

Consideration on American Individualism I : Its Formation in the Early Period

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Introduction

To get the whole picture of American individualism, it is first important to grasp how the early European immigrants initiated their experience in the New World. The uniqueness of American individualism is closely related to their colonial beginnings. The early Europeans' experience in the New World was, in many respects, distinctively new and dramatic in the history of human civilization. As a result, their experiences generated a powerful American mythology, which had a great impact on shaping America's future sense of itself. First, I attempt to describe the process in which the American mythology was formed in the American colonial period.

Then I focus on the republican and biblical tradition that derived from European thought. It must not be forgotten that the American Revolution actually inherited a large portion of European thought. The core of European thought that early Americans inherited can be paraphrased as "individualism." Before paying attention to a specific American framework, which I plan to discuss in the sequel to this paper, I hold it more important to grasp how European individualism originated in America and how individualism itself originated in the Western world.

1. The Individual in American Mythology

There is no doubt that the physical nature of the New World had much to do with the formation of the American mythology. Early Europeans, standing on the new continent, must have been struck by its boundless fresh and green landscape, where they were to begin their new lives. Of course they saw indigenous people living there, but their "simple" ways of life merely confirmed the identification of the New World with uncivilized nature.

What fascinated Europeans, Leo Marx (1964, p.36) claims, was a landscape untouched by history and unmixed with anything artificial. Early Europeans thought that the new continent looked "the way the world might have been

supposed to look before the beginning of civilization.”

The other important factor in the creation of the American mythology is the historical background of the first European immigrants. They came to the New World, cutting themselves loose from the old European societies, and freeing themselves from the past. They had a dream of starting again with fresh initiative in the New World, after having spoiled their first chances in the Old World. In R. W. B. Lewis's (1955, p.5) view, the American myth regards life and history as just beginning. The first Europeans thought that the new life in America was a divinely granted second chance. Lewis explains that, in a Bible reading generation, the image of early Americans was most easily identified with the “Adamic” figure. Adam symbolizes the first, the archetypal, man. In his very newness, he is fundamentally innocent and independent.

It is not surprising that, as these two factors intertwined, the image of America came to be recognized as a garden or “Eden.” To depict America as a garden, Marx (p.43) states, is to express “utopian” aspirations that Europeans had cherished. Europeans had accepted deprivation and suffering as an unavoidable basis for civilization. Arriving in the New World, they thought that they might realize what had been regarded as a poetic fantasy. Those were aspirations toward “abundance, leisure, freedom, and greater harmony of existence” (p.288). Access to unspoiled, bountiful nature was what accounted for the settlers' sense of their virtue and the special good fortune of Americans.

It must be pointed out that the New World was not always fancied as a garden by early Europeans. New settlers had an undeveloped continent in front of them. They often did not have institutional or technological devices for conquering the wilderness. In the conditions of pioneer America, where the services of the police, the church, the school, and the hospital were not often available, survival demanded action. The concept of “self-reliance” took on a significant meaning for them. Colonies required persons who would go ahead and tackle with wilderness “without waiting for signals to be given or for arrangements that would make it easy” (Potter, 1965, p.98). Marx (p.43) argues that both the contrasting images of America as a “hideous wilderness” and a garden are poetic metaphors which went beyond the limits of fact, but that each had a basis in the actual conditions in the New World.

St. John de Crevecoeur (1963), a French settler in the eighteenth century, described the American as a “new man, who acts upon new principles” in his

Letters from an American Farmer. The American, according to him, was the one “who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced” (p.49). Crèvecoeur depicted the voice of a man who discovered the possibility of changing his life:

From nothing to start into being; from a servant to the rank of a master; from being the slave of some despotic prince, to become a free man, invested with lands, to which every municipal blessing is annexed! What a change indeed! It is in consequence of that change that he becomes American (p.65).

Crèvecoeur’s description suggests that the myth of America as a new beginning was confirmed in the new settlers’ experience of regeneration in the New World. They became new, better, happier men; they felt as if they were born again there. It is no wonder that the myth took on a divine connotation.

The boundless frontier in the New World reinforced the power of the myth. As they had boundless land, there were always new territories to which they could move. Americans developed a belief that they had room to make progress in an endless manner. This idea of progress allowed many settlers to escape from where they settled whenever they felt any social constraints. They were mistrustful of things that would repress individuals. They turned instead to the dream of making a society of free and equal individuals.

It seems obvious that the majority of early American people possessed a deep confidence in the future of American society. The American mythology was transmitted to those Americans who directly participated in the building of a new nation. Russel Bleaine Nye (1960, p.100) demonstrates how confident they were by quoting some comments from a few distinguished Founding Fathers. John Adams considered the settlement of American colonies “as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant and emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.” Benjamin Franklin called the Revolution “a glorious task assigned by Providence.” Thomas Jefferson wrote of himself and the other leaders, “we feel that we are acting under obligations not confined to the limits of our own society.”

2. American Revolution and Individualism Inherited

Robert Bellah and his collaborators (1986), in their book *Habits of the Heart*, suggest that there are two traditions of the individualism that influenced the American Revolution. One is the civic and republican tradition and the other is the biblical tradition. Bellah et al. refer to these two types of individualism as “traditional” individualism, as opposed to “modern” individualism, which I plan to examine in the sequel to this paper.

According to Bellah et al. (p.30), the civic and republican tradition originated in the cities of classical Greece and Rome. Ancient Greeks and Romans gave a particular significance to the concept of citizenship, in which they were guaranteed freedom and equality by the rule of law. Under the concept of citizenship, no one was above the law, and all were equally subject to the law. Civic tradition stresses the principle of citizen participation. It presupposed that the citizens of a republic were motivated by civic virtue as well as self-interest.

The Founding Fathers inherited much of the civic and republican tradition. One of the remarkable achievements in the American Revolution was the establishment of a republican form of government. Bellah et al. (p.30) state that many individuals in the founding generation were exemplary of the republican tradition. In *The Federalist*, published originally in 1787, James Madison states that only a republican form of the government would be reconcilable with “the fundamental principles of the Revolution” (as cited in Commager, 1951, p.141). In his definition, a republic is a government which derives all its power from people, and is administered by persons holding their offices. Thomas Jefferson, in Bellah's description, was a genuine adherent of the republican tradition. He believed that political equality can only be effective in a republic where the citizens actually participate.

Biblical traditions, on the other hand, originated in the Jewish and Christian religions, which had been predominant in the Western world for many centuries and which had had great impact on Western civilization. Biblical traditions put emphasis on creating a community in which one can live a genuinely ethical and spiritual life, without regard to material prosperity. The biblical definition of freedom is articulated in reference to the covenant between God and the individual (Bellah et al., p.29, p.333). Biblical traditions take on an individualistic form in that all individuals are considered equal in the eyes of God. Any

authority that violates religious freedom can be resisted in biblical traditions.

Most Americans were committed and attached to their religions in the period of the American Revolution. It must be noted that many early settlers, represented by the Pilgrim Fathers, were refugees from persecution in religious establishments in Europe. Large numbers of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews came to America since its colonial beginnings. America allowed them to practice their religions in their own way. Thus, religion remained a strong force in American society. Robert Nisbet (1973, pp.73-95) argues that the American Revolution was accomplished by people who embraced their religious values and aspirations. He holds that the firm creation of religious freedom was the most heralded consequence of the American Revolution.

Thus, republican and biblical traditions greatly inspired the American revolutionary generation. Of course, the Founding Fathers had a divine passion to build a new type of model nation for the rest of mankind, but it is important to recognize that they relied on European traditional beliefs for their attempts.

Nye (p.101) points out two distinct advantages of the American Revolution. First, the Revolution did not have to destroy an established authority in order to evolve a new one, for Americans already possessed a free, liberal tradition. Second, American society after the Revolution was much more open, fluid, and forceful than European societies. These advantages enabled the Founding Fathers to act and think "within an American, non-feudal framework." European traditions that Americans inherited, therefore, took a new turn with their full energies in the New Land.

After the revolution, the Founding Fathers tried to construct a democratic government that would be workable, durable, and in harmony with their republican principles. The Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, expressed the basic philosophy of democracy and liberty. These phrases were deeply engraved in the minds of Americans:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness (as cited in Commager, 1951, p.6).

It must be noted that when it referred to “all men” above, it literally applied only to “men,” exclusive of women and slaves also. Indeed it had a different concept of equality from what holds today. However, the overall emancipation actually required a gradual process in tandem with changing social attitudes. It can be pointed out that the Declaration of Independence, in a sense, enabled a progressive interpretation of equality that applies to all people.

Irving Kristol (1973, p.6) points out that the Founding Fathers were well aware that the government they idealized would be an exceedingly difficult regime to maintain. They feared that government would grow to be a “beast” to oppress the individual. As a result, the Founding Fathers wrote the Constitution of the United States with a spirit of moderation and pragmatism. They invented a distinctively American system of government called the “separation of powers,” in which powers are carefully divided among branches of government. Robert Goldwin (1990) sums up the purpose of this system as follows:

Put separate parts of political power in the hands of different officials in different parts of the government ... and encourage ... ambition and self-interest. It seems that there is a need for very many ambitious and self-interested officials to keep our government in balance. As fundamental as separation of powers is as a principle of the Constitution, *even more fundamental is the need for officeholders to be ambitious and self-interested* [italic added] (p.29).

Conclusion

For early European immigrants, America represented a place of new beginning. They generated the powerful American mythology that stressed progress and self-reliance. On the other hand, they inherited a large portion of European thought imbued by civic and biblical traditions. Indeed the American Revolution, through which America gained independence and began to build its new society, sought something entirely new. “Traditional individualism” was an important part of the spirit of a new democratic nation.

Traditional individualism has long coexisted with “modern” individualism in America. Bellah et al. (p.143) suggest that the conflict between the two was initially muted. However, gradually, the latter became more dominant over

the former. The sequel to this paper will mainly discuss the transformation of American individualism under the process of industrialization in the nineteenth century.

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