

Nationalism and the Citizenship in the American Revolution and the Early Republic

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Introduction

The United States of America gives us a good case to consider on the delicate relationship between limited public-minded citizenship as republicanism idealized¹ and democracy by popular support. Both are close to each other, and seem to be identical. In my view democracy is a political system to mobilize popular participation in national unity as citizen under the nationalism. Republicanist citizenship is to share the serious burden of governing the republic while nationalism demands the people their devotion to and participation in the nation and provides an opportunity for material happiness.

On one hand, republicanism desires for the dedication of selfless citizens to the public. Every citizen is responsible for the common good. They are supposed to share the one common good, and that would bring about the solidarity to support the republic. For this purpose the citizens need a high standard of knowledge of and willingness for the public interest: i.e. virtue. Thus, the public-minded citizens could make decisions useful for the people as whole. This virtuous solidarity keeps the body politique working well for the good of the people.

On the other hand, according to Ernest Gellner, nationalism brings about unity and leads to the creation of the nation-state, which, by building an industrial society, should guarantee a material happiness for the people. Gellner explains the industrial society as follows:

Industrial society is the only society ever to live by and rely on sustained and perpetual growth, on an expected and continuous improvement. Not surprisingly, it was the first society to invent the concept and ideal of progress, of continuous improvement. Its favoured mode of social control is universal Danegeld, buying off social aggression with material enhancement; its greatest weakness is its inability to survive any temporary reduction of the social bribery fund, and to weather the loss of

¹ Republicanism, or civic humanism, is an Early Modern political ideology originating in Renaissance Florence. According to the idea, while the government should be for the good of the whole country, the power tends to enlarge itself for its own purpose regardless of the general interest. So it is the urgent responsibility of the citizens with virtue to be cautious of and keep the power from becoming tyranny. In Britain the Walpole and later administrations increased the power of central government and promoted market oriented policies, which caused severe criticism and caution against the government as "court" by "country" local gentry. The American colonists used "country" pamphlets to criticize royal governor's efforts to control the colonial legislature. J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1975, especially, Ch.12 Anglicization of the Republic: B) Court, Country, Standing Army. And also Bernard Baylin, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967. Arguing on these views, Gordon S. Wood clarifies that the American Revolution was rather the last political movement to create a classical republic than the first radical movement to democratize politics and society. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969.

legitimacy which befalls it if the cornucopia becomes temporarily jammed and the flow falters.²

Industrial society needs a certain size, and needs to be supported by an infrastructure: the legal system, communication and transportation, the monetary and credit system, the fiscal system including protective tariff, and the education system. In exchange for defending the unity of the polity, the people are eligible to enjoy the pursuit of happiness. When all the people in the nation join the union voluntarily, the nation would maintain a powerful state. Democracy deserves to the people contributing to the national unity as citizens, who are responsible for the common good - in this case, national security and economical development.

In the Early Republican period the United States originally started with a republic of limited virtuous citizenship in the idea of republicanism, but the surge of nationalism after the War of 1812 transformed their political ideology and organization into democracy. In the following paper I would like to trace the political transformation from town meeting to republicanism, and then into democracy. That would also show the change of people from ruled subjects to virtuous citizens to rule res publica, and then a nation with duties and rights to the state.

1. Town Meeting and Happy Subjects in Peaceable Kingdoms

Consensus and Burden-sharing

The town meeting was completely different from democracy. The town in New England was a closed world, so to speak, a peaceable kingdom, and the townspeople knew each other since childhood. They thus shared a common purpose and were not supposed to be divided among themselves. The meeting was not a place for making decisions, but rather for confirmations of their consensus. They disliked any policies that threatened harmony or revealed any cleavages in the community. Each member had a sort of veto in the meeting. When one member clung to his own opinion without compromise, the meeting would refrain from pushing such a decision as final. Of course, it was expected that a member would not insist on his own interest or biased view without considering the common interest.³

In order for such a holistic community to work well, it was necessary that the membership be closely conditioned and carefully screened. The townspeople were required to share various burden alternately. Minor offices for any members were, for example fence viewer, road viewer, deer-reeve, hog-reeve, sealer of leather, constable, and tax assessor. Major offices for dependable leading members in the community were selectman, town clerk, town treasurer, moderator and representative for the colonial legislature, and, militia officer. These were public duties geared toward keeping the communal life comfortable, and many of them were time-consuming and exhausting.

² Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1983, p.22.

³ Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1970. As for details of usual life of New England townspeople, see Sumner C. Powell, *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town*, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1963.

With the militia system townsmen were required, at their own expense, to be soldiers with arms and ammunition ready. To complete these duties the members had to have enough property and family to maintain an independent household. As long as one kept an independent status each was equal to the other. Any townsmen with ability, willingness and credibility could be chosen leaders although in a paternalistic society the more property, the more credibility.⁴

New-comers were screened carefully and needed public permission in the town meeting or at least the consent of the board of selectmen. When a constable found a stranger in the town he warned, followed and watched the person until that person went away beyond the town boundary. New-comers needed some host inhabitants who took responsibility for their life and behavior.⁵

The Ruler and the Ruled

Once the townspeople had established this personal community and kept it working peacefully, they had almost no commitment with and interest in the bigger world outside their own. The imperial or provincial government had the main charges of international affairs, diplomacy and defense, and internal peace and order. The prerogative authority took care of the peace and order of the Empire and the provinces. People were just the governed, and content with that status. Only the monarch and the aristocracy could afford to dedicate themselves to the commonweal without much attention to their own interest, or even against it. When the governments needed an extra finance for these matters they asked the subjects for their consent to the taxes. That was the traditional mechanism of the Parliament. It would just check the government to admit the necessity of the finance. The Commons of Parliament had not been the governing officers, and the electors had not been citizens who should be responsible for the common good.

Since the Glorious Revolution had established the parliament sovereignty in England, the King, the Lords and also the Commons in the Parliament have formed the governing institution. After that the electorate voted to choose a representative to make public decisions for the common good of the whole nation. At this stage they were expected to be citizens.⁶ The British Parliament thus claimed the sovereign power for the interest of the entire Empire including every American colonial matter, as in the Declaration Act in 1766. The Americans justified themselves in terms of the traditional consent of the subjects to a tax at the very beginning of the Revolution.

2. Forging the British Nation and Natural Right Citizenship in the American Colonies

⁴ Robert J. Taylor, *Western Massachusetts in the Revolution*, Providence, R.I., Brown Univ. Press, 1954, pp.33-51, and Edward Cook, Jr., *The Fathers of Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth-Century New England*, Baltimore & London, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976, pp.1-2, 25-32. Also for detail examples, see David Grayson Allen, *In English Ways, The Movement of Societies and the Transferal of England Local Laws and Customs to Massachusetts Bay in the Seventeenth Century*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1981, pp.30-74.

⁵ Josiah Benton, *Warning Out in New England*, Freeport, New York, Books for Libraries Press, 1910, rep. 1970, and Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms*, pp.92-119.

⁶ Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*, New York, W.W.Norton, 1988, chs.2-3. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, pp.155-168.

British Identity and the Foreign

The Union of England, Wales and Scotland forged the British nation, a creation of solid political community. A series of fights and victories against France reorganized the British nation into a more united and efficient state. Their victories were not won by bravery of the generals and soldiers, but by their effective fiscal system to support costly warfare. This fiscal-military state also built a large efficient bureaucracy, and made the Parliament the central institution for political, economical, and social activities in the nation.⁷ These state activities promoted a new British nationhood, and opened wide opportunities to the three nationals, especially to the Scots. The Scotch elite joined the British establishment to be British Lords, members of Parliament, and high officials in the civil and military government. This Unity called forth a new fervent identity of Britishness, which stimulated a strong anti-Scotch movement among English diehards like John Wilkes.⁸

This surge of British nationalism alienated American colonists conscious of their English origin. As T.H. Breen points out:

Economic and military transformation fed what for the mid-century American colonists would surely have been another arresting feature of the age, the sudden burst of British nationalism. Perhaps the Britons of this period did not experience what we might recognize as the advent of a full-blown nationalism Whatever label one employs, however, it now seems apparent that sometime during the 1740s English men and women of all social classes began to express a sentiment that might be described variously as a dramatic surge of national consciousness, a rise of defiant patriotism, or a greatly heightened affirmation of national identity.⁹

The British consciousness was underscored by contrast to Catholic France and colonial peoples in the Empire. Linda Colley discusses a symbolic painting titled "The Oracle" (1774) by John Dixon. In the image the American figure represented by a native young queen was at a distance in a dark shadow while having pleasant chats English, Scotch and Irish figures of young ladies in classical costume are looking at the picture of the prospering future of the British Empire.¹⁰ The British people saw the American colonists as foreigner or second-class subject. At the peak of the British nationalism after the Seven Years' War victory the Americans were irritated with that British arrogance. An aristocratic Virginia planter, Arthur Lee complained that the American colonists "are treated, not as the fellow subjects, but as the servants of Britain."¹¹

⁷ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989, esp. chs. 5 & 8.

⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837*, New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1992, pp. 105-117.

⁹ T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence*, New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 2004, pp. 77-78. On the surge of British nationalism and their arrogance toward American colonists, do., "Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions *Once More* in Need of Revising," *Journal of American History*, 84(1997), 19-23.

¹⁰ Colley, *Britons*, p. 133, and also pp. 133-137.

¹¹ Breen introduces some more examples, "Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution," 29- 33, And Lee's quotation is in the page 30.

American Identity by Natural Right Liberalism

English assertion of its own Britishness shocked Americans. They were forced to create their own identity and to search for a foundation for it. That was the starting point of American nationalism.¹² In a classic book on nationalism Ernest Gellner explains: "If the nationalism prospers it eliminates the alien high culture, but it does not then replace it by a local low culture: it revives or invents a local high (literate, specialist-transmitted) culture of its own, though admittedly one which will have some links with their earlier local folk styles and dialects."¹³ Breen explains the American necessity of another high culture to resist the nationalism of the metropolitan mother state. The American colonists appropriated the Lockean Natural Law theory with alacrity. "Threatened from outside by a self-confident military power, one that seemed intent on marginalizing the colonists within the empire, Americans countered with the universalist vocabulary of natural rights, in other words, with a language of political resistance that stressed a bundle of God-given rights as 'prior to and independent of the claims of political authority.'"¹⁴ The forging of the British nation catalyzed natural right liberalism in America.

In the process of the anti-British and Independence movement and the Revolution, the Americans argued their citizenship responsibility and status deeply and thoroughly based on natural right liberalism. As Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" confirmed, if the monarch and the aristocracy were not trustworthy, then the people and their representatives have to take on the whole responsibility for achieving the common good.¹⁵

Black Citizenship and Female Citizenship

Who were citizens, and who should be citizens? The American people in the Revolution took up challenging questions and claimed justice in natural right liberalism. Let us consider several examples. Challenges are mainly related with how universal their new constitution should be, especially in terms of race and gender. Universalism of natural right theory radically demanded inclusive citizenship.

Document 1: The Return of Sutton town, MA to the Proposed State Constitution of 1778.¹⁶ (Underlines are mine.)

[Proposed constitution of 1778, article V: Every male inhabitant of any town in this State, being free, and twenty-one years of age, excepting Negroes, Indians and molattoes, shall be intitled to vote for a Representative ...]

The V Art. appears to us wear a very gross complexion of Slavery;

¹² Breen, "Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution," 34-39.

¹³ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p.57.

¹⁴ Breen, "Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution," 36.

¹⁵ Wood, *Radicalism*, pp.243-259.

¹⁶ Robert J. Taylor, *Massachusetts, Colony to Commonwealth: Documents n the Formation of Its Constitution, 1775-1780*, Chapel Hill, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1961, pp.53, 64-65.

and is diametrically repugnant to the grand and Fundamental Maxims of Human Rights, vtz. "That Law to boind all must be assented to by all." which this Article by no means admits of , when it excludes free men, and men of Property from a voice in the election of Representatives; Negroes &c. are excluded even tho they are free and are men of Property. This is manifestly adding to the already accumulated Load of guilt lying upon the Land in Supporting the Slave Trade, when the poor innocent Affricans who never hurt or offered any Injury or Insult to this country have been so unjustly assaulted inhumanly Murdered many of them; to make way for stealing others, and then cruelly brought from their native Land, and Sold here like Beasts. And yet now by this Constitution, if by any good Providence they or any of their Posterity, obtain their freedom and a handsome Estate yet they must excluded the Priviledges of Men! This must be the bringing or incurring more wrath upon us. And it must be thought more insulting tho not So cruel, to deprive the original Naitives of the Land the Priviledges of Men. We also cant but observe that by this article the Convention had in contemplation of having many more slaves beside the Poor Africans, when they Say of others beside; being Free and 21 years old

Document 2. The Essex County Convention Result on the Proposed Constitution of 1778.¹⁷ (Underlines are mine.)

All members of the state are qualified to make the election, unless they have not sufficient discretion, or are so situated as to have no wills of their own; persons not twenty one years old are deemed of the former class, from their want of years and experience. The municipal law of this coutry will not trust them with the disposition of their lads, and consigns them to the care of their parents or guardians. Women what age soever they are of, are also considered as not having a sufficient acquired discretion; not from a deficiency in their mental powers, but from the natural tenderness and delicacy of their minds, their retired mode of life, and various domestic duties. These concurring, prevent that promiscuous intercourse with the world, which is necessary to qualify them for electors. Slaves are of the latter class and have no wills. But are slaves members of a free government? We feel the absurdity, and would to God, the situation of America and the tempers of it's inhabitants were such, that the slave-holder could not be found in the land.

Document 3: Correspondence on drafting Declaration of Independence between John and Abigail Adams.¹⁸

[From Abigail, Mar. 31, 1776] I long to hear that you have declare an independency – and by way in the new code of Laws which I suppose it

¹⁷ Taylor, *Massachusetts*, p.81.

¹⁸ L.H. Butterfield, Mark Friedlaender and Mary-Jo Kline, eds., *The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784*, Boston, Northeastern Univ. Press, 2002, pp.121, 122.

will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to forment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute by such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in immitation of the Supreem Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

[From John, Apr. 14] As to your extraordinary code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient-that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent - that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. - This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it.

In the republican regime people were now not only the ruled but also sovereign citizens responsible for keeping the peace and order in the whole nation. Since the task of the government was to protect life, liberty and property, a responsible citizen should have some property. For propertyless people would lose nothing under whatever government. Thus, it was not expected that they would contribute to the pursuit of a good government. A citizen needed prudence and independence which were secured by some amount of property.¹⁹ New codes of law, and state constitutions, contained property qualification for voting which also gave the right to vote also to people of color qualified in terms of land holding. Republicanism which stressed citizen's virtue and responsibility acknowledged universal qualification. In New Jersey propertied widows could vote.²⁰

In reality very few of the qualified citizens came to the election. Usually less than ten percent of them cast their votes in the first decades of the new Republic. Even the propertied and most interested citizens held deference to the political elite as in the age of loyal subjects. As political commitment and participation meant rather a duty and burden, most unqualified people did not care about who were qualified.²¹

¹⁹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, also his *Radicalism*, pp.178-189. Bernard Baylin, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*.

²⁰ Wood, *Radicalism*, pp.356-357. New Jersey legislature barred blacks from voting and ended women enfranchisement because of a voting fiasco in deciding Essex County seat in 1807. Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, New York, W.W.Norton, 2005, p.122, and also pp.27-30.

²¹ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, pp.119-120, 177.

3. The Surge of American Nationalism and Limiting Citizenship in the Early Nineteenth Century

Surge of Nationalism in the War of 1812

Because a nation is an imagined community the loyalty to the nation has to be learnt.²² A war is a good learning process for the people as a body. People could imagine killings and destructions in a far away place as their own damages. The enemy might hit one's hometown the next time around. The War of 1812 was fought in the Northwestern borders including Lake Erie, northern Maine, Washington D.C. and Baltimore, and New Orleans. Outside the battlefields people also had many things to do for the war: recruiting activities, drillings, maneuvers, and fundraising. A great deal of the people did fight the war in each place in various ways for the nation.²³

The War made citizens. Most of the propertyless soldiers did not fight for acquiring and protecting of their interests, but risked their lives and bodies for the sake of the public security of the nation. How could they seem irresponsible vis-a-vis and indifferent to the common good? They exhibited supreme public-mindedness. Excluding their participation the citizens could not govern the republic. As Linda Colley introduces Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opinion on the public mind and democracy:

Is the nation in the danger? Every man is called into play; every man feels his interest as a citizen predominating over his interest; the high and the low, and the middle classes become all alike politicians; the majority carry the day; and Jacobinism is the natural consequence. Let us not be deceived by words. Every state, in which all the inhabitants without distinction of property are roused to the exertion of a public spirit, is for the time a Jacobin state.²⁴

In America during the War of 1812 militiamen submitted petitions denouncing their disfranchisement. Sean Wilentz summarizes soldiers' comments as follows. "How could men be expected to fight and die for their country if they could not vote?"²⁵ All over the United States, the states adjusted themselves to Jacobinism through constitutional reforms.

Qualification of Property or Chance

In 1820 Massachusetts called a state convention to revise the constitution. As conservative Federalists still held power, the argument did not clash on a radical reform but on a subtle point. On which basis should decide apportionment of legislature seats, population or property? Old John Adams insisted that government by mere numbers

²² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983. Colley, *Britons*, p.295.

²³ On the War of 1812 generally, see J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830*, Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1983, esp. pp.151, 155-163, 166-176, 424-427.

²⁴ Colley, *Britons*, p.312.

²⁵ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, pp.164.

would lead the many to pillage the propertied few, and that the government's "great object is to render property secure" whereas young Daniel Webster believed majority held and respected property. Wilentz introduces the following idea. "Property ownership could be sufficiently widespread among the many, and opportunity to gain additional property sufficiently wide, that democracy and property right were compatible."²⁶ The new constitution abolished the existing freehold suffrage and gave the vote to all of the adult male taxpayers. Webster's political way of thinking fitted very well the emerging American industrial society. Webster understood it was not property itself but chances of property that conditioned the citizenship in this society. Mobility brings about a certain kind of egalitarianism.²⁷

Democrat for White Universal Suffrage

What's more, the War exalted the like-mindedness. The national experience of the War fought by not conscript soldiers, but militias and volunteers made the War the defense of "our union." The critical question is who were imagined to be "we" at the cost of lives.

During the last phase of the War of 1812 a very interesting case shows the intensified sense of community and the deep-rooted prejudice against Blacks. In the battlefield of New Orleans Andrew Jackson, the commander of the American army which was heavily outnumbered by the British invaders, decided to organize two battalions of free black soldiers over the objections of the slaveholders. Even though there was some discriminatory treatments in the army, Jackson ordered a Master officer to respect all the enlistees "without inquiring whether the troops are white, black or tea." The War at the same time united the whole community anyhow, and exposed honest feelings in the exceptional circumstance. In the end Jackson's army won a glorious victory just before arriving the news of the peace treaty.²⁸

Without urgent crisis, however, the color posed more of challenge to the homogeneity of the nation than did property holdings. The democratic reforms of the state constitutions in the 1820s shows the transformation of American citizenship. The New York convention provides a good case. Democratic reformists demanding larger political participation insisted on eliminating black suffrage. A democrat asserted, "The minds of the blacks are not competent to vote. ... Look to your jails and penitentiaries. By whom are they filled? By the very race, whom it is now proposed to clothe with the power of deciding upon your political rights." For him political equality could not be squared with social inequality. He thought free blacks were an inferior people because they did not share in the burdens of the state. Few of them were taxpayers, all were barred from militia service by law, a great number of them were illiterate. So he argued that "we ought to make a constitution adapted to our habits, manners, and state of society."²⁹ Thus he stressed parochial and present conditions rather than the universal principle of liberalism.

²⁶ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, pp.187-188.

²⁷ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, p.24.

²⁸ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, pp.173.

²⁹ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, pp.193-194.

Old Republicanism and Radical Liberalism as a Universal Standard

It was conservatives of old Republicanism who supported the black suffrage as well as property qualification. On the Republican principle, the interest in and the concern with the society tied with property owning was by far the most important factor in deciding who is entitled to vote. Wilentz explains that “lingering ideas of hierarchy placed all of the middling and lower orders in naturally subordinate positions, regardless of color—a subordination to be marked by property distinction in political rights.” The qualification for active citizenship should apply to the people universally.

Even a vehemently radical advocate of universal liberalism asserted universal suffrage for black and white men alike. Wilentz introduces his radically universal argument. “Denying blacks a vote in a government they were bound to obey was repugnant to all the principles and notions of liberty, to which we have heretofore professed to adhere, and to our declaration of independence.”³⁰ It would take half a century to legalize his liberal position, and half a century more to put legal equal rights into practice.

Conclusion

With the nationalism the way how to maintain the national unity is changing. In the nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon supremacy followed Manifest Destiny to pioneer the frontier. People of color were complete outsiders. Around the turn of the twentieth century new immigrants mainly from the Southern and Eastern Europe acquired the American citizenship, and the white women were admitted as citizen in the mass consumption society. Since the equality was established in the years after the end of the Second World War, the unity of the United States could henceforth be accomplished by the peace and equity of the various ethnic groups. The Civil Rights movement encouraged people of color to support the union by way of the American democracy.

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³⁰ *Ibid.*