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Seth Cotlar. *Tom Paine's America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. xii + 269 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3100-5; ISBN 978-0-8139-3106-7.

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The Fall of American Democracy: Paine to Jefferson

Seth Cotlar has written a fun and stimulating book that should provoke conversation–on this very board, I hope. A polyvocal examination of *Tom Paine's America* is precisely what his book's namesake would have hoped for. Don't let us fail him.

But if we do fail to generate a diverse, extensive discussion of the political ideas whose history Cotlar traces, we may be proving the truth of his core argument: that the proliferation of radical democratic ideas during the early 1790s caused a backlash, which subsequently saddled the United States with a model of passive citizenry.

Cotlar joins a rich tradition of declensionist historians, dating back at least to Edward Gibbon, who frame their narratives around a story of loss. For Cotlar, the early American republic is the setting, and what got lost was a broadly participatory model of democratic politics advocated by Tom Paine and his American admirers in the early 1790s. The election of 1800, in Cotlar's retelling, was not so much a revolutionary beginning as a counterrevolutionary endpoint. The book provides a useful counterpoint to Sean Wilentz's much-lauded Progressive tome *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (2005), which places Jefferson at the origin of a long arc toward equal government of the people, for the people, and by the people. Other historians have pointed out the limitations of the democratic tradition celebrated by Wilentz (its exclusion of non-whites and women especially), but Cotlar offers something new by suggesting that this tradition did not even represent an improvement on what came before.

Tom Paine's America begins in the early 1790s, which Cotlar sees as a moment when utopian democratic political ideas proliferated. Although these ideas ultimately failed to be implemented, Cotlar insists we should not disregard their meaningfulness (p. 80). Democratic authors fought for a radical "redefinition of politics" in which citizens would participate directly in governance through the mediation of "newspapers, town meetings, debating societies and taverns" (p. 180). American Paineites (subscribers to the sorts of arguments put forward by the *Rights of Man* [1791]), insisted that the views of "non-elite and non-elected citizens" should have direct bearing on governance. This "new politics" threatened the Federalists, who wanted the role of citizens limited to voting. More surprisingly, Cotlar argues that the "discourse of radical publicity" also worried the Jeffersonians, who feared being tarred with the brush of French Jacobinism. Together Federalists and Jeffersonians constructed a bipartisan political system that excluded the non-elected from direct democracy. Cotlar describes the increasing organization of American politics in the late 1790s as a retreat from an earlier, more open, ideal. He groups together a wide range of political practices including editorial electioneering (p. 47), judicial review (p. 160), and the two-party system (p. 208), as signs of declension. Each foreclosed a previous, more radical, possibility.

The political ideas of early republic democrats also had a significant economic dimension. Here Cotlar joins company with Terry Bouton, Woody Holton, and Michael McDonnell, whose books he cites several times.[1] All three have been labeled neo-Progressives for their attention to class dynamics within early American politics. Cotlar contributes to their depiction of the Revolutionary era as populated by working-class men who fought for the democratic right to "economic equality" (p. 143). He challenges Gordon Wood's and Joyce Appleby's treatment of the development of American capitalism as a broadly consensual process that laid the basis for democratization in the United States (p. 4). Instead, Cotlar argues that American Paineites made trenchant critiques of the emerging capitalist order and advocated egalitarian economic policies, including the es-

tablishment of a progressive tax scale, the distribution of public land in limited-sized parcels, and restrictions on corporations.

Tom Paine's America is both timely and thoughtful. Its salience for readers is unmistakable, as the group Occupy Wall Street gathers in lower Manhattan to take direct action against "corporate greed," President Obama and presidential candidate Herman Cain tangle over the relative merits of progressive and regressive taxation, and Tea Party favorite Rep. Paul Ryan fulminates against "class warfare."[2] The relationship between economic equality and democracy remains unresolved in American political culture today. Cotlar enriches the terms of this furious argument by bringing to light the wide range of economic and political arrangements that ordinary Americans once put forward.

According to Cotlar, theories of radical publicity and economic equality did not circulate just among a few avant-garde radicals. The Paineites' visionary new politics represented a widely shared ideal among many American men. This claim adds tremendous importance to the book. The loss that American society suffered took place not on the fringe, but in the center. Readers should come away from *Tom Paine's America* with a real sense of squelched opportunity. Perhaps the United States could have achieved a more equitable and democratic society a long time ago. However, Cotlar faces a familiar difficulty establishing his claim to the popularity of radical ideas in the early republic. Working primarily from printed material, he knows a lot more about the production of those ideas than their reception. The sources simply are not available to access the minds of Paine's readers: "the only concrete evidence that has survived" is the writings themselves, "and not the laborers' interpretations of them" (p. 9).

To circumvent this challenge, Cotlar argues in his opening chapters that newspapers–the primary medium for the publication of radical political thought in the early 1790s–defined "the range of the publicly utterable and the privately conceivable" (p. 9). Fair enough. Cotlar then takes his argument one step further by arguing that newspapers created communities of "reader-citizens" whose attitudes we can surmise from analyzing their reading material (pp. 16, 31). Reader-citizens engaged with newspapers in a public setting, often reading aloud in taverns and debating the contents during formal and informal gatherings. But how do we know that audiences identified themselves as a community of citizens defined by their reading? Perhaps they identified themselves within communities of faith, work, or region, and regarded newspapers as tools that consolidated those other identities. It is arguable that the category reader-citizen identifies nothing more than a source-effect, or the shadow left by the historian's own delineation of sources. Cotlar looks to newspapers for his evidence, seeks to understand what readers made of his sources, and finds reader-citizens. Would they exist if not for the looking?

Cotlar's strongest evidence for the historical existence of the reader-citizen community comes, ironically, from production sources. By reading the manuscript papers and published writings of Benjamin Franklin Bache, Eleazar Oswald, Thomas Adams, and Thomas Greenleaf, Cotlar has determined that these democratic editors aimed to create an "engaged, radicalized, and cosmopolitan citizenry" (p. 33). Still, do we know that readers reacted in the way that editors intended? Cotlar concedes "the line of causality from print to personal identity has never been neat or direct" (p. 114). So the historian is left to guess and infer. Sometimes Cotlar uses formulations that signal this uncertainty, like the conditional: "it would have been clear to any sympathetic reader" (p. 150). But other times he just takes the leap, as when he states that "Paine's many American readers shared his hope" (p. 158). Many probably did; many probably did not. For Cotlar, who seeks to write a democratic intellectual history, this uncertainty poses a real dilemma.

Another question raised by the book is how should historians conceptualize the transatlantic dimensions of American revolutionary (and counterrevolutionary) discourse? As his title suggests, Cotlar is very aware that the democratic ideas he studies were voiced on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. His book joins a recent wave of scholarship on the transatlantic politics of the early American republic.[3] Like Phillip Ziesche, Cotlar views early American democrats as "cosmopolitans" who self-consciously embraced their role in an international political community.[4] Unlike several recent scholars, however, Cotlar views Americans as followers more than co-equals in transatlantic discourse. According to Cotlar "Americans appropriate[d] the words and actions of their European compatriots" (p. 183). They offered "American glosses" on European discourses (p. 168).

If we take Americans of the 1790s at their cosmopolitan word, does it make sense to frame their iterations of international ideas as American glosses? From a historicist perspective, shouldn't this discourse be treated as supranational, or taking place within a community of thinkers who were not confined by national boundaries? Cotlar runs into trouble classing his authors by

nationality, since so many–like Paine himself–repeatedly crossed borders. If Paine was an English thinker when he wrote *Rights of Man*, was he an American thinker when he wrote *Common Sense* (1776), or a French thinker when he wrote *Age of Reason* (1793-94)? Why does Cotlar describe William Cobbett as a "British" anti-Jacobin during his residence in Philadelphia (p. 99), especially considering that Cobbett developed his critique of Jacobinism while living in America? And why does Matthew Carey sometimes seem to count as an "American" (pp. 51-53)?

Perhaps one answer is that Cotlar is more dubious about the meaningfulness of American counterrevolutionary discourse than he is about revolutionary discourse. According to Cotlar, democrats were "uniquely cosmopolitan" (p. 53). In contrast, Federalists felt threatened by "the dangers of cosmopolitanism" (p. 101) and resorted to "demonizing all things foreign" (p. 110). Democrats embraced French radicalism, but conservatives "exploited French news" (p. 189). Cotlar argues that rather than share in the transatlantic intellectual currents of the period, Federalists preached a new nationalist exceptionalism based in a vision of "martial manhood" that "had rarely appeared in American public discourse before" (p. 103).

Leaving the Federalists aside (suffice to say I disagree), Cotlar's claim that nationalist militarism was something new to the late 1790s is bound to raise a few eyebrows. Cotlar uses a Noah Webster quotation to exemplify Federalist nationalism that sounds fairly reminiscent of Tom Paine's famous claim in 1776 that the American "continent" was destined to become "the glory of the earth."[5] Twenty years later, Paine's American admirers could hardly be described as anti-militarist. If democrats didn't pose the dangerous threat to propertied elites that Federalists feared, the politics of the common man posed a definite danger to subordinated populations. For example, the distribution of western land in small parcels may have produced more egalitarian relations among whites, but it was a recipe for the violent dispossession of native peoples.

Cotlar acknowledges that his focus on ordinary white men "risks obscuring the real exclusions and inequalities that marked 1790's American political culture" (p. 165). By exclusions and inequalities he has in mind not only native populations, but African Americans and women. In defense of his radical subjects, Cotlar suggests that initially American Paineites expressed a significant degree of abolitionist sentiment. Their later retreat from antislavery opinion was part of the Jeffersonian counterrevolutionary reaction that Cotlar traces throughout the book (p. 55). Cotlar also offers a couple of quotations from American Paineites turned Wollstonecraftians, but he makes no effort to establish a strong tradition for women's rights within early American radicalism. By and large, Cotlar's narrative leaves the story of these excluded parties aside. Perhaps in this regard, *Tom Paine's America* is more like *The Rise of American Democracy* than the review's opening paragraphs suggest.

The important historical and methodological questions that *Tom Paine's America* raises about the appropriate boundaries of political participation in the early republic, the significance of economic equality as a democratic right, the popularity of democratic opinion during the nation's early years, and the structure of transatlantic ideas during the Age of Revolution make Cotlar's book a great pleasure to read. I found myself asking questions and underlining passages on nearly every page. The book could work terrifically in an advanced undergraduate or graduate seminar. I only wish I had read the book in a group setting so I could sit and debate it with other citizen-readers (in a tavern over a pitcher of warm beer). Maybe my fellow SHEARites will rise to the occasion?

Notes

[1]. Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: The People, the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); and Michael McDonnell, *The Politics of War: Race, Class, and Conflict in Revolutionary Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Oddly, Cotlar never cites Wilentz's *Rise of American Democracy*. The number of secondary sources cited in the endnotes is limited, perhaps a sign that the press, University of Virginia, sought to keep the final pages brief.

[2]. https://occupywallst.org/; www.hermancain.com/999plan; "American Jobs Act," www.whitehouse.gov; and Paul Ryan, "The Budget Debate We All Deserve" (May 15, 2011), www.paulryan.house.gov.

[3]. I offer a review of this scholarship in a forthcoming essay, "Transatlantic Revolution, National Identity, and American Exceptionalism in the Early Republic," *Reviews in American History* 39 (2011). Cotlar states that historians have paid "scant attention" (6) to the transatlantic dimensions of the early American republic, but if this was once true I would argue it is no longer the case.

[4]. Phillip Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

[5]. Tom Paine, *Common Sense: And Related Writings*, ed. Thomas P. Slaughter (New York: Bedford St. Martin's, 2000), 83.

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