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Book Review: Joyce Applyby's Inheriting the Revolution

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In Inheriting the Revolution, Joyce Appleby attempts to isolate the “first generation of Americans,” by which she means those born between 1776 and 1800. This generation, according to Appleby, faced a unique challenge. They developed in a period shortly after the Revolution and lacked any kind of example regarding their situation, created by events of which they had no first hand experience. In this climate, the first generation of Americans established the intellectual and social environment that would become the American vision. Appleby, a highly acclaimed writer and Professor of History at UCLA, relies primarily on a group of sources that she feels has not been fully examined. In researching numerous individuals from this “cohort,” she draws from over two hundred contemporary autobiographies from ordinary individuals, as well as a wide variety of secondary and primary sources.

Appleby examines many different facets of life in Post-Revolutionary America. Each chapter addresses a particular topic, including politics, economics, social class, interpersonal relationships, and reform efforts. Appleby seems more at home when addressing political and economic topics—her area of expertise. It is in these early chapters of the book that her analysis rings true. In keeping with her previous research, Appleby asserts that “far more than Andrew Jackson, Jefferson and his supporters democratized American politics.” This period is characterized by the failure of the elitist politics of the Federalist Party, a consequence of the revolutionary rejection of tradition and authority. The opening of economic opportunity, made possible by the shedding of colonial economic
controls, set about a change in the American mindset and undermined traditional class distinction. In both politics and economics, the emergence of individualism gave rise to a more participatory attitude among citizens.

Isolating the “cohort” from the revolutionary period and the Jacksonian period is a novel concept. Appleby attempts to prove that this generation laid the foundation for the reality born out of the ideology of the Revolution. Unfortunately, her attempt falls flat for one important reason. The “first Americans” did not live in a vacuum, isolated from those that came before or after them. Instead, they lived consecutively with those who did have first hand experiences from the Revolution, as well as those who would play an important role later in American history. By claiming that it was the first generation that cultivated individualism in politics and economics, Appleby ignores the colonial aspirations for the same goals. The narrative that she offers is a microcosm in a long, gradual evolution in thought.

There is another problem with Appleby’s analysis. The set of ideas that she purports to be created by the “cohort” ignores a large part of the population. By relying primarily on autobiographies, she limits the range of ideas to those who were sufficiently successful enough in early America to warrant an autobiography. Those who were not successful do not appear in her narrative. Also, autobiographies tend to be self-congratulatory and generally positive. Appleby recognizes these shortcomings and claims in her preface that she takes them into account, but despite that, the narrative she weaves seems to take the contemporary accounts at their face value. In addition, various groups in American society lack the attention she gives to successful northerners. While she is careful to mention African Americans and women, she neglects to seriously address the experiences of unsuccessful whites and Native Americans. But the most serious deficiency is her analysis (or lack thereof) of white Southerners.

No one can deny the divergence of Southern and Northern life in early America. Inherent economic differences, primarily the result of slavery, created a tremendous difference in Southern and Northern society. Appleby misses an excellent opportunity to critically examine these differences. Instead of carefully researching and classifying societal developments in the South the same way she did for the North, Appleby writes off the South as a regional anomaly that rejected the new American ideology in favor of more traditional and conservative ideas. Their reliance on slavery handicapped the South, where people were unwilling to accept the new ideas that would destroy their way of life. Appleby’s characterizations of the South are general. None of the anecdotal examples that compose her narrative of early America come from prominent Southerners. It is true that the dearth of written sources from the South limits the available pool of resources, but the implication that there are no such sources reflects badly on Appleby’s analytical effort.

The second half of Inheriting the Revolution focuses primarily on
social history. Through religious revivals and an increase in social reform movements, ordinary people activated new norms based on individualism in the absence of traditional norms based on authority. In the chapters addressing careers and intimate relations, Appleby demonstrates how the rejection of authority altered the family life as well. Young Americans cast off their traditional family roles. Many took jobs outside of the home that were created by new economic opportunities. Others left the home entirely to explore the new country, traveling to the newly opened frontier to the West. The individualism and freedom that characterized the new political system led to individualism and freedom in the family as well, although Appleby points out that in the South, sons remained closely tied to their fathers. Without any firm social control from the government, new freedom sparked a host of activity that appeared uncivilized to many. Particularly, consumption of alcohol and rejection of traditional religious authority inspired reform movements across the country. Through individual initiative, citizens formed groups, wrote constitutions, and appealed to individuals to adhere to republican ideals.

The most important reform came from religious revival. The Second Great Awakening had a tremendous effect on the development of American society. Preachers from numerous denominations spoke against the godlessness and sinful nature that pervaded society. These new denominations rejected religious authority characteristic of the old world. In particular, new Christians rejected authoritarian Calvinist doctrines in favor of more democratic theology and practices. No less important was the abolitionist movement, which, partially tied to the religious reform efforts, made tremendous strides in the North, though not in the South. An underlying theme in the development of American society is the importance of improved transportation and communication. Democratic participation in society as a whole, but particularly in reform efforts, depended on these innovations to garner support across wide geographical areas.

Taken as a whole, Appleby’s work cannot easily be classified into a particular historiographical school. While the bulk of the material comes from individual stories, including the perspectives of slaves, freedmen, women, and others typically ignored by consensus historians and championed by social historians, the stories she imparts are from exceptional people who achieved success. Also, her primary focus is not on their individual stories. Instead, she is interested in the stories as examples of the ideological changes that occurred during this transitional period in American history. Her entire argument is that a consensus of ideas was formed by the first generation of Americans which threw off the traditions of social, political, and economic authority. As such, she uses the mode of a social historian to achieve the aims of a neo-consensus historian.

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