

THE DECLINE OF
AMERICAN LIBERALISM

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The Hope of America

THE DISCOVERY of America, falling within the era of Western history known as the Renaissance and Reformation, helped to mark the transition from medieval to modern civilization. Following Columbus's epochal voyage in 1492, over a century elapsed before the first permanent English settlement in the New World was begun at Jamestown in 1607. But the next one hundred fifty years saw the building up of a colonial society that was also to contain the embryo of a new nation. It was during these years of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the rise of modern liberalism took place, not only on the continent of Europe, but in colonial America as well. In the New World the development of this American liberalism depended upon both native and inherited factors.

In all the long story of liberalism, in its American and European phases, it is important to remember that the eighteenth century was its classic age. In the United States this classic period, accordingly, belongs largely to our pre-national history, and it is not far from correct to say that liberalism and colonial America grew up together.

If we turn back to the beginnings of the American colonies we see that the motives that originally impelled private persons and nation-states to cross the Atlantic and build a new civilization were not always the same. In the case of the governments, the rival economic and strategic ambitions of the

great European powers summarized their interest in overseas ventures. But in regard to individuals, motivations were more complex. Some who came, such as Negro slaves or deported criminals, had little choice in the matter, while, at the other extreme, were the considerable number who migrated from sheer love of change or adventure. Probably the majority of the settlers who came to America did so because of their longing to break away from the rigid class society and restraints of Europe. In one way or another the average settler was fleeing absolutism. Religious dissenters, hopeful of escaping the bonds of an authoritarian state church, were joined by political refugees of every description. Most important of all was the lure of free land and the desire on the part of virtually every settler to secure greater economic and social advantages, both for himself and for his children.

In their quest for an individual freedom based on religious, political, social, and economic liberties, the settlers along the North American coastline were not to be disappointed. The harsh struggle for existence in a wilderness environment, although at first serving to emphasize the cruder and more material aspects of life, was gradually modified by the richness of the natural resources available to the early settlers. An abundance of free land ensured the widespread diffusion of property, higher wages, and greater social equality. Feudal customs of restricted land tenure proved impossible of general application in the New World. No hereditary aristocracy of lords and ladies owned exclusive title to the land, and the Old World customs of primogeniture and entailed estates were never popular in the colonies. Prosperity bred economic individualism and, in a land of seemingly boundless potential wealth, mercantilist notions of political economy began to yield the economic stage to a rising laissez-faire capitalism.

At the same time, with the colonists apparently deter-

mined to fight all outside authority, centralized political and economic controls emanating from the mother country proved difficult to enforce. In the opinion of Adam Smith, the celebrated English economist, the wealth of the colonies depended upon one simple economic factor, "plenty of good land," and one political factor, "liberty to manage their own affairs in their own way."¹ In the matter of religion, also, the numerous dissenting sects that were able to find refuge in the American colonies, plus the need to attract more settlers, did much to ensure a large degree of toleration. Thus the longing for freedom, which drove the more enterprising and adventuresome minority to the New World, was largely satisfied by contact with the American environment. "All took a risk, and in large part their hopes were joined."²

In the emphasis upon the role of the American environment, one must not overlook the continued interaction between the colonies and the mother country. Indeed the growth of liberalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a two-way process. At the same time that a native American liberalism was flourishing, and broadening the base of the intellectual inheritance carried from Europe, colonization and settlement of the New World were having a beneficent effect on the Old. By sloughing off the adventuresome, discontented, rebellious, or freedom-loving element of its population, Europe was able to support a more liberal economic climate for those who remained. Thus the wealth and example of the New World exercised a liberating influence on the Old, and the existence of the American colonies as a frontier outpost of Western Europe contributed to the prosperity of the whole.³

Among the most important legacies bequeathed by England to her colonies was the striving for political and religious liberty. The English people had come to pride themselves on their freedom, and in the years before coloni-

zation of America they had already acquired a strong hostility to any form of arbitrary power. Essential to the English political tradition was the belief that individuals had certain natural rights which government could not violate with impunity. This tradition, reinforced by the revolutions of the seventeenth century, was most eloquently expressed in the writings of John Locke. And it was Locke, also, who espoused publicly a policy of religious toleration. After the Glorious Revolution of 1689, the more extreme persecution of dissenters, either political or religious, declined in England, and personal freedom became part of the individual's rights as an English subject. These rights were also respected in the English overseas territories. In the royal charters drawn up for the various American colonies, the rights and privileges of an Englishman were considered as a part of his person to be taken wherever he went. Moreover, they were interpreted as applying equally well to all settlers of the New World, whatever their original nationality.

The continued development of colonial liberalism is a familiar story that does not need extensive elaboration in these pages. Essentially the colonial period witnessed the successful working out of the experiment of a free people living in a free land. Nowhere else were a people able to build a culture and civilization with so little native interference. The Indian tribes formed only a thin veneer across the continent, and the lands of North America were truly virgin soil open for exploitation and use. Thus the liberal ideas, already germinating in Europe in the seventeenth century, were able to grow even stronger in the free American territory and climate of opinion.

Most important of all to colonial liberalism was the fact that American society was fluid and constantly changing. It was a society that was open at both ends. From Western Europe in the eighteenth century a new stream of settlers came

to join the original English migrants of the previous century, and America early became a melting pot and a haven of refuge. Meanwhile the colonial population was pushing westward in search of still cheaper and better lands along the frontier. In time, as the population grew, the means of securing decent land cheaply diminished. Especially in the South, a native landed aristocracy of wealthy planters was able to force out the small individual farmer. Fortunately, however, with the growth of towns and town life there were new opportunities for the displaced yeoman farmers as artisans or mechanics. Moreover, there was the ever-present possibility of moving on farther west. The significant fact therefore is not the various economic barriers that were thrown in the way of a more equalitarian social order, but the large field that remained open to the enterprising individual.

It is true, of course, that class distinctions continued to exist in America as they always had in Europe. Sometimes social and class conflict reached the point of open revolt, as in the instances of Bacon's Rebellion in 1675 and the later uprising in the New York colony led by Jacob Leisler. But the lines between aristocratic and democratic elements were seldom well defined, and many complex outside political and economic issues were involved in these domestic colonial struggles. Thus sectional rivalry between tidewater and back country was always present as an additional source of dispute, and finally, of course, there was the open bitterness between the mother country and the colonies. In the course of the eighteenth century the aristocracy of merchants and planters was often able to assume greater economic and political powers, but at the same time the more democratic elements in the back-country regions were being strengthened by continued immigration. By the eve of the American Revolution therefore, despite the continued servile status of

a substantial minority, the American colonies, judged by European standards and customs, had advanced far in the direction of an equalitarian order.⁴

Class lines, however sharply drawn in America, were less rigid than those which divided the population of the European nations. The upper class in the colonies was less aristocratic than in Europe, and members of the middle class in America who tried to copy the manners and customs of the upper strata of society could more often hope to achieve a higher station in life. The middle class itself, comprising the small independent farmers, artisans, clerks, minor officials, and lesser merchants, as well as the lower clergy and teachers, was the most numerous class in America. In large part therefore the American colonial economy fulfilled liberal expectations, approximating closely the agrarian dream of a society in which property was widely diffused and divided on fairly equal terms. Only the presence of the lower class of Negro slaves and indentured white servants intervened to mar the picture of a free and liberal social system. /

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In the case of indentured servants, who are estimated to have made up one-half to two-thirds of all white immigrants, advancement though limited was not impossible. The labor contract, or indenture, enforcing a period of servitude of from four to seven years, soon became the chief means of securing settlers, especially in Pennsylvania and along the frontier. Conditions of work and legal protection for the indentured servant varied, but in any event his servile status was limited in time and he sometimes received a bonus in the form of land upon completion of his term of service. Once free, the former indentured servant passed into the ranks of the other settlers.

No such opportunities or inducements as attracted the indentured servants were held out to the Negroes brought to America from Africa and soon fastened into perpetual slav-

ery. Though a servile status described the situation of both the Negro slave and the indentured white laborer, it was the institution of Negro slavery that formed the great exception to generalizations about colonial equality and severely compromised early American liberalism. The very circumstances under which the Negro was brought to America, after first being uprooted from his native culture and herded aboard the slave ships, did violence to the liberal belief in the dignity and worth of the individual. Moreover, slavery entailed the disadvantage of encouraging wasteful use of the soil, thus making more difficult the lot of the small independent farmer. In Virginia, for example, by the eighteenth century masters and slaves dominated lands that had formerly belonged to free farmers.⁵ Slavery therefore, conflicting on both moral and economic grounds with the main tenets of liberalism, represented a paradox which a liberty-loving age could hardly well defend. On the other hand, it was a tribute to the liberalism of the American colonies that, by the time of the Revolution, the slave system was coming under growing attack.

Also a factor in mitigating the conflict of slavery with eighteenth-century liberalism was the continuing colonial interest in educating and Christianizing the Negro. So long as this was done there was some basis for the argument that the slave was being prepared for eventual freedom, and such colonial interest was in marked contrast to the indifference or hostility to Negro education that later came to characterize the South.

Almost as unfortunate as the Negro slave was the American Indian, who, though not enslaved, was often warred upon and divested of his lands and hunting grounds. American colonists were little inclined to accept the Indian as a noble savage. Such an idealized and romanticized picture of the American aborigines was popular chiefly among social

theorists and primitivists in Europe, who felt that the Indian was an unspoiled child of nature. But Americans, disillusioned by firsthand contact on the frontier battleground, soon gave up their early attempts to Christianize him, although the Puritans seem to have been the only group wholly to condemn the Indian as a savage incapable of civilization. In the settled areas along the seaboard, a few educated eighteenth-century Americans accepted the stylized European concept of the Indian, but the general colonial policy and attitude remained highly illiberal.⁶

Always remembering the exceptions of Indian and Negro, it was nevertheless true that, in the course of the eighteenth century, colonial America achieved the basic framework of a liberal society. Not democratic, and even in large part aristocratic, it was, however, liberal in the sense of the great freedom of opportunity available to the individual. The colonial aristocracy was frequently a natural aristocracy of talents and ability, rather than an upper class based on inheritance or title of nobility. In originality, or in depth of intellectual life, the American scholar, artist, or scientist was not the equal of his European counterpart, yet freedom of thought largely prevailed. And it was also true that the average American of the 1700's enjoyed more liberty than his seventeenth-century predecessor or his British contemporary.

In the political sphere, colonial assemblies were able to maintain their rights and privileges against the demands of autocratic royal governors. The colonial legislative bodies were particularly zealous in insisting upon their right to indulge in free discussion and debate. Underlying this right, in turn, was the whole cause of free speech and a free press for which a noteworthy victory against possible British interference was scored when a colonial jury in 1733 acquitted

John Peter Zenger, a German printer in New York, of the charge of libel.

Political liberty in the colonies was closely tied to the preservation of local government under representatives chosen by the people. It is true that the suffrage was much restricted by property qualifications so that only a minority, and often a very small minority, of the adult male population was able to vote. Also newly settled areas to the west were likely to be discriminated against and underrepresented in the colonial legislatures. But these limitations on democracy were partly overcome by such advantages as frequent elections and close ties between voters and elected representatives. The right of the people to instruct their delegates was a distinguishing feature of the colonial theory of representation, and "local self-government seemed to the colonial mind, to demand that representation should always be under the close scrutiny of the community." ⁷ In the case of the New England town meeting, all the freemen could attend and exercise an equal voice in community matters. Though the more direct democracy that accompanied the town meeting was limited in extent to the New England colonies, American political institutions as a whole were decentralized and divided among colony, county, and town governments. Undemocratic in restrictions on the suffrage and absence of majority rule, the colonial political system had, however, its redeeming liberal features. Against the British desire for more centralization and a tighter imperial control, colonial liberals argued that government should remain close to the people, its powers being diminished as it grew more remote from the popular will.

Religious institutions in the American colonies also shared the liberal atmosphere of the eighteenth century. The desire for religious liberty, which impelled many of the

colonists to come to America, was on the whole enhanced in the New World environment. The Puritans, holding to the narrow dogma of complete freedom only for those who were true believers of Calvinist doctrines, attempted to limit both political and religious liberty to members of their own corporation and church. But Puritan doctrines came under attack almost from the very beginnings of the settlements at Massachusetts Bay. Most prominent among early religious liberals who criticized the Puritan concept of church and state was Roger Williams. After his banishment from Massachusetts, Williams fled to Rhode Island, where he was able to put into practice many of his ideas of religious toleration, as well as to encourage a more democratic political and economic system. No other American of the seventeenth century went so far as Williams in his defense of individual liberty, or in carrying to its logical conclusion the Reformation principle of the right of free enquiry.

Outside Rhode Island, religious toleration came closest to complete freedom in the Middle Colonies. In contrast to the South, where Negro slaves provided the labor force, or to New England, where the Puritans discouraged outsiders, the proprietors of the Middle Colonies pursued a liberal policy designed to attract settlers in large numbers. Maryland granted its well-known act of toleration in 1649, and in New York the British allowed the Dutch population to continue its own forms of worship. Pennsylvania's liberal policy was a mixture of practical needs plus the real idealism of the Penn family in providing a refuge for members of the Society of Friends.

On the whole, therefore, the colonial period witnessed a gradual but steady progress toward religious toleration. In contrast to the French and Spanish colonies, where church and state remained in close union, the ties that bound them together in most of the English colonies were becoming

weaker. Final disestablishment of the churches awaited the American Revolution. Meanwhile it was true that Catholics, Jews, and atheists were subject to various restraints, but in general the eighteenth century saw a trend in the direction of greater religious liberalism. In New England the Puritan hold was relaxed, and the power of the theocracy waned after the loss of the old colonial charter in 1684. The final climax of religious hysteria and fanaticism in the Salem witchcraft delirium of 1692 quickly subsided after nineteen persons had been hanged and many more arrested and imprisoned. This persecution of numerous innocents in the witchcraft trials marked the last important instance of extreme religious intolerance in the colonies. In Virginia, where the Anglican Church was strongly established and supported by public taxation, dissent was nevertheless permitted. It was not without point therefore that the French husbandman Crèvecoeur commented on the extraordinary religious diversity and toleration that characterized the melting pot of the colonial population on the eve of the Revolution.⁸

By mid-century, religious liberalism was also being strengthened by the two opposite strands of thought that flowed from the natural religion of deism and the counter-movement of the Great Awakening. Deism, adhering to a concept of religion that was governed by natural rather than supernatural forces, emphasized the rational element in Christianity. The evangelists of the revival of the 1740's, known as the Great Awakening, on the other hand, stressed the emotional side of religion. But inherent in both approaches was a reaffirmation of the importance of the individual in religion and his emancipation from older and more conservative forms of worship.

The new trend in religious thought, with its emphasis on an individualistic and humanitarian approach, was an example of the more enlightened liberal attitude of the eight-

eenth century. In contrast to the harsh Calvinist view of man as essentially a depraved creature destined for eternal damnation, a more optimistic conception of human nature became popular during the Enlightenment. Holding with Locke's famous *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) the position that man was not born with innate ideas or a predetermined future, liberals argued that he was instead a product of his environment. From this plastic theory of human nature there followed naturally the conclusion that man's nature was subject to change and that reform could be achieved through an improvement of the environment. All of this went far toward making up a new psychology and philosophy of progress and reform. Such a faith was also able to derive added strength from a contemplation of the American environment, where even the most casual observer could see ample evidence of a very great change and improvement.

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The same liberalism that characterized American religious and political institutions on the eve of the War of Independence also prevailed in social life and thought. Abundant lands and the opportunity to get ahead economically resulted in a natural faith in a laissez-faire, agrarian type of society. Middle-class, family virtues of thrift, hard work, and self-reliance were favored and, in response to the need for population, women and children enjoyed a more important role and were also better treated than was the case in Europe. Although Puritanism exercised certain frustrations and restraints upon body and soul, colonial society was not in general censorious of one's private life and conduct. There was little provocation to crime among a people not crowded in slums or cities, and at the same time a growing humanitarian feeling characterized the colonial attitude toward the criminal. Formal education was still largely the privilege of the aristocracy, but there was the possibility of self-culture, as

Benjamin Franklin's career so amply demonstrated. Generally speaking, it was true that in education, morals, and social outlook American colonial life was moving hopefully in the direction of a greater freedom and wider opportunity.

In many ways the typical figure of this liberalism and enlightenment was Benjamin Franklin, who served almost equally well as the child or the spokesman of his age. Yet it is doubtful whether so enormously talented and gifted an individual as Franklin could in any sense be called typical. In almost any age or society, he presumably would have become a leader, but it was nevertheless a happy circumstance that his many-sided genius was allowed to flourish in the free atmosphere of colonial America. A self-made man, Franklin never forgot his humble background, and throughout his life continued to identify himself with the middle class. He also maintained a keen humanitarian interest in the less fortunate and actively promoted a multiplicity of reform schemes. A true liberal in his philosophy and life, he was tolerant and not dogmatic. In Europe he commanded respect as an example of American simplicity, and of the natural society of the New World. On both sides of the Atlantic his politics and economics were of a liberal persuasion. An agrarian, he regarded agriculture as the true source of wealth, and he therefore opposed an industrial organization of society. Private property he respected as a right, but he also urged that this right be tempered by individuals devoting their surplus wealth to charity and the general welfare of mankind. In science and education he stressed the practical needs of society, but he also had a great faith in self-education and never therefore advocated universal public schooling. America's first social philosopher, Franklin, in his life and thinking, exemplified the dignity of the free individual in a liberal society.⁹

Franklin's long career spanned the colonial and Revolu-

tionary eras of American history, the period of a rising liberalism. Beginning with the impulse that carried the settlers to the New World, and continuing to grow in the free environment of the American continent, the struggle for a liberal society, which Franklin helped to carry on, reached a crisis in the War for Independence waged against Great Britain.