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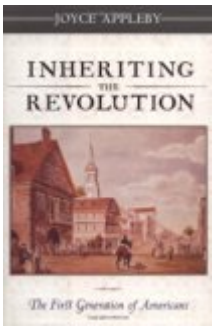
Joyce Appleby. *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000. viii + 322 pp. $26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-00236-4.



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The Morning After

Years ago, when history writing had a more social scientific flavor, we would have called a book based on several hundred life stories prosopography. The author would have reduced the life paths to a series of elements and counted how many of the subjects were farmers, rose or fell in social status, moved from country to city, served in the army, married a spouse from another town, and so on. Although she bases her study on the autobiographies of over two hundred people born between 1776 and 1800, Joyce Appleby has written another kind of book. In the spirit of a more up-to-date historiography that looks for meaning rather than cause, she give us an extended meditation on what happened to American society during the generation that grew up in the aftermath of the Revolution. She gives no breakdown of her subjects by section or gender. She does not give the proportion who entered the ministry, went to college, or got involved in a voluntary association. No appendices analyze her data base. Instead, her fine, well-informed intelligence plays across this vast sea of biographical information and recreates the world her subjects inhabited. To make a point, she tells a story or quotes an observation. Sometimes she offers a sketch of a complete life. Three decades ago, this would have been called "impressionistic" history; now we call it nuanced.

Besides her two hundred main subjects, Appleby has read and collected information on several thousand more. Coming of age between 1790 and 1830, this generation inherited the Revolution rather than earning it. They were not soldiers or sufferers. They did not know British oppression or the conditions of colonial society. The Revolution was a gift of their parents, and their task was to make something of it. The book describes the society that the heirs of the Revolution created.

In a sense, there is nothing really new in this book. We are told the familiar story of how elite rule decayed and a liberal society arose, a society that was individualistic, egalitarian, entrepreneurial, and voluntary. On the other hand, everything is made fresh in these pages. The combination of out-of-the-way stories unearthed from the autobiographies and Appleby's own ingenuity and insight puts the familiar in a new light. I was in-

trigued by an argument about the new careers that became available in post-Revolutionary society. The unprecedented opportunity to rise in the world brought a new kind of generalized identity into existence. Whether people made their way in publishing, preaching, the military, art, commerce, or along any number of other paths, their stories took a common form. They all wrote about the anticipation that was awakened in a society overflowing with new opportunities. People rose to these expectations early in life, often bypassing youth altogether. Although they often received timely help from a patron, they felt that in the end they had done it themselves. Looking around at others rising in the world, they began to think of themselves as a type. They were the sort of person who succeeded through valorous personal effort. "A kind of freemasonry of the aspiring took shape," (p. 127) Appleby comments, and this type defined America.

Although individual advancement motivated this rising generation, the society was anything but narrowly individualistic. Ambition and anticipation brought people together into innumerable societies of all kinds, many of them lumped under the heading of reform. Others organized for cultural appreciation or religious instruction. People had an irresistible urge to affiliate freely and voluntarily, out from under the aegis of the state or the supervision of the elite. They created institutions unlike anything known a century earlier. In colonial society, major institutions like the church and family were agencies of government, charged to support the social order. They were linked together by law, regulated from above, and considered indispensable extensions of the state. The inheritors of the Revolution broke free of this pyramid society and formed a society of elective circles, totally free of governmental or hierarchical control. People came together voluntarily to distribute bibles, to debate public issues, to hear lectures, to pray and cleanse their souls, to stop drink, to fight fires, to end slavery, all without sanction from any official body. They were joined not by family or locality but by affinity. In a matter of decades, this generation created civil society.

Appleby understands the ironies of liberal society. For one, she knows it was a creation and not an inevitability. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, America was set on a course that pointed toward rule by a republican elite. Even with popular elections of officials, elite rule might have been perpetuated. The Federalists expected the best families to retain their places at the head of society and provide a cadre of virtuous rulers from which the people could choose. At the time of ratification, the American aristocracy was powerful, experienced, and responsible, and yet it lost power. The collapse of elite rule came about not because of internal decay but because the inheritors of the Revolution refused to remain in place. They were ambitious, energetic, and eager, and the open, expanding American economy released their energies. Garnering office, wealth, and fame, they overshadowed established families. By neglect as much as by attack, a generation of ordinary Americans displaced the elite.

The success of this generation laid the foundation of American liberal ideology. The heirs of the Revolution forged the belief that America was a land of opportunity, where through hard work and talent, autonomous individuals could effect an improvement in their condition. Appleby knows this is at best a half truth. There were probably as many failures as successes in the turbulent economy of the early nineteenth century. She poses the question of why liberal ideology carried the day in the face of so much contradictory evidence? Why the cheerful gloss on a society ridden with failure and oppression? The answer lies, she believes, in the combination of democracy and commerce. A nation convinced of the superiority of its government was joined to an economy bent on expansion. The success of democracy and commerce in bringing prosperity to so many made the two invincible. The idea that liberty and

prosperity went together seemed irrefutable. It served the interests of the nation and of capitalism to perpetuate the liberal view.

As Appleby is at pains to explain, liberal doctrines, though dominant ideologically, spoke to a minority in America. By the end of the period, the South had dropped out of the consensus. Southerners did not move from farms into cities where the new careers awaited. They did not form voluntary circles for fear anti-slavery doctrines would infiltrate. They left power in the hands of a planter elite best able to control the labor force. Liberalism could find no home in the white South, and the enslaved population, of course, knew nothing of opportunity. The South remained an exception to all the developments that made liberalism possible in the North.

This major sectional exception added to the vast numbers of losers in the prosperity game raises the question of where was the true America? Were liberty and prosperity really the nation's defining themes? Appleby's book brings up questions debated decades ago in the days of consensus and conflict. How are we to treat an ideology that governs American thinking without accurately representing American experience? Was the opposition to liberal optimism more characteristic of American culture than the acceptance of the liberal consensus?

Even someone as conscious of the exceptions and the contradictions as Appleby cannot speak about American liberalism without seeming to validate beliefs she knows are half truths. Liberalism was the ideology of her two hundred autobiographers, to be sure, the people who had successful lives to write about. It may have satisfied the two thousand more who left a trail for her to follow in the historical records. But, as she repeats over and over, liberalism meant nothing to slaves, and bypassed most of the South. Liberal confidence was alien to the thousands of millenarians who expected a wicked and corrupt nation to be wiped out at the appearance of Christ. An even larger number of evangelicals thought prosperity and opportunity blinded people to their sins and stood in the way of salvation. Even the Transcendentalists, a reasonably secure intellectual elite, believed material well-being alienated people from their true selves.

The nation was filled with people who did not define their lives by their careers and who were ambivalent about freedom and prosperity. Driven by the blatant contradictions, vast numbers of dissenters broke with the liberal consensus and condemned American worldliness. Reading Appleby, we must amplify these negative notes when we hear them, or we may ourselves be drawn into the exuberance of liberal ideology and mistake it for the whole truth.

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