Edward Everett, was a better model for America; ancient Greece was tumultous, wild, and free, said Everett, "free to licentiousness, free to madness."[33]

No wonder those of the Founding Fathers who lived on into the early decades of the nineteenth century expressed anxiety over what they had wrought. Although they usually tried to put as good a face as they could on what was happening, they were bewildered, uneasy, and in some cases deeply disillusioned. Indeed, a pervasive pessimism, a fear of failure runs through the later writings of the Founding Fathers. The revolutionary experiment on behalf of liberty, Benjamin Rush concluded as early as 1801, "will certainly fail. It has already disappointed the expectations of its most sanguine and ardent friends." Like John Jay, Elias Boudinot, Noah Webster, and others, Rush ended by becoming a Christian enthusiast. Jefferson of course never went that far, but even he, confident and optimistic as he was, was in his last few years reduced at times to despair and what seems to us today

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[33] Joseph L. Blau, ed., *American Philosophic Addresses, 1700-1900* (New York 1946), 77.

to be an embarrassing fire-eating defense of the South and state rights. Jefferson hated the new democratic world he saw emerging in America—a world of speculation, banks, paper money, and evangelical Christianity that he thought he had laid to rest. He blamed the New England Federalists for everything that was going wrong, but even in his beloved Virginia he suffered disappointment and dismay. To his shock he had to fight like the devil to get his university established by the Virginia legislature. He lived too long and felt cast off by the new democratic forces he had helped create. "All, all dead," he wrote to an old friend in 1825, "and ourselves left alone midst a new gener[atio]n whom we know not, and who know not us."[34]

American society of 1825 was not the society of 1760 or even of 1790, and it was not the society the Founding Fathers had hoped to create. It was, however, a very democratic and egalitarian society, dominated as it was by common, ordinary people with very vulgar and pecuniary interests. Such common ordinary people not only brooked no aristocratic superiorities but also in their separate and strenuous pursuits of happiness dictated and shaped the values and contours of life to an extent never before or since seen in modern history. How that quintessentially American society emerged is a historical question of enormous importance. Can we any longer doubt the historical significance of the early republic?

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[34] Rush to Granville Sharp, Oct. 8, 1801, in John A. Woods, "The Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp 1773-1809," *Journal of American Studies*, 1 (Apr. 1967), 35; Jefferson to Francis Adrian van der Kemp, Jan. 11, 1825, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (12 vols., New York and London 1904-1905), XII, 400.