INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF AMERICAN RADICALISM

NEW EDITION

INTRODUCTION:

THE RIGHT OF REVOLUTION

Americans have made two revolutions, in 1776–1783 and in 1861–1865. They were "bourgeois" revolutions: the first preserved inherited property as it destroyed inherited government, the second enhanced property in factories and railroads as it abolished property in man.[1] Nevertheless, it is untrue that the American Revolution and the Civil War had no "ideology . . . capable of being made universal."[2] To energize and explain these upheavals, the men who made them created a revolutionary intellectual tradition. They addressed to the opinion of mankind the dramatic proposition that all men are created equal with natural liberties which, if taken away at all, cannot be justly taken without consent. As Thomas Paine observed, the American Revolution was unique precisely in being "a revolution in the principles and practise of governments" and not "merely a separation from England."[3] That is why those principles have been echoed by revolutionaries the world over from that day to this (most recently by the Vietnamese, whose

1945 declaration of independence begins with the words, "all men are created equal").

Because they expressed the aspirations of different social groups united only on behalf of independence, the ideas of the American Revolution meant many things to many men. Abolitionists, as they built a new revolutionary movement against chattel slavery, drew selectively on the intellectual resources of the past, clarifying and interpreting to suit their own needs. The American revolutionary tradition described in this book is the tradition which culminated in abolitionism: a tradition based on the more radical readings of the Declaration of Independence, which traced its intellectual ancestry more to Paine than to Locke.

Of necessity, however, all variants of the revolutionary tradition defended the right of revolution. During the century between 1760 and 1860 the right of revolution was justified by presidents as well as prophets, by politicians in power as well as by radicals out of it. "Revolutionary ground should be occupied," stated the Address of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1844, which continued: "Up, then, with the banner of revolution!"[4] But this was only to rephrase more flamboyantly what the Declaration of Independence termed the people's right "to alter or to abolish" the governments that they created. And Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address asserted: "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."

I

For all its ambiguities, the preamble to the Declaration of Independence is the single most concentrated expression of the revolutionary intellectual tradition. Without significant exception, subsequent variants of American radicalism have taken the Declaration of Independence as their point of departure and claimed to be the true heirs of the spirit of '76. Jefferson developed the philosophy of the document he had

drafted in the direction of states' rights and the defense of Southern sectionalism. But in doing so Jefferson continued to invoke the Declaration of Independence, as did the very language of the South Carolina Declaration of the Causes of Secession in 1860. Northern radicalism also traced its lineage to Independence Hall. On July 4, 1826, the day Jefferson and John Adams died, Robert Owen delivered a declaration of "mental independence" comprising secularism, equality of the sexes, and common ownership. These ideas inspired one current of Jacksonian dissent. But William Lloyd Garrison, anything but secular and intensely anti-Jacksonian, also adopted the rhetoric of the Declaration in drafting the manifestos of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 and the New England Non-Resistance Society in 1838. Lincoln referred to the Declaration of Independence as the "standard maxim for a free society" and compared its role as a spiritual regulator to that of the Biblical injunction, "Be ye perfect."[5] The Radical Republicans, Charles Sumner for example, maintained that the Declaration was part of the United States Constitution, or if it was not should at once be made so.

After the Civil War the glittering generalities of the Declaration retained their potency, and American radicalism continued to present itself as their fulfillment. "The reform I have proposed," wrote Henry George in *Progress and Poverty*,

> . . . is . . . but the carrying out in letter and spirit of the truth enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. . . . They who look upon Liberty as having accomplished her mission, when she has abolished hereditary privileges and given men the ballot, . . . have not seen her real grandeur. . . . We cannot go on prating of the inalienable rights of man and then denying the inalienable right to the bounty of the Creator.[6]

Edward Bellamy, in *Looking Backward*, had Doctor Leete explain the new society to Julian West in similar terms. "In a word," he said, "the people of the United States concluded to assume the conduct of their own business, just as one hundred odd years before they had assumed the conduct of their own government, organizing now for industrial purposes on precisely the same grounds that they had then organized for

political purposes."[7] Henry Demarest Lloyd invoked the analogy of the American Revolution in *Wealth Against Commonwealth,* declaring:

> Myriads of experiments to get the substance of liberty out of the forms of tyranny, to believe in princes, to trust good men to do good as kings, have taught the inexorable truth that, in the economy of nature, form and substance must move together. . . . Identical is the lesson we are learning with regard to industrial power and property. . . .

"Liberty recast the old forms of government into the Republic," Lloyd concluded, "and it must remould our institutions of wealth into the Commonwealth."[8] For Eugene Debs, Patrick Henry was "one of my first heroes; and my passion for his eloquent and burning defiance of King George inspired the first speech I ever attempted in public." Among the French and American revolutionaries who inspired Debs, Tom Paine "towered above them all."[9]

During the New Deal and World War II, it was voguish among radicals to identify their various causes with the alleged tradition of "Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln." The New Left of the 1960s, despite its oft-described sense of alienation and its quarrel with the intellectual habits of the previous generation, also uses the Revolution as a touchstone. Thus in November 1965 Carl Oglesby, then president of Students for a Democratic Society, asked an antiwar demonstration gathered at the Washington Monument to imagine what Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine would say to President Johnson and McGeorge Bundy about the war in Vietnam. And in August 1966, when the House Un-American Activities Committee subpoenaed antiwar activists, the head of the Free University of New York issued a statement invoking the Green Mountain Boys, and the chairman of the Berkeley Vietnam Day Committee appeared in the hearing chamber in the uniform of an officer of George Washington's army.

American Revolutionary rhetoric has been as popular with uneducated poor men as with articulate spokesmen, with Marxists as with non-Marxists, with Negroes as with whites. All, in the words of rebellious New York tenants in the 1840s,

have sought to "take up the ball of the Revolution where our fathers stopped it and roll it to the final consummation of freedom and independence of the Masses." Thus American Marxists, except for a short period under the influence of Friedrich Sorge, have "viewed labor radicalism as a movement to redeem the promise of the American Revolution." For instance, Daniel De Leon's rigidly doctrinaire Socialist Labor Party asserted in its 1889 program that "the inalienable right of all men to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" was its objective, too.[10] The same generalization holds for the history of black radicalism in America. The first major slave insurrection following the Revolution planned to march under a flag reading "Death or Liberty." One of the most celebrated fugitive slaves of the nineteenth century declared he was inspired by "that law which God wrote on the table of my heart, inspiring the love of freedom, and impelling me to seek it at every hazard." Both the NAACP and SNCC derive from W. E. B. Du Bois's seminal essay "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others" that ended with an appeal to "those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget": the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. The most militant Afro-Americans in the 1960s, similarly, still refer to a "higher law than the law of government" and to the conflict between "property rights" and "human rights," as did earlier American revolutionaries, white and black.[11]

For almost two hundred years all kinds of American radicals have traced their intellectual origins to the Declaration of Independence and to the Revolution it justified. They have stubbornly refused to surrender the memory of the American Revolution to liberalism or reaction, insisting that only radicalism could make real the rhetoric of 1776.

II

This process of looking backward has its perils. In its uncritical historiography of Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln, the Old Left mirrored its overcommitment to Franklin Roosevelt. Just as they failed to maintain sufficient political distance from F.D.R.'s coalition, so in rewriting American history radicals

of the New Deal era maintained too little intellectual distance between themselves and reform leaders of the past. In fact, it was no more accurate to characterize Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln as "friends of the common man" than it was to term Franklin Roosevelt "progressive" and leave the matter there. By defending states' rights and Southern sectional interests, Jefferson by implication protected slavery; by defending the Union and Northern sectional interests, Lincoln by implication promoted capitalism. It would be more accurate to say that at certain periods of their lives Jefferson and Lincoln expressed a revolutionary tradition, than to say that they created it. Six months before the Declaration of Independence a republican theory of natural rights was articulated by Paine and Richard Price. Long before Lincoln quoted the Declaration of Independence against slavery, abolitionists had roughhewed a revolutionary theory from the Declaration and the Bible. The characteristic exponents of the revolutionary tradition were poor workingmen who did not go to college and rarely held public office, such as Paine, Garrison, George, and Debs.

But if there is danger in romanticizing the past by fabricating a radicalism which was not there, it is equally misleading to suppose that there was no American radicalism prior to the formation of an industrial proletariat or the advent of Marxist theory. A continuous radical tradition existed. Ambiguous ideological axioms evolved, under the pressure of events, into radical corollaries which threatened private property and the authority of the state. These pages dwell on that unfolding clarification of abstract ideas. But it must not be forgotten that behind the words, constantly translating the printed pamphlet into the sermon or stump speech, and speeches into the whispers of conspiracy, stood men. When one asserts the reality of an unbroken continuity between the revolutionaries of 1776 and twentieth-century radicals, one refers not only to the intellectual fact that, for example, early nineteenth-century American socialists built on Jefferson's dictum that "the earth belongs to the living";[12] but also to the human fact that a son of utopian socialist Robert Owen was the principal draftsman of the Fourteenth Amendment, and a son of John

Brown sent grapes to the Haymarket anarchists as they awaited execution.[13]

The prophets of twentieth-century American radicalism, Debs and Du Bois, viewed themselves as executors of an American tradition which they were proud to inherit. Thus both men reverenced John Brown, whom Du Bois praised for (among other things) his "inchoate but growing belief in a more just and a more equal distribution of property," and Debs called "History's Greatest Hero."[14] Debs's best-remembered speech, to the jury on the occasion of his conviction for sedition in World War I, was a miniature history of the United States for radicals. He reminded his listeners that Samuel Adams had been condemned as an incendiary and Patrick Henry as a traitor, that Washington, Adams, and Paine "were the rebels of their day." Then the abolitionists began "another mighty agitation." Elijah Lovejoy, "opposed to chattel slavery —just as I am opposed to wage slavery," was "despised in his day as are the leaders of the I.W.W. in our day." It was my good fortune, Debs continued, to know Wendell Phillips personally; Garrison, Gerrit Smith, Thaddeus Stevens were once "regarded as monsters of depravity" but "you are teaching your children to revere their memories."

Then Debs turned to the theme of internationalism, quoting Paine's and Garrison's words, "My country is the world." He referred to Lincoln's opposition to the war with Mexico, and maintained that he himself did not go so far as Phillips, who had said that "the glory of free men is that they trample unjust laws under their feet." He ended, as his biographer notes, by paraphrasing, perhaps unconsciously, John Brown's last words to his jury in 1859.[15]

Politically as personally, recourse to the past can be a means of retrogression and escape; but it can also be the first step in a process of liberation. With or without the help of therapists all of us occasionally look back to our individual pasts to find strength for new beginnings. With or without the help of historians, similarly, Americans concerned to change the society around them have made appropriate use of the past as a source for forgotten alternatives, for encouragement to

endure. The Revolution-cum-Declaration can legitimately provide that "frequent recurrence to fundamental principles" which the Virginia Bill of Rights advised.

III

Distant and archaic as it may often appear, the language of the Declaration of Independence remains relevant as an instrument for social transformation. What pre-Civil War radicals meant by these old words has much in common with what the modern radical movement means by its own characteristic phrases. Men should be free, according to the revolutionary tradition, because on joining society they do not surrender their essential natural powers. If existing society abuses those powers, men should demand their restoration at once: "immediate emancipation," or as Garrison sometimes put it, "freedom now."[16]

Existential radicals of the mid-twentieth century have rediscovered the central affirmations of the older tradition. They have learned in the concentration camp or the American South that no external circumstances can deprive man of his capacity to be a free moral agent. At the Nuremburg Tribunal and elsewhere, they began to talk once more about the attributes of man as man: to use Jefferson's language, about "the common rights of mankind," "the rights of human nature," the "sacred" laws of nations "which even savage nations observe."[17]

For us, then, it is no longer satisfactory to dismiss the eighteenth-century rhetoric as mere myth. Even Carl Becker, author of an excellent study on the Declaration, discounted its philosophy as "a humane and engaging faith" which, however, was founded not on fact but on "a superficial knowledge of history" and a "naive faith in the instinctive virtues of human kind."[18] The young Karl Marx found the meaning of the Declaration equally transparent. The liberty protected by the French and American bills and declarations of rights was, for Marx, "the right to do everything which does not harm others." It rested, not on a communal relation between men, "but rather upon the separation of man from man." It was "the right of the *circumscribed* individual, withdrawn into himself," "the right