

# Birthday of principle

David Armitage

Published: 6 July 2007

THE FOURTH OF JULY AND THE FOUNDING OF AMERICA. By Peter De Bolla. 224pp.

Profile Books. Pounds 15.99 - 978 1 86197 850 9.

How is a State made or founded, how does a State make or found itself?" The question is Jacques Derrida's, but it has been asked often before by political theorists from Machiavelli to Hannah Arendt. Like Arendt, Derrida was prompted to pose it by reflecting on the mystery of the American founding, whose bicentennial in 1976 gave rise to his playful deconstruction of that "fabulous event". Unlike Machiavelli, who advised aspiring founders to "kill the sons of Brutus", Derrida declined to answer the basic question: "I won't . . . engage myself on this path, today".

The Fourth of July and the Founding of America by Peter De Bolla picks up where Derrida left off over thirty years ago. What, if anything, happened on July 4,

1776? What later happens with the re-enactment of that moment each succeeding July 4? What, in short, does that day mean, both within the grand sweep of history and to those who commemorate it? De Bolla's answers to these questions are as probing as Derrida's, but ultimately as inconclusive.

Not much happened on July 4, 1776, at least in Philadelphia. The Continental Congress voted to issue a declaration justifying the resolution for Independence it had ratified on July 2, a day John Adams predicted would become "the most memorable Epocha in the history of America". There was no immediate public proclamation of Independence: that would come days later. Nor was there a signing of the Declaration: that would not be completed until mid-August

1776. If this was the birth of a nation, it was long drawn out but strangely quiet.

De Bolla traces the process by which this day of seemingly little significance became the "punctual moment" around which American history pivots. It began with the first celebration of the Fourth, in 1777, but partisan strife and sectional dissension fissured its meaning in the decades before the Civil War.

Only after the war, in 1870, did July 4 become a federally legislated national holiday. By then, the trappings of Independence Day -the Stars and Stripes and the Liberty Bell, Uncle Sam and the Pledge of Allegiance -had already begun to accrete around it. With these symbols and ceremonies, Americans annually "express their consent to the grand project initiated in Philadelphia in 1776".

De Bolla argues that the Fourth both commemorates that originary act and enables Americans annually to reaffirm their agreement to its basic principles.

Yet those excluded from the original contract have been more sceptical about the promises of the Fourth: as the former slave Frederick Douglass told his mostly white audience in 1852, “This Fourth (of) July is yours, not mine”. More could have been made by De Bolla of such traditions of protest around the Fourth, as well as of the alternatives to it, such as the African American “Juneteenth” celebrations marking the anniversary of emancipation in 1865.

De Bolla repeatedly idealizes the collective and consensual “project that is America”, but in more sober moments he notes how such key terms as “independence” and “the Pursuit of Happiness” have gradually been individualized and now stand at odds with the original principles of the founders. He also remarks on the “strange hybridisation of the public and private . . . a kind of sacralisation of the political” that takes place on Independence Day, but such metaphors do not do the hard analytical work the apparent contradictions of the Fourth demand.

It is notable how often those who attempt to decipher the American founding reach for political theology as the key. Thus, Arendt contrasted the “clear signs of divine origin” in the Declaration’s invocation of “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” with the desacralization of the political she saw as characteristic of modernity. Even Derrida cloaked America’s founding in a similar mystification: “Someone, let’s call him Jefferson (but why not God?) desired that the institution of the American people should be . . . the erection of a proper name”.

Americans were supposed to have put such mystifications behind them in 1776.

The future American President James Monroe wrote, in 1802, that the subjects of monarchies might “degrade themselves by an unbecoming personal idolatry”, but the more dignified Americans “celebrate the birthday of principle”. But do the principles Americans celebrate each year betoken their modernity? Or does the fact that they celebrate them with the repetitive “rituals and rites” of a civic religion show them to be incorrigibly pre-modern? Peter De Bolla’s short, sharp book teasingly raises such questions, but cannot fully answer them. In the end, the fundamental mystery remains unresolved.