

# Two hundred forty years since the Declaration of Independence

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Two hundred and forty years ago today, representatives of the thirteen colonies that would form the United States of America signed the Declaration of Independence proclaiming their separation from the British Empire and monarchy. This action was, as the Declaration's principal author, Thomas Jefferson, would write fifty years later, the "signal of arousing men to burst [their] chains... [T]he mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."

Before the American Revolution, society for nearly 2,000 years had been based on the aristocratic principle, the "great chain of being," and the divine right of kings. The Revolution created a society in which hereditary titles of nobility were banned, monarchy outlawed and the separation of church and state established.

Explaining the transformation ushered in by the Revolution, the great historian Gordon Wood wrote:

One class did not overthrow another; the poor did not supplant the rich. But social relationships—the way people were connected one to another—were changed, and decisively so. By the early years of the nineteenth century the Revolution had created a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world.

As Wood pointed out, the Revolution was "the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history." It "not only radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, including the position of women, but also destroyed aristocracy as it had been understood in the Western world for at least two millennia."

The fact that in the American colonies, a provincial backwater, conceptions of an extremely radical and advanced character, rooted in the Enlightenment, were not only embraced but for the first time put into practice was a remarkable achievement.

The American Revolution did not fall from the sky. The revolutionaries saw themselves as defending the social gains of the English Revolution of the seventeenth century. But the impact of the American Revolution went far beyond anything that had been achieved on the European continent.

The victory of the American Revolution provided the ideological and political impetus for the French Revolution and all subsequent democratic, egalitarian and socialist movements. Karl Marx hailed the American Revolution as having "given... the first impulse... to the

European revolution of the eighteenth century" and the subsequent development of the working class socialist movement.

As with all great events in history, the Revolution was torn by contradictions. It was a bourgeois revolution and those who led it could not escape the social relations that prevailed at the time. Among the greatest of the contradictions was the fact that a substantial portion of the delegates to the Continental Congress who signed the Declaration proclaiming all men to be created equal came from colonies whose economies were based on slavery. Many of the greatest leaders of the Revolution were themselves slave-owners and were well aware of the conflict between the institution of slavery and the principles they professed. However, as Wood points out:

To focus, as we are today apt to do, on what the Revolution did not accomplish—highlighting and lamenting its failure to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women—is to miss the great significance of what it did accomplish; indeed, the Revolution made possible the anti-slavery and women's rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking.

The greatness of a revolution is expressed not merely in the problems it solves, but also in the new questions it raises. Anyone who would doubt the progressive and revolutionary implications of July 4, 1776 would do well to heed the words of one of its most eloquent defenders, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who, as an escaped slave, had no shortage of personal experience with oppression.

In a speech delivered on July 5, 1852 titled "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Douglass told his audience that the "signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men too—great enough to give fame to a great age... The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration."

Douglass added, "Now, take the Constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it. On the other hand, it will be found to contain principles and purposes entirely hostile to the existence of slavery."

Slavery, Douglass argued, was an affront to the principles proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, and the genuine application of these principles required the abolition of slavery. That contradiction would be resolved, at the cost of some 750,000 lives, in the Civil War, the "Second American Revolution."

Douglass' biting comment that the legacy of the American

Revolution “stands out the more as we contrast it with these degenerate times” applies with equal force to the state of American society and politics today. The principles that animated the American revolutionaries are in contradiction to the subsequent social and political development of the United States, which has become the most unequal society in the developed world—an aristocracy in all but name.

This all-pervasive reaction has been accompanied by a growing and ever more brazen ideological assault on the legacy of 1776. The fad of denigrating the Revolution, championed by those whose lack of experience with any genuine social struggle is rivaled only by their total disregard for historical fact, is exemplified by an article published Friday by *Vox.com* columnist Dylan Matthews.

Matthews writes, “This July 4, let’s not mince words: American independence in 1776 was a monumental mistake. We should be mourning the fact that we left the United Kingdom, not cheering it.” He declares that in comparison to the form of government that emerged from the Revolution, “Monarchy is, perhaps paradoxically, the more democratic option.”

He presents his apology for monarchy from the standpoint of identity politics, with its obsessive and false insistence that race, not class, is the fundamental category in history and politics, declaring, “[t]he main benefit of the revolution to colonists was that it gave more political power to America’s white male minority.”

Matthews argues, taking up the line of academics such as Simon Schama, that the British monarchy, not the American revolutionaries, was the true proponent of the liberation of the oppressed. In his *Rough Crossings*, Schama, an exponent of the efforts of reactionary historians to denigrate the American Revolution, declares that the revolution was “first and foremost mobilized to protect slavery.”

Both Schama and Matthews hail the efforts of the British Empire to recruit slaves to its cause, as if this tactic changed the counterrevolutionary aims of the British monarchy. (Schama, it should be noted, devoted another book to a venomous attack on the French Revolution.)

In his piece on *Vox.com*, Matthews claims that “anger” at the British efforts to mobilize slaves against the revolution “ran so deep that Thomas Jefferson included it as a grievance in a draft of the Declaration of Independence.” This is an example of the intellectual dishonesty that pervades such arguments. The quotation Matthew invokes, subsequently excised at the insistence of pro-slavery elements in the Continental Congress, is part of a scathing denunciation of chattel slavery. Jefferson wrote that King George:

... has waged cruel War against human Nature itself, violating its most sacred Rights of Life and Liberty in the Persons of a distant People who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into Slavery in another Hemisphere, or to incur miserable Death, in their Transportation thither...

He is now exciting those very People to rise in Arms among us, and to purchase their Liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the People upon whom he also obtruded them.

The reactionary denunciation of 1776 published in *Vox* is, predictably, endorsed with virtually identical arguments in an Op-Ed

piece published today in *The New York Times*, titled “Did a Fear of Slave Revolts Drive American Independence?” Its author, Robert F. Parkinson, an assistant professor of history at the University of Binghamton, writes:

For more than two centuries, we have been reading the Declaration of Independence wrong. Or rather, we’ve been celebrating the Declaration as people in the 19th and 20th centuries have told us we should, but not the Declaration as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams wrote it. To them, separation from Britain was as much, if not more, about racial fear and exclusion as it was about inalienable rights.

According to Parkinson, a mood of demonic racism prevailed among the revolutionary colonialists, with Jefferson, Adams and Franklin doing everything in their power to whip up anti-Indian and anti-Black mobs. The assistant professor writes:

We like to excuse the founders from this, to give them a pass. After all, *there is that bit* about everyone being “created equal” in this, the most important text of American history and identity. [Italics added]

For Parkinson, the words that comprise what is arguably the most famous and politically significant phrase ever written in the English language – “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” – is merely “that bit.”

The efforts to discredit and denigrate the first American Revolution are, in essence, ideological justifications for ever-widening social inequality based on class exploitation.

The socialist movement has always embraced the American Revolution and its declaration of human equality. Changing what has to be changed, the principles that are elaborated in the Declaration of Independence, with its proclamation of the rights of man, form the ideological, political and moral bedrock of the conceptions that animate the socialist movement.

Two hundred and forty years later in the United States, an immense and complex land of 320 million people, the egalitarian principles of the American Revolution continue to resonate powerfully in the consciousness of broad masses of people.



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