

Democracy and the American Revolution

GORDON S. WOOD

THE American Revolution is the single most important event in American history. Not only did it legally create the United States, but it defined most of the persistent values and noblest ideals of the American people, including their commitments to equality, and constitutionalism. Most important, the Revolution created American democracy, indeed, made Americans (despite the contradictory persistence of slavery until the middle decades of the nineteenth century) the first people in the modern world to possess a truly democratic government and society. With the Declaration of Independence in 1776 Americans threw off hereditary monarchy and all that monarchy implied of aristocratic hierarchies of blood and family and quickly established new republican governments in which all citizens were presumed to be equal. The American revolutionaries not only erected governments in which all parts, including in some cases even judges, were made elective by the people, but they soon expanded the right to vote to a degree that most Europeans scarcely conceived of. But even more important to democracy than this expansion of the suffrage was the way Americans in the revolutionary era brought common people into the affairs of government—not just as voters but as actual rulers. In fact, as a consequence of the Revolution Americans gave to ordinary workaday people a cultural and

social significance that they had never before had in history. In the end this celebration of common people in government and society became the essence of American democracy. By the early nineteenth century the huge sprawling and bustling money-making democracy that had emerged out of the American Revolution was new and improbable enough to startle the world. And it was not long before curious European intellectuals—Tocqueville being only the most famous—began journeying across the Atlantic to investigate just what the New World had wrought.

In the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world democracy, as it always had, referred to government by the people—not simply government electively derived from the people, which was a republic, but government actually administered by the people. It was, as James Otis of Massachusetts said, 'a government of all over all', in which the ruled became the rulers and the rulers the ruled. Enlightened Britons on both sides of the Atlantic might agree that ideally the people ought to govern themselves directly, but they realized that democracy in this literal sense had been approximated only in the Greek city-states and in the New England towns; actual self-government or simple democracy was not feasible for any large community. As one American polemicist stated in 1776, even the great radical Whig Algernon Sidney had written that he had known of 'no such thing' as 'in the strict sense . . . a pure democracy, where the people in themselves and by themselves, perform all that belongs to government'; and if any had ever existed in the world, he had 'nothing to say for it'. In fact, most eighteenth-century Britons in Europe and America were so uneasy over the impracticality and instability of pure democracy that democracy was commonly used vituperatively to discredit any untoward tendency towards popular government.

Still, all Britons were convinced that the people had a necessary role to play in government; indeed, without the people's presence government would inevitably become tyrannical. But in a large modern state how was their presence to be felt? Out of the impossibility of convening the whole people of the society, it was thought, arose the great British discovery of representation—'substituting the few in the room of the many', as some Americans put it. Through their representation in the House of Commons, and for the colonists their representation in their provincial assemblies, Britons in the Old World and the New believed they had achieved institutional bulwarks for protecting their liberties that other peoples could only dream of. Narrow though the suffrage was by modern standards and unrepresentative of the society as the eighteenth-century

House of Commons and the colonial assemblies may have been, they were for their day the most popular governmental bodies in the world. They constituted, and people understood them to constitute, what they called 'the democratical parts' of their mixed or balanced constitutions.

Englishmen in the mother country thus participated in government through their House of Commons just as the colonists participated in their provincial governments—their 'little models of the English constitution'—through their lower houses of representatives. This was what the eighteenth-century English-speaking world essentially meant by democracy. Democracy was not yet a faith, not an ideology, not an ethic; it was still a technical term of political science describing popular participation in government in a manner that was not all that different from the way the ancient Greeks had used it. For Britons as for Aristotle or Plutarch this popular participation ideally constituted only a part of their government. Much though the British people valued their participation in their House of Commons and their colonial assemblies, few of them thought that such popular participation by itself was sufficient for the working of a proper constitution and the protection of liberty. Some sort of mixture of democracy with monarchy and aristocracy was necessary.

Indeed, eighteenth-century Britons used the term 'democracy' almost always in conjunction with 'monarchy' and 'aristocracy'—as an essential part of the mixed or balanced constitution of Great Britain. The theory of mixed or balanced government was as old as the Greeks and had dominated Western political thinking for centuries. It was based on the ancient categorization of forms of government into three ideal types, monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—a classical scheme derived from the number and character of the ruling power: the one, the few, or the many. Each of these simple forms possessed a certain quality of excellence: for monarchy, it was order or energy; for aristocracy, it was wisdom; and for democracy, it was honesty or goodness. The maintenance of these peculiar qualities, however, depended on the forms of government standing fast on an imagined spectrum of power. Yet experience had tragically taught that none of these simple forms by itself could remain stable. Left alone each ran headlong into perversion in the eager search by the rulers, whether one, few, or many, for more power. Monarchy lunged toward its extremity and ended in despotism. Aristocracy, located midway on the band of power, pulled in both directions and created faction and division. And democracy, seeking more power in the hands of the people, degenerated into anarchy and tumult. The mixed or balanced polity was designed to prevent these perversions

by including each of the classic simple forms of government in the same constitution; the forces pulling in one direction would be counterbalanced by other forces and stability would result. Only through this reciprocal sharing of political power by the one, the few, and the many could the desirable qualities of each be preserved.

Through its expression in the eighteenth-century British constitution this theory of balanced government attained a vitality and prominence it had not had since antiquity. The division of British society into the three estates of king, nobles, and people and their constitutional embodiment in Crown, House of Lords, and House of Commons seemed almost miraculously to fulfil the ancient dream of balancing the simple forms of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy within a single constitution. State and society were made one. No wonder theorists everywhere, including Montesquieu, viewed the eighteenth-century British constitution with admiration and awe.

Most American revolutionaries in 1776 had no intention of abandoning this celebrated theory of mixed or balanced government—even though they were throwing off monarchy and establishing republics. They still believed that their new republican state governments, although now elective, ought to embody the classic principles of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. Consequently, in nearly all of their new state constitutions drafted in 1776–7 the revolutionaries created republican versions of a balanced constitution—with single though considerably weakened governors to express the one; with upper houses or senates to express the few; and with powerful and enlarged houses of representatives to express the many. In fact, it was the granting of so much power to the popular houses of representatives that led some Americans, like Richard Henry Lee of Virginia in 1776, to conclude that their new governments were ‘very much of the democratic kind’, even though ‘a Governor and second branch of legislation are admitted’.

In several states, particularly in Pennsylvania, some revolutionaries deliberately rejected incorporating the theory of balanced government in their new state constitutions. Radical forces in Pennsylvania in 1776 argued that a mixed government that included a governor and senate implied the existence of monarchical and aristocratic elements in their society that the republican revolution supposedly had abolished. ‘There is but one rank of men in America,’ the Pennsylvania radicals argued, ‘and therefore . . . there should be only one representation of them in government.’ The creation of a senate, they warned, would lead to the rise of a house of lords. Consequently, the constitution-makers in Pennsylvania, in

emulation of what they believed was ‘the Ancient Saxon constitution’, erected a simple government composed of a single legislative body with no governor and no senate or upper house. It was as close to an eighteenth-century version of democracy as seemed feasible for a large community.

This 1776 democratic constitution of Pennsylvania aroused a storm of controversy that did not subside until the constitution was changed a decade and half later. Debate over this radical state constitution provoked some of the most illuminating ideas of the entire revolutionary era and helped to transform American thinking about mixed government and democracy. Opponents of the Pennsylvania constitution thought that the state had created a political monster that ought mercifully to be put to death. They could not imagine a government without a single chief executive and an upper house of the legislature. But at the same time, in the egalitarian atmosphere of the republican revolution, opponents of the Pennsylvania constitution quickly came to realize that they could not easily justify establishing a governor and a senate for the state in the traditional terms of mixed or balanced government—as embodiments of monarchy and aristocracy. They were repeatedly forced to deny that their proposal for a senate meant they wanted to establish a hereditary aristocracy in Pennsylvania; they did not desire a house of lords, they said, but only a body that would incorporate into government the wisdom of the natural élite of the society and help to maintain a balance in the mixed republic. But the distinction was hard to sustain, and in the end the opponents of the Pennsylvania constitution had to abandon the theory of balanced government outright and to justify the existence of an upper house on the grounds that it was in no way an aristocracy but merely ‘a double representation of the people’. Bicameralism was now explained, not as the embodiment of different social estates or of Aristotle’s simple forms of government, but as the division into two branches of a mistrusted legislative power.

The implications of such an argument were immense. If the senates were thought simply to be another kind of representation of the people, then it was possible for other parts of the government—governors and judges, for example—to be likewise considered as representatives of the people. If this were the case, then the once clear distinction between a republic—where all authority flowed from the people—and a democracy—where the people were the rulers—would collapse.

At the outset of the constitution-making in 1776 Americans had not thought that their governors and senates, though elected by the people

(sometimes in the same manner and by the same electorate as the lower houses of the legislatures) were thereby considered to be representative of the people. Election was incidental to representation; it was not supposed to be its source. The mutuality of interests between the representative and those for whom he spoke was the proper measure of representation. Although the elected chief magistrates and the elected senates *derived* their authority from the people, they presumably did not share a mutuality of interests with the people and thus they did not *represent* them; that privilege belonged exclusively to the correctly named houses of representatives, whose members supposedly did share common interests with the people. But developments in their ideas of representation, initially revealed in the imperial debate with Great Britain in the 1760s, had already prepared Americans for a momentous shift in their thinking.

In justification of Parliament's right to tax the colonists spokesmen for the British government in 1765 argued that all Englishmen, whether or not they actually voted for Members of Parliament, were *virtually* represented in the House of Commons and thus in effect consented to the taxation. The colonists immediately rejected this claim that they were represented in Parliament in the same way non-voters in England were. What purpose is served, asked James Otis of Massachusetts in 1765, by the continual attempts of Englishmen to justify the lack of American representation in Parliament by citing the examples of the burgeoning new cities of Manchester and Birmingham, which returned no members to the House of Commons? 'If those now so considerable places are not represented, they ought to be.' Out of their experience in the New World Americans had come to believe in a very different kind of representation from that of the British—a kind of actual representation that made election and voting not incidental but central to the process. In America the rights and interests of a person seemed so particular and so personal and the mistrust of superiors so pervasive that only the strongest possible ties between him and the representative who spoke for him in government could suffice. Although actually voting for that representative was the least of those ties—local residential requirements for the representative and the instructing of the representative were others—the right to vote inevitably became more and more important to Americans.

By the 1780s many Americans had become convinced that only by actually voting for an official could a person guarantee his sense of being represented. This had the effect of making election the sole criterion of representation; as James Wilson put it, 'the right of representing is conferred by the act of electing.' Consequently, Americans had become

increasingly used to thinking of all elective parts of their republics as somehow or other representative of the people. Federal and state officials, the president, national senators, governors, state senators, even judges—any body that even derived its authority from the people—were now considered to be different kinds of representations of the people. To be sure, the members of the houses of representatives were thought to be the more 'immediate representatives', but they were no longer the full and exclusive representatives of the people. The people were represented everywhere and by all officials in America's governments.

By extending representation through all parts of their governments Americans were able to justify their new federal system with its multiplicity of officials at both the state and national level: all were now agents, limited agents, of the people who remained outside of the entire system of government. Because the so-called houses of representatives had lost their exclusive role of embodying the people in government, democracy as Americans had understood it in 1776 disappeared from their constitutions. The people ruled everywhere, or, from a different perspective, they ruled nowhere. The people, it seemed, did not actually participate any longer in the American governments as they continued to do, for example, in the House of Commons. Americans had taken the people as a social estate out of the government altogether and had thereby destroyed the identity between state and society that theorists since Aristotle had cherished. The 'true distinction' of America's governments—the element that separated them from the ancient republics—wrote James Madison in *The Federalist*, No. 63, 'lies in the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity, from any share' in the government. America, he said, possessed no democracy at all; it was a republic through and through—a republic for Madison being a government 'in which the scheme of representation takes place'.

Americans now told themselves that no people before them, not even the British, had ever understood the principle of representation as they had. The world, said James Wilson in 1788, had 'left to America the glory and happiness of forming a government where representation shall at once supply the basis and the cement of the superstructure . . . diffusing this vital principle throughout all the different divisions and departments of the government'. Representation, said Madison in *The Federalist*, was 'the pivot' on which the whole American system of government moved.

Because their governments were so new and distinctive, Americans groped for terms adequate to describe them. Many turned Madison's

perspective around and, because the people were represented everywhere, described the new system as thoroughly democratic. Indeed, said John Stevens of New Jersey, election by the people, and not the strength of the lower chambers in the legislatures, made 'our governments the most democratic that ever existed anywhere'. Yet others realized that democracy, as eighteenth-century political science had understood the term, was not an entirely accurate word to describe their new governments. They were better depicted as 'democratic republics', by which was meant, said Alexander Hamilton in 1788, 'a representative democracy'.

Although frightened conservatives in subsequent years continued to use the word 'democracy' pejoratively, increasingly they found more and more Americans not only willing to accept but to celebrate democracy as the most precise way of characterizing their political system. 'The government adopted here is a DEMOCRACY,' the renegade Baptist leader Elias Smith told his fellow Americans in 1809. 'It is well for us to understand this word, so much ridiculed by the international enemies of our beloved country. The word DEMOCRACY is formed of two Greek words, one signifies *the people*, and the other the *government* which is in the people . . . My Friends, let us never be ashamed of DEMOCRACY!' For many Americans in the early nineteenth century democracy had become identified with the nation. It was the faith they had come to believe in.

Yet this cursory analysis of the way democracy changed its meaning for Americans in the revolutionary era does not do justice to the full significance of what happened. It is perhaps too formal and theoretical, too concerned with the meanings of words and institutions, and too preoccupied with elections and voting to capture the substantial changes in society and politics that made post-revolutionary America the most completely democratic nation in the world. Although Americans themselves are often the last to realize the fact, democracy has come to mean much more than the counting of votes and electing representatives. Beneath the transformation of constitutions, the increase in elections, and the broadening of the suffrage in the revolutionary era lay more fundamental changes in the way Americans organized their politics and their society. These changes created the real and sustaining sources of America's democracy.

At the outset in 1776 the revolutionary leaders had a republican, not a democratic, conception of political leadership. They sought to destroy the monarchical reliance on family and kinship and to open up government to those who were not only talented but virtuous. To be virtuous

meant to possess the willingness to sacrifice private interests for the sake of the public good—a willingness not everyone in the society could muster. To be virtuous in this way, men had to be independent and free of the occupations and petty interests of the market-place. The ideal political leader since antiquity was always someone who was capable of rising above selfish commercial interests and was not burdened by the necessity of actively having to make a living. Hence, as Aristotle had said, those who had to 'live a mechanical or commercial life' could not be political leaders, since such leaders had to have 'leisure to develop their virtue'. In the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world many concluded that the best leaders and most virtuous citizens for a commonwealth were landed gentry who, as Adam Smith said, did not have to exert themselves for profit, and independent farmers who, as Jefferson said, were free of 'the casualties and caprice of customers'.

Some concluded that in an ideal republican world the public leaders ought to be virtuous enough to serve without salary. Office-holding, as Jefferson said, ought to be in accord with the 'Roman principle'. 'In a virtuous government . . . public offices are, what they should be, burdens to those appointed to them, which it would be wrong to decline, though foreseen to bring with them intense labor, and great private loss.' Receiving profits from a public smacked of interestedness and tainted the office-holder's virtue. Which is why the radical Pennsylvania constitution of 1776 abolished all 'offices of profit' in the government. For the same classical reasons George Washington was anxious that he not be paid a salary as commander-in-chief or as president.

This age-old emphasis on the leadership of a leisured landed gentry who did not have to work for a living lay at the heart of America's classical republicanism: only those who were capable of standing above the swirl of private market-place interests could make disinterested judgments on behalf of the public good. Therefore the idealistic goal of American republicanism in 1776 was to remove these private interests from politics or at least create a political system that would allow its gentry leaders to transcend these interests.

This republicanism, however, contained the seeds of its own transformation into democracy. The equality that was so crucial to republican citizenship had a permissive significance in America that could not be restrained, and ordinary people, whose meanness and need to labour had made them contemptible in the eyes of their superiors from the beginning of history, found in republican equality a powerful justification for their self-esteem and self-assertion. As a consequence, the important

age-old distinction between leisured gentlemen and common working people, which the revolutionary leaders continued to try to honour, was repeatedly blurred and eventually dissolved. At the same time the American people, as the republican source of all authority, proved unwilling to be represented exclusively by gentlemanly leaders, no matter how educated, leisured, or enlightened. They showed that they wanted their consent to be continual and explicit, and had said so at the very beginning of the imperial debate. In fact, the Americans' initial emphasis on actual rather than virtual representation in 1765 was a striking harbinger of future democratic developments.

The conceptions of actual and virtual representation that emerged in the 1760s presumed two very different sorts of society. Virtual representation made sense only in a society organized hierarchically where those on the top could meaningfully speak for those below them. It assumed that the people were a homogeneous body whose interests were capable of being discerned by an enlightened élite as one—as a unitary public good. But despite the hopes of many of the revolutionary leaders that America might be represented by disinterested gentlemen who could transcend the different interests and parties and promote a common good, American society proved in fact to be much too diverse and pluralistic, the lines of authority much too vague and tenuous, and the gentry leadership itself much too vulnerable to challenge from below for any sort of virtual representation to be sustained. Virtual representation may have still been meaningful in aristocratic and hierarchical Britain, but it made less and less sense in egalitarian America.

As the debate over the Constitution in 1787-8 eventually made clear, American society even within a single state was increasingly seen not as a unitary entity with a single common interest but, as a Marylander put it in 1788, a heterogeneous mixture of 'many different classes or orders of people, Merchants, Farmers, Planters, Mechanics, and Gentry or wealthy Men', all equal to one another. Although the new federal Constitution was designed to create a political system that would allow enlightened and virtuous leaders to transcend these clashing interests, the opponents of the Constitution acutely realized that the pluralism and egalitarianism of American society would prevent any élite, no matter how talented and enlightened, from speaking for the whole. Men from one class or interest, they said, could never be acquainted with the 'situation and wants' of those from another. The interests of the society were in fact so diverse and discrete that only individuals sharing a particular or partial interest could speak for that interest. The conception of actual representation that

was implicit in American life from the beginning was now drawn out to the fullest.

The opponents of the Constitution may have lost the battle over the new national government created in 1787-8, but in their understanding of the need for the most explicit form of consent possible they were more in tune with the future direction of American politics than were the supporters of the Constitution. It was foolish, they said, to tell people, as the proponents of the Constitution did, that they ought to overlook their personal and local interests when personal and local interests were all there really were. 'No man when he enters into society', said James Winthrop of Massachusetts in 1788, 'does it from a view to promote the good of others, but he does it for his own good.' Since all individuals and groups in the society were equally self-interested, the only 'fair representation' in government, declared the 'Federal Farmer', the most distinguished of the writers opposed to the Constitution, ought to be one where 'every order of men in the community . . . can have a share in it'. Consequently any American government ought 'to allow professional men, merchants, traders, farmers, mechanics, etc. to bring a just proportion of their best informed men respectively into the legislature'. The only way for a person to be fairly and accurately represented in government was to have someone like himself with his same interests speak for him; no one else could be trusted to do so. Indeed, such mistrust was a major impulse behind the development of American democracy. Americans thus concluded that only an explicit form of representation that allowed Germans, Baptists, artisans, farmers, and so on each to send delegates of its own kind into the political arena could embody the democratic particularism of their society.

Ultimately, the logic of this extreme form of actual representation determined that no one could be represented in government unless he had at least the right to vote. Thus expanding the suffrage became a major reform in the early Republic. At the time that Europeans were still struggling with the problems of embodying estates and other social groups in government, Americans rapidly opened up voting to almost the entire white adult male population. By 1825 nearly all the states had achieved universal white manhood suffrage.

But this extreme form of actual representation had other consequences besides expanding the suffrage. It eventually justified the participation of very ordinary people in government not merely as voters but as rulers. The early Republic of America saw the emergence into political leadership, especially in the state legislatures, of the very merchants, artisans, and businessmen who theorists from Aristotle on had said were

ill-equipped for such responsibilities because of their involvement in the market-place and lack of leisure to develop their virtue. Such mean men who worked for a living were presumably barred from government because they were partial and narrow-minded and had private interests to promote. Bringing such private interests directly into the operations of government, however, became central to the meaning of American democracy.

One of the crucial moments in the history of American politics—maybe the crucial moment—occurred in 1786 during several days of debate in the Pennsylvania assembly over the rechartering of the Bank of North America. The debate centred on the role of private interest in public affairs.

The principals in this debate were William Findley, a Scotch-Irish weaver from western Pennsylvania and a promoter of the debtor and paper-money interests in the state, and Robert Morris, the wealthiest merchant in the state, who had aristocratic aspirations and was a major supporter of the rechartering of the bank. In attempting to acquire another charter for the bank Morris and his genteel Philadelphia ilk continually tried to pose as disinterested gentlemen in the classical mould, who were above crass market-place interests and concerned only with the public good. But Findley and his plebeian western colleagues, who certainly had to work for a living, refused to let Morris and the aristocratic supporters of the bank get away with this pose. These supporters of the bank's rechartering, Findley charged, were themselves interested men; they were directors or stockholders of the bank and thus had no right to claim that they were neutral, disinterested umpires only deciding what was good for the state. The advocates of the bank 'feel interested in it personally, and therefore by promoting it they were acting as judges in their own cause'.

There was nothing new in these charges. To accuse one's opponent of being self-interested was conventional rhetorical strategy in eighteenth-century debates. But Findley went on to pursue another line of argument that was new—astonishingly new. He accepted Morris's and the other bank supporters' interest in the bank. There was nothing unusual or improper in their supporting rechartering of the bank, he said. They were, after all, directors and stockholders in the bank, and their promotion of the bank was only to be expected. 'Any others in their situation', said Findley, '... would do as they did.' Morris and the other investors in the bank had every 'right to advocate their own cause, on the floor of this house'. But, said Findley, they had no right to protest when others realize

'that it is their own cause they are advocating; and to give credit to their opinions, and to think of their votes accordingly'. They had no right, in other words, to try to pass off their support of their personal cause as an act of disinterested patrician virtue. The promotion of private interests in politics, said Findley, was quite legitimate, as long as it was open and above board and not disguised by specious claims of genteel disinterestedness. Precisely because no one in the society was capable of promoting an exclusive public interest that was distinguishable from the private interests of people, Findley suggested that the promotion of private interests necessarily was what American electoral politics was all about.

Findley was not content merely to expose and justify the reality of interest-group politics in representative legislatures. He glimpsed some of the important implications of such interest-group politics, and in just a few remarks he challenged the entire classical tradition of disinterested public leadership and set forth a rationale for competitive democratic politics that has never been bettered. If representatives were elected to promote the particular interests and private causes of their constituents, then the idea that such representatives were simply disinterested gentlemen, squire worthies called by duty to shoulder the burdens of public service, became archaic. It may have been meaningful in the past, when such virtuous men did exist, for such a disinterested representative to make no effort on his own behalf and simply stand for election. But now, said Findley, in the democratic America of many interests where the candidate for the legislature 'has a cause of his own to advocate, interest will dictate the propriety of canvassing for a seat'. Such interest-group politics meant that politically ambitious men, even those with interests and causes to advocate, now could legitimately run and compete for electoral office and thus become what Madison (in *The Federalist*, No. 10) most feared—parties who were at the same time judges in their own causes.

In this one radical suggestion in 1786 Findley was anticipating all of the modern democratic political developments of the succeeding generation in America: the increased electioneering and competitive politics, the open promotion of private interests in legislation, the acceptance of the legitimacy of political parties, the extension of the actual and direct representation of particular groups in government, and the eventual weakening if not the repudiation, of the classical republican ideal that legislators were supposed to be disinterested promoters of a public good that was separate from the private market-place interests of the society.

Under the pressure of these democratic developments the character of America's public officials had to change. Although many revolutionary

leaders ideally wished to see their offices, as Jefferson and Washington did, as burdens from which they should receive no monetary reward, they did not have the large plantations and hundreds of slaves to support them that Jefferson and Washington did. Consequently, from 1776 on many of them found themselves in the awkward position of having to urge their republican governments not only to pay salaries but to keep raising them. Although Members of Parliament were not paid salaries until 1911, members of American governments received salaries from the beginning of the Republic. This had an immense effect on the character of American political leadership.

In order to justify their salaries American officials began arguing that serving in government was no different from being a lawyer or doctor or even a businessman; it was another means of making a living. But seeing public office as just another occupation from which one earned a living was a long way from classical republican thinking. It effectively destroyed the two thousand-year-old inhibition against mechanics, businessmen, and other ignoble and commercially interested men serving in government.

As early as the 1780s ambitious men who worked for money, like the scrambling but wealthy businessman Matthew Lyon of Vermont, began attacking the leisure that gave educated gentlemen both the time and responsibility for public service. Leisure, meaning not having to work for a living, had been for ages a principal source of gentry distinctiveness and of the gentry's obligation to serve in government without pay. In the decades following the Revolution this leisure was labelled idleness and was subjected to scathing criticism—criticism that went beyond anything experienced in Britain or Europe in these years. Before this criticism ran its course in the early decades of the nineteenth century, there was nobody left, in the northern part of the United States at least, who dared publicly and proudly to claim that he did not work for a living. And, as foreign visitors discovered to their astonishment, this included even public officials.

In America, said Tocqueville, not only did everyone work for a living but everyone thought that work itself was honourable, even 'work specifically to gain money'. In Europe the classical republican tradition of political leadership by a disinterested leisured aristocracy was still very much alive. In Europe, said Tocqueville, there were 'hardly any public officials who do not claim to serve the state without interested motives. Their salary is a detail to which they sometimes give a little thought and to which they always pretend to give none.' But in America public service and profit were 'visibly united'. In fact, observed Tocqueville's

French compatriot Michael Chevalier, 'the idea of service and salary are so inseparably connected' in Americans' thinking that in their 'almanacs it is common to see the rate of pay annexed to the lists of public offices'.

All this stress on the fact that, in Tocqueville's words, 'every man works for his living' had immense consequences in making people feel equal. It was this equality in working in order to consume goods that had hitherto been the preserve of the tiny minority of leisured gentry that gave Americans whatever satisfaction they had in their busy lives: 'every day confers a number of small enjoyments on every man.' With everyone alike in working for profit, no one, including servants, said Tocqueville, had to 'feel degraded because they work'. Who could be humiliated by working for pay when even the president of the country 'works for a salary'?

Perhaps nothing separated early nineteenth-century Americans more from Europeans than their attitude toward labour and their egalitarian and democratic sense that everyone must participate in it. With everyone claiming to work and no exclusive working class, it is not surprising that the development of a socialist movement in the United States was inhibited. In America it seemed that everyone had to have an occupation, and beginning with the 1820 census every adult male was asked his occupation. All people became labourers and all activities, including public office-holding, were reduced to the making of a living—a severe and unprecedented levelling that no other society in the modern world quite duplicated. It gave American democracy a basic social power that the simple extension of the ballot and the mere counting of heads could never have achieved. Ultimately, this common preoccupation of Americans with making a living and consuming goods—pursuing their private happiness, many might say—has made their society even today, despite great disparities of wealth, one of the most democratic the world has ever seen.