A reply to our critics

In Defense of the American Revolution

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Andre Damon's July 4 perspective marking the 240th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 prompted many comments. Many were supportive, while a number were hostile.

In the words of one critic, the revolution was just a scheme of "wealthy white men who profited thereby." According to another, "The American Revolution was in no way ever intended to be egalitarian." It was only, as a different commenter put it, "a war led by one rich white-man's club against the 'tyranny' of another rich white-man's club." Yet another sees it as the "counter-revolution of 1776." One even finds in the American Revolution an event of "homicidal racism against non-White peoples." And so on.

This thinking hasn't come out of thin air. There has been, over the past few decades, a veritable industry dedicated to defaming the American Revolution—and especially its leading intellectual and most left-wing figure, Thomas Jefferson. Some commentators, such as historians Simon Schama and Gerald Horne, go so far as to argue that the British Empire was actually the progressive force in the war.

When boiled down to its crude essence, this historical method is a simple ad hominem fallacy, shot through with anachronistic moralizing. The latter-day opponents of the revolution demonize its individual leaders for failing to live up to present attitudes on race and gender—concepts that did not even exist in 1776—and, wherever possible, they dig up mud from these leaders' personal lives. Having established the supposed rottenness of the individual leaders—white men, all!—the critics assert that the revolution itself could have only been rotten.

Behind all of this are definite class interests. Workers and youth should ask themselves: What is the purpose of the relentless denigration of the American Revolution? Why the hatred of Jefferson in particular? Why the attempt to supplant historical analysis with racial interpretation?

The answer lies in the present, not the past. The aim is to falsify the country's revolutionary traditions in the context of growing working class resistance to a social and political order that, changing what has to be changed, reads as if *it* was being indicted, and not King George, by Jefferson's Declaration of Independence—a document that insisted on the "right" and the "duty" to "alter or abolish" any government that becomes destructive of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The attack on the revolution, moreover, dovetails with the attempt to balkanize the working class along racial lines—to insist, as *New York Times* columnist Michael Eric Dyson has recently done, that there is a difference between "white folk" and blacks from birth. This reactionary project must be pursued as well in the analysis of history, which is to be replaced with a near-zoological theory that claims to understand the motivations of all historical actors based on their race and gender.

In fact, the attempt to deny the progressive character of the American Revolution—even on the question of slavery—does not stand up to scrutiny.

The American Revolution was the first great world event that put a question mark over slavery. Before it, slavery aroused neither substantial support nor opposition. "[M]ost colonists felt little need as yet either to attack or to defend slavery any more than other forms of dependency or debasement," writes historian Gordon Wood. It came and went without saying for 150 years in a world, according to the historian Stephen Kolchin, "of pre-modern values, one that lacked the concepts of 'cruel and unusual punishments,' equal rights, and exploitation; it was a world that instead took for granted natural human inequality and the routine use of force necessary to maintain it… it was a world with few ideological constraints against the use of forced labor."

Historians such as Schama who assert that the British Empire was actually the progressive force in the American Revolution do much to distort or downplay the fact that it was the Empire that dominated the slave trade for the better part of two centuries, in the process generating enormous profits that found an outlet in British industrialization—and palatial aristocratic estates. (They also must hope that their readers are unaware of the long and bloody history of British imperialism in Ireland, India, China, the Caribbean and Africa!)

It is well known that many of the leading figures of the American Revolution, even slaveholders, opposed slavery in principle. Washington could say that there was "not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for [its] abolition." Madison fretted that its existence rendered the "Republican Theory of government still more fallacious." Patrick Henry lamented "that this abominable practice has been introduced in the most enlightened ages." And Jefferson, who as the leading propagandist of the revolution also embodied its contradictions more than any other, could write, in 1782, that he saw

> a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way, I hope, preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation; and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.

Ultimately, the destruction of slavery came not with the consent of the masters, but "by their extirpation" as a social class in the Civil War, by far the bloodiest struggle in US history.

The revolutionary generation did take certain measures aimed at putting slavery on the road to extinction. Jefferson authored the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, banning slavery forever in the territory that is today called the American Midwest. The very first state to enter the union after the Revolution, Vermont, explicitly banned slavery from the beginning. By the first years of the 19th century it was legislatively abolished in all the northern states. The Founders put in place a sunset on the transatlantic slave trade, enacted at the end of the second Jefferson administration in 1807.

There had been reason to believe that slavery might vanish from its

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cradle in Virginia and Maryland. In the Tidewater region of Virginia, 150 years of tobacco production before the revolution had depleted the soil. A shift toward cereal production, similar to Pennsylvanian agriculture to the north, was underway.

The invention of the cotton gin in 1792, however, upset all predictions. By 1850, cotton by itself earned more export dollars than all other American commodities combined. With the growing power of "King Cotton," slavery grew immensely. The sale and transfer of human beings became the second largest industry in the US South, after cotton production.

The connection between cotton production in the South and the British textile industry was a major factor behind the British Empire's sympathy for the South in the Civil War—a fact that the modern-day defenders of the "progressive" Empire pass over.

It is sometimes objected that the measures taken by the Founding Fathers to limit slavery were halfhearted, or worse, they surreptitiously sought to increase the value of US slaves. However, in taking such steps against slavery, the generation of 1776 anticipated the later program of Abraham Lincoln's Republican Party, which held that if slavery could be contained, it would be put on the path toward gradual extinction—until the Secession Crisis proved otherwise.

Of course, immediate material interests can always be found that influenced the actions of particular individuals. But stopping at these "discoveries" tells us very little. It is an approach to history that brings to mind Frederick Engels' comments on vulgar materialist philosophy, an approach that could not answer the question of what historical forces lay behind the motives of individuals and groups in history, the "historical forces which transform themselves into these motives in the brains of the actors."

"The old materialism never put this question to itself," Engels wrote. "Its conception of history, in so far as it has one at all, is therefore essentially pragmatic; it divides men who act in history into noble and ignoble and then finds that as a rule the noble are defrauded and the ignoble are victorious." This is in essence the argument of those who see in the American Revolution nothing but a scheme to maintain slavery.

In fact, the American Revolution did not just give birth to the Cotton Kingdom. It enormously expanded the productive forces in the North. Jefferson's "Empire for Liberty" succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. The rapid population of the Trans-Appalachian northwestern frontier with yeoman farmers, who sold an increasing share of their agricultural surplus to a national and international market, gave a mighty impulse to the development of transportation, commerce and ultimately industry, which in turn drew hundreds of thousands more immigrants to American shores.

In another recent attack on the American Revolution on the "left" web site *The Jacobin*, historian William Hogeland writes that the Founding Fathers' "ideology of rights and liberty was bound up, from ancient times—at least in their minds it was—with protecting property." This is true, but the presentation is predictably obtuse to contradiction in history. The English Civil War and the Enlightenment had not only brought forth the association between property and liberty, but the belief that there existed an even more ancient right—that is, that "the original right of property derived from a prior and even more fundamental natural right to self-ownership [and] the fruits of your own labor," as James Oakes puts it.

These two rights—the right to property and the right to freedom—were each given a powerful impulse by the American Revolution. The contradiction was exposed most sharply over the question of slavery, where, eventually, the slaveholders insisted that the right to property up to and including "property in man" was absolute. As Lincoln and the abolitionists saw it, the legacy left by the American Revolution tipped the scales toward freedom. We agree with this.

The American Revolution was a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and not a socialist revolution. It could assert universal human equality, but it could not bring it about. Yet, like all great historical events, it had implications and consequences that went beyond the constraints imposed upon it by its own time.

The American Revolution inspired the French Revolution, as well as revolutionary elements throughout Europe and the world. Jefferson, who was in France in 1789 as the American ambassador, consulted with the Marquis de Lafayette—also a hero of the American Revolution—as the latter drafted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. In a telling gesture, Lafayette sent the key of the Bastille to George Washington after its storming. Ever since, the American Revolution has inspired anti-colonial struggles from the Haitian Revolution in the late 18th century to the Vietnamese Revolution in the 20th.

The American Revolution was a product of the Enlightenment—that period of discovery emerging from the darkness of the medieval world-view that had seen in all that existed the unchanging work of God. Defying the wrath of the church, natural philosophers—scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo and Bruno—began to question the natural world. Simultaneously, political philosophers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Voltaire and Montesquieu began to ask questions about the social order. What was the nature of sovereignty? Why do Kings and parliaments rule? Or, as Rousseau put it, why is it "that man is born free, and yet everywhere is in chains?"

This gathering ideology, sustained by the emerging capitalist system, eroded feudal hierarchical relationships to the point that "the mere name of king commands little respect; and to talk of a king as God's vice-regent upon earth, or to give him any of these magnificent titles which formerly dazzled mankind, would but excite laughter in everyone," as the philosopher David Hume observed.

Connecting the other great events of the Enlightenment, the English Civil War to the French Revolution of 1789, the American Revolution delivered a shattering blow to the "Divine Right of Kings." It proclaimed the universal principle of human equality, cast clerics out of government, and spelled out in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights basic concepts of liberty.

The very contradiction between the assertion of human equality and its absence in reality has provided, and continues to provide, a powerful motor force to American history. Every struggle for equality since has invoked the principles promised in the American Revolution, including the abolitionist movement, for whom the Declaration of Independence was, in the words of historian David Brion Davis, "the touchstone, the sacred scripture." Indeed, the abolitionist senator Charles Sumner of Boston called the Declaration "the very soul" of America. For his part, Lincoln said he "never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."

Those who deny the progressive significance of the American Revolution end up denying the progressive character of all that flowed from it.

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