

The Fourth of July - Revolution and Counter-Revolution in America

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The following is an excerpt from a book about Trump, The Establishment, and the Resistance, that will be published in French by Syllepse early next year. – Dan La Botz



The Fourth of July celebrates the launching of the American Revolution and the founding of the nation. Americans have long prided themselves on having the most democratic country on earth, a model for the world. Yet, while American politicians and the media today frequently praise the “founding fathers” of the United States for establishing the country’s democratic institutions, the truth is that nothing could have been further from their minds.

The founding fathers—mothers are never mentioned—were by and large wealthy businessmen, rich farmers, or the owners of plantations and slaves. Several of the most famous, such as George Washington, John Adams and Alexander Hamilton at times favored the establishment of a monarchy or life-time president, while their more liberal opponents such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were among the architects of a republic of checks and balances so constructed that it would be a barrier against popular self-government.

The founding fathers generally feared and loathed the idea of democracy. Even Jefferson, who occasionally spoke out for democracy, had a very narrow conception of what that word meant. All of the founding fathers wished to keep their slaves in chains, to keep lower class farmers and laborers in their place, and to restrain immigrants’ rights. The idea of rights for women, blacks, or Indians, or even white farmers and laborers without property was utterly beyond their comprehension and the thought of it would have made them shudder. The American Revolution of 1776-1781 established what Marxists call a “bourgeois democracy,” but one that was far from democratic. America did become more democratic over the last 200 years, but not because of the founding fathers and their Constitution. White working people, black Americans, women, and immigrants have all had to fight the government to achieve political and civil rights, rights on which as we see today they have only a tenuous hold. We look here at the origins and development of the American political system, at the various party systems, and at the modern Republican and Democratic parties, especially the latter.

The Origins of the System

The American Revolution of 1776, often portrayed as a struggle not only for independence but also for the freedom of the American people, was in reality a struggle between the British government and its bankers, merchants, manufacturers, and landlords on the one hand and the American colonies’ rich merchants, wealthy farmers and planters on the other. The revolution was a struggle between the British ruling class and an incipient American ruling class; it was a fight over who had the right to exploit the resources and labor power available in the New World. Each ruling group wanted control of the territory, production, commerce, profits, and taxes produced in the colonies. The British elite thought it should be theirs, while the wealthy Americans wanted it for themselves.

That was the cause of the Revolution.

To fight the revolution, however, the colonial elites had had to mobilize the very lower classes that they looked forward to exploiting, and in doing so they raised the hopes and aspirations of the country's working people and the poor. Thomas Jefferson's words in The Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" suggested to the laboring classes that they had a stake in the struggle. Jefferson, of course, did not believe that women, blacks, or Indians were equal. He speculated that slavery might end (this was before the invention of the cotton gin), but he wrote of black people that they "are inferior to the white in the endowments both of body and mind."^[i] Indians he considered savages. Women's inferiority and subordination was taken for granted. Yet the word "equal" had an impact on the population.

The revolutionary struggle itself tended to empower the lower classes. The war against the British Army and its Hessian mercenaries was fought largely by common folk, by small farmers, mechanics, and laborers who wanted land, higher wages, more equal treatment, and some of whom wanted a voice and vote in government. The Declaration of Independence inspired women too, even if its most famous phrase had not explicitly included them. Slaves, who could see that they had no hope of liberation by the southern planters such as Washington and Jefferson, took advantage of the struggle by going over to the British in exchange for their freedom. Throughout the colonies things were turned upside down as the lower classes and the oppressed took the fight into their own hands. The Articles of Confederation, the first constitution of 1781, left power in the hands of state legislatures, subject to popular pressures.

The Counter-Revolution and the Constitution

When the war ended, the lower classes remained rowdy and even rebellious. Small farmers rose up, sometimes in armed revolts against their creditors and against increased taxation, and the state legislatures frequently granted them relief. Daniel Shays Rebellion, an armed uprising of 4,000 men against creditors and tax collectors, led the Boston merchants to create a mercenary militia that was sent to crush the uprising. These developments, and Shays Rebellion in particular, convinced the wealthy merchants, rich farmers, and plantation owners that they needed a stronger federal government that could insure the collection of debts and taxes.^[ii]

The ruling class realized that it had to stuff the democratic genie back into the authoritarian bottle of government; they had to put America's underlings back in their places. So the American capitalist and slave-owning classes launched a counter-revolution to suppress democracy and to quash the idea that the majority should rule. That counter-revolution required both a new ruling class ideology and a new constitution.^[iii]

John Adams, who would become the second president of the United States, worked indefatigably to devise the new ideology for the nascent American elite, a worldview that would serve them in their struggle against popular power. At the center of Adam's thinking was the notion that inequality was natural. As he wrote, "inequalities which God and nature have planted here, and which no human legislator ever can eradicate."^[iv] Those inequalities were birth and wealth. And the idea of democracy, Adams argued, had to be banished because it threatened what he called the "natural conditions" of private property and economic inequality. He firmly believed that, "No democracy ever did or can exist." Especially after the French Revolution of 1789, which horrified conservatives like himself, Adams argued that, "It becomes more indispensable, that every man should know his place and be made to keep it." As historian Larry E. Tise writes, "John Adams was by 1790 America's most articulate counter-revolutionary."^[v]

Though James Madison had been the principal author of the Bill of Rights (adopted in 1791),

amendments that protected Americans' civil liberties, he too opposed the rise of democracy. As Tise writes:

Madison saw in the wake of the American Revolution that American ideas about republicanism and democracy had gone awry. He was alarmed at the emergence of majoritarianism (the notion that majority votes in legislative assemblies determine everything) that had suddenly emerged.[vi]

Madison also believed that democracy threatened property and order. He had no faith in the ability of his fellow citizens to have any role in government. As he wrote in 1788 to Edmund Randolph:

Whatever respect may be due to the rights of private judgment, ... there can be no doubt that there are subjects to which the capacities of the bulk of mankind are unequal and on which they must be governed by those with whom they happen to have acquaintance and confidence.[vii]

Like Adams, Madison believed that the general public was not wise enough to manage its own affairs and, more important, was not to be trusted. Madison was particularly concerned, as he wrote in *The Federalist Papers*, number 10, about the dangers of "A rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project..."[viii] These were precisely the demands of the small farmers who had fought the revolution, had risen up with Daniel Shays, and who, he believed, must now be disempowered.

A New Ideology

The development of this new ideology based on the pillars of natural inequality, private property, and opposition to democracy provided the intellectual foundation for the adoption of the Constitution of 1783, a fundamentally conservative document intended to maintain political power in the hands of the upper classes. Written in secret, adopted by a small, elite assembly of 55 men in 1787, it was ratified by the state governments in 1788. Few except the wealthy had voted for those state governments. At the time only those who owned property of a significant value could vote in the states, excluding at least half of all white men. Or put another way, in the United States at the time, only 150,000 out of a total a population of five million, had the right to vote.[ix] Of course Black slaves and freemen, who made up about 15 percent of the population, and the many Indian tribes who were the original inhabitants of the land were completely excluded. Adopted and imposed by a small minority of wealthy and well-off people, the Constitution was intended to maintain their hold on the new government.[x]

The new Constitution did many things. First, though slavery was never mentioned by name, 10 clauses in the Constitution implicitly recognized the right to property in slaves, and one allowed the continuation of the slave trade for twenty years. The Constitution also permitted the slave states to count slaves as three-fifths of a person for purpose of representation in the House of Representatives, thus increasing the number of southern representatives and strengthening the political power of the slave states in the South.[xi]

Second, the Constitution gave the Congress the power, "To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes" To do so, the very first United States Congress then created the Department of War with responsibility for Indian affairs, suggesting that Congress viewed the Indian tribes as enemy foreign nations. And Indians could not be considered citizens if they did not pay federal and states taxes, which very few did or would.[xii]

Third, the Constitution made no mention of women, always referring only to persons, in effect

excluding women from both civil and political rights, since women had no legal existence. Under the British doctrine of coverture, men had legal personality, but—except for widows—women none, with no rights to own property or enter into contracts. As one scholar wrote, “Under the civil law of the continent a single woman was the ward of her father, and a married woman the ward of her husband....In the eyes of the common law man and wife were one, and the man was that one.”[xiii]

The Constitution not only excluded blacks, Indians, and women from citizenship, it built a bulwark against a popular democracy of white men as well. The Constitution’s framers had ingeniously created a number of anti-democratic features intended to frustrate any attempt at popular rule. Most important was the concept of “divided government” or “checks and balances,” that is the idea that each of the three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—would act as checks on the exercise of inordinate power by one of the other branches. In reality, this system was intended to make it virtually impossible for the lower classes to exert any influence on the state controlled by the upper classes.

One could imagine the people successfully winning control of the House of Representatives where the entire body stood for election every two years. But taking control of the entire Congress would be extremely difficult because Senators had (and still have) staggered six-year terms, only one-third of them being elected every two years. Moreover, Senators were originally not directly elected but were chosen by state legislatures. (Since the adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment in 1913 Senators have been directly elected).

Neither was the president chosen by popular vote; he was elected by the Electoral College, and those college electors were at first appointed and not chosen by popular vote until the mid-nineteenth century. The very division of the government into three branches meant that if the people somehow took control of the Congress, they would face both the president’s veto and the Supreme Court’s power to overturn their legislation. The Supreme Court Justices were not elected at all but appointed by the president, approved by the Senate, and served for life. All of these features tended to militate against any attempt at democratic control of the government.

In the United States, with a presidential rather than a parliamentary system, the tendency was from the beginning toward the establishment of two rival parties. The framers created a presidential system, not a parliamentary system such as that in England or later France where the election of the prime minister and the cabinet is dependent upon election by a majority of the parliament. Parliamentary systems permit and may even encourage the establishment of several parties representing the gamut of popular opinion. While it is possible that no single party may have a majority, in the parliamentary system, the various parties can form a bloc to govern.

The authors of the Constitution may not have realized all of the implications at the time, but the creation of what political scientists call a “single member district plurality system” strongly reinforced the tendency toward a two-party system. In this system a candidate does not need a majority to win, only a plurality, so a third party tends to be a spoiler for the party politically closest to it. This is different, for example, than a system where the two leading candidates face a run off in the final election. So today, for example, a left-of-center third party generally takes votes away from the Democratic Party, thereby possibly contributing to a victory of the Republicans. Similarly with a far right party, which might spoil a Republican majority. So, with two established parties, both dominated by the economic elite, one center-left and one center-right, it becomes extremely difficult to dislodge them.

The American counter-revolution saddled us with an undemocratic capitalist state and with a two-party system, historically two capitalist parties. On July Fourth, while having a burger and a beer, we should remember that we will have to get rid of this entire system if we are to bring about

a genuinely democratic system with real equality, that is a socialist society.

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[i] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), p. 163, his speculation on possible freedom, p. 143, his belief in their inferiority.

[ii] David P. Szatmary, *Shays Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1980) is the standard account.

[iii] See: Larry E. Tise, *The American Counter-Revolution: A Retreat from Liberty, 1783-1800* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1998); Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford, 2007); Woody Houton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang / Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007). See also: Michael Parenti, *Democracy for the Few* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), pp. 41-55.

[iv] Tise, *The American Counter-Revolution*, p. 401.

[v] Tise, *The American Counter-Revolution*, p. 411.

[vi] Tise, *The American Counter-Revolution*, p. 419.

[vii] Tise, *The American Counter-Revolution*, pp. 419-420.

[viii] James Madison, *The Federalist*, #10, available at:
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp

[ix] Francis Newton Thorpe, *A Constitutional History of the United States*, Vol. I, 1776-1850 (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1898), p. 97.

[x] Tise, *The American Counter-Revolution*, p. 402, p. 408, and p. 411.

[xi] David Waldstreicher, "How the Constitution Was Indeed Pro-Slavery," *The Atlantic*, Sept 19, 2015, available at:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/how-the-constitution-was-indeed-pro-slavery/406288/>

[xii] Robert J. Miller, "American Indians & the Constitution," available at:
<http://www.flashpointmag.com/amindus.htm>

[xiii] U.S. Senate Committee on Immigration Hearing, March 2, 1933, containing John L Cable, "Amrican Citizenship Rights of Women," available at:
<https://www.loc.gov/law/find/hearings/pdf/0014160126A.pdf>