Republicanism in the Age of Democratic Revolution: The Democratic-Republican Societies of the 1790s

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In a Republican government it is a duty incumbent on every citizen to afford his assistance, either by taking a part in its immediate administration, or by his advice and watchfulness, that its principles may remain incorrupt; for the spirit of liberty, like every virtue of the mind, is to be kept alive only by constant action. . . . The importance and truth of these reflections have operated upon a number of Germans in this city. . . . It is high time they should step forward, declare themselves independent of other influence, and think for themselves.¹

With these words, conveyed in the pages of the *National Gazette* on April 11, 1793, the German Republican Society of Philadelphia announced its entrance onto the stage of American politics. This Pennsylvanian organization proved to be only the first of more than fifty popular clubs established throughout the young United States in the last decade of the eighteenth century.² Protesting what they perceived to be the Federalist administration’s unwarranted accumulation of power, these so-called Democratic-Republican Societies explicitly drew upon the precedent of revolutionary grass-roots organizations, most notably the Sons of Liberty. In so doing, they brought together a cross-section of early American citizenry--farmers, artisans, mechanics, and common laborers, as well as professionals, middling politicians, and landed elites.³

In their brief career, the societies and their activities provoked considerable controversy. By organizing public or semi-public discussions of political matters and remonstrating to both local and national leaders, the societies challenged Federalist notions of an electorate at a safe remove from their representatives. Branded as “self-created” and blamed for the Whiskey Rebellion, most of the societies disbanded by 1795. Well before Thomas Jefferson’s election, these popular organizations had entirely disappeared from the national scene. Nevertheless, the
Democratic-Republican Societies left behind an altered political landscape. By serving as the first mediums of organized popular political dissent in the young nation, the Democratic-Republican Societies expanded the parameters of political participation, helping to play out the logic of popular sovereignty. And if they did not quite lay the groundwork for the Republican party, as Eugene Link suggested fifty years ago, the societies did indeed help carve out a place for political opposition in a republican society.⁴

The significance of these groups, however, goes beyond their influence on the structure of early American politics. For the Democratic-Republican Societies allow us a glimpse of how Jeffersonians from many walks of life fused and thereby transformed the variegated ideologies that pervaded early America, ideologies which historians have labeled “liberal” and “republican.” Scholars have used the term “liberalism” to denote democratic, egalitarian, individualistic, and capitalistic tendencies within American culture. Optimistic, forward looking, and obsessed with the pursuit of material gain, ordinary Jeffersonians, according to this view, assaulted notions of hierarchy and deference.⁵ Other scholars have perceived countervailing “republican” currents in the early republic. The concept of republicanism, as used by historians, refers to a broad universe of thought, including a belief in the necessity of a independent citizenry attentive to public affairs. Pessimistic, fearful of the more or less inevitable degeneration of republics, and alert to the necessary antipathy between liberty and power, republican strains of thought, it has been argued, profoundly influenced conceptions of the proper social and political order in Jeffersonian America.⁶

Scholars have often depicted such ideational traditions as competitors: Lockean possessive individualism versus Machiavellian civic humanism; self-interested pursuits of
happiness versus self-abnegating participation in the res publica; freedom from public affairs versus freedom to participate in politics. However, as some historians have come to argue, the people of the past did not perceive the two paradigms as rivals and therefore unselfconsciously blended them.\textsuperscript{7} To date, however, discussions of the “plurality of paradigms” have been, for the most part, suggestive and speculative in nature.\textsuperscript{8} It is the purpose of this essay, therefore, to “descend a moment from the heights of theoretical disputes and look a bit more closely at the ground,” to ask how “the language of early American politics . . . was reshaped by real people.”\textsuperscript{9}

In the name of vigilance, fear of corruption, apprehension of ministerial plots and excessive accumulation of power by agents of the government, in the name of many traditional “republican” concerns, the ordinary Americans who comprised the bulk of the membership of these post-revolutionary Democratic-Republican Societies launched a democratic and egalitarian uprising not against, but on behalf of, key strands of classical politics. Consequently, substantial portions of the elite of the revolutionary generation were hoisted on their own petard, so to speak, as ordinary Jeffersonians turned the language that had sustained a revolution onto some of its architects. The democratic ardor which spilled over in the wake of the American Revolution represented in many ways the fulfillment of inherited modes of thought, rather than a complete rejection of republican ideas. The Democratic-Republican Societies thus demonstrate not only the compatibility of democratic hopes and republican fears, but also the ways in which Americans of the early republic created a radically new, yet oddly familiar, language of politics.

* * * * *

The Democratic Societies of the 1790s were located throughout the United States--from
urban centers such as Philadelphia and New York to villages such as Greenville, South Carolina, and Colchester, Vermont; from the coastal areas of the Chesapeake and New England to the backcountry of the Carolinas, Kentucky, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. With membership ranging in size from a dozen or so to the 400 members claimed by Pendleton Society of backcountry South Carolina, these clubs brought together disparate groups of Americans. As James Nicholson, president of the Democratic Society of the City of New York maintained, the societies were “composed of, and mingle with, every class of citizens.” The Democratic Society of the County of Chittenden, Vermont declared that "we cannot, but in a small degree, claim dignified stations to sanctify [our] opinions.” Contemporary observers confirmed the judgment. William Cobbett described New York’s society as "butchers, tinkers, broken hucksters, and trans-Atlantic traitors," and the affiliated New York Tammany Society as “40 poor rogues and 3 rich fools.” So too, however, were many of the societies peopled by men of more distinguished standing in society. The eighty-four members of Vermont’s Chittenden society included “eight members of the legislature, all the general officers of the county, the high sheriff, the majority of the bench, and of the bar, except two.”

The leadership of many of the societies was comprised of men of relatively moderate wealth and stature: minor political figures, militia captains, naval officers, doctors, lawyers, and printers. Nevertheless, some of the societies’ leaders had little claim to prominence. James McCullough, president of the Patriotic Society of Newcastle County, Delaware, was a poor farmer and weaver who at his death left an estate of $229. William Henry and John Boyd, president and clerk, respectively, of the Bourbon County Democratic society in central Kentucky likewise held little property.
These thousands of Americans who joined these Democratic Societies believed that they lived in the most pivotal age of human history, an era when the common man was breaking free from the chains of political and social tyranny. As the Maine society declared, “we have arrived at that propitious period when the nature of freedom and equality is practically displayed and universally acknowledged.” The societies’ Painite mantra—“the Rights of Man”—most readily expressed this democratic and egalitarian idealism. Accordingly, the clubs brought their internal organization into line with such beliefs. The Philadelphia society, in a circular to other groups, revised an early draft of the letter, expunging the traditional “Sir” and “humble servants,” and replaced both with “fellow citizens.” By-laws and constitutions provided for the open participation of all, and members of the societies elected officers annually.  

Although the societies were not, as contemporaries and later historians would claim, puppets of the French or their minister, Genet, the formation of these popular organizations was in large part motivated by the founding of the French Republic and the commencement of hostilities in Europe. As the Democratic Society of Wythe County, Virginia, declared, "a war is raging in Europe, a war of tyrants against liberty, [that] cannot be unfelt by the people of the United States--it has roused our feelings." The French Revolution gave Americans a sense of vindication; the center of European culture had adopted their ideals. The rest of the world “never justly appreciated” the “real importance” of representative government and the egalitarian principle that underlay it, never that is “until the French National Convention had erected a European Republic in the same philosophical tenet.”

Yet, as demonstrated by both their structure and rhetoric, the societies just as explicitly drew upon the precedent of the American Revolution, that “fortunate occasion . . . exhibiting to
the world a representative system of government, established on the imperishable basis of a perfect equality of rights.” Moreover, by establishing committees of correspondence and raising liberty poles, the Democratic Societies of the 1790’s consciously mimicked revolutionary organizations. Many officials of the societies were themselves former Sons of Liberty. In protesting the measures and actions of the Federalist administration, the societies consciously modeled their positions on the "Spirit of ‘76," drawing upon a revolutionary inheritance of popular resistance to a perceived corrupt central authority.\textsuperscript{15}

The societies, in fact, saw the French and the American Revolutions as part of a single movement, based on one set of ideals, one vision. The New York society went as far as to draw a causal link between the two events: “deeply impressed with the importance, as well as the truth of the sentiments, acquired amidst the toils and the hardships of the American contest, our French auxiliaries . . . returning with honor to their native country, felt their patriotism kindle into indignation at the view of her wrongs and misfortunes.” It was but a short leap to the obvious conclusion: “the cause of France is our own . . . our interest, liberty, and public happiness are involved in her fate.” Given such an indissoluble tie, if the French republic fell, the societies reasoned, what would become of the American experiment? The Charleston society, for one, predicted that “the United States . . . may be forced to yield to European confederacy.” The Massachusetts Constitutional Society elaborated:

On the accomplishment of the great objects of their Revolution, depends not only the future happiness and prosperity of Frenchmen, but in our opinion of the whole world of mankind. Their success will put an effectual check to the progress of despotic ambition, while the failure of so great and gallant a nation, would encourage the despotism of the earth that aspire to the hope of extinguishing the spirit of liberty perhaps in every other part of the globe.
The struggle of the French represented only one example of the universal contest between the forces of tyranny and those of liberty. One Virginian society asked, “shall we Americans, who have kindled the spark of liberty, stand aloof and see it extinguished, when burning a bright flame, in France, which hath caught it from us? Do you not see if despots prevail, you must have a despot like the rest of the nations?”

Nevertheless, as compelling and sympathetic as they found international events, the societies were much more concerned with dangers to liberty at home. As the Wythe County society stated, “while with anxious expectation we contemplate the affairs of Europe, it would be criminal to forget our own country.” If foreign events inspired the formation of the societies, domestic events sustained them. So although the societies, for example, celebrated French military victories, and in one case, actually petitioned the French National Convention for membership in the Jacobin clubs in France, the clubs focused the most of their attention on the "the fatal imitation here of the corrupt policy of trans-Atlantic monarchy and aristocracy.” It was hardly necessary, the societies maintained, to look overseas for evidence of a struggle between liberty and tyranny; for at the precise moment of the apparently successful exportation of their Revolutionary principles, many Americans were coming to believe that their revolution at home was going awry.

Alongside the euphoric awareness of an intercontinental democratic and egalitarian explosion, came a sense of urgency and peril: “liberty and despotism seem in an equipoise in the balance of fate . . . when a world is warring against the Rights of Man.” According to the Democratic Societies, “the great question of the day” was “whether man shall be freed from the trammels of tyranny, or her iron chains be riveted on him forever.” Nowhere, the societies
maintained, was this titanic struggle more evident than in the United States itself. The Pendleton Society in backcountry South Carolina warned that “our councils are warped; aristocracy takes root and thrives; equality and liberty totters.” Another society lamented, “without some convulsive effort in the body-politic, the views we had so fondly formed on the rising happiness and greatness of our infant empire, must vanish like a dream.”

Despite an optimistic, almost millennial vision of a democratic and egalitarian society, a persistent, at times almost mordant anxiety about the future of the American republican experiment presaged the formation of the societies. What nation in the past, the societies asked, had attained liberty and then held onto it? History furnished only disturbing examples. As the Democratic Society of the City of New York reminded their fellow Americans, “remember that Greece and Rome, and Britain, NOW ENSLAVED, were all once free.” The Patriotic Society of the County of Newcastle, Delaware likewise sounded the alarm:

> If we consult the lamentable annals of mankind, and cast our eyes back over the historic page we shall find this solemn truth recorded in large characters; that all governments however free in their origin, have in the end degenerated into despotism. The want of vigilance in the people, added to the want of wisdom and consequently of virtue, has been the great cause of promoting that natural tendency in all of them . . . to slide gradually into the lap of slavery.

What had destroyed the liberty of these peoples? Its natural enemy, power. “Too much power is incompatible with the principles of republican government,” the New York society insisted, “EXCESS OF ENERGY IS DESPOTISM.”

With power endangering liberty and degeneration a constant threat, vigilance became an obligation of a virtuous citizenry, a "necessary attendant” to the security of a republican government. As the German Republican Society proclaimed,
There is a disposition in the human mind to tyrannize when clothed with power, men therefore who are trusted with it, should be watched with the eye of an eagle to prevent those abuses which never fail to arise from a want of vigilance. Jealousy is a security, nay it is a virtue in a republic, for it begets watchfulness; it is a necessary attendant upon a warm attachment to our country.

One New York society insisted that “patriotic vigilance can alone preserve what patriotic valor has won.” Such a responsibility rested, not upon any self-proclaimed gentry, but upon the people at large. The Philadelphia society confirmed “it is . . . the duty of every Freeman to regard with attention, and to discuss without fear, the conduct of the public Servants, in every department of the Government.” As one defender of the societies maintained, "it must be the mechanics and farmers, or the poorer class of people that must support the freedom of America.”

British oppositionists had long held that it was the duty of a virtuous citizenry to establish and maintain an alert jealousy toward their rulers, for government was the seat of power, and power was the natural enemy of liberty. The societies—and the lower and middling classes that made up the bulk of their membership—tapped into these same beliefs and assumptions about the life and death of republics. They provided eloquent testimony both to the power of such inherited ideals and the extent to which opponents of Federal policies throughout society shared this ideology. Men did not need to be expert in political philosophy to draw upon "country" ideology. Its essence—fear of power and mistrust of the powerful—represented a visceral reaction to oppression, real or perceived, to which most orders of society could in some fashion relate.

In the face of a traditional problem, the Jeffersonians proposed, for peacetime at least, a quite untraditional solution: "let us coalesce in our endeavors against usurpation." A New York state society maintained that “because the political happiness of every enlightened people depends on their observance of the democratical form of republican government, which is
untenable without social union and communication, and we think, societies formed for political investigation the best means, at present, of answering the desirable purpose.” Yet it was not simply the suspicion of (usually high ranking) men in power that marked the societies’ thought as characteristically “republican” or “country.” The societies did not limit their analysis to abstractions; they viewed the tangible policies of the Washington administration in light of such fears. A Vermont society concisely noted that “the principle acts of government which the societies have generally disapproved of, as far as we know, are the Assumption business--the Funding system--the Excise--and the appointment of the Chief Justice of the United States as an Ambassador to a foreign nation.” The societies consistently criticized each of these measures in light of republican fears.

The societies reviled the excise tax, that "horror of all free governments, that nursery of ministerial warriors, that tomb of liberty." The measure, they believed, threatened to energize the federal government unnecessarily, and by so doing, “throw open the sacred doors of domestic retirement, and expose the persons of all ages and sex, to the ferocious insolence of the lowest order of revenue officers, which would have a tendency to either debase the minds of the citizens, and prepare them for slavery, or excite disgust against the government, and produce convulsions and the dissolution of society.” “It is also highly objectionable,” one society argued, “by the number of officers it renders necessary, ever ready to join in a firm phalanx to support government even in unwarrantable measures.”

Likewise, the societies found John Jay's appointment as special envoy to Great Britain disturbing because he held it concurrently with his position as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court. The appointment sparked fears of executive manipulation of the judiciary, a
practice which republicans had long regarded as a fundamental threat to republican government. "We reprobate the vesting of Chief Justice Jay with a diplomatic mission," asserted a Pennsylvanian society, for it represented, they argued, "the confounding of judiciary and diplomatic functions, a principle that if countenanced and pursued would lead to an aristocratic engrossment of all offices and power in a few individuals." The Democratic Society of Wythe County, Virginia, in an "Address to the People of the United States," chimed in: "What is despotism? Is it not a union of executive, legislative, and judicial authorities in the same hands? Your Chief Justice has been appointed to an executive office. What has become of your constitution?"  

Hamilton's financial schemes--funding and assumption, the proposed national bank, and the system of excise taxes--lay at the heart of the societies’ criticisms of the administration. To the societies, such "prescriptions of Aristocracy, under the masque of Federalism" unmistakably indicated governmental corruption and, hence, a mortal threat to the infant nation. Such policies reflected the "pernicious influence of stockholders or their subordinates," who "want the spirit or integrity of republicans." The Wythe County, Virginia society remonstrated: “To trust yourselves to stockholders, what is it, but like the Romans, to deliver the poor debtor to his creditor, as his absolute property. To trust yourselves to speculators, what is it, but to commit the lamb to the wolf to be devoured. . . . Blush Americans for the conduct of your government!!!” Reminiscent of English “court” policy, Hamilton’s plans awakened traditional fears of a grasping and corrupt central administration.  

Republican uneasiness with Hamilton’s economic programs advanced to a broader critique of the ever-increasing commercialization of American society in the preceding
generation. Tunis Wortman, secretary of the Democratic Society of New York, exclaimed

It is a truth too evident to be disguised, that since the completion and final establishment of our revolution, the flame of liberty has burned less bright, and become less universal in its operation. The charms of wealth, the allurements of luxury, the thirst for gain and the ruinous system of speculation, have borne down like the irresistible flood upon us, and have threatened destruction to the most valuable elements of social life: the desire of affluence and the love of ease, have absorbed every honorable and patriotic consideration; have rendered us supine and indolent, and have nearly banished from our mind the sentiment of public virtue, destroyed the ardor of liberty, and diminished our attachment to the sacred interests of our country.27

As Wortman’s statement makes clear, a “sudden bursting forth, an explosion . . . of entrepreneurial energy . . . and of pecuniary desires” had taken place in the post-revolutionary era. Yet, ordinary Jeffersonians expressed a profound ambivalence toward such transformations. Many societies articulated an uneasiness toward long distance exchange. The Democratic Society of New York observed that “commerce, though justly celebrated as one of the greatest causes of the present civilization and refinement of manners, yet, by introducing the corrupt principles and abandoned politics of foreign climes, often proves injurious to the morals of the state.” The Philadelphia society agreed: “In the calm which peace affords, attention to private concerns too often supersedes the interest in the general weal.”28

The remonstrances and declarations of the Democratic-Republican Societies clearly show that a "Country-republican" ideology helped spur the formation of these clubs and profoundly shaped and guided their critique of the policies of the central government. In retrospect, it seems almost a certainty that Federalist imitation of British administrative and financial techniques would spark concerns among a populace whose ideas of political economy owed much to British oppositionist thought. As one Vermont society concisely summarized, “an increase of public
officers dependent upon the executive power, a blending of the distinct branches of government
together in the functions and offices of one man. . . . a foolish copying of ancient corrupt and
foreign governments and courts . . . are all highly dangerous to liberty.”

However--and the point is crucial--the Democratic-Republican Societies wielded these
concepts in strikingly novel fashion, and in the service of strikingly new ideas. If the formation
of the societies and their conduct owed much to fear of the degeneration of republics and
traditional concerns about corruption and virtue, liberty and power, so too were they motivated
by quite untraditional aspirations and hopes, by a concern for a beloved revolution that had
opened up the possibility for ordinary (white male) Americans to participate in public society to
a degree unimaginable a generation or so earlier. The American and French Revolutions, they
exclaimed, “have withdrawn the veil which concealed the dignity and the happiness of the
human race, and have taught us, no longer dazzled with adventitious splendor, or awed by
antiquated usurpation, to erect the Temple of LIBERTY on the ruins of Palaces and Thrones.”
As the Massachusetts Constitutional Society of Boston rejoiced, “till this period the art of
government has been but the study and benefit of the few to the exclusion and depression of the
many; but from this auspicious moment, a new scene has opened in the theater of human
affairs.”

Self-consciously embracing the ideas of Thomas Paine, the societies rarely missed the
opportunity to proclaim or toast the "Rights of Man." Moreover, nearly all of the surviving
constitutions of the societies give some form of expression to liberal ideals of natural rights. The
Democratic Society in the County of Addison, Vermont, asserted in its constitution that “all men
are naturally free, and possess equal rights,” while that of the Republican Society of Baltimore,
Maryland, wrote, “we recognize the right of every individual to the enjoyment of happiness,” a right “derived from nature, and engrafted into the human mind with the first principles of existence.”

From these premises issued forth a coherent and virulent attack on artificial privilege. The societies, for example, while criticizing Jay’s commission in terms of insidious executive influence, also denounced it as anti-democratic. A western Pennsylvanian society complained that “we hold it degrading to the citizens that it should be thought that no man can be capable of office, but one that is already thrown up, and is in some department.” The Madison Society of Grenville, South Carolina, went further: “all the offices of a free government ought to be divided as equally as possible among the citizens having respect to the necessary qualifications. . . . [A]ll combinations, or agreements, between any set of citizens, to acquire and hold an undue proportion of them, as it tends to destroy that equality among the inhabitants which is a leading feature in our government . . . is contrary to the principles of a republican, [and] ought by every virtuous citizen to be reprobated.”

Egalitarian notions combined with fear of governmental corruption to challenge the traditional idea that there was in fact a single and readily discernable common good. At times, however, the clubs asserted that there was in fact a unified societal interest: "the People of Pennsylvania form but one indivisible community, whose political rights and interests, whose national honor and prosperity, must in degree and duration be forever the same." Yet at other times, the logic of their attack upon elitist politics pointed toward a more modern view of divergent interests in society. One New York society in fact took such gradations for granted: “distinct and frequent opposite interests will naturally actuate citizens of different conditions,
stations, and etc.” “Legislators of the public, will naturally be mostly taken from a rank or condition more elevated by wealth and power, than the people in general,” argued the Democratic Society of Canaan, Columbia County, New York, “they will, in consequence of that difference . . . be tempted by a separate interest and bias.” The upswell of democratic idealism veered into a class conscious attack on the ostentation and pretension of the young nation’s elite. "Economy and Simplicity," toasted a member of the Philadelphia society, "may the agents of freemen be known for their patriotism and virtue, and not by the flavor of their wines, the delicacy of their viands, or the sumptuousness of their equipages." Some societies went as far as to question the ability of affluent classes to be good republicans. The Republican Society of the Town of Newark believed that it was “not strange to see the moneyed part of the people of American in general opposed to Republican Societies.” On the fourth of July 1795, members of the Juvenile Republican Society of New York City drank a toast to "less respect to the consuming speculator, who wallows in luxury, than to the productive mechanic who struggles with indigence." That same day, a song was sung at a celebration sponsored in part by the New York Democratic Society,

To redress all our wrongs, let Man’s Rights be applied;  
Truth and justice they shew, and by these we’ll abide.  
Luxurious pomp, which brings taxes and woes,  
No more we’ll maintain with the sweat of our brows.

The Republican Society of Portland, Maine, toasted and cheered (six times) to the sentiment “may every speculator in the American funds be obliged to wait on the officers and soldiers, widows and children, barefooted to do them justice.” Social divisions in the wake of an emerging national economy stretched the old organic
view of society to the breaking point. A growing awareness of separate orders and an ever-increasing concern for equality appeared quite naturally in a society in which differences in wealth and status were in fact expanding. Liberty, economically expressed, was to some extent undermining equality.36

By protesting administration policy, the societies prompted a reactionary and elitist Federalist response, as members of Congress, cabinet members, and the president himself denounced the societies. Backed into a corner, the societies’ defense of their right to exist further highlighted the democratic and egalitarian assault upon traditional political forms of hierarchy and deference.

The Democratic Societies came under attack from the moment of their inception, or even, it could be argued, before their inception. Philip Freneau in 1792, a full year before the first Democratic Society was established, reported that some people “seem greatly alarmed at an idea that had been lately started of establishing constitutional societies in every part of the United States, for the purpose of watching over the rights of the people, and giving an early alarm in case of governmental encroachments thereupon.”37 With their actual appearance, critics condemned the societies as bands of ill-informed, seditious anarchists, “composed of the very refuse and filth of society.” Having learned to fear the “democratic excess” of the Confederation period, Federalists saw in such societies only “the busy and restless sons of anarchy” attempting “to bring us back to those scenes of humiliation and distress from which the new Constitution has so wonderfully extricated us.” The mere existence of such popular organizations flew headlong into Federalist notions of a strong central government at a healthy remove from the people at large. Washington himself labeled the societies “the most diabolical attempt to destroy
the best fabric of human government and happiness that has ever been presented for the
acceptance of mankind.” In the face of the societies’ assault upon elitist politics and social
privilege, the Federalists insisted that democracy was a process, not an end of government;
popular participation began and ended on election day.38

Federalists protested that “it is sufficient that the governments of America are
Representative.” As Congressman William Vans Murray of Maryland asserted, “look at the
immense body of public functionaries, who in this country are elected immediately by the people
. . . Legislators, Councils, Governors, Courts, Jurors, and sheriffs. The whole country is full of
well constituted organs of the People's will.” Who, the Federalists’ asked, sanctioned the
activities of these clubs? The Democratic-Republican Societies could not claim the legitimacy
stemming from election. “Here you censure Representatives whom others have had a share in
electing,” asserted “A Friend to Good Government” in the pages of the New York Daily Gazette,
“you attempt to influence men and measures that I perhaps approve of, and that without my
consent.” He asked of the societies’ membership: “Are they chosen by the people? If not, as I
know of no other authority, I shall hereafter regard them as self-creators, as a branch perhaps, of
the Jacobin Society of Paris.” Others argued that ”such associations are only excellent as
revolutionary means, when a government is to be overturned. An exercise of this right, in a free
and happy country like this, resembles the sport of firebrands; it is phrenzy.”39

In their more boisterous moods, the societies did nothing to allay such fears. Virginia
clubs drank toasts to the guillotine (“may it have an attractive virtue to draw despots to it”),
while the Washington County society in western Pennsylvania expounded that “we are almost
ready to wish for a state of revolution and the guillotine of France for a short space in order to
inflict punishment on the miscreants that enervate and disgrace our government.” The Republican Society of Portland, Maine went so far as to resolve that “every member of this society equip themselves as speedily as possible with every implement of war . . . and to be ready to oppose every enemy to the Rights of Man, and good government.” In Lexington, Kentucky, members of the local society organized a mass demonstration, during which an effigy of Jay was guillotined. They afterward filled it with gunpowder and exploded it. Apparently, the Federalists’ fear of these “domestic Jacobins,” was not totally groundless.40

The Whiskey Rebellion marked a watershed in the short career of the American Democratic Societies. The backcountry riots gave the Federalists an excellent opportunity to connect domestic insurrection (such as it was) with the western Pennsylvania Democratic Societies, and, by implication, all Democratic Societies. George Washington claimed that "the Insurrection in the Western counties of [Pennsylvania] . . . may be considered the first ripe fruit of the Democratic Societies." Fellow Federalists quickly fell into line. Representative Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey was quite explicit: "These societies . . . produced the western insurrection." Edmund Randolph, Washington’s Secretary of State, announced to the president, "They may now, I believe, be crushed."41

Although the organizations across the country scrambled to dissociate themselves from the uprising, a powerful connection had been made, and in November of 1794, Washington's public denunciation of the societies as "self-created" brought the issue to a head. Although the Senate promptly endorsed the president's proclamation, the House of Representatives demurred. During the debates, Fisher Ames of Massachusetts made one of the fuller and more extreme expositions of the Federalist viewpoint: “If we reject [the proclamation censuring the societies] is
it not unchaining the demon of anarchy? Liberty, which poetry represents as a goddess, history
describes as a cannibal.” Ames added:

The present mild Republican system . . . combines within itself two indestructible
elements of destruction . . . vice and ignorance. Those who do not understand
their rights, will despise or confound them with wrongs, those whose turbulence
and licentiousness find restraints in equal laws, will seek gratification by evasions
or combinations to over awe or resist them.42

The besieged societies responded with a forceful defense of natural liberties in a
democratic society. The Patriotic society of Newcastle, Delaware exclaimed that “we are
strongly inclined to believe, that the uproar lately raised against self-created societies is nothing
less than a masked battery leveled against freedom of opinion.” As one member declared, “If we
as a number have not the right to speak our sentiments, by what political logic will the right of an
individual be defended?” In a similar frame of mind, a "Freeman" in New York insisted, "the
RESPONSIBILITY OF PUBLIC FUNCTIONARIES presupposes a RIGHT OF
INVESTIGATION INTO THEIR PROCEEDINGS." David Gelston, president of the
Democratic Society of the City of New York, let loose a barrage of democratic fury:

Is it for assembling that we are accused? what law FORBIDS it? for deliberating,
for thinking, for exercising the faculties of the mind? what statute has DEPRIVED
us of the RIGHT? . . . The government is responsible to its sovereign the people
for the faithful exercise of its entrusted powers, and any part of the people have
the right to express their opinions on the government. . . . The LIBERTIES, the
RIGHTS of the PEOPLE are IMMUTABLE, IMPRESSCRIPTIBLE, and
ETERNAL.”

Indeed, the societies perceived the attacks on them as a betrayal of the very principles on which
the United States was founded: "If we are not permitted to detect and expose the iniquity of
public men and measures--if it be deemed a heresy to question the infallibility of the rulers of our
own land, in the name of God to what purpose did we struggle thro and maintain a seven years war against a corrupt court?” A Vermont society defiantly proclaimed, “we claim the existence of our society, not as a matter of courtesy, but of right; a right which none but traitors to the majority of the people would attempt to prohibit us from.” A member of the Democratic Society of the City of New York asked, “‘Self-created’ . . . By whom then ought we be constituted?”

* * * * *

If traditional fears prompted this democratic and egalitarian upswell, it was not simply a matter of republican rhetoric masking liberal intent--an ideological Trojan horse of sorts. The societies’ language reveals a genuine (if, from our vantage point, curious) amalgam of old and new: a democratic and egalitarian movement that infused its rhetoric with republican ideas. However theoretically antithetical (or even on some level irreconcilable) neoclassical and liberal precepts may be, they clearly coexisted in practice. Liberalism and republicanism were neither mutually exclusive, competing paradigms, nor merely overlapping templates. The seemingly disparate universes of thought were in fact hopelessly intertwined and even intimately related. Thus, the Philadelphia “mother” society could exclaim, “Let perseverance be our common motto, public good our bond of union, equality our guide, and liberty our banner.” Hopes and fears, rights and duties became as one: “In a republican government . . . where the offices of state are equally open to every class and description of citizens, without any other distinction than that which arises from a superiority of virtue and talents. . . . It becomes the duty more particularly incumbent upon individuals, to require a perfect knowledge of the government and political institutions of their country, the administration of which they may one day be called upon to take an active share.” Or, as the Democratic Society of New York explicitly declared: “The words
Republican and Democratic are synonymous.” We should beware of the tendency to dichotomize what contemporaries freely blended. There was nothing necessarily incompatible in the pursuit of equality and fear of power, in a citizen’s concomitant right and duty to participate in public affairs, in the hope for the future tempered by a fear of the past. In early America, Republican concerns motivated assertions of democratic rights.

The societies expressed an emergent egalitarian upsurge catalyzed by the American and French Revolutions. In their objections to restrictions on office holding, their defense of the “Rights of Man,” and their insistence on the very right of such societies to exist, the Democratic-Republican Societies demonstrated “pent-up egalitarian anger” at “privilege in all its forms”; they represented an extra-political attack on polite, aristocratic models of society and a commitment to a newly emerging "informal voluntary political life open to all." Thus, as recent historians have made abundantly clear, democratizing currents unleashed by the American Revolution were central to the character of the early republic.

Yet recent historiography, while greatly helping us to understand the fundamentally democratic character and effect of the American Revolution, has underestimated how much this egalitarian upsurge owed to inherited concepts and the extent to which ordinary Americans used traditional, if moderated, republican concerns to communicate and justify democratic aspirations. For equally as interesting as the egalitarian spirit that in large part prompted the formation and sustained the societies was the specific form that such democratic wants, concerns, and frustrations took in the 1790s. As their rhetoric readily reveals, these popular organizations laced their remonstrances and declarations with a language historians of the past thirty years have labeled “republican.” Such concepts profoundly shaped the goals and activities of the societies;
indeed, the very *existence* of the clubs owed much to the traditional belief that it was the duty of an alert citizenry to prevent the more or less inevitable degeneration of a republic. Once established, the societies’ calls for public virtue and vigilance of governmental authorities, their fear of power and executive encroachment, likewise strongly suggest that recent historians have vastly exaggerated the death or evanescence of classical modes of thought in the post-constitutional era.\(^{48}\)

In the early republic, inherited ideas concerning the life and death of republics mingled freely with the radical ideas emanating from trans-Atlantic democratic revolutions, as ordinary Jeffersonians reshaped, redefined, and renegotiated received political languages.\(^ {49}\) Jeffersonian America jettisoned key tenets of “classical-republican” thought: no longer would theories of mixed and balanced government predominate; politics as the exclusive preserve of leisured gentlemen was, at least in the minds of most Jeffersonians, completely untenable; notions of a unitary public good were buckling under the weight of capitalist development. Nevertheless, early Americans wove key strands of republican ideology into the fabric of American political culture. Such a transformed political culture persisted well into the Jacksonian era and up to and even beyond the Civil War.\(^ {50}\) There is room for a recognition of the “radical,” egalitarian nature of the American Revolution and an appreciation of the persistence of traditional ideology; room for a recognition that democratic hope jostled uneasily alongside republican fears. The resulting synthetic language of politics, neither wholly liberal nor strictly republican, would continue to shape American society and politics for generations, long after the founding generation had passed from the scene.

2. The societies were given various names, including "Democratic," "Republican," "Democratic-Republican," "True Republican," "Constitutional," "United Freemen," "Patriotic," "Political," "Franklin," and "Madisonian." For the sake of uniformity, I shall refer to such organizations as "Democratic," or “Democratic-Republican.”

   Eugene Link, in *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), sets the number of societies at forty-two, while Philip Foner suggested that there were at least forty-six. Forrest McDonald, however, has pointed out that Link overlooked a dozen or so societies in New England alone. See *The Presidency of George Washington* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), footnote 130.


Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick’s *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), contains the most extended analysis of the societies as a whole since Link.


10. See “The Democratic-Republican Societies: An Introduction,” in Foner, 7, 317; Alfred Young, *Democratic-Republicans of New York*, 394. The Democratic Society of Philadelphia claimed about 315 members; Charleston 114; New York 100 to 200; Chittenden, (Vermont) claimed 84. Only two states, Georgia and Rhode Island, had no societies.

Elkins and McKitrick, relying for the most part on data from of the Philadelphia society, argue that “there were a great many more persons of wealth and power than was formerly supposed, even if most Federalists thought of all of them as rabble.” They add that “it is probably safe to assume that the membership from top to bottom was characterized by energy, restlessness, and ambition, and that they were a determined, self-assertive, upward moving lot.” They point to such men as Benjamin Rush, Stephen Girard, Blair McClanahan and John Swanwick, ambitious and self-made businessmen. *The Age of Federalism*, 457, 458. Such a depiction may well describe some of the membership--Link noted fifty years ago that merchants had a distinct and relatively powerful interest in the societies. Yet, without denying the presence of energetic, ambitious, and restless members, I would argue that Elkins and McKitrick’s assertion of the societies as uniformly ambitious and “upward moving” is questionable. Eugene Link, in analyzing the membership rolls of the Philadelphia and Charleston societies, found that, of those identified, workingmen and mechanics outnumbered all other classes. Another one third of their numbers could not be identified through city directories, suggesting that many of these men were of the lower orders of Philadelphian society. See Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies*, 93, 73. On the other end of the spectrum, Forrest McDonald probably went too far when he labeled the societies as “the militant left wing of the American Republican movement in general.” *The Presidency of George Washington*, 131.


15. “Address to Democratic-Republicans Throughout the United States, January 5, 1794” Massachusetts Constitutional Society, Boston, in Foner, 261; Foner, Democratic-Republican Societies, 5, 438; For an interpretation of the societies as a re-emergence of the "Spirit of '76", see Link, The Democratic-Republican Societies. Elkins and McKitrick argue for the fundamental dissimilarity between revolutionary and post-revolutionary popular organizations. The Sons of Liberty and the Committees of Correspondence of the 1760s and 1770s, they maintain, “could claim to represent the people’s real sentiments,” while the Democratic Societies by forming in a country where constituted and duly elected authority already existed, “were usurping authority which according to the logic of popular sovereignty as still construed by the civic values of the late eighteenth century—they were not wholly entitled.” The Age of Federalism, 848. Without drawing any exact parallels between these popular organizations, one could argue that, first,
neither organization could realistically claim to represent the “united community,” especially
given the presence of loyalists before the war and Federalists a generation later. But more
important is the fact that the parallel had profound meaning for the societies themselves.
Certainly, the groups’ membership conceived of themselves as inheritors of the revolutionary
clubs; the Philadelphia “mother” society almost named itself “The Sons of Liberty.”

the City of New York, in Foner, 188; “Resolutions Adopted, July 17, 1794,” Republican Society
in Portland, Maine, in Foner, 268; “Declaration of the Friends of Liberty and National Justice,
July 13, 1793,” Republican Society of South Carolina, Charleston, in Foner, 379; “Rules and
Regulations and Declaration, January 13, 1794,” Massachusetts Constitutional Society, Boston,
in Foner, 258. See also ”Manuscript Minutes of the Democratic Society of Pennsylvania,
Thursday the 9th of January 1794,” The Democratic Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in
Foner, 69; “Circular Letter to Patriotic Societies Throughout the United States,” Democratic
Society in Wythe County, in Foner, 325. For a trans-Atlantic look at the democratic revolutions
of the late eighteenth century which stresses the similarities of the American and French
Revolutions, see R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of

17. “Address to the People of the United States, July 4, 1794,” Democratic Society in Wythe
County (Virginia), in Foner, 353; “Toasts Drunk at a Celebration on the Recapture of Toulon,
March 20, 1794,” Democratic Society of the City of New York, in Foner 168; and “Resolutions

18. Manuscript minutes, June 5, 1794, Democratic Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Foner, 83; “Address to the People of the United States, January 8, 1795,” Patriotic Society of the County of Newcastle, Delaware, in Foner, 329; “Resolutions Adopted on a Variety of Subjects, June 30, 1794,” Franklin Society of Pendleton County (South Carolina), in Foner, 396; “To Messieurs Freneau and Paine, September 25, 1795,” Franklin Society of Pendleton County (South Carolina), in Foner, 398. See also Democratic Society of the City of New York, in Foner, 183.


20. "To Friends and Fellow Citizens, April 11, 1793," Democratic Society of Pennsylvania,


the Revolution.


“Resolutions Adopted Condemning the Conduct of Representative Richard Bland Lee, June 7, 1794,” Democratic-Republican Society of Dumfries (Virginia), in Foner, 351.


33. But even here, in the midst of this very liberal-individualistic assertion of the inevitability of competing interests in society, this New York state organization proposed a very republican remedy: the “only proper and efficacious check” to such abuse of government was “a vigilant inspection of the people at large.” “Principles, Articles, and Regulations, Agreed upon, Drawn, and Adopted, May 30, 1793,” Democratic Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in Foner, 65. See also “Declaration of the Political Principles and Constitution, August 30, 1794,” The Patriotic Society of Newcastle, Delaware, in Foner, 320; “Constitution, March 8, 1794,” Democratic Society of Canaan, Columbia County, (New York), in Foner, 238; “Address by a Member to the Democratic Society on Jay’s Treaty, September 3, 1795,” Democratic Society of
Canaan County (New York), in Foner, 249. “Address by a Member to the Democratic Society on Jay’s Treaty, September, 3, 1795,” Democratic Society of Canaan, Columbia County (New York), in Foner, 249; “Resolutions Adopted Upholding the Cause of France, April 7, 1794,” Democratic Society of Pinckneyville, (South Carolina), in Foner, 393.


37. National Gazette July 25, 1792, quoted in Foner, 23.

38. "'An Observer' to the Gazette of the United States, August 5, 1800," in Foner, 112; Gazette of


905. Edmund Randolph to George Washington, October 11, 1794. in Jared Speaks (ed) The Writings of George Washington, (Boston: Russell, Shattuck, and Williams, 1836), X: 443; Alexander Hamilton concurred: “the insurrection immediately is to be essentially attributed to one of those societies sometimes called the Mingo creek society, sometimes the Democratic Society.” Quoted in Foner, “Introduction,” 29.


44. See the essays in The Republican Synthesis Revisited.

45. Manuscript minutes, March 13, 1794, Democratic Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in Foner, 73; “Address to the Republican Citizens of the United States, May 28, 1794,” Democratic Society of the City of New York, in Foner, 179; “Address to the Republican Citizens of the


Not incidentally, the societies also suggest that many Americans of the early Republic were not so consumed with the “mindless pursuit of petty ambition” to abjure participation in matters of public interest. Indeed, if by “liberalism” we mean the right to privatized pursuits of happiness and a concomitant shunning of the public sphere, the existence of the societies would seem to provide evidence of a not wholly liberal citizenry. Without denying the very real fact that ordinary Americans’ pursued their personal visions of the good life, the Democratic Societies (along with the larger phenomenon of the explosion of partisan newspapers and
unorganized mass meetings in the 1790s) provide us with compelling evidence of ordinary
Americans in fairly sizable numbers evincing a concern for the res publica. See Joyce Appleby,
“The Radical Recreation of the American Republic,” in William and Mary Quarterly 51 (1994):
682. For a comprehensive argument that America was in fact founded upon ideals of
individualist pursuit of self-interest, see Jack P. Greene, Pursuits of Happiness: The Social
Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture (Chapel
Limits of the American Revolution,” in The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits
that the new nation was one “without much capacity--or interest in--collective public action” and
that “ordinary Americans showed themselves far more interested in accumulating material goods
and promoting the immediate welfare of themselves and their families.” “Introduction,” 7, 6. See
also Gordon Wood Radicalism of the American Revolution, which Joyce Appleby takes to task
for “reducing democratic values to crass material striving and competitive individualism.”
Appleby, “The Radical Recreation of the American Republic,” William and Mary Quarterly 51
(1994): 682. See also Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited," American Historical

49. For suggestive explorations of how pre-existing strains of political and social thought were
interwoven and transformed, see Daniel Walker Howe, The Political Culture of the American