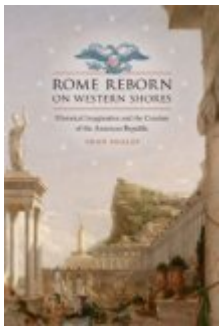
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eran Shalev. *Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Republic.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. xiii + 311 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2833-3.



Reviewed by Eileen Ka-May Cheng

Published on H-SHEAR (February, 2011)

Commissioned by Caleb McDaniel (Rice University)

In his *Rome Reborn on Western Shores*, Eran Shalev offers a valuable and provocative contribution to our understanding of the role and meaning of classical antiquity for Americans of the revolutionary generation. Joining such scholars as Carl Richard and Caroline Winterer in this endeavor, Shalev differs from them and their predecessors by focusing on how the uses of classical antiquity by revolutionary Americans illuminated their sense of history. As Shalev rightly points out, while scholars have widely noted the importance of classical antiquity to the revolutionary generation, they have paid little attention to how classical discourse was at one and the same time a form of historical discourse for Americans of this period. Such neglect has not only been a function of the influence of civic humanism on this subject, with its emphasis on the importance of ancient Greece and Rome as political models and sources; this neglect has also reflected and perpetuated long-standing assumptions about the superficiality of American historical consciousness more generally. Shalev persuasively refutes such assumptions and makes a larger contribution to our understanding of American historical consciousness with his analysis of how the complex and varied uses that revolutionary Americans made of the classical past signified the complex nature of their relationship to history and time.

Structuring his analysis chronologically and thematically, Shalev begins by broadly examining the influence of classical antiquity on revolutionary Americans and its role in providing them with a shared vocabulary and standards of assessment, emphasizing the importance of ancient Rome in particular. The revolutionaries' sense of connection to the ancient past in this way served to strengthen their connections to one another. More than just a common language, classical antiquity also offered Americans in this period a framework for understanding and giving meaning to their place in history. Revolutionary Americans did not just look to ancient Greece and Rome for historical models and analogies, but actually saw themselves as reliving and realizing events and developments from the classical past. Even

while demonstrating its unifying function, Shalev is careful to recognize the contested and fluid meanings that the classical past possessed for Americans. That very fluidity, for Shalev, is what helped give classical history its power, providing revolutionary Americans with a flexible vehicle for negotiating and adapting themselves to the transformation in their sense of identity and the dynamic character of history itself.

Specifically, Shalev points to how revolutionary Americans expressed their growing disenchantment with Britain through the changing comparisons they made between ancient Rome and the British Empire. Immediately following the British victory over France in the Seven Years War, the American colonists revealed their sense of pride in their British identity as they likened the greatness of the British Empire to that of the Roman Empire. After the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765, however, as tensions between Britain and the American colonists increased, Americans abandoned the view of Britain as the heir to Roman glory in favor of a more critical image that identified Britain with Roman corruption and tyranny. As the revolutionary crisis escalated, the comparisons between British and Roman tyranny became increasingly personal. Whereas the early attacks on Britain made general comparisons between Britain and Rome as a whole, by the 1770s, the revolutionaries drew direct parallels between particular individuals, likening British leaders and their supporters to specific Roman figures like Nero.

For Shalev, not only did American uses of the classical past change over time, but they also differed according to region. Southern interest in the decline of ancient Rome was premised on the assumption that America would eventually share the same fate. Southern revolutionaries thus subscribed to the belief in the cyclical nature of history so important to classical republican thought. Northern revolutionaries showed much less interest in understanding the decline of Rome because of their greater confidence in America's ability to avoid the cycles of decay and corruption that had destroyed the ancient republics. Instead, they embraced what Shalev terms a "classical typology" that synthesized a Protestant millennial understanding of time and history with classical historical narratives (p. 86). Consequently, revolutionaries in the North framed their understanding of classical history in terms of a typology that portrayed current events as the fulfillment of developments that had been prefigured in the classical past. Ultimately, then, regional differences in the uses of the classical past signified differing understandings of America's relationship to history itself. Whereas southerners assumed that America was subject to the same process of historical change and decay as other nations, northerners subscribed to the exceptionalist belief in America's ability to escape that process.

In the next chapters, Shalev further illuminates the complex cultural and psychological function that classical antiquity served for revolutionary Americans by examining the different vehicles they used to express their connection to the classical past. One such vehicle was the performance of classical identities in orations and plays. Revolutionary Americans in turn varied over the meaning and form of these performances,"taking the toga" both literally and figuratively (p. 150). Their ability to blur the line separating past from present by assuming classical\identities--whether by transposing Roman characters into contemporary dramas as Mercy Otis Warren did, or portraying such revolutionary orators as Joseph Warren in togas--revealed the malleability of time itself for revolutionary Americans. Rather than viewing time as something that only moved in one direction--forward--revolutionary Americans turned time into, as Shalev puts it, "an act that could be performed both forward and backward," as they simultaneously brought the classical past into the present and took the present into the classical past (p. 150). Thus, for Shalev, far from being a sign of the superficiality of their historical con-

sciousness, their seemingly anachronistic performance of classical roles demonstrated the complexity of their relationship to the past.

Another vehicle that revealed the fluid and complex meaning the classical past possessed for revolutionary Americans was the use of classical pseudonyms in political writing. Shalev focuses on the use of such pseudonyms in the debate over the ratification of the Constitution, when he argues this practice was at its peak. The adoption of classical pseudonyms was at once unifying and divisive, as both Federalists and anti-Federalists signed their public writings with a wide variety of classical names, predominantly of Roman origin. These pseudonyms thus provided Americans with a shared vocabulary, or an "intellectual 'middle ground,'" for expressing their differences with one another (p. 181). Classical pseudonyms also enabled Americans to adapt their understanding of time and history to the changing context and demands of their status as a new nation. By using pseudonyms to reenact classical roles in the present, Americans were better able to make sense of and give larger meaning to the fears and anxieties created by the challenge and difficulties of turning the United States into a viable political entity. Less confident than northern revolutionaries had been about the nation's ability to escape time, Americans on both sides of the ratification debate used classical pseudonyms to express their fears that the United States was subject to the same processes of historical decay and corruption that had destroyed ancient Rome.

This sense of anxiety had become increasingly acute by the 1790s, and as a result, Americans felt a growing sense of disjunction between their time and that of the Revolution. In the final chapter, Shalev shows how American historians in this period conveyed that sense of disjunction by framing their accounts of the Revolution in terms of classical history. Repeatedly likening the civic virtue displayed by the revolutionaries to that of classical heroes, such historians as Mercy Otis Warren and David Ramsay used these parallels to portray the Revolution as a reenactment or an extension of the classical past. In doing so, they imparted an epic quality to the Revolution that enabled them to sanctify it as a mythic event, while at the same time implicitly contrasting revolutionary virtue to the corruption and selfishness that seemed so prevalent in their own time. Hence, whereas the revolutionaries had used their appeals to classical history to collapse the distance between past and present, American historians of the 1790s underscored the distance between the two in their appeals to classical history. And so, according to Shalev, through their recognition of the differences between a mythic revolutionary past and the mundane reality of the present, in which Americans seemed all too subject to the forces of historical change and corruption, they unintentionally contributed to the development of a modern historicist understanding of the past "as fundamentally different and alienated from an altered present" (p. 215).

Despite his acknowledgment of the "innovative and groundbreaking" nature of this development (p. 214), Shalev overall emphasizes the simplistic and celebratory character of revolutionary historical writing, describing these works as "unabashedly patriotic, teleological, partisan, and propagandistic" (p. 189). While pointing to the varied forms and genres that these historians used to convey their mythic view of the Revoution--ranging from formal historical narratives to biographies and plays--Shalev ultimately attributes to them an underlying uniformity of interpretation and of their relationship to history. His treatment of revolutionary historical writing therefore differs from the approach he takes in the rest of the book, where he shows much greater recognition of the varied and contested character of revolutionary American historical consciousness. This recognition is one of the strengths of Shalev's work, for it not only challenges the widely held view of America as a nation whose commitment to exceptionalist ideology

limited its sense of history by inhibiting the development of a historicist outlook;[1] it also provides a valuable framework for rethinking the way that scholars have approached the study of historical thought and culture more generally by pointing to alternative forms and measures of historical consciousness besides historicism. In doing so, Shalev paradoxically displays his own historicist sensibility, avoiding the potentially whig tendency to judge early American historical consciousness according to modern standards of historicism.[2]

The content and placing of Shalev's final chapter, then, suggest a shift from multiplicity to both a greater sense of distance between past and present and a greater uniformity of historical consciousness by the time that the revolutionary historians started publishing their works. Yet his analysis here is open to question in both respects. For example, Lester Cohen's analysis of the revolutionary historians suggests that their sense of alienation from the revolutionary past was not as great as Shalev argues. In highlighting the disappointment and disenchantment of the revolutionary historians with Americans of their own time, and their portrayal of revolutionary heroes as embodying a model of virtue that was beyond recovery, Shalev departs from Cohen's emphasis on the exhortatory function of their idealization of revolutionary virtue. That is, according to Cohen, the revolutionary historians wrote in hopes that their depiction of revolutionary virtue would counteract the corruption they saw in their own time by providing their contemporaries with models to emulate. In these hopes of reviving the virtue of the revolutionaries, the revolutionary historians demonstrated their assumption that the revolutionary past was not as alien or as irrecoverable to them as Shalev suggests, in turn putting into question his argument for how they laid the basis for a historicist sensibility. While Shalev does comment on Cohen's work at the end of the chapter, he focuses on Cohen's discussion of how the revolutionary historians turned from a providential to a secular theory of causation, without going into Cohen's argument about how the revolutionary historians saw the writing of history as "itself a revolutionary act" whose purpose was to revive and extend the ideals of the Revolution, and its implications for his own analysis.[3]

Likewise, Karen O'Brien's portrayal of David Ramsay as a cosmopolitan historian who departed from exceptionalist assumptions in his history of the Revolution raises questions about Shalev's characterization of revolutionary historical writing as for the most part "a parochial, proto-exceptionalist affair" (p. 214).[4] While Shalev briefly notes the possibility that some of the revolutionary historians saw themselves as engaging in a cosmopolitan historiography, his analysis would have been more compelling if he had taken O'Brien's argument into fuller account in his discussion of Ramsay. O'Brien's and Cohen 's interpretations do not necessarily invalidate Shalev's portrayal of the revolutionary historians. On the contrary, he could have further strengthened his larger point about the varieties of historical consciousness in America by showing how all of these tendencies coexisted uneasily with one another.

As I hope is clear from the rest of the review, these questions do not take away from my overall appreciation for the value of Shalev's work; quite the contrary--such questions attest to its contribution in stimulating a deeper understanding of revolutionary and early national American historical consciousness.

Notes

[1]. See Dorothy Ross, “Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 909-28, on the complex relationship between exceptionalist ideology and the development of historicism in America, and the limits to that development.

[2]. On the widespread tendency to analyze the development of historical writing in teleological or "Whiggish" terms, and the notion of historical culture, see D. R. Woolf, “Disciplinary History

and Historical Culture. A Critique of the History of History: The Case of Early Modern England," *Cromohs* 2 (1997): 1-25, http://www.cromohs.unifi.it/2_97/woolf.html.

[3]. Lester Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 22, 185-211.

[4]. Karen O'Brien, "David Ramsay and the Delayed Americanization of American History," *Early American Literature* 29 (1994): 1-18; and Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 204-233.

ir

.

I