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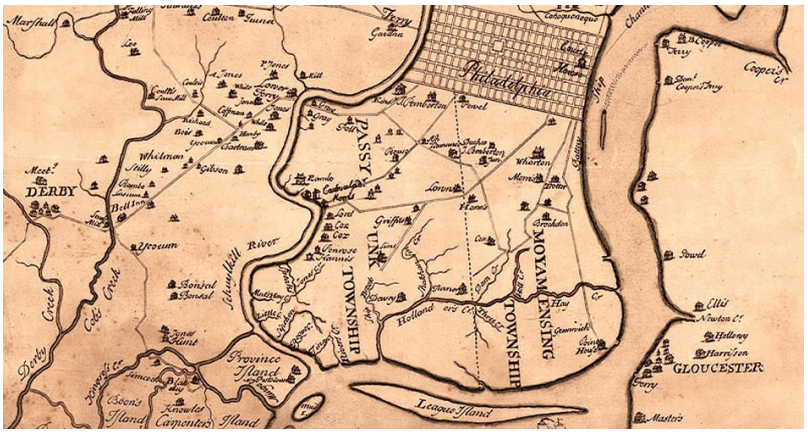
The Revolution's Reactionary Radicals



When Solomon observed that there's nothing new under the sun, he might have been speaking of politicians: Most plagiarize from their predecessors. Wage and price controls, blaming the victims rather than the authors of government's policies, banning pleasures and fun, encouraging "virtues" that advance the State and ridiculing or even outlawing those that don't — these tactics and more are favorites not only of modern Republicans and Democrats but of certain "Patriots" who seized power during the American Revolution. Indeed, they nearly subverted it: As one critic charged, they "hate Tyranny, but … their meaning is they hate Tyranny when themselves are not the Tyrants."

We talk of the Revolution, singular. But we might more properly pluralize it, given this secondary revolt raging within. And though the interior conflict spoke the larger war's language of liberty, it actually opposed freedom. Its proponents craved a vigorous government, with agencies and committees galore — all under their control.

They called themselves Radical Patriots, as though troops who marched barefoot through blizzards and starved to fight government weren't sufficiently radical and patriotic. But whatever their name, they were reactionaries who sought to return man to the State's shackles even as other Patriots struggled to free him.

The Radicals first roared to power in Philadelphia. We might suppose that city and its state already bore enough of the Revolution's burdens. Host to the Continental Congress for most of the war, prone to invasion, generous sources of both recruits and materiel for the war, Philadelphia and Pennsylvania also agonized under the Radicals.

At 25,000 residents, Philadelphia had been the second-largest city in the British Empire; only London with its 1,000,000 surpassed it. And the "City of Brotherly Love" was as beautiful as it was big: elegant brick homes, churches, taverns, shops, and theaters lined paved roads. Those streets lay in a logical grid, too, a healthy contrast to the muddy cow-paths serving most towns and villages.

No wonder Pennsylvania's Constitutional Convention met there soon after the Declaration of Independence freed the colonies from "all allegiance to the British Crown." But men who fervently believed in equality and democracy, not liberty, dominated the debates.

And as many Americans currently do, these delegates stretched the concept of equality to cover all of life. That led them to distrust excellence of any sort — wealth, scholarship, or whatever elevated a man over his fellows. One attendee supposedly announced that "All learning was an artificial restraint on

human understanding, he had done with it; and advised our sovereign Lords, the people to choose no lawyers, or other professional characters called educated or learned; but to select men uneducated, with unsophisticated understanding" to devise and control Pennsylvania's new government. Another described their "principle … : that any man, even the most illiterate, is as capable of any office as a person who has had the benefit of education; that education prevents the understanding, eradicates common honesty."

The Radicals' constitution established the most "popular" (the 18th-century term for "democratic") government in America, or, for that matter, the world. Its preamble didn't bother with natural law or Lockean principles of freedom. Instead, it praised democracy, declaring that government was "derived from and founded on the authority of the people only."

But democracy terrified 18th-century Americans. They knew it for mob rule under which the majority legally robs minorities of their freedom and property. John Adams condemned democracy as "arbitrary, tyrannical, bloody, cruel, and intolerable a government.… Robespierre [a driving force behind the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution] is a perfect exemplification of the character of the first bellwether in a democracy." Edmund Randolph warned against the "fury of democracy" at the Constitutional Convention, while Alexander Hamilton called "democracy" "our real disease" and feared that a small country could not sufficiently dilute its "poison."

Democracies require a brawny government to coerce minorities to the majority's will, yet Americans hated centralized power so vehemently they were warring against it. They considered their liberties "not merely as arbitrary grants, but as their unalienable, eternal rights, purchased by the blood and treasure of their ancestors," as Dr. Joseph Warren put it, and so devoted were they to these "eternal rights" that they would die for them: "The people of this country were not driven to take up arms," Sam Adams declared, "they did it *voluntarily* in defence of their liberty. They properly considered themselves as called by GOD, and warranted by HIM, to encounter every hazard in the common cause of *Man*." How, then, could the Radicals pervert a revolt against the State into support for a stronger one?

Easily, it turned out. For starters, they implied that Americans battled the *British* government rather than the British *government* — an error most textbooks and historians repeat to this day. And so they preached hatred of all things British and monarchical rather than of the State itself.

Then, too, their constitution presented government as benign and benevolent rather than as an enemy we must cripple and abolish. Not only did the constitution declare that God "alone knows to what degree of earthly happiness mankind may attain by perfecting the arts of government," it also promised that "government is, or ought to be, instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation or community."

But government destroys our benefit, protection, and security. Philadelphians learned that lesson firsthand when Redcoats came to town in September 1777.

Bullies Bandying the Law

Capturing the Continental Army would have ended the Revolution; instead, the British Army captured Philadelphia. Strategically, it hardly mattered: Congress simply packed its papers and decamped to York, Pennsylvania. In fact, the British "triumph" may have harmed more than helped their cause, given their callous criminality during their nine-months occupation.

Many Patriots evacuated before the British advance, leaving empty homes and businesses behind. His Majesty's Army immediately grabbed these for officers' quarters. Nor were those officers scrupulous about protecting rebels' property. They cut holes in parlor floors so that the basements functioned as privies. Furniture, fences, orchards, and shutters warmed them and cooked dinner that winter. They pocketed anything valuable, then, as if that weren't insult enough, rode their horses through gardens.

The British privates bivouacked about town were even more destructive. Churches lost pews to their cookfires; the streets choked on their filth and garbage.

Eighteenth-century armies couldn't campaign in winter's wet weather: Muskets aren't watertight and won't fire once moisture dampens their gunpowder. That meant the Redcoats rattled around an alien city with little to do but throw parties, gamble, drink, and attend the theatrical productions a group of officers staged. Philadelphia's ladies frequently accompanied them. Some girls were staunch Patriots or Loyalists; most probably didn't care about politics, especially when a good time with a handsomely uniformed charmer beckoned.

But when the British marched out of Philadelphia the following June and returning Patriots beheld their ruined homes for the first time, they excoriated these girls and their families as collaborators. And they listened eagerly to Radical demagogues promising Paradise now that they were in charge again. They would purge Philadelphia of British influence, all the vice and loose living the Redcoats had encouraged. So what if that meant spying on their neighbors to determine who was or wasn't under that pernicious influence, then persecuting anyone who relished British books, hospitality, fashions, or friends?

The Radicals also resumed ruining the economy, though the Continental Congress was doing a fine job by itself.

America's revolutionaries had wisely withheld from Congress the power to tax. Delegates could only ask the 13 states to supply troops as well as the money to feed, clothe, and equip them — or they could print money. Presses were abundant in literate America; paper money quickly flooded the country. So did inflation, devastating the new nation until Patriots must have suspected the British Army of running the presses. Meanwhile, 18th-century rulers were as astoundingly ignorant of economics as modern ones. When the Continental Congress debated taxing rather than asking, one member allegedly demanded why "he was expected to help tax people, when they could go to the printing-office and get money by the cart load."

The Radicals exacerbated the crisis, though they began harmlessly enough by decreeing that those cart-loads of scrap would no longer lose value — about as effective as legislating that young men and women on opposites sides of a war in the same city wouldn't fraternize. But then they tried to "fix" the inflation.

As always, government's solution was worse than the problem it had caused. Radicalized Pennsylvania set prices on a changing and ever-growing list of goods. Its Supreme Executive Council also organized a Committee of Inspection to enforce these diktats — though it lacked legal authority to do so.

No matter. The illegal committee relied on the same weapon that legal ones do: intimidation. It "investigated" merchants suspected of selling above what the Radicals permitted, threatening them with seizure of their wares — or worse. One leading Radical disapproved of the committee, yet he lusted to monitor those "suspected characters" whose "spirit of Aristocracy and Pride of Wealth" prompted them to sell their goods for a profit.

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Surprised at Their "Success"

Only the Radicals were surprised when merchants fled Pennsylvania for freer markets. The citizens left behind listened to their growling stomachs and the cries of hungry children. All this misery but no actual famine, as General John Cadwalader pointed out, only the scarcity that results when government meddles with the economy: "A plentiful harvest has filled the country with an abundance … and a market would bring such quantities to the city, that there would be no want of these necessaries in the future."

Like modern politicians, the Radicals held themselves blameless. Their victims, not their own boneheaded policies, were responsible for all disasters: "If goods have been removed [from Philadelphia]," they sniffed, "we are not the persons who have removed them; and if those who have been guilty of such practises, should plead in excuse that they did it because they could get a few pounds more in other places, what is it but to confess they care nothing for the welfare of the community among whom they reside, and that avarice and self-interest are their only principles."

Though they reduced a wealthy city to beggary, the Radicals refused to recant. Instead, they re-defined economic liberty. A market isn't free when government leaves it alone but only if it guarantees "the right of everyone to partake of it, and to deal to the best advantage he can, on just and equitable principles, subordinate to the common good; and as soon as this line is encroached on, either by the one extorting more for an article than it is worth, or the other for demanding it for less than its value, the *freedom* is equally invaded and requires to be regulated." No doubt coincidentally, this enhanced Radical power as its bureaucrats decided whose principles were just and equitable, when private deals violated the common good, and what regulations would redress extortionate prices, as well as the point at which prices became extortionate.

As if this weren't despotic enough, Radicals also branded some aspects of the market moral and others wicked. Men selling shoddy wares at low prices were good. Men smuggling rare goods past the Radicals were bad because they charged more to cover their risk and trouble — just as politicians today excoriate "price gouging." Folks should content themselves with moldy bread and sour butter, sold at prices the Radicals approved, rather than pine for good but expensive beef and pork.

Eighteenth-century Americans prized wealth as evidence of God's blessings, His reward for discipline, foresight, prudence, and self-restraint. Not the Radicals. They were among the first politicians to despise prosperity — unless, of course, it was their own.

They were Marxists a century before Karl codified such wickedness; like his later communist disciples, the Radicals damned people who created wealth, who owned businesses or land, as evil. Making money *per se* was evil, too. So was self-interest, the impulse that propels us into the market with the expectation of emerging better off, the urge that animates the economy, that prompts sellers to sell and buyers to buy, that inspires free people to produce and purchase goods. Like today's politicians, the Radical government vilified and hobbled anyone showing self-interest, anyone wealthy or trying to become wealthy. A clause in Pennsylvania's constitution decried "an enormous Proportion of Property vested in a few individuals" as "dangerous to the Rights, and destructive to the Common Happiness, of Mankind, and therefore every free State hath a right by its Laws to discourage the Possession of Such Property." Though saner heads eventually excised this, its contempt for property rights and economic freedom flourished in Radical ideology — and permeates modern American politics.

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Waging War

As much as they hated money, the Radicals loved the Revolutionary War. Indeed, their twin passions often conflicted; prosecuting war consumes enormous amounts of wealth, as American taxpayers can testify. But the Radicals condemned the Continental Congress' usual way of raising funds: One huffed that "to induce persons to lend money by promises of exorbitant interest, is not only to *dishonour a virtuous cause by applying to our vices for support*, but is adding distress to our country, by fueling the disease which occasioned it."

Still, the Radicals' support for the Revolution might have been their one saving grace had they not carried it to an extreme. They hounded, once or twice to the hangman's noose, anyone who lacked their fervency.

As the war ground on and their grand schemes failed, the Radicals waxed nostalgic for the Revolution's early days. They rewrote history to claim that at the time of Lexington and Concord, "no selfish thought engrossed our care, and every sordid soul withdrew and trembled." There had been "no other ambition than to excel in public service, no other avarice than for the public good." Colonists then had subjugated their desires and happiness to the public's good, as Radicals supposed those of ancient Rome had.

Like many Patriots, and perhaps more than most, the Radicals admired Roman Republicans for their patriotism, simplicity in manners and fashion, disdain for luxury, thrift. They expected Philadelphians to emulate those virtues, and if they didn't do so voluntarily, the Radicals would require it via legislation.

Every citizen should also "feel for the public as for himself." Those who "felt" for family and friends ahead of the abstract "public," who were wealthy or aspired to be, ambitious and self-interested, who defined the Radicals' virtues differently or prized others more, were enemies of the State.

The Radicals meant to make all Philadelphians, and eventually, as they gained more sway in Congress, all Americans as dutiful as themselves. That meant shifting the goals of the Revolution from "defending with Arms, their Property, Liberty, and Lives against all Attempts to deprive [the people] of them." As the Radicals exploited the Revolution to establish a righteous republic, one member of Pennsylvania's militia despairingly noted, "I love the Cause of liberty; but cannot heartily join in the prosecution of measures totally foreign to the original plan of Resistance. The madness of the multitude is but one degree better than submission to the Tea-Act."

Yet however many laws they passed and however many people they fined, banished, or hanged for running afoul of those laws, Pennsylvania's utopians failed to reform human nature. In 1779, after three years of the Radicals' ascendancy, one visiting New Jerseyan observed as "Constant a round of dissipation [in Philadelphia] as in London or Paris." Another critic of the Radicals noticed Philadelphia's "Avaricious Bustle" and the "Domination of Monopoly and Extortion" with neither "Luxury nor Fashion" declining a "Jot." The "dirty Struggle" for one's daily bread still continued, regardless of Radical virtue and its enforcement.

As would 20th-century Marxists, the Radicals faulted the lackeys implementing their government for its failures, not the institution itself. They remained "firmly persuaded that the constitution of Pennsylvania needs only to be faithfully administered by men, who are honestly disposed to support it according to its true spirit and intention, to be the best system of government in the world."

But Samuel Adams considered it "folly and danger to trust even *good men* with power, without regarding the use they make of it.... The love of power, like the love of money, increase with the possession of it."

Patrick Henry also dismissed the chimera of honest men: "fair, disinterested patriotism and professions of attachment to rectitude have never been solely trusted to by an enlightened, free people. If you depend on your President's and Senator's patriotism, you are gone.... Tell me not of checks [to that power] on paper; but tell me of checks founded on self-love [*i.e.*, self-interest]." To assume that any man, especially one augmented by governmental office, will deny his own interests in favor of the public's, is dangerously naive, according to John Adams: "It is not true, in fact, that any people ever existed who loved the public better than themselves, their private friends, neighbors, & c., and therefore this kind of virtue, this sort of love, is as precarious a foundation for liberty as honor or fear."

Government has always been not only a precarious but a fatal foundation for liberty. Politicians and bureaucrats then as now concentrated on consolidating their power regardless of their victims' suffering. Radicals ignored reality as zealously as Democrats and Republicans do to construct their theories, then shrugged at the resulting disasters when reality, and the people living in that reality, refused to conform to their ideas. They spoke in familiar, beloved terms — but only after twisting those terms to their purposes; they prattled about "freedom," by which Philadelphians thought they meant freedom *from* government, not freedom *through* government. Similarly, today's rulers hype "democracy" while unelected bureaucrats write the ukases constricting our lives.

The Radicals' power and party ended with the war, so thoroughly that we have entirely forgotten them. But their folly curses us still.

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