

Introduction

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READERS of the following essays will discover soon enough that professional scholars are no different from men and women outside the academy: they tend to disagree, argue, sometimes feud, and, in their better moments at least, seek common ground. The principal difference is that scholars generally consider these activities part of their craft, their trade in life.

Approximately a quarter of a century ago, during the academic heyday of the 1960s, a major breakthrough in scholarly understanding of the American Revolution occurred. The excitement generated by that breakthrough in turn stimulated an impressive volume of new scholarship on late eighteenth-century America that continued well beyond the bicentennial celebrations of the mid-1970s. Much of this historical writing, however, rather than reflecting the emergence of a fresh consensus about the origins, character, and consequences of the Revolution, became increasingly contentious and adversarial in tone. For a time in the early 1980s, it seemed, it was not possible to attend a major historical convention in the United States without encountering at least one session devoted to the simmering, sometimes acrimonious controversy surrounding 'republicanism' and the so-called 'republican synthesis' in the recent historiography of Revolutionary and Early National America.

To some extent, of course, this kind of squabbling is endemic to an academic culture that depends on spirited discussion and dissent. Professional historians are trained to criticize the work of

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others and to develop their own interpretations in relation to an existing body of scholarship. Some scholars even go out of their way to promote controversy. And for better or worse, scholarly journals and conventions thrive on disagreement and dissension, no matter how abstract, contrived, and even ill-defined the terms of an academic debate can regrettably become. To those outside the guild, the discussion may appear petty and pedantic, even incomprehensible, which should probably give academics more pause than it generally does. But most scholarly controversies, including the one that concerns us here, have generated much valuable light as well as heat. They will never be resolved completely to everyone's satisfaction. But ultimately they can serve to promote a fuller, richer, more nuanced understanding of the past, not merely among scholars, but even among casual students of history with nothing at stake in the adjudication of professional disputes.

When a distinguished panel of scholars convened in Worcester in the fall of 1989 to ponder anew the so-called 'republican synthesis,' they were venturing onto an academic battlefield at a time when the fiercest skirmishing was probably over but the smoke had by no means cleared. I do not wish to offer here my own summary of the history of this controversy because it would be tedious and redundant. Each of the following essays touches upon key aspects of the story, and the reader interested in a more comprehensive, detailed discussion of the relevant historiography can consult valuable essays by some of our authors published elsewhere.¹ I prefer instead to elaborate briefly on the significant breakthrough in our understanding of the Revolution that initiated the controversy, and I do so because I believe that amid all the heat and fire of our disagreements, larger sight of the primary,

1. See, for instance, Robert E. Shalhope, 'Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 29 (1972): 49-80, and 'Republicanism and Early American Historiography,' *ibid.* 39 (1982): 334-56, as well as Lance Banning, 'Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic,' *ibid.* 43 (1986): 3-19.

indisputable contribution of those pathbreaking studies from the 1960s can too easily be lost.

More than anything else, the understanding of 'republicanism' that emerged most clearly from the work of Bernard Bailyn and Gordon S. Wood over two decades ago undercut, once and for all, a persistent tendency among modern historians to approach the Revolutionary generation in fundamentally ahistorical terms—which is to say, in terms that obscured or denied the distinctiveness and radically different character of an eighteenth-century world of language, values, and experience. In short, we have learned both to understand and to respect the integrity of a political culture whose differentness, even 'foreignness,' twentieth-century scholars had generally underestimated or failed to recognize. This was no mean feat. Among other things, as Lance Banning suggests in his essay in this collection, we have been able, thanks to Bailyn, Wood, and others, 'to take advantage of the rediscovery of certain strands in revolutionary thinking which were largely lost to national memory (and even to historical scholarship) for perhaps a century's time.'² And this insight or breakthrough has clearly affected scholarship on the Revolution in unambiguously positive ways. When scholars now disagree—even, for instance, about the 'modernity' of an influential thinker like James Burgh, whose ideas the political scientist Isaac Kramnick explores in his valuable contribution to the Worcester symposium—their disagreements at least arise from a profound respect for the shaping influence of this eighteenth-century context and not from careless attempts to construe the revolutionaries in the largely irrelevant terms of our own political culture.

Another way of making the general point would be to suggest that the modern discovery of 'republicanism' as a distinctively eighteenth-century mode of thought and discourse has reminded historians of one of their primary responsibilities—which is, as Robert Shalhope frames the issue in his essay below, to reconstruct

2. See Banning's article in these pages.

the past 'in a way that would be recognizable to people of the time who actually experienced it.'³ Nothing can equal the sheer excitement of beginning to penetrate a distant culture, especially when its differentness takes one by surprise. When the American revolutionaries spoke obsessively of virtue, luxury, and corruption, they meant something quite resonant and specific that modern usage of these words no longer conveys; and without a sensitive understanding of what these terms meant to a past generation of Americans, we are simply unable to understand why they made a revolution and then struggled to establish a republic. Aware as we now are of the deep cultural chasm that separates scholars writing in the late twentieth century from their subjects, we have reduced considerably the risk of anachronistic distortion in so many areas of our endeavor, including what we take seriously about the past.

Historians of republicanism taught us, for instance, that what might appear to be trivial and insignificant issues from a modern perspective had, in fact, dramatic and even seminal relevance for eighteenth-century republicans. To invoke my favorite example, the establishment in Boston in 1785 of something as seemingly innocuous as a tea assembly, the 'Sans Souci Club,' with biweekly meetings for dancing, card-playing, and good cheer, generated what Gordon Wood has termed 'a frenzied public uproar that is inexplicable, and indeed ludicrous, unless viewed within the terms in which contemporaries described social character' and as a consequence understood the challenge of securing republican government in the wake of a successful but profoundly destabilizing war for independence.⁴ In the aftermath of the 'republican revolution' in recent historiography, indeed, nothing in the political landscape of late eighteenth-century America has looked quite the same.

But the fact remains that historians' use of republicanism, especially as an organizing theme, aroused vigorous controversy almost from the beginning. As Peter Onuf and Cathy Matson suggest in

3. See Shalhope's article in these pages.

4. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), p. 422.

the introductory paragraph of their essay below, the controversy went through two general phases. Initial debate was centered on what a number of dissenting scholars construed to be the elitist assumptions of the so-called 'ideological school' of historians and their allegedly 'idealist' explanation of the origins of the Revolution. More recently, the controversial dimension of the republican synthesis has focused on the extension of its approach and insights into the post-Revolutionary era, and especially on the relative importance of the specific ideological and discursive tradition that the pathbreaking scholars of republicanism had emphasized. Given historians' habits of abstraction and categorization, it was probably inevitable that the focus of any such debate would be reduced to a convenient but highly misleading shorthand—in this case, to what Lance Banning refers to in his essay as the 'notorious' debate over the relative influence and importance of 'republican' as opposed to 'liberal' ideas in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America. Several of our essays, especially Banning's, are noteworthy for their prudent insight into what has been misleading, as well as enlightening, in the scholarly debate over the precise historical relationship between the two abstractions, republicanism and liberalism, that appears now to have largely run its course. Perhaps it would not be going too far to suggest that the following essays, in the spirit of the conference that produced them, collectively provide an appropriate coda to that debate.

It is fitting as well that the conference honored a particular scholar whose own work sheds such interesting light on the larger historiographical theme. As George Athan Billias's brief but moving account, 'My Intellectual Odyssey,' suggests, only a small portion of his voluminous publications, and more generally of his scholarly and teaching concerns during his twenty-eight years at Clark University, touched directly on the controversy surrounding the republican synthesis. But when they did, and I might add still do, their wisdom offered valuable guidance to others.

As my remarks thus far have doubtless suggested, at times I am convinced that the principal fault of professional historians is our

penchant for abstraction—that is, our tendency to approach and describe the past in terms and categories that make sense to us and that satisfy the analytical demands of the profession but that are distressingly detached from the very real, and often quite personal, human experience of those individuals whom we are ostensibly seeking to understand. In his pathbreaking biography of Elbridge Gerry, Professor Billias sought to overcome what he correctly identified as the principal limitation of the major studies that first formed the republican synthesis—namely, their presentation of a highly abstract, generalized, and even overintellectualized portrait of what republicanism actually meant to members of the Revolutionary generation. His biography of Gerry brilliantly revealed a personal, more practical side of republicanism, and above all showed us the importance of portraying the precise working out in human lives of the broader cultural and political concerns we tend to subsume under the rubric of an abstraction like republicanism. I might add that the Gerry biography helped pave the way for a number of other biographical studies of Revolutionary-era Americans, including my own study of James Madison, that employed (though often in somewhat different ways) a similar approach—an approach that aimed above all to infuse specificity and texture, human texture, into our understanding of what living in a republican world of experience actually meant.⁵

And I might conclude by observing that Professor Billias, now officially retired from teaching, may once again be quietly leading the way for students of republicanism. His ongoing research on the influence of American constitutionalism throughout the world, as part of his larger, principled commitment to a global approach to American history, can serve to remind us of something

5. For examples, see Robert Dawidoff, *The Education of John Randolph* (New York, 1979); Robert E. Shalhope, *John Taylor of Caroline: Pastoral Republican* (Columbia, S.C., 1980); Charles Royster, *Light-Horse Harry Lee and the Legacy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1981); R. Kent Newmyer, *Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story: Statesman of the Old Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985); Paul K. Longmore, *The Invention of George Washington* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988); and Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers: James Madison and the Republican Legacy* (Cambridge and New York, 1989).

important that we may have lost sight of amid all our recent wrangling over issues of emphasis, terminology, and chronology in the republican synthesis. To a remarkable extent, we have been inexcusably parochial. We have failed to exploit fully the opportunity to understand better both the character and the development of republican ideas and institutions in the United States by placing them in the comparative context of republican movements, and even republican revolutions, in other parts of world, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century. For that reason, indeed, we might be well served to follow Professor Billias down the most recent path he has chosen to blaze in a profession that he continues to honor.

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