Interview with Gordon Wood on the American Revolution

“Labor celebrated as the highest value”

Tom Mackaman
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Gordon Wood is a leading scholar of the American Revolution. His book, The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993, and his* Creation of the Republic, 1776-1787 *won the Bancroft Prize in 1970. WSWS history writer Tom Mackaman recently spoke with Wood at Brown University, where he is professor emeritus of history.*

Tom Mackaman: Your basic conception of the American Revolution is that it was radical, that it was actually a revolution…

Gordon Wood: A social revolution, only not the one the Progressive historians [1] emphasized. Where they saw ordinary people as oppressed—under pressure from creditors and so on—I see them as middling sorts who are the future business-commercial sources of the economic explosion, in the North at least, of the early 19th Century. So I agree with the Progressives that there is a social conflict, but I put a different spin on it. I see these people not as oppressed, but really as angry and wanting to assert themselves against what they see as an aristocracy. It may not be an aristocracy by English standards, but in their eyes it is.

And these people are celebrating labor, and just by that celebration they’re way ahead of the Europeans in that respect. Because work, from Aristotle’s time, was considered despicable, mean, fit only for slaves.

TM: The curse of the fallen...

GW: Yes, and now all of a sudden it’s celebrated as the highest value. And that really makes slavery more and more of an anomaly in the North, but the South remains patriarchal and hierarchical. So I think this is one of the very interesting developments of the 19th century.

TM: How is it that the American Revolution invests labor with dignity?

GW: It’s not the revolution itself, it’s these people who are middling sorts, who are for the most part artisans, mechanics [2], proto-businessmen, who are held in contempt. And I use an example. I’ve written a book on this, Franklin.

In the 1740s, he’s probably the wealthiest man in Philadelphia, but he’s still held in contempt by many of the aristocrats of Pennsylvania society until he retires at the age of 42, I think it was, in 1748, and becomes a gentleman. He never works again a day in his life. Now, it doesn’t mean he’s not engaged in activities—political activities, scientific activities—those are legitimate things for an aristocrat to do. But to actually work or run a printing shop, well, that’s being in trade, if you will.

Of course, the British aristocracy holds these prejudices much longer than the Americans do. You get up to *Downton Abbey*, and Maggie Smith’s character represents an old, traditional view. She doesn’t like the idea that the heir to the estate wants to practice law, and she says you can’t do that, you’ve got to just run the estate. She’s just appalled at the idea of somebody who is working. That’s a leftover from an earlier age.

I think that’s what these mechanics, these artisans are angry about, because they’ve been held in contempt. That anger feeds into the revolution. They are the people in the 1780s that the Progressive historians have seen as an oppressed people. And they’re debtors. But debt is hardly a sign of poverty. It’s often a sign of borrowing to get ahead. They do get into trouble sometimes. Of course, in Massachusetts you have the government attempting to monetize its debt much too quickly, and putting pressure on the whole credit structure, and they begin seizing these people’s farms who have mortgaged them, and that’s what precipitates Shay’s Rebellion [3]. But these aren’t necessarily poor people. They’re people who are on the make, if you will, ambitious and middling is the way to put it.

And the debates that take place over the ratification of the Constitution are between middling people, like Melancton Smith in New York and William Findley, a former weaver, in Pennsylvania, self-educated, but he’s brilliant. And they give the Federalists a hard time. You read the debates and Findley really comes at them. He says, you’re just a bunch of aristocrats. Hamilton is on the defensive. He says, well, I’m not an aristocrat. But somehow everyone knows that he is.

TM: So the Revolution is setting this into motion, or these people are setting the Revolution into motion?

GW: Well, I think it’s a combination. These middling people are growing in size and strength. But they aren’t the only source of the Revolution. The Revolution is touched off by the imperial crisis. And southerners, the Virginians, are very much in the leadership of it.

I think the Revolution can be seen in a three-pronged way. One is the imperial crisis and the debate over that. It’s a colonial rebellion. Some historians have seen it exclusively in these terms. I think Bob Middlekauf has tended to see it just as a colonial rebellion.

TM: His is the Oxford history, *The Glorious Cause*?

GW: Yes. I think he tends to see it as essentially over in 1783, and you have some adjustments to make with the Constitution. That’s one aspect of it, the colonial rebellion. But I think the Revolution is far more than that. It’s not like the Algerians breaking away from France in the 1960s.

Ours goes much further. It is seen as a world-historical event. That’s because it coincides with something we call the Enlightenment. And so you have a lot of people—Jefferson in particular, but not just Jefferson—who see the colonial rebellion or the imperial issue as an opportunity to do something more. To not just break from England, but to create a different kind of government, one that will implement a lot of reforms. This will lead to the legal reforms that Jefferson is obsessed with—the education reforms, changing the nature of criminal punishment—a whole series of things we might call Enlightenment reforms.

Then the third aspect in this three-pronged Revolution is the class revolution that Carl Becker [4] referred to—the Revolution is not just about home rule, but who was to rule at home—and this is where the middling sorts are protesting the aristocratic rule. These have been seen by

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Progressive historians, including Becker and Beard and others, as the deprived people, people who are debtors, and the implication is that they are the poor people who are protesting against a rich aristocracy.

They are protesting against an aristocracy, but I don't see them as the poor and the oppressed. In their minds they're oppressed, but I think they're more middling sorts who have ambitions, commercial ambitions, and I think the crucial thing in all of this is paper money.

I've debated with Woody Holton [5], who is probably the leading Progressive historian of this generation. Holton and I agree that paper money is crucial, but we interpret its importance very differently. He sees it as a device by which poor debtors are going to get relieved of their oppressive credit by inflation. I think that's an aspect of it, but I think they want the paper money, and they continue to want the paper money, even after the Revolution because they needed it to trade.

Of course, the founders, Adams and Jefferson, had no understanding of banking. Adams says that if anybody has a piece of paper that can't be matched one-to-one to specie then that's a cheat on somebody.

TM: Maybe you could talk a little bit about the conflict between Jefferson and Hamilton over the question of the national bank.

GW: Hamilton is widely considered to be the founder of American capitalism. I think that that's a misinterpretation. He certainly understood banking. He's probably the only one of the major founders who did. But Hamilton had a much more hierarchical view. He was interested in overseas trade. He was interested in big merchants. He really ignored, politically, these artisans and mechanics.

TM: Is this what is called mercantile capitalism?

GW: Right. He was willing to promote manufacturing, but he really didn't follow up on that part of his program. He wanted to be an economic powerhouse, but he didn't grasp that the source of that power would be these middling people, these proto-businessmen.

His national bank made big loans to big merchants. As a consequence, you have this proliferation of banks that loaned to farmers and mechanics—that he didn't like. He wanted the Bank of the United States to be the dominant bank, and it would have agents or branches in a couple of cities, but he had no expectation of this proliferation of state banks. I mean, you had hundreds turning out paper money—that was not his vision. His vision was much more hierarchical, catering to big merchants and overseas trade.

TM: One thing you point to in your book is the strange early development of American politics, where you have these southern planters like Jefferson and Madison gaining the political support of these middling elements in the North, the artisans, the...

GW: Exactly. This is where Hamilton makes a terrible error, politically. This is a natural constituency for him, if he'd only realized it. He ignores them and they become Jeffersonians. These middling elements, these proto-businessmen, who have nothing in common, really, with these southern slave-holding planters nonetheless become Republicans because they are fighting a Federalist [6] aristocracy, which is sort of deaf to their interests. There are exceptions, especially in Massachusetts, but generally speaking, these middling sorts are angry at the aristocrats because the aristocrats see them as a threat.

TM: Is this the contest Jefferson is talking about when he calls his victory in the 1800 election "The Revolution of 1800"?

GW: Yes, but he never fully grasps why. He knows that they are ordinary people supporting him, but he thinks it's because they are with him intellectually, with his reason. Of all the founders, he lives with the greatest illusions, if you will.

As late as 1821, he says that there is not a young man alive today who won't die a Unitarian. I mean, how wrong could he be? The country is being swept by the Methodists and the Baptists in the Second Great Awakening, and he's talking about everyone becoming a Unitarian? So he's totally out of touch in some respects.

But he is in touch with what you might call the democratization of the society, and he sees himself as the leader of that. And that's what cemented his position as the greatest democrat in American history, the spokesman of democracy, even though he's a slave-holding aristocrat. He legitimately is the spokesman, and I try to make that clear in the book, because he does believe in the end that everyone is equal.

Of all the founders, he believed in the social sense that everyone has a common—and the Scots were making a big deal of this [7]—that in every breast there is this sense of oneness that makes us all equal, and it's the source for sympathy and for reaching out to other people. And Jefferson believes this. He says everyone, even black slaves, has this social sense of affection, if you will, towards other people. And this he feels is the bond that holds society together.

Paine had this feeling too. Both of them were real radicals, and I don't see any difference between the two of them, Paine and Jefferson, except that Paine is more outspoken because he's a public intellectual and doesn't have to worry about winning office. Jefferson gets so burned on his religious views that he goes quiet after 1800.

The ultimate position would be towards anarchy, that you don't need government at all, you just get rid of the intervening political forces that are preventing people from relating to one another. That's the radical position. That's why Jefferson believes in minimal government.

He's not trying to promote *laissez faire* capitalism. Even though that might be the consequence, it's not the intention. He starts from the assumption that government is the source of all evil. Government interferes with the natural flow of affection that we have for each other. It creates monopolies. It gives this guy a title and not that one. It creates distinctions. So inequality in society is fed by government, in Jefferson's mind. So you get the government out of the way and let people naturally relate to one another.

TM: Is this what was called natural rights philosophy?

GW: No, that's another aspect that the revolutionaries appealed to. On the eve of the Declaration of Independence, up until this point they've been talking about "our English rights," rights to not have our property taken, the right of *habeas corpus*, all of those rights that were summed up in English history going back to Magna Carta—which, by the way, has its 800th anniversary this year.

But on the eve of the Revolution, they're at the Continental Congress. It's 1775, and they're on the verge, they realize it's going to break, and they can't keep talking about the rights of Englishmen. So they say, alright, these rights are really natural rights.

I mean, it's not quite so simple as that, but suddenly they just change the language. And what they mean by that is that they exist in nature and that they're not related to any cultural boundaries. But they really are referring to old-fashioned English rights. The right to not have your property taken away is suddenly a natural right. The right to not be put in prison without having a trial, *habeas corpus* and so on, that's a natural right.

But there's a big tradition in political philosophy emphasizing natural rights, going back to nature, that is much contested by other political theorists. They simply don't get into this. You know most of these guys are lawyers. They're not closet philosophers. So in their polemics they draw on whatever will make a case for them.

TM: Why does Jefferson change the Lockean expression "life, liberty and property" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?"

GW: Well, first of all, it's more general and it involves more people. I think they just assumed property would be included in that. But I think it's more felicitous, and there is an obsession with the pursuit of happiness in the 18th century.

There's nothing new in Jefferson's Declaration. In fact, "all men are created equal" is conventional wisdom for many good Whigs in the 18th Century, including Englishmen who are aristocrats. They don't anticipate the consequences of saying that. They don't expect slaves suddenly to

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say, well, we're your equal. But they do believe—and I guess it's based on Lockean environmentalism—that the distinctions between people are really due to the environment.

There's kind of a general consensus among the more liberal Whigs, even among some English aristocrats, that all men are created equal. Even those lords in England who have inherited their position, inherited their wealth, they don't like to believe that it's based on inheritance. They like to believe that they're there because of merit. The whole notion that the English aristocracy is a meritocracy is widespread. It's stunning to realize how much they had bought into what you might call this liberal premise that their position is earned.

So when Jefferson says all men are created equal, William Byrd [8], a big slaveholder of the previous generation, was saying the same thing. It's to be liberal minded. To be enlightened is to say that.

TM: Does the same hold true for the conception of government the founders are outlining? What is novel about it? Is it that it's applied now? So, for example, the Declaration of Independence says that people have inalienable rights, that governments exist to protect these—in other words, it's a conception of rights, that they're with the people…

GW: Right. They're born with these rights. They're inalienable. So especially for someone like Jefferson, government is an imposition. It may be a necessary evil, as Paine calls it. But it's not something that's God-given.

So government is on the defensive. It's something that's erected to do certain things. But it's certainly not inherent in our lives. What is inherent is our rights. If you look at the first paragraph of Paine's *Common Sense*, he says government is a necessary evil, but society is benign and natural. And that I think is the most radical position.

You might get someone like Hamilton, who might accept that, but he feels government is far more necessary because he doesn't believe that people are naturally good. When it comes right down to it, people differ, just as they do today, over human nature.

Hamilton and Adams, for example, who are considered conservative, have a more dour view of human nature. People are not to be trusted. They don't love one another. Therefore, you need government to keep them at arm's length.

And Jefferson and Paine, being at the other end of the political spectrum, being on the left, if you will, would say people are naturally benign, they're goodhearted, and it's government that gets in the way, creates privileges, monopolies and distinctions.

This plays out in international politics. Republics are more pacific than monarchies. The radical position, the Paine position, is that monarchies are the cause of war. Monarchs seeking to aggrandize territory for themselves in the course of the 18th Century had brought about the series of wars—the War of the Spanish Succession, the War of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years War. So if you could become a republic—this is Jefferson's vision—spread republicanism, you could have peace.

TM: One point that you make in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* is that the founding generation didn't view this to be a national revolution as we would think of the term. What did you mean by that? Did they view this as a world event already in its time?

GW: Definitely. They saw it as a world-historical event that was going to spread. They're not surprised when the French Revolution breaks out. We've set the ball rolling and they're copying us. Some of the French liberals felt the same way. That's why Lafayette sends Washington the key to the Bastille, which is the symbol of the ancien regime, and the key hangs in Mount Vernon today. He's saying, thank you, so to speak, for getting this going.

And we thought that every revolution that occurred in the first half of the 19th Century was an attempt to be like us. And, of course, they all failed. The French Revolution—by 1815 the Bourbons are back on the throne…

TM: The defeats of 1848…

GW: Yes. The revolutions of 1848. I don't know of any good books that put Lincoln's administration in context. Because when Lincoln is saying we're the last, best hope [9], he's thinking about the revolutions of 1848, which were all attempts to be republics. The Germans, the French. It just didn't work. They all fail. So Lincoln is exactly right when he says we're the last, best hope, because it looks like democracy is failing.

TM: I'm glad you brought that up because earlier, when we were talking about Jefferson and Hamilton, there's this argument that Lincoln is actually the political descendent of Hamilton and not Jefferson. I think there's something tempting about that because you can draw a line from the Federalists to the Whigs to the Republicans, and you can say...

GW: I just think that's wrong, though. It seems to me that Jefferson is Lincoln's hero. I see him drawing from that. He mentions, "All honor to Jefferson." And it's because of equality.

And the idea of equality is expanded and used, and I mention that in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. Melville says in *Moby Dick* it has an awesome power. He says it with a certain amount of sarcasm there. He's got a quarrel with America. There's a kind of ambiguous attitude there.

TM: Can you say something about the rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights as they came out of the American Revolution—opposition to the standing army, the prohibition against torture, freedom of religion, freedom of speech—and so on.

GW: The right to bear arms, the idea that your home is your castle, these are all English precedents. The only really new right is the right of freedom of religion. The British still have an established church. I mean they have religious toleration, but they have an established church, and they did at the time.

Our religious liberty, which I think is expressed best by Jefferson's bill [10], where he just neutralizes the state in religious matters, is really a radical step, unprecedented in world history.

Madison shepherds the bill through because Jefferson is abroad in Paris. And Jefferson believes that—if you read the preamble to the bill, it's really quite extraordinary—he says our "religious opinions." He doesn't even talk about faith. He says "opinions," our opinions are no more important to our civic life than our opinions about physics or geometry. But the people who supported the bill, the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Quakers, the Methodists, they didn't give a damn about what he said in the preamble. All they wanted to do was get rid of the established Anglican Church.

Madison always sees this, the secret to America's religious freedom in its multiplicity of religions. Jefferson never sees this. He thinks Americans have become rational, like he is--that they believe in separation of church and state out of reason. Madison tries to tell him: Mr. Jefferson, it's the multiplicity of sects—and it just goes right by him. But he's a true believer, a real radical, an ideologue.

TM: Lincoln has this quote, where he's talking about Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, where he says the line about equality, "all men are created equal," that that was not necessary for rupture with England, that that was put there for future use. And you talk about the soaring thinking of a Jefferson and this immense panorama on which the founders saw the world. Were they thinking about the future?

GW: No. I don't think they thought that this was going to be used in the way it was used. I think generally it was conventional wisdom among liberals that everyone was born equal.

They had felt English snobbery or contempt. Washington felt it particularly. He had tried to get a royal commission in the army, and he was denied it. So he's a colonel in the militia, but he's being ordered around by captains and lieutenants who had royal commissions.

Certainly Adams, when he talks in his diary about those people, like the Hutchinsons, Governor Hutchinson [11], he says these families feel their

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wealth, feel their position. It rankled him. He resented it. He's moving in their circles. He's not one of the oppressed on bottom. He's a lawyer. He's got a lot of money. He goes to dinner parties with them. But he senses this social distinction. So equality is important to them.

TM: Let me ask you about some of the criticism of Jefferson, in particular, and the American Revolution, more generally, by, I suppose you could say, practitioners of identity politics. The argument has to do with slavery—that because the Revolution didn't abolish slavery, it was, in fact, a counterrevolution.

GW: Well, I think it's a distortion of history. Actually, the American Revolution makes slavery a problem for the first time. In the early 18th Century, there were very few people criticizing slavery. Historians will go back and pick out a Quaker who was speaking out against slavery, but those are anomalies. Most people took it for granted. In fact, if you go through the diaries of William Byrd, who was a very educated man, who was a member of the Royal Society, he has no qualms about slavery. He just takes it for granted. It's an unequal world and these are just people who served them.

It's the Revolution that raises it, and you get people like James Otis [12], who, in the revolutionary rhetoric, are saying, well, why are we enslaving blacks? Why shouldn't they have the same rights as whites? So the revolution suddenly makes slavery a problem. And people who want to keep it are thrown on the defensive. Every colony had slaves before the revolution. By 1804, slavery has been abolished by all the states north of the Mason Dixon line. So there is a major movement against slavery coming out of the American Revolution. That has to be emphasized.

And I think that the South, which has slavery much more deeply embedded in the social structure—40 percent of Virginia is enslaved; 60 percent of South Carolina is enslaved—it's no easy problem for them. I mean Rhode Island, this state, had 14 percent. That was tough enough, but they did it. Nonetheless, the slave owners are put on the defensive for the first time in history. That's the point I would emphasize. But, of course, that makes me a defender of slavery.

You have to get it in perspective. Since slavery existed for 3,000 years, what's interesting about the Revolution is the challenge to it, which it hadn't had before. The good historians of this, like David Davis [13], have emphasized that point. But for young people today it's almost impossible to conceive of slavery.

This is the same point I'd make about Jefferson. Here he is, raised in a slave society, his father had slaves, he has slaves, and everyone he knows of his elite has slaves, and yet he has the courage to speak out against it as a young man. And he comes to that simply by reading books, and he knows that it's wrong. Now he never fulfills that. He never frees any of his slaves—he frees Sally Hemings' [14] children, but that's it. Others, however, did free their slaves, including Washington.

Good historians are supposed to go back and explain why people behaved the way they did. It's all a question of perspective. I would emphasize the positive, antislavery aspects of the Revolution. But since they didn't fully abolish slavery, they'll always be seen as failing in some fundamental sense.

I think that's a mistake, because what the Revolution does is set into motion a sense that slavery is an abomination that must be eliminated sooner or later. The fact that the Constitution doesn't use the word "slavery" reveals that they knew that, somehow or other, in the future we're not going to have slaves. They didn't know what would happen, but they did not want to tarnish this document with the word.

TM: I'm taken with your explanation. I think the key point is that the Revolution poses the problem for the first time—perceived as a problem. It raises the question of equality, but it couldn't yet be answered fully. Of course, in the American Civil War 650,000 people die to settle that question.

GW: The Civil War is the fulfillment of the American Revolution. I think you can see it in those terms. And certainly Lincoln tended to see it in those terms.

It's a real fight. In Bailyn's [15] new book, one of the essays talks about the problem of trying to establish context in history. He says, ultimately, when you build a context, it seems you're excusing behavior, and so that makes it seem that you're defending slavery.

I don't know how you can escape from that. You have to explain why they behaved as they did. Now, they knew that slavery was wrong; many of them did, even though they continued to hold slaves. And many of them moved to abolish slavery—that's why the North did. But when you have 40 percent of your society in slavery, and the economy is totally dependent upon it, it is not an easy matter.

TM: It seems they were aware of the contradiction, but they didn't have a solution. Is it Jefferson who says we have the wolf by the ears but we can neither safely hold him nor let him go? And he ponders in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that, hopefully, slavery will go away, and it won't go away because of the extirpation of the masters. Which is actually what happens in the 1860s. At least as a class, they are wiped out. It seems to me that with identity politics, these historians look through history and try to impose on actors in the past conceptions based on their own political concerns in the present.

GW: This is a problem of history. We don't usually go back and condemn the Ancient Greeks for being slaveholders, because it would seem kind of silly. Maybe there have been books condemning Plato and Aristotle for being slaveholders, but what would be the point?

TM: There's also the question of the use of postmodernism in history. It's difficult to define, of course, but part of it rejects the idea that there are lessons to be learned from history.

GW: I deal with it in *The Purpose of the Past*, a collection of reviews I'd written over the previous 25 years. Postmodernism really flourished in the 1980s and people got very excited about it, especially literary people. And some historians did, but it didn't really take. It's so destructive of history—that you sort of make up the truth. That there is no truth. All of that is so destructive that most historians didn't buy into it.

I think most of the postmodernist theorists were ignored by the profession, but it has crept in, in the sense that we have a greater sense of relativism. But we are necessarily relativists. We believe that the culture is different today than in the past.

The historians who criticize the founders for being slaveholders, what do they do with John Winthrop, the 17th Century Puritan? Would it make much sense to go back and criticize him because he's a bigot and didn't believe in the separation of church and state? Would that be much of a history to do that? To condemn the Puritans for being so narrow minded? It would seem like a silly history. We know that they didn't believe in the separation of church and state, and they believed in a single truth, and that they punished people who dissented from that. But it would make a silly history. But with slavery, we do that.

Jefferson was such an articulate spokesman. He said all the right things, even on slavery. On all the other issues—trust in the people, the ordinary people. He becomes the apostle of freedom, the apostle of democracy. That's how he's been viewed until recently, and now he's been seriously tarnished.

But by the end of his life, in his private letters, Jefferson sounds like one of these 1850s fire-eating defenders of slavery. He thinks it's all a conspiracy by these priests up in New England, Puritans. Jefferson really does become an old man who is raging at the world.

TM: Madison dies very embittered too?

GW: Well , not quite so embittered as Jefferson. He's worried that the country is going to fall apart. And for good reason. It did. And he knows that slavery is the serpent that's undermining it. They ' re quite aware.

When Madison dies, he realizes that there are people all around him defending slavery in ways his generation would not have—openly,

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publicly, undermining the Declaration of Independence. As Calhoun [16] said, it was a mistake. To someone like Madison, that must have been appalling and scary, because he realizes the whole business could come undone.

In fact, I think all of them died disillusioned, to some extent, with what they had wrought. John Adams tries to make himself think it will work out, but he feels it's much too democratic, much too vulgar, it's not what we hoped for.

Van Buren [17] is the immediate generation after, and he says, you founders didn't understand democracy. And he is going to grab hold of it and use it. He builds a party, a New York party, and he's fully at home in that modern democratic politics in a way that these founders were not. He's not at all appalled by the vulgarity, what we would call the populism, of democratic politics.

TM: The founders were opposed to the concept of interest in politics in principle?

GW: Oh, definitely. And Van Buren not at all.

You know, what's interesting about that notion is to take the word "disinterested." Washington uses it all the time. He means impartiality. Standing above an interest. He's very concerned about that.

When he's offered 150 shares of a canal company by the Virginia legislature, he worries. He's out of office, and he needs the money, actually. He writes to about a dozen people he knows. What can I do? Should I accept these? Will this hurt my reputation for disinterestedness? If I refuse it, will it offend the legislature? He writes to Fairfax in England. He writes to Lafayette. He writes to everyone he can think of. And Jefferson finally gives him the answer. He says, Your Excellency, why don't you accept them and then give them away. So he does, and he gives them to Washington College, which eventually becomes Washington and Lee.

If you look up that word in the dictionary now, you'll find that there are two meanings. It also means uninterested, not caring. That is a meaning that developed mostly in the 20th Century. The older meaning has been lost. Very few people use it. You'll find that even educated people use the word in the sense of not caring. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, you'll find the word used that way. It's almost as if we can't conceive of anybody being truly disinterested.

TM: You mention the question of aristocracy, but someone might raise his hand and say in the colonies there really wasn't an aristocracy.

GW: Not a hereditary one, no. But I think it's a fair thing to say that there were aristocrats in the sense that they were not working with their hands. They saw themselves as gentlemen. That was the term they would use. Who is a gentleman, who is not. Something that gets blurred in the early 19th Century.

TM: Another word that's lost its original meaning.

GW: Mrs. Trollope [18] comes here and she complains, God, a dockworker calls himself a gentleman. And people use it now, "ladies and gentlemen," and it's a board we put on our restroom doors. But for them it was a real distinction of status. And it meant someone who didn't work with his hands, certainly not, and didn't work for money, openly.

Franklin had doubts of his gentry status even though he owned a very profitable printing business. He was not really a gentleman until he sold that business and had a coming out portrait painted of himself looking like a gentleman. Later, of course, artisans pick him up and make him into a hero, and by the 1820s he's their hero because none of the other founders could be related to what they were.

But in the 18th Century, being a gentleman was a very distinct status. In Southern churches, when all of the common people are settled, slaves are up in the balcony, wives are settled, the planters would come in, these gentry, with their spurs jingling, by themselves. They'd come in separately, the men, to get seated last. That's an assertion of power. And in the North, who is a gentleman is very important legally. They're treated differently in the common law. Adams talks about that. So it's a very sharp distinction that gets eroded.

TM: So it's there in the colonies. This is a society in which the aristocratic principle is operative. It's a monarchical…

GW: Right. What runs through my book, the central theme between the three parts—monarchy, republicanism and democracy—what I'm concerned with is how people connect to one another, how they relate to one another.

Monarchy is really held together by patronage. It's a hierarchical world and you're organized vertically. You look up and down. It's not a modern class system at all. And the major adhesive is patronage, broadly conceived.

In the republican model, they see it as virtue. In the 18th Century, in the classical view of virtue, you're essentially going to love one another. Just natural affection. This is the radical view of Jefferson and so on, that virtue is going to be the adhesive. Very utopian.

Then, finally, under democracy, you would say that the adhesive is interest. That's one theme running through the book. How is the society held together? The republican period is a very brief moment in our history, even if the ideal is still there.

Tocqueville comes and makes that point. What is the adhesive holding that society together? Interest. This would have been appalling to Washington. This isn't what he wanted at all. He wanted disinterested people. And that was his dream and the dream of these founders.

TM: I want to double back to something—the American conception of government. And you emphasized that it came out of English traditions. But I want to ask you about the question of sovereignty. The fact that the Constitution says "we the people," not "we the representatives of the people." In the English tradition, was not sovereignty still, at least in a symbolic sense, invested in the king? And this is getting to another question about the idea of where rights come from. I could be misapprehending this, but, for example, the difference from the German idea of *staatsrecht*, that the state gives rights to the people.

GW: That's not England at all, and, of course, Magna Carta is a good example of this. And really, if you think of English history, it's this contest between two sets of equally legitimate rights: the rights of the king to govern and the rights of the people to have their rights protected. Each of them has legitimate rights. His rights are called prerogatives. And there's a contest between those rights that goes from the Magna Carta right through the 17th Century, and that's when you have the crisis, and one king is executed and another driven from the throne. [19]

You have the solution with the Glorious Revolution, where Parliament—King in Parliament—is the final solution. That becomes the sovereign body. Sovereign in the sense that—as Blackstone [20] sums it up—anything that Parliament says is right, is right. Parliament is the maker of the rights, or the declarer of the rights. There are Englishmen who say those rights existed in nature, but Parliament can override those, and has. *Habeas corpus* can be changed by Parliament today, legally, as they did in Northern Ireland during The Troubles.

The difference between "legal" and "constitutional" doesn't exist in English thinking. Whatever Parliament says is *ipso facto* constitutional. Now, convention prevents them from overreaching, but technically Parliament can do whatever it does. And Blackstone says this—it can do anything that is not unnatural.

TM: Was the repeal of the Stamp Act and then the imposition of the Declaratory Act [21] an expression of this authority?

GW: Yes, it affirms that Parliament has the right to legislate anything whatsoever.

Now what happens in the debate, and this is fascinating—I'm editing two volumes consisting of 39 pamphlets on the imperial debate for the Library of America that is coming out in June—and it's fascinating because at the outset, the Americans try to say Parliament can't tax us because we're not represented. And the British try to say that you are represented, virtually.

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And it goes back and forth.

But the Americans had accepted Parliament's authority over them on matters related to trade—like the Navigation Acts of the 17th Century or the Molasses Act. They had accepted the constitutionality of certain things Parliament had done. So that's a problem for them.

They keep trying to say, well, you can regulate trade because that's part of the imperial responsibility, but you can't tax us. And the British come back and say, you can't divide Parliament's authority. If it can exercise one iota of authority over you, then it has total authority. It's all or nothing. That's what they mean by sovereignty of Parliament. The whole realm is involved in Parliament. The people, the nobles, the king, and therefore it's as if everyone has consented to an act of Parliament.

In his naiveté, Thomas Hutchinson, the loyalist governor, in 1773 confronts the Massachusetts House of Representatives with this all-or-nothing argument: You're either totally under Parliament or you're totally out. What happens is that when they are confronted with this all-or-nothing argument, all of the intellectuals—Jefferson, Hamilton, Wilson [22], Adams all say, all right, if that's our choice, we're independent of Parliament, we're tied only to the king. That's the position reached by all of the American intellectuals, the lawyers who think like this, by 1774. You have a whole series of pamphlets in which they say this.

They are tied solely to the king by 1774. This has been called by historians "the Commonwealth theory of the empire," because it anticipates the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which established the modern Commonwealth, where we have independent legislatures in New Zealand, Australia and Canada, with a common sovereign, the queen. This is what the Americans are anticipating in 1774.

Because they've had this contractual relationship, protection and allegiance being the considerations, when the king withdraws his protection, they withdraw their allegiance, and this is the Declaration of Independence. And if you read the Declaration, it says, King George, you've done this, this, and this, but no mention of Parliament.

TM: Right. Which had been the issue just a few years earlier.

GW: Of course. Parliament was the source of the Stamp Act, the Coercive Acts, the Townsend Duties, all of that. And yet the closest they come to recognizing Parliament in the Declaration is when they say you, King George III, have conspired with others. "With others" is the Parliament. They are so legal-minded, and they are so scrupulous about the constitutional issues involved here, that they only have to break from the king.

Sovereignty remains a problem. It is the most powerful doctrine, I would say, of Anglo-American political science in the 18th Century. That there must be, in every state, one final and indivisible lawmaking authority.

That's what Blackstone says. And the Americans buy into it. They keep saying, we'll divide sovereignty, and the British say you can't do that. So they finally withdraw sovereignty from Parliament and say that it is in each of our colonial legislatures, where the King is the head. That's their answer to that problem. They don't divide sovereignty, they surrender to it.

The problem comes with the debate over the Constitution between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. [23] The Anti-Federalists say, who is going to be sovereign? This Constitution is creating a federal government that, according to the supremacy clause, will have final authority. Since there has to be in every state one final, supreme, lawmaking authority, it's bound to end up in the Congress.

The Federalists say, no, we're going to divide sovereignty. The states will have some authority and the federal government will have other authority. And the Anti-Federalists picked up that same argument the British used, you can't divide sovereignty—it's either all or nothing. The Federalists are in a very tough position.

TM: Does "We the people," the idea that sovereignty…

GW: Here's the answer, and it's actually a brilliant answer: James Wilson, in a speech in Philadelphia, outside and then later in the ratifying convention. He says we're not going to divide sovereignty, we're going to relocate it. We're going to put sovereignty into the people as a whole.

He's not saying that all power is derived from the people, because every Whig believed that. The conventional wisdom in England in the 18th Century was that power originally came from the people. But what he's saying is that final lawmaking power lies with the people. And he is saying that they distribute various bits and pieces of their power to various offices. But the final lawmaking, supreme—the Blackstonian definition of sovereignty—lies with the people.

When Madison reads this, he says, that's it. That solves all of our problems. And the Federalists pick up that argument that Wilson made and run with it. And it really leaves the Anti-Federalists—well, what can they say? It sounds so democratic. But the issue of sovereignty is a real problem through this whole period.

TM: Did you follow the bankruptcy of Detroit at all?

GW: I followed it.

TM: One of our reporters, Jerry White, for the *World Socialist Web Site*, at this press conference on the bankruptcy—because they had effectively suspended democracy in Detroit when they put it into bankruptcy—asked the question of the Michigan governor, Rick Snyder, well, isn't this a novel conception of government where you can simply take away democracy? Snyder says, I'll answer that question, but he really did not get the historical element of it. He has the idea that democracy is something that can be given and taken away, rather than it being derived from the people.

GW: Well, most of the time the argument goes the other way. I think of the example of Federalist 78 [24], where Hamilton is trying to justify a kind of judicial review, and the Anti-Federalists say the legislatures are the representatives of the people and you can't have some federal judge come in and set aside the people's will. And Hamilton says the legislatures are not really any more agents of the people than the judges are. They are equally agents of the people. The people have not really embodied themselves in these representatives. They've given just a little bit of their authority. Then the argument gets picked up in a way that Hamilton hadn't anticipated, because if the judges are agents of the people, then the people should elect them.

By the time of the federal Constitution, Madison and others are saying that all of these federal officials are agents of the people, representatives of the people, with different duties. But there's no exclusive representation of the people. The people retain their ultimate sovereignty and they dole out, so to speak, on short loans, pieces of their power. That's the intellectual conception that underlies the Federalist achievement. And it's a fantastic achievement. The whole notion of sovereignty is changed, the whole idea of representation is transformed.

TM: Let me ask you a final question, and I thank you for speaking with us for so long. Is there any new work on the Revolution, on the late colonial era, on the early republic, that you find particularly promising?

GW: There are a lot of people who feel it's been sort of treading water and nothing much has been happening. Most of the work has been focused on race and gender. And there's been some good material on that, but mostly it's been going back and lamenting the failure of the founders to do away with slavery. No, there hasn't been much.

What's developing in history writing, you might say, we academics have become so inward-looking, writing for each other, sort of the way that physicists write papers for each other, that we've missed our obligation to the general public to write history for the public.

When I came of age in the 1950s—Hofstadter, Boorstin, Oscar Handlin, Eric Goldman and Woodward [25]—they wrote their academic history for a general public. They had two audiences. That's no longer true in most cases.

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Bill Cronon [26], in *Perspectives in American History*, a year or two ago—he says we've become boring and we're too narrow. It's not a question of boredom, and it's not a question of writing style. It's a question of the arguments we're having. We're really arguing with one another. And it's very difficult for a general public to comprehend the arguments. So what's happening is that the history that's being written for the general public is being written by non-academics, people with no PhDs., most famous, of course, being David McCullough, but I can name a dozen people in my field alone.

I think it's lamentable. I think it's an obligation that, even if we want to have these arguments with one another, that every once in a while we stop and try to write for a general audience. It's become very insular and inward. History ultimately has to engage the whole public. I just don't think the academics are paying enough attention to that.

Notes

[1] "Progressive history," associated chiefly with Charles Beard, was a materialist but non-Marxist approach to American history that was especially influential in the 1930s and 1940s.

[2] The term "mechanic" was commonly used to refer to those who labored in early manufacturing shops.

[3] An uprising of western Massachusetts debtors, mainly farmers, in 1786 and 1787 against the state authorities.

[4] Becker (1873-1945) was a leading Progressive historian of the American Revolution.

[5] Abner "Woody" Holton, professor of history at the University of South Carolina, is the author of *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*.

[6] Federalists and Republicans (or Democratic-Republicans) formed the first party system in American history in the late 1790s. The Federalists were led by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, the Republicans by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. The term Federalist was also used, in an earlier period, to refer to those who led the ideological struggle to adopt the Constitution in the late 1780s. Those Federalists were led by Hamilton, Madison and John Jay.

[7] The Scottish Enlightenment

[8] William Byrd II (1674-1744), a wealthy Virginia planter

[9] The reference is to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

[10] The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, drafted by Jefferson in 1777 and ratified in 1786

[11] Thomas Hutchinson (1711-1789), loyalist governor of the Massachusetts colony

[12] James Otis, Jr. (1725-1783), Massachusetts lawyer and patriot

[13] David Brion Davis, professor emeritus of history at Yale and a leading scholar of slavery and abolitionism in the Atlantic world.

[14] Sally Hemings (1773-1835) was Jefferson's mixed-race slave and likely his concubine, with whom he had six children, four of whom survived and were freed.

[15] Bernard Bailyn, professor emeritus at Harvard and leading scholar of the colonial and revolutionary eras, whose book *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* won the Pulitzer Prize. Bailyn was Wood's graduate school mentor. Wood is referring to Bailyn's new book, *Sometimes an Art: Nine Essays on History*.

[16] John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), South Carolina politician and advocate of slavery who declared it a "positive good."

[17] Martin Van Buren (1782-1862), New York politician and architect of the Jacksonian Democratic Party

[18] Frances Milton Trollope (1779–1863), English novelist and writer whose travelogue, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), sharply criticized Americans for their lack of deference and the vulgarity of their culture

[19] Charles I (Stuart), reigned from 1625 until his capture in the English Civil War and execution in 1649. Charles' son James II was driven from the throne in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

[20] Sir William Blackstone (1723 –1780), English jurist and judge and author of the definitive *Commentaries on the Laws of England*

[21] The Declaratory Act of 1766 accompanied the repeal of the hated Stamp Act. It reaffirmed Parliament's sovereignty over the colonies.

[22] James Wilson (1742-1798), leading American jurist and signer of the Declaration of Independence from Pennsylvania

[23] Federalists favored passage of the Constitution. Anti-Federalists opposed it.

[24] Wood is referring to the Federalist Papers, authored primarily by Madison, Hamilton and John Jay. These were the most influential writings in the debate on the ratification of the Constitution.

[25] Wood is referring to a number of leading American academic historians of the 1950s.

[26] William Cronon, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin and past president of the American Historical Association

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