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London Review of Books

The Last War of Religion

David Armitage

The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World by J.C.D. Clark

Cambridge, 404 pp, £35.00, October 1993, ISBN 0 521 44510 8

The Debate on the Constitution: Federalist and Anti-Federalist Speeches, Articles and Letters During the Struggle over Ratification. Vol. I edited by Bernard Bailyn

Library of America, 1214 pp, \$35.00, July 1993, ISBN 0 940450 42 9

All rebellions resemble one another, but every revolution is revolutionary in its own way. The French wrote the classic modern script for revolution – utopian, transformative and bloody – but even they recognised that the prologue to their drama had been playing in America since 1776. When viewed from 1789 or 1793, however, the American Revolution looked distinctly unrevolutionary. No Louis lost his head after Lexington; no American Bastille was stormed; no Robespierre emerged among the staid Ciceros and Cincinnati of the founding generation. What, then, was so revolutionary about the American Revolution: the colonists' successful rebellion against the British Crown, or the building of a nation under a novel Constitution which inspired the French to flattering imitation? Gordon Wood has argued powerfully, in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991), that the real revolution lay in the transformation of 'a monarchical society into a democratic one unlike any that had ever existed', though even this may underestimate its constitutional legacy. The United States resolved ancient political conundrums that still bedevil European and British politics, problems such as federal government, divided sovereignty, democratic rule over an extended territory and the separation of powers. Since the lessons of the ongoing American experiment are unknown to parts of Europe, notably Britain, the American Revolution may still be unfinished.

Looking back in 1818, John Adams asked a fundamental question: 'But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the hearts and minds of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations.' Historians have probed the hearts and minds of the people extensively of late, to explain both the origins of the rebellion and the consequences of the Revolution. They have argued over whether the Revolution's roots lay in the works of John Locke or those of the English Commonwealthmen,

in liberalism or Classical republicanism, in the language of natural rights or the discourse of civic virtue. At stake is the political identity of the United States itself, whether as the first of the liberal democracies or the last of the Classical republics.

A modern revolution is often imagined to be a secular millennium: the question of its religious roots has accordingly not bulked large in arguments over the American Revolution. Now that Jonathan Clark has discovered America, however, religion becomes the centrepiece of an interpretation which banishes all other explanations as anachronistic or incomplete. Clark is the man who put the Tory back into British history with his iconoclastic account of *English Society 1688-1832* (1985), which painted England's ancien régime as a hierarchical, aristocratic and monarchical society under the hegemony of the Church of England, buttressed by its bishops, defied only by Dissenters, and with no schisms wrought by 'isms' such as individualism, radicalism or liberalism. In his new book, the American colonies appear as the nightmare of that ancien régime, a serpent's nest of republicans and Dissenters ready to throw off their allegiance to Parliament, Crown and Church in the name of natural rights and religious heterodoxy. Neither liberalism nor Classical republicanism can account for the Revolution or for its consequences because, Clark argues, 'early-modern societies were essentially sectarian in their dynamics.' American rebels did not perform their revolutionary task in Roman costume and with Roman phrases; they borrowed speech, passions and allusions from the Old Testament. When Clark's real aim has been achieved, when the historiographical transformation of *English Society* has been accomplished for America, Habakkuk once more supplants Locke.

The American Revolution was not, then, the first of the democratic revolutions, it was the last of the wars of religion. This redescription effectively defamiliarises the Revolution, though how much it can explain is less clear. Clark leaves the term 'war of religion' undefined and seems unsure whether American events simply 'retained the characteristics of a war of religion', or if, more generally for the rebels, it was 'a holy war, either in the literal sense that religion identified their enemy, predisposed them to resistance and vastly heightened the emotional temperature, or in the more general sense that patriotic zeal derived its force by analogy with religious enthusiasm'. The strong form of Clark's thesis is based on three contentions: that the only important political 'discourses' in the early-modern Atlantic world were those of law and religion; that only within these discourses could disobedience be articulated and hence mobilised into rebellion; and that the target of such rebellion was the specifically 'Anglican' sovereign of King-in-Parliament born during the English Reformation, confirmed by the Restoration settlement, and pronounced mature after the Glorious Revolution. In the context of the British Atlantic world, the American Revolution was accordingly a 'rebellion of natural law against common law and a rebellion of Dissent against hegemonic Anglicanism' and these 'were the same rebellion, since their target was the unified sovereign created by England's unique constitutional and ecclesiastical development'.

The whipping-boy in Clark's narrative is the 18th-century jurist, William Blackstone, theorist of 'the English doctrine of sovereignty' as indivisible and indefeasible. Blackstone argued that,

under the particular historical conditions of the British Constitution, Parliament was ‘the place where that absolute despotic power, which must in all governments reside somewhere, is entrusted by the Constitution of these kingdoms’. This peculiarly English doctrine is still with us in the language of sovereignty so popular in those parts of the Conservative and (lest we forget) Unionist Party which resist power-sharing within Europe as fiercely as devolution within Britain itself. Less immediately familiar is Clark’s reconstruction of the ‘Blackstonian sovereign’ as a specifically Anglican agent of absolute legislative authority, against whom the American colonists, following a century-long tradition of religious rebellion in the Atlantic world, directed their righteous anger. Prominent Dissenters did attack Blackstone’s account of the laws penalising Nonconformity in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765), but he soon countered that this was historical not prescriptive, and revised it in later editions. Blackstone also recognised the primacy of natural law over all human law, and for that reason his many American readers – including Alexander Hamilton – took him to be a supporter of resistance, upholding the ‘inherent (though latent) powers of society, which no climate, not time, no constitution, no contract, can ever destroy or diminish’. Even Edmund Burke thought that Blackstone had nourished the American colonists’ ‘fierce Spirit of Liberty’, since his *Commentaries* had ‘sold nearly as many ... in America as in England’. Sovereignty was not necessarily Anglican even for Blackstone, who recognised the anomaly of a Presbyterian established church in Scotland; he certainly believed that sovereignty was indivisible, but he did not therefore deny the supremacy of natural law, or the possibility of legitimate rebellion. In the light of Blackstone’s 18th-century reputation, Clark’s Anglican Leviathan turns out to be something of a red herring.

The most valuable parts of *The Language of Liberty* are not those which treat the American Revolution, but those which deal with English state-formation in the early-modern Atlantic world. The creation of an English state, its priorities turned away from continental Europe and towards the British Isles and the Atlantic since the end of the Hundred Years War, is one of the key items on the contemporary historical agenda. Clark tells this story as the rise and progress of the Anglican sovereign of King-in-Parliament, opposed at every turn by the proponents of religious heterodoxy. Yet his account reveals that the intensity of English arguments for undivided sovereignty was in almost inverse proportion to the English state’s political and religious outreach. Legislative uniformity, centred on a single British Parliament at Westminster, was only achieved for mainland Britain with the Anglo-Scottish Union in 1707, and for the whole British Isles only in the wake of the American Revolution and an attempted Irish Revolution between 1801 and 1922. If a uniform ‘Anglicanism’ was indeed the aim for the English-speaking world, King-in-Parliament was singularly incapable of providing it, even if it wished to, whether in Ireland, in Scotland and least of all in the American colonies. Ireland retained its entrenched Catholic majority, Presbyterianism remained established in Scotland even after the Union, and the diverse ethnic and denominational character of the colonies effectively resisted any attempts at religious uniformity.

The British Atlantic Empire, unlike the Spanish or even the French, was acquired with an

absence of central design. The earliest colonies had been planted under charter by individuals or companies with little initial state interference, and only half-hearted co-operation from the established Church. No effort was made to unify the diverse American possessions until James, Duke of York's disastrous attempt to create a quasi-Spanish viceroyalty with the Dominion of New England in the 1680s. Nor did the Church of England ever extend its episcopal hierarchy to the colonies. These early failures to export central English institutions were only scratches on the rind of the oak in the 17th century; by the 1760s, they had become alarming fissures, and the almost simultaneous attempts to impose the will of Parliament (by means of the Stamp Acts) and the will of the Church (in the shape of a colonial bishop) on the colonies were signs, not of the strength, but rather of the weakness, of British sovereignty in America. The colonists bemoaned these belated movements in a common political and religious vocabulary – a language of virtue and corruption, of liberty and slavery, directed against what the politically multilingual Tom Paine succinctly stigmatised as 'Popery of government'. Burke – Paine's mighty opposite in a later revolution controversy, but his team-mate in this one – noted that the colonists' spirit of independence had been fomented by their freedom from religious conformity, but he also stressed that it had grown politically as a result of British neglect, and that it was institutionalised in their provincial governments and their economic forms, including slavery. Even John Adams admitted that 'molasses was an essential ingredient in American independence.' The language of liberty was indeed one of religion, but it was also a language embodied in institutions, forged by material interests, and expressive of creole identities.

Religion was not simply the cloak under which the colonists drew their political and economic daggers. Yet Clark's hostility to any materialist analysis, and his insistence that political grievances were inevitably also religious ones, drives him to an ultimately untestable and incoherent explanation of revolutionary behaviour. He argues that the beliefs of the mass of the colonists 'were mobilised, turned from defensive to offensive creeds, by the private and generally unacknowledged dogmas of clerical and lay élites', particularly doubts about the divinity of Jesus which affronted the Trinitarian orthodoxy of the Church of England. Many of the most prominent signers of the Declaration of Independence were indeed theologically heterodox, including Adams, Franklin and Jefferson. There had been ferocious episodes of sectarian strife within recent memory, such as the attempt to create a colonial bishop in 1767-70, or the vocal reaction to the Quebec Act (1774), which recognised Catholicism in Canada, two episodes which Clark curiously plays down. Yet the lengthy shopping-list of colonial grievances against George III which formed the bulk of the Declaration contained not a single religious grievance. A majority of the signers were members of the Church of England in 1776, and they remained Episcopalians after the Revolution. (Ironically, the Episcopalian Church ordained its first bishops only after the Revolution, among them the Rev James Madison, cousin to the President, in Virginia.) Clark's qualifications ultimately render his whole theory unstable. As he admits, 'not all politically engaged men were distinguished by theological heterodoxy ... smaller minorities acted as catalysts', such as the Congregationalist clergy of New England, backcountry Scots and Irish Presbyterians, and Baptists in the

Southern colonies. Quite how their sectarian appeals were made attractive to the otherwise religiously dormant, Clark never makes clear. Meanwhile, much of the colonists' 'fierce Spirit of Liberty' has been lost in his translation of it into the language of religious heterodoxy.

The Language of Liberty has revived the contemporary Tory explanation of the Revolution. High Tories in England, and those colonial loyalists branded as Tories, argued that only sectarianism sufficed to explain the American rebels' appalling disobedience. The loyalist Peter Oliver, writing in exile in London in 1781, detected the rebellion's roots in the 'Anarchy of Sentiment' produced by the English Reformation, and stirred up by the doctrines peddled by the 'black Regiment' of Massachusetts clergy. The loyalist historian Joseph Galloway agreed and laid the revolt at the door of 'republican sectaries' whose opinions 'were equally averse to those of the established Church and Government'. Most intransigent of all, perhaps, was the choleric young English Tory Ambrose Serle, who spent two years in Revolutionary America as secretary to Lord Howe in 1776-8. He was appalled beyond measure at what he found there. 'Religion is an Honor to man, if it be true Religion and truly used,' he wrote in his diary. 'But, employed in the Service of Sedition & Rebellion, and for the Subversion of an Empire, it is turned into an Abuse, and the more diabolical as it pretends to be the more sanctimonious.' The last sentence of *The Language of Liberty* is Serle's chilling quotation from Lucretius – 'Such conduct in such persons affords too much Room for the Taunts of Infidels: *Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.*' Clark clearly intends this to clinch his interpretation, but Serle's authorship of both *American Liberty: or an Essay ... Shewing that the Designs and Conduct of the Americans Tend Only to Tyranny and Slavery* (1775) and *A New Defence of the Holy Roman Church Against Heretics and Schismatics* (1779) should warn against taking his opinions as even a mainstream Tory view of the Revolution's sectarian dynamics.

The attempt to explain the Revolution in idiomatically British terms is salutary, and often revealing, but Clark's extension of his arguments to later American history is less successful. The religious and jurisprudential categories used to reconstruct the origins of the Revolution have little explanatory power for later periods, and even in the Revolutionary era may account for the behaviour of only a small minority. Disputes over undivided, 'Blackstonian' sovereignty, for example, cannot accommodate the social and intellectual consequences of independence, nation-building and Constitution-making; still less can they account for sectionalism, anti-slavery and Civil War. The American language of liberty found its expression in new institutions and political forms: as Paine noted in 1791, the 'American constitutions were to liberty, what a grammar is to language: they define its parts of speech, and practically construct them into syntax.' The French learned that language of liberty during their Revolution, as Paine hoped they would. The British, with their usual suspicion of foreign languages, have remained resistant, at least since 1790, when Pitt declared in the House of Commons that the 'American Constitution resembled ours neither in church nor in state' and 'sincerely wished it had, in affording equal opportunity for liberty and happiness of the subject'. The arguments collected in Bernard Bailyn's handsomely edited and enlightening

two-volume selection from *The Debate on the Constitution* in 1787-8 should challenge such complacency.

The American Revolution was not the first revolt of colonial nationalism, and the Constitution effectively created a nation where none had existed before. The debate over the Constitution's ratification similarly crystallised a unified national political culture. The sheer variety of media represented in Bailyn's selections is impressive – public oratory, personal correspondence, newspaper editorials, poetry and pamphlets, from such diverse figures as the lexicographer Noah Webster (a Federalist) and the historian Mercy Otis Warren (the only woman represented here, and an Anti-Federalist). The debate on the Constitution was the largest set-piece political dispute ever in the English-speaking world, and even the more than two thousand pages excerpted here are only a fraction of all that was written and spoken. It is often said that the United States has only produced one world-class work of political thought: the *Federalist Papers*. *The Debate on the Constitution* reveals the larger ferment which produced the strategic interventions of Hamilton, Madison and Jay.

Since 1781, the independent states had been loosely joined under what Madison called an 'inadequate, unsafe and pernicious Confederation', which by 1787 was racked by post-war debt, split by internal trade disputes and weak in foreign relations. The Constitutional Convention which met behind closed doors and armed guards in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 began with the aim of revising the Articles under which the Confederation had been governed. What came out of that conclave was a constitutional coup d'état: not a revision of the Articles, but a whole new Constitution that would erect a federal government with the full panoply of sovereign powers. The Confederation could have been replaced by a centralised superstate with unitary sovereignty like that described by Blackstone; by 13 separate and competing commonwealths; by two or more confederacies (the option belatedly revived in 1861); or by a federal republic with sovereignty divided between the states and the federal government. Contemporaries recognised that this set of possibilities – and the chance offered to choose between them – was an entirely novel one, but Old World precedents still necessarily informed New World choices.

The 18th-century British Constitution, with its supposed balance of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, in King, Lords and Commons, had been the wonder of Enlightened Europe. Independence lent enchantment, and the British example loomed large in the Constitutional debates. Americans congratulated themselves that they would be more free even than the British, historically and legendarily the freest people on earth, not least because they would have no monarch and no established Church. Federalists thought that the aim of the Philadelphia Convention had been to 'combine the acknowledged advantages of the British Constitution with proper Republican checks'. Meanwhile, Anti-Federalist opponents feared that '*Congress and President full proof shall bring, /A mere disguise for Parliament and King,*' and charged that the erection of a federal government would create an 'ironhanded despotism', worse even than the British monarchy because exercised in the name of the people. The Anti-Federalists' answer to this peculiarly American dilemma was a Bill of Rights,

like that produced in England in 1688. The first ten Amendments to the Constitution ratified in 1791 therefore enshrined an English remedy for the diseases feared incident to republican government, despite the qualms of those like Benjamin Rush, who saw it as ‘absurd to frame a formal declaration that our natural rights are acquired from ourselves’.

Despite American ideological debts to British examples, a common political language still divides Britain from the United States. For example, the current status of federalism as a boo-word in British politics would astonish most Americans. Its derogatory use to fuel fears of a centralised ‘United States of Europe’ recalls the early opprobrium attached to the term in the American debate. The victory of the Constitution, and hence of the Federalists, gave the word its new and positive meaning: instead of centralisation, federalism implied a composite system that delegates authority (and hence sovereignty) to the lowest feasible level of government. With an irony which Clark should have been the first to perceive, a Tory government had to plunder a papal encyclical to describe just this arrangement when it rediscovered the term ‘subsidiarity’. Only ignorance of American political language, and the English fetish of Parliamentary sovereignty, could have generated such a revealing absurdity. On the eve of elections to the European Parliament, Clark’s account of Anglo-American history may only prolong such misunderstandings. Meanwhile, *The Debate on the Constitution* might help to bridge the political language-barrier which divides Britain from Europe as surely as it sunders Britain from the United States. John Adams contended that ‘the American Revolution was not a common event. Its effects and consequences have already been awful over a great part of the globe. And when and where do they cease?’ In the light of Britain’s political relations with Europe, the answer may be that it is still too soon to tell.

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